

The Difficulties and Paradoxes of Interrupting Colonial Totalitarian Logicalities

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I wish to explore a few puzzles that can be seen at work in Nassim Noroozi's combination of Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and William James in the definition of wonderment. This point relates to the relationship between totality and the ways we relate to language and meaning within modernity. Different readings of Heidegger suggest different relationships between existence and meaning.¹ Similarly, James seems to wrestle with the question of wonderment vis-à-vis experience and thought. Noroozi defines wonderment both as experience-based thought that interrupts circumscribed totalitarian meanings and as the pluralization and subversion of meaning itself through the amplification of the ambivalence and traces of signification. The examples she uses make me wonder about the connections between totality and the enduring nature of logocentric enchantments, where currents and countercurrents of thought work to both interrupt and reinscribe each other.² How can we tell when this move is subversive and when is it not?

I believe a similar puzzle related to the relationship between meaning and experience/existence, is at play in Noroozi's conflation of Marie Battiste and Paulo Freire's projects of decolonization: although Battiste and Freire's critiques of totalitarian logicalities are somewhat similar, their projects of decolonization are not necessarily the same. Noroozi has been faithful to Freire but has betrayed Battiste. However, this is an important betrayal: it comes to teach us something. My response focuses on the paradoxes and difficulties of onto-epistemic ruptures, if we take distinctions between the two projects into account.

Freire's project emerges out of his critique of material and epistemic violence in agrarian contexts in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s. His campaign of emancipation was based on alphabetic literacy, and the idea that, once the oppressed can read the word, they will be able to read the world. This implies that the meanings of their oppression and potential emancipatory agency are tied to their mastery of alphabetic literacy. Freire's humanism frames progress as the education of the oppressed *and* the oppressor, but he sees the transformation of society happening through the self-liberation of the oppressed.

When this campaign was brought to Indigenous groups in Brazil, there was substantial resistance to both the idea of alphabetic literacy as a single liberating strategy and the idea of progress as emancipation. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro uses the term "Amazonian perspectivism" to describe an Indigenous logic that privileges non-ocular vision over writing and/or speech and that is not invested in notions of linear time, teleological progress or humanist Cartesian formalism.³ When faced with this resistance, Freire affirmed in writing that Indigenous people were *prerational*.⁴ Like John Dewey's concept of civilization constructed in his time against the "sav-

ages,”⁵ Freire’s idea of rational progress was also dependent on the construction of Indigenous peoples in (totalizing) pathological or deficit terms.

Conversely, my reading of Indigenous philosophies and ethics is that, in critiques of colonial and totalitarian logicalities, Freire’s logic is still based on colonial and totalitarian assumptions.⁶ However, Freire’s scholarship is also recognized as useful in opening opportunities for political negotiations within the settler-state totalitarian logic, a logic that not only determines the extent of control of lands but also the parameters of normality of knowledge and being, and the intelligibility of resistance. Indeed, Noroozi acknowledges this when she emphasizes the statement that “the struggle to break free from or decolonize the violent knowledge that questioned the humanness of *Amerindians* is ‘an ongoing struggle, and more difficult to overturn than political institutions.’”⁷

One way to distinguish between the two critical approaches to colonial logicalities is to represent them in terms of their target of critique: while Freire focuses on issues of epistemological hegemony, many Indigenous scholars tend to focus on issues of ontological (and metaphysical) hegemony.⁸ For these Indigenous scholars, including Battiste, Indigenous people face a difficult paradox. On the one hand, there is an urgency to survive against the odds of dispossession, destitution, and genocide within a modern settler context of exploitative and unsustainable capitalism and violent cognitive imperialism. *At the same time*, there is an urgent need to keep alive different possibilities for existence not defined by the single story of progress and human evolution of modernity.⁹

