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**ARTICLE**

# HuManitarianism: Race and the overrepresentation of ‘Man’

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the foundational role of race in humanitarianism, its historical geographies, genealogy, and contemporary practice. I pay particular attention to the work of Sylvia Wynter on the overrepresentation of (white bourgeois) Man in modernist understandings of the human that form the basis of humanitarianism in the present. Building on Wynter's work, I offer an alter-historical geography of humanitarianism – locating its genus in the voyages of 1441 and 1492 – that unsettles other critical work on the colonial origins of humanitarianism as both a normative and instrumental form of governance and their geographies. In following what Wynter terms a “human view”, I explore the racist orderings of Rational Man and his irrational, racialised “others” that work to structure humanitarianism's subjects. Alongside this, I consider the parasitic relations of humanitarianism to the negation of life enacted through the genocide of Black and Indigenous peoples, arguing humanitarianism's claims to save lives and relieve suffering cannot be divorced from conquistador violence. I argue that grappling with what Wynter calls “category problems” is necessary as humanitarianism – or huManitarianism – faces the contemporary challenges raised by Black Lives Matter that undermine and question its universalist legitimacy.

**KEYWORDS**

anti-blackness, humanitarianism, race, racism, white supremacy

Looking back, I realise I have never written about racism in the aid industry ... In my professional life, meanwhile, I've never been afraid to speak up on other issues, even at the expense of my career ... Why? Why did I never put this critical question at the forefront of my writing? I didn't because my work focused on those technocratic fixes in aid reform. I didn't because I thought that the aid industry wasn't ready to talk about racism. I didn't because I didn't think it was my place to. I didn't because I didn't want to offend my friends and colleagues. I didn't because nobody else was talking about it, at least not loudly. I didn't because I was a coward. (Currion, 2020, n.p.)

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, George Floyd was brutally murdered by police in Minneapolis, USA. Protests followed across the US and globally against systemic racism and racist violence, reanimating the demand that Black Lives Matter. Amid this heightened attention on racism, several international humanitarian organisations declared themselves racist. Save The Children acknowledged the “harm that has been caused – and continues to be caused – by racism in our organisation” and that the development and humanitarian sectors “have racism, colonialism and white supremacy deeply embedded in their mindsets, culture, practices and structures” (2020, n.p.). Meanwhile 1,000 staff from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) signed a statement declaring the organisation institutionally racist, claiming it did not do enough to tackle racism and perpetuated a “dehumanising” culture and a “privileged white minority” workforce (McVeigh, 2020, n.p.). These failures were acknowledged in an email sent by the International President and a Kenyan board member, declaring “action ... is long overdue” (Parker, 2020, n.p.). However, not all in the organisation agreed. Some suggested the term “racism” should not be used and that “MSF should talk about all lives matter” (McVeigh, 2020, n.p.). The Director-General of MSF France suggested that it was not MSF’s mission to resolve the “historical social and racial tensions shattering the American society” (Parker, 2020, n.p.). This angered others; one person claimed this reflected a naïve “we’re all part of the human race crap”, while another person said, “I am appalled that a white man in France is deciding [what MSF’s position should be] ... but I am not surprised.” The Executive Director of MSF US was clear that “a lot of us who are white are appreciating that police violence is only the apex of a pyramid of oppression. When you first encounter this, you say ‘That’s not me, I’m a humanitarian, we’re all such good people’” (McVeigh, 2020, n.p.).<sup>1</sup>

This reckoning rocking the humanitarian industry forms the foundation of this paper, wherein I focus on how colonialism, white supremacy, and racism are deeply embedded within humanitarianism far beyond the “historical social and racial tensions shattering American society” (Parker, 2020, n.p.). In this paper I read and interrogate humanitarianism from work in Black feminist studies which takes “as its task the definition of the human itself” (Weheliye, 2014, p. 20). I specifically draw on Sylvia Wynter’s “human view” that involves a re-writing of the histories and geographies of colonial conquest and her work on the overrepresentation of (white) bourgeois Man as *the* subject of enlightenment humanism on which humanitarianism rests (Wynter, 1996, 2003), as well as on Black feminist work that, building on Wynter’s foundations, probes “definitions of the human.” Drawing on this enables me to offer an alternative history of humanitarianism that foregrounds the foundational role of racial hierarchies, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity<sup>2</sup> in the production of the humanitarian subject and humanitarianism’s uneven geographies. With this reframing, I argue that humanitarianism does not just perform various forms of violence, or structure and set the limits of violence as has been argued by a number of scholars (e.g., Fassin, 2012; Weizman, 2012). Instead, violence as colonial conquest and genocide makes the human as the humanitarian subject through the negation of Black and Indigenous life in what Tiffany Lethabo King calls a “parasitic relationship” (2019, p. 39). This is more than a mere philosophical exercise. As Olivia U Rutazibwa argues it counters the liberal humanitarian idea that humanitarianism challenges the destruction of life within colonialism (2019, p. 65). Furthermore, bringing the foundational violence of humanitarianism’s human subject to the fore enables reflection on the presumption that “we have now entered a stage in human development where all subjects have been granted equal access to western humanity” (Weheliye, 2014, p. 10). Finally, what all of this enables me to highlight is how what I call huManitarianism is implicated in the continuation of white supremacy and underlines the need for an anticolonial reappraisal of what future humanitarianism(s) might look like (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021).

The reckoning currently rocking the humanitarian industry sees people questioning earlier efforts at tackling humanitarianism’s white supremacy problem, including moves to localisation focused, among other things, on hiring local staff in areas of humanitarian operations and ensuring “capacity is with those nearest to crisis affected-populations” (Currion, 2020, n.p.). For example, Hugo Slim (2020) questions whether racism lies behind failures and reluctance to localise humanitarianism further.<sup>3</sup> Many of these internal critiques locate the roots of humanitarianism’s racism in its colonial history “as the direct descendant of the old European empires” (Currion, 2020, n.p.). The history of humanitarianism in colonial governance and the abolition of slavery has been explored by several scholars. Alan Lester and Fae Dussart (2014) have intricately mapped the humanitarian sentiments held and enacted by British colonial administrators across British imperial space. Lester (2011) has argued for colonial encounters and contestations as sites producing biological understandings of race among white settlers rejecting universalist ideas proposed by colonial reformists. Ann Laura Stoler (2006) has linked humanitarian urges to protect Indigenous peoples from colonial violence to the further consolidation of colonial government in dynamics that speak to both the normative and instrumental aspects of humanitarianism, concerned with saving distant strangers while maintaining order (Duffield, 2010; Reid-Henry, 2014). Katharyne Mitchell (2017) has explored humanitarian impulses in American imperialism and their relations to the educational

development and governance of African Americans within the US. This work, while offering important additions to our critical understanding of humanitarianism as a tool of government, stops short of examining the racial hierarchies, racism, and geo-racial organisation involved in the production of the humanitarian subject itself: the human.

