



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Unsettling the Coloniality of the Affects: Transcontinental  
Reverberations between Teresa Brennan and Sylvia Wynter

Lauren Guilmette

philoSOPHIA, Volume 9, Number 1, Winter 2019, pp. 73-91 (Article)

Published by State University of New York Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/phi.2019.0014>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/729830>

# Unsettling the Coloniality of the Affects

---

Transcontinental Reverberations between  
Teresa Brennan and Sylvia Wynter

LAUREN GUILMETTE

**Abstract:** This article interprets Teresa Brennan's (2004) work on the forgetting of affect transmission in conjunction with Sylvia Wynter's (2003) argument concerning the rise of Western Man through the dehumanization of native and African peoples. While not directly in dialogue, Wynter's decolonial reading of Foucault's (1994) epistemic ruptures enriches Brennan's inquiry into this "forgetting," given that callous, repeated acts of cruelty characteristic of Western imperialism and slavery required a denial of the capacity to sense suffering in others perceived as differently human. Supplementing Brennan with Wynter, we can better describe the limits of sympathy discourses as resting on identification and perceived *sameness*. In turn, Brennan (posthumously) comes to Wynter's defense in her call for a new science of plural cultures to redefine the human, which some have interpreted as a positivist misreading of Frantz Fanon (2008). Brennan and Wynter alike have been criticized for their appeals to science; yet, I defend their respective proposals for social-scientific inquiry with support from Brennan's response to the 1996 Sokal Hoax: the influence of the social on the biological body is, indeed, difficult to study, but this does not invalidate the inquiry as such.

**Keywords:** Teresa Brennan, Sylvia Wynter, sociogeny, affect, sympathy

\*\*\*

This article interprets the late feminist theorist Teresa Brennan's theory of affect transmission and its early modern "forgetting" in conjunction with the work of Sylvia Wynter, who argues that the emergence of the Western concept of Man was based on the dehumanization of native and African people in Europe's colonization of the "New World." While Brennan and Wynter do not write in explicit dialogue, I engage their respective theories of the self-contained human as a Western construction, and the emotions as sociohistorical rather than innate. While Brennan was attuned to global energetic exploitation at both socioeconomic and ecological registers, I find that Wynter's decolonial attention to the overrepresentation of Western Man enriches Brennan's claims about the fantasy of the self-contained ego and the association of affective excess with gendered and racialized subjects.<sup>1</sup> Particularly through her reinterpretation of Michel Foucault (1994) on the ruptures between Western epistemes, Wynter can contextualize the displacement of sympathetic forms Brennan describes by placing it alongside concurrent justifications for the dehumanization and abuse of non-European cultures; these repeated acts of cruelty required a denial of the capacity to sense suffering in those marked as different from one's self. In the attention they each give to the sociohistorical shaping of "human nature," Wynter and Brennan enrich a transcontinental insight into the forgetting of affect transmission. With Wynter, in other words, we can better describe the limits of Western sympathy discourses as resting on perceived sameness that Brennan articulates.

In turn, Brennan comes to Wynter's defense in her call for a new science of cultures, which some interpret as a method of overcoming of human opacity—a kind of decolonial epistemic breakthrough that would bring us to fully understand human symbolic activity. However, Brennan and Wynter alike have been criticized for their respective attempts to bridge the natural and human sciences, e.g., Brennan because of her interest in endocrine research and Wynter because of her concern with neurobiological research into the maintenance of cultural symbols (cf. James 2007, Marriott 2012). I argue here that these critiques miss an important shared insight, namely that Wynter's challenge to the Western ethnoclass of Man and Brennan's critique of the foundational fantasy aim to unsettle the colonial norms of not only truth and freedom, but of what it means to be an expressive subject worthy of response. In aiming to situate the still-dominant sociobiological Western account of Man as but one possible construction of humanity, I benefit also from work by Hortense Spillers (1987) and Alexander G. Weheliye (2014) on "the flesh," as well as Sianne Ngai (2005) and Kyla Schuller (2017) on "animatedness," concepts I explicate below.

In the final section, I defend Brennan's and Wynter's proposals for social-scientific inquiry with support from Brennan's rather timely response to Alan Sokal's hoax article in *Social Text* (1996). Brennan (2003) takes interest in

Sokal's demonstration of "how far one can go with a string of problematizing, complicating, and critiquing adjectives," entirely without content, but criticizes it for assuming that "any sociology of physics was by definition absurd, and this despite other findings of hard science, to the effect that all social facts have their material dimension" (116). Ultimately, in defense of these authors' call for a new science of culture, I argue that the influence of the social on the biological body is, indeed, difficult to study, but this difficulty does not invalidate the inquiry as such.

### THE FORGETTING OF AFFECT TRANSMISSION: RECENT CRITIQUES OF BRENNAN ANSWERED

Teresa Brennan (1952–2003) came to academia later than most, engaged throughout her twenties in activist efforts in Australia and America before earning her doctorate in her late thirties. Brennan's academic career lasted only a decade; her life was tragically cut short by a hit-and-run car crash that left her in an irreversible coma shortly before her fifty-first birthday. Brennan's most widely read text is her posthumous work, *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), which opens with a question: "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'?" Brennan's point in raising the question is to challenge the presumption of the self-contained subject of Western modernity, whose affects, emotions, and/or feelings are presumed to belong to her/himself. This model of subject-formation rests on what Brennan calls the "foundational fantasy," which she developed in earlier books. In brief, this fantasy is a distortion of the subject that arose in early modern Europe, according to which it takes itself to be self-grounding and self-sufficient. As Brennan writes (2004), "After the seventeenth century the concept of transmission lost ground. . . . It was born, this new individual, free and equal in the marketplace. The original meaning of affect and affection was minimized . . . together with the idea that persons were also affected by the emotions of others" (17). The self-contained ego tends to project undesirable affects of dependency onto the caregiver, historically the mother, and these projections reinforce a cultural animosity toward "feminine beings" (which do not correlate to biological females for Brennan), particularly as these beings tend to be more vulnerable and/or receptive to the energies of others (14). "Boundaries," Brennan writes, "paradoxically, are an issue in a period where the transmission of affect is denied" (15).

