THE ENDURING CHALLENGES OF COLLECTIVE ONTO- (AND NEURO-) GENESIS

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TRANSCRIBED BY

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I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to the organizers of the LAPES 2017 conference in San Francisco who not only offered exceptional hospitality during my visit, but also transcribed my contribution to the conference, thereby giving me an invaluable opportunity to reflect on my own work. This text is a non-linear offshoot of these reflections where I invite readers to ponder and wonder about existence, reality, meaning, and practices of political and existential resistance through interwoven images, analyses, propositions, invitations and open-ended questions I scattered around the text. Although the text echoes my contribution in 2017, it is not (and could not be) the same as what was presented at the conference. However, there are things that happened in that event that are important to remember and to re-enact. For example, I started by acknowledging the land as a living entity and the ancestral custodians of the land, recognizing the violences committed against those who were and are Indigenous to the place. I then expressed gratitude for the people who had opened and held the space for the conference and acknowledged everyone present as extended family (parentes!). I mentioned that my presentation was not an attempt to "sell anything", but an invitation to re-imagine and experience education as collective onto-genesis: an expansion of horizons and constellations of knowledges, affect, lived experiences, sensibilities, temporalities, spatialities, rhythms, neuro-metabolic processes, and possibilities of (co)existence. I draw on Denise Ferreira da Silva's "with/out" - a movement of imaging oneself both within and gesturing outside the limits of modern-colonial imaginaries.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO L(O)SE(N) IN ORDER TO EXPERIENCE:

ETHICS WITH/OUT THE MODERN SUBJECT?

POLITICS WITH/OUT THE NATION STATE?

EDUCATION WITH/OUT THE EUROPEAN ENLIGHTENMENT?

BEING WITH/OUT SEPARABILITY?

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT WITHOUT DESPAIR?

My attempt to illustrate how this orientation could help us start to imagine and enliven the world differently involved several stories

related to "vivências" in a number of socially engaged and community-based pedagogical projects in the northeast of Brazil and in the district of Cusco in Peru. I reported in particular on the vivência (collective lived experiences) of the "Primeiro encontro internacional das juventudes" at the MST (movimento sem terra/landless workers movement) Assentamento Maceió.² The encontro was organized by the Universidade Federal do Ceará, Universidade Estadual do Ceará, Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira, and the University of British Columbia, in collaboration with NGOs from the Bom Jardim community in Fortaleza, the Quilombola Nazaré, the Assentamento Maceió, and parentes from the Indigenous communities of Tremembé and Pitaguary.

Through photographs and stories from the *vivências* (which will not be retold here), I invited the participants at the LAPES conference to envision a pedagogy that could engage (all of us as) learners in being intellectually, sensorially and affectively attentive and responsive to encountering complex worlds. The stories I told focused particularly on encountering communities that have a relationship with reality (including time, form, space) that is largely unintelligible to the modern-colonial onto-metaphysics that tends to reduce being to knowing and to establish relationships through normative categories of thought and desires for certainty, coherence and control. These communities relate to time, form and space primarily through rhythm and (non-normative) embodied principles of trust, consent and reciprocity that are not "conceptual" but lived, and that apply to both human and non-human beings.

The presentation highlighted the importance of paying attention to the dynamics of resistance as an act of hospicing worlds that are dying (within and outside of ourselves) and assisting with the births of new worlds that are potentially (but not necessarily) wiser – and that are inherently paradoxical (as seen from a modern-colonial ontology that seeks coherence and is averse to paradoxes). As an illustration, I drew

^{1 &}gt; Editor's note: "Primeiro encontro internacional das juventudes" translates roughly to "First international meeting of the youth".

