

**Book Review: Patel, Leigh. *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability*. Routledge, 2016, 120 pp.**

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*Leigh Patel's work on decolonizing educational spaces provides a glimpse into an important transcendental motif in decolonial studies: that decolonization must be visible in the structure of being as such. I argue in this book review that the specific ontological picture provided, what I call a "Decolonial Deleuzean" view, implies a one-and-many relationship characterizable by what one scholar has called a "vegetal" ontology, the human social coordinate system in the metaphor of "the plant that is not one." I argue further that this view fails to provide a believable picture of specifically human decolonial belonging in its ontological register by claiming that the plant metaphor provides an inappropriate one-and-many relationship to actual human spaces. "Decolonial Deleuzean" education therefore reintroduces the very exclusivity criterion it is designed to eliminate. I provide, finally, a psychoanalytical correction, one which is compatible with the decolonial project, but strictly speaking, not the Deleuzean one.*

**Preamble**

Leigh Patel must be credited with making two wise ontological moves at the outset of her work *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability*.<sup>1</sup> These correspond to dismissals of two analytical modalities particular to the "postmodern" orientation, deconstruction and post-structuralism. Both are bypassed on the same grounds, namely in favor of speaking in a more affirmative, reconstructive dialect within a broadly postmodern set of languages.<sup>2</sup>

Post-structuralism is not so much argued against as it is leap-frogged in favor of a (correctly) superior positionality in a Deleuzean framework which, as has been argued in other places, corrects the major malfunction of Foucauldian historicism. Via *reductio ad absurdum* – in its project of providing totalizing descriptive and mechanistic reductions of

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<sup>1</sup> Leigh Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability* (New York: Routledge, 2016), *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> In this, Patel shares the *modus operandi* of key figures of decolonial thought. See Sara de Jong, "Writing Rights: Suturing Spivak's Postcolonial and de Souza Santos' Decolonial Thought," *Postcolonial Studies* 25:1 (2022), p. 91.

the human body and activity, thus displacing the human from the center point of thought and being—it ultimately re-inscribes the human as “the measure of all things,”<sup>3</sup> the very component whose centrality it is designed to erase. Foucault, in other words, reintroduces a deeper, humanistic transcendental reference point at the very origin of thought and being—including transcendentalizing the thought of the transcendental itself. What is needed, as an adjustment, is a Deleuzian maneuver whereby being as such is diffused into local “assemblages”<sup>4</sup> which as a result also diffuse the (fictitious) hierarchical essentialisms common to human collective complexes into a fluidity which does not itself have the character of the human. Patel must be credited for declaring allegiance to this far more sophisticated line of thought.

And against deconstruction Patel offers a promising argument along much the same lines. Patel implies a battery of objections, ranging from deconstruction’s (inadvertent) entrenchment of hierarchies by parasitically playing on their “reversals,” to its reliance on what can be termed “metanarratives of violence” in its essentialization of not only binaries but also irreducible antagonisms between any given oppositional pairings.

What’s needed instead—as Patel points out so clearly—is a (reconstructive) privileging of presence over absence to help recover loss among subjugated populations in colonial historical contexts, constructing a place not only beyond this loss but also beyond any irreducible antagonisms between subaltern groups and their colonial visitors.<sup>5</sup>

### Reconstruction of Patel’s Position

Patel’s project promises this recovery. Patel’s overall position—at the level of a robust political ontology—can be compared to the famous uBuntu formula “I am because we are,”<sup>6</sup> to be understood here as a privileging of autochthonous repudiations of binary oppositionality and the affirmation of ontological “togetherness.” The basic thesis here is that we cannot isolate the individual as such because we cannot even individuate the collective itself as an itemizable unit at the level of conceptual analysis.<sup>7</sup>

The failure of itemizing the collective should be understood as a trademark of an ontology whereby roughly the following three semiotic criteria are exemplified. Given this failure, what follows is: (i) the instability and ungroundedness of the identity of singular, individual object, whose identity instead depends on an intuited abstraction from its organic place in a historical community; (ii) the possibility that even a well-defined formal system characterizing the totality of such (intuited) individuals might not be able to

<sup>3</sup> For this line of argumentation see A. Kiarina Kordela, *Being, Time, Bios: Capitalism and Ontology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), pp. xv, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> These points can be distilled from fragmentary comments in Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, pp. 9, 51, 89f. See also Christine Rogers Stanton, “Crossing Methodological Borders: Decolonizing Community-Based Participatory Research,” *Quantitative Inquiry* 20:5 (2014), p. 581, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1988), p. 296., who touch on these points as well.