While Brennan's work has been touted recently by Schuller (2017) as "among the strongest works in affect theory," it is largely unexplored and barely credited in the literature (6). *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010) engages Brennan only critically (37) or generically, in passing (275, 283); in the former case, Sara Ahmed groups Brennan with theorists of "affect contagion" who minimize the

ways affects are *misinterpreted* in transmission, due to differences in positioning of race, sexuality, and other axes of identification. Her critique attaches to Brennan's opening line about feeling the atmosphere, but she suggests that Brennan assumes we all enter a room in the same way, regardless of differences and relations of power (37). While Ahmed's essay is an excellent piece in its own right—and the point she makes regarding Brennan's text is an important one—I do not agree that Brennan assumed this. Ahmed's critique is unfortunate because Brennan has been so infrequently canonized in the affective turn that this is perhaps the only time many readers will see her name, but from a wider vantage point, it is difficult to maintain. Indeed, Brennan (2004) qualifies a few pages later that, although affects are transpersonal, the linguistic and visual content through which I interpret a given affect will “remain my own . . . the product of the particular historical conjunction of words and experiences I represent” (7). When taken alongside Brennan's work on social pressure and the energetic draining of feminized and racialized groups, I find it ultimately falls flat.

Among those who have engaged Brennan's theory of affect transmission in greater detail, including her close friends and interlocutors, the reception has still been largely critical. Susan James (2007), a close intellectual friend of hers, nonetheless takes issue with 1) the extent to which Brennan emphasizes transmission as a *physical* process, and 2) her claim that awareness of transmission was reduced after the seventeenth century, with the rise of the modern subject. Regarding the former, James finds that Brennan's emphasis on the physicality of affect before the seventeenth century reinforces a mind-body dualism that her earlier concepts opposed, e.g., “social pressure” (52). Tying the two together, she speculates that Brennan embraced the physicality of pheromones because she thought only a “scientific” explanation would convince her readers but suggests that this over-focus on physicality led Brennan to overlook eighteenth-century theories of sympathy as a new paradigm of interpreting the affects (*ibid.*). James cites Scottish Enlightenment views, such as David Hume's claim that we can “receive by communication the inclinations and sentiments” of other people, making our minds “mirror to one another.” She also cites Adam Smith's claim that the passions sometimes seem “transfused from one man to another, instantaneously, and antecedent to what excited them in the person principally concerned” (53). Finding these views to be essentially the same as Brennan's transfusions of affect—James disputes Brennan's claim that eighteenth-century writers repressed the knowledge of affect transmission. “Teresa does not discuss sympathy,” she claims, before turning toward her own recent work on comparison and sympathy in the eighteenth century, which she defends as an alternative affect to offset the envy and projection of the comparative Brennan describes (54).

James is not correct, however, in assuming that the theories she discusses are essentially the same as affect transmission because they each revolve around analogical reasoning and imaginative reflection, and not resonance, porosity, or interchange. Smith begins his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), for example, with the observation that we can only imagine the pain of others, shuddering at the suffering we perceive: “We have *of course* no immediate experience of what other men feel; so the only way we can get an idea of what someone else is feeling is by thinking about what we would feel if we were in his situation” (emphasis added). Because James’s focus is on the physicality of Brennan’s account of affect transmission, she finds Smith’s claim about shuddering sufficient to contradict Brennan’s thesis about a lack of physicality in affect theories after the seventeenth century. Yet, if we shift the emphasis from physicality to a critique of this sympathy’s analogical structure, her thesis becomes more compelling. Smith’s “of course” is loaded in light of what Brennan describes as the Western ego’s insistence upon self-containment, which becomes all the more so in conversation with Wynter’s challenge to the universalization of Western Man as *the* representative human. Nonetheless, James’s critique is productive because it pushes the legacy of her late friend toward a question Brennan did not finish answering before her death: *How is modern sympathy distinct from the earlier forms of transmission, and what does this mean for how we conceive of sympathy as an ethical impulse?*

Brennan’s claims about the forgetting of affect transmission gain depth in dialogue with Foucault’s theory of epistemic shifts in *The Order of Things* (1994), and all the more with Wynter’s decolonial rethinking of Foucault’s theory (2003). Brennan references Foucault minimally in her work, associating a Foucauldian focus on dismembering “disreputable master narratives” as an overreaction to the errors of Marxism (1993, 5). Yet, Brennan also gives Foucault credit (which she does not give to “Foucauldians”) for recognizing that as we limit ourselves to local inquiries, we risk “letting ourselves be determined by more general structures of which we may not be conscious, and over which we have no control” (6; citing Foucault 1984, 47). Along parallel lines, Wynter (2003) criticizes Foucault for over-attending to discontinuities, such that he tends to miss a “continuous cultural field” of racial hierarchies upon which various institutions have relied over the centuries (318). Still, before turning to Wynter, I find it productive to consider in brief the seventeenth-century shift Brennan describes alongside Foucault’s analysis of the shift from a Renaissance episteme of resemblances to a Classical episteme of representation, particularly the role of “sympathy” on either side of that rupture, which Wynter’s interpretation will deepen in the following section.

