the FEBRUARY journal

Berlin Universities Publishing Journals

Article

Toying with Canonical Figures: Counterhumanist Experiments and the Politics of Personhood at the Heart of Professional Training in France

Eman Shehata
London School of Economics, London

This item has been published in Issue 06 'Method as Play / Play as Method,' edited by Anisha Anantpurkar and Pasha Tretyakova.

To cite this item: Shehata, E. (2026). Toying with canonical figures: Counterhumanist experiments and the politics of personhood at the heart of professional training in France. *The February Journal*, 06: 122–144.
DOI: 10.60633/tfj.i06.121

To link to this item: https://doi.org/10.60633/tfj.i06.121
Published: 13 April 2026

ISSN-2940-5181
thefebruaryjournal.org
Berlin, Berlin Universities Publishing

Toying with Canonical Figures: Counterhumanist Experiments and the Politics of Personhood at the Heart of Professional Training in France

Eman Shehata

The stand-alone, bounded humanist figure of the individual has long been critiqued by anthropologists, who challenged its exclusionary stakes and its position as the natural starting point of questions and debates in the social sciences. In confronting the shadows of dominant models of being, such as *Homo economicus*, in their field, anthropologists of welfare and the economic imagination reveal a gap between intended results and the socially complex realities they observe ethnographically, which slip through the abstractions of such models. This article builds on and extends these critical insights by inverting the terms of analysis. Instead of showing how hegemonic economic models of being can be undermined through ethnography, it inquires into what keeps them alive. The contribution suggests a different theoretical point of departure by adopting Sylvia Wynter's concept of 'being human as praxis' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015). Being human as praxis is a playful experiment that offers generative pathways in thinking beyond the humanist trope of neoliberal subjectivity. It allows us to consider the enactment and regeneration (or not) of dominant mythologies of being human, and their racial ontologies, through an inclusive and dynamic understanding of being human, centered on storytelling and praxis. Grounded in fieldwork at a simulation-based training center in Lyon preoccupied with 'professional reconversion,' where play emerges as a praxis of mastery and worldmaking, I argue that Wynter's conception of humanness as a verb rather than a noun shifts our focus from the trope of autonomous subjects towards a politics of personhood enacted through everyday reproductions of autonomy as symbolic life.

Keywords: anthropological theory, autonomy, being human as praxis, Homo economicus, individualism, professional training, worldmaking

> *How was Homo oeconomicus foisted on us? In spite of his elegant foreign name, he is selfish and unmannered, brutish as Caliban, naïve as Man Friday. We all love to speak scathingly of him. Judging from the bad press he receives, we actually dislike him a lot and cannot believe anyone could really be so greedy and selfish. He is logical, but even that is unattractive. His shadow stretches across our thoughts so effectively that we even use his language for criticizing him. . . Our subject is about his origins: Where did someone without social attributes come from in the first place, and why has he expanded from a small, theoretical niche to become*

an all-embracing mythological figure. . . like a republican parallel to the imperial microcosm of former civilizations?

Mary Douglas and Steven Ney
(1998, cit. in Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 13).

There is a young woman who used to be a doctor in Algeria
and she ended up becoming a nurse here
She was a doctor
She had her own cabinet
<...> You must redo everything from scratch
<...>
Sure there are customs you must learn to work in a company but a doctor
whether they're Iranian, Algerian or Congolese
The human body is the same <...>
The instructions to build a bridge in Algeria or France are the same

— Excerpt from an interview with Masha,
a job counsellor at Mission Locale
(Soignet, 2022, p. 213).

'He has to mourn his old life to welcome a new life,' said an employee from the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes regional government when reflecting on the professional trajectory of one of the trainees at Immersitu, the situational learning center where I did my fieldwork. A plumber turned production manager, the man in question was deemed to have had a remarkable journey. His example was often brought up by trainers to demonstrate the possibilities of *formation* ('training'). In the refurbished and chic industrial warehouse where the manufacturing and production management training took place, two trainers talked with two neatly dressed government officials about 'professional reconversion' and its transformative potential. 'You wouldn't believe what people have to go through when they come here,' said one of the women in a concerned tone before reasserting the value that *formation* can bring to a person's life.

Sitting on the leather couches in the reception area, they exchanged personal stories of triumph and struggle and reflected on ways they could make industry attractive. 'I find it better to formulate your offer of *formation* in terms of a project,' one of the trainers suggested. A professional project was imagined by trainers as something to be constructed over the course of a person's working life; a showcase of autonomy and something to take pride in, regardless of whether one has secured a job. On my way back to the training center, I thought about what the woman from La Région had said about the plumber: 'He has to mourn his old life to welcome a new

life.' This was not the first time I had come across this phrasing,[1] but I found it striking, nonetheless. What does the invocation of mourning tell us about how *formation* is conceived? What kind of 'new life' is imagined here?

In recent years, under Emmanuel Macron's leadership, the French government has invested significant amounts into professional training, conceiving it as a solution to long-term unemployment and pushing people further into activity. It orchestrated an overhaul of the public training system, automating access to training in a way that has triggered an individualization of social problems. In parallel to so-called activation policies that sparked national outrage over the past decades, videos were created and publicized on the social media accounts of the Ministry of Labor, celebrating individuals who 'took matters into their own hands' and shaped their own professional futures by undertaking a professional reconversion.

Valorizations of autonomy, projected by the French government and my interlocutors, recall a familiar story. This is a story rehearsed in Foucauldian governmentality analyses (Brown, 2015; Rose, 1996, Wacquant, 2009) about the homogenizing figure of an 'active individual,' an 'autonomous subject' and a pervasive neoliberal order with particular global tendencies towards responsibilization and personal development (Kipnis, 2007). Such a story would posit that professional training has become another avenue through which the state creates citizens as workers and productive subjects. Missing from this familiar story, however, is an important question that has preoccupied anthropology and anthropologists: how are we to make sense of our interlocutors' encounters with such discourses? Anthropologists of welfare and the economic imagination (Chong, 2015; James and Kirwan, 2020; Koch, 2018) have addressed this question by demonstrating a mismatch between dominant models of personhood (intended results) and what they observe ethnographically as more historically contingent, socially complex realities (unintended consequences). This article builds on and extends these critical insights through a playful inversion: instead of showing how hegemonic economic models of being can be undermined through ethnography, it inquires into what keeps them alive.

