Contents

List of Maps and Tables vii
Acknowledgements viii
Notes on Contributors ix

1 Eurocentrism, Political Struggles and the Entrenched
   Will-to-Ignorance: An Introduction
   Silvia Rodríguez Maeso and Marta Araújo 1

2 Epistemic Racism/Sexism, Westernized Universities and the
   Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long Sixteenth Century
   Ramón Grosfoguel 23

3 Violence and Coloniality in Latin America: An Alternative
   Reading of Subalternization, Racialization and Visceralità
   Arturo Arias 47

4 Social Races and Decolonial Struggles in France
   Sadri Khiari 65

5 Towards a Critique of Eurocentrism: Remarks on
   Wittgenstein, Philosophy and Racism
   S. Sayyid 80

6 How Post-colonial and Decolonial Theories are Received
   in Europe and the Idea of Europe
   Montserrat Galcerán Huguet 93

7 Africanist Scholarship, Eurocentrism and the Politics of
   Knowledge
   Branwen Gruffydd Jones 114

8 Scientific Colonialism: The Eurocentric Approach to
   Colonialism
   Sandew Hira 136

9 Secrets, Lies, Silences and Invisibilities: Unveiling the
   Participation of Africans on the Mozambique Front
   during World War I
   Maria Paula Meneses and Margarida Gomes 154
Conceptual Clarity, Please! On the Uses and Abuses of the Concepts of ‘Slave’ and ‘Trade’ in the Study of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slavery

Kwame Nimako

Making the Teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture Compulsory: Tensions and Contradictions for Anti-racist Education in Brazil

Nilma Lino Gomes

Race and Racism in Mexican History Textbooks: A Silent Presence

María Dolores Ballesteros Páez

Social Mobilization and the Public History of Slavery in the United States

Stephen Small

Index
1

Eurocentrism, Political Struggles and the Entrenched Will-to-Ignorance: An Introduction

Silvia Rodríguez Maeso and Marta Araújo

This edited collection is an interdisciplinary production, bringing the work of international scholars and political activists within a wide range of approaches and disciplines, including History, Anthropology, Political Sociology, Philosophy, International Relations, Political Economy and the Sociology of Education. It addresses key contemporary issues in the critique of Eurocentrism and racism, in relation to debates on the production, sedimentation and circulation of scientific knowledge, historical narratives and memories in Europe and the Americas. It takes as its crucial starting point the concept of Eurocentrism as grounded in the project of Modernity and, in particular, its specific configuration of colonialism, history and Being which has led to the emergence of race as a key organizing principle in the modern world order from the geopolitical perspective of the creation of Europe/Europeanness, the expression of its hegemony and its contestation.

We consider Eurocentrism as a paradigm for interpreting a (past, present and future) reality that uncritically establishes the idea of European and Western historical progress/achievement and its political and ethical superiority, based on scientific rationality and the construction of the rule of law. Accordingly, we propose that it is essential to debate Eurocentrism within the formation of Western knowledge and its claims for universal validity, since this provides a certain historical mapping of the world that unambiguously establishes which events and processes are scientifically relevant and how they are interpreted – simultaneously discovering and covering them.
In order to understand the consequences of Eurocentrism in terms of the way in which certain patterns of interpretation are produced and contested, it is vital to question the fundamental basis of the centuries-old project of Modernity: coloniality/racism. More specifically, following authors such as Enrique Dussel (2000, 2008), Sylvia Wynter (1995, 2003) and Aníbal Quijano (2000, 2007), we consider that Eurocentrism is rooted in the Eurocentred colonization of America in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and in two interrelated processes: the production of onto-colonial taxonomies based on the ‘Western Idea of Man’ (Wynter, 2003; Maldonado-Torres, 2004) in the distribution of (ir-)rationality/(sub-)humanity (that is, race), and the gradual establishment of capitalist accumulation as a global standard for labour and market control. Hence, Eurocentrism is not mere ethnocentrism, that is, the perspective from which each people tells their history, nor is racism simply the product of ‘exacerbated ethnocentrism’ (Cox, 1970 [1948]), pp. 477–9).

This conceptual framework calls for a critical analysis of modern and contemporary configurations of race and racism. In other words, ‘modernity is racial’ (Hesse, 2007, p. 643), and the specific relationships between power and knowledge that forge the contemporary contours of Eurocentrism can tell us about the histories of race and racism and their enduring legacies. This is paramount to unsettling a key epistemological and political effect of the ways in which we interpret Modernity and the idea of a European specificity (implicitly read as superiority), that is, the drawing of an ‘abyssal line’ (Santos, 2007) in the production of history. Boaventura de Sousa Santos has characterized modern thinking as ‘abyssal thinking’, consisting of ‘a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones’ (ibid., p. 45). He thus argues that whereas ‘Western modernity’ can be defined ‘as a socio-political paradigm founded on the tension between social regulation and social emancipation’, the visible distinction is simultaneously founded on an invisible one that establishes a division between metropolitan societies and colonial territories. While the ‘regulation/emancipation’ dichotomy is applied to the metropolitan side of the line, the colonial territories are ruled by the ‘appropriation/violence’ dichotomy. Following this analysis, Santos considers ‘modern scientific knowledge and modern law’ as ‘the most accomplished and clear manifestation of abyssal thinking’ (ibid., p. 46). Accordingly, the spheres of science and law produce, and are sustained by, a ‘radical denial’ that ‘eliminates whatever realities are on the other side of the line’; although the colonial side of the line is the condition of possibility for the
emergence of modern law and science, this is rendered invisible (ibid., p. 48). Erasing this history – what Maldonado-Torres (2004, p. 30) has described as the ‘forgetfulness of coloniality’ in both Western Philosophy and contemporary social theory’ – is, therefore, a key characteristic of Eurocentrism. This allows for an interpretation of Modernity – of liberal democracy, citizenship, the nation-state and human rights, among other ‘universal’ categories – as if race, racism and colonialism did not lie at the core of this historical process, inside and outside the geographical borders of ‘Europe’, Europeanized nation-states and/or the West. Most importantly, race has been tenaciously produced and inscribed in the world through ‘the idea of a neutral epistemic subject whose reflections only respond to the structures of the spaceless realm of the universal’ (ibid., p. 29), an aspect crucial to the debates analyzed in this collection.