In the Renaissance episteme, Foucault (1994) describes the conditions of knowledge as resemblances between the play of signs in the macrocosm of the universe, which he delineates according to the four “similitudes”: emulation,

convenience, analogy, and sympathy (19). Analogy superimposes *emulation* (resemblances across space) and *convenience* (adjacencies, bonds, joints), which entails a proportionality of the natural world to the body of Man. Here, all processes find their meaning and significance by being seen as like Man—rivers are the earth’s veins, and diamonds the shining eyes of the earth’s dark face (21–22). The fourth form, sympathy, is distinct from analogy as an interpenetrative and transformative force for which “no path has been determined in advance, no distance laid down, no links prescribed”; Foucault adds that it can cross “the vastest spaces in an instant: it falls like a thunderbolt from the distant planet upon the man ruled by that planet; on the other hand, it can be brought into being by a simple contact” (22, 26). These sympathies must be distinguished from the Classical sentiments of the eighteenth century that James describes, according to which we *represent* to ourselves the pleasures and pains of others and, benevolently imagining how we would feel in their shoes. Renaissance sympathies are not always benevolent, nor are they understood in terms of feelings an individual possesses; rather, these sympathies are transmissions having “the dangerous power of assimilating, or rendering things identical to one another, of mingling them, of causing their individuality to disappear.” For this reason, they must be counterbalanced by the antipathies, which maintain “the isolation of things,” to keep the diversity of nature from collapsing into a homogenous mass (26–27).

Important for Brennan as for Foucault, Renaissance sympathies existed *outside* the individual and were able to *possess* that subject, as opposed to Classical sentiments, which become *possessions* of that subject to be cultivated. The sympathy of Hume or Smith no longer claims me from without, but arises as a considered judgment from within, as the result imagining another’s pleasure or pain as my *own* (cf. Brennan 2004, 103–06). Placing Foucault’s account of epistemic rupture alongside Brennan’s theory, we discern that Brennan is arguably referencing this earlier Renaissance (albeit still Western) understanding of sympathy when she laments the forgetting of affect transmission; indeed, she theorizes a shift since the seventeenth century with which I think Foucault would agree: the belief that one is physically transformed by the feelings of others through affective porosity is denied and replaced with a model of analogical reflection between self-contained subjects that only imagine themselves to be the *same*. Following Foucault, sympathy in the Renaissance produces likenesses between things such that they resemble each other, but, in the Classical era’s focus on the intercession of representation, this intimate inter-affectivity becomes a source of error (51). As Western “sympathy” develops to become a matter of identification via analogy, further, this range of common feeling is constrained to those with whom Man identifies, minimizing the possibility of transmission across perceived differences.

TRANSCONTINENTAL REVERBERATIONS: WYNTER'S CRITIQUE OF MANI  
AND MAN<sup>2</sup>

The subject of Western modernity—the hegemonic ethnoclass of Man—was formed through its constitutive exclusions, framing concepts not only of “being,” “power,” “truth,” and “freedom,” but also of *affect* and capacities for *feeling*. But how? Through Wynter’s interpretation of Foucault, I want to suggest that the forgetting of affect transmission can only be formulated in the context of a Western European inability (premised on a preexisting refusal) to analogize (not sympathize) with others. They refused to feel the pain of others in their conquest, colonization, and enslavement of other peoples, and refused to allow themselves to be transformed, but taxonomized and hierarchized the different peoples. Here again, if the moral sentiments become a matter of identification, then the space of moral obligation for Man is always already constrained to those whom he perceives as *like* himself.

Wynter opens her essay “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument” (2003) with a series of epigraphs to serve as guide-quotes, the first of which comes from Foucault’s conclusion to *The Order of Things* (1994) on the relatively recent invention of Man. Foucault writes that this appearance “was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangement of knowledge,” and should these arrangements give way to new ones, “one could certainly wager that man would be erased” (1994, 422). Here, Wynter leaves off Foucault’s famous closing image, by which the paragraph tends to be remembered: “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (*ibid.*). Why might Wynter leave out this phrase in her citation of Foucault? As Weheliye argues, “Man will only be abolished ‘like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea’ if we disarticulate the modern human (Man) from its twin: racializing assemblages” (2014, 8). Such an epistemic breakthrough would unsettle the givenness of the Western ethnoclass of Man by not only emphasizing the contingency of our given order, as Foucault does, but also the colonial politics keeping the previous order in place—for instance, secularizing discourses of “original sin” in terms of “scarcity” and “natural selection.” Yet, Wynter posits that Foucault’s concern for historical discontinuities and ruptures, misses a “continuous cultural field” of racial hierarchies upon which various institutions over the centuries have relied (2003, 318).

Wynter writes to disarticulate the hegemonic mode of the Western ethnoclass, with its coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom, from the descriptive possibilities of humanity; in this critical effort, perhaps we see the face starting to wash away. Reading Wynter’s guide-quote, one might indeed recall sand and sea in its absence, and in turn, one might be led to reflect on the comparative absence of sand and sea in his *histoires*. Through Wynter’s



appropriation, we might also recall the seas over which the ships of Columbus sailed and the sands upon which his culture did not think it possible to walk ashore. Beginning with the 1492 voyage of Columbus, the face of Man was imprinted on these sands with repeated and callous violence, overrepresenting its place as admirer and interpreter of the “natural” world. In Pico’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1496), Wynter finds the founding manifesto of a new epoch—one in which Adam and Eve did not *fall* but, rather, were created when God wanted “someone to admire His works” (276, 287). To place Man, in this way, as the midpoint admirer in the hierarchy of all things, meant that these works must follow rules knowable to humans; in other words, the physical laws of nature must be everywhere the same and reliable to pursue their study. This was the primary innovation of Columbus and a pivotal step in the Renaissance invention of Man<sub>1</sub>, which Wynter takes to prefigure the heliocentric universe of Copernicus insofar as his voyage already disproved the “premise of the nonhomogeneity of the earth’s geography” (279).

