

Epistemology as Politics and the Double-bind of Border Thinking: Lévi-Strauss, Deleuze and Guattari, Mignolo

Timothy Nicholas Laurie, University of Sydney

‘Epistemology’ is a fraught term for what Walter D. Mignolo calls ‘de-colonial’ critique. Two uses of the term are most often encountered in the social sciences and post-colonial studies. On the one hand, borrowing from the Kantian philosophical tradition, epistemology is understood as a method of knowing and imputes to its subject an orderly and consistent faculty for reason and concept-building distinct from pleasures and inclinations. On the other hand, in structuralist frameworks influenced by Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and others the *episteme* (without its -ology) can be a powerful critical concept for historicising and politicising the institutional basis of ‘methods of knowing’—that is, by locating knowledge-formation within its practical milieu of actions, habits, *dispositifs*, and so on. This difference between epistemology and the historical *episteme* can be fruitful as a means to denaturalise the cognitive norms of social scientific inquiry, but also raises some peculiar difficulties for a historiographical and political project like that proposed by Mignolo, to which this article is addressed. How can one criticise the projects of governance through knowing (*episteme*), linked historically to Anglo-European State enterprises of imperial expansion and colonialism, without also according to these States the capacity to think in an orderly and consistent manner distinct from their pleasures and inclinations (epistemology)? Or, to what extent is the critique of colonial reason dependent on a normative definition of colonialism as, first and foremost, a method of reasoning about the world?

This article explores this duality of epistemology and *episteme* in the academic study of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and what Mignolo calls ‘coloniality/modernity,’ taking interest in contemporary anxieties about social scientific methods that were often carved out during periods of European colonial expansion. I want to show that the disjunction between epistemology and the *episteme* leads to some difficulties in accounting for the work of gathering sources and organising knowledge claims that are required to critique others’ ways of knowing. In particular, I note some difficulties involved in the gendering of historiographical methods that grant Mignolo and others access to the colonial archive, and argue that the focus on ‘ways of thinking’ can limit sensitivity to the social character of knowledge formation and transmission. The article begins by revisiting Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology as a cultural relativist response to colonial violence, then considers the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as critics of epistemology *tout court*, who argue for a different account of power formations informed by their engagement with psychoanalysis. Finally, the article surveys Walter D. Mignolo’s critique of coloniality/modernity as an *epistemic* configuration and looks at the solutions he offers by focusing on the geo-politics of textual production.

Feeling and communicating with Claude Lévi-Strauss

Drawing on a variety of ethnographic methods, Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism is ostensibly grounded in an extensive, sometimes obsessive, ‘observation of facts’ (1977: 280), and is thus ‘based on the sincerity and honesty of him [sic] who can say ... “I was there; such-and-such happened to me; you will believe it to be there yourself”’ (1966: 117). Faced with an excess of fieldwork observations in ‘exotic’ cultures, Lévi-Strauss’s own analytical method mirrors that of his own ‘bricoleur,’ taking ‘to pieces and reconstruct[ing] sets of events (on a physical, socio-historical or technical plane) and [using] them as so many indestructible pieces for structural patterns’ (1972: 33). Structural anthropology is a Humpty-Dumpty procedure: break things apart, taxonomise, then put back together as a set of relations, a social totality defined in terms of internal logical principles. For Lévi-Strauss, the unity of the ‘scattered fragments’ (Humpty-off-the-wall) with which the anthropologist deals is in the subjective consciousness of ‘primitive man [sic]’ himself, whose thought ‘is founded on [the] demand for order’ (10). In this way, the method of anthropology is not simply one among others, but is a social scientific translation of the ‘method’ of ‘primitive peoples,’ some of whom Lévi-

Strauss describes as ‘sociologists ... as colleagues with whom one may freely confer’ (1987: 49).

From which universal human need does the ‘demand for order’ derive? For Lévi-Strauss, the social provision of a language for human emotions can help us ‘undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible’ (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 198). Unconscious classifications may involve accommodations to ‘social powers’ from outside, certainly, but they also help us to overcome the threat from within, for the transition to ‘verbal expression’ can induce ‘the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganization, in a favourable direction, of the process to which [a person experiencing pain] is subjected’ (1977: 198). Cultural institutions based in collective social participation allow human beings to transfer disorderly affective experiences into orderly sign-structures (1987: 7). Lévi-Strauss thus offers a compelling argument for cultural relativism, because the human capacity to stabilise ambiguous or volatile experiences depends on the community-based affordances of language, habit, and art. In this context, Lévi-Strauss’s critique of colonialism, expressed circuitously throughout *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) but more explicitly in later lectures and papers (Lévi-Strauss 1966), is not simply that cultures should be preserved; after all, different peoples have constantly modified their shared systems of communication. Rather, it is the synchronicity of an internally organised community that guarantees no person will be exposed to inarticulable or inexpressible cruelties—destitution, abject poverty, starvation and so on. Following French sociologist Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss is concerned that Western colonialism displaces shared cultural codes with unsustainable motives—profit, exploitation, unchecked military growth—creating a European ‘humanity alienated from itself’ and making ‘so many men [sic] the objects of execration and contempt’ (1966: 122). Although confident in the virtues of European social sciences, Lévi-Strauss is a critic of a Eurocentrism that holds the global expansion of money, labour and commodities as an unquestionable good for humanity as whole, and points out—as many have done since—that the communal ethic structuring social relationships *among* Europeans were not extended to the treatment of the non-European peoples with whom colonialists and imperialists had (often coercive) exchanges. Correspondingly, Lévi-Strauss is optimistic that a community not alienated from itself would be incapable of treating ‘a single race or people on the surface of the earth ... as an object’ (123).

