

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Katherine McKittrick (ed)**, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5820-6 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8223-5834-3 (paper)

*Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* brings together a robust collection of essays by interdisciplinary scholars who advocate the critical thought and writings of novelist, cultural theorist, and Black Studies scholar, Sylvia Wynter, as a model for radically reorienting humanistic studies in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the mid-1980s, Wynter has emphasized the essential role that professional and organic anticolonial intellectuals must play in “rewriting knowledge” beyond liberal humanism’s purely bioeconomic, bourgeois, Western conception of *complete* humanness, “Man”. The contributors to this edited book represent a cohort of “Wynterian” scholars who are particularly interested in expanding upon Wynter’s argument that liberal humanism is *fundamentally* inadequate at comprehending the humanity of late modernity’s structurally marginalized, genetically dysselected, and “narratively condemned” populations. From the scale of the synapses to the scale of geopolitics, each contribution to *Being Human as Praxis* unpacks what “being human” means in relation to the West’s world-changing histories of conquest, indigenous genocide, racial chattel slavery, and the expansion of modern bourgeois global economic paradigms.

The prelude to *Being Human as Praxis*’ essays is Katherine McKittrick’s transcription of a series of conversations conducted with Wynter between 2007 and 2014. Assembled under the title, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?”, these conversations present the major features of Wynter’s argument for the historical urgency of moving beyond the overrepresentation of “Man” as if it signified the human itself. Wynter speaks directly to the historical fallacy of liberal humanism’s conception of Man-as-human, when asserting that to remain “committed to our now secular, no longer theocentric but not less absolute biocentric

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[liberal] premise, that the human is...a *purely* natural organism” is the grounds for an “unparalleled catastrophe” in our times. This is, more precisely, a catastrophe in which our states, ruling-classes, and academic disciplines presume “Man” as *the* model of human social potential. A captivating feature of Wynter’s theory of the human is her emphasis on the singular importance of creative resistance, political struggle, and “heresy” in creating the conditions for major epistemic shifts, such as the one required to rewrite knowledge beyond liberal humanism’s overrepresentation of Man-as-human. In “Unparalleled Catastrophe...”, Wynter argues that the prerequisite to rewriting knowledge beyond “Man”, is “a new science, a hybrid science: a science of the Word”. In her later essay in *Being Human as Praxis*, McKittrick distinguishes this science of the Word as a framework in which “consciousness and experience are neurochemically determined by our social systems, a viewpoint that noticeably asserts that who/what we are and how we survive are not driven by genetics and extrahuman laws of naturalism” (p.145). McKittrick and the authors of *Being Human as Praxis* employ Wynter’s science of the Word as the basis for confronting significant aspects of the racial violence that characterizes early 21<sup>st</sup> century Western modernity. In doing so they elaborate the transdisciplinary relevance of Wynter’s critical thought, and confirm the ongoing relevance of the Black/Caribbean radical intellectual tradition to the West’s current state-sanctioned racial/colonial regimes.

In the opening essay of this collection, Denise Ferreira da Silva delves into the modern *geopolitical* predicament posed by the overrepresentation of Man-as-Human. Ferreira da Silva shows how modern political texts and global juridical architectures that seek to fulfill the universal promise of liberal freedom and democracy, depend on “a particular thread of humanity as a moral signifier that is also *the* ethical gauge for the members of the global polity” (p.103). The modern liberal order of knowledge that divides the Human into the rational European and

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irrational Other is, in this sense, essential rather than epiphenomenal to the rules of power that frame the “global contract” of the planet’s current political juridical-economic figures such as nation-states, multinational corporations, international nongovernmental organizations, multilateral bodies, and so forth. Walter Mignolo’s essay distinguishes Wynter’s call for a cognitive and epistemic shift beyond Man and towards the Human, as a *decolonial* project. An important dimension of Wynter’s thinking laid out by Mignolo, is her identification of “capitalism” as *one economic aspect* of liberal modernity’s colonial matrix of power (p.113). Mignolo’s focus on Wynter’s move towards thinking “through the nuances of colonial encounter with and beyond a capitalist frame” is especially important in clarifying the global relevance of her distinctly decolonial worldview. As he puts it, “what you see and feel from different colonial places is the colonial matrix of power of which the economy is only one component: domination precedes accumulation, and domination needs a cultural model or a colonial matrix that legitimizes and naturalizes exploitation” (p.115). The distinctly decolonial dimension of Wynter’s critical thought on which Mignolo puts emphasis, “does not simply protest the contents of imperial coloniality; it demands a delinking of oneself from the knowledge of systems we take for granted (and can profit from) and practicing epistemic disobedience” (p.107). Thus, epistemic disobedience as an explicit dimension of Wynter’s heresy is precisely the objective of her decolonial engagement.