^{2 &}gt; Editor's note: An "assentamento" is a settlement. The "Assentamento Maceió" is an MST settlement in the city of Maceió, Brazil.

attention to a picture of a bedroom in the assentamento Maceió of the Brazilian landless movement where, on one wall, there was a large graffiti of Che Guevara's face, the opposite wall featured a large graffiti of the face of Jesus and the back wall had the logo of Botafogo football club, with Jesus and Che linked together by the hammock where I slept. I also showed the picture of a bedroom where I slept while visiting a project at the Pincheq community in Peru where the walls displayed similar ideological complexities, with a picture of Jesus placed alongside the yin and yang symbol and a puma pelt representing 'Kay Pacha', the Quechua representation of the living world (both pictures were taken and are shown with permission). IIMAGES 1 AND 21

I used the images as starting points to talk about the enduring challenges of being present to the pluri-verses that exist within complex communities of struggle and the heterogeneities, contradictions, and social tensions that operate within these communities and also within ourselves.³

HOW CAN WE ENGAGE AND BE TAUGHT BY
DIFFERENT SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE AND BEING,
AND BY DIFFERENT STRUGGLES AND ATTEMPTS
TO CREATE ALTERNATIVES?
HOW CAN WE DO THIS WHILE REMAINING ACUTELY
AWARE OF THEIR GIFTS, LIMITATIONS, COMPLEXITIES,
AND CONTRADICTIONS, AS WELL AS OUR OWN
(MIS)INTERPRETATIONS, PROJECTIONS, AND APPROPRIATIONS?

Our socialization into a modern-colonial way of knowing and being through modern institutions does not prepare us for this task. Through a modern/colonial grammar, we are socialized to invest (both intellectually and affectively) in the coherence of a single story of progress, development and human evolution. When we realize this story is flawed

^{3 →} Vanessa Andreotti, Cash Ahenakew, and Garrick Cooper, "Equivocal Knowing and Elusive Realities: Imagining Global Citizenship Otherwise," In V. de Oliveira Andreotti, L. de Souza (Eds.), Postcolonial Perspectives on Global Citizenship Education (New York: Routledge, 2011): 221-238.



[IMAGE 1] A bedroom in Assentamento Maceió in Brazil



[IMAGE 2] A bedroom in Comunidad Pincheq in Peru

and violent, we tend to resist it from within the same grammar and want to change the content of the single story: to replace it with another story that provides us with a familiar sense of *ontological* security, hope, purpose, authority and legitimacy. We tend to look for a theory, a theorist, a leader, a movement or a specific community who can offer a promise and a package of codes, morals, labels, values and virtues that will appease our fears, restore our hope, and make things feel right again. In my presentation at the conference I used the images of the "house modernity built"⁴, "boxhead"⁵, and a set of three images evoking different layers of reality to illustrate the (epistemological) grammar and its grip on our sense of (ontological) security.

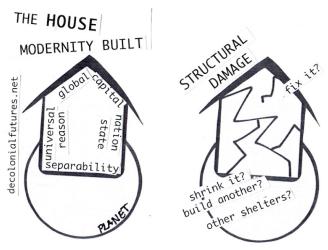
HOW HAS MODERNITY/COLONIALITY TRAPPED US
IN EXPERIENCES OF LANGUAGE, KNOWLEDGE, AGENCY,
AUTONOMY, IDENTITY, CRITICALITY, ART,
SEXUALITY, EARTH, TIME, SPACE, AND SELF...
THAT RESTRICT OUR HORIZONS AND WHAT
WE CONSIDER TO BE POSSIBLE / DESIRABLE / INTELLIGIBLE?

"The house modernity built" IIMAGE 31 has its foundations laid on an ontic concrete that separates humans from the land/earth and the rest of nature, constructing land as resource/property and creating hierarchies of value that rank entities of nature against each other according to their perceived utility. The carrying walls of this house are represented, on one side, by bricks of utility-maximizing individual rationalism cemented onto the pillars of Western humanism. On the other side, there is the wet wall of nation states offering (false) securities through

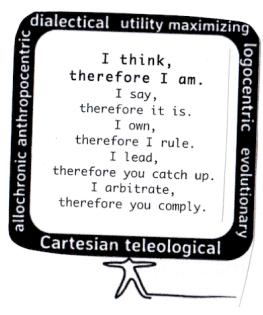
- 4 > Sharon Stein, Dallas Hunt, Rene Suša, and Vanessa Andreotti, "The educational challenge of unraveling the fantasies of ontological security," *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 11, no. 2 (2017): 69-79.
- 5 → Vanessa Andreotti, "Engaging the (geo)political economy of knowledge construction: Towards decoloniality and diversality in global citizenship education," Globalization, Society and Education Journal, 9, nos. 3-4 (2011): 381-397; Vanessa Andreotti, "Education, knowledge, and the righting of wrongs," Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives, 1, no. 1 (2012): 19-31; Vanessa Andreotti, "Re-imagining education as an un-coercive re-arrangement of desires," Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives, 5, no. 1 (2016): 79-88; Vanessa Andreotti, "Educação para a expansão de horizontes, saberes, vivências, afetos, sensibilidades e possibilidades de (co)existência," Sinergias: Diálogos educativos para a transformação social, 6 (2018): 61-72.

