

EU Today Podcast 11 Transcript

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Intro music in theme of piano playing Ode to Joy!

Katie Lindner: Hello, and welcome to EU Today, a podcast from the Center for European studies, a Jean Monnet Center of Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thank you to the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission, the EU Delegation to the U.S., and the U.S. Department of Education for supporting our center and its programs. On this podcast, we sit down with scholars and policy leaders to discuss pressing issues facing the EU. We hope you enjoy it.

Brett Harris: Hello, and welcome to EU Today. My name is Brett Harris, and I am a Contemporary European Studies major at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In this episode, UNC Faculty and Jean Monnet Center of Excellence Key Staff Member Dr. Priscilla Layne will be interviewing Dr. Sherryl Vint of the University of California, Riverside, on the ability of science fiction texts to provide insight into contemporary European and transatlantic politics. This interview occurred in anticipation of Dr. Layne's conference, *Environmentalism, Fantasy and Intersectionality: A Comparison Between the US and the EU*. During the conference, Dr. Vint gave the keynote lecture entitled: "Humanization and Belonging: Reproduction, Environment, Futurity."

Priscilla Layne is an Associate Professor of German and Adjunct Associate Professor of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Layne is currently working on her second book, *Out of this World: Afro-German Afrofuturism*, which focuses on Afro-German authors' use of Afrofuturist concepts in literature and theater. In addition to this project, some of the broader themes she is interested in are German national identity, conceptions of race and self/other in Germany, cross-racial empathy, postcolonialism, and rebellion.

Sherryl Vint is Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Riverside, where she directs the Speculative Fictions and Cultures of Science program. Her books include *Bodies of Tomorrow*, *Animal Alterity*, *Science Fiction: A Guide to the Perplexed*, *Science Fiction: The Essential Knowledge*, and *Biopolitical*

Futures in Twenty-First Century Speculative Fiction. She is an editor of *Science Fiction Studies*, and the book series *Science and Popular Culture*. She has edited several books, most recently *After the Human: Theory, Culture and Criticism in the 21st Century*.

[Ode to Joy fades back in and plays for appx. 4 measures]

Dr. Priscilla Layne: So, the first question is: one of your major works is a book entitled *Animal Alterity*. Could you explain a little about a little bit more about what this alterity entails?

Dr. Sherryl Vint: Sure, I titled the book that in part because I like to the alliteration. So, I don't know how much I was thinking that alterity necessarily conveyed something different than otherness, but I do think it's important to realize that the otherness operates in two dimensions, and that that is tied in with a whole biopolitical set of tools that has to do with the human/non-human division, which I've done different work on further since that book came out, but on the one hand, I think it's important to keep in mind that animals are actually different. So, there's ways in which we anthropomorphize animals and like, what does that mean for ways that we incorporate them into sort of human forms of sociality? And often human forms of sociality, that are precisely about the way humans have distanced ourselves from natural environments. And so, there's an environmental component to that. But the other side is that we also define what it means to be human. Through this notion of all territory. So, humans are different from animals and that's the foundation of what it means to be human, then becomes this difference which is really politically relevant not only for our relationship with other species, but because of the way that's speciation has also been a racialization historically and deeply linked with colonialism and those kinds of encounters.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, I'm really interested in that, in those topics. I recently wrote an essay about a German novel. I don't know if you've heard of it—the English title is *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*?

Dr. Vint: No, but I'll definitely look for it.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, you should check it out. So, the author, her name is Yoko Tawada. She's originally from Japan but has lived in Germany for a really long time and writes in German and Japanese and this novel is three generations of polar bears. And the first one is the grandmother who used to be a Russian circus star and leaves the circus and decides to write a memoir.

Dr. Vint: That's really interesting. Especially like the circus is being one of these key places where humans or animals get interpolated into human culture, but in these ways that are very deforming of what their actual capacities are.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, one of the things I looked into for that is the idea that we also attach different values to different kinds of animals. You know, so like cats and dogs are more special than say cows and pigs. So, I looked into, "Well, what do we think of polar bears? What do they symbolize in our psyche?" So yeah, I think it's a really fascinating topic and, especially, like you said, how it intersects with race and colonialism.