This “discovery” enabled the transposition of a Christian moral map of habitable and uninhabitable lands onto a “new archipelago of Otherness,” secularized via the “color line” and the repetition of dehumanizing racist tropes (321). With increasingly economic (rather than religious) aims for colonizing continents, the Western categorization of phenotypical and cultural differences naturalized a new hierarchy to replace the old, shifting the terms of “subhumanity” to justify African enslavement, Latin American and Asian conquest, and the overconsumption of resources by wealthy nations (263, 289). In the nineteenth century, with the rise of what she names Man<sub>2</sub>, biological terms came to supplement economic justifications for hegemonic power and overrepresentation, producing a secularized state of Original Sin in which financial stability—reinforced by the survival-of-the-fittest—replaced salvation for the Western ethnoclass of Man (315). The struggle of this millennium, Wynter argues, will be between Man and those against whom this “descriptive statement” is staked and then overrepresented.

One can unsettle this overrepresentation by redescribing the Human in different, *hybrid* terms, a critical act that would perhaps also unsettle Man’s overarching inability to recognize the affective transmissions and feelings of its subjugated Others (2015, 29). With this in mind, Wynter builds upon Aimé Césaire’s 1946 call for a new science of the Word, the study of our “sociogenically encoded ‘second set of instructions’” that have been reinforced through myths and narratives. Brought to a cellular level, they “co-function” with our “first set of instructions,” i.e., our genetic inheritance (2015, 58). While the natural sciences have become highly capable of explanation and prediction regarding nonhuman worlds, the social sciences and humanities have not yet determined how to explain collective behaviors. Wynter’s proposed study would engage “our narratively inscribed, governing sociogenic principles, descriptive

statement, or code of symbolic life/death, together with the overall symbolic, representational processes to which they give rise” (2003, 328). For Wynter, these secondary instructions—the entrenched remains of our Darwinian and Malthusian macro-origin stories—serve to “iterate and normalize *homo oeconomicus*” at a physiological level, co-functioning with the endogenous neurochemical regulations of the brain to produce opiate-reward and opiate-blocking neurochemicals (2015, 11). She distinguishes the contemporary neoliberal order of *homo oeconomicus* from the Roman Empire, which could only travel so far to conquer distant lands; by contrast, the West “has brought the whole human species into its hegemonic, now purely secular . . . model of being human,” according to which we are at once homogenized and differentiated as biological mechanisms (2015, 21).

Developing this hybridity of the human, Wynter turns to Fanon (2008/1952), who recognized that his French imperial education taught him to mimic and internalize desires opposed to his own flourishing, a set of analogies he had to actively counter in turning toward the possibility of reinventing the human (20–21, 30, cf. Wynter 2015, 49). As Walter D. Mignolo (2015) observes, Fanon’s form of narrative is groundbreaking in its movement between reporting third- and first-person perspectives, weaving together psychosocial analysis and auto-ethnographic reflection (116, cf. Paris 2018, 86–87). Wynter builds upon Fanon’s insistence that humanity is more than ontogeny and phylogeny, more than the biological development of the organism and of the species; alongside these skins, we can experience the symbolic world of masks, or sociogeny (2015, 23). On Wynter’s interpretation, Fanon’s “sociogeny” considers the impact of sociohistorical forces on bodily experience, complicating any “straightforwardly mechanistic model of input and output” for individual agency by acknowledging the “rhetorical-neurobiological feedback loops” that reinforce not only how “we” feel but what “we” are capable of feeling and with whom (cf. Hantel 2018, 67). In other words, Wynter elaborates Fanon’s claim that our hybrid identities can be better grasped, in our simultaneity of skin and masks, as forms of praxis rather than nouns, activities rather than static givens (2015, 33).

Following Fanon (2008), Wynter thus argues that dynamics of colonial power must be studied in order to be destroyed (xvi). A sociogenic analysis alone can speak to the history of violence carried out in the name of this “descriptive statement”—the definition of what it means to be *fully* human. Beyond critiquing these hegemonic claims, this new “science of the Word” enables the “true leap” Fanon names at the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*: we must introduce *invention* into existence. In this space of invention, Wynter (2003) discerns “a new frontier . . . onto a non-adaptive mode of human self-cognition: onto the possibility, therefore, of our fully realized autonomy of feelings, thoughts, behaviors” (331). This new frontier can recognize the

plurality of other descriptive statements, working toward a redefinition of the Human that would break with the adaptive “truth-for” terms needed to conserve the descriptive statement of Man (269). We can recall this plurality when we look to recent history and the social sciences on a transcontinental scale, beyond the Western canon to other large-scale cultures who mapped their “descriptive statements” no less absolutely with their own “objective sets of facts” (331).