In exploring the French case of professional reconversion, this contribution suggests a different theoretical point of departure by adopting Sylvia Wynter's concept of 'being human as praxis' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015). Wynter's conception of humanness as a verb rather than a noun makes an important contribution to the anthropology of personhood and to anthropological conversations on individualization and responsibilization. Being human as praxis offers generative pathways in thinking beyond the humanist trope of neoliberal subjectivity. While the latter is primarily focused on subjugation, governance, and discursive power, Wynter's praxis-oriented theorization directs our attention to making and unmaking the world, the ways in which hegemonic stories of being are sustained, and how they can be unsettled. By centering Blackness and attending to the neglect of race in Michel Foucault's post-Enlightenment self (da Silva, 2015), Wynter's approach to humanness illustrates how Blackness becomes 'the empirical-experiential-

symbolic site through which modernity and all its unmet promises are enabled and made plane' (McKittrick, 2015, p. 2). It is this very enactment and regeneration (or not) of modernity's unmet promises that interests me in this article, particularly in relation to those who 'inhabit the underside of the category of man-as-human' (McKittrick, 2015, p. 2) in France today. Inspired by Wynter's theory of being human as a form of generative mythmaking, I show how training practices reproduce dominant mythologies of being human-as-Man—or, in Wynter's words, a hierarchical, biocentric, and economically oriented model of humanness—through a project of masterful being that is not only exclusionary of North African and Black migrants but is predicated on their exclusion and their persistent relegation to what Graeber (2018) calls 'the caring classes.'

Being human as praxis in the context of professional training takes the form of a set of mediations. Firstly, professional reconversion is premised on a promise of rebirth that subsumes life into work. To go back to the opening vignette, what does it mean to think of professional reconversion as a life project? Over the course of my fieldwork, conversations with trainers and state employees would iterate the observation that 'to reconvert' is not just about work or merely changing your job. Rather, candidates are expected to embark on a transcendental journey that will change their lives. Reconversion is likened to undertaking a *metamorphosis*, where they can take charge of their destiny and begin writing their own stories. The French word for training, *formation*, also means constitution, genesis, and creation. Calls to *se former tout au long de la vie* ('to train or constitute oneself on a lifelong basis') have been at the forefront of training campaigns launched by the French government in the past decade. Such calls materialized in Immersitu through role play, where trainers believed that simulating the workplace was a way to master the uncertainties of a brutal job market. To survive in the post-Fordist landscape of French labor insecurity, they often spoke of the indispensability of *savoir être* ('know how to be'). They preached the importance of becoming *un(e) battant(e)* ('a fighter') and advocated a utopian understanding of play as a praxis of mastery. As I show elsewhere, however, *savoir être* is a racially coded project (how to embody Frenchness) masquerading as a universal and meritocratic pursuit. This project of mastery was deemed futile for North African and Black migrants who were consistently 'dysselected' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 37) from the master narrative of personhood, despite 'playing the game.'

Taking my cue from Wynter, I think of personhood not as an endpoint but as a pursuit, as invention, not essence; a political project and a sustained mythology that overrepresent the Western bourgeois conception of humanity as a universal to which all people must assimilate. The hegemonic project of personhood I discuss in this article (on which I elaborate on below) can be understood as a specific instantiation of Wynter's figure of Man 2 (see endnote 3)—a model of humanness that instrumentalizes Charles Darwin's ideas of evolution and natural selection, thus naturalizing racial hierarchies and inscribing them into the very architecture of social, economic, and political orders.

Thinking of reconversion as regeneration, therefore, entails what Wynter (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015) refers to as a 'storytelling-chartered code of symbolic life and death' reflecting the interests and cosmogony of a ruling class (p. 29). At the heart of professional reconversion schemes is an elusive project of personhood, or *savoir être*, that articulates autonomy as symbolic life and dependency as symbolic death. Symbolic life is, as Wynter theorizes, a story outlining 'a plan of salvation' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 29). Against the backdrop of workfarist transformations in social protection in France, this article is interested in how professional reconversion is imagined as *a plan of salvation from dependency*. It is interested in how such a plan is enacted, questioned by people forced to undertake it, and what it reinforces.

Figure 1. A photo depicting professional reconversion, frame grab from the AFPA (National Agency for Adult Vocational Training / Agence Nationale pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes) website, displayed on a webpage titled 'Professional reconversion: reinvent your professional life.' Courtesy of the author.

Secondly, autonomy enacted as symbolic life erases already existing ties of dependency. A locally prominent project of personhood that I focus on in this article is the figure of *le débrouillard* ('resourceful person'). A culturally specific embodiment of 'the naturally selected master of Malthusian natural scarcity' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 37), *le débrouillard* is a model of personhood that incarnates autonomy as symbolic life. It is a noun derived from the verb *se débrouiller* ('to manage or get by on one's own'), referring to the one who figures things out. I show how becoming *débrouillard* is a master narrative articulated through praxis. For example, Laurent (one of the life coaches regularly contributing to Immersitu) was a strong advocate of the method of *Le Réseau* ('the network')—a method designed with *cadres* ('French managers') in mind. *Le Réseau* is a paradoxical method premised on 'looking for a job without asking for a job.' It is deliberately formulated against dependency. Here, I ask why and how people are reiterating normative fictions like that of the *débrouillard*. In a way, *Le Réseau* can be regarded as a 'strategic mechanism' (Wynter in da Silva, 2015, p. 95) that distracts from the ontogenic and biocentric implications of *savoir être*. Against such mechanisms of abstraction, this article historicizes the master narrative of autonomy by tracing its emergence through the imperial legacies of *formation professionelle*. Questioning how normative categories and narratives are

upheld and perpetuated involves thinking against a pervasive capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009) and totalizing economic logics (Bear et al., 2015).

Finally, *formation professionelle* operates through a politics of personhood, where certain ways of being, living, and knowing become more worthwhile than others. While my fieldwork was not about labor integration *per se*, rigid schemes that migrants and refugees had to navigate to access work in France were a frequent topic of discussion, as the opening vignette shows. Thus, to understand the unequal stakes of projects of personhood at the heart of *formation professionelle,* and how people are routinely 'dysselected' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015) from imaginaries of a 'master-subject' (Singh, 2017, p. 4), it is essential to pay attention to the regeneration of epistemic injustice. The devaluation of the knowledge produced by marginalized peoples is not a side-effect, but rather a core modality of racial capitalism (Gilmore, 2022). Labor integration schemes are a material manifestation of the colonial afterlives of professional training and their lingering narrow understandings of being human. Weaving together semi-fictionalized accounts of advice sessions between migrants and employment counsellors (Message et al., 2022) and ethnographic observations from my fieldwork, I write about how migrants and refugees find their ways of knowing devalued and must start from scratch upon arriving in France.