Meanwhile, scholarship on racism in humanitarian practice has addressed white saviourism (see Richey, 2016). This work has offered important critical insight for understanding the unequal power relations and subjectivities that emerge through colonial (and contemporary) humanitarian practice and affective encounters, as well as the civilising narratives (re)produced (see Henderson, 2013). Other work on race and racism in humanitarianism has paid attention to the white supremacy animating and structuring the experiences of humanitarians of colour. For instance, Adia Benton (2016) has argued that Black African expatriate workers are racialised in professional hierarchies of competence. Lewis Turner (2020) has discussed the production of racial hierarchies between humanitarians and their subjects. Other work (e.g., Danewid, 2017) has focused on dynamics of empathy and hospitality that erase structural questions of responsibility, allowing the reproduction of what Gloria Wekker (2016) calls “white innocence”. This recent focus on race in humanitarianism offers important insights into humanitarian organisations’ attempts to reckon with the call of Black Lives Matter. However, like work on colonial humanitarianism or white saviourism, it does not address the foundational role of race and the overrepresentation of Man in the production of humanitarian subjects.

This paper is indebted to the critical work discussed above but moves beyond it through engaging with Sylvia Wynter’s excavations to argue for a history of humanitarianism that takes seriously the particular production of Man as a stand-in for humanity more generally and the role of Transatlantic conquistador violence and genocide in the production of humanitarianism’s subject. I argue this is a necessary move for understanding the racism that animates both past and present humanitarian practice. The paper proceeds as follows: I start by exploring contrasting histories and geographies of humanitarianism before introducing Wynter’s alternative reading of European modernity and humanism located in the Transatlantic colonial encounters that ballooned outwards and into the present from 1441 and 1492 respectively. I then move on to examine Wynter’s work on the overrepresentation of a particular conception of Man as *the* human subject following a series of African, Caribbean, and American encounters in the wakes of the 1441 and 1492 voyages and in the words of Katherine McKittrick, “the geo-racial reorganisation” (2006, p. 129) they engendered. Wynter’s Man, as opposed to man, is a subjective representation rooted in specific spatio-temporal colonial encounters that through overrepresentation has been universalised as *the* human subject “ideologically representing itself as ‘world’ humanness” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 126). This underwrites my choice to use huMan and huManitarianism throughout this paper as a way of stressing these subjective representations that have come to represent an assumed universality in humanitarianism. Following this, I discuss the emergence of what will be recognisable to scholars of humanitarianism as the distant stranger for whose sake humanitarianism intervenes. Here I discuss the roles of the necessary other and racial hierarchies in the creation of this distant stranger and the huMan, complemented by an exploration of their uneven geographies. I then turn my attention to exploring the “repetitive process of making the modern human through extinguishing Black and Indigenous life” (King, 2019, p. 39) that creates a “parasitic relationship” (2019, p. 39) between colonial conquest, genocide, and saving lives. This is rounded off with a discussion of how the reorientation offered by Wynter unsettles huManitarianism in an age of Black Lives Matter. Since doing this points to an uncertain future for caring for unknown distant others, I argue that through the necessary anti-racism work brought forth by Black Lives Matter and the critical work of Black feminists such as Wynter, huManitarianism is given an opportunity to inhabit a demonic ground, understood as a de/anticolonial non-deterministic schema of uncertainty and non-linearity (McKittrick, 2006, p. xxiv), and work towards other pluriversal (Rojas, 2016) forms of life.

## 2 | ALTER-HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF HUMANITARIANISM

In genealogies of humanitarianism, various key processes and events tie it to distinctly European processes of modernity. These include British campaigns of abolition in the later 18th and early 19th centuries, the Battle of Solferino in 1859, and Henry Dunant’s subsequent founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva in 1863 (see Barnett, 2012), as well as the earlier Lisbon earthquake of 1755, arguably the first mass media representation (in Europe) of a distant tragedy.

It is with the Lisbon earthquake that Eyal Weizman (2012) begins his account of the history of humanitarian politics. Or more specifically, Weizman begins with Voltaire’s account of the earthquake as told in *Candide*, written during Voltaire’s time in Geneva. In Voltaire’s satirical reimagining of the earthquake, *Candide*’s subsequent travels across the Atlantic and his encounters with abusive Jesuit missionaries in Paraguay, various aspects of humanitarianism are

identified, including the central role representations of suffering play in generating sympathy for distant and unknown others and the perpetuation of violence through humanitarian desires to help. It is noteworthy that Weizman chooses to locate his critique between Geneva, a city more traditionally associated with histories of humanitarianism and international order, and Lisbon, from where early European colonial expansion radiated in a number of voyages. This historical geography speaks to mainstream understandings of humanitarianism in international order. Geneva standing in for the rule-based system of International Humanitarian Law and the concurrent institutionalisation of humanitarianism. Lisbon representing the colonial histories of humanitarianism and their early genesis in African, Caribbean, and North American encounters with unknown others. However, by the time of the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, enlightenment humanism was becoming ever more firmly entrenched in Europe's move to secular nation-statehood and colonial encounters were already long established.

What happens if we cast our gaze back to the earliest of these encounters, that brought into being the Triangular Trade, plantation capitalism, and North American settler colonialism alongside secular notions of the universal human through the violence represented by Voltaire's abusive Jesuit missionaries? Such an alternative historical geography is provided by Sylvia Wynter, who as McKittrick argues "encourages her readers to struggle with what they know, and where they know from" (2006, p. 122) providing "multiple and multiscalar 'grounds'" and sites "of possible critical intervention" (2006, p. 123).