<sup>6</sup> See Joel Mukwede, “Peace and Harmony through uBuntu in a Globalized World,” *Comparative Education for Global Citizenship, Peace and Shared Living through uBuntu*, edited by N’Dri Thérèse Assié-Lumumba, Michael Cross, Kanishka Bedi and Sakunthala Ekanayake (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2022) for more on this.

<sup>7</sup> Patel makes use of Karen Barad’s notion of “intra-actions” to make this point. See Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, pp. 11, 25f., 37.

guarantee the concrete identity of a single object within that system in a way which allows that individual to be coherently decontextualized from that system; and (iii) the possibility that all individuals have a “textuality” which is radically dependent on linguistic, historical, communal, traditional, and experiential contexts.<sup>8</sup>

Patel’s position should therefore be linked to this broader project connecting ontology, politics, and mathematical set theory to the specifically decolonial attempts to recover the place of the subaltern in the “flow” of the currents in the Deleuzean ocean. We can call it a “decolonial Deleuzean” project.<sup>9</sup>

### Sticking Point(s)

Before any substantive critique is set out in the following section, it would be appropriate to mention the points of learning for my own part which have resulted from engaging with Patel’s text. This learning centers around the way in which the decolonial project injects *time* into the static and oppositional complexes of deconstructivist and post-structuralist modes of re-presentation. Time, given the picture of political ontology provided in Patel’s project, must be seen no longer as a static, spatially itemized set of coordinate points, but as a common, communal offering, taking place prior to any set of relations between nodal points in a social space operating in time.

The implications for classroom assessment here are clear but overwhelming – and as such impractical – given the extent to which it suggests a restructuring of traditional educational spaces. If time is unable to be coherently itemized (deductively implying that students cannot be either), then assessments must be “grown,” rather than scheduled, in an organic context tailored to the student and responsive to exactly no pressure from external and institutional timelines. A suggestion of this sort, privileging as it does the organic relationship between student and teacher, student and student, and each as diffuse points within a transformed institutional setting, can be seen in Patel’s comments on her own students which emphasize these relational priorities rather than institutional prerequisites.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This point is made in Vladimir Tasić, *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 65. Interestingly, it is credited to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century mathematician Henri Poincaré. Caution should be given here, however, since this intuitionist position does not on its own answer to the objections against the objections to deconstruction and post-structuralism given in the previous section precisely because points (i)-(iii) *are themselves* the coordinates of the postmodern turn as such. For this, see Tasić, *Postmodern Thought*, pp. 93ff., 144. It does however serve as a common starting point between the properly decolonialist position of Patel and the already bypassed positions of Foucault and Derrida in favor of Deleuze. Concerning the Poincaré triplet, the notion of “ethnomathematics” in Ylva Jannok Nutti, “Decolonizing Indigenous Teaching: Renewing Actions through a Critical Utopian Action Research Framework.” *Action Research* 16:1 (2018), *passim* is helpfully expressed by its characterization.

<sup>9</sup> This is a misnomer, but it is the best I can get done in this short space. Spivak claims that Deleuze is right to seek out pre-representational and non-binary forms of theory but has the tendency to collapse the difference between representation as a *practice* and representation as a *signpost*. He thus ends up only dismantling the logic of semiotic representation but leaves unfinished—even unconceptualized—the project of dismantling various metastases of democratic political representationalism: “Since theory [for Deleuze] is also only ‘action,’ the theoretician [i.e. Deleuze] does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group.” See Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” p. 275. What I have in mind in the “decolonial Deleuze,” roughly the figure metonymizing the position of ontological monism *plus* a kind of radical emancipatory politics consistent with Spivak’s criticism—the kind of picture we get with Patel and others.

<sup>10</sup> Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, pp. 62ff.

