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16 Dialogues about Sheep, Black Holes, and Movement

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Spector Books

# ON SEPARATIONS

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IN CONVERSATION WITH Lorenzo Gerbi

It is difficult to conceive of our world without the classifications that make up its different parts. Before you are born, most people will be asking your parents: “Is it a boy or a girl?” unknowingly highlighting some of the most fundamental divisions of modern society, those of sex and gender. If you were to contest this widely accepted framework, you would probably be accused of indoctrination or privileging “ideology” over “science.” Being raised and educated in such compartmentalizing thinking, it is no wonder how easily we accept and normalize these separations in our everyday lives. Antonio García Gutiérrez refers to these separations as strategies in a “system of classification”: “in today’s world, the “classificatory” logic of ancient times continues to reproduce through conventional or tacit dichotomies, through oppositions that show only one side of the.”<sup>1</sup> Arturo Escobar further discusses these “dualisms,” stating that the problem is not the existence of the dichotomies “per se,” but how these have been used to create hierarchies and separations.<sup>2</sup> This logic of disjunction is at the basis of the

<sup>1</sup> Antonio García Gutiérrez, *En pedazos. El sentido de la desclasificación* (ACCI: Asociación Cultural y Científica Iberoamericana, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Arturo Escobar, “Notes on the Ontology of Design”, M. de la Cadena, M. Blaser (orgs.), Sawyer Seminar, *Indigenous Cosmopolitics: Dialogues about the Reconstitution of Worlds* (UCDavis, 2012).

metaphysics of reason,<sup>3</sup> which traces its origin to Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato's three laws of thought, which were then further reaffirmed by philosophers like Descartes (*res cogitans versus res extensa*, mind versus body, etc.). Especially two of those three laws—the law of identity (A=A, each thing is identical with itself) and non-contradiction (A≠non-A, contradictory propositions cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time)—contributed to erasing an ambivalent (or polyvalent) approach to reality and reducing it to a bivalent one, a dichotomic and reductionist logic that structures reality in oppositions.

The present text is an extension, a written testimony, of a conversation we have been having throughout the last months, a conversation about separations. The separations we present are not exhaustive, nor do they have a particular hierarchy or structure of categorization; they are simply cutting lines we found on the path of our conversation and, by walking on/through/across them, we might have contributed to diffusing them to some extent. Some separations are clustered together—with no particular pattern or rationale—and further discussed; others are just listed at the end of the text. Like Nada in John Carpenter's *They Live*,<sup>4</sup> we decided to put on the glasses that would allow us to see these separations more clearly, and through this text we want to invite you, dear reader, to do the same.

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Umberto Galimberti, *// corpo* (Milan: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1987).  
4 John Carpenter, *They Live* (Alive Films, 1988).

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau refers to “strategies” as actions enacted by the powerful as a way to further consolidate their positions; in contrast,

he suggests that “tactics” belong to the weak, as ruses attempting to challenge and subvert relations of power.<sup>5</sup> In proposing this framing, he created a dichotomy that separated the thinkers, who would reflect on the world from a distance (strategists), from the doers, who would engage with the world on a street-level (tacticians). This division—which can also be associated with one between theory and practice—is a cornerstone of the compartmentalized approach in modern thought, and it limits us to occupy either one of the two positions. However, Maria Lugonés suggested the role of the “street-walker theorist,” someone who would disrupt this dichotomy by being able to both “reflect on” and “engage with” the world; who can assume a strategic position and have an overview of the operating space, and also a tactical role to intervene directly in this same space.<sup>6</sup> This separation is also associated with certain spaces or contexts: academia is the space for theory (or research) and the “outside world” is the field for practice. Whereas in academia non-research-based practice is frowned upon, across different fields of practice academics are seen as pretentious people standing on their ivory towers. This dichotomy (which, in all fairness, is relatively less evident in the creative fields) is

<sup>5</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages = Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003).

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highlighted from both sides of the supposed division and reinforces the compartmentalized quality of modern thought. How can we allow for an overflow and more active articulation between the two sides of the—so-called—dichotomy? “Researching in the field” and “practicing in the academy” might be the first step to begin collapsing this separation which only benefits the powers that be.

