

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The autopoetics of the self: A ‘demonic’ approach to ontological security studies

Lucy Gehring 

Department of War Studies, King’s College London, London, UK
Email: lucy.s.gehring@kcl.ac.uk

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Abstract

Ontological security studies (OSS) has been established as a significant area of study in critical security studies (CSS) to describe the ways in which social groups sustain and secure a stable sense of self. Although the self is the central figure of OSS, the subfield is yet to engage in a sustained interrogation of subjectivity in a way that questions its colonial foundations. In this article, I return to Jef Huysmans’s seminal understanding of security as a ‘thick signifier’ to analyse the ways in which OSS upholds the colonial activity of ordering, particularly an ordering of the self. By introducing Sylvia Wynter’s account of the emergence of Man-as-human, I question OSS’s conventional understandings of the self as constituted by identity. Analysing the self as a sociogenic being governed by autopoetics uncovers the ways in which understandings of the self that collapse into ‘identity’ serve to uphold coloniality. By redeploying Huysmans’s understanding of ontological security as that which simultaneously orders and guarantees the activity of ordering, I interrogate the ways in which doing OSS has real-world implications for those denied humanness in our colonial present. This analytic, termed a ‘demonic’ approach by Wynter, unlocks radically alternative understandings of being human that can be operationalized in service of collective liberation.

Keywords: autopoetics; critical security studies; ontological security studies; Sylvia Wynter

Introduction

In May 2020, the world learned of the brutal murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis Police Department officer. Protests around the globe provoked a reckoning with the ongoing oppression of Black Americans and Black folks globally, with individuals, groups, corporations, and institutions reflecting on their complicity in racial oppression. At the same time, a reckoning with racism in critical security studies (CSS) unfolded. Catalysed by Ole Wæver’s announcement on social media of the publication of his and Barry Buzan’s rejoinder to Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit’s ‘Is securitization theory racist?’ article in *Security Dialogue*,¹ CSS scholars and students grappled with the question of racism in the discipline.² Since then, a new generation of scholarship joined previous engagements with race and racism in International Relations (IR) and CSS,³ in particular the ways in which these disciplines reproduce

¹ Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit, ‘Is securitization theory racist? Civilizationism, methodological whiteness, and antiblack thought in the Copenhagen School’, *Security Dialogue*, 51:3 (2020), pp. 3–22.

² Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, ‘Racism and responsibility – The critical limits of deepfake methodology in security studies: A reply to Howell and Richter-Montpetit’, *Security Dialogue*, 51:4 (2020), pp. 386–94.

³ See, for example, Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (London: Cornell University Press, 2015); Errol A. Henderson, ‘The revolution will not be theorised: The “Howard School”’

colonial assumptions inherent in Western knowledge.⁴ Ontological security studies (OSS), now an established area of study within CSS, has, however, not yet been engaged with on these terms. Although there has been valuable literature in postcolonial OSS which examines the processes by which groups – particularly migrants – come to represent threats to ontological security, revolving around the dialectical construction of both ‘Self’ and ‘Other’,⁵ OSS has yet to confront its own complicity in broader racialized orders of knowledge.⁶

Ontological security is concerned with the ontology of the self and methods by which it (whether an individual, social group, or state) secures its sense of self. The self therefore occupies a critically important terrain of analysis for OSS, and some recent analyses have sought to introduce a diversity of intellectual perspectives of the self.⁷ However, OSS has yet to think through the politics of subjectivity and the self as immanently constituted by the colonial encounter and its role in wider racial orders of knowledge. I take these politics as the focus of this article, drawing on Jef Huysmans’s understanding of security as a ‘thick signifier’ to expand the terms of engagement with the self within OSS. Huysmans’s analysis focuses on the ordering function of security and also locates security within wider symbolic orders, which I expand upon to reflect on the self within wider symbolic orders.

Extending Huysmans’s focus on order, I introduce Sylvia Wynter’s intellectual oeuvre. A canonical figure in Afro-Caribbean philosophy, Wynter offers a radically alternative conceptualization of what it means to be human, one which takes seriously the racial ordering inherent to our understandings of being human. For Wynter, the self is immanently constituted by both organic (ontogenic and phylogenic) and cultural (sociogenic) matter and is as such governed by ‘descriptive statements’ that come to represent the totality of humanness. Being human is, in Wynter’s analysis, a praxical phenomenon: a verb and a relational act deeply implicated in ascendant orders of knowledge. This article takes her understanding of Man-as-human as its focal point to dislocate analysis from identity and towards a more expansive understanding which takes the colonial encounter as constitutive of the self.

I take Wynter’s philosophy to propose an understanding of the self as praxis which extends beyond OSS’s emphasis on identity production and securitization in order to expose the racial orders of knowledge that make ‘identity’ possible. To do so, I introduce ‘autopoetics’, Wynter’s groundbreaking redeployment of systems theory to understand the ways in which humanness stably and recursively self-reproduces, occluding the process from itself. By occupying a perspective of

challenge to white supremacist IR theory’, *Millennium*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 492–510; Errol A. Henderson, ‘Hidden in plain sight: Racism and international relations theory’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:1 (2013), pp. 71–92; Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, Robbie Shilliam (eds), *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2015); Alexander Davis, Vineet Thakur, and Peter Vale, *The Imperial Discipline: Race and the Founding of International Relations* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

⁴See, for example, Navnita Chadha Behera, Kristina Hinds, and Arlene B. Tickner, ‘Making amends: Towards an antiracist critical security studies and international relations’, *Security Dialogue*, 52:1 (2021), pp. 8–16.

⁵On migrants as threats to ontological security: Christine Agius, ‘“This is not who we are”: Gendered bordering practices, ontological insecurity, and lines of continuity under the Trump presidency’, *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 385–402; Nick Vaughan-Williams and Maria Pisani, ‘Migrating borders, bordering lives: Everyday geographies of ontological security and insecurity in Malta’, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 21:5 (2020), pp. 651–73; Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Feeling at home in Europe: Migration, ontological security, and the political psychology of EU bordering’, *Political Psychology*, 39:6 (2018), pp. 1373–87.

⁶It should be emphasized, however, that OSS is far from unique in this respect; much scholarship in International Relations and beyond has critiqued racial orders of knowledge that underpin Western intellectualism. I take OSS as the focus of this article given the centrality of the self to its analytic, which invites a Wynterian critique.

⁷Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, ‘Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47; Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security’, *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67; Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56; Bahar Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety into international relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 257–72; Marco A. Vieira, ‘(Re-)imagining the “Self” of ontological security: The case of Brazil’s ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64.

those denied humanness by our current modality of being human – what Wynter terms a ‘demonic’ approach – we can begin to uncover the sociogenic codes that govern the self, as part of a wider project of the liberation of being human from the colonial encounter.

In the article’s final section, I return to Huysmans’s understanding of ontological security as that which guarantees the activity of ordering itself so as to reflect upon the material implications of OSS’s narrow focus on identity markers. Taking our colonial present and the Western academic imaginary as articulations of ordering, I reflect upon the broader consequences of confining the self to identity and restate Wynter’s call for the liberation of subjectivity as part of radical collective struggle. Indeed, as Rinaldo Walcott puts it, ‘wherever identity enters, the impossible follows, terror follows; avoiding it does not dissolve or resolve its hold on the human, but engaging it can remind us of the need to endlessly alter the human beyond Man.’⁸ In Walcott’s spirit, this article engages with identity as it is understood in OSS, foregrounding not only the immanently *racial* constitution of the self but also the political and intellectual struggles at stake in our colonial definitions of being human.