borders, rights, illusions of sovereignty, (national) homogeneity and promises of social mobility, cohesion and inclusion. The roof of this house is currently made of roof tiles of investment markets that make up the volatile context of financialized global capitalism (focused on shareholders' return of investment), layered over the beams of continuous growth and consumption as a measure of progress and civilization. The image on the side presents the house mouldy and cracking as it has already exceeded the carrying limits of the planet that it stands on. Through the image we readers are invited to imagine people inside the house discussing what to do, as they watch a crowd form at the door. Outside, many of those who have provided the materials, the labour and bore the costs of construction, maintenance and sewage management of the house, knock on the door expecting to be allowed in.

For the people within the house who are noticing the cracks, the first moment of realization of brokenness is one where distractions and denials kick in: people try to fix what is beyond repair by reinforcing the house's structure, specially its roof. The second moment is one where alternatives with guarantees are sought: people try to look for the same securities of the house in another (idealized and romanticized) architectural plan that can replace the one that is collapsing. Discussions in the broader field of education have established a circularity between these two moments (i.e. seeking hope in fixing the house of looking for already articulated alternatives). However, a possibility exists for a third moment of becoming disillusioned with this circularity and re-orienting our desires towards possibilities of existence outside the promises and parameters of intelligibility that the house has created. This is the moment when we may start to disinvest in the structures of being (not just of 'knowing') that are sustained by the promises and economies of the house. This disinvestment is not about a search for articulated solutions for the crises we face, or an exit from the house fuelled by aversion, but rather about the insight that for us to exist otherwise, we have to pay attention to the lessons being taught by the limits, failures and eventual collapse of the house itself (i.e. what I call "hospicing"). This we can only do through facing its death both



[IMAGE 3] The house modernity built



[IMAGE 4] Boxhead

internal and external to ourselves and opening up the possibility that the identification or dis-identification with the economies of the house will no longer define our existence or allocate our desires and affective and intellectual investments.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE COSTS OF

(MODERN/COLONIAL)

SEPARABILITY, DESACRALIZATION,

AND UNIVERSALIZATION?

HOW CAN DISILLUSIONMENT BE PRODUCTIVE?

The next image [IMAGE 4], "boxhead", illustrates how difficult it is to engage in the intellectual and affective process described above, in the discussion of "The House that Modernity Built". The image of a large square-headed being with a tiny (unfinished) outlined body represents the modern grammar of intelligibility imprinted on its frame through 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 modernity as we know it and create subjects who are versed in a modern-colonial habitus and amenable to the modern 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. Boxhead 'thinks, therefore he is': his relationship with the world is mediated by his cognitive repertoire of meanings, rather than by his senses.

Each referent brackets a way of creating meaning that buffers his sense of reality. Logocentrism compels him to believe that reality can be described in language in its totality. Universalism leads him to understand his interpretation of reality as objective and to project it as the only legitimate and valuable world view. Anthropocentric reasoning makes him see himself as separate from nature and having a mandate to manage, exploit and control it. Teleological thinking makes him want to plan for the engineering of a future that he can already imagine. Dialectical thinking makes him fall in love with a linear logic that is obsessed with consensus, coherence, solutions (guided by desires for

order and control through the over-coding of the world) and averse to paradoxes, complexities and contradictions (that are inherent in a plural, living and un-definable world). Allochronic and evolutionary thinking make him judge others according to criteria 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.