MODERN – PRE-MODERN  
KNOWLEDGE /  
OBJECTIVE – SUBJECTIVE  
KNOWLEDGE /  
UNIVERSAL – LOCAL KNOWLEDGE /  
REDUCTIONISM – HOLISM /  
SIMPLIFICATION – COMPLEXITY

In the foreword to Morin’s book *On Complexity*, Alfonso Montuori introduces a list of oppositions that compare modern knowledge—structured through the “scientific method”—to pre-modern knowledge:<sup>7</sup> objective knowledge of objects in the exterior world, rather than subjective

knowledge of interior moods, opinions, experiences, and so on; quantification, and therefore “objective” data that could be measured as opposed to qualitative data that is “subjective” and cannot be measured; reductionism, or a focus on parts rather than wholes (holism); determinism—or finding laws of cause and effect that determine events as opposed to chance events that cannot be predicted by laws (contingency); certainty, rather than uncertainty; absolute, rather than “relative” knowledge; universal knowledge (applicable anywhere and everywhere) rather than particular, local knowledge (applicable only to certain specific settings); one right way of looking at a situation, rather than a multiplicity of perspectives, and the search for that one right way;

either/or thinking, borrowed from Aristotle, which rejects any form of ambiguity or paradox.

From the Enlightenment on, pre-modern knowledge was labeled as primitive, because of its spiritual component and connection with religious ideology, in the battle for intellectual freedom against authoritarianism and superstition fought by science. "Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century science indeed was an instrument of liberation and enlightenment. It does not follow that science is bound to remain such an instrument. There is nothing inherent in science or in any other ideology that makes it essentially liberating. Ideologies can deteriorate and become stupid religions."<sup>8</sup> This deterioration is evident in how scientific facts are taught at school from a very young age in a stultifying and acritical manner. Science is exempt from criticism, becoming "as oppressive as the ideologies it once had to fight."<sup>9</sup> It has found the truth in the scientific method and now follows it, losing its role as an instrument of change and liberation.

The last consideration is nevertheless not a conservative scepticism towards science—and the undeniable advances it brought to society—but instead is a critique of its attitude, which can imply the exclusion of other voices and the undermining of different ways of grasping the reality around us. How can we question the modern organization (and formation) of knowledge and its derived methodological truths and assumptions while opening up to pre-Enlightenment knowledge? Could the opposite variables from Montuori's list above, as well as the separations mentioned in this text, help us think about "dis-organizing knowledge" and

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Paul Feyerabend and John Preston, *Knowledge, Science and Relativism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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Ibid.

apprehending the complexity of reality? This process of dis-organizing passes by dismantling the structures in which the current knowledge operates; through the selection of meaningful data, by separating, unifying, centralizing and arranging into hierarchies, all these operations are driven by logical principles of disjunction, reduction, and abstraction that guide our perception of the world, without us being conscious of them. According to Morin, these principles form the “paradigm of simplification,” first theorized by Descartes by separating “the thinking subject and the thing being thought of.” This simplification fragmented the complex fabric of reality by repressing disorder, ambiguity, and uncertainty, leading to the belief that the resulting ordered reality produced was reality itself.

FICTION – REALITY /  
T E - F A L S E  
R U

In the published transcripts of his Berkeley Literature Classes, Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar recounts an anecdote of when, as a child, he lent a novel by Jules Verne to a friend; a few days later, his friend returned him the book and said: “I can’t read it, it’s pure fantasy.”<sup>10</sup> Beyond the fact that he could not conceive of this as a reason “not” to read a book, Cortázar realized that his relation to fantasy—or fiction—was not the same as it is for many other people; “the fantastic for me wasn’t what it was for other people; for me it was one aspect of reality, which under certain circumstances could manifest itself, but it wasn’t some kind of outrage within an established reality.”<sup>11</sup> Just think for a moment on the expression “the real world,” so often

10 Julio Cortázar, Álvarez Carles Garriga, Katherine Silver, *Literature Class: Berkeley, 1980* (New York: New Directions, 2017).

11 Ibid.

used and abused in learning spaces to refer to contexts of work, and assuming there is a fantasy—or fictional—world in contraposition. But beyond the (false) dichotomy, the great ditch dug between fiction and reality, what we find problematic is the way in which fiction is treated in a derogatory way, similar to Cortázar’s childhood friend: why do we see it as something that has nothing to do with life? Why do we associate fiction with falsehood and reality with truth? Speculative design makes use of narratives that might be labeled as “fictional,” but they might say as much—if not more—about our daily life as a wooden chair, a cold beer or an old tree—all of which are undeniably perceived as “real.” This is because “fiction” is made of the same matter as “reality”: conventions that are, at a certain moment and place, widely accepted by a large social group. From media to religion and from entertainment to literature, we are “storytellers” par excellence, and we should never underestimate the extent to which these stories we tell shape our world(s).