Since at least the 1960s cultural relativism has often been viewed as a politically reactionary stance, not only because the cultural *status quo* is implicitly preferred against radical social transformation, but also because it de-politicises the space of cultural translation, such that the political circumstances of professional inquiry into colonised peoples are hidden by rhetorical invocations of absolute Otherness (see Fanon 1963; Mignolo 2007). Lévi-Strauss's data was grounded in the basic claim that 'I was there,' but 'there' was always a product of contemporary struggles over political power, in which colonial administrators' own 'ethnographies' created 'fertile ground' for professional ethnographers' accounts of unresolvable cultural differences (Pels & Salemink 1994: 11, 14). What Frantz Fanon criticised as the 'cultural congresses' of 'bourgeois intellectuals' deflected questions about the legitimacy of colonial States by fetishising the correct or incorrect administration of traditions and customs (Fanon 1963: 43). The ensuing challenge to social anthropology was twofold: firstly, how does one conduct ethnographic research when both the object of research and the objectivity of the researcher can no longer be taken for granted? Secondly, how does one distinguish between the social scientific search for cultural order, and the political search for ways to justify ordering others—even, or especially, by way of 'culture'?

The first problem is one of renewing objectivity, but the second pierces the membrane between descriptions of 'how things really are' and the professional imperative to carve out spaces of legitimacy from within State-sponsored institutions. Lévi-Strauss speaks from the vantage point of a State intent on securing knowledge for the purposes of, as he himself would often claim, salvaging local cultures (Lévi-Strauss 1966), but the salvation workers also ascribe to themselves legitimacy and authority in the process. In *Tristes Tropiques*, the subject of Western modernity is at once convicted of abusing State instruments *and* interpellated as responsible for fixing the 'native situation' by the redeployment of those same instruments. In the following section I examine one attempt to circumvent the self-legitimising exercises of the European social sciences in the philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari.

Two orders of politics

Deleuze and Guattari published *Anti-Oedipus* (the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*) in 1972, responding in part to the limitations of ideology critique in accounting for the weaknesses of the French radicalisms associated with the May 1968

student-led uprisings. For activists trained in Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, the social mediation of the unconscious was blamed for the reproduction of social domination: whether in the bedroom or the boardroom, injustice was accounted for by failures in the *language* of representation.

Yet for Deleuze and Guattari, too many examples abounded of 'segregative' territorialisations within the Left itself, 'enclaves whose archaism is just as capable of nourishing a modern fascism as of freeing a revolutionary charge' (2004: 279). The authors' concern with revolutionary movements is not over matters of principle or political representation, but in the informal conduits of desire that multiply micro-fascistic sedimentations around *whatever* principles or representational strategies are chosen—even benign or peaceable ones. Communal living can be terrifying, but this does not mean the ideologies have failed—they may even have worked too well:

The masses certainly do not passively submit to power; nor do they 'want' to be repressed, in a kind of masochistic hysteria; nor are they tricked by ideological lure. Desire is never separable from complex assemblages that necessarily tie into molecular levels, from micro-formations already shaping postures, attitudes, perceptions, expectations, semiotic systems ... It's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective. (Deleuze & Guattari 2004b: 237)

This is an important departure from structuralist reason. For Lévi-Strauss, social relations are formed through shared structures of communication, such that collective toxicities are assumed to be manifested within a group's sign-systems. For example, social violence would be expected to show itself through everyday semiotic codifications of self and other, the rulers and the ruled, the permissible and the prohibited, and so on. For Deleuze and Guattari, by contrast, qualitative variations in the *affective* bonds between people make revolutionary groups capable of becoming micro-fascistic, or transform a sound principle into a damaging social practice. Political desire involves not only systems of ideas but also direct investments into the social field, history, and mythology, and also into events, affects, and 'partial objects' (an ear, a tune, fractured memories). Structuralism bites its own tail because it accounts for 'order' only in the grammar of signification, so that even a critique of order is always a re-ordering, a demystification of one arrangement by way of another, *ad infinitum*. Thus the non-coincidence of social logics with political ideologies strikes at a great weakness of structural anthropology, because within mass social and political mobilisations 'the

most contradictory ideas can exist side by side and tolerate each other, without any conflict arising from the logical contradiction between them' (Freud 1949: 18). There are many examples where deeply flawed ideologies have enabled positive political affiliations (liberalism and the US Civil Rights Movement), or where noble ideologies have become implicated in, if not directly causing, authoritarian territorialisations (Marxism and Stalinism in the USSR). The proper response to bad ideologies may not be counter-ideologies, but political activities shifted to another level, by other means, with new resources.

