Learning to Unlearn
Tlostanova, Madina V., Mignolo, Walter D.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Tlostanova, Madina V. and Walter D. Mignolo.
Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas.
The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24260.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24260

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=859239
BORDER THINKING and theorizing emerged from and as a response to the violence (frontiers) of imperial/territorial epistemology and the rhetoric of salvation that continues to be implemented on the assumption of the inferiority or devilish intentions of the other and, therefore, continues to justify oppression and exploitation as well as eradication of difference. Border thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority and, as such, is the necessary condition for decolonial projects. Recent immigration to the imperial sites of Europe and the U.S.—crossing the imperial and colonial differences—contributes to maintaining the conditions for border thinking that emerged from the very inception of modern imperial expansion. In this regard, critical border thinking displaces and subsumes Max Horkheimer’s “critical theory,” which was and still is grounded in the experience of European internal history ([1937] 1999). “Decolonial border thinking” instead is grounded in the experiences of the colonies and subaltern empires. Consequently, it provides the epistemology that was denied by imperial expansion. “Decolonial border thinking” also denies the epistemic privilege of the humanities and the social sciences—the privilege of an observer that makes the rest of the world an object of observation (from Orientalism to Area Studies). It also moves away from the postcolonial toward the decolonial, shifting to the geo- and body politics of knowledge.
Why do we need border thinking (border epistemology)? Where is it taking us? To the decolonial shift as a fracture of the epistemology of the zero point. Decolonial border thinking brings to the foreground different kinds of theoretical actors and principles of knowledge that displace European modernity (which articulated the very concept of theory in the social sciences and the humanities) and empower those who have been epistemically disempowered by the theo- and egopolitics of knowledge. The decolonial epistemic shift is no longer grounded in the Greek and Latin categories of thought that informed modern epistemology (since the Renaissance) in the six European imperial languages (Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese for the Renaissance; French, English, and German for the Enlightenment) but in the epistemic borders between European imperial categories and languages and categories that modern epistemology ruled out as epistemically nonsustainable (e.g., Mandarin, Japanese, Russian, Hindi, Urdu, Aymara, Nahuatl, Wolof, Arabic). The epistemology of the zero point is “managerial,” and it is today common to business, natural sciences, professional schools, and the social sciences. Border thinking is the epistemology of the future, without which another world will be impossible.

Epistemology is woven into language and, above all, into alphabetically written languages. And languages are not something human beings have but what human beings are. As such, languages are embedded in the body and in the memories (geohistorically located) of each person. A person formed in Aymara, Hindi, or Russian who has to learn the rules and principles of knowledge mainly inscribed in the three imperial languages of the second modernity (French, English, and German) would of necessity have to deal with a “gap”; while a person formed in German or English who learns the rules and principles of knowledge inscribed in German or English is not subject to such gap. But, there is more, since the situation is not just the one that can be accounted for in terms of the universal history of human beings and society. Knowledge and subjectivities have been and continue to be shaped by the colonial and imperial differences that structured the modern/colonial world.

Consider, on the one hand, knowledge in the modern and imperial European languages, and on the other hand, knowledge in Russian, Arabic, or Mandarin. The difference here is imperial: In the sphere of knowledge, scholars, diplomats, and intellectuals in China, Russia, and the Arabic countries have to know English. The reverse is optional, not necessary. However, these languages are not just different. In the modern/colonial unconscious, they belong to different epistemic ranks. “Modern” science, philosophy, and
the social sciences are not grounded in the Russian, Chinese, and Arabic languages. That of course does not mean that no thinking is going on or knowledge produced in Russian, Chinese, or Arabic. It means, on the contrary, that in the global distribution of intellectual and scientific labor, knowledge produced in English, French, or German does not need to take into account knowledge in Russian, Chinese, and Arabic. Furthermore, increasingly since the sixteenth century, knowledge in Russian, Chinese, and Arabic cannot avoid intellectual production in English, French, and German. Strictly speaking, societies in which Russian, Chinese, and Arabic are spoken were not colonized in the way the Americas and South Asia were. Thus, any languages beyond the six imperial European ones, and their grounding in Greek and Latin, have been disqualified as languages with worldwide epistemic import. And, of course, this impinges on subject formation: People who are not trusted in their thinking are doubted in their rationality and wounded in their dignity. Border thinking then emerges from the colonial and the imperial wound.

If we consider, instead, Hindi or Aymara, the epistemic difference with modern European languages and epistemology is colonial. In both cases, the colonality of knowledge and being goes hand in hand with modernity’s rhetoric of salvation. Today, the shaping of subjectivity, the colonality of being/knowledge are often described within the so-called globalization of culture, a phrase that in the rhetoric of modernity reproduces the logic of colonality of knowledge and being.

**Borders Are Not Only Geographical but Also Epistemic**

“Borders” are not only geographic but also political, subjective (e.g., cultural), and epistemic; and contrary to frontiers, the very concept of “border” implies the existence of people, languages, religions, and knowledge on both sides linked through relations established by the colonality of power (e.g., structured by the imperial and colonial differences). “Borders” in this precise sense, are not a natural outcome of a natural or divine historical processes in human history but created in the very constitution of the modern/colonial world. If we limit our observations to the geographic, epistemic, and subjective types of borders in the modern/colonial world, we see that they all have been created from the perspective of European imperial/colonial expansion.