Rethinking the human...

The stand-alone, self-contained figure of the individual has long been subject to critical debate among anthropologists of personhood. In their historical review of individualism in anthropological theory, Jon Bialecki and Girish Daswani (2015) show how anthropologists challenged the way in which the individual was taken for granted as 'the natural starting point of questions and debates in economics, psychology and philosophy' (p. 275). They identify theoretical concepts such as Marilyn Strathern's 'dividuality' and Roy Wagner's 'fractality,' which point us to a more relational model of personhood, moving away from bounded, self-contained, and static understandings of the person (Daswani and Bialecki, 2015, p. 274) and their Western assumptions. They argue, however, that such relational conceptions—despite their attractiveness—should not necessarily overshadow what we might observe as an interest in individualism in our fieldwork sites. Rather they invite us 'to acknowledge when and where this concept appears or presents itself as important—not merely in the lives of our interlocutors but also as a story that we come to tell ourselves' (Daswani and Bialecki, 2015, p. 275). They further elaborate that 'the fictive nature of the individualism, and the power that comes from that fiction, should not be forgotten either' (Daswani and Bialecki, 2015, p. 274).

It is this very fictive nature of individualism and its regeneration that inspires my thinking along the lines of Wynter's 'being human as praxis.' Being human as praxis builds on and extends anthropological conversations on personhood by thinking beyond the essentialism of the individual. My

intention in thinking with Wynter's 'counterhumanist' approach to theorizing personhood is not to suggest that my interlocutors are not interested in individualism. Rather, I wish to understand their interest in it beyond totalizing logics and through 'an active, dynamic and inclusive understanding of being human' (Goodley, 2023, p. 168). I first read Wynter in 2022, when I was writing up my dissertation and happened to be working on a chapter on 'professional reconversion.' Like other anthropologists of welfare and the economy (James and Kirwan, 2020; Koch, 2018), I had grown weary of the pervasive trope of neoliberal subjectivity, its overestimation of power, and its rehearsed singular focus on self-fashioning. Wynter may not have written explicitly about play, but I found her theory of 'being human as praxis' to be an invitation to play with anthropological theory: 'a thought experiment about what social theory would be if it started from an alternative understanding of persons' (Schram, 2015, p. 319; also cit. in Bialecki and Daswani, 2015, p. 274).

Wynter's theory of the human is formulated against a purely biological (biogenic) understanding of being human at the core of European Enlightenment. Inspired by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's (1980) autopoiesis, on one hand, and Franz Fanon's (1967) concept of sociogeny,[2] on the other, she theorizes the human to be both bios/organic and mythos/symbolic. Both autopoiesis and sociogeny help Wynter think of a theory of the human that breaks with linear schemes of understanding humanity. Her theory extends Maturana and Varela's theory of autopoiesis or self-(re)generation 'to the cultural activity of human life' (Erasmus, 2020, p. 50). For Wynter, what makes us human is our capacity to bring worlds into being through storytelling. To consider being human as praxis is, therefore, not only to play with and against canonical figures in social theory or to denaturalize racial taxonomies, but also to be hopeful about our collective potential to unmake the world. Importantly, it entails, as Denise Ferreira da Silva suggests (2015), 'a refiguring of humanness that is produced in relation to the monumental history of race' (p. 93).

It is in the vein of this situational practice that Wynter's theory of the human can be distinguished from posthumanism. While mainstream posthumanist theorists of the 1970s challenged the centrality of man and his mastery over nature, they did so in a way that does not take into account the racialization of the category 'human,' the co-constitution of European 'ideas of race and species' (Erasmus, 2020, p. 59), or the 'radical epistemologies that emerged from plantation and domestic slavery <...> and scholarly engagements with these histories' (Erasmus, 2020, p. 56). Thus, Zimitri Erasmus argues that this has worked to recenter European Anglophone and Francophone theory.

Thinking with a different theory of humanness not only provides a necessary step away from the frames of thought that naturalize hegemonic figures like that of the autonomous individual, but it also situates the latter in a genealogy of critical theory informed by anti-colonial struggles. Wynter's theory is an elaboration of Fanon's theory of living under colonial power in French Martinique that he articulated through the concept of skins/

masks (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 54). Growing up in Martinique under overt French rule, Fanon was brought up with a naturalized conception of Man through colonial history lessons that taught him that his ancestors were the Gauls (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 49). This 'monohumanist' understanding of personhood, Wynter explains, happened due to the Gauls being '*storied* as the origin-mythic ancestors by the revolutionary French bourgeoisie' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 49, original emphasis.). What belies the concept of sociogeny is the institutionalization of a mythical racial hierarchy that masquerades as natural (ontogeny). For Fanon, the conflation of sociogeny (social production of a phenomenon) with ontogeny is how race is brought into being. Fanon's concept of sociogeny lays the foundations for an agential human that brings society into being (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 53). Wynter builds on this in developing her concept of 'Third Emergence,'[3] marked by 'a sociogenic code of symbolic life/death' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 33).

Grounded in ethnographic research in what is commonly referred to as 'the city of the Gauls,' this article is inspired by anti-colonial theorizations that rethink mainstream conceptual tools, thus making an analytical shift from thinking of autonomy as subjectivity to autonomy as symbolic life. To do so, I must first conjure the imperial histories of training that shadow powerful mythologies of autonomy in France.

...and provincializing autonomy

In September 2018, a new bill was passed by the French Ministry of Labor for 'the freedom to choose one's professional future,' making training a 'new fundamental right' of the French social model of the 21st century. The phrasing of such a law blurs the line between freedom and work, obfuscating, on the one hand, the coercive nature of wage labor and, on the other, its unequal gendered and racialized divisions. It puts forth a universalist promise of autonomy that, like other 'models in contemporary capitalism,' derives its power from its 'ability to erase particularity and sever objects, people, and resources from their contexts' (Bear et al., 2015). This bill imagines professional training as a pathway that increases a person's freedom. But looking into the imperial legacies of *formation* shows us that this promise has always been elusive, whereby some were enlisted in 'maintaining or augmenting [the] freedom [of others]' (Graeber, 2018). In 1962, in the midst of a post-WWII economic prosperity commonly referred to nowadays as the *Trentes Glorieuses* ('the 30 glorious years') that required a steady workforce, the French government created the *Bureau de Migrations dans les Departements d'Outre Mer* (BUMIDOM / Bureau for the Development of Migration in the Overseas Departments). Between the 1960s and 1980s, hundreds of thousands of French Caribbeans from La Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana moved to metropolitan France under this state-organized migration scheme looking for a better life. In her book

Decolonial Feminism, Françoise Vergès (2019) shows that in the aftermath of decolonization, a gap in so-called 'category C jobs' (workers needed in hospitals, kindergartens, in the domestic sphere) motivated the BUMIDOM campaign launched by the French government to encourage Caribbean women specifically to move to France. The desire for autonomy aroused by independence and decolonization was absorbed and regenerated in terms of the needs of a postcolonial labor regime.

