On Being: THEORY AND THE ANCESTOR (THCRT 9156)

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Class Meets: Every Wednesday from 5:00-8:00 pm
Office Hours: By Appointment, In-Person/Zoom

INVOCATION

To the Sun, in whose tight embrace we and other planets travel the Cosmos free of charge, we are grateful. To the Earth, the ground of our being, we are grateful. To all fellow creatures on this planet—on land, in the air, and in the waters—we are grateful; we apologize that our human ways have ravaged your ways of life in the recent past. To our personal and collective ancestors, we are grateful, and we shall right the wrongs. We are grateful to, and acknowledge, the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Chonnonton Nations, on whose traditional Dish with One Spoon Treaty Territory this course takes place. And so, it is.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Mauya! Sam'kele! Welcome to this graduate seminar! This course invites you to critically re-examine the foundational theories of your academic disciplines through the central figure of the **ancestor**, a concept foundational to many Indigenous cosmologies. We will draw on African and African Diasporic (Black) thought and historiography to help you reimagine scholarly practice and become a better ancestor for future generations. As Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison articulated, the goal of intellectual work is to find our own intellectual voice and make our own imagination as "unencumbered as possible and as responsible as possible". If the planet were not an "it" but an ancestor, how would we live, think, and write? This is the central question we will explore as we work to cultivate a more responsible and engaged scholarly practice where diverse intellectual traditions can coexist.

This seminar is an engaged rethinking of the modern humanities and social sciences, not a "search and rescue" mission. We will immerse ourselves in a variety of texts, including classic works from the Western tradition, to understand how and why they continue to influence disciplinary thought. You will be challenged to re-assess the core meanings of **ontology** (theories of being), **axiology** (theories of value), **epistemology** (theories of knowledge), and **methodology** (theories and tools of knowledge production) from Indigenous perspectives. Ultimately, this course will dare you to consider what it means to be a scholar in your own discipline(s), and on a planet in peril.

LEARNING EXPECTATIONS

This course is designed to support and challenge students to:

- **Re-historicize an aspect of their academic discipline(s)** by analyzing and critiquing the historical and intellectual foundations of their field from Indigenous and decolonial perspectives.

- **Re-evaluate the conceptual and theoretical paradigms** by applying and integrating theoretical frameworks from the course to assess the efficacy of existing scholarly paradigms.
- **Imagine transformative epistemic futures** by developing an original research project or paper that uses Indigenous and other perspectives to articulate a scholarly practice that is deeply responsible to the Earth, to the Ancestors, and to all living beings, honoring the sacredness of life in every body.

LEARNING AND EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The course is guided by an ethos of **care** and **Ubuntu** for its call-and-response curriculum. While the instructor is ultimately responsible for all classroom activities and final grades, students will participate in select aspects of the assessment process. This collaborative approach, which includes peer review, is intended to foster both competence in evaluative skills and a thoughtful, equitable review culture. Detailed guidelines and submission timelines will be made available on the course website.

- **Preparation, Active Participation, and Attendance (30%)**
    - **Attendance (15%):** In-person attendance each week is part of the course practice. To accommodate life's demands, you may miss up to two classes. Missing more than two classes will decrease this portion of your grade to half its value (7.5%).
    - **Preparation and Active Participation (15%):** Teams will take turns leading discussions per provided guidelines (the call), and the class will respond by reading complementary material to generate rigorous and joyous learning (the response).
- **Reflection Essays and Peer Evaluations (40%)**
    - **Reflection Essay 1 (20%):** Half the class will write an essay on Part 1 of the course. The other half will evaluate the essays.
    - **Reflection Essay 2 (20%):** The half of the class that evaluated the first set of essays will now write an essay on Part 2 of the course. The half that wrote the first essays will now evaluate the second set of essays.
- **Individual Paper (30%):** This final assignment is designed to incorporate individual and collective learning of course material.

COURSE MATERIALS

Most of the assigned material is embedded in the syllabus and is available either open-source or through Western Libraries, which students can access at no extra charge. Only two books are for purchase. While the course is text-heavy, students are encouraged to bring methods from their own disciplines and abilities. This approach ensures we all encounter the material anew each time we gather to learn.

The weekly learning process is structured as a call-and-response. Reading Leads (RLs) will **call** by focusing on the underlined or highlighted text(s) and create a handout for the class. The rest of the class will **respond** by reading the other text(s) and use the RLs' handout to

generate questions for debate, fostering innovation. This way, no one will come to class assuming they know it all, as we will co-create in the learning.
Note: Films are part of the course materials and may occasionally be watched in part or whole during class.

Part 1: Foundations of Radical Thought and Disciplinary Critique (Weeks 1-5)
This part of the course establishes a theoretical foundation by exploring key concepts from African and Black radical thought. We will confront the intellectual traditions that have shaped our fields and begin the process of re-evaluation.

- **Week 1: September 10 - The Scholar as Human and Other Introductions**
  - Anna Sims Bartel and Debra A. Castillo. Eds. *The Scholar as Human: Research and Teaching for Public Impact*. Read Part I, all 3 chapters.
  - bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*. Read chapters: Intro, 1-4, & 8-9.

- **Week 2: September 17 - Unsettling the Coloniality of Being & Returning to Being**
  - Sylvia Wynter. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument". *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.
  - Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 240–270.
  - Kwasi Wiredu. "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion." *African Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1998).

