



# Transfiguring the geo and the human: the thresholds of the earth.

Gregynog Theory School 2022

March 17-18 2022



ESRC Wales Doctoral  
Training Partnership  
Partneriaeth Hyfforddiant  
Doethurol Cymru ESRC

## Welcome to Theory School 2022

The annual *Gregynog Theory School* has been funded by the ESRC Cohort Development Fund to provide a forum for post-graduate students throughout the UK to engage with theoretical topics in a supportive and collaborative setting. The Theory School is organised and sponsored by the Wales DTP but is open to all post-graduate students.

**Keynote: Deborah Dixon**

School of Geographical Sciences, University of Glasgow

### DTP Postgraduate Researchers:

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

### DTP Academic Staff:

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

### Guest Researchers:

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

## Schedule

### Thursday March 17<sup>th</sup>

12.15 - 13.15:	Lunch
13.15 - 14.30:	Welcome & Keynote: Prof Deborah Dixon
14.30 - 16.00:	Seminar 1
16.00 - 16.30:	Tea break
16.30 - 18.00:	Seminar 2
19.00:	Dinner

### Friday March 18<sup>th</sup>

8.00 - 9.00:	Breakfast
9.00 - 10.30:	Seminars 3-5 (student choice)
10.30 - 11.00:	Coffee break
11.00 - 12.30:	Seminars 3-5 (student choice)
12.30 - 13.30	Farewell briefing

## Gregynog Theory School Workshop Guidance

### Tips to help you prepare for discussion

The Gregynog Theory School is a place where we work through difficult texts in a collaborative fashion in order to gain understanding of complex ideas that may push our own thinking. We begin from the presumption that theory is difficult and as such requires group discussion. This means that everyone in your discussion group is in the same boat. We are all trying to work through, understand and develop the implications of difficult texts and we do so from a position where few of us are experts. In order to help with this process we offer the following guidance.

#### **1. Staff are not experts:**

It is important to understand that many of the staff have also not engaged with the texts being explored and thus should not be counted on to be sources of expertise or authority. This means that questions about the reading will need to be grappled with collaboratively and you should expect questions about the meaning of terms, concepts or passage to be turned back to the group. The aim of the discussion leader will be to establish a collaborative ethic where the group can work through the text together.

#### **2. Keep discussion focused on the text:**

The best source for understanding is the text itself. Thus, questions about meaning or points of discussion should refer to specific pages and passages. Do not be surprised if the discussion leader asks you to link your point to a specific page and asks you to read a passage out loud. Points of confusion and discussion are best elaborated as they are discussed step by step, working through ideas sentence by sentence. Keeping focused on the text anchors conversation on the author and their ideas.

#### **3. Read with the author:**

The role of the seminar is to understand the main ideas of the reading and to use those ideas to encourage further thinking and discussion. For this reason, it may be useful to avoid - or at least delay - critique. The main ambition should be to read with the author, meaning to try and follow their thinking process as much as possible. This does not mean we should avoid raising questions about the argument or develop counter positions. But it does mean making understanding the priority.

#### **4. It is ok to be pushed on your ideas:**

Raising half-baked ideas is to be encouraged and we should all be willing to articulate our thoughts even if they are not 100% (or even 50%) clear in our mind. In addition, given the collaborative ethic of the group, we should not be discouraged if the discussion leader or other members of the group push us on these ideas to foster clarity. Sometimes this process can help us make sense of inklings that we have not fully developed.

#### **5. Come prepared with questions:**

You are encouraged to come to the sessions with questions about the reading already in mind. These can be questions of clarification (about basic terminology), argument (about overall thesis or direction) or implication (about tensions in the reading or illuminating how different authors address the same issue). It is often helpful to come to the session with passages or points highlighted that you found particularly interesting, confusing or worthy of discussion (please note down the page). Indeed, often the best questions come from those areas we find genuinely puzzling or perhaps particularly innovative in the text.

### 6. A note about expectations:

The Gregynog Theory School is a state funded event that allows staff and post-graduates the unique opportunity to come together to discuss complex material in an open, supportive and collaborative fashion. But the expectations are high. There is a lot of reading assigned, many of the texts are difficult to comprehend and we spend long hours in discussion. While we understand that you will not find everything useful or relevant, we expect students to read the work, engage in discussion and approach the process with intellectual intent and an open mind. While you may not be able to read everything closely, it is expected that you will come prepared. Sometimes students feel the need to confess that they have not done the work. While this may seem like an intellectually honest position, in reality it invalidates your contribution. The expectation is that you read. And while we understand that you may not be able to read everything well or fully, we expect you will read enough to participate effectively.