Locating order(ing) in ontological security

Ontological security refers to the security of the self: the ways in which our ways of being in the world and our conception of being is secure or made insecure. The concept was introduced by Scottish psychoanalyst R. D. Laing in *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*,⁹ in which he sought ‘to give an account of a quite specifically personal form of depersonalization and disintegration.’¹⁰ Laing resisted ‘imposing our categories of thought on to the patient’, which can result in the possibility of knowing ‘just about everything that can be known about the psychopathology of schizophrenia [...] without being able to understand one single schizophrenic.’¹¹ Instead, Laing advocated observation of the patient ‘as expressive of his mode of being-in-the-world’, or subjectivity.¹²

From here, Laing introduces his conceptualization of ontological security: ‘Such a basically *ontologically* secure person will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity.’¹³ Individuals with psychosis or schizophrenia, however, ‘may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question.’¹⁴ For individuals experiencing such ontological insecurity, ‘such a basis for living has not been reached’ and ‘the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat.’¹⁵

It is these aspects of Laing’s work that were taken up by Anthony Giddens to introduce ontological security to the social sciences. Giddens’s sociological interpretation of ontological security maintains that individuals can gain a sense of agency when they can rely upon a certain measure of trust and stability in routines, material environments, and social narratives. As he puts it, ‘Rituals of trust and tact in day-to-day life [...] are much more than merely ways of protecting one’s own self-esteem [...] they touch on the most basic aspects of ontological security.’¹⁶ Without being able to take these things for granted, ‘each encounter would have to be dealt with on an ad hoc basis,

⁸Rinaldo Walcott, ‘Genres of human: Multiculturalism, cosmo-politics, and the Caribbean basin’, in Katherine McKittrick (ed.), *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 183–202.

⁹R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin Books, 2010 [1960]).

¹⁰Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 23.

¹¹Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 33.

¹²Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 32.

¹³Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 39.

¹⁴Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 42.

¹⁵Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 42.

¹⁶Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Policy Press, 1991), p. 47.

placing individuals in a permanent state of anxiety.¹⁷ This anxiety ‘tends to threaten awareness of self-identity’, as relations between the self and the world become obscured.¹⁸ For Giddens’s social actor, this routinization and habitualization arises from encounters with others: ‘for him that individual is one that is embedded into an intersubjective whole in the period of late modernity; the individual cannot be understood separately and asocially.’¹⁹

Security, in this sense, refers to ‘security-as-being’ rather than ‘security-as-survival’. Giddens’s sociological interpretation has since been taken up by scholars in the CSS tradition, becoming an established area of study. OSS now covers a range of theoretical perspectives and in terms of various issues: feminist,²⁰ postcolonial,²¹ psychoanalytic,²² the vernacular and everyday,²³ affect,²⁴ the realist security dilemma,²⁵ narrative,²⁶ dread and anxiety,²⁷ populism,²⁸ embodiment,²⁹ Indigenous cosmologies,³⁰ materiality and territoriality³¹ – among many others. As interpretations of ontological security in CSS have proliferated, some studies have sought to return to Laing and/or Giddens’s conceptualizations of ontological security in order to clarify terms, introduce new vantage points, and critique OSS’s limitations.³²

Despite this empirical diversity, OSS tends to uphold a common understanding of ontological security and ontological insecurity. For Homolar and Scholz, ‘Being ontologically secure allows us to “encounter all the hazards of life [...]” with a firm sense of both our own and others’ reality and identity’; ‘we need to be able to trust that we – as well as our environment – will remain constant,

¹⁷ Michael Skey, ‘“A sense of where you belong in the world”: National belonging, ontological security and the status of the ethnic majority in England’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 16:4 (2010), pp. 715–733.

¹⁸ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 45.

¹⁹ Chris Rossdale, ‘Enclosing critique: The limits of ontological security’, *International Political Sociology*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 369–386.

²⁰ Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Feeling ontologically (in)secure: States, traumas and the governing of gendered space’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1, pp. 90–108; Agius, ‘“This is not who we are”’.

²¹ Giorgio Shani, ‘Human security as ontological security: A post-colonial approach’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 275–93; Carmina Yu Untalan, ‘Decentering the self, seeing like the other: Toward a postcolonial approach to ontological security’, *International Political Sociology*, 14 (2019), pp. 40–56; John Cash and Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Postcolonial bordering and ontological insecurities’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 267–74.

²² Jakob Eberle, ‘Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22:1 (2019), pp. 243–68; Vieira, ‘(Re-)imagining the “Self”’.

²³ Stuart Croft and Nick Vaughan-Williams, ‘Fit for purpose? Fitting ontological security studies “into” the discipline of international relations: Towards a vernacular turn’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 12–30; Alexandria J. Innes, ‘Everyday ontological security: Emotion and migration in British soaps’, *International Political Sociology*, 11:4 (2017), pp. 380–97.

²⁴ Ty Solomon, ‘Ontological security, circulations of affect, and the Arab Spring’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 934–58.

²⁵ Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 41–70.

²⁶ Jelena Subotić, ‘Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12 (2016), pp. 610–27.

²⁷ Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety’; Croft and Vaughan-Williams, ‘Fit for purpose?’; Kinnvall and Mitzen, ‘Thinking with and beyond Giddens’; Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, ‘Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 875–95.

²⁸ Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, ‘The power of Trump-speak: Populist crisis narratives and ontological security’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 344–64; Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries: The emotional appeal of populism’, *Humanity & Society*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 523–43.

²⁹ Nina C. Krickel-Choi, ‘The embodied state: Why and how physical security matters for ontological security’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 25 (2021), pp. 159–181.

³⁰ Justin de Leon, ‘Lakota experiences of (in)security: Cosmology and ontological security’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 22:1 (2020), pp. 33–62.

³¹ Filip Ejdus, ‘“Not a heap of stones”: Material environments and ontological security in international relations’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 30:1 (2017), pp. 23–43; Vincent Della Sala, ‘Homeland security: Territorial myths and ontological security in the European Union’, *Journal of European Integration*, 39:5 (2017), pp. 545–58.

³² Rossdale, ‘Enclosing critique’; Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety’; Kinnvall and Mitzen, ‘Thinking with and beyond Giddens’; Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, ‘Returning to the roots’.

stable and predictable.³³ Krickel-Choi describes ontological security as ‘a form of “psychological well-being” or, in the broadest sense, as the “psychological security of the self”’.³⁴ Similarly, Innes and Steele see ontological security as ‘the seeking of a consistent self through time and space, and the desire to have that self-recognised and affirmed by others [...] it is a form of security-seeking that is pursued regarding the “who” or “what” ontologically it is or desires to be.’³⁵

There are a range of approaches to this ontologically securing self (be it a focus on intersubjectivity, autobiographical narratives, the state and other political groupings, or individuals and social groups),³⁶ but two central tenets of ontological security within OSS can be identified, namely, the self seeks stability, certitude, and constancy in itself and in its social and material environment, and the self (whether at the state, group, or individual level) participates in behaviour to enhance its sense of ontological security (whether intersubjectively or intra-subjectively). Disciplinarily speaking, this focus on identity and intersubjectivity dovetails two important disciplinary shifts in IR. The early 1990s in IR saw, first, calls for the broadening and deepening of IR’s definition of security. Research groups that came to be known as the Copenhagen and Welsh Schools expanded security studies beyond both a conventional military focus and a conventional state-centrism. Secondly, David Campbell’s *Writing Security* and Alexander Wendt’s ‘Anarchy is what states make of it’, published in 1991 and 1992 respectively, introduced intersubjectivity and the social/discursive construction of security to IR.³⁷

These intellectual developments in IR – a ‘sociological turn’, of sorts – laid the groundwork for Jef Huysmans to interrogate the foundational meaning of security in his pioneering 1998 article.³⁸ Moving beyond a definitional or conceptual understanding of security, Huysmans analyses security as a ‘thick signifier’: a performative formation which does not refer to an external, objective reality but instead ‘positions people in their relations to themselves, to nature and to other human beings with a particular discursive, symbolic order.’³⁹ In other words, ‘security’ articulates ‘a particular way of organizing forms of life’ and social relations along a specific ordering logic.⁴⁰ Huysmans’s rationalization for this understanding of security is predicated on security’s foundational double fear of death. Death is not only ‘a fear-of-the-power-of-others-to-kill-me’, but also a fear of indeterminability and uncertainty: an external condition that we seek to avoid through the acquisition of knowledge and the creation of agencies which mediate the relation between life and death (such as the state).⁴¹ Following this logic, security involves both the mediation of death and the activity of ordering, the latter of which attempts to secure the possibility of determinability. For Huysmans, threat construction (or ‘daily security’) mediates relations between the self and its enemies in order to mitigate the ‘fear-of-the-power-of-others-to-kill-me’. The figure of the stranger, a figure both inside and outside a society, differs from enemies in that they disrupt the possibility of ordering: the security-seeking self is confronted with a disordering element that resists categorization.⁴² As such, strangeness challenges the political legitimacy of death-mediating agencies such as the state, since its capacity to order is threatened.