In conceiving of Eurocentrism as a paradigm for an interpretation of reality, we insist on the need to bring the relationship between knowledge and power to the centre of disputes on national identity, cultural diversity and the validation of ‘other’ narratives. More specifically, we insist on the need to interrogate and explain what Sylvia Wynter (1992, 1995, 2003) refers to as the ‘organization/order of knowledge’ and its ‘descriptive/prescriptive statements’. We argue that what is at stake is not that the history of Europe and the Americas is being written without considering colonialism and racial enslavement, but rather that the dominant approach often interprets these processes as a dark chapter (UNESCO, 2002, p. 17) in the triumphant development of Modernity (Wolf, 1997 [1982]), that is, an appendix to this history that is offset by the eventual progress in rights, equality and democracy. Accordingly, while colonialism and racism may be acknowledged in the debates on history and memory, they are often approached, to paraphrase Aimé Césaire (2000 [1955], p. 53), as that ‘annoying fly’ that interrupts the state’s ‘forgetting machine’ (ibid., p. 52), driven by what needs to be remembered, celebrated or commemorated (e.g. the multicultural empire, mestizaje, intercultural encounters, liberal revolutions). Moreover, the legacies of colonialism are to be conventionally understood within the liberal framework of human rights. Following the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, p. 96) on the formulas of silence pervading the production of history on the Haitian Revolution, we argue that this framework erases and banalizes the histories of collective struggles and questions of political responsibility (for instance, the enduring anti-enslavement and anti-colonial/liberation struggles versus the narratives of White humanist abolitionism and independences granted in due time – drawing on the idea of the immaturity of the...
colonized for immediate emancipation/liberation). For instance, as Angela Davis (1981, p. 59) showed in the case of White anti-slavery/abolitionist and women’s rights movements in the United States, these initiatives towards emancipation both perpetuated racism and failed to promote a wider anti-racist consciousness – an example of the enduring rule of White supremacy/privilege.

We thus consider it crucial to approach the history of the formation of modern nation-states as inextricably bound to that of colonialism and racial enslavement (Goldberg, 2002; Santos, 2007; Nimako and Willemsen, 2011). This conceptual approach enables the discussion to move beyond traditional analyses that view debates on history and memory as merely a matter of the identity politics of groups demanding representation (Wynter, 1992; Deloria, 1995), particularly evident in the Northern American context, or as an issue emerging from the so-called challenges of globalization and the increasing diversity of national societies otherwise viewed as ethnically homogeneous in Europe (Goldberg, 2002, 2009). Hence the collection of chapters presented here takes as its starting point the critical enquiry of taken-for-granted assumptions underlying interpretations of the boundaries of the colonial, the national, and Europe/Europeanness (Hesse, 2007). In particular, this book engages with the construction of the ‘Euro-Immigrant nation’ (Wynter, 1992) in several American contexts and the presumed homogeneity of the nation in Europe – achieved and enforced through violence and the purging of difference (Goldberg, 2002, 2009). Both these notions consecrate the privilege of White Europeans and their descendants, albeit unwritten in historical accounts due to a depoliticizing approach (Brown, 2006). If, on the contrary, we take heterogeneity as constitutive of (post-)colonial nation-states and race as the key governing principle behind the subjugation of populations/nature and the distribution of moral values, the privilege of unmarked whiteness (inscribed in institutions, laws and practices) becomes a terrain for academic enquiry and political struggle. This is all the more relevant with regard to historical narratives, since they constitute a crucial site for the naturalization of privilege, as is evident in contemporary discussions on colonialism, slavery and (anti)-racism. Accordingly, several chapters in this collection interrogate the ways in which different patterns of silencing articulate with, and accommodate, recognition and representation through formulas of knowledge production, consolidation and consumption that trivialize existing power arrangements and enduring political struggles. As a whole, they point to the consequences of unveiling local and regional interconnected histories opening up a
tension not only with ‘other’ histories, but also with specific attempts within Eurocentric thought to continually reshape the world in racially hierarchical terms and to recentre the West/Europe.

Organization of the book

Chapters 2–8 focus on the notion of Eurocentrism as a paradigm for interpreting reality grounded in the project of Modernity, that is, in colonialism, capitalism and race. In particular, these contributions engage with the geopolitics of knowledge production in order to understand and challenge the ways in which academic narratives and methodologies are embedded in the naturalization and reproduction of racism.

