

(Re)inventing the Human – Representations of Humanism in Sylvia Wynter's Work

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McKittrick, Katherine (Ed.): Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Abstract:

On Being Human as Praxis attempts to offer a conclusive overview of Sylvia Wynter's work. The essays presented in this anthology engage with her texts through different, individualized lenses. Wynter's work addresses a wide range of topics like literature, history, critical theory, and religion, and includes several genres such as essays, plays, and interviews. The essays reflect upon this variety by covering various topics including race and racial differences, the concept of power, the question of black bodies, and black geographies.

McKittrick opens this volume with Wynter's famous interview „The Re-enchantment of Humanism“, which introduces Wynter as an „anticolonial figure“ (p. 2) who addresses (post)colonial subjects' constant exposure to racism, their experiences with regard to blackness, and how these still inform modern society. McKittrick reads Wynter's oeuvre as a project of resistance and attempts in her anthology what Wynter accomplishes in her work — to rethink standardized western forms of knowledge systems.

Questioning the focus on essays as the main genre, the collection continues with a dialogic text between McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter. Their conversations began in 2007 and offer insight into Wynter's thoughts and ideas. Through the format of dialogue McKittrick gives a voice to Wynter herself, which she then frames with comments and explanations. Constituting a third of the anthology, this chapter exemplifies McKittrick's effort to put Wynter herself center stage.

In her work, Wynter rethinks western concepts of being human and challenges normative beliefs and structures of knowledge. She argues that the conception of the human is informed by knowledge systems that are based upon a colonial and racialized western model of humanism. These divide the world into asymmetric categories such as „the selected and the dysselected“ (p. 10), center and periphery, or colonizers and colonized. Drawing upon biblical and Darwinian ideologies, Wynter explains how the issue of race still informs society. In order to challenge these views, Wynter rethinks what it means to be human and offers a different origin narrative. She proposes a new humanism that defies westernized standards of thinking. According to McKittrick, she develops a „counterhumanism“, which imagines humans as a „hybrid species“ (p. 11), thus breaking away from classifications of humans in static, asymmetric categories.

The following essays elaborate on Wynter’s work and connect it to discourses like colonization, multiculturalism, and migration, among others. Here, the call and response dynamic of the first chapter is mirrored by the essays, which take on a similar role as McKittrick in taking up the dialogue with Wynter. With her references to such a wide range of disciplines such as history, literature, critical theory, religion, and neurobiology, and also her abstract and dense style of writing, this dialogue places high demands on the reader’s involvement. Here, the essays provide a gateway for the reader to join in.

One example is the contribution by Walter D. Mignolo – “Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?” which takes a decolonial approach to Wynter’s work. According to Mignolo she unravels „colonial knowledge systems [...] through which knowledge and knowing are constituted“ (p. 106). Mignolo situates Wynter in a decolonial space, which he positions outside of the present order of knowledge. He characterizes her as a „radical thinker“ who „engage[s] in epistemic disobedience“ (p. 106). Therefore, she constructs a counter discourse and rethinks being human as a female Afro-Caribbean thinker. Beyond that, Mignolo mentions Wynter’s notion that Humanism, or being Human, is a constructed narrative, which can only exist because it is reinforced through the telling of stories rooted within „biocentric Human origin stories“ (p. 107). At the same time he emphasizes how those stories are characterized by dysselection and the bourgeois system of knowledge of the Western world. This narrative approach discloses Wynter’s mission to not only rethink or reinvent the conception of the Human but to question and to challenge the very categories and instruments through which Humanism was/is constructed. Mignolo questions European knowledge system based on racial differences, which divide the world into binary oppositions. Instead he stresses one of Wynter’s most drastic notions, which reappears throughout her work: „[B]eyond Man, toward the Human“ (p. 110); while „Man“ represents the western, colonial order of being, the „Human“ implicates the notion of humans as hybrid beings.

All essays in this volume reflect upon Wynter's hermetic theoretical thoughts and guide the reader through her concept of humanism. Here, McKittrick's introductory interview serves as a point of reference and allows Wynter herself to participate in this process. *On Being Human* opens up unique perspectives on discourses of modern society. While Wynter's analytical work is now being widely received, her creative work also deserves closer attention. Carole Boyce Davies' „From Masquerade to Maskerade“ is the only chapter to offer an analysis of Wynter's drama „Maskerade“. A welcome addition would be a critical reading of Wynter's only novel *The Hills of Hebron*, which engages with Jamaica's colonial past from a distinctively black perspective. Published in the year of Jamaica's independence, it underlines forms of resistance of the Afro-Caribbean community in Hebron.

German Abstract:

Die (Neu)erfindung des Menschen — Repräsentationen von Humanismus in Sylvia Wynters Werken

Der Sammelband *On Being Human as Praxis* gibt einen anschaulichen Überblick über die Arbeit von Sylvia Wynter. Ihre Texte beleuchten ein breites Spektrum an Themen, wie zum Beispiel Literatur, Geschichte, Kritische Theorie und Religion und bedient sich dabei verschiedener Genres; unter anderem Aufsätze, Dramen und Interviews. Der Sammelband beleuchtet diese Vielfalt, indem die verschiedenen Autor_Innen Themen wie Rassismus, Macht, die Frage nach „schwarzen Körpern“ und „schwarzen Geographien“ nachgehen.

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