The BUMIDOM framed itself around the importance of 'autonomy and professional training.' As a campaign, it urged young women to come to France to work as domestic workers because 'domestic labour could also become a means for the young courageous girl <...> to adapt to metropolitan life in a familial setting and to make use of her free hours to rework her skill set and prepare for exams that will open doors to other jobs' (cit. in Vergès, 2019, p. 87).4 The BUMIDOM,[4] as recent scholarship has noted, has been 'largely obfuscated from collective national memory' (Jørholt, 2022, p. 275; see also Wimbush, 2018). While some had migrated searching for livelihood, reports and films documenting the brutality of BUMIDOM show incidences of what Aimé Césaire referred to as migration by way of deportation, exemplified in the case of *les enfants de la Creuse* ('children of La Creuse'), in which, between 1962 and 1984, over 2000 children from La Réunion were uprooted from their homes and forcibly resettled across underpopulated rural regions in mainland France (Wimbush, 2023, p. 1337). Upon their arrival, despite legally being French citizens, they had to undergo personality tests and physical examination. Some were assigned jobs in construction and administration right away, and others were directed to training centers. As Wimbush (2018) adds in an article titled 'France haunted by its own Windrush scandal,' 'women were sent to Crouy-sur-Ourcq in Île-de-France, where they learnt to cook French food and run a household before being employed in health care and domestic service sectors.'

Figure 2: An image from the 2007 film on the BUMIDOM titled *L'avenir est ailleurs* ('The Future is Elsewhere') by Antoine Léonard-Maestrati. The writing on the wall reads: 'young one, do not leave your country, no to the BUMIDOM.' Courtesy of the author.

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, professional training was entangled with humanist mythologies propagated through the French colonial enterprise. Indigenous people in the colonies were left out of socialist emancipatory utopias reimagining the wage labor system. Excluded from the category of 'always already' autonomous Man (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 55), they were subjected to civilisational impositions of work to cure what was presumed to be an innate laziness. In Madagascar, for example, a 'moralising' or 'educational tax' was imposed by the French 'to teach the natives the value of work' (Stewart, 2022, p. 113). Moreover, in Morocco, colonial administrators privileged practical education when conceiving of modernization plans. They adopted a vocational training policy, thereby restricting the realm of possibilities available to indigenous people by furthering the productivist interests of a 'Greater France' (Kozakowski, 2020). According to Michael Kozakowski, schools were more 'career-oriented,' with tailored pedagogies for indigenous people. Far from increasing 'one's freedom,' he elaborates that 'vocational training was highly racialised in its conceptions, reflected essentialising (and demeaning) assumptions about students' psychological and physical capabilities, and was highly unequal in both its quality and in the opportunities it provided' (Kozakowski, 2020, p. 177).

Tracing the historical connections between autonomy and professional training shows its material limits. Abstract universalism at the forefront of professional training campaigns masks the unequal division of labor and the racial myths that lie behind it. Writing about the gendered and racialized dimensions of autonomy, Vergès (2019) speaks of a reconfiguration of work, particularly the care labor industry, where migrant (mostly Muslim) women can only be granted entry on the grounds of being saved from an oppressive male-dominated culture. Their emancipation, as imagined in liberal feminist projects, must happen in this context through their enlisting in the labor market. The jobs awaiting them—much like those awaiting Caribbean women through the BUMIDOM—are, however, in the cleaning and caretaking sector (as domestic workers, auxiliary nurses, babysitters, and cleaning ladies). This permits middle-class white women to reach higher positions in their professional lives (becoming *cadre,* in the French terminology), now that they have assistance in housework (Vergès, 2019, p. 85).

Taking professional coaching in France as a focus, the French economist and philosopher Frédéric Lordon is interested in how people become enlisted in the pursuits and desires of others. In his book *Willing Slaves of Capital* (Lordon, 2010), he demystifies the concept of individual autonomy as it pertains to the employment relation, arguing that its very existence is premised on a fictive humanist understanding of a 'self-determined' subject. In a similar vein, this article is interested in how enlistment happens in the context of professional training. Following Wynter's 'human as praxis,' it suggests that enlistment (or what Lordon refers to as making others do something) happens through everyday articulations of autonomy as symbolic life. In doing so, it joins anthropological discussions on personhood that are committed to 'problematising how we construct the person as an object of study'

(Bialecki and Daswani, 2015, p. 274). In what follows, I focus on *débrouillardise* ('resourcefulness'), a pervasive mythology of autonomous personhood—gaining traction against the backdrop of a waning welfare state—and the ways in which it was enacted as symbolic life through training practices.

Se débrouiller: Exercises in living against dependency

Throughout my time at the professional training center that I have called Immersitu, candidates were expected to articulate their job search in terms of a 'professional project.' Specialists in professional transitions helped unemployed people develop their professional projects. In job-seeking techniques workshops, feedback sessions, and recruitment interviews, they emphasized the importance of becoming *débrouillard* ('resourceful') and celebrated people who could fend for themselves. A *débrouillard* is someone who does not wait around for assistance or accepts to be a burden on others but defines (or at least continuously attempts to define) the stakes of their own life. *La débrouillardise* (also known as *Système D*) has widely figured in public accounts and discourses on unemployment in France. The French newspaper *20 Minutes* stated in 2016 that '62% of young people consider *débrouillardise* to be the best way to find a job.'[5] A 2008 documentary titled *La France de la débrouille*[6] recounts cases of people (referred to as the kings and queens of *Système D*) living on modest salaries and 'distanced from' formal employment, making do with the meagre solidarity income of 500 euros. This includes mothers on maternity leave who had to learn to make yoghurt, biscuits, and cleaning products to save money, aspiring actors who rely on gallery openings to eat, fathers who must haggle in stores to make sure their daughters have what they need, and students who manage on their own by selling their stuff online and making a profit.