“Border thinking” (or “border epistemology”) emerges primarily from the people’s antiimperial epistemic responses to the colonial difference—the difference that hegemonic discourse endowed to “other” people, classifying
them as inferior and at the same time asserting its geohistorical and body-social configurations as superior and the models to be followed. “These” people (we, Madina and Walter, included) refuse to be geographically caged, subjectively humiliated and denigrated, and epistemically disregarded. For this reason, the decolonial epistemic shift proposes to change the rules of the game—and not just the content—and the reason for which knowledge is produced: Decolonization, instead of working toward the accumulation of knowledge and imperial management, works toward the empowerment and liberation of different layers (racial, sexual, gender, class, linguistic, epistemetic, religious, etc.) from oppression and toward undermining the assumption on which imperial power is naturalized, enacted, and corrupted.

Second, border thinking could emerge also from the imperial difference, i.e., through the same mechanism as the colonial difference but applied to people in similar socioeconomic conditions to the ones who are in a dominant position. Western (Christian and secular) discourses about Indians and Blacks (that is, Africans transported to the Americas) founded the colonial difference and the modern matrix of racism. During the same period, the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries, Western Christian and secular discourse founded the imperial difference with the Ottoman Sultanate and the Russian Empires. Turks and Russians, in other words, were obviously not Indians and Blacks from Western hegemonic geo- and body classification of the world. However, it was clear for everybody in the West that, even if Turks and Russians were not Blacks or Indians, they were not European either. Starting at least from Kant and Hegel onward, the Russians are not considered quite white/European and therefore, not quite human. In Kant’s classification of the world in a decreasing order of meeting the requirements of the enlightened Reason, Russians held a very modest place, to put it mildly. In Anthropology from a Pragmatic View, he simply says that “since Russia has not yet developed definite characteristics from its natural potential; since Poland has no longer characteristics, and since the nationals of European Turkey never have had a character, nor will ever attain what is necessary for a definite national character, the description of these nations’ characters may properly be passed over here” (Kant [1798] 1996: 231). Hegel, reflecting on the universal history, was writing about the Slavs, who in his opinion were ahistorical people: “This entire body of peoples remains excluded from our consideration, because hitherto it has not appeared as an independent element in the series of phases that Reason has assumed in the World” (Hegel [1882] 1991: 350). However, “second class” empires also had to deal with colonies. The Russian/Soviet Empire, Japan between 1895 and 1945, and the Ottoman Sultanate, before its demise, are all Janus-faced empires: One eye
points toward Western capitalist and dominant empires; the other toward their own colonies (Tlostanova 2003).

Zero point epistemology manifests itself in the theo- and egopolitics of knowledge. Both Christian theology and secular philosophy and science are grounded in the Rationality of Ego rather than in the Wisdom of God. By so doing, the zero point epistemology posited itself not just as the right way of knowing but as the only way. Whatever did not fit the demands of theological and egological principles was relegated to the world of the barbarians, the not quite yet or those who maybe, some day will. Both, Christian theology and secular philosophy and Western science shaped Western imperial expansion throughout the last five centuries. Border thinking began a process of detachment from the magic effect of theological and egological imperialism. Border thinkers dwell in the difference (colonial and/or imperial), and dwelling in the borders, border thinkers look at, watch, ponder, examine, and study imperial thinkers. Imperial thinkers are not necessarily imperialists. Imperial thinkers think within theological and egological premises: They inhabit the house of zero point epistemology.

Thus, border thinkers ask first, what are the relations between geohistorical locations and epistemology, on the one hand; and between identity and epistemology, on the other? Border thinkers do not believe that Aristotle’s or Kant’s ideas and reasoning were detached from their bodies and their geohistories, where their senses were soaking. Consequently, decolonial intellectuals do not believe in the universality of statements made from any local history. And there is nothing but local history. The ideas of global or universal histories are just an imperial epistemic euphemism. Border thinkers quickly bring to the foreground Ibn-Sina, al-Gazhali, Ibn-Rushd, Guaman Poma, Ottobah Cugoano, Mahatma Gandhi, Nawal el Saadawi, and many others next to Aristotle and Kant. Border thinkers seat next to those in the “second row” (seen from the perspective of zero point epistemology) and watch and contemplate those sitting on a pedestal and looking down the valley, classifying the creatures who are in the valley and not on pedestals. The issues and questions deriving from them are never asked by theological and egological epistemologies. The array of possibilities for border thinking is indeed vast, but they all have one thing in common: How do people in the world deal with Western economic, political, and epistemic expansion if they do not want to assimilate or remain passive and if they/we choose to imagine a future that is their/our own invention and not the invention of the empires, hegemonic or subaltern? Someone born and raised in British India has little in common with someone born and raised in Spanish America; languages and religions are different, histories are incommensurable.
However, they have a common history: the imperial/colonial history of Western capitalist and Christian empires—Spain and England. From the imperial perspective—either of the dominant empires (England, U.S.) or the subaltern empires (Russia, China, the Ottoman Sultanate of the past)—border thinking is almost an impossibility (one would have to give up the epistemic privilege of Western modernity and admit that knowledge and understanding are generated beyond institutional norms and control), and from the colonial perspective, border thinking is straightforwardly a necessity. Dwelling and reflecting in the borders does not take you to comparative studies but to border thinking. Comparative studies presuppose that the knowing subject dwells in the zero epistemic point; places himself on the top of the hill, observing from above the movements in the two valleys, one to his right and the other to his left. The observer is in neither of the valleys but remains detached on the top of his hill.