In essays such as “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation” (1971) and “1492: A New World View” (1995), Wynter articulates how liberal humanism’s narratives of naturally selected/dysselected humanity manifest in the spatial, social, and political knowledge of Western modernity’s states and ruling-classes. In his elaboration of Wynter’s premise of a “geo-racial syntax undergirding post-Enlightenment configurations of humanness”, Bench Ansfield draws attention to the ways in which contemporary urban renewal campaigns deploy narratives of

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spatial contamination derived from a cartography of humanness in which “the uninhabitable spatializes a human Other category of the unimaginable/native/black” (p.125). Using renewal campaigns in post-Katrina New Orleans as an example, Ansfield argues that this racialized gradation of inhabitability is “negotiated through regimes of spatial and bodily discipline, which regulate different spaces and bodies in contiguous and divergent ways” (p.136). In Ansfield’s adaptation of Wynter’s raciocartographic project, the militarized policing and state-sanctioned violence against the black bodies and spaces of post-Katrina New Orleans is symptomatic of the work of the state in attempting to maintain the *semiotic balance* of the dominant order of knowledge and power whose highest priority is protecting the integrity of “white bodies and white spaces (as understood to be metonymical with *pure* bodies and spaces)” (p.137). The discursive residue of the geo-racial knowledge that Wynter elucidates has been instituted through Man’s underlying cartography of constructing humanness.

We may extend this mapping into current debates over definitions of indigeneity and questions of colonial residues in the colonial encounter within the Americas. For instance, in her essay, Nandita Sharma specifically troubles some contemporary currents of indigenous nationalism that recruit native/non-native binaries based on a classificatory schema that privileges territory, ancestry, and blood. Such native nationalisms run the risk of conflating the violence of settler colonialism with the modern history of diaspora and mass migration. Drawing upon Wynter’s landmark essay, “1492: A New World View”, Sharma makes urgent how the migratory process is part of the violence of the colonial experience for indigenous *and* diasporic communities alike. While the movement of peoples to and from places that are not originally from their “homeland” becomes implicated in the modern displacement of indigenous populations, however, the shared experience of European imperialism and settler colonialism as projects of dehumanization, opens identifications between colonized native and non-native

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communities. Thus within these political terrains a condition of possibility for transformative alliances may invest in the abolition of modernity's "partial perspectives of being human" (p.169).

Contributors to *Being Human as Praxis* advance Wynter's critique of the overrepresentation of Man-as-human, alongside meditations about Western modernity's racially and culturally dehumanized populations' production and participation within political and cultural traditions that imagine alternatives to Man's terms of order, relations of power, and narratives of difference. Provocatively, Demetrius Eudell proposes that "our contemporary global crises can be interpreted as epistemological ones that are generated from the premises that underlie our present secular disciplinary system of knowledge and the prototype of being to which it necessarily gives rise" (p.243). The critical potential of this Wynterian perspective resides, first, in recognizing that modern racial ideology is "a behavior regulatory system and order-instituting mechanism" that is *fundamental*, rather than epiphenomenal, to the social logics of the modern world system (p.243). Rinaldo Walcott also draws on Wynter's epistemological view of the geopolitical predicament posed by Man's raciocolonial terms of order and dynamics of power, by focusing on the Caribbean Basin as a central site in which Man's behavior-regulating and order-instituting mechanisms have been (and continue to be) refined and reconstituted. Walcott's argument is that the brutal racial regimes that haunt and continue to operate within the Caribbean are the basis for the region's revolutionary political and cultural traditions "from below" that "differently imagine, and live, the human as an alterable species-subject" (p.186). This archipelago of poverty is therefore both an important site for the Enlightenment invention of Man, but also a space of unique invention that continues to generate "the production of new modes of human life, even today" (p.188).