Patel also applies this idea fruitfully to critiquing the standard notion of “social justice,” claiming that it fails to dilate the time dimension and in turn ends up standing in as “a proxy for heteropatriarchal racist logics of individuality”<sup>11</sup>—logics which are identified precisely by their use of static oppositional matrices already aptly dealt with in the first section above. This aspect of Patel’s work is refreshing and worth emulating, especially when measured against the post-structuralist and deconstructive failures: social justice as such is hijacked territory, repurposed to provide new rationale for the very oppressive social schema it was developed to combat.

## Critique

The decolonial Deleuzean project must be seen under a metaphorical rubric capable of conceptualizing an affirmative ontological and political project; it would not be enough, of course, to remain in the mode of simply pointing to an anticipated solution or giving a piecemeal or incomplete approach.<sup>12</sup> Michael Marder has offered one intriguing picture which I have chosen for two reasons, because it provides a positive project which brokers the relationship between an ontology capable of expressing the relation between the “one” and the “many” captured in the uBuntu catchphrase—the many “in” the one and vice versa; and because it provides an appropriate “organic” metaphor thematically continuous with Patel’s decolonial onto-politics of *place*.<sup>13</sup>

Marder’s picture is that of a “vegetal democracy” anchored in the metaphor of the plant seed, which negates the oppositionality between individual-and-community: “the plurality of the singular [can be found in] the seed that is already many, the plant that is already legion.”<sup>14</sup> The “seed” metaphor expresses the educational picture Patel offers, not only in its place-dimension as an organic capsule containing the non-oppositional teacher-student-institution fluid, but also in its time-dimension as the seed which “contains” the information-infused material controlling the entire range of its organic modalities unfolding in time. This sutures the plurality of its own temporal unfolding into every moment of its life cycle with its ability to spawn other “legion” individuals through the seeds which pass on to its environment.

We should see this metaphor in all its concrete dimensions in plant life, as a complex reticulum of network-connected roots<sup>15</sup> which, according to Marder, “exposes itself to darkness as well as to light, unconscious being as well as consciousness, which may, as a whole, turn out to be nothing but an excrescence, an outgrowth of... ‘plant-

<sup>11</sup> Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, p. 90. This is part of Patel’s insistence on dismantling settler logics (cf. Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, pp. 87f.)—an enterprise which also includes onto-logics.

<sup>12</sup> I think Patel stops short of providing such a metaphorical rubric (which is understandable given the scope of the project), especially in Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, pp. 87f.

<sup>13</sup> I take it that “place” plays on the dynamics of the many-in-one, since it can be seen as both singular (“here”) and repeatable. It is superior to “space,” which connotes a totalizing gridwork excluding plurality.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Marder, “Vegetal Democracy: The Plant that is not One,” *Politics of the One: Concepts of the One and the Many in Contemporary Thought*, edited by Artemy Magun (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> Deleuze calls this “the new harmony” in the climax of his piece on the “baroque,” by which he means a rooted reticulum of this very kind. See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley (London: Althone Press Ltd, 1993), p. 125.

thinking.”<sup>16</sup> Patel’s onto-logic should strike us as eminently open to such a reading, what I’ve called a “vegetal ontology” in the title.

Now Barbara Cassin has distinguished three modes of negation, which mirror the triad: negation as difference (let’s call it Negation1), negation as otherness (let’s call it Negation2), and negation as exception (let’s call it Negation3).<sup>17</sup> Of these three, only Negation3 has the special property of being coextensive with the exception (empty place) generated between two options, and as such has the ability to “stop the negative buck” without creating yet another negative pairing. The other two come without this clause and imply a potentially endlessly repeatable process of negation.

There usually is no difficulty applying one of these negations to a given positive item. The problem starts when we negate not an item but another oppositional pair. Which negation (1, 2, or 3) corresponds to this difference? The question here is subtle: if we are negating an opposition, of the negation not between the pairs but applied to the pairs as a set—what is the modality of *this* negation? Does it merely generate another, larger oppositional pairing? And if it does, does this not create an infinite regress of higher-order oppositions more appropriate to Negation1 and 2 than it is to Negation3? My intuition here is that Marder, and Patel by extension, are not able to erase the oppositions they promise with a Negation3—problematic because they claim to offer a picture which does just this, “satisfying” opposition as such without exceptions (in political terminology, without generating subalternity).