What distinguishes Deleuze and Guattari's critique of organisational desire from, say, earlier iterations of these themes by Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich or Herbert Marcuse, is that fluid groups are no better than inflexible ones, for it is 'possible that one group or individual's line of flight may not work to benefit that of another group or individual; it may on the contrary block it, plug it, throw it even deeper into rigid segmentarity' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004b: 226). Deleuze and Guattari replace cultural typologies with what they call 'multiplicities', themselves containing a *mélange* of different ideals, myths and logical systems (2004a: 45–46). A multiplicity need not signify evenly across its surface to be organisationally robust; conversely, the stability of signifying systems over time often disguises deeper transformations at the organisational level (165). There is no tradition, heritage or historical memory that is not always-already *doing something* in the present. Even contemporary nostalgia or re-invented traditions are not necessarily anachronistic, but rather imply 'a political situation': 'What about the possibility of a resurgence of regional languages: not just the resurgence of various patois, but the possibility of new mythical and new referential functions? And what about the ambiguity of these movements, which already have a long history, *displaying both fascistic and revolutionary tendencies?*' (Deleuze 2007: 69, emphasis in original; see also Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 24). Adequate responses to cultural nationalism, for example, must complement the critique of signification with heightened sensitivity to 're-organisation of functions' and 're-grouping of forces' transposed from homes to workplaces to schools (Deleuze & Guattari 2004b: 353). Signification is not the enemy: as Dorothea Olkowski has observed, sometimes the most pernicious microfascisms feed on communication breakdown and political confusion, as when the Ku Klux Klan affectively disrupted an organised citizens' commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. (Olkowski 1993). Slogans, symbols and even *epistemes* can, in some small way,

accommodate participatory interlocution, but many other socialised practices of violence are not so transparent. Micro-politics between the cracks can be far more dangerous than politics in public.

Deleuze and Guattari extend this framework in their discussions of colonialism. In *Anti-Oedipus* the authors borrow the term ‘internal colonialism’ (first proposed by Gonzalez Casanova) to describe the ‘interior colony’ of the bourgeois European household: ‘Oedipus is always colonization pursued by other means, it is the interior colony, and we shall see that even here at home, where we Europeans are concerned, it is our intimate colonial education’ (Deleuze & Guattari 2004b: 186). Closed circuits of investment in familial hierarchies do not simply anticipate the ‘paternalistic’ violence of the colonial administration, but rather it is the *global* character of nationalism, nativism, and political antagonism that insinuates itself into families, schools, workplaces and informal private spaces, for ‘Oedipus depends on this sort of nationalistic, religious, racist sentiment, and not the reverse’ (Deleuze & Guattari 2004b: 114; see also Laurie & Stark 2012: 23-24). There is thus a back-and-forth movement between public mythologies of conquest and ethnocentric entitlement, and the banal habituations of ‘cultured’ social relations that slide beneath imperial ideologies proper:

We will always be failures at playing African or Indian, even Chinese, and no voyage to the South Seas, however arduous, will allow us to cross the wall, get out of the whole, or lose our face ... These are Eastern physical and spiritual exercises, but for a couple, like a conjugal bed tucked with a Chinese sheet: you did do your exercises today, didn't you? (Deleuze & Guattari 2004b: 209; see also 106, 305)

Informal ‘affective’ economies and their attendant significations are not necessarily stable insofar as capitalism tends towards the absolute ‘deterritorialisation’ of persons, objects, places and values. Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari are careful to show that *all* societies exhibit some oscillation between the ‘filial’ reproduction of social relationships (‘administrative and hierarchical’) and the supple reworking of values, identities and geographies through lateral ‘alliances’ (‘political and economic’) (2004a: 161). There is no reason to be suspicious of *doxa*, routine or discipline except insofar as they participate in toxic institutional activities and their social extensions—something we can never completely know in advance, because these relations of participation are constantly changing. Correspondingly, whatever academic tools we use to study political power—whether sociological, anthropological, philosophical or otherwise—are subject to all types of appropriation at the borderline (‘all that counts is the constantly

shifting borderline'), especially in periods when academic institutions are misaligned with political interests, or when 'the State as organism has problems with its own collective bodies' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004b: 404).