³³ Homolar and Scholz, ‘The power of Trump-speak’, pp. 356–7.

³⁴ Krickel-Choi, ‘The embodied state’, p. 3.

³⁵ Alexandria J. Innes and Brent J. Steele, ‘Memory, trauma and ontological security’, in Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte (eds), *Memory and Trauma in International Relations: Theories, Cases and Debates* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 15–29.

³⁶ Kinnvall, ‘Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries’, p. 530.

³⁷ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics’, *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425.

³⁸ Jef Huysmans, ‘Security! What do you mean? From concept to thick signifier’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 226–55.

³⁹ Huysmans, ‘Security!’, p. 232.

⁴⁰ Huysmans, ‘Security!’, p. 231.

⁴¹ Huysmans, ‘Security!’, pp. 235–6.

⁴² Huysmans, ‘Security!’, pp. 241–2.

For Huysmans, then, ontological security mediates relations between the self and the stranger and is concerned with ‘how to order social relations while simultaneously guaranteeing the very activity of ordering itself’.⁴³ Strangeness, in this understanding of ontological security as a thick signifier, must be neutralized in order to secure the ordering capacity of the state (possibly, but not inevitably, through threat construction). In Huysmans’s formulation, ontological insecurity is understood as an inability to order social relations and/or to mediate between life and death, resulting in a ‘fundamental legitimacy crisis for security agencies (state institutions, the state, and international organizations)’.⁴⁴ In this way, Huysmans operationalizes ontological security in a way different from Giddens’s original formulation and from how it is commonly deployed in CSS: not only is the referent object of security located at the state rather than individual level, but the ability to order is central to experiencing ontological in/security.

Reducing the self to identity: Ontological security’s occlusion of order(ing)

What do we mean when we speak of ordering? For mainstream IR theorists, the foundations of order lie in the territorial sovereignty of states and juridical equality between them. International order, it follows, refers to the balance of power between states in the international system, and war, international institutions, and norms are crucial to traditional accounts of international order and disorder. In these conventional accounts, order is placed in dialectical relation to disorder, with the two also understood as mutually exclusive: where the international order is challenged, disorder prevails.⁴⁵

Developed during the Cold War, conventional security studies largely inherited IR’s understanding of order. In the context of a bipolar superpower contest, security studies was ‘concerned primarily with international system structure, power balancing, the elements of national power, deterrence, nuclear strategy, the causes of war, and the management of crises’:⁴⁶ in other words, strategies pursued by states to secure the international order. The Copenhagen/Welsh School and constructivist approaches to security studies – as introduced above and broadly accepted as the genesis of CSS as a discrete subfield – retained a focus on security but sought to redefine it in terms of human-centric emancipation and discursive processes of securitization.⁴⁷

Order and ordering rarely explicitly features in CSS literature. Although CSS asks, ‘whose security?’,⁴⁸ less common are interrogations of *which order* security upholds and *how* security orders. Here, Huysmans’s account differs from conventional CSS. For Huysmans, ordering in a security sense refers to a ‘logic of security’, which cannot be reduced to a specific form or content but is rather ‘an ensemble of rules that is immanent to a security practice and that defines the practice in its specificity’.⁴⁹ In other words, security ordering ‘positions people in their relations to themselves, to nature and to other human beings within a particular discursive, symbolic order’.⁵⁰ In this way, ordering – understood as a ‘specific metaphysics of life’⁵¹ – is explicitly inherent in an understanding of security as a thick signifier.

⁴³ Huysmans, ‘Security!’, p. 242.

⁴⁴ Huysmans, ‘Security!’, p. 244.

⁴⁵ Karen Smith, ‘Order, ordering and disorder’, in Arlene B. Tickner and Karen Smith (eds), *International Relations from the Global South: Worlds of Difference* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 77–83.

⁴⁶ Tarak Barkawi, ‘Empire and order in international relations and security studies’, in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedias: International Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 7.

⁴⁷ For a good overview of ‘conventional’ CSS and its disciplinary history, see Paul Williams, ‘Critical security studies’, in Alex J. Bellamy (ed.), *International Society and Its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 135–50.

⁴⁸ For an overview of CSS perspectives which ask ‘whose security?’, see Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams (eds), *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

⁴⁹ Huysmans, ‘Security!’, p. 232.

⁵⁰ Huysmans, ‘Security!’, p. 232.

⁵¹ Huysmans, ‘Security!’, p. 231.

The first intervention this article makes is analysing ontological security and OSS via Huysmans's understanding of security as a process of ordering and of guaranteeing the activity of ordering. Put another way, it asks *what and how does ontological security order?* As we have seen, OSS generally defines ontological security as the routines and behaviour that a subject pursues to secure a stable sense or narrative of its self/itself. Ontological security as a thick signifier, it follows, therefore orders the self and, in doing so, guarantees the activity of ordering. In other words, ontological security and its deployment in OSS scholarship position the self within a particular symbolic order, both in terms of a specific metaphysics of life and in terms of the scholarly, disciplinary act of ordering.

Chris Rossdale, in an important contribution to OSS entitled 'Enclosing critique: The limits of ontological security', put forward 'a critique of ordering *political* subjectivity within an ontological security/insecurity framework'.⁵² In Rossdale's theorization of subjectivity in OSS, he sought to demonstrate the limits of ontological security analyses which subscribe to 'contiguous and stable narrative of selfhood'.⁵³ His argument is summarized well in the following passage:

a framework of ontological security and insecurity [...] positions things in a binary [...]. The binary analytic writes out or disciplines those movements, agents, and practices which cut across, move beyond, or disrupt the terrain of ontological in/security, which demonstrate alternative conceptions of critical subjectivity that take the contours of ontological security as their object, and which explores modes of becoming beyond these terms.⁵⁴

In other words, ontological in/security writes out modes of being in the world which radically disrupt and subvert aspirations to stability and wholeness. Rossdale resists this enclosure of the self by putting forth alternative subjectivities which instead 'celebrate incompleteness and expendability as the precondition of otherness' and 'foster spaces in which subjectivity remains an open (and political) question'.⁵⁵

Building on Rossdale's contribution, OSS has engaged in generative analyses of the self from a range of unconventional theoretical perspectives. For instance, the late 2010s saw a number of post-colonial Lacanian readings of the self-operationalized in tandem with ontological security. Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject, understood as constituted by an inherent 'lack of essence or foundation' and a desire for wholeness, has been analysed through Gayatri Spivak's formulation of the colonial 'Self/Other' subjective relation in several works. An understanding postcolonial Lacanian self has been deployed in a number of ways, for example to critique populist politics' reinforcement of the immigrant/refugee imaginary as the 'Other' that denies the 'Self' fulfilment of a nostalgic colonial past,⁵⁶ to interrogate the role of desire and fantasy in narratives of the self,⁵⁷ to pose alternative understandings of the Other,⁵⁸ and to trace shifting Brazilian racial self-understandings.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, these analyses continue to engage in an ordering of the self in several ways. First, by deploying a Lacanian understanding of the self that is predicated on an inherent Lack, the underlying drive towards the self's 'wholeness' is still left intact, thereby not addressing Rossdale's challenge to imagine subjectivities which resist the foreclosure of the subject. For instance, in Vieira's analysis of Brazilian narratives of racial identity, in which he traces a shift by which political elites have engaged in a contemporary reformulation of Brazil's Lack based on its 'non-Western, principally African origins',⁶⁰ the subjectivity of enslaved West Africans is still enclosed within Brazilian

⁵²Rossdale, 'Enclosing critique', p. 370.