The vegetal ontology surely successfully completes a Negation2 of an oppositional pair like individual-collective or teacher-student: it subordinates the opposition against the background of another situation in which the opposition cannot possibly be generated, thereby (allegedly) reconciling the original opposition. Plants, because of their interconnected or intra-active roots, represent a situation which is beyond the one-many difference, and so capable of satisfying any antagonism whose pairs are mutually rooted in its networks. And it is this which the student-teacher opposition is meant to mirror by extension in Patel. But: of the negation used in negating the pairing, is it Negation2 or Negation3? I argue it is a Negation2 because it generates afresh an opposition between plant-thinking and human-thinking.

This is not the intention, of course; Marder has in mind to include the human world and its ontological and political nexus into the vegetal modality. But the human sphere is in danger of being disanalogous to the vegetal democracy because we are not dealing with a single but with a double layer of metaphor: where there is a single layer of metaphor employed in plant-thinking (figuratively connecting the seed “as individual” with the seed

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<sup>16</sup> Marder, “Vegetal Democracy,” p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> As seen in Barbara Cassin, *Jacques the Sophist: Lacan, Logos, and Psychoanalysis*, translated by Michael Syrotinski (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), pp. 95ff. Here are some model examples: Negation1 = “This candidate’s insistence that reducing funding in schools will lead to better education cannot be taken seriously.”

Negation2 = “Who cares what we will experience when we die; what did we experience before we were born?”

Negation3 = “So that’s the Senate. Now let’s turn now to see how things work in the House of Condoms.”

The last example is a personal anecdote. Negation1 is equal to non-sense (it could make sense but doesn’t); Negation2 is without-sense (it does not even meet the criteria for sense-making); and Negation3 is (in Cassin’s terms) ab-sense (“It makes present the hole in the sense/non-sense orb”). See Cassin, *Jacques the Sophist*, p. 99; the quote is harmlessly altered for clarity.

“as legion”), there is an additional layer employed in translating this picture for humanity (namely that humanity is “like a plant” and that plants are “like individual-legions”).

What is disanalogous here is the first of these layers, the direct connection between the human sphere and the reticulated, interconnected root-network of plants: for humanity, this is just a figure speech, whereas for plants, they are metaphorically “legion” but literally/actually co-constituted in such a root network. We can call to mind whichever cutting-edge studies of plant neural networks extended through roots interconnecting under the ground to form actual pathways of co-touching structures, able to transmit organic impulses via material pathways to other members of the fold. This is a matter of physical, literal concreteness for plants; but for humans this remains at the distance of a metaphor since we do not “touch” in such social-symbolic ways as appendages/extensions of our concrete bodies. We remain corporeally “individual.” Humans are then at best figuratively reticulated whereas plants are reticulated as a descriptive fact of the properties of their biomass.

Therefore, there is reason to think that vegetal ontology generates another oppositional pairing, this time between vegetation-and-humanity. This disrupts the ability to use the theory of vegetal ontology as a literal praxis for understanding and acting in the human spheres, precisely because it fails to provide a common matrix in which human oppositions find their symbolic reconciliation. Marder’s vegetal democracy, in short, is still related to the human world through Negation2. That is, vegetal democracy is the anchor point which is *other to* the oppositions generated by the majority of human activity; humans are not literally arrangeable plant-wise, and the metaphor meant to provide this link is still in a relation of negation to the literal circumstances of human interconnectivity.

The only remedy is to counter Marder’s move and apply not Negation2 but Negation3 to the mesh-like folding of the plant root system and its metaphoric relation to humanity: humans and vegetation share a deeper unity-in-difference because within each of them (the human, the vegetal) there reappears *the difference between human and vegetation* as the “utterly dark spot”<sup>18</sup> equally cohabiting both. This is equivalent to determining an “objective fiction,” an object with symbolic properties but without concrete existence which nevertheless causes real effects. This is the true territory of Negation3, namely that the vegetal network and the human body politic as such contain the dark spot corresponding to the pure difference between them: it is the a priori negative reappearing as an embodied object hidden at the center of all identity which constitutes the “one” in the plurality and vice versa. And if we act from this point of unity, from this dark spot, we can accommodate even what the plant network cannot. If we do not make this move, we do not successfully Negate3 all opposition. For its part vegetal ontology does not generate this one “in” the legion; it merely creates another legion and then smuggles an ersatz unification into the human situation in the guise of a seed. But humans have no seeds.