Writing from the Caribbean and offering a vast sweep of western hemispheric history centred on complex colonial relations of the Atlantic and beyond from the 15th to the 21st century, Wynter starts her alternative historical geography with the successful 1441 Portuguese navigation around and beyond Cape Bojador in present-day Western Sahara and Columbus' 1492 Atlantic crossing. These two voyages and the encounters they engendered brought about a number of epistemic breaks in European knowledge of the Earth's geography, human life, and the role of a Christian god in ordering the world:

Before the fifteenth-century voyages of the Portuguese and Columbus, which disproved this premise of the nonhomogeneity of the earth's geography, the Torrid Zone beyond the bulge of Cape Bojador on the upper coast of Africa had therefore had to be known as too hot for habitation, while the Western hemisphere had had to be known as being devoid of land, seeing that all land there had to remain, in the framework of Christian Aristotelian physics, submerged in its "natural place" under water, since ostensibly not held "unnaturally" above the water by Divine Grace. (Wynter, 2003, p. 279)

In what she calls her "human view" – a reimagining or alter-geography – of 1492, Wynter is clear about the importance of 1441. The Portuguese rounding of Cape Bojador and the subsequent landing on the shores of what is today Senegal was "the necessary and indispensable prelude, not only to Columbus' own voyage but also to the specific pattern of relations ... between Christian Europe and the non-Christian peoples of the world" (Wynter, 1996, p. 10–11). The voyage of 1441 challenged the premise of what Wynter calls the "*habitable/uninhabitable* line" (1996, p. 24; italics in original). The voyage of 1441 unsettled a "theocentric system of inference" about the Earth's geography that had "been logically represented as being divided between *habitable* and *uninhabitable* realms" (Wynter, 1996, p. 25; italics in original) under a Christian god's grace and called into question for whose sake (*propter nos homines*) the Earth existed (Wynter, 1996, p. 27). Katherine McKittrick argues this unsettling of the habitable/uninhabitable line ushered in a "geo-racial reorganisation" (1996, p. 129) both ontologically and in terms of European imperial socio-political power. Meanwhile, the epistemic break of 1441 and the questions that emerged from the voyage of 1441 around the *propter nos homines*, or the humankind for whose sake the Earth was made, leads Tiffany King, in her reading of Wynter, to argue that:

The making of the European human and the Black (human other) occurred on the shores of what is now Senegal in the 1440s. In this recurring scene starting in the mid-1400s, Black people become lesser humans; Indigenous peoples soon followed in the 1490s, when the bloody theatrics and overrepresentation of the human are restaged at the site of Indigenous bodies who become lesser humans on the other side of the Atlantic in what will become the Americas. (2019, p. 40)

### 3 | THE HUMAN

The "human view" of 1492 is exactly that: a view of what 1492 and the earlier voyage of 1441 meant for the boundaries of humanity: who was included within its boundaries and who was excluded and on what terms. In this "human

view”, the centring of colonial encounters in West Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas, and subsequent mobility across Transatlantic space(s) that fuelled the Slave Trade and plantation capitalism produced new “biocentric logics” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 126) and civilisational hierarchies carving out differences between white Europeans, Black Africans, and Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and Americas, with these classificatory demarcations structuring the limits of Man. It is to the production of Man as the overrepresented subject of humanity that I now turn my attention.

In tracing the overrepresentation of Man, Wynter draws our attention to “Man in two forms” (2003, p. 264), what she calls Man1 and Man2, subjects that grow from particular spatio-temporalities and epistemological developments with ontological repercussions. According to Wynter, Man1 “was from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century” (2003, p. 264) and was a new exploratory subject brought into existence by the geographic encounters of the voyages and their aftermaths that saw a decline in Christian supernatural socio-spatial planetary organisation. Man2 emerges from these earlier specific colonial encounters with Black and Indigenous people alongside the growth of biological race science and amid the further consolidation of European imperialism. As Wynter says, the development of Man1 and Man2 were “made possible only on the basis of the dynamics of a coloniser/colonised relation that the West was to discursively constitute and empirically institutionalise on the islands of the Caribbean and, later, on the mainlands of the Americas” (2003, p. 264).

Therefore, numerous epistemic breaks ripple outwards in space and time from 1441 and Columbus' 1492 voyage relating to European understandings of physiology, politics, geography, and religion. As McKittrick, discussing Wynter's “human view”, says, “first, early explorers and religious evangelists had to make sense of a world, and cultures, they had previously considered non-existent; and they could only make sense of the world through their subjective knowledges and positionalities” (2006, pp. 124–125). As discussed above, those encountered on the voyage of 1441 existed beyond the habitable/uninhabitable line in the “Torrid Zone” (Wynter, 2003, p. 279). Meanwhile the voyage of 1492 brought Europeans into contact with people in the Western Hemisphere who, according to the existing ordering principles held by Columbus and his contemporaries, should not have been there, living on land thought to have been underwater beyond the habitable/uninhabitable line. Consequently, according to Wynter, the Torrid Zone and Western Hemisphere served as *nec plus ultra* (nothing further beyond) signs or markers as to the limits of Europe and what stood outside of a Christian god's redemptive grace (1996, p. 43).

However, the communities encountered, whether in Africa or the Americas, could not be readily considered enemies of Christianity because of their very geographical location *nec plus ultra*. This was a conundrum that set in motion the invention of Man2 as “the newly invented Man of the humanists, as the rational (or ratiocentric) political subject of the state” (Wynter, 2003, p. 288).<sup>4</sup> As McKittrick says, “Man had to be worked out differently, humanness altered, on terms that spiritually legitimated a nonindigenous New World presence and the profitable dehumanisation of the indigenous and enslaved black cultures” (2006, p. 126). As a result, Man2 reconceptualised the *nec plus ultra* enemies of Christianity – Indigenous and enslaved Black Africans and Indigenous Americans – according to a racialised “Chain of Being comprised of differential/hierarchical degrees of rationality ... between different populations, their religions, cultures, forms of life; in other words, their modes of being human” (Wynter, 2003, p. 300). Patterns of conquest and colonial subjugation came to be inscribed in this new ranking system, or “Chain of Being”, manifesting, Wynter argues, in the overrepresentation of Man and “its well-being as that of the human species as a whole, rather than as it is veridically: that of the Western and westernised (or conversely) global middle classes” (2003, p. 313).