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 the image differently, seeing ourselves not as the box, but as the line that draws the picture, we may have two important insights. First, that the very desire for an outside of the box comes from within the box (dialectical aversion to Boxhead generally comes from and reinforces its traits). Second, that we are already free to draw different things, but perhaps not without learning the lessons that being locked in these choices for 500 years has made us repeat (or we will end up making the same mistakes thinking and declaring that we are doing something new). In this sense, we need to hold the Cartesian possibility and modernity itself not as pathologies to be demonized, but as interesting and extremely important experiments whose lessons will teach us to make different mistakes in the future. This shift of perception can calibrate our search for what will create the possibility of onto-genesis, understanding that the ways of knowing and being that have created the problems we face are unlikely to provide the solutions.

WHO ARE WE BEYOND OUR PERCEIVED IDENTITIES,
SELF-IMAGES AND EGO-LOGICAL DESIRES?
WE TEND TO LOOK FOR A POLITICS THAT
CAN ENGENDER A DIFFERENT KIND OF EXISTENCE,
BUT WHAT IF IT IS THE OTHER WAY AROUND?

Jacqui Alexander gestures in this direction in her analysis of a yearning for wholeness that gets codified within modernity/coloniality as a yearning for belonging through categories of representation. ⁶ She states that the material and psychic dismemberment and fragmentation created

6 > Jacqui Alexander, Pedagogies of crossing: Meditations on feminism, sexual politics, memory, and the sacred (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

by modernity/coloniality produce "a yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert, and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment." She suggests that strategies of membership in coalitions, like those of citizenship, community, family, political movement, nationalism and solidarity in identity or ideology, although important, have not addressed the source of this yearning. For Alexander, these coalitions have reproduced the very fragmentation and separation that she identifies as the root of the problem. She states that the source of this yearning is a "deep knowing that we are in fact interdependent – neither separate, nor autonomous." She explains:

As human beings we have a sacred connection to each other, and this is why enforced separations wreak havoc in our Souls. There is a great danger then, in living lives of segregation. Racial segregation. Segregation in politics. Segregated frameworks. Segregated and compartmentalised selves. What we have devised as an oppositional politics has been necessary, but it will never sustain us, for a while it may give us some temporary gains (which become more ephemeral the greater the threat, which is not a reason not to fight), it can never ultimately feed that deep place within us: that space of the erotic, that space of the Soul, that space of the Divine.

However, practices that are grounded on forces of interruption (i.e. the erotic, the aesthetic, the divine, the hilarious and the more than human) are essential, but insufficient to the task of honouring the lessons of Boxhead and the House. Without a (self)ethnography of (egological) boxheads within us these forces are usually instrumentalized and allocated towards the same problematic and often harmful compensatory desires (based on insecurities designed for the maintenance of modernity-coloniality).

- 7→ Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing, 281.
- 8→ Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing, 282.
- 9 → Ibid.

WHAT IF MODERNITY/COLONIALITY HAS HELD US EXISTENTIALLY HOSTAGE BY CREATING AND HARNESSING OUR FEARS, AND CONDITIONING OUR DESIRES?

Boxhead experiences time as (only) linear and the self as uni-dimensional. His life purpose is indexing and codifying reality into units of meaning with a view to engineering something that will control reality itself (and protect us from its inherent plurality and indeterminacy, and, ultimately, from pain and from death). In order to illustrate how this relationship with time, reality, and meaning is problematic, I used renditions of an image representing different layers of existence (see Image 5). At the bottom of the image, a dark layer evoked existence beyond space and time. This was followed by a layer where time and space weave and fold to create the possibility of form and of life. The third layer showed different temporalities of bio-physical existence, including human existence. The fourth layer showed the codifications of this existence in meaning through oral practices (blurred squares), and the last layer showed these codifications in alphabetic writing (clearly defined squares). The top layer of Image 5 thus represents different academic attempts to codify experience and existence in (often reductionist and totalizing) boxes, with each different box claiming (implicitly or explicitly) to capture the whole picture in a squared universalizing and totalizing whole. We can contrast this with the lessons of Image 3 (The House), which illustrated the need for a different kind of language and sensorial experience that, instead of indexing reality into meaning, had the potential to play, flow, and move (with/in) reality itself. [IMAGE 5]

This modern-colonial obsession with the indexing or codification of reality in boxed categories of representation/meaning works like a spell¹⁰ where making sense codifies all other senses until we can only sense what "makes sense", and we numb to sensorial experiences that cannot be codified. In this context, it is not surprising that the search for meaning (codifying experience) becomes the purpose of existence.