⁵³Rossdale, 'Enclosing critique', p. 369.

⁵⁴Rossdale, 'Enclosing critique', p. 378.

⁵⁵Rossdale, 'Enclosing critique', p. 380.

⁵⁶Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries'.

⁵⁷Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security'.

⁵⁸Untalan, 'Decentering the self, seeing like the other'.

⁵⁹Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the 'Self'.

⁶⁰Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the 'Self', p. 163.

self-understanding. Put another way, Brazilians' striving for wholeness is reformulated rather than fundamentally challenged, and, in doing so, alternative subjectivities (in this case, that of enslaved West Africans) are folded into this impulse rather than understood as constitutive of a fundamental challenge. Secondly, although analysing the self via Spivak's Self/Other colonial relation is a generative move in OSS, these postcolonial Lacanian analyses continue to guarantee the activity of ordering by collapsing the subject into questions of identity and enemy construction by describing processes by which the Other has been categorized as the Other. By associating the Other with the subject's Lack, subjects are fixed with racial and mobility identities and implicitly assumed to threaten the Self's ability to secure wholeness. Although these analyses provide answers to questions of 'whose (ontological) security?' and the ability of a colonial Self to establish and securitize identity narratives, the literature does not interrogate the politics of being in a fuller sense, since it continues to engage in ordering along Wholeness/Lack and Self/Order binary logics. In Kinnvall's study on populist politics, for example, migrants and social 'out-groups' are positioned as threats to the Self's imperial nostalgia and provoke feelings of anger, frustration, and anxiety.⁶¹ While this provides answers to the question of 'whose ontological security?', it continues to affix identities to particular subjects and thereby engages in an ordering of the self. Lastly, though empire and racialization are central to Spivak's Self/Other formulation, these ordering dynamics can feature as secondary explanatory, rather than constitutive, forces to the politics of the self. In other words, OSS literature which does engage with race and racism tends to function at the level of identity-making rather than interrogating how racialization and empire are central to the constitution of the self. For instance, Carmina Yu Untalan's work on how the postcolonial Other can creatively confront ontological insecurities draws on the case of Okinawan 'Otherness' vis-à-vis the US and Japanese 'Selves'.⁶² Although Untalan effectively critiques state-centric OSS in the way it limits the Other to an element that either 'threatens or satisfies the Self', therefore 'perpetuating the colonialist logic of survival and power accumulation',⁶³ the article's empirics conclude that 'the Okinawans have been sometimes willing to make their sense of identity flexible and accommodating (to work with the Japanese and US selves) [...] for survival'.⁶⁴ Ultimately, understandings of racialized Selves and Others are collapsed into identity management without a more fundamental interrogation of how the racialization of the Self/Other is constitutive to the politics of being.

Sylvia Wynter's theory of being human as praxis

The principal intervention this article makes is an interrogation of the ontological security's self and the biographical narrative it seeks to secure – Huysmans's 'specific metaphysics of life' – by introducing Sylvia Wynter's theory of being human as praxis. By doing so, it proposes a radical challenge to conceptualizations of the self present in existing OSS literature by foregrounding dynamics of racialization and empire as constitutive of the self.

By now, 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose'⁶⁵ has become something of a truism in IR and CSS, but it takes on a new significance in terms of Sylvia Wynter's theory of the human. I provide here a brief biography of Wynter to stress the centrality of transformation and 'real-world' liberation from the colonial project of universalized humanity to her theory of being human as praxis.

Cuban-born Jamaican scholar Sylvia Wynter's oeuvre has rightly been described as a 'dense, lush intellectual, and creative corpus' originating in a rich tradition of Caribbean diasporic intellectual

⁶¹ Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries', p. 537.

⁶² Untalan, 'Decentering the self, seeing like the other', p. 40.

⁶³ Untalan, 'Decentering the self, seeing like the other', p. 44.

⁶⁴ Untalan, 'Decentering the self, seeing like the other', p. 53.

⁶⁵ Robert Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond international relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10:2 (1981), pp.126–155.

labour to ‘unearth the knowledge(s) buried in the histories of the ex-slave archipelago.’⁶⁶ Wynter read modern languages (Spanish with an English minor) at King’s College London in the late 1940s, where she also became involved in anti-colonial political activism. Her professional life began in the performing and creative arts, before she travelled in 1961 to Guyana⁶⁷ to work with Cheddi Jagan, a prominent anti-colonial and communist leader, whereupon she observed first-hand the racial and class tensions between Black and Indian folks.⁶⁸ Wynter’s experiences in Guyana catalysed a reassessment of her intellectual perspective. Since the mid-1940s, Caribbean Marxism had been the prevailing philosophy among West Indian radical students, intellectuals, and activists. The profound racial division in Guyana led Wynter to question and ultimately move away from Marxism, and, in returning to academia in 1963 to lecture at the University of the West Indies, she began to develop a perspective that ‘recognises that production was not the organizing principle of society, rather race and racial ideology are the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.’⁶⁹

Wynter took up a professorship at University of California–San Diego in the early seventies. In an interview in 2000, she emphasized the importance of her time in the United States and the Black Power and civil rights movements there: ‘I began to experience the entirely different nature of what it is to be something called “black” in this society, as distinct from in Jamaica, in the Caribbean [...] For being American in post-Civil War US is being white, being above all, *not-black*. The totality of this negation was something new to me!’⁷⁰ Wynter concludes that ‘Black America needs a liberatory theory developed from the Black experience’, one that confronts ‘how the Black lower classes remain the most wretched social group in the Western social order.’⁷¹ Drawing on lived experiences in the Caribbean and the Americas, as well as her training in medieval and Renaissance Spanish culture, Wynter mobilized early Spanish imperial history – in particular theological debates about the humanness of Indigenous peoples – to formulate her theory of racial hierarchization and human ontology.⁷² Wynter’s philosophical project can be described as a postulation of a new humanism which entails a redefinition ‘of the human being, its related “rational world view”, and its ordering body of knowledge’, what she terms an ‘un/writing of our present normative defining of the secular mode of the Subject.’⁷³ Wynter’s liberatory theory, therefore, is well suited to the task of interrogating the self from a ‘*Black* “gaze from below”’,⁷⁴ and, indeed, the knowledges upon which dominant understandings of the self come to be. Operationalizing her theory, the self can be analysed along Huysmans’s two-pronged understanding of ontological security as that which orders the self *and* that which secures the activity of ordering itself.

For Wynter, answers to the question of what it means to be human can be traced back to the ‘heretical’ overturning of medieval Christendom by Renaissance humanist scholars.⁷⁵ Wynter begins with the intelligentsia’s return to classical Greek texts throughout the fifteenth century, contending that this intellectual Renaissance constituted a gravitational shift in the order of knowledge. The *Studia Humanitatis* broke with ‘the higher system of divinely sanctioned identity’;

⁶⁶Karishma Desai and Brenda Nyandiko Sanya, ‘Towards decolonial praxis: Reconfiguring the human and the curriculum’, *Gender and Education*, 28:6 (2016), pp. 710–724.

⁶⁷Then colonized by the English and known as British Guiana.

⁶⁸Derrick White, ‘Black metamorphosis: A prelude to Sylvia Wynter’s theory of the human’, *The CLR James Journal*, 16:1 (2010), pp. 127–148.

⁶⁹White, ‘Black metamorphosis’, pp. 133–7.

⁷⁰White, ‘Black metamorphosis’, p. 129.

⁷¹White, ‘Black metamorphosis’, pp. 139–40.

⁷²White, ‘Black metamorphosis’, p. 135.

⁷³Sylvia Wynter, ‘The ceremony must be found: After humanism’, *Boundary 2*, 12:3 (1984), pp. 19–70.