According to Wynter, therefore, “*Man*” is a “culture-relative term” and I would argue a spatio-temporally specific term; a “desupernaturalised *conception of the human*” that has evolved out of a Christian<sup>5</sup> origin narrative and schema that shifted through a hybrid religious-secular form following 1492 to become supposedly secular and global in scope, with European imperialism positing this “culture-specific conception of being human ... *as if* it were the universal of the human species” (1996, p. 43; italics in original). This then is a form of absolutism that “ensures all actions taken for the sake of the well-being of the human referent object continue to be perceived *as if* they were being taken for the sake of the human-in-general: *propter nos homines*” (Wynter, 1996, p. 43; italics in original).

The overrepresentation of Man2 as *the huMan* subject of huManitarianism unsettles the foundations of universality from which humanitarianism draws its normative legitimacy. Alongside this, it challenges those who have drawn out humanitarianism's biopolitical focus on providing the necessary conditions for life. Much of the work that explores the biopolitics of humanitarianism unintentionally – like other Foucauldian work in Critical Security Studies (see Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2019) – reproduces the huMan at the level of biological and biocentric life. This raises further questions about what type of life is overshadowed or erased by discussions of humanitarianism as biopolitical. In thinking more on this, Weheliye contends that discussions of biopolitical life expel racial hierarchies beyond discussions of life, remaining “always already beyond the administrative, ideological, and conceptual precincts of Europe; they function as

and in an unnamed elsewhere” (2014, p. 62; italics in original). Alongside this, other species and ecological life is cut adrift from that of human life by biocentric hierarchies that we see perpetuated in huManitarian practice. Biopolitical life, therefore, performs a universality that enables discussion of the biocentric human in politics while ignoring the role of race and racism in the creation of the huMan as what Weheliye would call a racialised assemblage. For Weheliye (2014), the human as huMan is always racialised, as race is foundational to the production of what we understand today as the human subject.

#### 4 | THE DISTANT HUMAN

The epistemic breaks that rippled out from the voyages of 1441 and 1492 and subsequent encounters made possible two ambiguous schema that I argue sit at the heart of humanitarianism as both a normative ideal and instrumental practice, both past and present. The first was the creation of Man2 or the huMan, for whose sake Earth existed, creating a secular ideal that placed biocentric humanity at the centre or at the top of a secular system. At the same time, this first schema made the second schema necessary. The second schema involved the creation of new hierarchies ordered around race and white supremacy that benefited imperial expansion in the interests of the *propter nos homines* it had been claimed the Earth existed.

But for huManitarianism and the professional humanitarian industry currently reckoning with racism specifically, there is another aspect of Wynter’s alter-historical geography that is of critical importance: the role of distance in encounters with hitherto unknown others. I contend that these *nec plus ultra* encounters with distant unknown others in spaces once thought uninhabitable or uninhabited are fundamental to understanding huManitarianism’s paternalist organising principles of helping distant strangers based on uneven geographies in the present. I argue that the universality of huManitarianism is made possible through encounters with strangers, historically understood as *nec plus ultra* non-European Others thought to be beyond or outside civilisation. This in turn makes possible paternalistic assumptions around the need for, and right of, intervention. But more than this, I argue that this *nec plus ultra* stranger is racialised and inscribed in spaces of underdevelopment, or what Wynter calls “poverty archipelagos” (1992, p. 243).<sup>6</sup> It is this spatiality that is important to a huManitarianism with specific geographies of intervention centred on such “poverty archipelagos” and spaces of assumed underdevelopment according to a particular Eurocentric rubric. Meanwhile, recent work on the discomfort of humanitarian practices inside European space highlights the uneven geographies and spatial assumptions that operate within huManitarian imaginaries (see Danewid, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins, 2020).<sup>7</sup>

The habitable/uninhabitable imaginary punctured by the voyages of 1441 and 1492 shattered European subjective understandings of the world and brought Europeans into contact with strangers outside of the ordering principles laid down by Christianity. In these encounters, European “knowledge of the world as it is” – as experienced by Europeans – came to be replaced with “knowledge of categories” allowing for processes of abstraction and articulation across distance. It is these that underpin what Wynter calls “symbolic kin” or “interaltruistic conspecifics” (1996, p. 20), or what we could call humanity as a species bound by relations of responsibility for each other’s well-being. These encounters were necessary “symbolic representations, or cultural programs” that “have socialised us to be symbolic conspecifics of, and therefore, to display altruistic behaviours toward those who constitute the *nos* on whose behalf we collectively act” (Wynter, 1996, p. 31).

Therefore, these encounters with others outside and beyond the habitable line created the necessary symbolic representations of the stranger and the huMan that underpin universalist humanitarian ethics. Wynter continues this line of thinking further in separating narrow and exclusive modes of kinship from altruistic behaviours or “artificial modes of affective altruism or empathy” and the construction of a wider *nos* – or we – upon “which our complex human orders can alone be based” (1996, p. 31). Therefore, these encounters beyond the habitable/uninhabitable line bring into being the stranger as the necessary foil for the creation of a universal huMan, and the stranger as the necessary subject of an affective altruism across distance, alongside the humanity in whose name huManitarianism acts.

However, as discussed earlier in discussions of Man1 and Man2, the stranger as the necessary foil for the creation of the huMan was racialised according to classificatory hierarchies distinguishing between white and Indigenous and Black Others. As McKittrick working with Wynter argues, differential racial hierarchies were spatially organised, through measuring inhabitability, into overdetermined spaces of Man with an assumed “normal way of life” (2006, p. 131) and uninhabitable spaces of racial and social difference. This relationship between huManitarianism’s necessary Other (the racialised stranger) and its coterminous uneven geographies speak to the ongoing hierarchies between (white) saviours and their victims. But as humanitarianism pursues agendas of localisation and is increasingly staffed by the labour of

those from the colonised world, this relationship speaks to hierarchies between national staff in the “field” and international staff in headquarters in the colonising Minority World (see Benton, 2016). Furthermore, it raises critical questions about the possibility of a huManitarianism without the necessary racialised stranger, all of which will be returned to after a discussion of the centrality of violence in the constitution of huManitarian's subject.