HUMANS – NATURE /  
ECONOMY – ECOLOGY /  
CULTURE – NATURE

Nature is a word that part of humanity invented to differentiate itself from an other, self-defining by opposition. As if humans were not part of nature, by naming it, we turn this other into an object, something we can use to our advantage. This way of looking at nature is embedded in our culture, it is a meme that originated together with the Western world. One of the first institutional definitions of nature is the one depicted in the Bible: nature as a garden, something we can harvest from, at our disposal to satisfy all our needs. It might seem a distant metaphor, but it is a solid foundation of the problematic capitalist relationship we hold with the planet we inhabit. The same attitude is at the base of the separation between economy and ecology: our environmental

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household (*oikos* in Greek) has just been partially studied, understood and felt through ecology (*logos*, learning about), but most of all has been managed (*nemein*) through the economy (*oikonomia*), a cultural construct that imposed an artificial logic of value exchange in which humans are the main beneficiaries, regardless of all the non-human agents involved. What if ecology had informed an economy that looked at nature as a model, a closed system that grows, flourishes and decays, where flows of matter, lives, and energy feed each other and balance each other out simultaneously?

THINKING – FEELING /  
OBSERVER – OBSERVED /  
CIVILIZED – SAVAGE (BARBARIAN) /  
HUMANS – NATURE

Orlando Fals-Borda was a Colombian sociologist working with indigenous, afro-Colombian, and peasant communities of the

Caribbean coastal region in the 1960s. Confronted by the lack of appropriate frameworks in the social sciences to conduct research in such contexts, he developed Participatory Action-Research (PAR), a research approach with communities that had explicitly political and transformative intentions.<sup>12</sup> Representing a contraposition to the rationalistic tradition of modern science, he presented himself as a *sentipensante*, a neologism combining the words *sentimiento* (feeling) and *pensamiento* (thought). In collapsing this dichotomy, he was making a point for ways of conducting research that do not create hierarchies and separations between the rational and the emotional. This could be evidenced in one of his most famous publications, *Historia Doble de la Costa* (*Double History of the Coast*), a book with a dual narrative, each of which is represented in

12 Orlando Fals Borda, "Investigating Reality in Order to Transform It: The Colombian Experience", *Dialectical Anthropology* 4, n. 1, (1979).

one side of the book's spreads; left pages had the “academic voice” representing rationality—even if carrying a certain level of sarcasm towards the scientific tradition—and the right pages were written in a more “personal voice,” which represented the emotions and affects. But PAR had a much more profound political project, one which challenged yet another dichotomy imposed by research in the social sciences: that between “the observer”—the researcher, who would also be historically associated with rationality and seen as the “civilized”—and “the observed”—the communities being studied, who could be associated with the emotions and seen as savages. By including participants in different phases of the research process, they were giving agency to those who were not allowed to have a say on how knowledge was constructed or what counted as valid knowledge. Furthermore, the research process was explicitly transformative, which meant that it did not (only) aim at better understandings of the participants, their contexts and communities, but strove to transform their immediate realities for the better.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, working in a territory rich in rivers—with their subsequent basins and wetlands—of the Colombian Caribbean coastal region, Fals-Borda appropriated the image of the *hombre hicotea* (or “turtle man”), an anthropomorphic figure that collapsed the division between “humans” and “nature” and suggests new ecological relations.<sup>14</sup>

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Ibid.

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Douglas McRae, “El Hombre Hicotea y La Ecología de Los Paisajes Acuáticos En Resistencia En El San Jorge”, *Tabula Rasa*, n. 23, (2015).