The next question is whether border thinkers could dwell in the borders and emerge from the borders of subaltern empires or are their chances for emergence better in the colonies, and what kind of colonies at that—the (ex-)colonies of a subaltern empire (e.g., Uzbekistan, Ukraine) or a hegemonic empire (e.g., India during the British rule, Iraq under U.S. imperial moves, Bolivia and Ecuador in the history of the Spanish empire and the present of the U.S. domination in Latin America, or South Africa in its past and present). In the case of Russia, border thinkers have to deal with imperial borders—the borders between Russia and the West are not quite the same kind of borders as those between Mexico and the U.S. But, on the other hand, border thinkers also have to deal with borders between the Russian Federation and the ex-colonies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Uzbekistan is not exactly India; the Caucasus is not exactly the Andean region of South America. Border thinkers walk away from imperial abstract universals (e.g., critical theory, semiotics of culture or nomadology for everyone in the planet) that will account for all experiences and geohistorical violence and memories. They/we assume that border thinking is one way toward decolonial options and the promotion of pluriversality or, if you wish, the coexistence of universals. Global futures would be a world where universals coexist because, otherwise, there may easily be no future, global or regional. Pluriversality, and not universality, is the major claim made by border and decolonial thinkers, since, once again, there is no pluriversality from the perspective of theo- and epopolitics of knowledge. And without pluriversality and the decolonial coexistence of universals, the blinding impulses to domination and personal gluttony, prevail. Pluriversality is possible only from border thinking, that is, from shifting the geography of reason to geo-
and body politics of knowledge. Because, if pluriversality is coopted from the perspective of theo- and egological thinking (from the left or from the right), it will become an imperial abstract universal. This is precisely the logic of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is based on a pluriversal content controlled by a universal epistemology. Pluriversality predicated from the perspective of zero point epistemology (liberal, Christian, or Marxist) ceases to be such and becomes a mask, a content of imperial epistemic appropriation. Thus, learning to unlearn is essential and becomes a road to decolonial options.

Whereas imperial epistemology is based on theological and egological principles, as we stated already, the shift to geo- and body-political principles is indeed a decolonial move. Geo- and body politics are the “displaced inversion” of theo- and egopolitics of knowledge. It is an “inversion” because it is assumed that John Locke’s “secondary qualities” cannot be bracketed in the process of knowing and understanding. In a world order in which the imperial and colonial differences establish all hierarchies, from economy to knowledge, “secondary qualities” that matter are colonial local histories (geopolitics) subordinated to imperial local histories, on the one hand, and colonial subjectivities (Fanon’s “wretched of the earth”), on the other. Colonial subjectivities are the consequences of racialized bodies, the inferiority that imperial classification assigned to everybody that does not comply with the criteria of knowledge established by white, European, Christian, and secular men. “Displaced inversion” changes not only the content but fundamentally the terms of the conversation: the geo- and body-political perspectives delink from the imperial and totalitarian bent of theo- and egological principles. It is hardly enough to question the secularity of the social sciences from the perspective of theology, as John Milbank does. It is of the essence to move away from inversions internal to imperial epistemology and to shift the geography and the biography of reason.

These positions are hard to reconcile, which is clearly seen in any juxtaposition of Western and radical non-Western theorizing of borders. From the perspective of the imperial difference, the conditions and possibilities of border thinking and decolonization are not only different but also more difficult. If, in the history of borders marked by colonial differences, the opposition to the empire is clear and loud, in the history of borders marked by imperial differences, the assimilation (e.g., Peter the Great in Russia) and desire to become the West or competition (the Soviet Union confronting Western capitalist empires) takes precedence over decolonization (which would be a sort of deimperialization), as we see in the case of Russia today. China offers still another example of border thinking through the impe-
rial difference: adaptation without assimilation.\textsuperscript{35} Overall, the conditions for decolonization seem to be more promising in the colonies and ex-colonies or in empires that had been reduced to colonies (e.g., the Islamic Empire, which, by the nineteenth century, was already subdivided and found itself at the mercy of the new imperialism, England and France).

In the Eurasian space, sporadic instances of border thinking were practiced by people who experienced double and multiple marginalization and discrimination by several imperial (at least in their form) or quasi-imperial interventions at once. But, these histories largely remained undocumented. The views of these people (if ever they were put on paper) were erased by the empires and Western modernity, for instance, nineteenth-century Caucasus anticolonial movement activist Saferby Zan or late-nineteenth-century secular intellectual, journalist, and Tatar enlightener Ismail Bey Gasprinsky. In most cases, these border thinkers had to ultimately make a compromise with the dominant power(s) by manipulating in between them or choosing the assimilative position of Ariels, as it happened in the case of the Kazakh writer and intellectual Olzhas Suleimenov.