Wynter admits the paradox of recognizing one’s own “descriptive statement,” in much the same way Foucault problematized the position of engaging other “epistemes”: the functioning of existing strategies and mechanisms—in our present biocentric model, for instance—requires that we repress its status as “truth-for” a particular group and not a universal claim—repress the fact of a descriptive statement (326). Yet, in this paradox, we learn something beyond the ethnoclass of Man about the capacities of the human: because we are a self-representing species, we can and must study “the functioning of these symbolic, representational, behavior-motivating/demotivating processes” (ibid.). As Max Hantel (2018) argues, Wynter’s interpretation of Fanon “takes the ‘nature-culture’ interface as its object of study,” as “a transcultural constant” of humanity’s self-organizing and self-representing (“autopoietic”) tendencies—“the specific cultural modalities of the human” as they correlate with “neurological and biochemical states” (67, citing Wynter 2001, 60).<sup>2</sup> In the third section of this article, I consider the ways in which Wynter’s proposed non-adaptive mode of human self-knowing, thinking, feeling, and behaving bears upon and finds support in Brennan’s theory of affect transmission, specifically where it is rooted in her attempts to rethink the bounds of the social and the biological. Before turning to a defense of Wynter’s methodology in conversation with a defense of Brennan’s, I must first outline some key critiques of Wynter’s call for a new science of the Word, as a matter of the interplay between neurobiology and racialized culture.

### UNSETTLING THE COLONIALITY OF THE AFFECTS: BETWEEN THE SOCIAL AND THE BIOLOGICAL

While recent theorists have affirmed Wynter’s *critical* project—her decolonial theory and her global attention to dynamics of racialization—they have been less willing, as Weheliye (2014) ambivalently puts it, “to trail Wynter’s pioneering inroads into the territory of the neurobiological” in studying sociogeny (29). Denise Ferreira da Silva (2015) takes distance from Wynter’s hope of a “universal *nomos*” as counterproductive for “disassembling . . . disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms of subjection and raciality” (100). Instead of this grand project, she appreciates the critical “fissures” opened up by Wynter’s account of the overrepresentation of Man (101).

David Marriott (2012), who is among Wynter's strongest critics, argues that she does not reflect but in fact diverges from Fanon insofar as she interprets sociogeny as a search for "psychophysical law (of knowledge, of the conscious mind)" and "positivist phenomenological explanations" (79). In Marriott's words, this "fantasy of science" optimistically coexists with the widespread realization that those who have been historically oppressed "can see more clearly" the narrative functioning of implicit cultural norms, often taken as *givens* by the Western ethnoclass (80). Importantly for Marriott, Wynter's interpretation sidesteps the opacity of the psychoanalytic unconscious for Fanon; the "epidermalization" of the racialized subject names an introjection of Western caricatured representations and associations into one's bodily being (85). Thus, Marriott finds that Wynter misreads Fanon through the positivist dream of a new science, seeking a transparency that is not attainable; he writes: "unlike Fanon, for whom the real is always veiled or masked, Wynter presupposes that the real can somehow be known" (53). Here Marriott raises important questions that Wynter does not directly entertain: Can the shadowy, imaginary realm of anecdotes, stereotypes, symbols, and other products of culture be subjected to the terms of a science? How do we explain the process by which the social shapes the biological, the process by which Fanon (2008) came to write, "My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's day" (93)?

For Marriott, Wynter's turn to science suggests "a new way of making the human calculable and predictable" at the same time that it also claims to produce an "epistemic breakthrough" of historically marginalized populations, decolonizing the meaning of the human (50). If Marriott is correct that Wynter's appeal to a new science must involve this calculability, teleologically directed at transparent knowledge concerning the human, then indeed such a project would be a positivist misreading of Fanon's sociogeny. More affirmatively but still ambivalently, Weheliye observes that Wynter's interest in the autopoiesis of culture stretches Fanon's concept beyond his claims, "not in order to take refuge" in the sciences as anterior to culture and ideology, but "to provide a transdisciplinary global approach to the study of human life that explains how sociogenic phenomena, particularly race, become anchored in the ontogenic flesh" (26). Among the strongest supporters of Wynter's view, Katherine McKittrick's (2006) concept of "demonic grounds" names liminal perspectives within the present ordering of the human as Man; elsewhere, McKittrick (2015) elaborates Wynter's decolonial *scientia* refuses "to privilege biocentricity—of which race and racism are outcomes—as the natural, pregiven order of things" (154).

This section puts Wynter's decolonial *scientia*—her proposed interdisciplinary study of cultures, symbolic systems, and non-adaptive modes of human self-knowing, thinking, feeling, and behaving—in dialogue

with Brennan's (2004) suggestion for an interdisciplinary study of affect transmission, rooted in their respective attempts to rethink the bounds of the social and the biological. Both projects take up the nature-culture distinction against its dominant interpretation by considering how the social also shapes the biological (74). Here, Brennan draws on neuroscientific work concerned with olfaction and pheromones to counter the notion that intentionality is "restricted by the skin," looking instead to how one's motivations can be shaped by factors outside the subject—relational transmissions, symbolic structures, and genetic inheritances (75). Brennan was fascinated by research on psychosomatic conditions linked to environmental and sociohistorical factors, such as attention-deficit disorder, fibromyalgia, and chronic fatigue. She focuses on these, not to suggest we could dismiss or somehow "overcome" these "with a stiff upper lip," but rather, to take them seriously in their dynamic biological and social ambiguities (3, cf. 45–48). Here, Brennan supports Wynter's point that sociohistorical narratives and other representations enable and constrain our bodily being according to existing hierarchies. We enhance and deplete one another in transpersonal exchanges of affect, even as we might differently interpret these exchanges through the words and images available to us.