Let's see, so you also discussed that the otherness attributed to animals by humans is also attributed to humans by humans, which I think is a good segue from the issue of race and colonialism. What forms does this take in science fiction, and what are contemporary real analogs in Europe?

Dr. Vint: Yeah, so I mean that the segue obviously colonialism and racialization, and the work I've been doing more recently I've been taking this up through Sylvia Winter, and the ways that Sylvia Winter talks about what she calls the genres of man, which, in fact, I'll be discussing more in in my talk, but through the animal studies framework. So, the work I was doing prior to this—it's one of the points that Derrida makes about the way the human gets invented through its difference from the animal, and he also makes the point that humans don't even really have these things we attribute to ourselves. So, we say that we have reason and self-knowledge and all these capacities that in fact we never have as fully as we claim that we have them in a certain philosophical tradition. So that's part of what he becomes interested in, is not only the way we use dehumanizing discourse to exclude some people from a sense of common humanity, but the way that we also come up with this very distorted understanding of what it means to be human, because we think we have these capacities that are completely separated from our emotions and our body, mind, things like that, in ways that that just aren't reflective of what humans are. Actually, we're much more conflictual and we don't even really know what we're doing, half the time, or we do things without understanding on a conscious level why.

And so, science fiction is really rich for human relations with the non-human. It's one of the reasons that I work in this genre, because these are questions that interest me. But of course, there's aliens. There are robots, there's post-humans that are engineered in various kinds of ways. So, there's a wealth of voice that science fiction is really right for symbolizing, both its fear of—but also desire for—communication with something that's really different from oneself.

And of course, this comes up in all kinds of... Unfortunately, it comes up almost in entirely negative ways, I would say, in contemporary examples. It comes up in anxieties about immigration and all this stuff around "What it would mean if cultures are diluted?" It comes up and anxieties around racial difference, obviously, as we've already discussed. And I guess it's starting to come up in the sense of how we interact with Artificial Intelligences (AIs) and things like that. I mean, they're not really intelligence in the way science fiction imagines AIs, but all these assistants that we have in various things like that. There are ways that the data sets these machines learn—machine learning is really what it is—the data sets these machines are fed reflect the human biases of the human populations that generated the data sets. And so, you get ways that machines themselves end up producing precisely the same kinds of gender and racial biases that humans have. So that's another real-world example that needs more analysis, I would say.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, when I think about the way the AIs are presented in sci-fi it's so often gendered. The AI is so often a woman.

Dr. Vint: Well, it is now, but I think something that's really fascinating about that is now that AI is basically being imagined in all these service roles. AIs are assistants. AIs are making our appointments. AIs are making our shopping—all those, like Cortana, Alexa, Siri—they all have female names. They all default have female voices, even your GPS default has a female voice. But back in the 70s and 80s when we were imagining AI and it was much more around military machines, production planning, things like that. All of those science fiction AIs had male voices. So, things like HAL, he's the most famous, but the gendering clearly comes with a different way that that AI is imagined to replace a different sort of set of human functions.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, that's a good point. The earliest example I can remember from my childhood is the car from Knight Rider.

Dr. Vint: Right. Yes.

Dr. Layne: I guess that KITT's a very masculine-looking car.

Dr. Vint: KITT is, I hadn't thought of that. But KITT is actually a quite interesting example because he's a very masculine looking car. And they're obviously having all these action adventures in that series, but he's actually more like Siri or Alexa, he's more generating the data, helping out. So, I mean, maybe there's a queer reading of KITT that could be

Dr. Layne: So actually, on the topic of non-human characters or characters who are close to human but different in other ways, reminds me of one of the films, you'll be discussing in your keynote, the Swedish film *Border*, which features some perhaps

post-human or fantastical species in the form of trolls. Can this notion of the otherness humans attribute to animals be useful for understanding this film?