In his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, French philosopher Jacques Rancière defines the teacher as an explicator: she/he is introduced to the life of a child,

who learned everything by his/her intelligence until that moment, including something very complex like the mother tongue.<sup>15</sup> Rancière's vision starts with the equalizing premise that all humans can understand what other humans did and understood. He defines explication as the myth of pedagogy, which divides intelligence into two: an inferior intelligence (the one of the young child) and a superior one, powered by reason and method, which allows the teacher to transmit her/his knowledge. The inferior intelligence is strongly activated by the will, the sense of urgency, but also by the constraints of the situation: in other words, one can learn by oneself when one is motivated (by need or obligations/limitations). The mastery of the teacher, according to Rancière, should consist in leaving his intelligence out of the picture in order to allow students' intelligence to grapple with that of the studied material.<sup>16</sup> From this consideration, Rancière derives his notion of the "emancipatory master," who has the capability of forcing students to use their (inferior) intelligence to deal directly with the material without his explication. Since, according to Rancière's vision, explanation is stultifying and not needed, he theorized the notion of the ignorant teacher as somebody who is teaching by asking questions about what he/she doesn't know.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, also plays with the separation between teacher and students. He offers a model of education where this equality between teacher and students finds its dimension in a pedagogical situation created around a shared issue/urgency.<sup>18</sup> The latter offers, as mentioned above, the needed intrinsic motivation to activate inferior intelligence. He defined this model as problem-posing education, opposite to the banking model of education. In the latter, there's no intention to make students aware and critical of the oppressor, so knowledge is transferred passively and passively received by the students-containers; the teacher creates the discipline, the students are disciplined by him/her. This kind of teacher can be identified as Rancière's stultifying master, the explicator. In problem-posing education, the educator is the student and the student is the educator: the educator is a sort of middleman, an ignorant schoolmaster, a kind of facilitator/organizer that shares the same interests as the students.

#### OTHER SEPARATIONS

OBSERVED – OBSERVER / COLOURED – WHITE / ACTION – REFLECTION / TIME – SPACE / US – THEM / I – WE / LIVING – NON-LIVING / RIGHT – WRONG / EXPERTS – NON-EXPERTS / TALKING – LISTENING / OPPRESSOR – OPPRESSED / DOING – BEING / KNOWING – ACTING / WEST – THE REST / NORTH – SOUTH / PRACTICE – RESEARCH / MAN – WOMAN / HUMAN – NON-HUMAN / SUBJECT – OBJECT / PART – WHOLE / SPECIFIC – GENERAL

<sup>18</sup> *Paulo Freire et al., Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

## OUTRO: IN (LOOSE) PIECES

In discussing these separations, are we making the boundaries of each category more clear or more fussy? Are we drawing a line where before some people did not see one? Or are we erasing the dividing lines we find on our way? As Antonio García Gutierrez<sup>19</sup> says, any strategy of “declassification” will have to pass before by means of “classification;” so before blurring the lines, we have to make them as visible as possible. The paradox remains unsolved: we have still presented a series of separations, of perceived oppositions we encounter in our everyday lives, while calling for a less compartmentalized vision of knowledge and society. However, each set discussed in the text could also be seen as a “loose piece” of a larger picture; no, not “parts” of a “whole”—which is another dichotomy—but pieces that make sense in and of themselves, and that can be articulated between them in different ways. García Gutierrez describes these as “pieces” (*pedazos*)—a rough translation from the *tojolabal* (Mayan language spoken in Chiapas) *xet'an* —, which help us build knowledges (plural used deliberately) beyond dichotomies and separations<sup>20</sup> or, as Escobar would say, beyond the “hierarchical classification of differences” imposed by coloniality.<sup>21</sup>

Now, dear reader, we invite you to put on the glasses we used, so as to better see the separations: what do you see? What did we miss? Complete the list, reflect on and discuss them, so as to be able to break them into “pieces” and de-compartimentalize (y)our experience of everyday life.

19 Ibid., García Gutiérrez.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., Escobar.

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is a designer, curator and educator based in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. He is the co-director of Baltan Laboratories, a cultural "indisciplinary" lab focusing on societal issues through a relational approach, creating spaces to rehearse living otherwise. In his practice, he proposes a rupture in the broad discourse around inter-, trans-, and multi-disciplinarity by adopting an "indisciplinary" approach that relies on temporarily removing disciplines to help develop a better collaboration attitude between them. He is a co-author of the publication *HumaniTies and Artificial Intelligence* (European Commission, 2022) and Editor-in-Chief of *Fictional Journal*. His project *Raise Your Voice* is part of the exhibition *Italy: A New Collective Landscape* at ADI Design Museum (Milan, 2023).