In his book \textit{Az I Ya} (Suleimenov 1975), he retold the Russian foundational epic \textit{Lay of Igor's Campaign} from a Turkic viewpoint and stressed a utopian possibility of creating a great secular Eurasian Slavic–Turkic confederation or polity based on common history and culture. It is a meditation created similarly to Anzaldúa's text, on the border of the generally accepted genres of the scholarly and fictional discourse. Suleimenov presents a cultural manifesto that incorporates in a discursively unstable way elements of historiography, poetry, etymological problem, and a traditional novel. The Soviet scholarly establishment was infuriated with this book and regarded it as an infringement on the grandeur of the great Russian national tradition, with its fake secondary Eurocentric myth. Suleimenov got out of the prescribed role of a secondary colonial other who, within the Soviet system, had to follow a simple rule: Soviet in its essence, ethnic-national in its form. What is more important, however, is that Suleimenov's positioning in the long run is not so similar to Anzaldúa's mestiza. The difference is that Suleimenov's subjectivity is traditional for the Russian/Soviet Empire's internal assimilated other. It is based on synthesizing and not on border impulse, in relation to the Russian and “Asian” nomadic traditions. In contrast with Anzaldúa, Suleimenov is not living in the border, constantly juggling traditions and identities. He is rather a subaltern brought up on the Russian dominant culture, viewed as the champion of (Soviet) modernity. By looking for similarities between the Russian and the nomadic traditions, he is trying to upscale the Nomadic one instead of denigrating the Russian or draw attention to its
colonialist nature. Thus, what is at work in case of Suleimenov is a forbidden
(for the late Soviet period) ethnic-cultural revivalist impulse of rewriting the
dominant tradition by means of looking for similarities between the imperial
and the subaltern cosmologies and origins. Thus, he is not negating or
rejecting the colonizer but rather trying to integrate into the sameness in
yet another way. This is possible in a limited number of imperial/colonial
configurations, mainly those that originated in the subaltern empires and
their colonies. We cannot imagine an African writer proving the common
roots of his native culture and the British one. But we can imagine a Circas-
sian slave in the Ottoman Sultanate looking for a kinship with the Turks.
Suleimenov seems to be a Soviet Ariel who suddenly made a Caliban-like
move and was punished for that by the empire. In post-Soviet period, when
the ethnic political pendulum, in Emil Pain’s words, goes from minority eth-
nic nationalism to the predominance of fundamentalist Russian chauvinism,
Suleimeinov’s utopian, but global and positive, model is equally unattractive
to both parties.

The world marked by imperial more than colonial difference lives on/
in the border, yet instead of border thinking, we mostly find blurred, in-
between, self-Orientalized models (the Ottoman Sultanate, Russia/USSR,
central and southeastern Europe). It is difficult to conceptualize such locales
and epistemic and existential configurations from the viewpoints of either
the West or the radical non-West, as well as from the viewpoint of the very
people who were colonized by Western thinking, infected with secondary
Eurocentrism and unable to analyze their own split subjectivity (their double
consciousness, as a necessary condition for border thinking), because it is
always easier to analyze binary polar structures than soft and blurred differ-
ence—the same but not quite, different but too similar. The geo- and body
politics of knowledge as well as border thinking implies the awareness of
the double consciousness, which is not the case in the world of imperial dif-
ference that longs to belong to modernity’s sameness so much that it often
erases it own difference.

Double consciousness, as conceptualized by W. E. B. Du Bois lies in the
very foundation of border thinking: One is not possible without the other.
Imperial consciousness is always territorial and monotopic; border think-
ing is always pluritopic and engendered by the violence of the colonial and
imperial differences. Internal imperial critique (be that of Bartolomé de las
casas or Karl Marx) is territorial and monotopic and assumes the “truth”
of abstract universals (peaceful Christianization by conversion, free mar-
ket, international revolution of the proletarians, etc.). Double consciousness
emerges from the experiences of being someone (Black, inscribed in the
memory and histories of the slave trade in the Atlantic economy) who was classified by the imperial-national gaze (European imperial frame of mind, U.S. emerging imperial nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century). Thus, the problem of identity and identity politics is a direct consequence of imperial knowledge making all the inhabitants of the New World Indians and Blacks and all of Asia the Yellow Race. Identity in politics is a step forward: It means to build transformative projects on the identity infringed on “us” by the imperial “them.” “Infringed on us” means that identity is not ontological but conceptual and that identities are imposed by imperial discourses rather than emerging from the soul of those who have been classified and identified. If border thinking is the unavoidable condition of imperial/colonial domination, critical border thinking is the imperial/colonial condition transformed into epistemic and political projects of decolonization. Hence, identity emerges in politics. For that reason, decolonial thinking is always already critical, it is border thinking and it is double consciousness. Hegel, Kant, and Marx, to name just three European luminaries, at different times denied internal others—be they Slavic people or Turks—a place in the universal history, in the march of modernity, in the unfolding of global proletarian revolution, and so forth. Their disincorporated epistemology and their belief in a universal parameter blinded them to the subjectivity of otherness and more so to internal others. It was beyond their scope to understand why a Russian feels himself as a cockroach in Europe, while a Turk buying a coat from a French store is in fact buying a European dream.

The reaction of internal others to this rejection has been that of an unconscious border, divided between the First and Third worlds, wanting to see itself as part of a center. The painful border splitness is being masked and at once reinforced, when in Istanbul they change the alphabet to Latin or make slightly crooked but recognizably Parisian boulevards, when in Moscow they speak only French or destroy their own economy in order to please the IMF. Today, the split configuration of internal others is expressed in the continuing hierarchy of othering: The world of imperial difference, on the one hand, plays the role of unwanted and threatening immigrant into the West; on the other hand, the West guards its own borders (including epistemic borders) against the unwanted immigration from the ex-Soviet republics and the ex–Third World. However, when border thinking does not emerge, the alternatives are competition, assimilation, or resistance without a vision toward the future.