Chapter 2 by Ramón Grosfoguel interrogates the historical roots of the contemporary order of knowledge (re)produced by the Westernized university, which renders other Western and non-Western knowledges inferior and outside the acceptable canon of thought. The author regards the contemporary hegemonic Human Sciences as founded on epistemic racism/sexism and locates their roots in the four genocides/epistemicides of the long sixteenth century: against Jewish and Muslim populations during the conquest of Al-Andalus and its aftermath; against Indigenous peoples in the conquest of the Americas; against Africans kidnapped and enslaved in the Americas; against women accused of witchcraft and burned alive in Europe. The chapter unfolds in dialogue with Enrique Dussel’s insightful critique of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of Cartesian philosophy. The author analyzes how these four genocides/epistemicides made it possible for ‘I conquer, therefore I am’ to be transformed into the epistemic racism/sexism of the Cartesian rationale ‘I think, therefore I am’. Grosfoguel’s approach reveals the interrelation between these four processes of violence as constitutive of the modern/colonial world’s epistemic structures and of Western man’s epistemic privilege. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the need to move beyond Eurocentred Modernity and discusses the implications and possibilities for the decolonization of the Westernized university.

In Chapter 3, Arturo Arias focuses more closely on the nature of violence in the modern colonial world. Proposing a decolonial perspective, Arias explores the nature of violence exercised by hegemonic elites over subalternized and racialized civil societies in Latin America vis-à-vis the ‘visceral’ reaction of colonized subjects. This is illustrated by two cases: the nineteenth-century Yucatan Caste War and the late twentieth-century Guatemalan Civil War. Arias discusses the ways in
which the justification for violence has been anchored in the ontological naturalization of racism at the centre of the everyday governance of all kinds of domestic events or, in other words, the ways in which colonialism has enabled Indigenous peoples and African ‘slaves’ to be conceived of as inferior to the conquering European subjects. Regarding the Yucatan Caste War, the author argues that the actual violence unleashed by Indigenous subjects is a solid example of a situation in which originary violence, enacted by Western elites convinced of their racial superiority, significantly contributed towards forestalling any possibility of peaceful behaviour on the part of the Indigenous population. Arias suggests that a similar case could be argued for the 37-year-long civil war in Guatemala, referring in particular to the brutal military counter-offensive against the insurrection in the Maya highlands that began in the summer of 1982. The author therefore argues that it is necessary to read and locate the Maya population’s visceral response outside the disciplinary political mythologies of Western-centred revolutionary progress and the national ideal of mestizaje. More specifically, Arias sees the Guatemalan Maya movement’s construction of a transnational field of political struggle as extending beyond the repressive epistemological frontiers of nationhood that have characterized the Marxist-oriented Ladino left. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the challenges posed by a decolonial logic: what happens when we view violence not only as inevitable, but as ‘just’?

In Chapter 4, Sadri Khiari offers an appraisal of the context in which a decolonial strategy emerged in anti-racist struggles in France. His starting point is that racism can only be successfully approached by considering the political arena as the site of a power struggle between races, thus moving beyond the legacy of the colonial progressive/conservative or left/right cleavage which structures politics and has implied rendering the racial invisible. The consequence of the universal linear Eurocentric history that unfolded with the advent of Modernity and progress has been the relegation of other spaces, experiences and accounts to non-history or to earlier stages of history. Khiari thus interrogates the French conversion of a worldwide system of racial domination established since the sixteenth century and embodied in the formation and consolidation of the (White) Republic, which preserves the privilege of the unmarked whiteness constitutive of the racial system. In analyzing the challenges faced by decolonial politics in France, he points to the need to construct a border strategy that recognizes the dislocated sites and disjointed temporalities of emancipation and liberation struggles beyond the White Eurocentric political imaginary.
Khiari argues that while liberation struggles developed an internationalist character (for example, the resistance of Africans deported to America and the Caribbean, the anti-colonial wars and the converging struggles of the ‘Third World’ following independence or the anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa), they should be interpreted as racial struggles against White power. Within this approach, struggles for emancipation and liberation within the French Hexagon ought to be understood as resistance to the racial order challenging the continuing renewal of the coloniality of power relations. The author illustrates this with the articulation of class and race struggles, integrationist anti-racism and contemporary academic explanations of racism, which have established race as external to any historical power relationship, thus looking to the state for the possibility of its regeneration – in harmony with the republican ideal – whilst preventing anti-racism from being regarded as a political strategy outside particularism.

In Chapter 5, S. Sayyid casts a critical gaze upon certain readings of the post-colonial and calls for an engagement not simply with the critique of media representations and cultural prejudice, but also with the profound ways in which Eurocentrism is constitutive of Western knowledge. In his view, this is a necessary endeavour to grasp the ways in which cultural, philosophical and geopolitical forces and processes were organized in the service of the Eurocentred (colonial and racial) world order. Accordingly, he proposes to move beyond essentialism in the critique of Eurocentrism, laying down the horizons of a decolonial Philosophy. Sayyid calls for a non-essentialist reading of Wittgenstein’s work and proposes that his contribution, particularly his later work, implies a critique of Eurocentrism that is relevant for an understanding of its relationship with epistemology, culture and racism. Following Wittgenstein’s performative view of language and the relevance of the context in which language games are played, Eurocentrism is hence understood as a learned epistemology and ontology, rather than just in geopolitical terms. The chapter closes with the author distinguishing the difference between being European and the project of Eurocentrism, emphasizing that neither Eurocentrism nor its critique is exclusive to Europeans. Considering the logic of Eurocentrism a relationship of domination, Sayyid argues that the search for epistemological alternatives towards decolonial ends, including the decolonization of post-colonial studies, cannot reproduce the hierarchy of the West over the non-West.