Gendering politics

Depending on one's viewpoint, Deleuze and Guattari either provide a remarkable insight into important differences between existing social multiplicities and the orderly 'epistemological' subject of the Kantian tradition, or they paralyze the critical obligation to condemn nefarious ideologies, an obligation that depends on producing some evaluation of conflicting positions or perspectives. A peculiar kind of relativism can certainly be detected throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, in which Deleuze and Guattari consistently remind their reader that no type of organisation is 'better' than another. For example, the micro-political 'line of molecularisation' can be distinguished from macro-political identity-based movements, yet 'we will not say that it is necessarily better' (2004b: 217); between the State and the 'affective' social mobilisations of the 'war machine,' the latter 'answers to other rules. We are not saying that they are better, of course' (395), and then later, 'who could say which is better and which is worse? It is true that war kills, and hideously mutilates. But it is especially true after the State has appropriated the war machine' (470); and finally, in the case of the State and social stratification, the question 'is not whether the status of women, or those on the bottom, is better or worse, but the type of organization from which that status results' (231).

Philosophy inevitably addresses itself to problems that admit some profound ambivalence or uncertainty: this is, perhaps, its professional and pedagogical virtue. Yet there is a risk here of *under*-determining social analysis by reaching the same conclusion—'we cannot say'—regardless of circumstance. In order to perform an adequate sensitivity to ambivalence, Deleuze and Guattari deploy a reading strategy so attentive to indeterminacy that any denunciation of categorically objectionable violence or inequality becomes immediately suspect. In producing the question, 'who could say which is better and which is worse?', Deleuze and Guattari must first evict this 'who' of any potential occupants, so that no person could simply respond, 'I can say which is better and which is worse.' Let's consider an example from *Anti-Oedipus*. Deleuze and Guattari cite Edmund Leach's discussions of 'groups of men residing in the same area,

or in neighbouring areas, who arrange marriages and shape concrete reality to a much greater extent than do systems of filiation' (2004a: 161–62). The alliances sustaining kinship practices emerge as a 'perverse tie of a primary sexuality between local groups, between brothers-in-law, co-husbands, childhood partners,' impelled 'by the action of the local lines and their non-oedipal primary homosexuality' (180–81). Deleuze and Guattari find in Leach's 'groups of men' another example of 'micro-fascisms,' or the affective bonds of persons that can shape political discourse, without speaking a coherent language of its own. Anticipating questions about the gendering of alliance, Deleuze and Guattari speculate about why female homosexuality had not led to Amazonian women trading men and conclude, in casual dialogue with Georges Devereux's reading of Mojave (not Amazonian) kinship practices, that 'women's affinity with the germinal influx ... [results] in the enclosed position of women in the midst of extended filiations' (2004a: 180). The germinal influx is repressed by 'the great coders,' those men who 'meet and assemble to take wives for themselves, to negotiate for them, to share them' (178–80). The 'germinal influx,' and women's biological relationship to it, is described only in oblique terms as an intensity of desire, to be contrasted with investments in extensive social networks and alliances, implicitly aligned with the male political sphere.

Returning to the example prompting Deleuze and Guattari's discussion, Leach's 'groups of men' were the product of ethnographic study conducted partly while on active military service in Burma (Leach 1961: v–vi, 114–23). Leach's volume is fiercely critical of generalisations from one society to a narrative about 'politics' in 'primitive societies' (1–2), and no firm conclusion is reached that Jingpaw 'alliances' actually eclipse 'filiation' (or that indirect political circuits take priority over systemic and hierarchical reproductions of social unities). Searching for ruptures that testify to the singularity of political desire over social structure, Deleuze and Guattari fall back on a *methodological* dogma that aligns femininity with reproduction and masculinity with politics and/or the primordial 'male bond.' Drawing on feminist methodologies in archaeology, Key and MacKinnon argue that, in the case of the Maya, the shift from non-State to State society and the subsequent collapse of the Mayan empire involved frequently overlooked transformations of women's roles (Key & MacKinnon 2000). Far from being a natural separation, the division of labour between men and women was contested at a political level, and the omission of women's involvement in politics

results more from the ideological slant of male researchers than from clear documentary evidence (Key & MacKinnon 2000: 113–14; see also Slocum 1975: 36–37, and Pyburn 2004). More generally, Lila Leibowitz argues that the popularity of man-the-hunter anthropologies in the 1960s—eg, Lee and Devore’s collection *Man the Hunter* (1968) and Lionel Tiger’s best-selling *Men in Groups* (1969)—emerged as part of a revived interest in physiological sex-differences in reaction to liberal, ‘nonbiogenetic’ challenges to sex-role differentiation (Leibowitz 1975: 22).

