

artesmundi¹⁰

#2

Taylor Le Melle

**A wooden sculpture in
Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron***

The Long Story

On page 283, Obadiah takes a break from work. Wanting to ‘save his strength,’ he sits, and ‘idly’ begins to carve a doll out of wood.

Consider this beleaguered man. By the time he decides to take this break, he has spent most of the narrative reeling under the angst of having been stripped of his role as community Elder of the New Believers, a Christian church founded by Prophet Moses, who inspired a significant number of those living in Cockpit Centre to discontinue practising either a hoodoo spiritual religion or Christianity in an English church and to begin worshipping a black God, a man who also preached that he foresaw for them a better life in the hills of Jamaica: a hamlet that this Prophet Moses named Hebron. When the Church of New Believers left their town to establish a life in these forest hills, Prophet Moses personally decreed Obadiah, then eighteen, as a successor; some twenty years later, Obiadiah is accused of breaking a vow of chastity and while his wife Rose acquiesces her exile by retreating to an abandoned hut at the peak of one of the hills upon which the community lives; Obiadiah drives himself into a state of hysterical and ragged dishevelment trying to prove his innocence, to no avail.

I’m trying to tell you that the man was *low*. Not to mention that he, along with the entire community of Hebron, had been facing a drought and subsequent scarcity of food and water for months. When I read him on page 283, I wonder what strength he could possibly be saving.

Before the community fled for Hebron, Obadiah had been training as a woodworker, and that was precisely the role he took up in their new outpost. While it is never directly mentioned, I believe it reasonable to assume that he had a hand in building every dwelling in Hebron which has now excised him. I imagine he would have been experiencing this as unjust: peak alienation.

Stripped from his social, emotional, political fabric, yet nobody could take his profession; I infer from the text that he's still a woodworker at heart. Perhaps the word profession is insufficient: I mean his skill, his trade. Your church-going aunt so-and-so might call it his *purpose*. But still his profession, too, as before he co-piloted the exodus out of Cockpit Centre he was an apprentice carpenter, meaning that had he not chosen a new path, he would have been in a position to be commissioned and paid to do woodwork.

Alas, as should now be clear, by page 283 no one was hiring him. He is described as looking upon his own belongings as if they were 'reminiscences' of a person who had 'vanished.' Were he someone that came into a psychiatric treatment, the officer might note down possible dissociation. Now that readers hopefully have a feel for him, you can hopefully now too feel him at the top of a thorny silk cotton tree, eating a raw egg 'still warm,' packing three eggs in a silk pouch for his wife – the connotations held in this scene deserve attention but first I want to get to the 'toy.'

He climbs down from that tree, and starts hewing another one, trimming its branches and stripping the trunk bark. He saws several planks, cuts the wood and planes with the intention of making a child's cradle. But before he starts, he takes that break.

He makes the doll. He is in a state of restful unthinking; the toy is just what results from what his hand wants to do. I understand this to be a state of meditation, which at some point he breaks and 'began to concentrate'. I do not read this concentration as work, labour or ardour simply as intent.

Wynter then associates his conscious creation with his development of a 'new awareness'; this, too, deserves attention, but suffice to say that his awareness is phrased as 'stumbl(ing) upon God' as he walks

down from the hill and continues walking through the night, arriving the next morning two towns away at a set of double doors at the 'LABOUR OFFICE' where he arrives to wait amongst a 'hostile' crowd gathered in front of two policemen who 'swung their batons casually and wore guns,' at the behest of an 'elderly dark-brown man with greying hair and gold rimmed glasses.' Think of this man as an unfortunate symbol of complicity with the English government on whose behalf he is being paid to read a letter to the crowd. Obadiah thinks that the contents of the letter 'might mean food and water,' as in listening to the letter might tell him how he can get some money. Instead, after the greying-complicit reads a letter from 'His Majesty's Government,' the crowd erupts with anger, and the police kill several people with indiscriminate gunshots.

This uprising also deserves attention, but *I'm trying to get back to the toy.*

When Obadiah survives this outburst of lethal violence, his first thought is to lament that 'there would be no work for him today... no work for anyone.' He survived a massacre and his most pressing thought is still the need for money. That's the city life.

Between pages 290 and 297, there was no money; 'no one bought or sold.' He begs for food and is given four 'over-ripe fruits'; again, he eats one and keeps three for his wife, Rose. His propensity to deny himself nourishment for the sake of his noble aims deserves attention, too, but still, we glide on to the toy. At the moment when he receives the free mangoes, free because they were too ripe to be sold, he tries, in turn, to give the toy away as a gesture of appreciation to that mango seller who refuses him, 'her face clouded with anger.' It seems in the violent bowels of the city, what little capacity for appreciation she may have is reserved only for money. But note how, even possessed by anger, she can still deploy generosity, as she feels the will to nourish and acts upon it. She

knows that something she cannot sell is still for *good*. What I learn is that within the metropolitan schema in which she lives, appreciation – which requires perspective – is a luxury that she cannot afford.