In Chapter 6, Montserrat Galcerán Huguet poses crucial questions about the interrelationship between contemporary European politics
and established scholarship, which points towards the enduring centrality of an idea of Europe that continues to claim universal validity whilst remaining blind to the colonial difference that sustains the Enlightenment concept of reason. Galcerán Huguet starts by considering the effects of post-colonial and decolonial theories on the idea of Europe and by raising the fundamental epistemological question that these conceptual approaches imply: how to think beyond the colonial framework? Her analysis interrogates the resistance among European academics and intellectuals to post-colonial and decolonial theories, taking as an example the French context and the work by Africanist scholar Jean-François Bayart, namely his critical position regarding the theoretical, historical and political claims of the Party of the Indigenous of the Republic. Galcerán Huguet focuses on the ways in which post-colonial theories developed within Anglo-American academia have merged with the European trend known as post-structuralism, most notably the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and how post-colonial writers place themselves in a highly contentious area in which worldwide Westernization is taken as a given. She stresses that this literature locates the discussion of ‘European identity’ in the recognition that the European project of Modernity was founded on the enslavement of other peoples and cultures, whose lives and experiences have been marked by these processes. Yet, as she argues, there is also a reluctance to acknowledge coloniality except in a sanitized way that reflects the supposed European self-critical tradition, as illustrated by the 2003 European Manifesto signed by Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. Finally, the author discusses the specific place of Latin America and Spain within this constellation of political and academic debates, theories and interventions, pointing to the differences between post-colonial and decolonial studies in the use of critical categories for dominant thought. The chapter concludes by questioning the epistemic privilege of dominant European culture in worldwide academia.

In Chapter 7, Branwen Gruffydd Jones focuses on the power/knowledge relationship, exposing the pervasiveness of Eurocentrism at the heart of the rise and consolidation of Africanist scholarship. Her analysis centres on nineteenth-century British and European colonial enterprises and the post-war establishment of ‘area studies’ in the US. Jones sees knowledge production as a crucial element of European colonial rule and as becoming institutionalized in research programmes via funding from large American philanthropic foundations since World War II (for instance, Rockefeller, Carnegie and Ford), particularly in the face of growing anti-colonial protest and organization. Her
analysis thus helps to unravel how hegemonic Africanist scholarship has conformed to this geopolitics and to the epistemological context of modernization theory, behaviouralism and positivist comparative politics. Jones questions the predominant academic debates within this framework, which range from issues concerning political transition and instability, nationalism, political parties, leadership and the role of elites, to the more specific analysis of neo-patrimonialism. Accordingly, she considers it paramount to draw attention to the Philosophy of History within which these vocabularies and theoretical frameworks have been constructed as one which positions African societies in a time separate from, and prior to, that of Europe or the West – also prevalent in other studies in areas which analyze politics in so-called ‘new’ and ‘developing’ states. Jones concludes by warning of the pervasiveness of a historicist consciousness in the conventional vocabularies of ‘state failure’, which echoes a lament for the passing of colonial rule.

In Chapter 8, Sandew Hira proposes that mainstream academic and popular approaches to colonialism and slavery in the Netherlands are ideologically grounded in the legacies of European White Enlightenment thinking. He argues that colonialism had a deep impact on the development of science, defining the way in which the relationship between European and non-European societies was addressed and studied and codifying racism within the rise and consolidation of Western social thought. Scientific colonialism does not consider the view from the (codified as) ‘other’ and fails to situate its own narrative as enunciated within the logic of the oppressor and exploiter. Moreover, as illustrated by Hira’s analysis, this Eurocentric approach also fails to meet the test of its claims for factuality and logical rationality. This is often overlooked in academic endeavours due to unchecked implicit assumptions and propositions, the production of knowledge of a descriptive nature, the deployment of statistical data to confer scientific authority on a particular ideological positioning, and partial accounts of colonialism and slavery. Hira thus engages with a Decolonizing the Mind approach which aims to make such assumptions and concepts explicit, in addition to checking their factual and logical basis.

Chapters 9–13 critically engage with dominant contemporary conceptual frameworks and official narratives on the (post-)colonial nation, race and history. In particular, the authors engage with accounts of colonialism, slavery and the colonized in terms of their relation to customary national histories and enduring struggles against racism. The marginalization of critical narratives by/on the colonized and their relegation to scientific, political and pedagogical irrelevance in
Europe and the Westernized world are some of the ideas discussed. One implication of these Eurocentric academic and political approaches is that they reflect on the dissemination and sedimentation of knowledge, namely in museums, state-sanctioned curricula and textbooks, which are analyzed in several chapters in this collection.