## Closure

We should bring this back to earth in a way relevant to the scope of Patel’s work. In accepting a “decolonial Deleuze,” as I’ve put it not far above, Patel remains trapped in

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<sup>18</sup> See Miran Božović, *An Utterly Dark Spot: Gaze and Body in Early Modern Philosophy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), pp. 116ff. Perhaps Marder would say he already does this; if he were to insist I would concede. My argument about the disanalogy of the human sphere would still hold however, and this would merely adjust the thesis to say that Marder’s account requires an absential compliment.

another opposition—undetected and unacknowledged in her work—between the decolonized root network of teacher-student-institution<sup>19</sup> and the generic package of needs appending to any particular student. A student can have any specific need, including needs—and this is where I think Patel’s work is most wanting—which may conflict with the co-participatory presuppositions constitutive of the networked reticulum itself. That is, even if the student has a need which is incompatible with educational practice emancipated from its commodification of time or from its status-first individualistic mentality (among other faults), this student still has expressed a need which either can or cannot be accommodated within the decolonial mode of praxis. And, unfortunately, Patel tells the story of a student who approaches her in a somewhat superficial and mechanical way emphasizing past accomplishment, institutional fit, and practical utility (for working together in a research project) rather than more genuinely placing intra-active emphasis on relationships, mutual interest, and organic out-growth. “We just met,” Patel replies,<sup>20</sup> presumably communicating a “no,” “not for me,” “not yet,” or, and she puts it, “let’s see how it goes.”<sup>21</sup> All students are accommodated, apparently, unless those students have a desire which conflicts with the co-participatory prerequisite.

But, to return to the uBuntu phrase, it is not the case that I cease to be simply because I fail to recognize that I am because we (first) are—I still “am,” perhaps I’m not very good at it (at be-ing), but my being is still supported even when in a relation of Negation2 to the decolonial root system—that is, strictly outside of and other to it. Yet it is not the job of the emancipated place to make this exclusionary call (this must be beyond even this opposition) but it is rather the maladroitness student who must be accountable for their fit—and if this means exclusion, let it be so; but by its own light it cannot be the decolonized reticulum which bakes in such a necessary estrangement. Which it arguably does in Patel’s response to the student—she cannot accommodate by design someone approaching research in that way.

This is the case I said a moment ago cannot be included in the vegetal ontology and as such stands as its exception. Without overstepping what is and is not my business, instead of “we’ll see how it goes”—a comment Patel mobilizes as a functional “no” to the student—that is, “not with that attitude,” or perhaps “yes, on the understanding that you will be completely changed by the time your request is granted,” which is still technically a no to the unchanged version of the student asking—perhaps us teachers, in cases where we encounter students who are not playing the appropriate co-participatory “game,” should instead opt to enforce the strictly objective fiction that is the impersonal (exclusionary, unfair, mechanical, “colonial”) ruleset. Yes, in principle I can work with you—we could say—and simply lie to the student. Apply for the research position, we could continue, we’ll check to see if you’ll fit, etc.—and if the student fails to go through the usual battery of “schmoozing” and networking necessary to establish strictly impersonal rules (which of course is also a lie/cover up, since the impersonal, independent, and unbiased rules both generate and presuppose a highly personal and biased set of co-dependencies)—then we should simply let the opportunity pass the student whom we’ve lied to by.

But it is the lie which must be clearly enunciated (the purely virtual set of impersonal rules) for the system to work (for these rules to be implicitly broken and to hire

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<sup>19</sup> The (transformed) institution here is the context in which student-teacher antagonisms can be dissolved, plant style.

<sup>20</sup> Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, p. 62.

<sup>21</sup> Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, p. 64.

on the student who knows the rules are “real fictions” and acts accordingly). In this regard, decolonial places are no different from any other, for they still need the lie—it is just a matter of what gets the right people in the right positions for the right projects, rightly participating. And Patel is clearly after this exact thing as well.

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