Or, said another way: appreciation is a nutrient she can't metabolise right now. This, too, deserves further attention.

After Obadiah leaves this old, angry woman, he listens to a group of uncles talk porch-politics about banding together to 'go back to Africa,' then he settles down to sleep on the street, still hungry.

The next morning is a Wednesday: a day associated with Mercury and with alchemy, with creative force, wit, with quickness, moving at the speed of discernment or the luck that wisdom provides. On this Wednesday after a bloodbath, Obiadiiah indeed has a chance meeting. He wakes up as he is approached by someone who, at first glance, fills him 'with an unreasoning terror,' and in the face of this perceived threat, Obadiah pulls the wooden toy out from his small stash of things and brandishes it 'like a weapon.' At this point, the approaching man's 'blue eyes were apologetic.' A reader might be tempted, based on this apologetic blue eye, to deduce that Obadiah is misguided, that because his terror grows outside of the realm of reasoning that he is somehow overreacting. What I read is that even though Obadiah cannot explain why he does not like this man, his gut reaction, on this quick-witted and wise Wednesday, tells him the man is somehow harmful. And this apologetic demeanour could signal nothing more than that this blue-eyed person is not cognisant of how harmful his presence is, or maybe that not acknowledging that his ease of movement requires the harm of others. His lack of respect for the fact that Obadiah is sleeping is clear. To have personal space is to, I think, be in some possession of a type of property. Our personal space follows us wherever we go, in a hula hoop of about a metre in diameter. This 'stranger' does not

recognise Obadiah to be in possession of even that. I, too, would have woken up to this and immediately thought, *back. the. fuck. up.*

But the stranger does not back up. Instead, he asks Obadiah ‘can I look’ and ‘gently’ takes the toy out of Obadiah’s hand, moving ‘his fingers, with reverence, over the polished surfaces of the toy.’ We readers learn that the toy has been carved out of a piece of ‘mahoe’ wood, a tree species also called Hibiscus (either *Elatius* or *tiliaceus*): the national tree of Jamaica.

After the stranger runs his hands over what Obadiah has made, he asks:

‘I wonder, he said in his slow, heavy voice, ‘if the soul of man is not to be found in shape, in forms...?’

Here we learn that this blue-eyed stranger is German. Not waiting for Obadiah to answer his question, the German invites him to breakfast and they go, talking over ‘plates piled high.’ The year is 1940 and he has fled Europe after a number of personal tragedies, including the destruction of his sculpture collection. ‘I write books about sculpture... I make, too,’ he says, and describes a carving that he ‘saw in Africa,’ one that he purchased in Dahomey, that had subsequently been destroyed. He tells of how what Obadiah has made reminds him of what he lost and asks “I would like to buy it from you.. If you will sell it to me?” Thinking, of course, of food and water and his wife, Obadiah agrees to sell the toy, and at the end of the exchange, the German man buys the toy in exchange for a five pound note. Obadiah ‘understood at once that there was more to the doll than the wood and the shape he had fashioned’ and after this transaction, he returns to Hebron to carve more wooden toys which he then sells in his market communities for a few pence each. Doing this, he makes enough for him and his wife to live on during their exile, and enough to buy food and water for all of Hebron on the day of his return to the congregation.

The Analysis

What could Sylvia Wynter be offering us in that part of the narrative? This writer who, in a [1971](#) essay, describes the novel format and capitalist society as ‘twin children of the same parents’?

Though his projection and misrecognition of Obiadiah’s object as a sculpture was pivotal, the German man himself is not important. He doesn’t have a name: he is just a device. Obiadiah’s gut reaction was to not like him, and this is also mine. But I will accept him, and not give him much more attention than that.

Through this narrative, I see Obiadiah as someone experiencing a state of destitution, who is also in a perpetual state of production. The massacre at the labour office suggests that seeking work also has high, even unquantifiable, costs. Somehow the most productive act (five pounds in 1940 would purchase four hundred euro) was not to work, but to pursue his own needs and place the solid waste of that desire on display.

How is this applicable to us? We who may not be poor, but instead are precarious.

Still: why consider the use of the noun ‘sculpture’ as a misrecognition of the object that we are discussing? Two projections co-create the truth around what this thing is.

To these questions, I quote from Wynter’s essay ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’:

... the writer, the artist, is by the very nature of his craft linked to the structure of use-value statements[.] the impulse of creation thus being directed by human needs, he remained as a hangover in the [plantation] societies.