During my fieldwork, I noticed some of my unemployed interlocutors referring to themselves as *débrouillard* in a way to tell me not to worry, explaining that, even if life is difficult, their advisors are unhelpful, and the job market is saturated, they will get by, somehow. *Le débrouillard*, a masculine figure in its conception, can be contrasted with *le tanguy*, a popular culture reference that soon became an epithet for failed personhood that my interlocutors mocked. In a conversation between Salma and Amelie, two trainees in their fifties doing the tertiary sector training, they had identified *le tanguy* as a type of man you should avoid on dating websites. Amelie mentioned the popular reference when talking about a man she had been seeing for a while who lived with his mother and asked her on the first date about her pension. Derived from the 2001 French comedy film *Tanguy*,[7] which tells the story of a 28-year-old man who still lives with his parents, the term *tanguy* is used to derogatorily highlight someone's (usually a man's) dependency.

The prominence of the French figure of the *débrouillard(e)* needs to be situated in relation to a loss of faith in state assistance over the past decades in France. Over the course of my fieldwork, I had become aware of

Figure 3: A poster of the film Tanguy (2001). The caption reads: 'At 28 years old, he still lives with his parents.' Courtesy of the author.

the negative reputation that *France Travail* (France's national employment agency, known as *Pole Emploi* at the time of my fieldwork) agents had at the center. Many of my interlocutors had grown tired and wary of employment counsellors, who were considered, at best, incompetent and, at worst, as watchdogs making sure unemployed people pursue an 'active life.' The face-to-face encounters with welfare agencies, prevalent in the mid-1990s (Dubois, 2010), had become increasingly uncommon at the time of my fieldwork. A post-lockdown workplace led to communication being channelled to phone calls or emails between welfare recipients and counsellors. Moreover, trainees complained to me about the carelessness of their advisors. This was the case with Salma, an Algerian woman who wanted to train as a receptionist but found herself enrolled in the wrong training program: on human resources. Due to her advisor's error, Salma ended up in Immersitu despite it no longer offering the administrative training she initially sought. Her advisor had not noticed until months later in a checkup phone call between them.

This loss of faith has a political and economic history, predating the pandemic. According to anthropologists who studied welfare in France (Dubois, 2014; Mazouz, 2015), the introduction of anti-welfare fraud policies

in the 2000s led to an increase in the authority of welfare agents. This further highlighted the long-standing tradition of privileges accorded to civil servants in France (Esping-Andersen, 1990), leading to strong criticism of these officials. The standardization effected by control programs had also created a race for numbers as employment agents struggled to meet performance goals—of getting a maximum number of people back to work—while paying attention to and caring for the needs of job seekers (Mazouz, 2015; cf. Forbess & James, 2017).

In addition to this, a pervasive stigmatization and sense of shame that unemployed people felt when distanced from work for extended periods was prominent in public accounts of unemployment. In a 2021 report published by the voluntary association Solidarités Nouvelles face au Chômage (SNC / New Solidarities in the Face of Unemployment), unemployment was considered not only humiliating but also degrading to the body.[8] Drawing on statistical evidence, the report presents a factual account of the psychological vulnerability experienced during unemployment that can lead a person to depression, isolation, and drug abuse. It is in the wake of these affectively charged transformations that becoming *débrouillard* is articulated as a plan of salvation by trainers and professional coaches.

I first met Laurent in October 2021 in an induction session he was leading to welcome new trainees to the center. He is a 50-something-year-old white man, always neatly dressed and known around the center by his peers and trainees as *carré* ('square,' that is, someone who is direct, discerning, and likes things done in a precise manner). Laurent introduced himself succinctly and told me that his professional trajectory, which involved project management, comprised four phases: he was a consultant for 12 years, worked in a savings bank company for another 12, and then worked in an insurance company for 11 years before devoting his time more fully to freelance professional coaching in the last four years. In our interview, he explained that he became interested in 'the problem of job-seeking' because he himself used to be unemployed. During our interview, as well as in the induction session and in personal development workshops he led for the consultant group, Laurent decried what he referred to as facile self-victimizing narratives that fixate on how terrible capitalism was and attempted to redirect his listeners' attention to a plan of action. He believed that individuals had the power to change their own destinies. In the case of unemployment, he advocated for a diligent and methodical approach to rescue people from what he saw as helplessness.

After being unemployed for six months, Laurent was eager to reintegrate into 'active life.' He joined a support group that had developed a networking-based approach to help managers find jobs. Later, he further developed this approach and began offering it at training centers. *Le Réseau* ('the network') is an exercise in becoming *débrouillard*. Laurent's approach, borrowed from the support group he joined, helps the unemployed build a network of contacts. He confidently argues that this network will eventually lead to finding a job and has been proven to cut the job search time in half.

In our interview, Laurent first explained to me what the approach consists of and then asked me to mentally count all the people I know. He had applied a similar method during a networking workshop held at Immersitu. The first step, he explained, was to list all our acquaintances, whether they work in our field or not; this could consist of friends, family, acquaintances, and people we are connected to on social media.

> 'The idea is to meet as many people as you can with the goal of speaking to them about three things: at first, who we are, we present ourselves, and we ask the other person to do the same, then I speak of the professional project that I've defined myself... Here, I have to be able to say something about what I want to do, and then I ask the person for their opinion on my project, and the third thing is to ask for two names of people they know that I can meet.'

Laurent adds that even if this *entretien réseau* ('networking interview') is with someone you know well, you have to ask your friends or family to do this formal exercise with you, where you speak professionally and get their opinion on your professional project. During his six months of unemployment, Laurent tells me he met over 200 people. When I asked him if the support group/association provides contacts, he told me that the association *ne met pas en relation, elle permet de se mettre en relation* ('doesn't put you in contact, it allows you to put yourself in contact'), that is, it provides people with a method, so they can build their own network as opposed to just giving names. This semantic distinction was important for him; he argued it stressed the point of the exercise: 'There are two ways of accompanying the unemployed [towards employment]: either you do the work for them, or you give them the method to do it themselves.' He explains that *le Réseau* is an approach that enables people to *s'auto-actioner* ('activate/motivate themselves'), allowing them to become autonomous.

The emphasis on self-activation in Laurent's words may initially seem to reinforce state efforts to cultivate a productive workforce, where seeking employment is regarded as a civic responsibility (Wacquant, 2012). In recent years, however, anthropologists of welfare (James and Kirwan, 2020; Koch, 2015, 2018) have challenged dominant narratives of 'active citizenship,' highlighting the pitfalls of the conception of the autonomous individual and undermining its encompassing reach. In her ethnography of broker/resident relations in a council estate in England, Insa Koch (2018) writes about the gap between dominant images of an 'active citizen' formulated by local authorities and her interlocutors' understandings of what counts as good governance in their everyday struggles. In a similar vein, Deborah James and Samuel Kirwan's (2020) study of relations between welfare recipients and advisors in Britain shows the limits of the all-encompassing individualized figure of *Homo economicus*. Thinking through the concept of 'householding' and transnational ties of dependency, they suggest a less uniform understanding of welfare encounters that transcends austerity accounts of responsibilization.