For instance, when the European imperial/colonial model was replicated and transformed in subaltern empires or empires-colonies, like Russia or the Ottoman Sultanate, which became mirror reflections of each other, it led to
ideological and intellectual dependency on the West and the epistemic colonization by the West, which resulted in the phenomenon of two cultures—the culture of European-oriented imperial/national elite with secondary Eurocentric inferiority complexes and the impenetrable culture of people, that the elite is either ashamed of or attracted to, in the importing of the Western discourses of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, liberalism, socialism, modernization, progress, and the like (Tlostanova 2004a). The two empires shared the subaltern status in relation to the Western empires of modernity, but each had its own configuration of imperial subalternity—Russia was a quasi-Western subaltern empire that, in order to survive, had to put on different masks for different partners and the Ottoman Sultanate was a quasi-Islamic one that also had to have multiple faces and in a sense, in contrast with Russia, even practice tolerance as the principle of survival. But, in both cases, paradoxically, the hierarchy of otherness was built exclusively in accordance with Western European racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious norms, which deliberately put both the Ottoman Sultanate and the Russian Empires into the situation of empires—colonies, creating peculiar inferiority complexes and specific transitory, in-between and underconceptualized cultural, social, epistemic, and political forms.

The imperial and colonial epistemic differences create the conditions for border thinking but do not determine it. In the hierarchical structure of the modern/colonial world, we can identify the four main types of dependency relations:

1. The oppositional attitude consisting in total rejection of Western epistemology and subjectivity based on fundamentalist defense of languages, religions, knowledges, and the like.
2. The assimilating attitude, consisting in wanting to become like the superior other and, therefore, yielding to the imperial language, knowledge, and subjectivity at the high price of alienating oneself into the imperial other. This is the case of the trickster empire Turkey, making its own subaltern status work for its benefit, through transcultural and transreligious mediation of Western ideologies and establishing new alliances based not on abstract principles of democracy and freedom but on religious, linguistic, indigenously economic and cultural expansionism, and soft penetration, which today turns out to be more effective than many European and American strategies (Özbudun and Keyman 2002).
3. Competition within the capitalist rules of the game or adaptation without assimilation (e.g., China or modern defeated Russia, to some
extent, which is still grounding itself in the doomed imperial myths of
grandeur and dominance, finding solace in understanding the border
as an aggressive expansionistic “third way,” and reviving the dusted
ideology of Eurasianism).

4. Border thinking and critical border thinking, which consist in the
incorporation of Western contributions in different domains of life
and knowledge into an epistemic and political project that affirms the
difference, colonial or imperial, to which most of the population of the
world has been subjected throughout five hundred years of economic,
religious, epistemic imperial expansion and its consequences in the
formation of split subjectivities.

Dependency relations with the exteriority of Europe are established through
the imperial and colonial differences. But these dependency relations with
the colonies, revert back to its internal others like the Jews, the immigrants,
and the states, ex-Soviet colonies, now joining the European Union. Aimé
Césaire clearly saw, in the 1950s, that the colonial matrix of power set up
and implemented through the four hundred fifty years of colonization, were
implemented by the Nazi regime in Germany and by the Communist regime
in the Soviet Union ([1955] 2000). These are all different historical conditions
from where border positions could be developed as active decolonizing proj-
ects, both epistemic and political from the lived experiences (i.e., subjectiv-
ity) of diverse communities. The geo- and body politics of knowledge would
be of the essence to disengage from the epistemology of the zero point in
which the geo- and the body-political have been repressed. The epistemol-
ogy of the zero point that privileges political economy and political theory
continues to repress the geohistorical and body-graphic politics of knowl-
edge in which critical border thinking is founded. The interconnections
between geohistorical locations (in the modern/colonial order of things)
and epistemology, on the one hand, and body-racial and gender epistemic
configurations, on the other, sustain “the inverted displacement” we describe
here as geopolitics and body politics of knowledge. If, say, René Descartes or
Immanuel Kant suppressed (in their theo- and egopolitical epistemic foun-
dations) the geo- and body-political component of their thinking, Frantz
Fanon and Gloria Anzaldúa brought both (geo- and body politics) wide and
louid into the open.

Border thinking needs its own genealogy and its own history; a history
and genealogy that emerges in the very act of performing border thinking.
Without it, border thinking would remain either an appendix of modern
Western imperial epistemology and the variants of canonical history of
Western civilization told from the imperial perspective (from the Renaissance, to Hegel, to Marx) or an object of study for the social sciences (like the savage mind for earlier anthropologists). And decolonization runs the risk of being appropriated and immediately trivialized not only by the World Bank but also by the so-called progressive European intellectuals who prefer to see it as emerging from their own European history and out of their own epistemic universality. These champions of Eurocentered epistemic universality tend to “re-write” in their own terms the concepts, projects, and categories of thought that have emerged precisely to delink from both right and left Eurocentrism (Driscoll 2010). If border thinking is ever to emerge in the world of imperial difference today, it would have to happen in the colonial and ex-colonial locales of the subaltern empires, among the people who were multiply marginalized and denied their voice by Western modernity—directly and through subaltern imperial mediation. These are the Caucasus and Central Asia (in connection with Russia); the Kurds, Greeks, and Armenians (in connection with the Ottoman Sultanate); the Yugoslavian bundle of contradictions in the Balkans; and the like. But these voices will hardly be heard soon. These mute colonies of the subaltern empires are split in between the Western culture (now also directly accessible to them) and its bad subaltern empire copies, the ex mediators of civilization. Plus their own native ethnic traditions continue to play their part in the process of further disintegrating their already split selves, being shattered into even smaller pieces. That is why the manifestations of the “multitude” (in Georgia, the Ukraine, or Kirgizstan) have been so far geared more by a desire to assimilate to the West than to engage in imagining a possible future beyond the options offered by Communism and its aftermath and liberalism and is aftermath.