In Chapter 9, Maria Paula Meneses and Margarida Gomes interrogate the exclusion of the view codified as ‘other’, exploring the silences on African involvement in World War I by looking at the case of the theatres of war in territories colonized by Portugal (which maintained a state of ‘neutrality’). The chapter illustrates the interrelationship between the methods applied to compel Africans to serve on the Mozambique front in World War I to prevent a German invasion – with a focus on the role of the Niassa Company and the carriers – and the legal system that imposed forced labour and extended the existing structure of racial hierarchy. The authors thus unravel the ways in which World War I and its aftermath were crucial to the enforcement of modern Portuguese colonial policies. Following Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ sociology of absences and his critical theory on ‘modern abyssal thinking’, Meneses and Gomes highlight the ways in which the dominant Western narrative on World War I has failed to consider ‘other’ involvements (their reasons, trajectories and implications) precisely because it favours a Eurocentric and linear approach to the history of this conflict, primarily recognizing the (mostly White) expeditionary forces that fought on the European front as lawful combatants. Thus, the silence surrounding the African troops in Mozambique during World War I is exemplary of the re-enactment of an abyssal line that tenaciously splits the metropolitan from the colonial side of the line. The chapter shows that an approach to the conflict as restricted to the geographical limits of Europe is closely related to the long-standing tendency to treat African social phenomena as atypical, local processes outside global rational explanations, assuming linear temporality as the neutral medium within which history unfolds.

The scholarly production of knowledge is also a central question in Chapter 10 by Kwame Nimako. This author calls for conceptual clarity within academic and political approaches and discourses on the transatlantic slave trade and slavery (including ‘modern slavery’), in the light of the weak empirical grounding for these concepts and their nineteenth- and twentieth-century reinventions (after the legal abolition of slavery and the end of the Cold War). Nimako questions the current conceptual inflation, academic institutionalization and universalization of these notions among career historians. He thus challenges...
the practice of calling on archival material to validate certain scientific claims – which broadly overlooks the fact that such evidence was obtained and preserved for specific purposes, including maintaining the racial hierarchy. In considering that this material can be used to study social formation and the production of knowledge, Nimako thus suggests we engage with, rather than ignore, the historical fraud that allows for the perpetual naturalization of slavery and shifts the burden of responsibility for slavery away from Europe and European descendants. This conceptual shift is crucial to discussing the legacies of European slavery, specifically with regard to the formation of the nation-state, national identities and cultural traditions, and the continuing (though changing) racisms that shape international and domestic relations. The chapter concludes with the suggestion that the abuse of the concept of slavery is partly a consequence of parallel lives and intertwined belonging: people sharing the same spaces but having different experiences and memories, giving rise to different understandings and notions of freedom and emancipation, with consequences for the production of knowledge.

In Chapter 11, Nilma Lino Gomes addresses the historical demands of the Black movement during the last century in Brazil, particularly in terms of education. In 2003, under the Lula da Silva government, these demands culminated in the legal requirement for the mandatory teaching of the history of African-Brazilian and African history and culture in compulsory education. By linking this official initiative to other related debates – such as anti-racist teaching and affirmative action – Gomes explores the challenges, tensions and contradictions that have emerged with the implementation of this law. Although the background context to its approval is the emerging consensus on the lack of representation and misrepresentation of ethno-racial diversity in Brazil, resulting from enduring grassroots struggles, the implementation of the law has revealed the difficulties in achieving anti-racist teaching throughout the Brazilian educational system. Despite the alliances that have been formed between the state, international organizations and grassroots movements, the broader context of political ambiguity in the commitment to fight racism and the legacies of a Eurocentric knowledge system have hampered meaningful change. Ten years after its implementation, this legislation has not been sufficiently consolidated in public policies, thus curtailling the efforts made by grassroots movements to achieve structural change in education. Nonetheless, such collective demands have been crucial to launching a broader political debate across the country on institutionalized racism.
Chapter 12 explores the limited changes to history teaching in Mexico brought about by state reforms to education which were, at least partially, a reaction to the grassroots struggles of the Zapatista movement. Dolores Ballesteros Páez focuses on discourses on race and racism in secondary education history teaching following the 1993 and 2006 educational reforms in Mexico, which were meant to contest the assimilationist approach that pervaded the education system during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in 1994 and the adoption of international recommendations on the multicultural curriculum, the defence of a pluricultural identity has emerged in schoolbooks. However, as Ballesteros Páez suggests, despite the increasing representation of certain populations (especially Indigenous and African enslaved populations), these remain a silent presence: although the 2006 education reform introduced a multi/intercultural approach (mostly adding new content to textbooks), by continuing to silence the racist and nationalist ideas behind the political construction of the Mexican nation, these populations remain on the margins of the main narrative. Mexican national identity, drawing on ideas such as mestizaje and, more recently, multiculturalism and interculturality, is nowadays constructed as homogeneous (supposedly a blend of Indigenous, African and Spanish elements), whilst erasing certain populations from national history, restricting their presence to small sections or viewing them as limiting the modernization of the country. Through the illusion of inclusion, the privileged position of the descendants of Spanish colonial settlers is both consecrated and rendered invisible, whilst a systematic and historically informed reflection on racism and its changing dynamics in Mexican society is evaded. This can be seen in the erasure of the idea of race as a crucial factor in contemporary inequalities and as a key mobilizing force within grassroots struggles. This chapter thus illustrates the limited horizons of policy reform in challenging Eurocentrism in education.