Similarly, this article is interested in dominant narratives of personhood and the ways in which people grapple with them. However, it

does so by emphasizing other questions. Instead of focusing on the mismatch between normative models of personhood and ways of being on the ground, it investigates, as per Wynter (2015), how normative models are perpetuated through storytelling and practice. Thus, to attempt to 'activate oneself' by defining one's own professional project, taking charge of and resolving one's own unemployment, creating spreadsheets and rehearsing personal pitches, as Laurent and his colleagues preach, may all be seen as actions that contribute to the articulation of *débrouillardise* into symbolic life. They breathe life into fictions of individualism. They are attempts to attach oneself to *la vie active* ('active life') as defined through mainstream understandings of unemployment in France. By making *débrouillardise* the only commonsensical course of action, such technocratic solutions to unemployment obscure the ontologies of race and culture that sustain unequal cartographies of labor. Dependency coded as symbolic death is singularized into individual failure rather than the product of imperial formations of difference.

In introducing the approach to an audience of job seekers at Immersitu, Laurent mentioned, perhaps too often, that a key feature of conducting a networking interview is *not* to ask for a job. Noticing the confusion of his audience, Laurent nervously joked about the irony of the approach. Some attendees, like Sofia, a Spanish woman in her late thirties who was participating in HR training, were clearly puzzled by this advice. Sofia questioned the reasoning behind this caveat, stating, 'I am looking for a job though... So, why not ask for a job?' Though framed as a call to action, the method seemed detached from the immediacy and urgency of making ends meet. *Le Réseau* is a de facto relational approach; at its core, it consists of building networks and relationships. It does so, however, by defining those relationships in a way that eschews the dependencies and vulnerabilities experienced by most of the participants in the Immersitu program. Rather, *Le Réseau* was conceived as involving a person who had the financial luxury to wait for things to sort themselves out. Migrants living on RSA (minimum solidarity income) faced a double bind: they could neither afford to spend the time involved in following the *Réseau* approach to find a job, nor did they possess the social capital that a *cadre* enjoys. This disparity illustrates Stuart Hall's famous iteration that 'race is the modality in which class is lived' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 394).

As a method designed with *cadres* (French managers) in mind, its propagation through techniques of job-seeking workshops at training centers like Immersitu provoked confusion and, in some instances, outrage from trainees. Refraining from asking for a job but hoping that a dozen or hundred interviews will serendipitously lead to one is a purposeful rejection of being positioned as needy. This active repudiation of dependency abstracts away from histories of colonial oppression and excludes those who cannot or refuse to be 'fighters,' thereby 'dysselecting' them from master narratives of personhood. As critical race theorists and abolitionist scholars (Gilmore 2022; da Silva in Wynter and McKittrick, 2015) have consistently shown, however, this racialized dysselection is not a glitch in the matrix: it is fundamental to the very workings of capitalism.

While earlier sections have shown the violent limits of promises of autonomy and the historically pivotal place that *formation professionelle* occupied in reproducing postcolonial cartographies of labor, the next section will look into the ways in which imperial legacies reverberate through labor integration schemes today.

Bienvenue en France: Professional training and a politics of personhood

On a sunny April morning, I head to Vénissieux[9] to visit the local branch of the *Entreprise Ephémère.* First set up about five years ago, the 'ephemeral' or temporary company is a project for marginalized youths that regularly relocates across the country. Like the situational training center, otherwise known as a practice company, it simulates a corporate environment, more specifically, a recruiting firm where unemployed youth spend six weeks organizing themselves in fictional departments (communication, HR, call center) with the goal of 'selling themselves' and their colleagues to companies and landing a job. While I was not allowed to do participant observation at the *Entreprise Ephémère*, I was invited to accompany Alexandre, the pedagogical director of Immersitu, on his visit, where he gave a presentation about the center and talked to the youths about his professional trajectory. On our visit, we encountered Firas, a young Algerian man in his early twenties who has been struggling to find work in his field. Firas oversaw the fictive communication department at the Ephemeral Enterprise, printing posters for his colleagues and advertising their skills on social media. Before escorting Alexandre to the media room and helping him set up his presentation, he briefly introduced his colleagues and the work they had been doing over the past six weeks. Having graduated with a degree in graphic design from Oran, Algeria, Firas complained to us that his diploma was not recognized in France. *Je devais refaire ma vie a Lyon* ('I had to redo my life in Lyon'), he told us. Firas, like my interlocutors at Immersitu, was frustrated with the job counsellors he met at Mission Locale and Pôle Emploi. He recounted how they hastily overlooked his qualifications and how they continued to suggest that he take up positions as a caregiver or in sports education.

Much like what we see in the vignette at the beginning of this article, the 'reconversion' that migrants are expected to undergo is one marked by downward mobility. This has many parallels in the literature. For example, in an interaction between Kadia, a former journalist, and her job counsellor, the latter said: 'African diplomas... we have a lot of doubts about them <...> in any case your diplomas will not be recognized here <...> we have job offers for *femmes de ménage* (maids) what do you think?' (Israël, 2022, p. 137).

When Firas tells us that he has to 'redo his life,' the 'new life' that awaits him is far from the utopian and optimistic imaginary put forth by the government official at the beginning of this article. The emphasis on practice, evident in workplace 'rehearsals' like those at the Entreprise Ephémère, had

appealed to Firas. He felt that perhaps demonstrating his skills *in situ* would rupture mythical racial hierarchies shaping the contemporary training system in France. I never saw Firas again and never found out if his job search had been successful. His example, however, points to an enduring politics of personhood at the heart of professional training schemes. It shows the continuing impact of the imperial legacies of vocational training and their essentializing assumptions on contemporary understandings of personhood in France. This paper builds on Didier Fassin's (2018) politics of life and Miriam Iris Ticktin's (2011) politics of care—two frameworks that illuminate the unequal stakes of humanitarianism and immigration regimes in France—to analyze the workings of *formation,* proposing what I observe as a politics of personhood.