My criticism here is not only that Deleuze and Guattari’s pay insufficient attention to women in anthropology. Indeed, the burgeoning anthropology of women in the 1970s was fraught with many of the methodological problems extant in Deleuze and Guattari’s own work (Ebron 2001: 225). It is also the fetishisation of structural indeterminacy that is troubling here, although its immediate casualties are undoubtedly those elided from the authors’ ‘experimental’ reading practices. Christopher Miller’s criticisms of *A Thousand Plateaus* illuminate such concerns about the philosophical elegance of Deleuze and Guattari’s readings of second-hand anthropologies, insofar as the authors elide the historical ‘outsides’ of their own personal libraries:

[Depending] on someone else’s ethnography in order to build one’s own interpretation in the discourse of the humanities is an insecure business at best. The pitfalls of this dependency are everywhere: How was the information obtained? Is the author reliable? Were his/her sources biased? In what political context did the inquiry take place? What epistemological baggage comes in with the source? Behind all these questions and behind all uses of anthropology lurks the condition without which anthropology would not have come into being: colonialism and its project of controlling by knowing. (Miller 1998: 190)

Deleuze and Guattari do recognise many of these concerns in their discussions of ethnologists (see 2004b: 473–74), but the extent to which philosophy is granted exemption from such criticisms is important here. In a final collaboration, *What Is Philosophy?* (1994), Deleuze and Guattari note that ‘[without] history experimentation would remain indeterminate and unconditioned, but experimentation is not historical. It is philosophical’ (1994: 111). The subsequent commentary is littered with geophilosophical characterisations of the English (who ‘nomadise over the old Greek earth’), the French (who ‘build’) and the Germans (who ‘lay foundations’), in turn separated from the ‘prephilosophical’ thought of Chinese, Hindu, Jewish and Islamic thinkers (as a minor concession, these are later positioned ‘alongside’ philosophy) (1994: 95). In ‘What is the Creative Act?’ (Deleuze 2007), Deleuze has also remarked that ‘[if] philosophy exists, it is because it has its own content’ (318), and that within

the discipline proper to philosophy, '[anyone] can speak to anyone else' (319). Compare this with the slavish exposition of shaman rituals and 'primitive' codings that fill-out 'Savages, Barbarians, Civilized Men' in *Anti-Oedipus* and several lengthy commentaries in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Only philosophy escapes the otherwise rigorous treatment of knowledge formation as entangled with political desire found throughout Deleuze and Guattari's earlier engagements with the social sciences. The exceptionalism of European philosophy begins with the exceptional absence of ethnographic attention to philosophical alliances (its 'politics and economics') that Deleuze and Guattari's apply so liberally to others' ways of thinking.

However, self-reflexivity would not necessarily provide an instant corrective to the ethical inconstancy of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Reflexivity in the Kantian epistemological tradition can introduce so much self-doubt that the only certainties become *a priori* syntheses of categorical imperatives, removing the positive historical sensibility necessary for de-colonial or post-colonial critique. It is also important that concepts borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari have often helped to unsettle theoretical *doxa* in history, anthropology and other disciplines, and scholars such as Todd Ramon Ochoa (2007), Bhriqupati Singh (2008) and Meaghan Morris (1998) have drawn on Deleuze or Deleuze and Guattari in developing innovative methodologies. But I do wonder whether the language of 'experimentation,' and its tacit alliance with the pronounced ambivalences developed throughout *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* ('we cannot say ...'), may lead to its own territorialisations, or to what Deleuze and Guattari elsewhere denounce as 'solitary work, irresponsible, illegible, and non-marketable, which on the contrary must pay not only to be read, but to be translated and reduced' (2004a: 146). Irma McClaurin notes that often 'those who are "authorized" to speak on what constitutes innovation in the discipline are those already recognized as authorities' (2001: 50), and we should ask whether rhetorical uncertainty at one level is simply certainty of a different *kind* at another—that is, certainty that all political desire will be ambivalent and inconsistent. Rather ironically, Deleuze and Guattari's refusal of ideology critique contains the germ of a new *doxa*, one that could render any firm social criticism ontologically suspect *a priori*. In the next section, I examine an alternative approach to epistemological critique in the work of Mignolo that attempts to counter-balance the exhaustive (and exhausting) ambivalences of post-structuralist argumentation.

Walter D. Mignolo and the geo-politics of translation

This article cannot do justice to the broad scope of Mignolo's *oeuvre*, but will focus instead on his framing of *epistemic* differences with respect to modernity/coloniality. In the collection *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, Mignolo ties the Judeo-Christian consecration of the Holy Book as divine depository of knowledge to the *episteme* informing Spanish representations of Amerindian writing practices. Mignolo argues that colonial epistemologies based on the Book served to subordinate the complex writing practices of the Mayans, Aztecs and Incas to unflattering terms of comparison, especially when Amerindian terminology was translated into imagined Spanish equivalents. With a continuing focus on Amerindian experiences, Mignolo argues in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* that the 'locus of enunciation,' the position from which the speaker speaks, 'is as much part of the knowing and understanding processes as are the data for the disciplinary ... construction of the "real"' (Mignolo 1995: 21). Developing this theme, the philological attention to maps, books, the *quipu* and the *amoxтли* (among many others) in *The Darker Side* are invaluable for any historical understanding of diverging European and Amerindian literacies in New World colonial encounters. In two chapters devoted to Spanish cartographies, Mignolo literally 'maps' the ways in which European ideas about spatial organisation fed into politically expedient discourses naturalising the European 'center' against the colonial margins (1995: 219–313).

