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ARTICLE

Trans the Disciplines!

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Abstract

Vitriolic disputes over trans identity and decolonisation have made university campuses into the battlegrounds of the culture wars. Yet the connections between these controversies and the epistemic function of the academy remain underexamined. In this article, I argue that the structures of oppression and privilege that activists seek to dismantle are sustained by the disciplinarity of the academy. Inspired by Sylvia Wynter's radical critique of Western humanism, I show how the entrenched division between the sciences and the humanities upholds a biocentric conception of truth that underwrites "Man," the mode of life that colonises the concept of the human. The article outlines Wynter's theory of sociogenesis to interrogate the role of the disciplines in repressing awareness of the sociocultural constitution of modes of life, arguing that this denial of discursive construction sustains the hegemony of Man while foreclosing trans liberation. What follows, I suggest, is that the academy's culture wars crises cannot be resolved through diversity policies. Instead, I call for a transformation of disciplinarity that untethers the academy from the epistemological commitments of Man. Only by eschewing positivism and universalism can institutions of higher education break with the coloniality of gender and contribute to reimagining the human.

Keywords: coloniality; disciplinarity; epistemology; Sylvia Wynter; trans rights

The increasingly acrimonious dispute over trans rights is now centre stage in the culture wars that rage on across the campuses of the United Kingdom. Universities that actively oppose transphobia are routinely accused of stifling freedom of speech, and the 2025 Supreme Court ruling on women-only spaces has raised dilemmas of inclusion that remain unresolved.[1] Yet in the enormous discourse generated by the flashpoints, commentators have rarely explored the connections between the trans issue and the other big battles of the academic culture wars: calls for reparations for slavery, and efforts to decolonise the curriculum. In what follows, I argue that universities will struggle to rise to these challenges until the connections between them are addressed; and it is disciplinarity, I suggest, that provides the site for this reckoning. Critical approaches to the epistemology of academic structures have appeared recently in decolonial studies, Black studies, and trans studies, with scholars often noting the Eurocentrism of the academy and the colonial origins of the disciplinary branches. The thinker I most frequently return to here is Sylvia Wynter. With her striking account of how the coloniality of knowledge sustains the schisms of race,

[1] On freedom of speech, see Webster 2024. On the Supreme Court ruling, see Griffin 2025a.

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gender, and class, Wynter offers a powerful lens through which to assess our conjuncture. If my Wynterian analysis of the trans crisis is correct, then what's required is a new modality of study—a remaking of the disciplines that transforms the academe and the episteme.

Why should disciplinarity be important for the gender wars? As scholars have observed, the trans dispute is not just ontological (concerning the category *woman*, for example) but also epistemological.[2] Anti-trans activists insist upon the universal and commonsense truth of binary immutable sex, urging politicians, judges, vice chancellors, and the general public to reject the "fantasies" of trans experience and "choose reality."[3] Aligning themselves with the familiar traditions of the European scientific method, anti-trans activists are often willing to espouse a positivist vision of sex as a purely biological domain.[4] Sex, they contend, is an unchanging fact, a *natural* fact, available to neutral and objective observation. They believe sex comprises a natural order that society contravenes at its peril. To adopt such positions, one must assiduously ignore the pivotal scholarship in feminist philosophy and science studies that has exposed the omissions, exclusions, and presuppositions necessary for the creation of a God's eye view.[5] And the dismissal of this important work has been facilitated by the disciplinary separation of fields of study.

Disciplines produce forms of segregation—"academic apartheid," as Chela Sandoval puts it—that maintain established structures of knowledge and power by preventing the cross-pollination of ideas and methodologies.[6] While many working in the natural sciences have, of course, appreciated the achievements of the humanities and social sciences, the disciplinary division has authorised the view that questions of privilege and oppression are none of science's business. This myth of scientific neutrality has enabled a containment of the epistemic revolutions that feminist interventions have often threatened to ignite within the fundamentals of the sciences and the everyday ways of knowing they inform.[7] Little wonder that trans scholars have long sought to problematise the disciplines. According to Cameron Awkward-Rich, for instance, "*trans* names a project of undoing (gender, disciplines, selves)."[8]