Dr. Vint: Yeah, I would say that's really my interest in the film. I would say I don't know a lot about the actual mythology around trolls, so I'm reading it more in terms of how these images come up in speculative fiction, generally, but I think—without wanting to repeat myself too much—I think that similar kinds of things that we see in a racialized discourse really show up in that film that the trolls are imagined just as people of color have been, just that women have been, just as working-class people have been. They're imagined as closer to nature. They don't have refined manners. They eat with their hands. They eat raw food. They have some kind of connection with animals that seems closer than then what the Swedish people have.

But I think—and this is another reason I'm interested in this film—that there's also way the film opens a door for us to think of those so-called animalized attributes in a more positive way as well: that they're not like destroying by killing other species, that there's more sustainable life ways that might be attached to how the trolls appear that I would connect with ways that Indigenous groups across the world have been long, involved in sort of advocating for environmental protections. A recent interest in a return to Indigenous lifeways where I live here in California, for example. We're having record upon record fire season, and there's a range of reasons for that, of course, but among them is the fact that Indigenous ways of managing the forest, which include allowing fires that are small and controlled and more frequent were repressed by a colonial system that thought it knew better, and created these conditions for now these catastrophic, out-of-control fires that we're living with right now.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, I think that relates not only to the wildfires, but also to the pandemic.

Dr. Vint: Yes.

Dr. Layne: The issue of space. So, where people live where people have lived historically and how we seem to continue encroaching on space on the space of animals. On space that maybe historically Indigenous people didn't live there, because you needed the room to burn. So, it's interesting how, I think, hopefully, this pandemic has made us start to discuss that a little bit more ways that we can live more sustainably.

Dr. Vint: Yeah, I hope so. I think something that's often misunderstood about, well, there's so many things misunderstood about the pandemic, unfortunately, but I hear sometimes people talking about the pandemic is sort of inevitable that at some

point something like this would happen. And I mean, of course, from one point of view, that's true, that microbes are constantly evolving, they can jump from species to species, which is usually these pneumonic plagues are what cause these massive outbreaks as we're experiencing today. But one of the reasons they're jumping species—species that didn't used to come into contact with each other—*do* because of development. So, there's what I would call a science fiction film from about a decade ago now on Steven Soderbergh *Contagion*, which is precisely about that. I mean, it's mostly about how it is they develop the vaccine and what happens in society as the pandemic is ongoing. But in the very final moments of that scene of the film, you actually see that it's cranes moving into and knocking down trees and displacing bats that lived into them. That's the sort of zero moment of the pandemic.

Dr. Layne: That's eerie! I haven't brought myself to watch that film. I feel like we're living it. I just can't watch a movie about it too.

Dr. Vint: Yeah, I just knew the film very well because I've taught it several times for exactly the reasons we're talking about. I taught it several times before we were living through and pandemics. So, I just know it quite well, but it gets some things right, but also, there are things that it doesn't imagine. For example, how politicized the pandemic has become or the inequity that has to do with wealth and with not only with access to things now because of wealth but with historical health disparities that are the also the product of racialism and poverty, those kinds of things don't show up in the film at all, and that seems at the heart of the how we're actually experiencing a pandemic, now that we're living it.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, on the topic of space and to double back to animals, one aspect of sci-fi and non-fictional life, and the non-fictional life that you described is the marginalization of animals and urban spaces; you talked about knocking down the trees, displacing the bats. What impact does this have him on human perceptions of otherness, and how might we incorporate these insights into reading contemporary movements to restore and maintain green spaces in American and European cities? And since we've talked a little bit about California—I don't know if you have any examples of places in Europe that have been doing this better than we do.