### Session Schedule and Leaders

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Seminar Session</b>	<b>Seminar Room 1 Group A</b>	<b>Seminar Room 2 Group B</b>	<b>Writing Room Group C</b>
Thursday March 17th	14.30 16.00	Seminar 1: Coloniality of Being	██████	██████	██████
	16.30 18.00	Seminar 2: Genre of Man	██████	██████	██████
<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>		<b>Seminar 3 Poetics of Relation</b>	<b>Seminar 4 Materialist Feminist Geopolitics</b>	<b>Seminar 5 Black Political Economy</b>
Friday March 18th	9.00 10.30		██████	██████████	██████
	11.00 12.30		██████	██████████	██████



## **Transfiguring the geo and the human: the thresholds of earth**

Amidst past and current articulations of an inhuman, abhuman, less-than-human and more-than-human humanity, how has the concept of Man framed the question of the human in Western academia? And how does this notion continue to circulate through contemporary debates around intersectionality, decolonialization and feminist politics?

Using the post-colonial afro-Caribbean writers Sylvia Wynter and Edouard Glissant as starting points, the 2022 Gregynog Theory School will explore how certain *genres* of colonial thought continue to have a deep symbolic hold on the politics and geopolitics of the academy as well as how these genres shape certain problematics, e.g., how are state-driven politics of life and death acknowledged and defined; how are certain conceptual terrains deemed relevant and productive; and what are the terms of admittance of ideas and practices that work to other worldly frameworks? At stake is not simply questions of subjectivity, difference and alterity but the notion of sovereignty itself and the question of what it means to have boundaries, borders or thresholds – as well as what it means to defend, cross or transcend them.

Through an exploration of the earthly approaches of Wynter and Glissant (as well as their intersections with writers such as Grosz, Žižek, Braidotti and their interlocutors) we will examine how a more fleshly, terrene, even monstrous perspective on the symbolic allows us to revisit questions of representation (and representational politics) on new terms as well as envision what it means to value decolonialization when the very terms of our politics (e.g., the Anthropocene, climate change) continue to be organized around the concept of Man.

The topic is divided into five separate seminars which will be explored over four sessions. While all attendees will participate in seminars 1 and 2 on Day 1, students can choose from seminars 3, 4 and 5 on Day 2. The schedule for the Theory School, along with seminar themes and readings is presented below.

## Seminar sessions and readings

### 1. Coloniality of Being

Born in Cuba, and spending childhood years in Jamaica, novelist, playwright and scholar Sylvia Wynter undertook a B.A. in Modern Languages (Spanish) at Kings College London. She was Assistant Lecturer in Hispanic literature at the University of the West Indies before being appointed Professor in the Department of Literature at the University of California at San Diego, leading a new program in 'Third World' literature. She became chairperson of African and Afro-American Studies in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Stanford University. Long concerned with how the conflation of 'Humanity' with the figure of white, Western, bourgeois Man relies on the dehumanisation of those not regarded as fitting this description, Prof. Wynter spelled out the consequences of this dehumanisation for the treatment of Black men by police in the USA in her (1994) 'Letter to my Colleagues'. In the 'The 'Coloniality of Being' Prof. Wynter expands on the 'overrepresentation' of Man, and the consequences of this for the well-being of humanity and for a habitable Earth. This argument not only counters the 'species-thinking' that has animated so many Anthropocene debates, it maps a historical geography of desecularisation manifest in a 'cosmic rift' that allows for the emergence of physical, and then biological sciences, in 'modern' universities. Not only does it situate a techno-industrial, capitalist mode of production as indispensable to this 'master code' delineating the nature of human being, it states the need to redescribe the human outside of the ongoing 'coloniality of power' if it is to be unsettled. This essay sets the scene for us this year at Gregynog, but is also a reminder of theory as resistance, and a trenchant call for a decolonial theory to come.

#### Readings

- Wynter, S. (2003) "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument." *The New Centennial Review* 3: 257-337.