Thinking from the Borders

Borders could be “studied” from the perspective of territorial epistemology (e.g., Western social sciences; Horkheimer’s traditional theory) but the “problem” of the twenty-first century would be not so much to study the life and deeds of the borders but to think from the borders themselves and therefore to be the border, in Anzaldúa’s words. The main problem of the twenty-first century is not just crossing borders but dwelling in the borders. We, Madina and Walter, are border dwellers, and hence the argument unfolded here is not an analysis of observers practicing a zero-point epistemology but that of border dwellers engaging in border and decolonial thinking. That is, dwelling in the borders means rewriting geographic frontiers, imperial/colonial
subjectivities, and territorial epistemologies. Paraphrasing W. E. B. Du Bois, we can say that the problem of the twenty-first century would be—next to that of the color line announced by Du Bois—the problem of the “epistemic line” (Bogues 2003: 69–94). However, the epistemic line does not replace or displace the color line. The color and epistemic lines belong to different realms of reality, since epistemology is not supposed to have color, gender, or sexuality. In terms of social class, the problems are easier to deal with because it was assumed that epistemology belonged to a division of labor in which the “intellectual workers” do not belong to the same class as the “proletarians.” However, intellectual workers, even if they are not proletarians, do have color, gender, and sexuality. Thus, the “borders” between the color (and gender and sexuality) line and the epistemic line are precisely where the “problem” appears and the solutions are being played out. For, there is a shift at work at the moment when the epistemic line is interrogated from the perspective of the color (gender and sexuality) line. It is at this very moment that border thinking or border epistemology emerges: It emerges in the crack and it emerges as an epistemic shift. It is a shift from the theo- and ego- to the geo- and body politics of knowledge.

The question commonly asked is this: How do you engage (in) border thinking and how do you enact the decolonial shift? What is the method? Interestingly enough, the question is most often asked by predominantly white and North Atlantic scholars and intellectuals. It is impossible to imagine Du Bois asking that question, because he prompted it with his own thinking, dwelling in what he called “double consciousness.” The question is interesting because it plays like a boomerang and returns to the person who asked it. Why is he or she asking that question? Where is he or she dwelling, in a single consciousness? Why was it an Afro American like Du Bois and not a German like Habermas who came up with a concept such as double consciousness? Furthermore, double consciousness would not admit the thesis that promotes the “inclusion of the other” (Habermas 1998). Double consciousness and the inclusion of the other confront each other across the colonial difference. The question is not being asked because modern epistemology (theologically and egologically based) separated the geo- and corporal location of the thinker. The hubris of the zero point—by eliminating perspectives—prevents the possibility of asking, how can I at once inhabit the zero point and what the zero point negates? Asking that question, “feeling” that modern epistemology is totalitarian (that it negates all other alternatives to the zero-point) is the first step to border thinking. And, it is also a dwelling that is no longer the House of the Spirit—i.e., the dwelling of modern European philosophy and science.
To answer the previous question, let us look again at the Janus-faced empire of Russia/Soviet Union and think about how border thinking could emerge out of the imperial difference of Russia today dwelling in the memories of subaltern empires, on the one hand, and how could it emerge in the colonies or ex-colonies, on the other? How could border thinking and decolonization of knowledge and being (i.e., the decolonial shift) be thought out and enacted from the histories and perspectives of those locales? The blurred spaces of imperial difference once again link knowledge production and race (accepting as natural the idea that modern epistemology is and should be white). However, no matter how hard “the other” tries to imitate or adapt European or—today—American epistemological hegemony, for the West, the world of imperial difference continues to play the part of culture-producing and not knowledge-generating regions of the earth, never really changing their ahistorical status assigned by Hegel. This scenario is particularly clear in case of Russia and its imperial/colonial interdependence with its colonies in Asia and Eastern Europe. Russia did not have its own theology in the Western sense of the word; philosophy and science were shaped there following the Western model and borrowed from Europe in their already secularized variants, while later on there emerged a double alterity from the old Russia and from Europe that failed to fulfill its universalist promises. Epistemology, philosophy, and science were born in Russia at the point when European modernity had already managed to naturalize its dominance and erase all the inauspicious for itself, the histories and epistemic traditions (such as the Islamic one), while considerably altering and correcting others (like the Antiquity) to its benefit. Russia discovered epistemology as such at that very moment and has not ever since seriously questioned its basic Eurocentric principles, consequently classifying the rest of the world, including its own non-European colonies, according to the Western European racist colonial matrix of power.

The most promising case for border thinking in Eurasia is to be found in non-European (ex-) colonies of Russia that have managed to preserve their epistemic link with the indigenous cosmology and centers of thought, philosophy, and science. That is why the logical step of the Soviet Empire was to erase completely and effectively all the traces of this link: to deprive these people of their past, epistemology, and culture; to rewrite history in such a way that their antiquity would be negated; to ban the previous (Greek or Arabic) alphabetic systems and make them start anew with the Cyrillic. Border thinking, in other words, could not be acknowledged by the territorial epistemology of the state without loosing its imperial control of knowledge and subjectivity. It is also symptomatic that virtually all instances of border
thinking in Eurasia come in fictional or semi-fictional forms, especially in the post-Soviet period. That is, border thinking presupposes the transgression of genre and disciplinary boundaries. Here, border thinking creates border or transcultural aesthetics with specific narrative viewpoints, discourse, and optics (Orhan Pamuk in Turkey; Milorad Pavić in Serbia; Zorikto Dorzhiev, Afanasy Mamedov, or Vyacheslav Useinov in Russia and the ex-Soviet republics).