Dr. Vint: To the extent that I know about these initiatives—and I wouldn't say this is something that that I'm an expert on—it seems to me they're largely rationalized in terms of benefits to human health. And so, there clearly are benefits to human health. I'm not trying to be dismissive of that. But I don't know that I see them as necessarily opening much of a door to any kind of like cross-species greater sense of sustainability around how it is that that other animals also need these spaces to live. Unless we understand those animals in terms of how we tend to think of trees now, in terms of, "well, we like oxygen. So, I just like trees." Or: "worms are not cute and cuddly, but we want the soil to be fertile." And so, it's what I would call an

instrumentalist attitude. And I don't think there's a lot of space for understanding that we need more of a sense of a commons and actually sharing the space, even if we're not directly benefiting from another species being there. I would prefer a different kind of sharing that would acknowledge the right of other—well, right is not a word I like—but acknowledge that other species should be there as much as we should be, that we're part of a shared kind of ecosystem and life, world, things like that. So, I think it's more than urbanization—and again there's a long, complex history, mostly to do with capitalism about displacing people from the land and deliberately concentrating them in cities for labor—so acknowledging that it's not people's choice. It's all these other factors, forcing people into urban environments they cut people off from animals so much, especially once we develop mechanical ways of locomotion that I know all kinds of people who grew up in cities, who's like never really had an encounter with an animal.

Dr. Layne: I would be one of those people! I grew up in Chicago and think the extent of which I encountered animals that weren't pets were squirrels and raccoons and possums. So when I moved to North Carolina, it was another world, you know, with the deer and countless bugs I'd never heard of before.

Dr. Vint: Yes, I mean even having pets like a lot of people don't want to keep pets. I think that we get this like almost like a septic attitude as if like all animals are dirty and we're not animals somehow that comes with like high-rise urban living, and then and then a lot of people like don't even have pets, or if they do, they'll be pets that are so bred for aesthetic reasons, that they're more humanized than not in certain kinds of ways.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, that's true. We see a trainer once a week for my puppy, who's four months old.

Dr. Vint: So yes, you have a lot of learning to do!

Dr. Layne: And our trainer mentioned this one dog with a nice white coat, whose owner said, "but just don't let her get muddy." I thought, "she's a dog! Of course, she's going to get muddy!"

It does make you wonder about how we see animals, you know, fitting into our lives. One thing I'd like to circle back to, that you mentioned earlier was the topic of biopolitics. When I think of a lot of the sci-fi, I've been watching, I feel biopolitics plays an important role. Also, in the film, *Highlight*, that you'll be discussing in your keynote, where these prisoners are sent on this little death mission to extract resources from outer space. So, I was wondering if you could, for our audience, explain a little bit what biopolitics is exactly. How does science fiction help us

understand it better, and what role might play in shaping discourses surrounding minority populations in the EU and in the US?

Dr. Vint: Yeah, I'll try to! I don't know how well I can summarize all of biopolitics quickly, especially because there's disagreements among the major biopolitical theorists on exactly what it means. But actually, the book that I just completed—so the one that's coming out in April—is about science fiction and biopolitics, and it really grew out of the work on the human/animal boundary, because it is precisely about sorting life into categories of what's valued and what's not valued, including some humans are valued and not valued. So, the pandemic, which we've been discussing a little bit, is exemplary for making really visible how biopolitical logics operate. The start for this for me was Foucault's ideas, and basically, biopolitics just means governance in terms of the actual bodies of the people. And so, the state becomes really interested in, birth and death rates and managing illness and nutrition, and all these sorts of ways of managing on a biological level, but also targeting at the unit of the population instead of being so interested in the individual consciousness of its subjects.

And for Foucault, it's really about what kinds of people are valued and how do we organize society to channel resources to the kinds of people that are valued. And then at the same time, what kind of people are seen more as a drain on the is talked about is the health of the state. And usually, the health of the state and the health of the economy are really closely overlapping kind of terms. So, people that are seen to economically waste resources are not contributing to the productive economy. And we can obviously see how this maps very clearly on to the kind of traditional discriminations that have founded North American and European societies based on white supremacy ever since the colonial era.