In Chapter 13, the final chapter, Stephen Small analyzes the processes of knowledge production and dissemination that have made ‘other’ experiences and narrations visible, although still consigned to marginality in public history. Specifically, he focuses on the public memory of slavery and on representations of the struggles of African-Americans in museums and on plantation sites. Small argues that while there is an impressive amount of research and knowledge about slavery and its legacies in the US and extensive information is available in a wide range of museums, mainstream accounts continue to provide narrow
coverage and a particular discursive orientation – presenting a grand narrative of American history that emphasizes freedom, equality and fairness. Despite improvements, these accounts do not fully escape the US nationalist ideology of progress and the legacy of *Southern gentility*, disavowing public discussion of race and slavery. Plantation museums incorporate or marginalize slavery in relative terms, or simply annihilate it from their narratives. Specialist museums managed by African-Americans, on the other hand, tend to offer a more complete account of the extent and depth of slavery and its legacies, which is crucial to challenging dominant views and assumptions and to highlighting their contributions to labour, technology, medicine, knowledge and culture in the US. Small thus argues that the contemporary museum infrastructure continues to constitute a ‘separation of knowledge’ that is the outcome of the ‘segregation of knowledge’ – itself a legacy of slavery and legal segregation. His chapter reminds us that knowledge production is inseparable from racialized ideologies, and that these ideologies continue to be shaped by a combination of factors, including economic profit, political gain, nostalgia and the evasion of guilt, as well as hostility to Black people. Small concludes that only continued social mobilization will prevent the marginalization of knowledge of the Black experience in US history.

* * *

Dominant debates on colonialism and racial enslavement exemplify the workings of Eurocentrism as a paradigm of knowledge production and interpretation. Despite occupying a marginal position within modern historiography (Trouillot, 1995; Vergès, 2008), in recent decades there has been a re-emergence of political and academic interest in the history and in memorialization of slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. International efforts have been crucial in fostering public debate, namely: (a) the International UNESCO *Slave Route* programme focusing on disseminating knowledge on slavery, which was launched in Benin in 1994 following a proposal by Haiti and several African countries; (b) the 2001 United Nations-sponsored Durban World Conference against Racism and the declaration that the transatlantic slave trade and slavery were inextricably associated with racism; (c) the UNESCO initiatives launched during the International Year for the Commemoration of the Struggle against Slavery and its Abolition (2004) to encourage research into the links between the slave trade, slavery and contemporary racism.

Despite their relevance in launching a debate that in many contexts had been dormant, three questions are particularly problematic
within the approach and initiatives proposed. Rooted in Eurocentric thinking, such endeavours depoliticize Atlantic slavery and regenerate the historical cover-up of its close links with colonialism and racism (Goldberg, 1993; Hesse, 2002). First, through the persistence of the approach to the ‘transatlantic slave trade’ as a ‘tragedy’ (for example, UNESCO, 2001, p. 14; 2002, p. 6), an exceptional process, or an appendix to the history of Europe. The 2001 Durban Declaration (UNESCO, 2002), whilst acknowledging the negative impact of slavery on Africa, broadly omits its benefits to Europe: Atlantic slavery is approached as a process happening over there – in the colonies – with little relevance to European history. Consigning slavery to a dark chapter (ibid., p. 17) of this history paves the way for the centrality of contemporary narratives that depoliticize colonialism and enslavement – and, consequently, racism – within the semantics of mestizaje, multiculturalism and interculturality (Araújo and Maeso, 2012a; see also Ballesteros Páez, Chapter 12 in this volume).

Second, with the increasingly widespread idea of the universality of slavery – at the heart of the Slave Route project (for example, Diène, 1998; UNESCO, 2013). This is the revival of a colonial narrative that prevented racial enslavement from being considered a European ‘discovery’, generally blaming it on Arabs and Muslims and calling for European moral outrage alongside continuing colonial exploitation (Hochschild, 2006 [1988]; Gopal, 2006; Nimako, Chapter 10 in this volume). The idea of the ubiquity of enslavement is also being reformulated within the currently expanding study of ‘modern slavery’, assuming ‘that research work on the Atlantic “slave” trade and slavery is exhausted’ (Nimako and Willemsen, 2011, p. 190). This again turns race into a coincidental factor in the history of Atlantic slavery, a non-constitutive element of this system of exploitation. As such, the relationship between slavery and race becomes relevant – an obsession? – for the scholars and activists of (anti-)racism but optional or, at most, a parenthesis in academic and pedagogical accounts of colonialism and slavery.

Third, via an approach to education and scientific knowledge as antidotes to racism (Henriques, 1984), consolidated in the post-war context in which UNESCO emerged and eventually becoming hegemonic. In contemporary times, international debates on slavery and history teaching continue to enshrine the role of scientific knowledge in combating racism via the production of accounts that ‘give [this phenomenon] a rigorous scientific character’ (UNESCO, 2001, p. 15) and thus eradicate ‘ignorance and prejudice’ (ibid., p. 6; see also pp. 5–12). The relative insignificance of the ‘transatlantic slave trade’
in European/Western history and historiography (and its contemporary containment within accommodating narratives) cannot be reduced to a matter of academic ignorance. Such an approach derives, as Trouillot (1995, p. 6) suggests, from a positivist view of science that masks the configurations of power through a naive epistemology. We therefore need to consider the ‘strange’ silence (UNESCO, 2001, p. 14) on racial enslavement as the consequence of crucial intellectual choices and engagements that foster the absence of knowledge but are not reducible to it (Trouillot, 1995).