In addition to the subordination of indigenous Amerindian languages, the 'colonial matrix of power' (1999: 239) also privileged certain institutional apparatuses of knowing and managing others' knowledges: 'Cultures of scholarship were precisely what people outside Europe either lacked ... or if they happened to possess them (like China, India, or the Islamic world), they became an object of study' (Mignolo 2000: 304). Echoing Lévi-Strauss's modified cultural relativism, Mignolo concedes that 'there is nothing wrong in the fact that a given group of people put forward its own cosmovision,' and advocates 'a world in which many worlds will co-exist' (2007: 499). In keeping with the thesis of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), problems arise 'when a limited number of people feel they are appointed by God to bring (their) good to the rest of humanity. That is ... the provincial pretense to universality' (Mignolo 2007: 493). But Mignolo is not interested in retrieving 'an authentic knowledge from Chinese, Arabic or Aymara,' but instead seeks to include in the foundation of knowledge 'subjectivities

that have been subjected in and by the colonial matrix of power' (2007: 493). It is not those outside academia who are 'traditional,' but rather *epistemic* fixtures within social scientific inquiry that sediment distinctions between 'our' intellectual advances and 'their' backwardness, so much so that 'the traditional defense of traditions should be constantly contested at all levels, including the cultures of scholarship and the parochial defense of disciplinarity, even under new paradigms' (2000: 203). As long as colonialism and neocolonialism are cast as problems to be solved from within European social scientific *epistemes*, solutions will always be found in the *renewal* of State power, rather than in the questioning of its geo-political preconditions. Even the post-structural play with 'the discourse of the coloniser' forgets 'to ask how the colonised represent themselves ... without the need of self-appointed chroniclers, philosophers, missionaries, or men of letters to represent (depict as well as speak for) them' (Mignolo 1995: 332; see also 2000: 308–9).

Proposing an *epistemic* cure to the ills of intellectual ethnocentrism, Mignolo borrows from Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of the 'borderlands,' those institutional spaces that engage non-Western audiences, languages and experiences, and are thus forced to inhabit in-between spaces from which 'an *identity based on politics* (and not *politics based on identity*)' can emerge (2007: 492, emphasis in original; see also 1995: xiii; 2000: 271). This 'border gnosis'—and elsewhere, "'barbarian" theorizing' (303)—aims to displace the institutional fetishisation of European philosophy as the yardstick by which credible critique is measured. The appropriate response requires that the 'grammar of de-coloniality ... [begins with] languages and subjectivities that have been denied the possibility of participating in the production, distribution, and organization of knowledge'—that is, from the 'institutionally and economically dis-enfranchised' (2007: 492). Only a reorganisation of *epistemic* premises enables Mignolo to 'avoid the Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism and to legitimise border epistemologies emerging from the wounds of colonial histories, memories and experiences' (2000: 37). The important point is to politicise epistemology from the experiences of those on the 'border,' not to develop yet another epistemology of politics. Although not interested in advertising any personal 'victim status' as such (1999: 240), Mignolo reminds his reader that '[scholarship], like travelling theories, wandering and sedentary scholars, in the First or the Third World, cannot avoid the marks in their bodies imprinted by the coloniality of power, which, in the last analysis, orient their thinking' (2000: 186). This

last point requires qualification: in a more recent piece, Mignolo hesitates before a strict typology of *episteme* by citizenship, providing broader parameters for ‘de-coloniality’ as ‘working toward a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society over those that differ’ (2007: 459). As already noted, this ‘modified’ relativism shares with Lévi-Strauss the belief that all social ideals are equal, except those that insist themselves upon others through expansionist and authoritarian dictates.

A raft of criticisms have been made of Mignolo’s border thinking, including the elision of class differences and institutional privilege in the ‘loci of enunciation’ (Browitt 2004; Hulme 1999: 224–29); the over-emphasis on top-down ‘Manichean’ accounts of conflict that are unable to explain violence or oppression guided by no single ‘logical design or plan’ (Cheah 2006); the implicit ‘nostalgia for some unadulterated Amerindian “voice”’ found in Mignolo’s philological studies, one that posits European logocentrism as the ‘original sin’ (Michaelsen & Shershow 2007: 43, 48); the imposition of false continuity between pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment notions of modernity and/or colonialism (Hulme 1999: 220–21); and finally, the alleged inattention to the methodological problems posed by Mignolo’s reconstruction of histories through textual analysis (Schwaller 1996). Many of these criticisms depend on social scientific *epistemes* that are themselves being criticised by Mignolo, so my initial focus here will be on the status of the *episteme* itself. The normative implications of this term are often unsatisfying: a possible implication of Mignolo’s ‘border thinking’, for example, is that those with a non-colonial *episteme* are not held to be complicit with objectionable violence, whether colonial, neo-colonial or otherwise. But clearly this has happened at least once before, for the ‘colonial matrix of power’ did not spring up *sui generis* and neither did the State form or capital enterprise, the key social technologies that Mignolo identifies with the acceleration of colonialism. The critique of colonial *epistemes* addresses itself to a historical configuration in which knowledge is central, but must pass outside the *episteme* to explain how that historical configuration came into being.