## 5 | PARASITIC HUMANITARIANISM

As discussed so far, an insistence on Wynter's “human view” opens new horizons for thinking about the role of colonial conquest and race in huManitarianism, challenging the universal foundations on which it rests and foregrounding the role of a racialised Other in the creation of the huManitarian subject. These are critical epistemic ruptures of huManitarianism in an age of Black Lives Matter and the humanitarian industry's reckoning with racism. Yet they stop short of appraising how such encounters, racial hierarchies, and the violence that was both a necessary part of their production and an imminent result (in)form the practice of huManitarianism. Here I turn my attention to what King (2019) calls the “parasitic relationship” between the genocidal violence against Black and Indigenous life that proliferated from early colonial encounters in West Africa, the Caribbean, and mainland America and modernist humanism. Violence that resulted in among other things enslavement, transportation, plantation capitalism, the theft of land and resources, and the destruction of ways of being on both sides of the Atlantic. In this section, I build on King's exploration of this parasitic relationship to question what this means for huManitarianism in the present.

The Janus-faced nature of huManitarianism, concerned with care and control or control through care (Ticktin, 2011), as a crime of peace (Albahari, 2015) and prolonger of conflicts and political violence (Belloni, 2007), a handmaiden of western military-imperialism (Lopez et al., 2015), or as a counter-revolutionary strategy (Weizman, 2012) are well known. Historical work on colonial humanitarianism has been clear on its use as a counter-revolutionary force following the Haitian revolution and fears of Black uprisings across imperial space (Lester & Dussart, 2014), while radical writings at the time saw the paternalist form of abolition proposed by William Wilberforce as a reactionary force (Hazlitt, 1825/1969). The instrumental imperial and capitalist interests behind abolitionary moves have been well documented (Du Bois, 1920; James, 1938/2001; Jameson, 1981). Thus, abolition and other humanitarian acts in the face of colonial violence can be read as a form of what Wekker (2016) calls white innocence.

Alongside this, anticolonial work has discussed the “abstraction” and “redemption” that help to distance objects of study from their constitutive colonial histories and the violence therein. Building on Krishna (2001) has argued that abstraction and redemption work as “strategies of containment” that allow “what can be thought to seem internally coherent in its own terms, while repressing the unthinkable ... which lies beyond its boundaries” (Jameson, 1981, p. 53). Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui has argued that with self-determination it was assumed by colonising powers that former colonised people had “completed the civilizing qua Enlightenment project of a universal order” (1996, p. 182). Kerem Nişancioğlu in work on race and sovereignty has recently added to this discussion with talk of “closure”, which he defines as “the means through which racism is presented as a ‘solved problem’” and “locked-off as an object of analysis”. “It is through closure”, he argues, “that the otherwise ‘intolerable contradictions’ that undergird the construction of sovereignty are made internally coherent” (Nişancioğlu, 2020, p. 43). Nişancioğlu's arguments hold important insights for understanding race in huManitarianism and what Wynter calls “interaltruistic conspecifics”. In discussing the historical role of race in the production of white sovereignty, Nişancioğlu, echoing Grovogui (1996, pp. 185–188), argues that the recognition of sovereignty “delimits the analytical scope of race to discursive and/or legal struggles over recognition of colonized peoples within the confines of the already existing state-system” and erases alternative anticolonial perspectives (Nişancioğlu, 2020, p. 44).

I argue the same dynamics apply to the recognition of the huMan and by extension huManitarianism. First, recognition from others is central to the creation of the huMan as the subject of huManitarianism, alongside the recognition of others' humanity as the foundation of action. Second, recognition in huManitarianism delimits and reduces discussions of who is accorded huManity and how that huManity came into being to discursive or legal struggles within the confines of an enlightenment universal order. Third, recognition erases alternative anticolonial perspectives that are critical of how the category of huMan came to be. The work that recognition does for my argument here is to shine a light on how the recognition of others' humanity underpinning huManitarianism actively erases its violent and genocidal foundations (King, 2019) and assumes “black [and other non-white subjects] have been fully assimilated into the human qua Man” (Weheliye, 2014, p. 11). An honest reckoning with such violent foundations seems an urgent and necessary task for a humanitarian ethics concerned with relieving the effects of violence and upholding human dignity.

Drawing on the work of Wynter and other Black feminist scholars (see Hartman, 1997; Spillers, 1987), alongside Native feminist scholars (see Byrd, 2011; Smith, 2005; Trask, 1999), King carefully elaborates how the making of Black and Indigenous “flesh” through spatio-temporally diverse relations of subjugation, expulsion, enslavement, (sexual) violence, and its destruction through genocide are productive of the huMan (2019, p. 58). For Weheliye, “human (viscus/flesh)” is “borne of political violence” (2014, p. 11). A focus on flesh born from political violence is especially important for thinking about huManitarianism as a practice focused on biocentric life. This life, however, through its humanist grammar that results in universalising claims, erases the death of racialised others at the heart of its production. And yet a focus on biocentric flesh and the corporeality of the body is of paramount importance for understanding humanitarian practice, where shared corporeality and the emerging medical sciences are argued by some to be at the root of affective desires to help (Lacquer, 1989). Importantly also, these medical sciences are rooted in fleshy violence against Black and Indigenous bodies, with conquest and the colony operating as a laboratory for knowledge about the huMan as biological flesh (Tilley, 2011). Meanwhile, inversely, this focus on flesh allows King to argue for the role of genocide – as a non-epiphenomenal event – in “the bloody trail of White/human self-actualization” (2019, p. 71), whereby the huMan and modernist humanism come into being through ongoing, repetitive violence against Black and Indigenous bodies in colonised spaces.