⁷⁴Sylvia Wynter, ‘The ceremony found: Towards the autopoietic turn/overturn, its autonomy of human agency and extraterritoriality of (Self-)cognition’, in Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Bröck-Sallah (eds), *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 184–252.

⁷⁵For a good overview of humanism in the context of Wynter’s theory, see Zimitri Erasmus, ‘Sylvia Wynter’s theory of the human: Counter-, not post-humanist’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 37:6 (2020), pp. 3–4.

a secularization and rationalization of knowledge that Wynter terms ‘degodding’ insofar as it represented an ‘alternative system of learning whose referential authority was no longer that of Christian theology.’⁷⁶ Man thus was ‘released’ from theological ‘margins of knowledge’ which had hitherto dictated that ‘fallen man could not hope to know by which God had ordered his Creation.’⁷⁷ This humanist order of knowledge epistemologically empowered man to gather knowledge of previously unknowable physical reality and its cosmological laws of functioning.⁷⁸ Natural causality, rather than divine causality, functioned as the explanatory principle of reality and of the structural oppositions (Sameness/Difference, order/chaos) in reality’s order of values. These transformations gave rise to ‘an alternative mode of life and being’ in which man ‘underwent a new Counter-Birth, a Renaissance’, in which one could now be understood not only as Christian but also as Rational Man.⁷⁹ Within this cognitive transformation, as well as the rise of the modern state⁸⁰ and decline of feudalism in Europe,⁸¹ Man was no longer solely understood as a religious subject of the Church, but also as a rational and political subject of the state.

Order was no longer exclusively conceptualized as degrees of perfection from the terrestrial realm of Fallen Man/Flesh to the celestial realm of the Divine/Spirit;⁸² rather, order now could be based upon degrees of perfection from unreason/irrationality to reason/rationality. Secular reason emerged as an alternative epistemological principle by which Man could understand the world and his central place within it, giving rise to the emergence of the physical sciences. Wynter cites the Copernican leap – which displaced Christian notions of the earth as fixed in the centre of the universe – as a heretical shift that produced the figure of Man as governed by reason, science, and the state, rather than the spiritual, theolog, and the Church.⁸³ It is at this historical juncture, Wynter contends, that a continuum of being emerges: Man is situated at the midpoint between ‘the “super-celestial” regions [...] (i.e., angels, pure intelligences), and on the other, a region “filled with a diverse throng of animals, the cast off and residual parts of the lower world”’.⁸⁴

Crucially, these Christian Renaissance socio-political and cultural notions of Man took on a new significance in the global context of Spain and Portugal’s colonial conquests beginning in the fifteenth century. As European knowledge of the world expanded with Iberian slaving and evangelizing missions in Africa, the Atlantic, and South Asia, the continuum of perfectibility from the cosmos to the tropics was mapped onto the geography of the earth.⁸⁵ The spatialization of this general order of existence upheld a geographic opposition between temperate and habitable regions centred on Jerusalem on the one hand, and the uninhabitable Torrid Zone beyond the north-westernmost bulge of the African continent.⁸⁶ The association between the sub-Saharan African climate and its peoples’ alleged irrationality (which came to form a cornerstone of Catholic theological justifications for the transatlantic slave trade) found antecedents in medieval Islam. Writing in the eleventh century, Sā’id al-Andalusi, a Spanish historian, wrote that:

For those peoples [...] who live near and beyond the equinoctial line to the limit of the inhabited world in the south, the long presence of the sun at the zenith makes the air hot and the atmosphere thin. Because of this their temperaments become hot and their humors fiery, their

⁷⁶Wynter, ‘The ceremony must be found’, pp. 25–8.

⁷⁷Wynter, ‘The ceremony must be found’, p. 25 and p. 28.

⁷⁸Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation – an argument’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3:3 (2003), pp. 277–8; Wynter, ‘The ceremony must be found’, p. 33.

⁷⁹Wynter, ‘The ceremony must be found’, p. 29.

⁸⁰Wynter, ‘Unsettling’, p. 26; Wynter, ‘The ceremony must be found’, p. 26.

⁸¹Wynter, ‘The ceremony must be found’, p. 30.

⁸²Wynter, ‘Unsettling’, pp. 272–3.

⁸³Wynter, ‘Unsettling’, pp. 278–80.

⁸⁴Wynter, ‘Unsettling’, p. 287.

⁸⁵See Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁸⁶Wynter, ‘Unsettling’, pp. 278–9.

color black and their hair woolly. Thus, they lack self-control and steadiness of mind and are overcome by fickleness, foolishness, and ignorance. Such are the blacks, who live at the extremity of the land of Ethiopia, the Nubians, the Zanj and the like.⁸⁷

Climate-rationality theory, along with ancient Christian associations of hell, sin, and demons with the colour black,⁸⁸ as well as Islamic racism such as that above,⁸⁹ provided religious and cultural frameworks within which Black and Indigenous peoples came to be understood in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century colonial expeditions. These embryonic forms of racial ordering came to 'be mapped on phenotypical and religio-cultural differences between human variations and/or population groups', not as divinely ordained, but ordained by the 'law of nature'.⁹⁰ In other words, the idea of a *natural* difference between white-Christian-rational-political Man emerged as the Iberian colonizers encountered Indigenous modes of being.

It is this development that rests at the centre of Wynter's thesis. By-nature difference, she argues, came to be defined 'not only on differential degrees of rationality, but also as being human, of humanity'.⁹¹ Ways of being that Iberians encountered in the Americas, in Africa, in the Caribbean, and in South, East, and South-East Asia could no longer be seen within the terms of rational, political, secular Man. As the demand for slave labour in settler colonies grew, theological debates sought to establish the humanness of Indigenous peoples – whom the law of nature decreed 'natural slaves'⁹² – to determine whether they may be enslaved. While Indigenous Americans became legally protected from being understood as commodifiable/property in the transatlantic slave trade,⁹³ Spanish and Portuguese slavers and settlers could continually justify enslavement of Africans, Caribbeans, and South, East, and South-East Asians in terms of their 'not-quite-humanness'. For Wynter, Black Africans, categorized by colonizers as 'the figure of the Negro' were placed 'at the nadir of its Chain of Being; that is, on a rung of the ladder lower than that of all humans'.⁹⁴

Natural difference, then, acted as justification to deny humanness to colonized and Indigenous peoples. Its inverse (indeed, dialectical) action was to confer humanness *only* to white-Christian-rational-political Man. In Wynterian terminology, Man became the 'descriptive statement' of humanness: this way of being was 'overrepresented' as the only universally applicable mode of being human. Other empires have, of course, formulated political subjectivities. What distinguishes Man, however, is its universal imposition. As Wynter puts it, 'Rome's empire was *Roman*. Instead, [...] the West, over the last five hundred years, has brought the *whole* human species into its hegemonic, now purely secular [...] model of being *human*'.⁹⁵ Since Man was born of natural law, itself invented as a universal and extra-human ordering principle, it follows that Man is itself universal; the expression of generic humanness.

⁸⁷James H. Sweet, 'The Iberian roots of American racist thought', *The William & Mary Quarterly*, 54:1 (1997), pp. 143–166. See also Manuela Mourão, 'Whitewash: Nationhood, empire, and the formation of Portuguese racial identity', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 11:1 (2011), pp. 90–124.

⁸⁸Sweet, 'Iberian roots', p. 154; Wynter, 'Unsettling', pp. 301–2; David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

⁸⁹Sweet, 'Iberian roots', pp. 145–50.

⁹⁰Wynter, 'Unsettling', pp. 296–7.

⁹¹Wynter, 'Unsettling', p. 299.

⁹²Wynter, 'The ceremony must be found', p. 34.

⁹³Of course, Indigenous Americans were not spared from the barbarity of European colonialism: many groups were subject to indentured and forced labour, slaughtered, or faced near-extinction by settler colonists from the seventeenth century onwards.