As Brennan's *Globalization and Its Terrors: Daily Life in the West* (2002) and Wynter's "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future" (2015) both illustrate, the social shaping of the biological is often far from subtle. Oppressive socioeconomic policies have physiological effects, as tragically apparent in recent crises of environmental racism in the US demonstrate. Those living in socioeconomic precarity are more vulnerable to increasing violent storms (as a result of climate change), as well as to toxic dumping and water contamination (cf. Marable 2006, Dalton 2016). In less literal but still toxic (deadly) examples of energetic dumping, Brennan and Wynter call our attention to those "neutral" and "colorblind" *projections* of the Western ethnoclass that are nonetheless steeped in racialized and/or sexualized fear; for instance, Darren Wilson's defense testimony that Mike Brown appeared "like a demon" to bulk up through his bullets (cf. Ferguson Documents 2014), transphobic laws for bathroom usage in North Carolina (cf. Cobb 2016), and the recent immigration detention crisis, which locked up both adults and children on following a politically cultivated fear of migrants as "dangerous individuals" (cf. Escobar 2018).

Brennan and Wynter alike posit the work of symbolic representation and expression as distinctively human, but they do not thereby accept a universal account of these representations and/or expressions as definitive. Although Marriott (2012) accurately observes that Wynter interprets Fanon's concept of "sociogeny" beyond his psychoanalytic intent, I do not agree that sidestepping of psychoanalysis for decolonial theory makes her a positivist—nor does it reduce sociogeny to a *techne*—because I do not agree that it asks the human to

become calculable, as he insists. In this respect, her project aligns with Lisa Feldman Barrett's (2017) critique of the still-prominent "basic emotions" thesis, popularized by Paul Ekman (2007) in the early 1980s. Ekman pursued Darwin's (2009/1872) evolutionary thesis to study whether the facial expressions of six "basic emotions" could be comprehended cross-culturally. If emotions express innate and inherited needs of the human, might their expression then provide a common ground on which we all could understand each other? Brennan's and Wynter's respective projects both reject the notion of universal human feeling, though Brennan has been misread this way in *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010)—as offering a theory of affect contagion in which one person can catch another person's emotion (37, 283).

By contrast, Feldman Barrett defends a "constructed emotion" thesis, which proposes that emotions do not exist as stable distinctive neural fingerprints but occur through a complex interplay of mental processes that do not come from specific parts of the brain (40). Emotions are constructed by the brain's representation of sensations (interoception) and predictions of what will happen next: "Everything you feel is based on prediction from your knowledge and past experience" (78). Thus, our emotional expressions may overlap with shared concepts and practices to interpret our experiences: "What's universal is the ability to form concepts that make our physical sensations meaningful" (38). Humans are meaning-making beings, and emotions are no less real for being constructed from social reality; we are taught to notice some things and not others in a given cultural setting, admitting some details as information and dismissing others, toward the reinforcement of a coherent worldview that can be shared (133, 83). This does not make cross-cultural emotional understanding impossible, nor does it make intra-cultural comprehension wholly transparent; rather, it means that our cultural and historical differences in expression do not need to be reduced to a root explanation. The Western structure of sympathy that arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sought this kind of imaginative root in the analogical grounding of our concern. Perhaps part of *the problem*, rather than the solution, has been the insistence that one could only care about others one perceives as similar to oneself.

Thus, the emotional expressions of those perceived as different from Man's own have often historically been caricatured as reactive and exaggerated, often in feminized and/or racialized ways. Sianne Ngai's (2005) work on "animateness" explores the dynamics of vitality and automatic mechanization in racialized representations of emotional expression (32, 91).<sup>3</sup> Ngai draws on examples from sentimental abolitionist literature in the mid-nineteenth century, namely in William Lloyd Garrison's 1845 preface to Frederick Douglass's autobiography, in which he testifies to Douglass's "animated" physical and emotional qualities as a sign of the authenticity of his narrative (95). Similarly, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Tom must be a saintly

and self-sacrificing Christian while Eliza must be a fearless, adrenaline-driven mother for these figures to resonate with her white readership. Ngai observes that these speakers serve their authors as ventriloquist puppets of Euro-American values (98, cf. Baldwin 1949). Drawing on Ngai, Kyla Schuller (2017) finds that a similar fantasy of the simultaneously “mechanical” and “malleable” worker supported an “industrial economy in which bodies of color are set into motion like the commodities they produce, and their individual feeling serves only as unmarketizable excess” (14). Within Man’s limited expectations, historically feminized, racialized, and otherwise marginalized subjects who achieve some “success” in this economy have tended to learn how to express the culturally desired emotion at the desired time, whether or not this expression matches one’s affective-energetic state. This could be described as a form of more or less self-conscious animation. At the same time, however, expressions that exceed or defy the expectations of the hegemonic ethnoclass may be regarded as animated. For example, Ahmed’s (2010) “feminist killjoy” spoils the fun of others by refusing to laugh along with sexist jokes; Audre Lorde’s (1984) “angry” presence as a black feminist “self-righteously” disrupts a predominantly white feminist conference; and, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s (2011) “misfit” does not align with the ableist presumptions of public spaces.