And then further it gets attached to all this anxiety about immigration right now. Without even getting into the reasons for why there's a pressure of migration that leads to people trying to enter Europe in the US—which has its own biopolitical element to it—that very anxiety about immigrants coming in, as much as it's articulated in terms of fear of difference and fear of cultural dilution, it's also articulated in terms of here resource distribution.

And so that is foundational the biopolitical order Foucault talks about: making live the part of the society that you value and letting die the other part. And so here in the US, I think, very, very visibly all these the economy versus the pandemic conversations is foundationally biopolitical. It's like "in order to keep the stock market and the economy healthy, we're just gonna have to let certain people die."

Dr. Layne: "They're disposable." Exactly, exactly.

Dr. Vint: Yeah. And so, Foucault is really the person who I would say most influences me, but another important biopolitical theorist who does is Giorgio Agamben. For him, the camp—as in the Nazi concentration camp—is the foundational biopolitical technology, and Agamben also intersects a lot with how science fiction takes up a lot of these questions. The reason the camp paradigmatic for him is because it is about that boundary again. You dehumanized a certain group and they're segregated away, and then that produces the human, the valued group that the state is seeking to protect the health of.

And then there's critiques. Achilles Mbembe is the most prominent, but he wants to introduce the term necropolitics. And it's not that death is not a part of biopolitics, but he wants to shift the word to put the emphasis on how European biopolitics unfolded. Foundationally, again the health of the center was made by creating death in the colonial peripheries and that too has a racialized history.

The only person who really tries to think through this and really positively strongly is Roberto Esposito, and he might be of interest in this conversation because of his most recent book *A philosophy for Europe*. His notion is the immunitary paradigm of biopolitics. And so, by immunitary, he's interested in the etymology of those words. So immune means like exempt from the *munis*; exempt from the community. The obligation, the duty to community. And so, for him, the foundational existence of humans is as the *munis* as the community and it's only through strategies of nation states and other desires to invent these divisions that we think we have to protect ourselves from this difference. And then you get this immunitary function that is the biopolitical death dealing.

And so, he tries to think through ways that we can emphasize the commons again, emphasize community again, and think through different kinds of logics which actually, interestingly enough, have to do with how the immune system actually works. The immune system is not as we long imagined this death dealing, rooting-out-all-difference-and-destroying-it, but in fact the most healthy immune systems are able to incorporate some difference and live with multiplicity, the same way we should expose ourselves to lots of different microbes so that we have a healthy microbiome and things like that. And so, he's trying to develop a different kind of logic. The reason he goes at a philosophy for Europe, he says is that we need to remember that Europe was always foundationally heterogeneous, and this notion that Europe is this homogenized, fixed thing is actually just a product of modernity and a very distorted way of understanding

Dr. Layne: Oh wow, that's great. I really need to check that book out because, that's definitely my take on politics in Germany, for example, and the fear of difference, and how Germany, I would argue, has also been heterogeneous for much longer

than people realize. That sounds really fascinating. I feel like your book is definitely relates to the times we're in.

Now, I'm curious. Are there certain films in particular that you're looking at in this book on biopolitics?

Dr. Vint: So, there's a mix of films and novels in the book. And actually, TV shows, too. So, the most recognizable ones I talked about are the reboot of *Westworld*. So, HBO's version of *Westworld*. I'm trying not to go into too much detail about this, but among the things I find really interesting about it is how it reimagines these artificial beings through a subjectivity of trauma. They remember all the violence that humans enact on them, and what it is to always be the other of the human is explored in that in a way that I think speaks to colonial histories and other ways that US and European cultures are having to come to terms with their histories of colonialism and the damage that they've done to people othered through those processes.

Another one I talk about is *Blade Runner 2049*, which I read much more in terms of labor and a desire to both dehumanize people that are laborers, but also to reduce them to just labor power. So, to erase all humanity and just have work and then people. From the state's point of view, they don't really want them to exist outside of that having labor power like their actual human problems. Their needs for social support all those things are not valued by the state.