These possibilities challenge the idea that existence is defined by meaning, as dominant ideas of modern subjectivities would have it. The metaphysical choice behind these possibilities represents reality as something that is not narrativizable, that cannot be apprehended by language or the human mind. Language, in this case, is something that buffers experience from absolute reality. In this context, stories are really important, but they do not describe experience or reality itself; they are used as “metaphors” defined by their purpose of mobilizing constellations of meaning from *logos* to *mythos* (where *mythos* is also understood differently from modern conceptualizations). This metaphoricality is what points to a realm of interdependence, entanglement, interconnectedness, and oneness beyond knowledge, categorical meanings, linear time, and even embodied flesh. Dwayne Donald refers to colonization as the denial of this entanglement,¹⁰ Eduardo and Bonnie Duran refer to the continuous harm caused by this denial as a “soul wound,”¹¹ and M. Jacqui Alexander warns us that the healing of the soul wound cannot happen through identity categorizations (although categorizations are not to be dismissed).¹² For her, our deepest yearning for wholeness, after being separated by epistemic totality, can only be addressed through the aesthetic, the erotic, and the divine (I have recently been advised to add “the hilarious” to this list). These arguments are echoed in recent Black and Feminist literature.¹³

To summarize, my argument so far has been that Freirean decolonization is bound to a self-centering normative modern ontology, whereas the ontology I tentatively

described with reference to Indigenous literature here is based on a nonanthropocentric self-decentering ethic, where existence is not defined by meanings (especially logocentric meanings) and where generosity, compassion, and humility are *not intellectual choices*. Therefore, from this perspective, critical consciousness is not enough to interrupt or decolonize — in terms of undoing of epistemic structures of our enchantment with colonial capitalist modernity.

To conclude my musings on the difficulties of interrupting colonial totalitarian logicalities, I will present a pedagogical cartography that I have used to help my students to visualize investments, desires, paradoxes, and contradictions (that are often denied) in our oversocialization into modern ideals. The cartography of the modern subject represents the frames of reference of modernity juxtaposed on a square-headed Cartesian subject who “thinks, therefore he is,” and whose relationship with the world is mediated by his cognitive repertoire of meanings rather than by his senses. Each side of the square head represents different and enduring referents that circumscribe his relationship with reality. Although not all referents may surface at the same time, they ascribe coherence to the project of schooling as we know it and create subjects who are amenable to the modern epistemic totalitarian dream of seamless progress, development, and evolution carried out by human agency through the use of objective knowledge to control the environment and engineer a perfect society.

Apart from the usual “I think, therefore I am” of autonomous, self-transparent, and dualistic Cartesian subjectivities, we have a number of other features that circumscribe his obsession with defining reality through meaning alone. Logocentrism compels him to believe that reality can be described in language (“I say, therefore it is.”). Universalism leads him to understand his interpretation of reality as objective and to project it as the only legitimate and valuable world view (“I think, therefore it is all there is.”). Anthropocentric reasoning makes him see himself as separate from nature and having a mandate to manage, exploit, and control it (“I think, therefore the world is mine.”). Teleological thinking makes him want to plan for the engineering of a future that he can already imagine (“I plan, therefore it will be.”). Dialectical thinking makes him fall in love with a linear logic averse to paradoxes, complexities and contradictions (“It is this, therefore it cannot be that.”). Allochronic and evolutionary thinking make him judge others according to a criterion where he is represented as being in the present of (linear) time while others are in the past, and where he leads humanity in a single path of evolution (“I thrive here and now, therefore you break down then and there.”).

However, the first reading of this picture is deceiving because it gives us a false idea that there is an outside and an inside of the box. But, if we look at it differently, seeing ourselves as the line that draws the box, as in figure 1, two important insights emerge: first, that the very desire for an outside of the box comes from within the box and, second, that we are already free to draw different things, but perhaps not without learning the lessons that being locked in these conceptual frames for 500 years has exposed us to. In this sense, we need to hold the Cartesian possibility and modernity itself not as pathologies to be demonized but as very strict and important

teachers. In order to experience the possibility of wonderment beyond intellectual choices, we need to face our own socialization into and investments in colonial total