Schuller extends Ngai’s thinking about animatedness and normalized emotional expression to her own work on sentimental biopower and the “impressible” subject, charting impressibility as a “key measure for racially and sexually differentiating the refined, sensitive, and civilized subject who was embedded in time and capable of progress, and in need of protection, from the coarse, rigid, and savage elements of the population suspended as flesh” (8). Here, Schuller follows Spillers’s (1987) distinction of the “flesh” (*viscus*) from the rights-holding figure of the “body” (*habeas corpus*) as “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (67, cf. Weheliye 2014, 11). For both New World colonization and African enslavement, the flesh registers the material and largely undocumented history of “wounding” as a kind of “hieroglyphics.” Spillers allows that flesh may not be readily decipherable to dominant Western discourses, but it is not thereby silent (*ibid.*).<sup>4</sup> Drawing on this insight, Schuller underscores the framing of what registers as significant for an imperialist gaze—what is allowed to register.<sup>5</sup> As has been arguably underemphasized in affect theory, that which energizes or drains us is already bound up in networks of power, replete with images and symbolic representations that attach and entrench us in various asymmetrical relations (13). If it is true that the “human” has been defined in the hegemonic terms of Western Man and those out of alignment with these bodily presumptions have been treated as “flesh,” then neither the “body” nor the “flesh” reflects universally innate conditions, but historical constructions through which we live and

breathe. Thus, I find in Ngai, Schuller, and Spillers additional support for the emergent *scientia* proposed by Brennan and Wynter—all in all, a theory of constructed emotion, in which the study of these neurobiological conditions entail an examination of symbolic practices and the influence of social forces on the body. In the closing section, I consider Brennan's (1997) response to the Sokal Hoax, in which she defends the possibility of this kind of interdisciplinary inquiry.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In "Social Pressure" (1997), Brennan responded to the notorious hoax article written by the NYU physicist Alan Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" (1996), staking out the academic space of inquiry into the physiological shifts of sociality. Sokal successfully published this "hoax" in the postmodern cultural studies journal *Social Text*, intending to mock contributions of social theorists to the natural sciences, with lines about scientists who "cling to dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony." He summarized his own basic assumptions as a physicist, interspersed with quotation marks and asides—that an external world exists with properties independent of individual minds, "encoded in 'eternal' physical laws" such that "human beings can obtain reliable, albeit imperfect and tentative, knowledge of these laws . . . by the (so-called) scientific method"—and then claims he will take these "Western" assumptions apart, showing "the ideology of domination behind 'objectivity'" (217). One can almost hear the cynical laughter in the suggestion that feminist and poststructuralist critiques have "demystified the substantive content of Western scientific practice" (*ibid.*). I can imagine Sokal envisioned himself mocking theorists just like Brennan and Wynter when he faux-posed that scientific discourses "cannot assert a privileged epistemological status with respect to counter-hegemonic narratives emanating from dissident or marginalized communities" (218).

In response, Brennan (1997) writes that Sokal's hoax drew interest as well as controversy because the piece "demonstrated how far one can go with a string of problematizing, complicating, and critiquing adjectives, with no content whatsoever" (116). Its major downside, however, was taking "for granted that any sociology of physics was by definition absurd, and this despite other findings of hard science, to the effect that all social facts have their material dimension" (*ibid.*). The influence of social forces on the biological body is, indeed, difficult to study insofar as it is hard to isolate low-grade effects in physical experimentation. Brennan illustrates this point by citing the difficulty involved in discovering the long-term effects of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs, e.g., aerosol sprays) on the ozone layer. In the



same way, the kinds of sociobiological transmissions cited above, such as the cumulative effects on each of us of manifold affective-energetic relations in a given environment, “would be very difficult to gauge” at the level of the individual; “the notion of a sum of total affects operating as “social pressure” would be even harder. Nonetheless, Brennan says, “*the difficulties here should not be confused with the notion that the effects are non-existent*” (ibid.).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude extends to the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University, which houses Brennan’s papers. Thanks to Lynn Appleton, Michael Horswell, and others at FAU for supporting my work on Brennan. I am grateful to Lynne Huffer, Taryn Jordan, and the other members of the *philoSOPHIA* Foucault-Winter Workshop in 2018, as well as Axelle Karera, among others, for encouraging my research into Wynter. Thanks to Robert Leib and to Priscilla Renta for reading drafts of this piece (though any flaws are my own).

**Lauren Guilmette** is an assistant professor of philosophy at Florida Atlantic University, where she specializes in recent continental and feminist philosophy. Her published articles include “The Violence of Curiosity: Butler’s Foucault, Foucault’s Herculine, and the Will-to-Know” (*philoSOPHIA* 7.1, 2017). She currently has two additional essays on Teresa Brennan forthcoming this year with *differences* and with the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. She can be reached at [leguilmette@gmail.com](mailto:leguilmette@gmail.com).

## NOTES

1. Having spent her short life on three continents and traveling throughout many countries in the others—especially Nepal, where she adopted a daughter in the year before she died—Brennan was attuned to global injustices and energetic imbalances beyond the Euro-American world, focusing her 2002 monograph on the unsustainable abuses of late capitalist globalization. Yet, her most famous text, *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), arguably underemphasizes the transcontinental colonial history that shapes the “forgetting” Brennan diagnoses of early modernity, which Wynter’s account (2003) brings to the foreground.
2. Autopoiesis, following Varela and Maturana (1980), names a homeostatic system of self-maintenance, in which some changes and not others are framed as self-corrections. Hantel (2018) concretely explains autopoiesis: “The tortuous rhetorical language of ‘Right to Work’ legislation, for instance, which destroys collective

