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### Derrida à l'œuvre: Deconstruction at large, Introduction

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## **Derrida à l'œuvre: Deconstruction at large**

### **Introduction**

Deconstruction at large is an invitation for a community of method that visualizes and contemplates the at large by drawing on Derrida's *œuvre* not as a monument to be maintained and revered but as the affirmation of a promise, the promise of the political, of democracy to come, of taking the (im)possible place of the last witness. To inherit from Derrida's *œuvre* is a double act of avowing and disavowing, of closely engaging and transgressing, of following and departing from Derrida's thought. The texts, contexts and events that the articles of this special issue engage, open the path to the contingencies, reciprocities and exchanges of a deconstructive critical practice that dares to imagine and theoretically engender a world *otherwise*, a world in relation. The contributors to this special issue respond, each in their own unique way and from different historical and cultural contexts to the call of deconstruction at large. Several of them engage with some of the ways in which Abdelkebir Khatibi identifies decolonization and deconstruction as constitutive of a double critique that "consists in opposing to the Western episteme its unthought-of outside, while radicalizing the margin" (38). Others emphasize what Khatibi underscores when he observes that this double critique seeks to transgress "institutional thoughts" by taking flight into the "thoughts of the impossible" (35), namely, into the "other-thought," which "speaks in tongues, listening to every word—from wherever it comes" (38). Taken together, these articles share a commitment to attempting to lend an ear to—or even performing—a deconstruction mindful of its promise to attend to the other and to what is still awaiting to be said.

In "Taking Black British Literature to the Deconstruction Table," Joan Anim-Addo proposes that the deconstructive and decolonial flight into the yet

unthought that *speaks in tongues* be attempted at the deconstructive table in the name of what Derrida's critique of white metaphysics and its politics of sovereignty has yet to directly reckon with, namely, the blatant omission of contemporary black literary and philosophical thought in Europe. What happens when we bring to the deconstruction table literary and theoretical texts from the Caribbean and from Black British studies, two fields that have yet to receive their recognition in the UK let alone in other places of the world, even though they have for a long time now deconstructed white metaphysics and coloniality? Taking cue from her own colonial education, Anim-Addo demonstrates the long effects of colonial textbooks on the political and social imaginary of the members of the Black British diaspora in the UK and Europe long after the end of official colonization. To countervail the persistence of the images of the lazy colonized subject, unwilling to partake in the white civilizing mission, Anim-Addo advocates for a radical pedagogical and critical practice that carnivalizes the process of theorizing and creates an intercultural dialogue between literary and theoretical texts across and beyond the western philosophical and literary canons. Bringing her own black libretto *Imoinda* to the deconstruction table is a gesture that conjures the at large. To force the history of the concept of Man to tremble at its limits, we need texts that deconstruct this history and rewrite it into the history of the human. The black libretto gives voice to the history of Imoinda, the silenced black princess in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, and dramatizes her act of survivance as the double act of resistance against her dehumanization and perseverance. *Imoinda* invites its readers to attend to the enslaved African women's struggles to create a feminist community that draws on its African heritage to reinvent the concept of the human and a humanity at large beyond the dehumanizing and racist discourses of their colonial masters.

Affiliating Caribbean and African literary and philosophical traditions with Derrida's thought, opens the path for a deconstruction at large that delinks the concept of the human from the history of Man. It allows us to rethink the human as a relational and intercultural concept against and beyond an anthropocentric taxonomy of species that have differentiated human and animal to foreground the dominance of Man. In "Derrida and the Limit of the Human/Nonhuman Other in African Indigenous Beliefs," Georgia Mandelou relates indigenous African thought to Derrida's rigorous attention to the animal other as the limit where the bestializing of the non-western human and the invention of the animal as the radical other to the sovereign Man meet in the wake of the consolidation of race thinking and racist practices. Derrida's

deconstruction of these taxonomic borders between human and animal, and human and less than human other, gives rise to a limitrophy, in other words, an insistence not on the limits that separate and divide humans from animals, and one human from another, but on the boundaries that connect and correlate them. Thus, it gives rise to forms and modalities of being-with other animals and other humans despite and beyond the racializing and dividing taxonomies. Mandelou invites into a relation of reciprocity and exchange the indigenous art and storytelling practices of the San peoples from South Africa that feed off the convergence of animal and human ontologies and Derrida's deconstruction of the limits that have separated the animal and the human. In her article, deconstruction at large takes the form of an intercultural dialogue between, on the one hand, the African beliefs of *ubuntu* and *ukama*, as expressed in indigenous art and storytelling, and, on the other hand, Derrida's philosophical questioning of an anthropocentric understanding of being. Mandelou's article spells out some of the ways in which this understanding was consolidated by a sovereign politics that has disavowed and undermined the possibility of imagining modalities of living together well. Rather than reading African concepts through Derrida or Derrida's thought through African concepts, Mandelou proposes a reconstellation of limitrophy as a shared poetics that foregrounds being-with as always in transition and in becoming.