King’s arguments about the parasitic relations between what would become “various forms of secular humanism” (2019, p. 43) and Black and Indigenous life require a rethinking of the huMan as the product of what she calls “conquistador relations” (2019, p. 44). Taking this parasitic relationship seriously requires us to see colonial spaces as sites for the (re)production of “the liberal human” on terms that push beyond earlier work on colonialism and humanitarian government that are addressed in part by Alan Lester’s work on biological race and the rejection of universalist ideals by white settlers in colonial Australia (2011). In engaging with Black and Native Studies scholarship, King is careful to parse the differences in Black and Indigenous experiences of enslavement, transportation, dispossession, loss of land, and genocide. However, King advances the concept of the “shoal” as a meeting place between the Atlantic Ocean, the American landmass, and Africa to consider Black and Indigenous experiences in the past and present under a rubric of violent colonial encounters. Consideration of this scholarship, and Black and Indigenous experiences, makes visible in explicit ways not only the imbrications and intimacies between colonialism and humanitarianism but also the violence that forms the episteme of huManitarianism by locating them as Wynter does in alter-historical geographies and earlier encounters on the shores of Senegal and the Caribbean. As King explains, foregrounding conquistador relations:

Speaks directly to and addresses the gratuitous violence that discourses of “settlement” often evade through euphemisms such as “elimination,” “disappearance,” and “removal from the land.” The directness of “conquest,” “genocide,” and “murder” short-circuits and avoids the kinds of understatements proffered by theoretical and analytical frames parried by settler colonialism and postcolonial studies. (2019, p. 45)

The world-altering ruptures that conquest ushered in make “it almost impossible for the human imagination to fully conceive of its violence” (King, 2019, p. 49). But more than this, the continuation of such violence into the present day makes it even harder, King argues, to find the “critical imaginaries ... or find the appropriate level of abstraction and texture to make it legible” (2019, p. 49). This illegibility runs through much critical and even postcolonial scholarship that fails to tackle what Wynter (2003) describes as the category problem of the huMan.

Meanwhile, examining huManitarianism from within Black and Native Studies and their meeting places in the shoals requires more than a reflection of the colonial production of humanity or the (settler) colony as the site of humanitarian government. Forged through conquistador relations, genocide, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity that elevated Man2 at the expense of irrational others, including women, huManitarianism’s foundations in such parasitic relations present a fundamental epistemic and by extension ethical dilemma. The genocidal violence and the negation of Black and Indigenous life that forms the basis of huManitarianism’s subject, both historically and through continued systemic racism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity, presents a predicament for huManitarian aims of saving lives, relieving suffering, and upholding human dignity. How is it possible for huManitarianism to take Black Lives Matter seriously when it is epistemically tied in parasitic relations to the negation of Black and Indigenous life? As King makes clear, “anti-Blackness is a world and human making phenomenon” (2019, p. 66).

HuManitarianism therefore has what Wynter has called a category problem. Weheliye argues that the universalism of Man2 prevents thinking creatively about humanity as it could be (2014, p. 11). Examining humanitarianism as huManitarianism from, to borrow from King, the shoalpoint of Black and Native Studies requires us to question the making and remaking of the human itself, away from the huMan to something more expansive, capable of

understanding and acknowledging the negated lives on which humanist categories are based. In recent discussions of Wynter's work, McKittrick is emphatic that Wynter's work is not only about "the human" but is about "new ways of living with each other" (2021, p. 42) that can come from spending time in demonic ground. There is a need, therefore, for huManitarianism to enter a demonic ground from which alternative forms of life – interspecies–interecological (McKittrick, 2021, p. 42) – free from the current hegemonic, biocentric, white supremacist, patriarchal configurations of the human as Man can be considered.

## 6 | BLACK LIVES MATTER, HUMANITARIANISM, AND THE DEMONIC GROUND

Sylvia Wynter argues that the human has not yet been fully realised, "because the mutation by which we have gradually come to secure the autonomy of the mode of cognition specific to our species in the wake of the voyage of 1492 has been only partial" (1996, p. 40). For Wynter, Blackness is the symbolic negation of womanhood and manhood, as much as it is of whiteness. Therefore, challenging the category problem requires the "collective deconstruction of the system of symbolic representations that are instituting our present 'form of life' and its model of being 'Man,' whose extreme human Other is the black" (Wynter, 1996, p. 41). This new model cannot be found in the "neoliberal humanist piety of *multiculturalism* ... but in the poetics of a new *propter nos*" (Wynter, 1996, p. 41; italics in original). This poetics of a new *propter nos* began, according to Wynter, in the 1960s civil rights and anticolonial movements, and it can be argued continues today with Black Lives Matter. Such a new poetics would:

Have to engage both in a redefinition of the relation between *concrete* individual men and women and in the socializing processes of the systems of symbolic representations generated from the codes that govern all human purposes and behaviours – including those of our present globally hegemonic culture, as at present instituted about in its model of being "Man". (Wynter, 1996, p. 47)

This category problem, therefore, requires explicit antiracist work from humanitarianism. In fact, following Wynter's arguments it could be argued that antiracist work is *real* humanitarianism, working as it does to reconfigure a more expansive idea of life while recognising the systemic harms of genocidal violence in the past and present. However, care needs to be taken to avoid "moves to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1–40) generated by practices of recognition. For example, when Save The Children claim that racism is "an affront to our values" (Parker, 2020, n.p.), this can be read as a move to innocence, performing both a recognition of racism and sympathy with its victims through claiming racism goes against the organisation's values. However, such a claim attempts a separation between humanitarianism as a normative ideal and the origins of such ideals. Who is the "our" or *propter nos homines* of those values? It is what Weheliye refers to as a universalisation of the exception (2014, p. 11), where the "our" or "us" of European enlightenment values comes to claim a universal position. Universalising claims such as these perpetuate humanitarianism as an institutional practice with intra-organisational dynamics that are separate from external operations and re-enforces the idea that racism is an internal problem that can be closed organisationally through processes of recognition. Furthermore, the appeal to values is a negation of how those values came into being through the parasitic relations of conquest and genocide, and thus fail to address Wynter's argument that:

All our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources ... these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle. (2003, pp. 260–261)