Due to the academy's noted contributions to white supremacy, there are strong resonances between the trans distrust of the disciplines and the critiques found in Black studies, decolonial studies, and postcolonial studies.[9] "Discipline is empire," Katherine McKittrick explains.[10] The categorisation of knowledge follows the methodology of violent taxonomies, emulating "positivist classificatory thinking (thinking that is produced in the shadows of biological determinism and colonialism)."[11] Many scholars agree. "All modern disciplines are racialized," according to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a sentiment echoed by S. A. Smythe, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Walter Mignolo.[12] For Lewis Gordon, the hardening of disciplinary boundaries results in the insularity that universalises European knowledge.[13] But what is it, precisely, that connects the gendered and racialised dimensions

[2] For example, Dickey 2023.
[3] Jenkins 2023.
[4] Butler 2024; Summersell 2018.
[5] For example, Haraway 1988.
[6] Sandoval 2000. Cf. Foucault 2002.
[7] See Rooney 2011; Superson and Cudd 2002.
[8] Awkward-Rich 2017, 833. See also Stryker 2008.
[9] Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018.
[10] McKittrick 2021, 36.
[11] McKittrick 2021, 38.
[12] de Sousa Santos, 2018, 191; Grosfoguel 2016; Mignolo 2009; Smythe 2021.
[13] Gordon 2006.

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of disciplinarity? And what can be done? Can the academy meet Achille Mbembe's call for "the radical refounding of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions"?[14]

1. Interrupting the episteme of Man

Sylvia Wynter offers some answers. The disciplines are already doomed, she declares: they have been marked for destruction ever since Frantz Fanon's work on the sociocultural formation of the psyche.[15] Fanon's point is that the sociogeny of the psyche was neglected by Freud, leaving psychoanalysis bereft of the tools required to understand the effects of racism and colonialism.[16] With a stunning leap of philosophical imagination, Wynter expands on Fanon to theorise sociogenesis as the concept that has to be repressed in general—excluded from study, forgotten, rendered impossible—in order for coloniality to be sustained.[17] The academic disciplines participate in this repression, she claims, by upholding a biocentric picture of human formation that occludes sociogenic factors. To accept Wynter's argument is to find the culture wars reframed and the academy implicated. If Wynter is correct, and if, as scholars have recently suggested, biocentrism is also the wellspring of the notion of biological sex defended by the anti-trans movement, then two consequences appear.[18] Firstly, it becomes difficult to deny the coloniality of the anti-trans movement. Secondly, there is the potential for universities to take anti-colonial action by transforming their disciplinary structures. To examine the viability of these conclusions, let us consider Wynter's claims in more detail.

Wynter's determination to challenge biocentrism by bringing sociogenic processes to light is motivated by her understanding of the colonial order of knowledge: the episteme. Truth and knowledge have been colonised on a global scale, she argues, by what Foucault calls "Man," the image of human subjectivity that arose during the Renaissance, and which remains an emblem of the dominance of the Global North.[19] For Wynter, however, Man is also a "genre," a way of being human that the self-representation begets. To be more specific, Man is formed through valorisations of masculinity, whiteness, rationality, and affluence. It is the putative neutrality of these norms that enables Man to mistake itself for the human *in toto*, a synecdochal "overrepresentation" in which a fragment stands for the whole.[20] Wynter explains the sociogenesis of Man—the simultaneous creation of the image and the genre—in terms that lay out the epistemology that concerns us here. Drawing on the work of leading scientists, she argues that Man, like all human genres, is produced through neurological responses to narrative language practices, especially collective storytelling.[21] Origin stories, cosmogonies, and ontological descriptions of human nature contain dualistic codes that symbolically valuate the world, thereby stimulating the opioid receptors in human brains that motivate adaptive behaviours. Aspects of the narratives that are positively codified (whiteness, for example) trigger a pleasure response, while negatively

[14] Mbembe 2016, 37, quoted in Ybarra 2022, 36.
[15] Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 16–17.
[16] Fanon 1986, 13.
[17] Wynter 2013.
[18] For example, Griffin 2025a; Hansen 2023.
[19] Foucault 2002.
[20] The arguments summarised here are presented at length in Wynter 1997, 2003, 2013, 2015; Wynter and McKittrick 2015.
[21] For Wynter's use of scientific scholarship (including the work of David Bohm, James Danielli, Gerald Edelman, and Avram Goldstein) see, for example, Wynter 1997, 540–41, 2003, 272–74, 2013, 37–38, 45–54, 2015, 217–23.