### 2. The Genre of Man

In sundering the overrepresented 'Man' of physical and biological science from 'humanity', how is the latter to be understood such that it remains a referent that somehow aggregates but yet is attentive to concrete conditions of existence? It is this question – and variations thereof – that has drawn some academics, including feminist materialists, to the work of Wynter. To question the Genre of Man is to interrogate how this unembodied referent has been constructed from the serial denial of the fleshiness of human life, and the making 'earthly' of Man and his Others, *but differently so*. To counter the Genre of Man is to corporealize and ecologise outside of these terms; to realise socialised bodies, and specific bodily practices, such as thinking, anew. The readings here extrapolate from Wynter's argument, taking us to the ecological import of Wynter's work, the 'truth of the world' that the term *terra* relates (and the relationality it naturalises), and the importance of 'fungibility' for understanding 'dividualism' as the making, exploitation, and experiencing of multiple sites of difference.

### Readings

- Hantel, M. (2020) "Plasticity and Fungibility: On Sylvia Wynter's Pieza Framework." *Social Text* 38 (2): 97-119.
- Kaiser, B. M. and K. Thiele (2017) "Terra." Open Access PDF.
- Parker, E. A. (2018) "The human as double bind: Sylvia Wynter and the genre of "man". *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32(3): 439-449.

### **3. Poetics of Relation**

For Prof Wynter, the poetics of Edouard Glissant offer a 'countermeaning' to the 'Word of Man' that animated the general plantation structure but also its specificities in Martinique, where Glissant was born and raised, and which continues to order the 'past' of the Antilles. A key component of this countermeaning – but which is also demonstrated in the morphology of Glissant's poetics - is the 'anti-Universal'; what poststructuralists might call a radical alterity rooted in land and routed by the seas. Small wonder Glissant's poetics have fascinated academics such as Wynter, interested in teasing out the logos and bios of human being in the world, and the 'unblocking' of freedom and autonomy. And, that geographers have taken inspiration from Glissant's geographical imaginaries, from 'distance' to 'ecology' and 'territory'.

### Readings

- Glissant, E.D. (1997) *Poetics of relation*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press. Chapter entitled 'Theories' Pages 132-167 + 'the burning beach' 205-210.
- Wynter, S. (1989) "Beyond the word of man: Glissant and the new discourse of the Antilles." *World Literature Today* 63(4): 637-648.

### **4. Materialist Feminist Geopolitics**

'Feminist geopolitics' continues to be articulated as a corrective to the disembodied framings of both a 'traditional geopolitics' and a 'critical geopolitics,' where the lived experience of borders, citizenship and territorialising are offered as evidence of the production/challenging of power inequalities and a silencing/voicing of the disempowered. In counterpoint, a materialist feminist geopolitics – arguably – collects the haunting traces not only of the gendering work of geopolitical analysis, but of the geopolitics that shape what is understood to be 'lived experience', conjured through flesh, bones, touch, feeling and affect. Delving into the 'Genre of Man', a materialist feminist geopolitics searches the back catalogues of the physical and biological sciences for breaches and interregnums, experiments and precedents, signs and portents of worlds cut short and worlds ushered in.

### Readings

- Dixon, D. (2015) *Feminist geopolitics: Material States*. Burlington, Ashgate. Chapters 1 and 4.
- Last, A. (2018) "Open space to risk the Earth: The nonhuman and nonhistory." *Feminist Review* 118(1): 87-92.

### **Session 5: Black Political Economy and Racial Capitalism**

These readings respond to, and enliven debate about concepts brought by Max Hantel in his article 'Plasticity and Fungibility: On Sylvia Wynter's Pieza Framework.' The Pieza framework, as Hantel describes it, is a political technology for dehumanising chattel slaves



in order to construct fungible assets and create a measure of value exchange. These readings explore how black labour has been separated from black personhood and humanity to create tradeable, commodifiable human value. What have been the evolving and reorganising structures of power that have maintained this control over black economies to this day? Both Davis and Bhattacharya go deeper into the intersectional oppressions of race and gender, via a discussion of reproductive labour, the private and domestic internal labour that (re)produces and maintains black labour. These readings are foundational to an understanding of the dehumanising power of neo-liberal capitalism that detaches the person from the production, and the formations of self-determining black political economies as a response.

### Readings

- Bhattacharyya, G. (2018) *Rethinking racial capitalism: questions of reproduction and survival*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Chapters 1 and 2.
- Davis, A.Y. (1998) Women and capitalism: dialectics of oppression and liberation in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, Joy James (ed). London: Blackwell. Chapter 11 (161-192).

## NOTES