In bearing witness to his struggles inside MSF, Arnab Majumdar recounts how "training sessions for Canadian hires who would soon move to field offices referred to national staff – more than 90 percent of MSF's employees – as 'vulnerable to corruption'" (2020, n.p.). This vulnerability, Majumdar argues, was used as justification for national (read local) staff's exclusion from senior management positions. Alongside this, "field management experience was a prerequisite" for management positions (Majumdar, 2020, n.p.). What does this requirement for field management experience and belief in the vulnerability of local staff to corruption (re)enact? First, an assumption that professional humanitarianism requires the need to venture *plus ultra* to distant places to work with strange others (re)enacts the necessary differences at the heart of universalist humanitarianism. Second, it (re)enacts an assumption that the knowledge gained through such journeys counts more than local knowledge and experience and is universally applicable, reaffirming epistemic hierarchies around whose and what

knowledge matters. Third, it (re)enacts a belief that “Man” is beyond corruption as the rational Man2 capable of operating objectively and beyond self-interest through which local staff are relegated to irrational, inherently corruptible, self-interested Others incapable of the universalist values of Man2. This in turn relegates national/local staff to the ethnographic Other and upholds Man2 as the universalist exception capable of acting *propter nos homines*.

Majumdar’s MSF role became one of using online training sessions to break down the separation between international and national staff. These online training sessions immediately ran up against a “category problem”. As Majumdar explained, “to begin the authorisation process, you needed to identify yourself as MSF defined you: Are you international or national? *Are you us, or are you them?*” (2020, n.p.; italics in original). In struggling to overcome this category problem at the heart of how MSF understands its organisation and those who work for it, Majumdar was confronted with what he describes as “extreme fragility” where, after asking that “new perspectives and additional skills” be incorporated into a future strategic plan, he was accused of “reverse racism” and of being disrespectful (2020, n.p.). What Majumdar had pointed to in highlighting the category problem was the exceptionality of Man2 masquerading as universal humanity that anchors huManitarianism. The fragility he invoked from his white colleagues suggests a recognition of this tension and threatened to topple the house of cards. By addressing the structures behind the international/national dichotomy, Majumdar pulled on a thread that we can trace back to 1441 and 1492 that if followed highlights the overrepresentation of the exceptional Man2 in the universal huManitarian subject and ideal. By pulling at this thread, the necessity of the racialised “other” from the Torrid Zones beyond the edge of the world known to Europeans in the construction of the rational European self comes to the fore. Pulling at this thread asks huManitarianism to confront its history in these encounters and unsettles its claims to universal humanity from which it draws legitimacy, while pointing to the parasitic relationship it has with violence and genocide that has resulted from these encounters.

That said, the hierarchies underpinning the international/national staff dichotomy in humanitarianism have not remained free of criticism. Didier Fassin (2012) bases what he calls the “politics of life” on an analysis of the different values attached to the lives and labour of international and national staff. This politics of life sees humanitarianism engage in biopolitical interventions that value certain lives over others. However, the “politics of life” enables a side-stepping of the overrepresentation of Man2 and the parasitic relationship discussed here. The question of race is elided or hidden in discussion of international/national, echoing the ways in which colonised identities were assumed to have been replaced by self-determined postcolonial national identities and a politics of recognition (see Grovogui, 1996). Fassin’s politics of life therefore addresses the differentiation in everyday practices of humanitarianism while leaving huManitarianism’s politics of liberal recognition undisturbed and the universalisation of the exception in Man2 untouched.

In questioning why he has been afraid to explore racism in humanitarian practice, Paul Currion does not explore where a journey such as that just described might take him, e.g., to questioning the exceptionalism of Man2 in the foundations of huManitarianism. Instead, he explores the limits of recognition, worried that “addressing the issue of racism in the aid industry won’t go far enough. The language of anti-racism can and will be co-opted by corporate processes – the endless round of training courses, workshops, and conferences” (2020, n.p.). These concerns appear to echo those around diversity work – akin to Wynter’s multiculturalism of the 1980s – that does little to tackle racial and intersecting inequalities at a systemic or epistemic level. It is necessary, therefore, for antiracist work to avoid co-optation into technocratic and consequently depoliticising techniques of governing. Alongside this it is necessary for antiracist work to avoid becoming a tool of the already overrepresented Man2.

I argue that such co-optation of anti-racism by an exceptionalising huManitarianism can be avoided through taking seriously the overrepresentation of Man “as if it were the human itself” (Wynter, 2003, p. 260). As Wynter argues, this overrepresentation sits at the heart “of all our present struggles” (2003, p. 260). By moving discussions of the human to a demonic ground, it becomes possible to talk of life “unburdened by [the] shackles of Man” (Weheliye, 2014, p. 21). Demonic ground works here as an encounter with “the space of Otherness, the grounds of being human, poverty archipelagos, archipelagos of human Otherness, les damnés de la terre/the wretched of the earth, the color-line, terra nullius/lands of no one” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 123) through which new life can come into being. Through her work in dismantling Man1 and Man2 using a multi-scalar and multi-sited focus on the colonial and racial histories of the modernist huMan, Wynter neither claims to impose new exclusive categories of human, nor enacts universalising moves that would absent the human and its past from future relations. Instead, she argues for a dwelling in demonic ground, which can be understood as “the liminal precincts” that govern current “configurations of the human as Man in order to abolish this figuration and create other forms of life” (Weheliye, 2014, p. 21). Through dwelling in demonic ground, Wynter demands different schema for what it means to be human. This means taking seriously alternative non-white supremacist

ontologies and epistemologies offered by Black and Indigenous feminists in their full diversity in rethinking and enacting humanitarian futures cut adrift from humanitarianism's foundations. This could also be considered localisation where the local would not stand in contrast to the universal but would exist in a pluriverse (see Rojas, 2016; Rutazibwa, 2018) of multiple possibilities. Without this, antiracist and anticolonial work “merely sketches a different map of Man's territorialising assemblages” (Weheliye, 2014, p. 23).