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codified aspects (Blackness) induce discomfort. Through these valuations, genres form in counterpoint to each other, as outsiders are stigmatised (as infidels, savages, etc.), while the in-group perceives itself as good (the chosen people, the civilised, etc.). Crucially, neurochemical rewards are only delivered to those who believe these narratives to be true, not humanly invented, incentivising the repression of the awareness that creativity and imagination underpin the process.

Unwittingly, then, all human genres occupy epistemic ecologies of their own making, epistemes in which local stories are mistaken for universal truths. This is clearly a recipe for colonialism, and it is Wynter's primary explanation for oppression; it is also the target of her "epistemic disobedience," to borrow Mignolo's expression.[22] Wynter aims to interrupt the stable reproduction of the episteme of Man by undermining its biocentrism, its commitment to narratives that assert the "natural" origins of the species and minimise the sociocultural. In addition to refuting biocentrism and demanding liberation from the violent scripts of colonial modernity, Wynter proposes a "New Studia," a research programme devoted to the sociogenic and autopoietic systems of genre formation.[23] If there are opportunities for the arrival of the New Studia, then there are also countless obstacles, returning us to the two hypotheses mentioned above: following Wynter, the coloniality of the anti-trans movement is undeniable, and the academic disciplines have anti-colonial potential. Regarding the first, it is evident that all biocentric narratives bolster the episteme of Man, inadvertently or otherwise. Can the anti-trans lobby be described as anything other than biocentric? Sex is more important than gender, for trans-exclusionary feminists: sex is natural and enduring, while gender is social, cultural, and contingent. Sex is a scientifically verifiable reality; gender is subjective, perhaps illusory. With this defence of traditional science, common sense, and the nature/culture binary, the anti-trans movement nominates itself as perhaps the most dynamic and implacable biocentric force in contemporary discourse.

The anti-colonial potential of the academy, on the other hand, is less immediately apparent. As "the privileged site for producing and legitimating cognitive injustice," the university might seem as much of an obstacle to anti-colonial praxis as the anti-trans movement.[24] For Wynter, however, the academy can contribute to transforming the episteme through the restructuring of the disciplines. She alights upon a key disciplinary partition, the separation of the natural sciences from the humanities and social sciences. The division of knowledge into these two silos—"the Two Cultures," as CP Snow famously called them—is fundamental to the colonial truth regime. Needless to say, Wynter is not denying the importance of the natural sciences, but, quoting Aimé Césaire, she describes them as "half-starved."[25] Against biocentrism, Wynter defines the human as a hybrid of the biological and the discursive, arguing that the discovery of this "*bios*/*mythos*" hybridity is hindered by the disciplinary partition.[26] The sciences will not apprehend hybridity until they are able to study biological sociogenic phenomena using the tools developed elsewhere to study the effects of signs and narratives; the tools, in other words, of literary studies.[27] By tearing down the silos and

[22] Mignolo 2009; Mignolo 2015, 106.

[23] Wynter 2015. For Wynter's use of autopoiesis, inspired by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, see Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 27–33.

[24] de Sousa Santos 2024, 171.

[25] Wynter 2013, 60.

[26] Wynter 2015, 201.

[27] Gagne 2007; Wynter 2003, 269–71, 317–18, 330; Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 16–17, 43–44.

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instituting the New Studia, universities could cease reproducing the colonial episteme and start interrogating it.

2. Toward a pluriversal New Studia

The academic transformation that I'm broaching is undoubtedly radical. But the fault lines of the culture wars only deepen within the neoliberal paradigm. Recall the bewilderment with which universities received the repeal of trans rights by the Supreme Court in April 2025. Ruling that the term "sex" in the Equality Act 2010 refers only to "biological sex," which it considers immutable, the Supreme Court makes it legal to exclude trans women from women-only facilities.[28] This was followed by guidelines from the Equality and Human Rights Commission stating that public service providers now have a legal obligation to prevent trans women from using those facilities.[29] Such requirements present huge operational challenges to universities, as well as undercutting the trans-friendly message of their equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies. Additionally, however, the academy faces the embarrassment of the scientific doctrine that informs the ruling. Let me be clear that I'm not blaming biology professors personally for the concept of "biological sex" now enshrined in UK law—many of them have, in fact, publicly denounced it.[30] However, as Sara Ahmed pointed out following the ruling, biology is a discipline with a strongly gendered history.[31] So although universities cannot be expected to govern general knowledge, the academy bears some responsibility for the ubiquity of this confused and outdated notion of sex. As Wynter indicates, the discipline of biology has furnished the episteme with an incomplete picture of the human, and the best efforts of scientists such as Anne Fausto-Sterling are yet to turn the tide.[32]