The problem here is not a lack of historical rigor. Mignolo is persuasive that ‘positivist’ histories can reveal a multitude of truths, none of which necessarily challenge the *episteme* through which they are produced. More important is that the imputation of

moral failing to those complicit with the ‘colonial matrix of power’ allows the de-colonial critic to simply refuse the *epistemic* ‘choice’ that others are purported to have made. For example, in his commentary on the ‘epistemic turn’ in colonial studies, Ramón Grosfoguel (2007) blames the ‘arrogance’ of the subject who claims the ‘God-like’ status of epistemic omnipotence (215), while Mignolo also warns against ‘the modern and *imperial* temptation of the good and best uni-versal’ (2007: 500, emphasis in original). Elsewhere both the ‘spell and the enchantment of imperial modernity’ and ‘fundamentalist responses to imperial global designs’ are held responsible for the perpetuation of modernity/coloniality (Mignolo & Tlostanova 2006: 219). In each case, a subject is positioned *behind* universal thinking that has ‘entered into’ poor thinking as either a motivational error or a political mis-judgment. But what leads to arrogance and by what is the subject of modernity tempted? As Rey Chow has pointed out, arguments of this kind can be convoluted into a fetishisation of the question, ‘who speaks?’, with the commonplace presumption that the discovery of power is itself ‘a kind of moral and/or rhetorical victory,’ as rhetorically compelling as it is inefficacious (Chow 1993: 146). Unless we wish to indict Eurocentrists for being arrogant and celebrate non-Europeans for lack of arrogance—a cultural relativist distinction that Mignolo and Grosfoguel furiously reject—then some other explanation for the development of Eurocentric *epistemes* is needed.

Mignolo’s de-colonial critique has at its core a version of human subjectivity so orderly that his or her capacity for violence becomes almost unimaginable, except outside submission to maleficent epistemological temptations. Violence cannot exist without first being mediated by a system of signs: on this point, Lévi-Strauss and Mignolo are in complete agreement. There is also a more subtle methodological sympathy here that should not go unnoticed. In *The Darker Side* Mignolo tells us that ‘[since] I am dealing with signs, I need philological procedures’ (1995: 9), but later insists the ‘use of the tool is as ideological as the descriptions invented to justify its use’ (24). These conflicting assertions can only be resolved through a reversal of terms: since Mignolo is dealing with philological procedures he needs signs, just as Lévi-Strauss’ method both requires and produces structures. The practice of philology as a *scientific* enterprise promises to reconstruct human behaviour from the ideas and grammars of a period (from letters, manifestos, treatises, public declarations or other ‘epistolary’ materials), not from the lives of the people required to act upon or respond to those ideas. Thus the reader

searches Mignolo in vain for subalterns, but does find the ‘epistemologically subaltern’ (1999: 240); wants to understand how ‘theories’ relate to peoples’ actions in the world but finds only ‘theoretical actors’ (Mignolo & Tlostanova 2006: 206); seeks to understand colonialism but is left trying to work out which set of orderly premises best fit the colonial grammar. Had colonial administrators ever been confused in their morality or passionate in their exercise of government, Mignolo’s philology could not reveal this (see Cooper & Stoler 1997 on this point). Philology is anti-experiential. So while we must agree with Mignolo that ‘one should ask whether people in La Paz, Bolivia, are living the life world in an experiential space that gets further away from the “horizon of expectations” of people in Munich, Germany’ (2007: 495), Mignolo is not actually asking this question. The immediate conclusion is simply that ‘in Munich, you do not see or feel coloniality’ (495), a conclusion that not only erases the ‘experiential space’ of many different migrant groups and displaced ‘illegal’ workers throughout Germany and the European Union, but forgets that many wealthier residents in La Paz might *see* coloniality without *feeling* coloniality as Mignolo does. To make this point clear, I do not intend to dispute the common experience felt by many subalterns of racial classification (497), humiliation and marginalisation (492), and exploitation (498), but I do want to recognise that as lived experiences with psychological and social resonances, the causes and consequences of colonial violence cannot be indexed back to individuals’ agreement with or disputation of the dominant *episteme* or its institutional locale.