- **Week 3: September 24 – Not Fetishizing Scholarship & Resisting the Urge to Diss (Francis)**
  - James Lorand Matory. *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. (access through WL)
  - Cedric J. Robinson. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (access through WL).
  - Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000). {recommended, not required}.

- **Week 4: October 1 – The Historian, the Subject, and Power (Mara & Zach)**
  - Marc Epprecht. *Accidental Queer: And Other Essays around Critical Masculinity Studies in Southern Africa and Canada*. Wits University Press, 2013.* *Author will visit class and there are copies of the book available.*
  - Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*. Windhoek: Sister Namibia, 2008.

- **Week 5: October 8 – The Lives of Others in the Minds of Some (Wesley & Myles)**
    - **Reflection Essay 1 due for half the class.**
    - V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
    - Tom C. McCaskie, "Exiled from History: Africa in Hegel's Academic Practice." *History in Africa* 46 (2019): 165-194. (access through WL)
    - John Keenan and Karima Kadi-Hanifi. "Epistemological Moor-Ing. Re-Positioning Foucault, Bourdieu and Derrida Theory to Its Northern African Origins." *Teaching in Higher Education* 26, no. 6 (2021): 855–70. {recommended, not required}. (access through WL)

Part 2: Re-evaluating Disciplinary Epistemologies (Weeks 6-9)
Building on our theoretical grounding, we will now apply these critiques to specific disciplines, examining how Indigenous and Black thought offers transformative alternatives. The goal here is to integrate, not replace, these new perspectives into a broader understanding of scholarship.

- Week 6: October 15 - Gender, Race, and Postcolonialism (Kailey & Sasha)
    - **Peer Evaluation on Reflection Essay 1 due.**
    - Gaurav Gajanan Desai and Supriya Nair, eds., *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005 (Response Reads, Parts I, VI, VIII and your choice).
    - bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000.

- **Week 7: October 22 – History, Memory, and Research (Tareq)**
    - Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. (access through WL)
    - Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*. (access through WL)

- **Week 8: October 29 - Indigenous Philosophy and Contested Ecologies**
    - Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. (access through WL)
    - Lesley Green. *Rock | Water | Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. (access through WL) https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478004615.

- Week 9: November 5 – Decolonizing the Psyche (**Charlie & Jack**)
    - **Reflection Essay 2 due for the other half of the class.**
    - Robert A. Segal, "Jung and Lévy-Bruhl," in *Psychoanalysis and the Legacy of the Safe Harbor: A Collection of Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2017, 101–114. (access through WL)
    - Farhad Dalal, "Jung, a Racist," *Psychological Studies* 66, no. 4 (2021): 450–454. (access through WL)
    - C. G Jung and Aniela Jaffé. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Rev. ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. (access through WL)

Part 3: Imagining Transformative Futures (Weeks 10-13)
This final part moves from critique to practice. We will explore how scholars actively engage in the making of new, more just, and more humane knowledge. This section emphasizes the creation of a scholarly ecosystem where all traditions can contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the world.

- Week 10: November 12 – Language, Memory, and Resurgence
    - **Peer Evaluation on Reflection Essay 2 due.**
    - Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing Language and Other Revolutionary Ideas*. The New Press, 2025. (Part I – Brightspace)
    - Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings*, ed. Aelred Stubbs. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. (Selection – Brightspace)
    - Lewis Gordon. *Fear of Black Consciousness*. (Selection – Brightspace)

- Week 11: November 19 – Literary History as Radical Scholarship
    - Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. (access through WL)
    - Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. (access through WL)

- Week 12: November 26 – **Decolonizing the Anthropocene** (two films+)
    - Anil Sumrith, *The Burning Earth: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024.*
    - Merton & Merton, *Taking Root: The Vision of Environmentalist Wangari Maathai*. 2016. San Francisco, California, USA: Kanopy Streaming.
    - James Becket, Camilla Denton Becket, et al, *The Seeds of Vandana Shiva*. Sausalito, CA: Ro*Co Films, 2021.

- **Week 13: December 3 – What Will Your Scholarship Offer the Earth and Humanity?**
    - **Individual Paper due.**
    - Concluding Invocation, Final Thoughts and Projects.

ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The history of the disciplines may have once only valued that which was and is Western-derived; here, we will uphold levels of excellence that prize academic rigor and scholarly integrity not as weapons, but as tools for intellectual and personal growth. We will abide by Western University's codes of academic integrity found here.

GRADING GUIDE, CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF THEORY AND CRITICISM

- **B | B- or lower:** Performance below the level required of a graduate student.
- **B+ (78-79):** Competent work, sufficient for the MA level, but the student does not have the potential to do PhD work. Below standard for a PhD-level student.
- **A- (80-84):** Good MA-level work. Indicates the student's potential (with some reservations) to do PhD work. Acceptable PhD work.
- **A (85-87):** Strong performance at the MA level, fully equal to that of an average PhD student. Work in this range must be well-written and show some originality. Good PhD-level work.
- **A (88-89):** Excellent at both MA and PhD levels. Showing potential for A+ work and originality beyond simple points of detail.
- **A+ (90 and above):** Work that is publishable, with some possible revisions. This should be considered equivalent to advanced PhD-level work. Marks of over 90 should be given with parsimony, and one should not expect to award them every year.