- bargaining power for unions in the United States of America, discursively casts its anti-labor effects as the natural (and so apolitical and acultural) defense of citizens to buy and sell their possessive individualism as they ‘always have’” (68).
3. Ngai (2005) focuses not on the featured emotions of the Western tradition but on ambivalent affects she calls “ugly feelings,” which—*contra* Frederic Jameson—she finds are anything but “waning” in the twenty-first century (3). In line with Brennan (though not in direct conversation with her work), Ngai argues that these feelings are irreducibly socio-historical, maintaining themselves in and through linguistic signs, practices, and institutions (7). These affective tones are not sites of resistance, nor are they “solutions” to be romanticized, though they can provide critical productivity through their analysis in popular representations of late capitalism (4).
  4. Indeed, drawing our attention to this pathos-laden materiality, Spillers references Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (1994), specifically that moment in the preface when he contemplates the taxonomy of Borges’s “certain Chinese encyclopedia” and finds reflected back in this unfamiliar ordering, with amusement, “the stark impossibility of thinking *that*” (xvi); in other words, the contingency of the terms through which we make sense of our world. In Spillers’s essay, she turns instead to the flesh as a profoundly unsettling taxonomy of American slavery, “these items from a certain American encyclopedia,” records of purchases, beatings, deaths, whose “imposed uniformity comprises the shock, that somehow this mix of named things, live and inanimate, collapsed by contiguity to the same text of ‘realism,’ carries a disturbingly prominent item of misplacement” (79).
  5. As William M. Paris (2018) elaborates, Spillers’s concept of “flesh” not only upends dominant structures of representation concerning the “body” but also challenges the biological primacy of blood ties, ties denied and disrespected by white slave owners, such that new forms of kinship had to be cultivated; thus, distinct from the inheritance blood, the flesh gestures instead to “an intergenerational praxis of reorganizing the field of ‘truth’” (93, 95, cf. Spillers 1987, 74–76). Before Wynter and Brennan, Spillers’s earlier essay stakes out the vital impact of social forces on the biological body, minimizing the tropes of sociobiology for relational sites of transformation.
  6. For an excellent recent analysis of academic hoaxes, please see Spera and Peña-Guzmán 2019.

## WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. “Happy Objects.” In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Baldwin, James. 1998 [1949]. “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” In *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison. New York: Library of America.

- Brennan, Teresa. 2004. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- . 2003 [1997]. “Social Pressure.” In *Continental Feminism Reader*, edited by Ann J. Cahill and Jennifer Hansen. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; originally published in *American Imago* 54, no. 3.
- . 1990s. The Age of Paranoia. Unpublished manuscript. Teresa Brennan Papers, 1965–2002. Feminist Theory Archive, Brown University.
- . 2002. *Globalization and Its Terrors*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1993. *History After Lacan*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Cobb, Jelani. 2016. “Opening Doors: North Carolina’s bathroom bill is reminiscent of the days of de-jure discrimination.” *The New Yorker*, May 5. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/north-carolinas-retrograde-step>.
- Dalton, Deron. 2016. “Flint, Katrina, and the Rise of Environmental Racism.” *The Daily Dot*, April 4. <https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/what-is-environmental-racism/>.
- Darwin, Charles. 2009 [1872]. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Anniversary Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ekman, Paul. 2007 [2003]. *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Holt Paperbacks.
- Escobar, Natalie. 2018. “Family Separation Isn’t New.” *The Atlantic*, August 14. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/08/us-immigration-policy-has-traumatized-children-for-nearly-100-years/567479/>.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008 [1952]. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Ferguson Documents: Officer Wilson’s Testimony. 2014. *NPR: the two way*, November 25. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/11/25/366519644/ferguson-docs-officer-darren-wilsons-testimony>.
- Feldman Barrett, Lisa. 2017. *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*. Boston: Mariner.
- Ferreira da Silva, Denise. 2015. “Before Man: Sylvia Wynter’s Rewriting of the Modern Episteme.” In *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katharine McKittrick. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1994 [1966]. *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 2011. “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept.” *Hypatia* 26, no. 3: 591–609.
- Hantel, Max. 2018. “What Is It Like to Be a Human?: Sylvia Wynter on Autopoiesis.” *philoSOPHIA* 8, no. 1: 61–79.
- James, Susan. 2007. “Repressed Knowledge and the Transmission of Affect.” In *Living Attention*, edited by Alice Jardine, Shannon Lundeen, and Kelly Oliver. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982 [1980]. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. New York: Crossing Press.

- Marable, Manning. 2006. "Katrina's Unnatural Disaster: A Tragedy of Black Suffering and White Denial." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 8, no. 1: 1–8.
- Marriott, David. 2012. "Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Sociogeny, and 'the Damned.'" *CR: The New Centennial Review* 11, no. 3: 45–90.
- Maturana, Humberto, and Francisco J. Varela. 1980. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: Realization of the Living*. London: D. Reidel.
- McKittrick, Katherine. 2015. "Axis, Bold as Love: Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science." In *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- . 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2015. "Sylvia Wynter: What Does it Mean to be Human?" In *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ngai, Sianne. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Paris, William M. 2018. "Humanism's Secret Shadow: The Construction of Black Gender/Sexuality in Frantz Fanon and Hortense Spillers." *philoSOPHIA* 8, no. 1: 81–99.
- Schuller, Kyla. 2017. *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Smith, Adam. 2010 [1759]. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. New York: Penguin.
- Sokal, Alan. 1996. "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." *Social Text* 46–47: 217–52.
- Spera, Rebekah, and David M. Peña-Guzmán. 2019. "The Anatomy of a Philosophical Hoax: The Politics of Delegitimation in Contemporary Philosophy." *Metaphilosophy* 50, no. 1–2: 156–74.
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2: 64–81.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. 2010 [1852]. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Norton Critical Edition, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Edited by Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. 2014. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wynter, Sylvia, and Katherine McKittrick. 2015. "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations." In *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3: 257–337.
- . 2001. "Toward the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience." In *National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America*, edited by Antonio Gomez-Moriana and Mercedes Duran-Cogan. New York: Routledge.