These are serious limitations to Mignolo’s focus on ‘writing’ and the *episteme* as the key lens through which cultural differences are understood and negotiated, ones that are also significantly marked by the gendered character of Mignolo’s own research. Irene Silverblatt interrogates the positions of power occupied by ‘native informants’ within Incan communities: ‘indigenous authors wrote in a highly politicised, contradictory milieu which saturated their work. They too have often been idealised, presumed to speak of and for a “pure” Inca past’ (1987: xxv). Silverblatt’s argument is not only that the colonial situation shaped Incan story-telling for Spanish audiences (a point made by Mignolo throughout *The Darker Side*), but that the *choice* of Incan representatives was also shaped by Spanish cultural attitudes. In particular, men ‘were considered innately more suitable to public life by the Spanish. Their values, imposed on the colonies, favoured men as society’s representatives, administrators, and power brokers’ (xxx). In *Writing Without Words*, John Monaghan also argues that the meanings of ‘signs’ are

tied up in the body and expertise of learned men, and that our ‘disembodied’ understanding of graphic semiotics precludes any holistic analysis of the internal cultural politics of Amerindian societies (Monaghan 1994: 96–97). In the three-page section of *Local Histories/Global Designs* entitled ‘Gender and the Coloniality of Power,’ Mignolo does quote at length Sara Suleri’s analysis of the ‘figurative status of gender’ in Orientalist narratives, and concludes that introducing ‘gender and feminism into colonial cultural studies confirms the epistemological breakthrough being enacted by postcolonial theorising’ (2000: 126). The ‘politics and sensibilities’ of his own discourse are, according to Mignolo, ‘comparable’ to those engaging with gender, race and class configurations (124). He also suggests that in the (apparently separate) field of Women’s Studies, Norma Alarcón’s recovery of ‘woman’ as a subject of knowledge ‘mirrors’ the positioned subject of colonial discourse (119). Yet throughout, Mignolo excludes the possibility that gender might have social and methodological consequences *within* postcolonial research practices, ones not easily overcome by attributing gendered violence to the temptations of ‘modern’ and ‘imperialist’ thinking. Like Deleuze and Guattari, issues of gender are never allowed to disturb the epistemological scaffolding of political philosophy, a discipline that must frequently gauge social consciousness from borrowed ethnographic or historical research.

Working between philology and political philosophy, Mignolo encounters comparable problems to those raised in Deleuze and Guattari’s discourse on gender and alliance. On the one hand, he is suspicious of cultural relativism and its propensity to neutralise power by appealing to ahistorical cultural worldviews (Mignolo 1995: 15; 2007). On the other hand, Mignolo draws on a methodological procedure deeply imbedded within structuralist anthropology; namely, the indexing of ‘culture’ to a collection of signs supposed to express the *epistemes* shared by all members of a given community. These are not fatal flaws in Mignolo’s argument, but they do shed light on some crossroads in his own borderlands. The resounding strength of Mignolo’s work is to create a space where multiple anti-colonial, post-colonial and de-colonial knowledges exist side-by-side and stretch across many centuries. Deleuze, Guattari and Mignolo all challenge the paradigms of cultural relativism and force political engagement with the legacies and trajectories of social scientific inquiry. However, these same critics can also be found reshuffling old cards, turning the ‘raw materials’ of social scientific inquiry into figurative topes, whether the mythical personages that populate Deleuze and Guattari’s

prose or Mignolo's border Gnostic, who has long ceased to be an epistemologically bounded research participant in universities or other machineries of knowledge production. The somewhat facile epistemological questions—how does one come to learn about colonialism, through which social contexts and lived experiences, and what are the important ethical objections to coloniality or its legacy?—are so greatly eclipsed by *epistemic* anxiety that the 'discourse on colonialism' becomes a 'discourse on the discourse on colonialism.' From this latter position it can be impossible to become disentangled.

Postscript on the public intellectual

During an interview conducted in 1989, Deleuze responded to a question about a debate surrounding the wearing of veils in French schools. He suggested that the 'spontaneous will of the young girls involved seems particularly reinforced by the pressure of parents who are anti-secular,' and then considered some possible ramifications of the debate:

It's a matter of knowing just how far the Islamic associations want to take their demands. Will the second phase be to demand the right to Islamic prayer in the class room? And then will the third phase be to demand a reassessment of the literature taught in the class room, claiming that a text by Racine or Voltaire is an offense to Muslim dignity? (Deleuze 2007: 365)

Deleuze cited, as his preference, 'a secular movement among the Arabs themselves.' The interview is entitled simply, 'A Slippery Slope.' Tradition is not critiqued *in itself*, but is understood as a movement within a European frame of reference, in which the French national became both commentator and potential victim of the racial and cultural Other. Deleuze's final court of appeal becomes the freedom of great literatures, but we do not know for whom Racine and Voltaire are worth defending (the French? professors of literature? Penguin Classics?), nor are we told of the numerous exclusions from French classrooms of books considered an affront to Christian sensibilities or those of European secularism. The doubt cast speculatively on the girls' commitment to their veils—'We can't be sure that the young girls feel all that strongly about it' (Deleuze 2007: 363)—only obscured the fact that Deleuze, rather than the young girls, was being interviewed by *Libération*. What Deleuze is saying certainly bespeaks an *episteme*, but is also inconsistent with his own claims elsewhere about the dangers of authority and speaking for others. It is in part the inconsistency introduced by the situation of speaking (in this case a magazine, an audience, the professional motivations of a philosopher and so on) and not the speaker's published *epistemic* commitments that

contains the danger, because political violence can pass as much by way of caprice and contradiction as it does by doctrine and dogma.

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