In his book *Life: A Critical User's Manual*, Fassin (2018) argues that Foucault's biopolitics is etymologically misleading. He notes that what Foucault was interested in is the government of populations, pertaining to 'modalities of regulation, rationales of control, and ways of governing, rather than the content of biopolitics, its debates and action, and its stakes and conflict' (Fassin, 2018, p. 88). By focusing on the former, Fassin adds that Foucault neglects more pressing questions concerning what politics does to life. He proposes to recover the literal meaning behind biopolitics and puts forth a 'politics of life' by taking the case of medical humanitarianism (p. 91) and focusing on the mechanisms that reproduce inequalities. A politics of life, interested in differential treatment of lives, ushers in two shifts, according to Fassin. The first is 'a shift from the singular to the plural—from life in general to lives in particular,' which then fosters another shift, 'from the normative to the empirical,' and in that vein puts forward context-specific questions about the worth of lives in different settings (Fassin, 2018, p. 92).

Putting Wynter's being human as praxis in conversation with Fassin's politics of life, I attempt a shift from the normative to the empirical by considering what I refer to as a politics of personhood. An ethnography of professional training asks questions not so much about the worth of lives but about ways of living and their politics. To invoke a politics of personhood is to inquire about how certain ways of being human, living, and knowing become more worthwhile than others—or, following Wynter, to interrogate 'the ongoing production and reproduction of "the bourgeois answer to the question of what is human"' (Wynter in da Silva, 2015, p. 95). This, I have tried to show throughout the article, can be discerned in professional coaching practices and labor integration schemes. So far, I have tried to show, building on Wynter, that professional reconversion schemes are built around a project of personhood that universalises a bourgeois Western conception of what it means to be human. This project operates by articulating autonomy as symbolic life and dependency as symbolic death.

Focusing on normative figures like *le débrouillard*, I have enquired about the ways in which elusive promises of an autonomous life are enacted through training practices like professional coaching, how they become both desirable and commonplace, and how they abstract away from enduring

ontologies of race that shape unequal divisions of labor. Previous sections of the article have also shown how dependency is devalued and erased both through postcolonial migration campaigns like the BUMIDOM and through trainers' job-seeking techniques like *le Réseau.* My analysis of the politics of personhood shaping *formation* in France has followed two paths. First, I have showed how people regenerate this code of symbolic life and death. Second, I have demonstrated how the perpetuation of Eurocentric knowledge practice is evident through the routine dismissal of the ways of knowing of migrants from formerly colonized countries. As we have seen through the cases of Firas and other migrants, labor integration schemes, much like the humanitarian practices observed by Ticktin (2011), 'enable a particular postcolonial state that understands its former colonies as utterly different, lesser, not constitutive of its very core' (p. 191). In this context, migrants find themselves compelled to take on jobs in the care sector. Whilst 'a politics of care reproduces a second-class status for immigrants in France, particularly those from the global South' (Ticktin, 2011, p. 24), a politics of personhood shaping *formation professionelle* contributes to the reproduction of unequal cartographies of labor.

Conclusion

In writing this article, one of my goals was to think beyond the theoretical impasse of a powerful story, that of a homogenizing, all-encompassing neoliberal subjectivity that has been consistently put into question by anthropologists in the past decades. I proposed that we rethink the conceptual tools at our disposal in anthropological analysis, toying with canonical figures such as *Homo economicus*, the autonomous individual, and the bounded humanist subject. In this vein, I have considered the importance of destabilizing the category 'human' in both my interlocutors' stories and in anthropological theory. To get out of this theoretical deadlock, I instead proposed a playful inversion—for us to consider, following Wynter, an understanding of humanness centred on praxis. Grounded in an ethnographic context where play is deemed a praxis of mastery, my analysis of being human as praxis in the context of professional training is therefore less aligned with celebratory applications of the theory[10] (Goodley, 2023) and more with studies demonstrating how generative forces can make capitalism continue (Bear, 2014; Weiss, 2022; Yanagisako, 2002). Advocating for an 'anthropological theory of praxis,' Alpa Shah (2021) argues, allows us to consider 'the changing relationships between multiple imaginations of the world, material relations and everyday action' (p. 5). In a similar vein, this article was motivated by a desire to understand how dominant mythologies of being gained salience in people's daily lives. It is through this capacity to bring worlds into being that Wynter theorizes as fundamental to being human that we can consider how normative categories, ontological violences, and intersectional inequalities are reproduced, as well as how this can change.

1. 'faire le deuil' appears in *Le Dit de la cymbalaire*, an autobiographical account of Charles Merigot (2013, p. 39), who is recounting his experience with long-term unemployment after he was let go from his job as a technician in a hospital at 43 years old.
2. This concept is an extension of Freudian ideas of ontogeny, referring to the biological development of an individual subject, and phylogeny, which is concerned with the study of the evolutionary history of societies and families. Sociogeny is more interested in the social production of a phenomenon.
3. The Third Emergence of the human as hybrid is thought of in relation to two correlated models of being human that Wynter identifies. The first is Man 1, the secularized figure of the rational political subject emerging with Renaissance studies of humanity (Studia humanitatis) and the 'Columbian encounter' of 1492. The second, Man 2, which is an extension of the first, is 'based on Western bourgeoisie's model of being human <...> articulated as, since the latter half of the nineteenth century, liberal monohumanism's homo oeconomicus' (Wynter and McKittrick 2015:10). Wynter's Third Emergence of the human is, as Zimitri Erasmus (2020) elaborates, 'hybrid from the moment that it comes into the world,' making it 'always already an agential being with the capacity to come to know and to represent the world' (p. 54).
4. Although the BUMIDOM bears a strong resemblance to the UK's Windrush in the 1950s, historians of post-colonial France have argued that the former has been left out of French historiography to preserve 'France's Republican model of universalism' (Wimbush, 2023, p. 1328).
5. See https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/1828383-20160420-temps-crise-jeunes-misent-debrouillardise-decrocher-job (accessed on 31 March 2026).
6. See https://madelen.ina.fr/content/la-france-de-la-debrouille-80442 (accessed on 31 March 2026).
7. See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0274155/ (accessed on 31 March 2026).
8. See the SNC's report here: https://snc.asso.fr/espace-medias/communiques-presse/3829-synthese-enquete-sante-2021 (accessed on 31 March 2026).
9. A working-class neighborhood (*quartier populaire or banlieue*) on the outskirts of Lyon that is mostly populated by Black and North African communities.
10. Goodley's (2023) thinking with Wynter's 'being human as praxis' is in relation to people with disabilities. In his paper, he pays attention to their practices of activism and celebrates their worldmaking endeavors in the context of a reigning 'neoliberal-ableism.'

Bibliography

1. Bear, L. (2014). For labour: Ajeet's accident and the ethics of technological fixes in time. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 71—88.