⁹⁴Wynter, 'Unsettling', p. 301. Subsequent interpretations and analyses of Wynter's theory of the human have sought to redress her silence on enslavement and indentured labour in Asia. See, for example, Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁹⁵Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, 'Unparalleled catastrophe for our species? Or, to give humanness a different future: Conversations', in McKittrick (ed.), *Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp.9–89, emphasis in original.

With Wynter's account of the emergence of Man in place, let us now turn to her theorization of being human as praxis. Martiniquais psychiatrist and intellectual Frantz Fanon's groundbreaking introduction of the sociogenic explanation in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*) is, for Wynter, 'one of the strongest openings towards such re-writing of knowledge.'⁹⁶ Fanon proposed that ontogenic (the development of an organism) and phylogenic (the evolution of an organism) explanations are insufficient for understanding psychoanalysis and the constitution of the subject and that a sociogenic explanation must be incorporated. To be human, in Fanonian and Wynterian terms, is not simply to be a purely biological organism but also a deeply *cultural* one: there is a constitutive relation between 'the human as a living system and a vitally material being (ontogeny), and, on the other hand, the human as a symbolic, "languageing" being [...] (sociogeny).'⁹⁷ Being human 'is consequently a complex mediation between natural and social processes and not a unidirectional course emanating from "purely organic life".'⁹⁸

Colonial power, for Fanon and Wynter, is the white sociogenic attachment of lack, degeneracy, and inferiority to Blackness, i.e., 'I am who I am in relation to the other who sees me as such, and [therefore, in a colonial context] [...] becoming black is bound up with being perceived as black by a white person,'⁹⁹ and, as such, 'white subjectivity is naturalized in consciousness and embodiment as the normative bearer of humanity in colonized black subjects.'¹⁰⁰ Man, in this understanding, is a product of European 'philosophical and scientific projects,' an 'oversized figure' that becomes the yardstick against which all other forms of being and selfhood are measured.¹⁰¹ In Wynterian terms, we may say that Man is *selected*, and other forms of being are *dysselected*, condemned to less-than-humanity in terms that extend far beyond liberal critiques of race.¹⁰² Wynter's radical move is to dislocate the 'idea of race' from its liberal notion, namely a 'mistaken, false scientific apprehension of the human body'; she instead 'begins with the ontological question – that which ponders human existence and who/what we are – *alongside* the "idea of race".'¹⁰³ Wynter's 'counter-humanism' demands that we think through 'the ways in which a racial presence is necessary to the expansion, development, and implementation of imperial order and the production of Man-as-human.'¹⁰⁴ In other words, Wynter insists that we interrogate human life itself, and the racial codes that govern it, in order to trigger another 'heretical' overturning of knowledge in which humanness can be fundamentally redefined and freed from racialization.

The liberation of humanness relies on an understanding of being human as praxis; that is, 'the human as verb, as alterable, as relational,' rather than a noun or a biological given which condemns the dysselected to their status as such.¹⁰⁵ Wynter cites Judith Butler's 'illuminating redefinition of gender as a praxis rather than a noun' as foundational in her redefinition of being human as praxis which unlocks an understanding of how 'those currently inhabiting the underside of the category of Man-as-human – under our current epistemological regimes, those cast out as impoverished and colonized and undesirable and lacking reason – can, and do, provide a way to think about

⁹⁶Rafael Vizcaíno, 'Sylvia Wynter's new science of the word and the autopoetics of the flesh,' *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 14:1 (2022), pp. 72–88.

⁹⁷Erasmus, 'Wynter's theory,' p. 8.

⁹⁸Vizcaíno, 'New science of the word,' p. 76.

⁹⁹Walter Mignolo, 'Sylvia Wynter: What does it mean to be human?', in McKittrick (ed.), *Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 106–123.

¹⁰⁰Vizcaíno, 'New science of the word,' p. 76.

¹⁰¹Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'Before *Man*: Sylvia Wynter's rewriting of the modern episteme,' in McKittrick (ed.), *Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 90–105.

¹⁰²Wynter, 'Unsettling,' p. 322.

¹⁰³Da Silva, 'Before *Man*,' p. 93.

¹⁰⁴Katherine McKittrick, 'Yours in the intellectual struggle: Sylvia Wynter and the realization of the living,' in McKittrick (ed.), *Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 1–8.

¹⁰⁵McKittrick, 'Yours in the intellectual struggle,' pp. 7–8.

being human anew'.¹⁰⁶ This 'Black gaze from below' is essential to the re/writing of our present order of life; in other words, ways of being human differently.

Wynter's understanding of *being* human as praxis places analytical centrality on the *action*, rather than *condition*, that is integral to subjectivity. For our interrogation of the self in OSS, being human as praxis therefore dislocates analytical primacy away from the self as a noun – connoting fixity, categorization, order – and instead towards the self as a *verb*: the creative, uncapturable, discontinuous, generative movement constitutive of the self. Being human as praxis opens up an 'audaciously imaginative'¹⁰⁷ intellectual vista whereby we can embrace an understanding of humans as *constituted* by particular fields of physical, political, historical, and psychosocial formations of power, in order to, in turn, trouble the orders of knowledge upon which they rest.

The autopoetics of the self and OSS

Holding in mind Wynter's understanding of the self as praxis, i.e. constituted by specifically colonial and racial orders of knowledge, we can introduce two final elements of Wynter's philosophical oeuvre in order to trouble OSS's failure to divest from identity management. One of Wynter's 'most original and groundbreaking contributions' is her appropriation of 'autopoiesis' as *autopoetics*.¹⁰⁸ Coined by two Chilean biologists to apply cybernetics and systems theory to cognitive biology, 'autopoiesis' holds that organic systems are animated by a dynamically symbiotic relation with 'external' systems in a self-regenerative process. Put differently, a living system autonomously produces and reproduces itself to maintain its own unity, and, in such a closed system, any interaction with outside elements is predetermined by the internality of the system itself.¹⁰⁹ For Wynter, the ways humans represent themselves as human functions as an autopoietic system, becoming 'self-conscious through self-observation; by making descriptions of ourselves (representations), and by interacting with our descriptions[,] we can describe ourselves describing ourselves, in an endless recursive process'.¹¹⁰ We see how, therefore, Man-as-human (an autopoietic system) recursively and endlessly self-regenerates, obscuring the 'mechanisms of occultation by means of which we have been able to make opaque to ourselves' that humanness is not a predetermined biological given but is *praxis*.¹¹¹

Weaving together Wynter's theorizations so far, we can therefore speak of the emergence of Man-as-human (or 'the self') as an autopoietic praxis which is obscured from itself. A crucial dynamic of this is the universalization of modern Western scientism, i.e. how our orders of knowledge are governed by rationality and scientificity. In contradistinction, and following Aimé Césaire, Wynter contends that 'we come to imagine/experience ourselves, our modes of being' through literary and aesthetic orders – what she has referred to as 'psycho-aesthetic structures'.¹¹² The autopoietic praxis of the self can be analysed through a *poetic* knowledge, as "words", as "narrative schemas" to be read, interpreted, and deconstructed'.¹¹³ The poetic is, for Wynter, intimately connected with Fanon's sociogeny: the symbolic, cultural, narrativizing codes which govern being human as much as our biological matter does.¹¹⁴

Autopoetics, therefore, describes the self-reproduction of symbolic and narrative (sociogenic) orders through which humanness comes to be recursively defined: an 'autopoetics of the self'. As we have seen, Wynter calls for an analytic from the perspective of the dysselected – that is, those

¹⁰⁶McKittrick, 'Yours in the intellectual struggle', p. 3.

¹⁰⁷Erasmus, 'Wynter's theory', p. 1.

¹⁰⁸Vizcaino, 'New science of the word', p. 80, n. 10.

¹⁰⁹Vizcaino, 'New science of the word', pp. 80–1.

¹¹⁰Vizcaino, 'New science of the word', p. 81.

¹¹¹Wynter, 'Unsettling', p. 328.

¹¹²Wynter, 'The ceremony must be found', p. 32.

¹¹³Vizcaino, 'New science of the word', p. 78.