Considering Obadiah's story, I interpret here that making art is a psycho-spiritual need, and that the precariat should take this need quite seriously in a time when the constant seeking of work has high psycho-spiritual costs. And so, as well, should the salariat, who invest monogamous trust in a corporation in exchange for a guarantee that material needs will be met, and are in return driven far into states of psycho-spiritual and mental states of unwellness. Wynter continues:

The novel form reflects [a] critical and oppositional stance to a process of alienation which had begun to fragment the very human community, without which the writer has neither purpose, nor source material, nor view of the world nor audience. The novel form, a product of the market economy, its exchange structure, its individual here set free to realize his individuality by the 'liberal' values of individualism, linked to the very existence of the market system, nevertheless, instead of expressing the values of the market society, develops and expands as a form of resistance to this very market society. In effect, the novel form and the novel is the critique of the very historical process which has brought it to such heights of fulfilment.

What I read from this is that the novel form, which Wynter accepts but does not invest in, enjoys the suffering of the real world. Without the real world, there is no novel. In this dialectic, the novel is fairly comfortable and is not required to alleviate its condition. The novel resists market society in that the format is, strictly speaking, constructed through useless behaviour; and yet, there is a market demand for novels because they reflect leisure, a physiological need that deserves critique only insofar as it is enclosed as an activity to be enjoyed by rich people. The novel must, Wynter believes, 'expand' us out of a market society.

No doubt I am building towards a horizon, no doubt, that sculpture also performs in this way. As in: we could rewrite Wynter's

reflection above to include The Artist's sculpture, Obiadiah's toy, as well as the objects we make. Consider:

The {sculptural} form reflects [a] critical and oppositional stance to a process of alienation which had begun to fragment the very human community, without which {The Artist} has neither purpose, nor source material, nor view of the world nor audience. The {sculptural} form, a product of the market economy, its exchange structure, its individual here set free to realize his individuality by the 'liberal' values of individualism, linked to the very existence of the market system, nevertheless, instead of expressing the values of the market society, develops and expands as a form of resistance to this very market society. In effect, the {sculptural} form and the novel is the critique of the very historical process which has brought it to such heights of fulfilment.

Where I think this potential can be found in sculptural form is precisely at the point where it can be misrecognised – so to speak – as a commerce object. Art for sale.

When, together, Obiadiah and the stranger come to understand the object as one of commerce, how does this come to pass? My belief in the subjectivity of objects pertains that we must consider that this wooden toy *intentionally posed as an art object* on Obadiah's behalf.

After all: if you're a collector, paintings and sculptures and photographs *are* toys, no? As such, the transaction which changes the designation of the whittled Hibiscus wood into a commerce object is one of *translation*. It didn't change; different agents merely named it with different signals. I can accept this because European (coloniser-favoured enlightenment) philosophy is the only one I know of which demands hard lines, categorisations and delineations of this type of object. It is an ideology which asks, What

is it? Rather than something more interesting like: *What is it doing right now?*

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END

All quotes in the 'Long Story' section of this text are from pages 282-303 of *The Hills of Hebron*, the only novel by the anticolonial philosopher Sylvia Wynter, which was published in 1962. Daw pob dyfyniad yn yr adran 'The Long Story' o dudalennau 282-303 *The Hills of Hebron* (1962), unig nofel yr athronydd gwrth-wladychol Sylvia Wynter.

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Taylor Le Melle's mother can't stand when 'polymath' appears in artist statements: 'please stop using twenty-dollar words!' she pleads. But mother, is polymath not more to the point than stringing together a life with endless slashes: writer/publisher/infrastructuralist/herbali st/designer/curator/..../? (You can read more writing at lemelle.substack.com and find other resources at not-nowhere.org.)

Taylor Le Melle's 'A wooden sculpture in Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*' is the second in [a series of eight newly-commissioned texts](#) developed alongside [Artes Mundi 10](#), which is showing in Cardiff, Swansea, Newtown and Llandudno between October 2023 and February 2024.

Gall mam **Taylor Le Melle** ddim goddef pan mae'n gweld 'polymath' mewn bywgraffiadau artistiaid: 'please stop using twenty-dollar words!' Ond mam, nad yw'r diffiniad yn fwy addas na cheisio diffinio bywyd mewn slashes di-ddiwedd: sgwennwr/cyhoeddwr/isadeileddwr/perlysieuydd/dylunyd /curadur? (Gallwch ddarllen mwy ar lemelle.substack.com, ac adnoddau eraill ar not-nowhere.org.)

'A wooden sculpture in Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*' gan **Taylor Le Melle** yw'r ail yn [ein cyfres o gomisiynau sgwennu](#) wedi'u datblygu yn rhan o [Artes Mundi 10](#), sydd ar ddangos yn Abertawe, Caerdydd, y Drenewydd a Llandudno rhwng Hydref 2023 a Chwefror 2024.