Questioning the life/death dichotomy and examining the forms and modalities of nonlife that inform and affect life raise the question of being and living in the midst of a catastrophic Anthropocene. Angela Patricia Pineda's "Desiring Life: Colonial violence and the Life/Nonlife boundary: Thinking with Derrida" identifies the task of deconstruction at large with a predominantly existential and political question: the question of what life is. The life/nonlife boundary is a highly debatable one across the histories of the Plantationocene and the Anthropocene. Racism and the overextraction of resources that deplete the native and indigenous populations of their material and symbolic resources overlap in this boundary. The latter becomes the object of political, economic and philosophical debates about which lands, forms of life, species and populations should be protected and saved; they can also be turned into redundancies and collateral damage for the free range of neoliberal capitalism and the survival of the economies of the privileged twenty percent of the world. Drawing on Wynter and Povinelli and relating them to Derrida's deconstruction of the limit between life and nonlife, Pineda examines the affinities between the three thinkers to foreground ways of thinking the planetary entanglement of life and nonlife elements as the source of



anticolonial and non-anthropocentric ontologies that dismantle and transgress the grammar of coloniality/modernity.

Considering the repeated disasters of the human in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the life/nonlife boundary is indissolubly related with the question of testimony and the act of bearing witness to the disappearance and destruction of the world. Testimony is an act of responsibility towards the vulnerable, the oppressed and the ones facing death, if only it is performed against the politics of violence and an architecture of reason that tries to justify not only the disaster as collateral damage but also the dead as the necessary casualties for the protection of the civilized against the brutes. In “Dreaming the Impossible: On the Gift of Witnessing,” Anthie Georgiadi traces Derrida’s analyses of the gift, the dream and the secret to weave the elective affinities between them. She demonstrates how they are integral elements of the act of witnessing that is timely and urgent in the present. For Georgiadi, witnessing is a gift that breaks through the circle of economy and even takes the risk of being invalidated by the politics that it disrupts; the dream is a narrative that symptomatically reveals the real in reality and thrusts its readers into the discomfort zone of the unintelligible; and the secret is the right of the vulnerable that the democratic polis, shelter and refuge try to protect against their dehumanization. All three are integral parts of the timely need for a politics of response-ability before the disaster, before the dead and the drowning. Deconstructing the concepts of gift, dream and secret to delink them from the “infectious logic of exchange” that threatens to transform any act of responsibility “into yet another transactional encounter,” is foundational to the ethical stance of response-ability for the at large of the world, where certain communities and certain peoples are the sacrificial rams of “despicable violence.”

Visiting the site of the disaster at a distance complicates the responsible act of theoretical witnessing. To visit the at large manifested in the ruins of shipwrecks requires the deconstructive practice of fabricating the archive of the disaster. This can be done through the vestiges and trails of various images, documents and accounts that are not integrated into a centralized narrative but are rather assembled and narrated in a manner that conjures their intertextual affinities with other histories and disasters. In “Testifying for the Pylos Disaster: Who/What ‘bears witness for the witness?’” Elpida Ziavra proposes that the critical fabulation of the Adriana shipwreck that took place off the coast of Pylos in 2023, should be thought in the light of the proper names of two other disasters against humanity, namely that of Hiroshima and Auschwitz. The reconstellation of these proper names of the different histories of

violence against human beings fends off the threat of monumentalizing the events and thus of forgetting them. Ziavra draws on Derrida's seminars on *Testimony* and his return to Paul Celan's line, "No one/bears witness/ for the witness" in "Ashglory." She thus contemplates the possibility of a theoretical act of witnessing that emanates from different fragments, elliptical statements, and photographs to take the position of the "no one," of the nonperson who is also the embodiment of all the silences, unspoken accounts, and stories that have not been told and yet exist. These are stories that cannot be passed on, and yet have taken place and keep haunting us.

As many of the previous texts remind us, the at large is manifested in the multiplicity of stories and histories that are conjured by painful experiences and lived disasters. The archive of texts that are assembled in the place of the last witness whose account is lost, omitted or not heard, is haunted by the specters of the other histories that each new disaster summons from the past to face us in the present. This speaks to what we have attempted to show in our two-columned reflection on deconstruction at large: one of its tasks is to defend the texts that offer shelter to these specters, that house their histories, their ellipses and silencing by the institutions, including the University. Deconstruction at large invites us to engage with certain blind spots of thinking (with) Derrida, while also attending to potentialities that risk remaining unacknowledged by what one might call immanent readings of his work. The final three contributions to this special issue pursue this task in distinct yet complementary ways; the three texts approach the notion of the "at large" through the prism of travel, both ongoing and yet to-come. The first re-replaces Derrida in the context of Latin American decoloniality. The second resituates part of the early Derridean corpus within a transatlantic horizon, thereby bringing to light a series of significant resonances with contemporary art and art criticism. The third, drawing on heterogeneous experiences of reading, seeks to reflect on the implications of what it might mean to defend the text—or even to defend ourselves with the aid of texts—in a world that is at once plural, fragile, and difficult.