¹¹⁴Erasmus, 'Wynter's theory', p. 7.

who lie outside of the terms of Man-as-humanness – in order to become conscious of the autopoetics of the self and, eventually, provoke a re/writing of modern orders of knowledge in service of the liberation of the self from Man-as-human. Wynter and her long-standing intellectual companion Katherine McKittrick term this mode of analysing sociogenic codes which govern the self as a ‘demonic approach’, a phrase borrowed from the biological and mathematical sciences which refers to ‘a working system that cannot have a determined, or knowable, outcome.’¹¹⁵ A ‘demonic’ approach, therefore, is one governed by the impossibility of prediction, mobilized in service of identifying a system ‘that can only unfold and produce an outcome if uncertainty, or (dis)organization, or something supernaturally demonic, is integral to the methodology.’¹¹⁶ Essentially, a ‘demonic’ analytic is one which occupies the perspective of the dysselected in order to raise consciousness of the orders of knowledge which self-reproduce Man-as-human. The play on words immanent to a ‘demonic’ understanding of the self is intentional for Wynter and McKittrick: it brings attention both to the denial of humanness to the dysselected (or ‘supernaturally demonic’) and to an autopoetic analysis of the self which refuses ordering, prediction, and fixity.

What is at stake for OSS with this ‘demonic’ understanding of the self? Putting together these elements of Wynter’s magisterial oeuvre, a ‘demonic’ approach to the self in OSS speaks to Rosedale’s challenge within OSS to liberate an understanding of the self from fixity and determination. An understanding of the self as autopoetic interrogates modern orders of knowledge that privilege pseudoscientific/humanist categorizations of subjectivity, instead offering a methodology for a radical rewriting of being human that refuses to be ordered. Central to this rewriting is a liberation from the racial codes which extend beyond notions of race and racialization as identity markers but indeed constitute and structure our current modality of being human.

As we have seen above, analyses of the ontological security-seeking self in OSS can often collapse into descriptions of identity securitization; for instance, the ways in which populist politics naturalize anti-immigrant sentiments.¹¹⁷ Even OSS scholarship which aims to ‘avoid collapsing together the concepts of self, identity, and ontological security’, such as Browning and Joenniemi’s ‘Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity’, falls short of effectively delinking the self and identity management. The authors’ central claim is that the self is a reflexive subject, requiring self-articulation and recognition from others, and that the late modern self must grapple with ‘the contingencies of radical doubt’ and a ‘changing normative environment.’¹¹⁸ The anxiety produced by such uncertainty can be mitigated by flexibility and adaptability towards the self; therefore, ontological security can be attained through an ‘opening up [...] around identity.’¹¹⁹ For the authors, friendship, which is based on ‘equality, respect, solidarity [...] and] positive forms of difference’ should also be a source that the self can draw upon for an articulation of ‘safe identities.’¹²⁰ Ultimately, the self is still understood in terms of identity management in this analysis, since its contribution lies in positing an adaptive and accepting approach towards identities in order for the self to soothe ontological anxieties. Additionally, ontological security is still framed as the pursuit of a ‘safe identity’, achieved by the recognition of identities different to oneself’s, and as such, the self and identity management remain analytically entangled.

With Wynter’s theorization, those whom she terms ‘dysselected’ occupy a subjectivity that cannot be collapsed into notions of identity. Since the self is autopoetically defined in relation to the Western European, white, Christian idea of Man, being human ‘is a *relational* act’. This act positions ‘the contemporary underclass as colonized-nonwhite-black-poor-incarcerated-jobless people’ – Wynter’s dysselected – not simply as occupying social categories, but as ‘identifiably condemned

¹¹⁵McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, p. xxiv.

¹¹⁶McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, p. xxiv.

¹¹⁷Kinnvall, ‘Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries’, p. 534.

¹¹⁸Browning and Joenniemi, ‘Self-articulation’, pp. 41–2.

¹¹⁹Browning and Joenniemi, ‘Self-articulation’, p. 45.

¹²⁰Browning and Joenniemi, ‘Self-articulation’, p. 43.

due to their dysseparated *human* status.¹²¹ Dysseparation, therefore, transcends liberal notions of race and other identity markers, instead invoking an entire order of knowledge which overrepresents Man as the only referent for being human. Many OSS analyses, by locating ontological in/security at the level of migration status, race, nationality, religion, and so forth, ultimately serve to affix and entrench identity markers. As such, conventional OSS forgoes a deeper interrogation of the symbolic orders upon which ‘identity’ rests and arrests possibilities for subverting them.

A ‘demonic’ approach to OSS

We have found generative connections between Huysmans’s understanding of security as a thick signifier and Wynter’s conceptualization of being human as praxis, since both foreground ‘specific metaphysics of life’ and symbolic orders. Indeed, this article’s intervention thus far can be summarized as a Wynterian extension of Huysmans’s understanding of ontological security as that which ‘positions people in their relations to themselves, to nature and to other human beings within a particular discursive, symbolic order’ and, in doing so, guarantees the activity of ordering itself. So far, I have contended that an autopoietic understanding of the self can shed light on the deeper symbolic and racial orders upon which modern selfhood rests – Huysmans’s first articulation of ontological security’s function. In this final section, I reflect upon the second, i.e. how the intellectual project of OSS guarantees the activity of ordering itself. In doing so, I offer a ‘demonic’ approach to OSS not only in intellectual terms but also in terms of the activity of *doing* OSS ‘in the world’. Put differently, why does it matter, in material terms, that OSS conceptualizes the self in terms of identity politics?

Above, I introduced Wynter’s philosophical oeuvre with a brief biography in order to situate her thought in the material socio-political world. Anti-colonial revolutionary movements both in 1930s Jamaica and the 1960s United States constitute more than a historical background or political context for a purely intellectual project; instead, in Wynter’s words, these ‘multiple forms of spontaneously erupting uprisings of “otherness” [...] determine[d] what was to be the imperative trajectory of my life and work.’¹²² It was from the ‘epistemological tumult’ initiated by anti-colonial and civil rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s that Wynter first forged an articulation of humanness, since revolutionary struggles on the ground ‘opened up new claims to the category of human.’¹²³ Beyond empirical fodder for an intellectual project, the ‘Fifties/Sixties’ were crucial in that it was also the terrain for ‘Black Americans’ struggle for the establishment of Black Studies within the university system of the USA.¹²⁴ The incorporation of this field of knowledge ‘made possible’ Wynter’s exploration of humanness in two senses: by honing her theoretical understanding of race as ‘*the issue* whose historically-instituted singularity could not be made into a subset of *any other issue*’, and also in the sense that, without Black Studies emerging as a physical site for knowledge generation, such a ‘*Black “gaze from below”*’ could not exist.¹²⁵

In the ‘lingering afterglow’ of these institutional and revolutionary struggles, Wynter authored her theory of human of being praxis in an endeavour to ‘reenact Renaissance humanism’s original heresy’ and embark upon a re/writing of humanness.¹²⁶ Since then, Wynter writes that her ‘own heresy remained incomplete’ and that her ‘essay can be seen in this respect to have, in the end, failed.’¹²⁷ In subsequent publications, Wynter muses on this and on the ‘incomplete and unfinished

¹²¹McKittrick, ‘Yours in the intellectuals’, p. 7.

¹²²Wynter, ‘The ceremony found’, p. 185.

¹²³Katherine McKittrick, ‘Axis, bold as love: On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the promise of science’, in McKittrick (ed.), *Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 142–163.

¹²⁴Wynter, ‘The ceremony found’, p. 186.

¹²⁵Wynter, ‘The ceremony found’, pp. 186–7.

¹²⁶Sylvia Wynter, *Human Being as Noun? Or Being Human as Praxis? Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtturn: A Manifesto*, unpublished manuscript, p. 2 and p. 5.