Let us explore a different local history. In North Africa, the Moroccan philosopher Mohammed Al-Jabri asked an interesting question: Muslim philosophers of the past as well as Christian philosophers of the Middle Age founded their philosophy on Aristotle’s *Physics* (1999). In that line of thought, Descartes built his own philosophy on Galilean physics that, in its turn, was built on Aristotle’s. What then happened during the time span between Ibn-Rushd (1128–98), who brought Muslim thought to its most rationalistic point, and René Descartes? Living in Spain, in Seville, and making remarkable contributions to philosophy, logic, medicine, music, and jurisprudence, he wrote his major philosophic work “Tuhafut al-Tuhafut” [The Incoherence of the Philosophers] in response to al-Ghazali (1058–1111), who was born and died in Tus, Iran, and had a profound influence on what would become known as European thought, at least until the beginning of modern philosophy and experimental science. So, then, why, since Descartes, has the epistemic line erased Muslim contributions to human thought?

In trying to understand how the Western Christians won the epistemic battle against the Muslim philosophy, let us remember, as an anchor before René Descartes, the name and works of Desiderio Erasmus, a Dutch humanist (1466 [Rotterdam]–1536 [England]) with a remarkable influence in Spain, during the kingdom of Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire (Bataillon [1950] 1965). Metaphorically, Erasmus was one of the main agents in pushing Ibn Rushd out of the memory of a reconstituting Christian Spain, shortly after the final defeat of the Moors in 1492. There is a straight line between Erasmus’s theology and Descartes’s secular philosophy; while there is a profound gap between Erasmus and Descartes, on the one hand, and Al-Ghazali and Ibn-Rushd, on the other. A historical and epistemic gap was converted into a mirage and translated into a natural and logical historical continuity. The mirage is that it appears as if “universal history and intellectual history” follow an ascending temporal line, and therefore, it is natural that René Descartes continued and took advantage of an accumulation of meaning that had been taking place in a genealogy that went from the Central-Asian philosopher and physician Ibn Sina (born in a village named Afshana near the ancient Central Asian cultural center of Bukhara (modern
Uzbekistan), to the Iranian al-Ghazali to the Spanish-Morrocan Ibn-Rushd. But that, as we all know, is not the way the history was told. Ibn-Rushd was eradicated from the Universal march of Human thought and Descartes, after Bacon, inscribed a genealogy of thought that was grounded in Galileo and in Aristotle; while Kant followed suit by replacing Galileo with Newton. To redress this history and contribute to a pluriversal world in which many worlds coexist is one of the tasks of the border thinking and the decolonial shift.

The conditions for border thinking illustrated in the three previous configurations and the potential to make the decolonial shift are certainly there. Yet, the dominance and hegemony of Western Christianity (in its diversity) and secular liberalism (in its diversity), managed to engender both assimilation and apartheid, which is illustrated by Muslim and other non-Western forms of fundamentalism today. During the existence of the Soviet Union and its aftermath, Communism, as an alternative to Christianity (including its Orthodox variant) within the modern/colonial world, enacted the same logic of coloniality of Western empires toward the Soviet colonies. But, on the other hand, in the domain of the imperial difference, the Soviet Union remained a second-class empire that implemented the same logic of Western coloniality but altered its content.

Border thinking and the decolonial shift allows to imagine the ways out of the confrontation between Western promotion of its global designs and the Russian/Soviet Empire and colonies, on the one hand, and Islamic/Ottoman legacies in the Middle East, on the other. It has yet to find a way in which “either-or” is at a deadlock, which seems to be maintained by the success of capitalism in wearing different masks (liberal, Islamic, etc.). In Russia, however, there are no efforts at creating any alternative mediating bordering models and the two dominant ones, in this respect, remain the word-for-word repetition of the Western discourses, rapidly going out of fashion today, and the return to the mixture of Russian and Soviet imperial ideology of a besieged camp. As a result we see today the full swing division of the ex-Russian “property” between the more powerful rivals, as we can witness in several minor revolutions going on in the ex-colonies of Soviet Union: Georgia, the Ukraine, Moldova, Kirgizia, Uzbekistan, and so on. What happens here is the redistribution of borders that are changing one master for another. In contrast with Japan, China, or the Islamic world, where the ancient and elaborate native epistemic, cultural, and religious systems did not allow the Western modernization to destroy this basis completely, in such unstable, in-between, and blurred spaces marked with incomplete or partial difference as Russia, central Europe, or the Ottoman Sultanate, the forceful insertion
of Western epistemology easily pushed their own problematic roots, which were not very deeply ingrained in the first place, completely out.

**Border Thinking at the Crossroad of Local Histories and Global Designs**

One of the common views about modernity and globalization (i.e., a later stage of modernity) is to conceive the first in contradistinction with alternative modernities and the second in contradistinction with the local. Local histories/alternative modernities are dependent and surrogate components of the triumphal march of Global history/modernity. The assumed reality in both cases is that globalization “moves” to the periphery, and it is in the peripheries where alternative modernities take place as well. Our three theses are an exercise in border thinking (or thinking from the borders) and they contest both the held view of the global/local and of modernity/alternative modernities.