## 7 | CONCLUSION

In the wake of a reanimated Black Lives Matter movement and amid continued calls for decolonisation and anti-colonialism, humanitarianism like academia has been asked to confront the ideological and geographical origins of our institutions. I have addressed these ideological and geographic origins as they relate to humanitarianism as both an international practice and a topic of study through engaging with Wynter's alter-historical geography that centres race's epistemic role in understandings of what I call the humanitarian subject. The alter-historical geography offered by Wynter's “human view” of 1441 and 1492, as the location of the secular humanism underpinning universalist humanitarianism, offers a different view on the role of colonialism and Transatlantic Slavery in the history of humanitarianism, with the voyages of 1441 and 1492 ushering in an “instantiation and spatialization of Whiteness and humanness” (King, 2019, p. 51). Instead of locating the genus of humanitarianism within the white discomfort that animated abolition and concerns over the welfare of colonised populations, locating the genus of humanitarianism in the voyages of the 1400s makes visible the centrality of conquest and genocide of Black and Indigenous life in the creation of the universal humanitarian subject in whose name (*propter nos homines*) humanitarianism acts. This in turn is profoundly unsettling for humanitarian ethics focused on relieving suffering, saving lives, and upholding human dignity. Furthermore, for scholars of humanitarianism it raises the question as to whether postcolonial critiques of humanitarianism as the handmaiden of western imperialism rooted in earlier colonial endeavours are enough, leaving as they do the foundational role of race and racism untroubled. I argue that it is not enough and that what is required, if any humanitarianism is to survive current reckonings, is an anticolonial humanitarianism focused on pluriversal knowledge and forms of life that decentre and disassemble the huMan.

In arguing for the overrepresentation of Man2 in humanitarianism, I have laid bare the universalisation of the exception while offering avenues for rethinking humanitarianism in the future through dwelling in Wynter's demonic ground as a site of alternative pluriversal forms of life and critical intervention (McKittrick, 2006, p. 123). Such reframings aim at decentring humanitarianism beyond the institutionalised focus on localisation concerned with the nationalities of humanitarian workers, instead centring local knowledge(s), and opening a space for multiple humanitarisms unmoored from anchorage in European headquarters and knowledge systems. Finally, and importantly, the alter-historical geography offered by Wynter's “human view” can be read as a necessary move towards justice that recognises the violence at the heart of whiteness and its anti-Black and Indigenous negation and refuses the white innocence of “we're all part of the human race crap”.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data derived from public-domain resources.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I have had several encounters with humanitarian workers wherein raising questions of racism results in a defensive retreat to the universality of the human that underpins humanitarian practice and shapes their humanitarian identity. These encounters shape my thinking and argument in this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> I acknowledge there are tensions in Black Studies and Native Studies over the effects of European slavery and settler colonialism over issues of settlement and land restitution, that their impacts are felt differently across imperial space, and that the experiences of Black and Indigenous people under European domination cannot be collapsed neatly into each other. For more on these tensions, see King (2019, pp. 36–73).
- <sup>3</sup> I am grateful for the close counsel, off-the-record discussions, and informal conversations I have had with a number of humanitarian workers over the challenges of racism as well as the particular dynamics of Black Lives Matter for organisational and ideational futures.
- <sup>4</sup> The particular colonial encounters that saw Man1 transmute into Man2 can be traced through a focus on the 16th-century clash between the evangelical priest Bartolomé de Las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda, “humanist royal historian and apologist for the Spanish settlers of then Santo Domingo” (Wynter, 2003, p. 269). “The clash between Las Casas and Sepúlveda was a clash over ... whether the primary generic identity should continue to be that of Las Casas’s theocentric Christian, or that of the newly invented Man of the humanists, as the rational (or ratiocentric) political subject of the state” (Wynter, 2003, p. 288).
- <sup>5</sup> Wynter uses the term “Judeo-Christian” here. However, as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has recently argued, such framing remains “untroubled” in Wynter’s work resulting in a failure to consider how Jews were and have been produced within Christian Europe as Christianity’s original Other and the idolaters within. Judeo or Judeo-Christian in this sense is a form of antisemitic violence wherein Judaism is made part of a European origin story and cultural heritage, erasing two millennia of Christian genocidal violence against Jews, as well as invisibilising varied forms of Jewish life beyond Europe, in Africa and Asia. Azoulay argues that alongside African and Amerindian people as the “heathens” encountered in 1441 and 1492, Jews were Christianity’s “Others” within Europe and earlier boundary markers serving theocratic orderings of Christian and idolater. She questions why, in Wynter’s “human view” of 1492, Wynter fails to mention “the purging of Jews and Muslims from the body politics of Spain and Portugal that also occurred in 1492” (Azoulay, 2020, p. 25). Therefore, I choose throughout this paper to avoid Wynter’s use of Judeo-Christian in acknowledgement of antisemitic violence and its founding role as a Christian European boundary marker and ordering principle of racist exclusivity, and antisemitism as a manifestation of the very overrepresentation of Man that Wynter is concerned with.
- <sup>6</sup> For Wynter, poverty archipelagos are multi-sited and her use of archipelagos captures their uneven geographies and their locations that run from criminalised Black and Latinx people in the US prison-industrial complex, to “Welfare Moms” and a growing global precarious class as part of “a global archipelago, constituted by the Third- and Fourth-World peoples of the so-called “underdeveloped” areas of the world – most totally of all by the peoples of the continent of Africa (now stricken with AIDS, drought, and ongoing civil wars, and whose bottommost place as the most impoverished of all the earth’s continents is directly paralleled by the situation of its Black Diaspora peoples, with Haiti being produced and reproduced as the most impoverished nation of the Americas) – a systemic pattern emerges” (2003, p. 261).
- <sup>7</sup> Over the past ten years I have had numerous encounters with professional humanitarians that suggest an assumed humanitarian geography located in and around interventions in the colonised Majority World. Such narratives reproduce ideas that humanitarianism “just does not happen in certain places”, such as the United States and Europe, because these spaces are civilised, or if it does then it is assumed it will be celebrated and welcomed due to logics of liberal interventionism. These assumptions have faced considerable challenges, most recently in Europe in response to migrant rescues. However, these ideas are illustrations of and reproduce myths of civilisational exceptionalism, wherein colonial Europe and its white settler colonies, e.g., Canada, the USA, and Australia, are cosmopolitan spaces of peace and human rights. Such myths are in fact shattered by Wynter’s ideas about “poverty archipelagos”, where she links the experiences of the racialised, excluded, and precarious in the colonising Minority World with those in the colonised Majority World.

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