¹²⁷Wynter, *Human Being as Noun?*, pp. 5–6.

challenge to the conception of Man itself' of the 'Fifties/Sixties'.¹²⁸ In terms of social revolution, Wynter found that movements too quickly 'accepted the fiction of equivalence' or legal equality, the conceptualization of which itself is reliant on a dialectical 'inequality', thus maintaining the relation between Man-as-human and less-than-human. Without a fundamental transformation of the social order, a 'sliding hierarchy' of oppression was instituted¹²⁹ – what we can term 'identity politics' in contemporary terms. This incomplete revolutionary struggle was codified within the social relations and imaginaries of academia: the 'hopeful intellectual project' of Black Studies has, in her eyes, since become '*ethniciz[ed]*' in middle-class assimilationist terms as *African American Studies*¹³⁰ and has abandoned a re/writing of being human 'in favour of valorizing a project through which Man-as-human is axiomatically preconceptualized as the marker of emancipation.'¹³¹ In such "'identity" studies' projects, the study of 'race' is 'one working toward or meeting the standards of Man', rather than a fundamental challenge to 'the making and meaning of Man-as-human.'¹³²

Wynter's reflections on the co-optation of revolutionary struggles in academia reveal several important insights for a demonic approach to OSS. In the first place, we see how a more radical reflexivity – which takes the activity of 'doing research' as an object of critique in and of itself – understands the researcher as engaged in 'the performance of social relations and imaginaries' of the Western academy.¹³³ A demonic approach calls our attention not only to the ways in which OSS epistemically orders the social world on the pages of monographs and journal articles but *also* to the conditions of possibility for the knowledge of OSS to exist within a 'specific metaphysics of life' in which the academy is constituted by both 'overrepresented' racial orders of knowledge and anti-colonial struggles outside of academia.

In terms of OSS, this subfield of study gained traction in the 2000s and 2010s, a period in which liberal identity politics became entrenched as the terrain for social struggle. We can define liberal identity politics along two axes: the rendering of social identities as essential and affixed and a reliance on the liberal state to achieve limited – usually legal – reforms in order to 'achieve' equality.¹³⁴ This approach encourages a focus on the individual, a 'personalization and individualization of oppression', and an analysis of one's experience is '*at the expense* of simultaneously analysing how structures condition experiences.'¹³⁵ Since the millennium, we have seen how social identities are understood as reified, deterministic, and totalizing, resulting in the so-called 'culture wars' and identity politics *du jour*, and an attendant dislocation of struggle away from radical collective liberation. In this way, identity politics' ascendancy creates the conditions of possibility for OSS's focus on identity management and an understanding of the self as defined by social identities. This analytic authorizes the epistemic ordering of the self within the confines of identity in an autopoietic sense: a recursive feedback loop in which thought (in this case, the self as identity) becomes embodied (so that being human is enacted along identity lines). Returning once more to Huysmans, we can therefore understand the activity of doing OSS as an intellectual project which 'guarantees the activity of ordering itself'; it is 'a strategy of managing the limits of reflexivity – death as the undetermined – by fixing social relations into a symbolic and institutional order' so as to 'make life intelligible.'¹³⁶

¹²⁸McKittrick, 'Axis, bold as love', p. 151.

¹²⁹White, 'Black metamorphosis', p. 140–2.

¹³⁰Wynter, 'The ceremony found', p. 186.

¹³¹McKittrick, 'Axis, bold as love', p. 151.

¹³²McKittrick, 'Axis, bold as love', p. 151.

¹³³Rossdale, 'Enclosing critique', p. 381.

¹³⁴Sara Salem, 'Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25:4 (2018), pp. 403–418, n. 1; Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

¹³⁵Rekia Jibrin and Sara Salem, 'Revisiting intersectionality: Reflections on theory and praxis', *Trans-Scripts*, 5 (2015), pp. 7–24.

¹³⁶Huysmans, 'Security!', p. 242.

Wynter's demonic approach and attendant reflections on Black Studies as an incomplete revolutionary intellectual project also warns us against the co-optation of radical struggle within intellectual thought. The 'ethnicization' of Black Studies as African American Studies, Wynter contends, depoliticized struggles for an overturning of Man-as-human and instead reformulated the project as one of enunciating strategies for the dysselected to pursue Man-as-humanness. In a similar vein, contemporary academia's embrace of intersectionality – an analysis of the co-constitutive axes of oppression rooted in a critique of coloniality – can be seen as an extension of Black Studies' incomplete revolutionary intellectual project. Instead of a fundamental critique of material structures of oppression, intersectionality's focus on identity results in a 'valorization of difference without consequences, recognition without redistribution'.¹³⁷ Chandra Mohanty and Silma Bilge, in their respective articles, both chart the ways in which intersectionality has become diluted and co-opted by neoliberal academia.¹³⁸ The flattening and commodification of difference in the academy has the effect of 'conflat[ing] political struggles and identities with market niches' in which 'identity-based radical politics are often turned into corporatized diversity tools leveraged by dominant groups to attain various ideological and institutional goals'.¹³⁹ Intersectionality and theories of identity, therefore, become neutralized and tamed, stripped of their radical collective focus on social justice.

From the perspective of the dysselected (i.e. a demonic approach), this intellectual neutralization has critically important material implications. In Wynterian terms, co-optation of radical challenges to being human ensures that 'colonized-nonwhite-black-poor-incarcerated-jobless people' are condemned to a dysselected less-than-human status. This denial of humanness manifests itself in various forms of 'organized violence and abandonment', including racial capitalism, mass incarceration, police brutality, and strict migration control.¹⁴⁰ Put simply, affixing social identities such as migration status or race – rooted, as Wynter demonstrates, in the colonial encounter – to forms of being human underwrites the various forms of epistemic and material violence that, in turn, uphold racial ordering that makes 'identity' possible. This process of subjectification and identity re/production operates autopoetically, further re/producing violence in an enclosed and recursive feedback loop.

A demonic approach to OSS occupies a radically alternative perspective to the self and to identity, and, in doing so, 'holds in it the possibility of undoing and unsettling – not replacing or occupying – Western conceptions of what it means to be human'.¹⁴¹ For Rinaldo Walcott, a demonic approach can be spatialized in the Caribbean basin; the 'failed nation-states of the archipelago of misery [...] forged out of modernity's brutality', insofar as this region symbolizes a 'constant negotiation of human difference [...] all the while articulating a humanness yet "to come"'.¹⁴² Interrogating the autopoetics of the self from the 'space' of the Caribbean urges us to confront 'the ways in which our colonial present and imperialism continue to make identity a locus of control, containment, and regulation'.¹⁴³ It is through this demonic confrontation that we may begin to attend to Wynter's call for 'a revolution *in thought*, a complete "rewriting of knowledge"' which can liberate our understanding of the self from racial orders of knowledge and violence. In doing so, we can decisively exceed a redefinition of being human from a purely intellectual project and engage in struggles for radical collective liberation as part of a global recreation of human life.

¹³⁷ Silma Bilge, 'Intersectionality undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies', *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10:2 (2013), pp. 405–424.

¹³⁸ Bilge, 'Intersectionality undone'; Chandra Mohanty, 'Transnational feminist crossings: On neoliberalism and radical critique', *Signs*, 38:4 (2013), pp. 967–91.

¹³⁹ Mohanty, 'Transnational feminist crossings', p. 972; Bilge, 'Intersectionality undone', pp. 407–9.

¹⁴⁰ Sabrina Axster, Ida Danewid, Asher Goldstein et al., 'Colonial lives of the carceral archipelago: Rethinking the neoliberal security state', *International Political Sociology*, 15:3 (2021), pp. 415–439.

¹⁴¹ McKittrick, 'Yours in the intellectual struggle', p. 2.

¹⁴² Walcott, 'Genres of human', p. 194.

¹⁴³ Walcott, 'Genres of human', p. 198.

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Lucy Gehring is a PhD candidate in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. Her research focuses on forms of carceral labour from early modernity to contemporary times to uncover histories of present colonial pacification. She holds an MA in International Conflict Studies from King's College London and an MSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science.