In "Traces of Derrida in Latin America," Mabel Moraña responds to the call for thinking the poetics and politics of deconstruction at large by aligning Derrida's deconstruction of the economy of meaning that draws on fixed binary categories with the decolonial practice of delinking philosophical concepts from the Eurocentric system of thought. For Moraña, a deconstructive and decolonial analysis can address the situational and relational spaces of Latin America, where the questions of citizen-subject, rights and epistemology

are troubled by the knowledges and ontologies of various conflicting cultures and their paradigms. Derrida's critique of Man as the sovereign being, democracy as an autoimmune system, and the call for a philosophy and politics that is attentive to the future-present rather than fixed on monumentalizing the past, are some of the trajectories that Moraña maps as points of convergence between decolonization and deconstruction, trajectories that she points to in her text and further develops in her book, *Jacques Derrida, el ex-céntrico*.

Stamatina Dimakopoulou's "To Be Repeatable Is by the Same Token to Be Alterable": A Return to the Moment of *Différance*," invites us to return to the first phase of Derrida's philosophical production and publications, far too often—and very unjustly—considered as merely preparing the political readings of his last two decades. If *différance* remains, in various ways, omnipresent in Derrida's work until the end, Dimakopoulou chooses to understand "the 'at large' through unreciprocated impulses that also allow us to revisit the consistently demarcated intellectual contexts of Derrida's early work." More specifically, she places emphasis on emblematic journals such as *Tel Quel* (with which Derrida briefly crossed paths) and its Maoist inclinations, and, on the other side of the Atlantic, *October*. Dimakopoulou thus reminds us that, from the very beginning of deconstruction, art and art criticism were receptive to concepts suggested by Derrida; her contextual reading of the "parergon" not only attests to this but also sheds light on another "at large" of deconstruction, namely its intertwining with aesthetics and the aesthetic field. When Dimakopoulou turns to Artaud—whom Derrida examines extensively in "La parole soufflée"—as well as to the experimental writing of *Glas*, she foregrounds a unique practice of montage (an atypical philosophy entangled with various modes of avant-garde creation) and, at the same time and perhaps more importantly, moves beyond the very idea of originality across different fields. In fact, by evoking several cases (the most compelling here being that of Sylvère Lotringer writing on Ferdinand de Saussure), she situates deconstruction within the "at large" of a broader concern with writing that both accompanied and nourished what is usually referred to as "French Theory." In an interesting—and perhaps involuntary—resonance with the exhibition *Echo Delay Reverb: American Art/Francophone Thought*, currently on view (October 22, 2025–February 15, 2026) at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Dimakopoulou (re)installs deconstruction on the side of literary and artistic creation.

R. Radhakrishnan takes up a somehow similar thread in response to Salman Rushdie's being attacked and stabbed multiple times on stage in August 2022, nearly three decades after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*.

Radhakrishnan contemplates the ethics and politics involved in the call to defend the text, all texts and their right to narrate. Defending the text as a general mandate against the violence unleashed against their authors, a violence that is immoral, condemnable, and completely unjustifiable, raises questions about which texts have gained the right to be defended, which texts are forgotten and disavowed, which languages exert more power over the right to narrate, and which do not because of their less hegemonic or peripheral roles in the global market. There are certain texts and contexts that may be indefensible because of their nationalistic and extremist politics and overtones, Radhkarishnan argues. What should be defended however is the multiplicity of the world that texts summon and represent in the complexity and opacity of their contexts, even if such contexts reveal other worlds that are not part of the dominant view of the world as constructed by settler colonialism. What diverse texts can offer is a path to a relational poetics and politics that represent the world in its variations and modalities that cannot be integrated into one whole and do not make themselves available for dialectic relations that foresee a happy and harmonious closure that ultimately reinforces the dominant view of one world. Radhkarishnan's text alludes to the fact that deconstruction at large is a way of assuming a responsibility: deconstruction cannot afford to be nonchalant about "the contingency as well as the circumstantiality of history in the name of the ideality of philosophical wisdom," he avers. Instead, it is time that deconstruction reckoned with the at large of a world where the task is "to practice relationality without recourse with the understanding that the World itself is nothing but Perspective, and not a transcendent horizon that accommodates perspectival play and provides such play with its teleological/historicist sanction."

We embrace Radhakrisnan's words and respond to his call with the special issue at hand.

### Work Cited

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