^{10 →} See David Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).



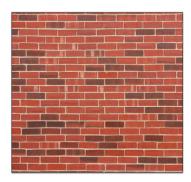
[IMAGE 5] Layered reality

In an economy of codifications, meaning is a currency that equates with "value": producing meaning in ways that "stick" confers people authority, credibility, status and legitimacy. When this happens, epistemic certainty becomes the ground for ontological security and being is easily reduced to knowing. Within this neuro-biological configuration, fears of worthlessness, indeterminacy, rejection, pointlessness and scarcity generate desires for mastery, coherence, consensus, superiority, accumulation and control. These desires are translated into perceived entitlements of representation (identity), universality, and stability. These perceived entitlements are embodied as cumulative "property" in intellectual, affective, relational and material economies, particularly (but not exclusively) within modernity/coloniality (and dialectical attempts to overcome it).

WHAT EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES CAN
OPEN UP POSSIBILITIES/WORLDS THAT ARE VIABLE,
BUT UNIMAGINABLE OR INARTICULABLE WITHIN
OUR CURRENT FRAMES OF REFERENCE?

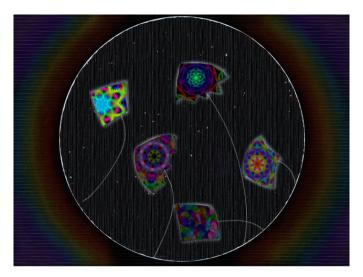
The onto-metaphysics that may ground this search for meaning as a basis for (or purpose of) being sees/senses reality as mostly knowable and language as something that can index reality into meaning-full knowledge. The images below IIMAGE 61 of a square (reality), bricks (meaning) and the motion of brick-layering (knowing) can be useful for visualizing this social-existential imaginary and the desire to get the square fully covered (e.g. knowing reality and/or ourselves fully). In contrast, the image of a hexagon (reality), covered in threads and textiles (meaning) and the motion of weaving (knowing) could be used to show different relationships between language and reality in a distinct onto-metaphysics (where language acquires a different texture and purpose). Many attempts to integrate Southern and Indigenous ways of knowing into modern/colonial institutions could be seen as

^{11 -&}gt; Vanessa Andreotti, Renato Pereira, and Eliana Edmundo, "O imaginário global dominante e algumas reflexões sobre os pré-requisitos para uma educação pós-abissal," Sinergias: Diálogos educativos para a transformação social, 5 (2017): 41-54.





[IMAGE 6] Brick layering and textile weaving



[IMAGE 7] Kite flying

attempts to turn textiles into bricks.12

The next image IIMAGE 71, of a circle (reality), kites (meaning), different measures of kite threads (different modes of temporality) and the motion of kite flying (knowing) takes us to yet a different possibility. In the kite-flying image, reality is unknowable in its absolute sense and experience is communicated through provisional stories that access different layers of being, in/through different temporalities. In this image, attunement (to the wind) is essential: we need to calibrate the pull of the thread against the direction and force of the wind and let the wind take the kite while keeping the tension and groundedness of the thread.

My invitation to observe, make, and fly kites with this text has two dimensions: (1) taking a step back to examine the discursive and affective regimes of visibility, intelligibility, and affectability that police the boundaries of (our) imagination (the 'analectic' dimension), and (2) exploring the terms that enable/disable the folding/unfolding of existing and new possibilities (the dimension of onto-genesis). In this sense, practicing attunement with the wind is about activating our capacity to experience that which exceeds what is intelligible, to imagine beyond categories of thought and affective entrapments, to acknowledge the inevitability of pain, death and (re)birth, and to "sit with" the indeterminacy and plurality of the world without the need for identification and/or dis-identification. This involves looking in the mirror and not turning away when facing both the beauty and ugliness of humanity in each of us, through a deep recognition of our entangled vulnerabilities: our strengths and precariousness, medicines and poisons, light and shadow, capacity for love and violence, and, crucially, our own arrogance, unspoken sense of superiority, insecurities, traumas and contradictions.¹⁴ This moves the questions we ask from a focus on representation, canonical