It is not insignificant that Wynter's early intellectual life took form in her work as a

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playwright, novelist, and cultural critic in the post-independence West Indies and post-Civil Rights Movement United States. Wynter's work during this time places her firmly within a generation of 20<sup>th</sup> century radical Black intellectuals, who sought to reinterpret the history of the modern world from the perspective of the plantation system of the ex-slave archipelago of the Americas, and "to re-represent the lives and social worlds of the majority of its people" (quoted in Eudell 2010: 311). In her contribution to the collection, Carole Boyce Davies turns her attention to this early period of Wynter's intellectual life in order to identify the early strands of her theory of being human as praxis (p.203). By approaching her early creative work as a playwright as forms of critical theory, Davies draws on the entire palette of interventions presented by *Being Human as Praxis*. Through intellectual biography and close readings of Wynter's play *Maskerade* (1970—see Brewster 2012), Davies demonstrates that anticolonial artists, workers, and intellectuals, including Wynter, belong to a modern Black/Caribbean tradition that views modern systems of dehumanization as cultural predicaments by liberal humanism. Davies makes the point that through Wynter's dramatic interventions as a fiction writer it is possible to identify a body of "creative and analytical materials that specifically target the Caribbean—even though all of her work would, at some level, engage the meaning of the Caribbean in the grander scheme(s) of European modernity" (p.204). Recent debates about the need to conceptualize a "new humanism" for the Humanities might proceed by exploring the often marginalized radical histories of thought, critical cultural production, and political struggle that are observable in the biographies of individuals like Sylvia Wynter. Intellectual biography in this instance might serve more than just to draw scholarly attention to the relatively understudied thought and literature of heretical intellectuals like Wynter, but also towards a the ongoing project of "restorying" the history of modernity from the perspective of the "narratively condemned".

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*Being Human as Praxis* is a major contribution to growing efforts to bring Sylvia Wynter's critical thought to the fore of contemporary critical social theory. The collection secures Wynter's status as a heretical intellectual insisting on the relevance of the radical Black/Caribbean decolonial tradition to the systemic crises of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century planet. At the same time that *On Being Human as Praxis* is a major contribution to theoretical elaborations and applications of Wynter's theories, the volume also participates in the Wynterian project of bringing the multitude of small- and large-scale revolts against "Man" into view as the constitutive strands of a modern radical humanist political tradition whose relevance to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is bound to become more and more apparent. Contained within Wynter's heretical vision of a new humanism are decolonial social and cultural histories that challenge our historically constructed terms of order, by experimenting with and stretching beyond the social imagination instituted by capitalism, liberalism, and white supremacy.<sup>1</sup> This book points us towards new visions of human collective social potential, and profoundly new ways of being human, born in the heretical struggles of modernity's bioeconomically dehumanized, genetically dysselected, and narratively condemned.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> From her youth onward Wynter witnessed flows of labor and capital and the systemic condemnation of Third World peoples to dehumanizing standards of living and terms of political order. In the footsteps of pioneering Caribbean (and West African) women who went to Britain as university students, Wynter found herself amidst political communities that were integral to the development of Black internationalism. The decolonial intellectual communities she participated in during her life in Britain, Jamaica, and the United States from the 1950s to the

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1990s are in their respective ways participants in a Decolonial Atlantic tradition in which those at the “underside of modernity” have grappled with the experience of anti-Black/anti-Native humanism and neocolonialism in the post-World War II transatlantic world. Whether in her fiction writing and literary criticism in the 1960s Caribbean, or her participation in radical Black Studies initiatives in the 1970s, Wynter’s subsequent and more well known writings on “the human” from the 1980s to the present originate in the epistemic ruptures initiated by the historic political, cultural, and intellectual insurgencies of Western racial-capitalist modernity’s subordinated populations (see Rodriguez 2015).

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