2. Bear, L., Ho, K., Tsing, A. L., & Yanagisako, S. (2015). Gens: A feminist manifesto for the study of capitalism, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism (accessed on 31 March 2026).
3. Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Zone Books.
4. Chong, K. (2015). Producing 'globa'" corporate subjects in post-Mao China: Management consultancy, culture and corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Business Anthropology*, 4 (2), 320—341.
5. da Silva, D. F. (2015). Before man: Sylvia Wynter's rewriting of the modern episteme. In K. McKittrick (Ed.), *Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis* (pp. 90—105). Duke University Press.
6. Douglas, M., & Ney, S. (1998). *Missing persons: A critique of the social sciences* (Aaron Wildavsky Forum for Public Policy). Russell Sage Foundation.
7. Dubois, V. (2010). *The bureaucrat and the poor: Encounters in French welfare offices*. Routledge.
8. Dubois, V. (2014). The economic vulgate of welfare reform: Elements for a socioanthropological critique. *Current Anthropology*, *55*(S9), 138—146.
9. Erasmus, Z. (2020). Sylvia Wynter's theory of the human: Counter-, not post-humanist. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 37(6), 47—65.
10. Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Princeton University Press.
11. Fanon, F. (1967) *Black skin, white masks*. Pluto Press.
12. Fassin, D. (2018). *Life: A critical user's manual*. Polity Press.
13. Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Zero Books.
14. Forbess, A., & James, D. (2017). Innovation and patchwork partnerships: advice services in austere times. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 7(7), 1465—1486.
15. Gilmore, R. W. (2022). *Abolition geography: Essays towards liberation*. Verso Books.
16. Goodley, D. (2023). Being human as praxis: For people with learning disabilities. *Subjectivity*, 30, 167—184.
17. Graeber, D. (2018, March 22). The revolt of the caring classes (Grande conférence, Collège de France), https://davidgraeber.org/articles/the-revolt-of-the-caring-classes/ (accessed on 31 March 2026).
18. Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. N., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order*. Macmillan.
19. Israël, T. (2022). Entre deux articles scannés, nos paroles. In V. Message, N. Murzilli & V. Houdart-Merot (Eds.), *Raconter le chômage* (pp. 133—146). Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.
20. James, D., & Kirwan, S. (2020). Sorting out income: Transnational householding and austerity Britain. *Social Anthropology*, *28*(3), 671—685.
21. Jørholt, E. (2022). Unearthing BUMIDOM: The state-organized migration of French Caribbeans to mainland France (1963—1982) as portrayed in recent audiovisual productions. *Modern & Contemporary France*, *30*(3), 275—293.

22. Kipnis, A. (2007). Neoliberalism reified: Suzhi discourse and tropes of neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *13*(2), 383—400.
23. Koch, I. (2015). "The state has replaced the man": Women, family homes, and the benefit system on a council estate in England. *Focaal*, *2015*(73), 84-96
24. Koch, I. (2018). Towards an anthropology of global inequalities and their local manifestations: Social anthropology in 2017. *Social Anthropology*, 26(2), 253—268.
25. Kozakowski, M. A. (2020). Becoming workers of greater France: Vocational education in colonial Morocco, 1912—1939. In H. G. Dores and M. Bandeira Jerónimo (Eds.), *Education and development in colonial and postcolonial Africa: Policies, paradigms, and entanglements, 1890s—1980s* (pp. 173—204).
26. Lordon F. (2010). *Willing slaves of capital: Spinoza and Marx on desire*. London: Verso.
27. Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1980). Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living. D. Reidel Publishing Company.
28. Mazouz, S. (2015). Profiling job seekers: The counseling of youths at an employment center. In D. Fassin (Ed.), *At the heart of the state: The moral world of institutions*. Pluto Press.
29. McKittrick, K., & Wynter, S. (2015). *Sylvia Wynter on being human as praxis*. Duke University Press. Palgrave Macmillan.
30. Message, V., Murzilli, N., & Houdart-Merot, V. (2022). (Eds.), *Raconter le chômage*. Universitaires de Vincenne.
31. Rose, N. (1996). Power and subjectivity: Critical history and psychology. In C. F. Graumann & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Historical dimensions of psychological discourse* (pp. 103—124). Cambridge University Press.
32. Shah, A. (2021). For an anthropological theory of praxis: Dystopic utopia in Indian Maoism and the rise of the Hindu Right. *Social Anthropology/ Anthropologie Sociale*, *29*(1), 68—86.
33. Soignet, M. (2022). Si je crois au plein emploi? In V. Message, N. Murzilli & V. Houdart-Merot (Eds.), *Raconter le chômage* (pp. 195—220). Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.
34. Stewart, M. (2022). *Tax and government in the 21st century*. Cambridge University Press.
35. Strathern, M. (1992). *Reproducing the future: Essays on anthropology, kinship and the new reproductive technologies*. Manchester University Press.
36. Ticktin, M. I. (2011). *Casualties of care: Immigration and the politics of humanitarianism in France*. University of California Press.
37. Vergès, F. (2019). *Un féminisme décolonial*. La Fabrique.
38. Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the poor: The neoliberal government of social insecurity*. Duke University Press.
39. Wacquant, L. (2012), Three steps to a historical anthropology of actually existing neoliberalism. *Social Anthropology*, 20, 66—79.

40. Weiss, H. (2022). Social reproduction as the reproduction of capitalism. *Focaal*, 93, 105–111.
41. Wimbush, A. (2018, May 11). France haunted by its own Windrush scandal. *The New European*, https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/brexit-news-wimbush-looks-at-frances-post-colonial-history-for-new-european-27570/ (accessed on 31 March 2026).
42. Wimbush, A. (2023). The Windrush and the BUMIDOM: The memorialization of Caribbean migration. *Memory Studies*, 16(5), 1328–1342.
43. Wynter, S., & McKittrick, K. (2015). Unparalleled catastrophe for our species? Or, to give humanness a different future: Conversations. In K. McKittrick (Ed.), *Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis* (pp. 9–89). Duke University Press.
44. Yanagisako, S. (2002). *Producing culture and capital: Family firms in Italy*. Princeton University Press.

Author's Bio

Eman Shehata (she/her) is an economic anthropologist, writer, and editor from Cairo, Egypt. Her writing and research sit at the intersections of feminism and counterhumanism, exploring the affective politics of work, worldmaking and play under capitalism. She is currently a visiting fellow at the Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, United Kingdom.

Address: Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics.
London, United Kingdom, WC2A 2AE.
E-mail: em.shehata93@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7684-204X