Regarding the first, the distinction between global and local is based on a territorial, not a border, epistemology that assumes the global emanating from Western Europe and the U.S. to the rest of the world, where the local dwells. In that regard, globalization is seen as a set of processes that engender responses and reactions from those who defend the “authentic cultures” or political sovereignty threatened by global forces. Our theses assume, on the contrary, that local histories are everywhere, in the U.S. and the European Union as well as in Tanzania, Bolivia, China, or Mercosur. But, the question is that not every local history is in a position to devise and enact global designs; the majority of local histories on the planet have had to deal, in the past five hundred years, with an increasing spread of imperial global designs of all kinds: religious, political, economic, linguistic and epistemic, and cultural.

The coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being, i.e., the spread of global designs from local histories where they emerged to local histories to which they are alien, create the conditions for border thinking (instead of authenticity), for the decolonial epistemic shift aiming at the decolonization of knowledge and being. And, it is in the precise sense of the imperial/colonial conflicts between global designs that spread forms of knowledges and subjectivities from the local histories where they emerge to local histories to which they are alien, that the decolonial epistemic shift is geo- and body-politically oriented in confrontation with the theo-and egopolitics that has sustained the global imperial designs.
From this emerges our second conclusion, our response to the emergence of the idea of “alternative modernities” that are grounded in the territorial epistemology of modernity. In other words, the very idea of alternative modernities makes sense only from an epistemological Eurocentered perspective that looks at the world as if the epistemic gaze was independent of any geohistorical and body-graphic location. That is precisely the epistemology of the zero-point that, historically, has the name of theology and ecology. The government of Evo Morales is not claiming a colonial modernity but rather the decolonization of the state and the economy, altogether with decolonization of education (knowledge and being). From the perspective of border thinking and the decolonial shift, the idea of alternative modernities is, as we just said, already embedded in the Eurocentered idea of modernity. There is no modernity, in other words, beyond the macro-narratives, invented since the Renaissance by means of which Europe was invented as geohistorically occupying the center of space and the present in time. From a border epistemology, the idea of alternative modernities is unsound and what is needed instead are “alternatives to modernity,” i.e., alternatives to the naturalized idea that the past five hundred years of European history are the point of arrival (or the end of history) of the human race, and as Anthony Giddens has it, it will be modernity all the way down. If that is the case, then, it will be coloniality all the way down, because from a border epistemology perspective, coloniality is constitutive (and not derivative) of modernity.

“Demodernize” in this context would mean to reenact in Europe or in the U.S., decolonial projects that are emerging not as “colonial modernities” but as alternatives to modernity/coloniality, alternatives to the perpetuation of the colonial matrix of power. It is clear that decolonization and deimperialization do not mean the same for the U.S. and European Union citizens and for the immigrants to these countries or the citizens of Bolivia, Algeria, and India. In its turn, deimperialization does not indicate the same for the citizens of Germany and France and for those of Russia and China. There is no universal blueprint for either decolonialization or deimperialization. To decolonize means at the same time to demodernize. And demodernizing means delinking from modern Western epistemology, from the perspective of which the questions of “representation” and “totality” are being constantly asked. Demodernize does not mean going back in time as it is usually understood by the proponents of modernity’s vector models, who immediately react by refusing “to go back to the Dark Ages.” We mean something completely different here, and to understand what is demodernizing, one has to forget the generally accepted juxtaposition of modernity and tradition as its dark other. To do this would already mean a decolonial step.
Border thinking is indeed a way to move toward the decolonial shift; and the decolonial shift, in the last analysis, consists in “delinking” (“desprenderse” is the word employed by Anibal Quijano in 1992) of theo- and egological epistemic tyranny of the modern world and its epistemic and cultural (e.g., formation of subjectivities) consequences: the coloniality of knowledge and being. But to delink is not to abandon, to ignore. No one could abandon or ignore the deposit and sedimentation of imperial languages and categories of thought. Border thinking proposes how to deal with that imperial sedimentation while at the same time getting out of the spell and the enchantment of imperial modernity. The decolonial epistemic shift, grounded in border thinking, aims at processes of decolonizing knowledge and being. Decolonizing being and knowledge is a way toward the idea that “another world is possible” (and not of alternative modernities). That world, as the Zapatistas had it, will be “a world in which many worlds will coexist” and not a world in which there persists “globalization” or the imposition of global designs and “authenticity,” nor will fundamentalists responses to imperial global designs reproduce an unending war against the enemies of imperial abstract universals. A world in which many worlds coexist cannot be imagined and predicated on the basis of the “good abstract universal valid for all” but, instead, on pluriversality as a universal project. Critical border thinking and the decolonial shift are one road toward that possible future. Ours was an effort at theorizing in the borders and contributing to changing the geo-body politics of knowledge.

Today, the colonial matrix of power is dominated more than ever in the past five hundred years by the sphere of the economy. Once Christianity wanted to control the souls, now the spirit of economy controls the bodies and souls. The rhetorical promise is not “Paradise after death,” but “Happiness after Development.” There is nowhere to go from here if we remain within the logic of coloniality. And more and more people realize that it is high time that we reject the rhetoric of modernity and, subsequently, the logic of coloniality and attempt to shift the biography and geography of reason from its established Western place to the locales marked by the colonial difference. Here, the most instrumental concepts would be that of political society bursting the harmony of the liberal model apart and the new subject of the decolonial agency: the damnés. Modernity/coloniality inadvertently generates critical dimension from within and on its colonial side, it nourishes the seeds of the decolonial consciousness and the future development of demodern agency, while the very concept of the colonial matrix of power is the first basic critical step in decolonial thinking.