These global debates have acquired specific relevance and contours in different contexts – with race being variously considered as if it could be temporarily hidden from view, or added in as an extra explanatory element. Throughout the last century, initiatives to reconsider national imaginaries of colonialism, race and slavery have emerged in Europe and in the Americas,2 with education becoming a battleground for important struggles for knowledge/power. For instance, since the 1960s in the US,3 the Civil Rights movement has pushed for a reorganization of the system of knowledge, albeit accompanied by institutional reaction (Wynter, 1992, p. 11; see also Davis, 1981; Deloria, 1995). As Frank Füredi (1998) argued, UNESCO’s rejection of race as a scientifically and politically consensual concept since the 1950s led to the rise of ideas of cultural difference and pluralism – rather than equality – in international political and academic debate, which would have an impact on debates in education. The Cold War and national liberation struggles in Africa and Asia – endangering the privilege of the West in the world order – further created a context in which mobilization around racial consciousness was politically and diplomatically deflected (ibid.). Accordingly, most debates on history teaching and textbooks have been narrowly framed by the need to represent the (colonized/enslaved) ‘other’ in multicultural societies. Official initiatives to broaden the curriculum, as well as much scholarly work, have failed to move beyond an understanding of racism as ‘ignorance and prejudice’ and of Eurocentrism as misrepresenting or lacking the ‘other’ side of history, which is dominant in UNESCO interventions. They have favoured a rectification and/or compensatory approach that reduces ‘aggressive nationalism’ (UNESCO, 2001, p. 11) and adds in limited amounts of the ‘version of the losers’, whilst failing to challenge existing descriptive and prescriptive rules that determine in/exclusion:

Multiculturalism can seem to be an attractive answer to the particularism of the Euro-Immigrant perspective from which the present textbooks are written ... Rather than seeking to reinvent our
present cultural native model, the multi-culturalism alternative seeks to ‘save’ the nation model by multiculturalizing it. It does not move outside the conceptual field of our present EuroAmerican cultural model. (Wynter, 1992, p. 16)

Thus, on both sides of the Atlantic, the master script on slavery (Swartz, 1992), colonialism, race and the nation has broadly remained unchanged – by design and by implementation. Debates on the multicultural curriculum and multiperspectivity have failed to unsettle Eurocentrism and to produce a profound critique of the construction of the core idea of the national/European/Western ‘we’ in which the ‘other’ is to be included. Cornel West’s assertion remains relevant:

We need to tell a story about ways in which ‘Eurocentrism’ as a category for the debate is hiding and obscuring something, obfuscating a debate, prepackaging a debate that thereby never really takes place and becomes, instead, this battle between bureaucrats over slots and curriculum … the only way we get beyond a paralyzing either/or perspective is to take a look at this idea of Europe, the very idea of Europe as an ideological construct. (West, 1993, pp. 120–1)

What is therefore required is an approach that considers not merely the (mis)representation of the ‘other’ but shows the theoretical and analytical relevance of the notion of Eurocentrism to understanding the ways in which race and racism are rendered (in)visible in the debate on nationhood, citizenship, democracy and human rights (Araújo and Maeso, 2012b). Whilst education is a crucial site for the analysis of the naturalization both of Eurocentric thinking and of related political and cultural contestation, these struggles have never been about mere symbolic representation, but about access to resources (Wynter, 1992; Deloria, 1995). This is particularly evident in Nilma Gomes’ Chapter 11 in this volume: demands for inclusion in the canon of knowledge have been linked to a wider struggle against the institutionalization of racism. Affirmative action in higher education and the debate this has unleashed in Brazilian universities bears witness to this.

Beyond academic historiography and formal education systems, the increasing relevance of multisited productions of history should also be noted, particularly with regard to their role in shaping collective memories of colonialism, enslavement and racism. Public commemorations, museums and exhibitions, media productions and pedagogical materials are crucial sites for the construction and
Eurocentrism, Political Struggles and Will-to-Ignorance

sedimentation of historical narratives. They usually reveal the ‘institutionalized practice of social forgetting’ (Nimako and Small, 2012) and are particularly relevant to understanding the problematic status of any political discussion on (anti-)racism (Eichstedt and Small, 2003). While the state has had an advantage in ensuring its citizens acquire official history through compulsory schooling, museums, public events and commemorative commissions (Wertsch, 2002), significant ruptures with official knowledge have often been the result of the enduring struggles of grassroots movements, political activists and intellectuals. Local initiatives have been crucial to the development of collective memories, frequently building on national and international partnerships. Many of these initiatives and cultural productions aim to promote alternative, critical forms of memorializing colonialism and enslavement through intellectual collaboration and communitarian knowledge production and dissemination (for example, community-based libraries, digital resources, guided tours). In Europe, for instance, in cities such as London or Amsterdam, Black History/Heritage tours have emerged to challenge official discourses that consign colonialism and enslavement to a distant and thus irrelevant (irreparable) past. In the US, as Stephen Small argues in Chapter 13 of this volume, despite the impressive amount of knowledge produced on slavery, most initiatives designed to memorialize it – in museums and plantation sites – continue to disseminate a hegemonic narrative on the relationship between colonialism and nation-state formation; those that do not are mostly the result of Black mobilization.