The topics of race, coloniality, and disability have been glaringly absent from the discourse on trans rights in the United Kingdom. A Wynterian reading brings their connections into sharp relief, revealing that biological determinism is an ever-present danger within a biocentric order of knowledge.[33] To the extent that they uphold this biocentrism via the disciplinary partition, universities are structurally racist, ableist, and sexist—the liberal platitudes of their EDI statements notwithstanding. This might explain why the biological concept of race lives on in the public imagination. After twenty years of scientific consensus, and despite the work of legions of educators and researchers, the idea that race is a social construct is yet to be widely accepted.[34] Meanwhile, ideological projects to revive eugenics and scientific racism appear to be gaining ground, imperilling the lives of disabled people, migrants, and all racialised people.[35] If our biocentric episteme is indeed fertile ground for violent attempts to entrench white supremacy and cisnormativity, then the urgency of the academic intervention that I'm proposing is obvious.

However, it is important to stress that the purpose of the New Studia is not to bring about the triumph of the pro-trans lobby. The aim cannot be to create a reformed discipline of biology

[28] For Women Scotland v The Scottish Ministers 2025.
[29] Equality and Human Rights Commission 2025.
[30] For example, Southgate et al. 2025.
[31] Ahmed 2025.
[32] See Fausto-Sterling 2000. Cf. Rehmann-Sutter et al. 2023. For comparable work from other fields, see Fuentes 2025; Richardson 2022; Velocci 2024; Watkins and DiMarco 2025.
[33] I discuss the political imperatives that impede public awareness of these connections in Griffin 2024.
[34] Rutherford 2025.
[35] Sear 2025.

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that generates trans-affirming science; that would just be more positivism. Nor can the aim be to comprehensively disprove binary sex and replace it with a trans-affirming alternative; that would just be more universalism, the continued colonisation of sex. Rather than crowning a winner of the culture wars, the Wynterian epistemic shift would expose the coloniality of all such oppositional formations, replacing the university with what decolonial scholars call the "pluriversity."[36] It would be naïve to assume that any of our current political projects would be vindicated by programmes of study operating within the "trans-disciplinary, trans-epistemic, trans natural-scientific cum trans-cosmogonic modality" of a pluriversity.[37]

Scepticism regarding the plausibility of an academic revolution is to be expected, and critics such as David Marriott have challenged the Wynterian framework that I've used here.[38] I will not pretend that it is easy to imagine any university in the United Kingdom transforming into a pluriversity, dissolving the Two Cultures, and devoting itself to the New Studia. But the higher education sector is in crisis, its funding model utterly discredited, and the humanities are yet again under attack. What future does the university have in a neoliberal world? Perhaps, rather than allowing itself to be gradually eroded, demoralised, privatised, and then quietly dismantled, the academy should fight back. Decolonial epistemology does not provide a roadmap for this, of course, but it does supply a meticulous analysis of the academy's role in the colonial order. To address this complicity and pursue anti-colonial praxis, the university must transition. Anti-trans commentators will declare this impossible, as they always do. Impossibility, however, is an epistemic operator: when the episteme shifts, possibility does too.

Christopher Griffin is an early-career researcher working across trans studies, decolonial studies, social and political thought, and literary studies. Their work focuses on constitutive exclusion, examining the legal, philosophical, and literary narratives that both reproduce and counter forms of sacrificial relationality. Griffin completed a PhD at the University of Brighton in 2022 with a thesis entitled "Dispossessive Citizenship: Property and Personhood in Speculative Narrative." Their work has appeared in *Krisis: Journal of Contemporary Philosophy*, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, *Derrida Today*, *South Atlantic Review*, *Interfere: Journal for Critical Thought and Radical Politics*, and in blogs such as LSE's Engenderings. Recent lecturing work has included modules on Foucault, existentialism, and poststructuralism at the University of Brighton.

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[36] Boidin et al. 2012.

[37] Wynter 2015, 245.

[38] Marriott argues that Wynter's account of the rupture achieved by Fanon's theory of sociogenesis offers little more than "a new way of making the human calculable and predictable," effectively committing her to the positivism and teleology that she aspires to overcome (Marriott 2011, 80). I offer a response to Marriott's critique in Griffin 2025b. See also Guilmette 2019; Washington 2024.

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