The rest is mostly done through novels, but always connecting to real-world examples. So, I also have a chapter on transplant industries and transnational transplant industries and the way that that is tied up in sort of global north/global south relations. Similarly, with IVF and other kinds of surrogacy services. There's a chapter that has to do with pharmacy and patenting of drugs and ways that the global pharmaceutical industry is creating this politics of health, that's excluding poorer nations that also tend to be historically colonized nations. So basically, all the ways—I'm sad to say—the same exclusions that have shaped modernity get intensified and perpetuated by these kinds of structures.

Dr. Layne: Now that's really great. There's one last topic that I wanted to ask you about that that's important to your work: the issue of embodiment. So, if you could maybe explain what embodiment means for sci-fi, and how might sci-fi help us understand the discrepancies between embodied experiences and representative structures of governance, like for example in the EU and in the US?

Dr. Vint: Yeah, so that's really where my work started: each book kind of built on the last. Well, I first was interested in embodiment. And that led me to realizing how

much the human/animal boundary was behind that, which led me to realizing how much biopolitics was behind that.

So, my initial interest in embodiment was a long-standing European tradition in which body and mind are somehow separate, and mind is important, and body is contingent and peripheral. And you see this come up in science fiction all the time, and in some real world fantasies, like the real world funded projects, but they're not real, if you get what I mean: about how we could like upload our minds transfer our minds to different kinds of bodies store minds and computers, all that kind of idea and I mean I think where that intersects then with the sort of political questions that you're asking is that representative democracy as the ideal that liberal governance presumes a kind of homogeneity of the citizen. So, it doesn't quite say you're only mind and you're not body, but it presumes that kind of homogeneity which has its philosophical roots in that early modern mind/body distinction, where the body was seen as not very central to your identity.

And so, there's all kinds of ways that plays out. There's, "equal before the law" but not equal in the historical conditions that bring you before the law or not. There are all ways that you're supposedly equal before the law, but all kinds of unconscious bias on the part of jurors and judges and police and everyone else leads to different outcomes which are very, very well documented. There are ways in which we presume politics can proceed by kind of rational public sphere debates, but in fact, we see all around us—to my enormous distress, frankly—that politics also proceeds by ethics and rationality and strange coalitions and unconscious motivations that we don't even really understand. And so, I think there's a real gap between how people live their lives and what they value and why and how they experience or don't experience being part of the political community. And then these very abstract structures we have which supposedly put us all together and give us a voice, which is a very disembodied thing in a certain kind of way.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, that's a great point and ties into all the discussions around the Constitution, and how to interpret it these days. Well, I thank you for this great conversation about your work. I feel like you've really shown how you know how political and thought provoking and philosophical sci-fi can be. And it's really astounding to think about way back when, in the 50s, when it was just seen as pulp, stuff for kids, and how much of an impact sci-fi novels and films can make on our society through taking the problems that we're dealing with and extrapolating them and making us hopefully see new solutions to these problems.

Dr. Vint: That's certainly the goal. And I think sometimes it's precisely because you get this displacement. It lets you talk about things in a way that might be harder to talk about in realistic fiction. A great example right now—I don't know if you had a chance to see or not—but HBO's *Lovecraft Country*.

Dr. Layne: Yeah, I've seen the first three or four episodes.

Dr. Vint: Yeah, and I think it's doing astonishing things with showing the violence of American history in a way that's very emotionally accessible for people watching the show in a way that sometimes just knowing the facts of that history hasn't made people feel it in quite the same way. So, I think it's a great example of how the genre can be used to these like important political ends.

Dr. Layne: Well, on that note, I'll say, I'm really looking forward to your keynote next week. And thank you again for joining us from California.

Dr. Vint: No, it's my pleasure. And thank you. I mean, thank you so much for inviting me and looking forward to the rest of the conference!

[Ode to Joy plays in the background]

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[Ode to Joy fades out]

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