^{12 →} Cash Ahenakew, "Grafting Indigenous Ways of Knowing Onto Non-Indigenous Ways of Being," *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 9, no. 3 (2016): 323-340; Riyad Shahjahan, Gerardo Ramirez, and Vanessa Andreotti, "Attempting to Imagine the Unimaginable: A Decolonial Reading of Global University Rankings," *Comparative Education Review*, 61, no. 1 (2017): 51-73.

^{13 -&}gt; Carl Mika, Indigenous Education and the Metaphysics of Presence: A Worlded Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2017).

^{14 →} See Andreotti, Pereira & Edmundo, "O imaginário global dominante"; Vanessa Andreotti, et al., "Mobilising Different Conversations About Global Justice in Education: Toward Alternative Futures in Uncertain Times," Policy & Practice, 26 (2018): 9-41.

narratives and normativity, towards questions about what capacities have been exiled by the house of modernity.

HOW HAVE OUR DREAMS BEEN TAMED?

HOW CAN THEY BE DECOLONIZED?

HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN THEY HAVE BEEN?

I will conclude this article with a reflection based on what a small community has taught me over the past 20 years. This small Quechua community in Peru has ancestral practices that involve the intake of a powerful self-dissociative plant-based brew in their processes of knowledge production. This entheogenic practice (of re-membering the sacred) could be framed as both educational and philosophical in that context. The practice offers an opportunity for people to experience their location within a wider metabolism with a much longer temporality than humanity, and to encounter a nonhuman intelligence that, among other things, enables ancestors, animals, plants and the land itself to communicate, heal and dream through human embodiments. This practice is what sustains the possibility of a different onto-metaphysics that grounds their philosophy of *buen vivir* and *buen morir* in ways that are not intelligible to our modern political and existential grammar.

From this community's perspective, the modern-colonial delusions of separation and species-supremacy are equated with a metabolic sickness that effectively creates a neuro-biologial problem for the wider social-ecological body. In our conversations about this dis-ease, neuroscientific language has been used metaphorically to speculate on what could be the cause, the symptoms and the cure for this sickness. We have talked about the possibility that our attachments to modernity-coloniality are neuro-chemical. In this sense, one theory we have discussed is that modernity's insistence on separability creates a deficiency in our production of serotonin (which is the neurotransmitter associated with the visceral sensation of "nature relatedness"). This deficiency is then exploited by modernity, which offers us a substitute package of chemical sensations that can make us 'feel good' while and

as long as we participate in its economies (e.g. likes on Facebook giving us dopamine fixes).

Spivak talks about an education-to-come as an "uncoercive re-arrangement of desires"15 for an "ethical imperative towards the Other, before will"16. Seeing modernity as a neurochemical designer has given a different connotation to Spivak's words. It fundamentally changed the way I thought about education. This was the point where, in my own practice, I started to notice that our problem is less related to knowledge and has more to do with an addictive habit of being that limits our capacity to feel and want otherwise. On the one hand, I do not think that my Quechua teachers can offer conceptual answers to the philosophical questions that emerge in my socialization within modernity-coloniality. Providing normative or categorical answers is not their primary concern since they are not trying to dialectically negate modernity by offering a teleological pathway "forward", but to draw attention to the teachings of modernity's ontological limits and violences. On the hand, I wonder if their ancestral practices, kept against the odds of colonialism, may one day offer us the compass for accessing the capacities exiled by modernity, which could in turn open possibilities for neuroand onto-genesis.

WHAT EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES CAN
OVERRIDE OUR NEURO-BIOLOGICAL WIRINGS
AND ENGENDER A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY
FOR EVERYTHING, ALL THE TIME,
THAT IS NOT DEPENDENT ON CONVICTIONS
OR ALLOCATIONS OF WILL?

^{15 →} Gayatri Spivak, "Righting wrongs," The South Atlantic Quarterly, 103, nos. 2-3 (2004): 526.
16 → Spivak, "Righting wrongs," 528.