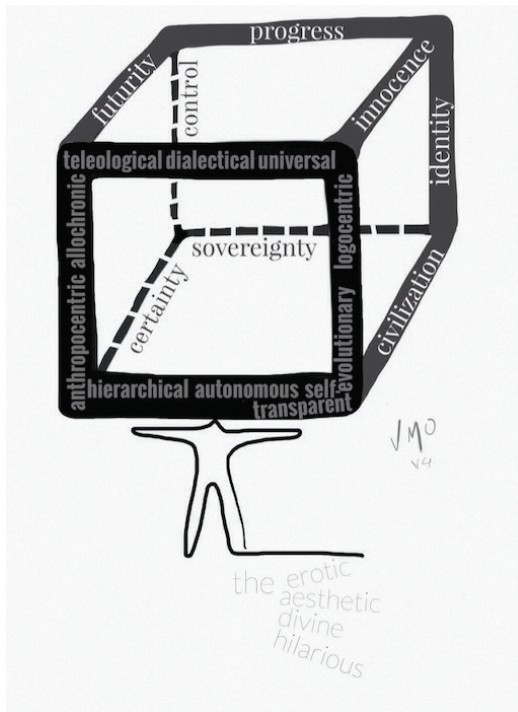


Figure 1. Boxhead.v4

ities as well as the benefits and satisfactions we derive from them (for example, our attachments to certainty, security, comfort, control, prestige, affluence, vanity, and so on).¹⁴ An education for wonderment that takes us to other possibilities of being will require the undoing of Western narcissism and the decentering, disarming, and displacement of the modern subject. I congratulate Noroozi for her contribution to this important and life-long (and wide) conversation.

1. See Carl Te Hira, "The Enowning of Thought and Whakapapa: Heidegger's Fourfold." *Review of Contemporary Philosophy* 13 (2014): 48–60.

2. See Michel Foucault, *Life: Experience and Science*, trans. Carolyn Fawcett, in J. D. Faubion, ed., *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (1985; repr., London: Penguin Books, 1998), 369–392.

3. Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 469–488.

4. Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974).

5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

6. See, for example, C.A. Bowers, "Why a Critical Pedagogy of Place is an Oxymoron," *Environmental Education Research* 14, no. 3 (2008): 325–335.

7. Joanne P. Sharpe, *Geographies of PostColonialism* (London: Sage, 2009), 5, quoted in Noroozi's essay in this volume (emphasis in original).

8. See, for example Willie Ermine, "Aboriginal Epistemology," in Marie Battiste and Jean Barman, eds., *First Nation Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1995), 101–112; Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light, 2000); Dwayne Trevor Donald, "Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage: Imagining Decolonization of Aboriginal-Canadian Relations in Educational Contexts," *First Nations Perspectives 2*, no. 1 (2009): 1–24; Vanessa Andreotti, Cash Ahenakew, and Garrick Cooper, "Equivocal Knowing and Elusive Realities Imagining Global Citizenship Otherwise," in Vanessa Andreotti and Lynn Mario T.M. de Souza, eds., *Postcolonial Perspectives on Global Citizenship Education* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Cash Ahenakew, Vanessa Andreotti, Garrick Cooper, and Hemi Hireme, "Beyond Epistemic Provincialism: De-provincializing Indigenous Resistance," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 10, no. 3 (2014): 216–231; Mika, "The Enowning of Thought and Whakapapa."
9. Cash Ahenakew et al., "Beyond epistemic provincialism."
10. Donald, "Forts, Curriculum, and Indigenous Métissage."
11. Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran, *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).
12. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
13. See Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The quest(ion) of Blackness toward the End of the World," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81–97 and Freda Motena, "Wykład prof. Freda Motena: Performans i "czarność." Vimeo video, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/100330139>.
14. Vanessa Andreotti, "Conflicting Epistemic Demands in Poststructuralist and Postcolonial Engagements with Questions of Complicity in Systemic Harm," *Educational Studies* 50, no. 4: 378–397.