This goes to show that the relationship between anti-racist and political liberation struggles and scientific discourse has always been, at least, uneasy. Universities have historically been sites for the reproduction of White privilege, through the canonization of certain scientific theories and explanations. More importantly, they also provide the arsenal of categories to be deployed concerning the ‘political’, the ‘religious’, ‘violence’, and so on, all of which revolve around the question of Being Human. As Vine Deloria ironically remarks:

The constant drumbeat of scientific personalities who manipulate the public’s image of Indians by describing archaeological horizons instead of societies, speaking of hunter-gatherers instead of communities, and attacking Indian knowledge of the past as fictional mythology, has created a situation in which the average citizen is greatly surprised to learn that Indians are offended by racial slurs and insults. (Deloria, 1995, p. 21)
This modern/racist question has compelled colonized peoples ‘to define what it means to be human because there is a deep understanding of what it has meant to be considered not fully human, to be savage’ (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012 [1999], p. 28; original emphasis). This process has been somehow translated by scholars into the more fashionable question of (political) agency, although usually accompanied by the policing of knowledge production by the colonized and minoritized. For instance, the pervasiveness of Eurocentrism and racism lays at the centre of the heated controversy surrounding Rigoberta Menchú Tum and her biographical testimony on the massacres by the Guatemalan army in 1981–82. Entitled I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian woman in Guatemala, the testimony follows the publication of a book, by American anthropologist David Stoll in 1999, questioning the veracity and representativeness of her narrative (Arias, 2001). To these critiques, she responded:

> It is not a question of you believing in my own truth or someone else’s; I’m simply saying that I have the right to my memory, as do my people. (Rigoberta Menchú Tum, interviewed by Juan Jesús Aznárez, 1999, in Aznárez, 2001, p. 116)

This polemic is illustrative of the ways in which certain knowledge is read as too subjective and suspicious – an ad hoc narrative serving more a specific (and dubious) political agenda than an objective interpretation of ‘events’ – as well as the common construction of Indigenous peoples as easily ‘manipulated’ by external political forces. Although the relationship between knowledge and power may have been acknowledged and incorporated in scholarly reflections, Westernized academia and its internal rules of reproduction remain – as Khiari argues in Chapter 4 of this volume – anchored in a Eurocentric paradigm that disregards race as a power struggle. Grosfoguel’s interconnected analysis in Chapter 2 of this volume provides an understanding of the historical roots of this epistemological order and the main challenges this poses to the Westernized university.

More often than not, the depoliticization of race and racism prevents established academics from thinking outside the colonial framework, rapidly condemning some knowledge as ‘ideological’ and therefore irrelevant, as Galcerán Huguet points out in Chapter 6 of this volume. At the core of this issue is the ‘self’–‘other’ dichotomy, which has been mainly interrogated by critical scholarship. Fernando Coronil (1989), in his review of Tzvetan Todorov’s The Conquest of America, noted that the
‘fascination with the construction of “otherness”’ leaves the colonial self unmarked and perpetuates the imperial ‘politics of selfhood’ (p. 329). This present collection therefore considers it imperative to unravel how the unmarked self – inscribed in legal frameworks, institutional practices and historical archives – is reproduced through the use and reinvention of certain vocabularies, concepts, and arguments, as analyzed by Jones, Hira and Nimako in Chapters 7, 8 and 10 of this volume. The politics of knowledge are also closely related to the geopolitical borders of scholarly inquiry and their production and organization of our ‘objects’ of analysis and interpretations. In this sense, as already stated, it is essential to question the divide between the colonial and the metropolitan. In Chapter 9 of this volume, Meneses and Gomes’ interrogation of the dominant narratives of World War I, which foreground the imaginary of a ‘European war’, represents a step in this direction. They also highlight the problematic construction of national cases that continues to frame the understanding of historical processes and political struggles on the frontiers of nationhood.

What, then, are the challenges? The articles compiled in the issue of Human Architecture edited by Boidin and colleagues point towards the ‘potential for the renewal of American and European universities’ (2012, p. 2) brought by the different experiences and historical trajectories of academic and grassroots movement critiques of the production of knowledge. They also examine the multiple layers of ‘re-Westernization’ and the containment of ‘critical inquiry’ in several topics (such as slavery and racism) through the reproduction of hegemonic research fields and frameworks of inquiry (for example, ‘immigration/minority studies’). This serves as a critical warning on the shortcomings of many critiques of Eurocentrism emerging from academia (see also Sayyid, Chapter 5 in this volume). As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui stresses in her critique of the establishment of ‘post-colonial’ and ‘cultural studies’ research in US universities, these institutionalized fields assemble a ‘conceptual apparatus, and forms of reference and counterreference that have isolated academic treatises from any obligation to or dialogue with insurgent social forces’ (2012, p. 98).

This calls for an approach to the decolonization project as a practice that it is always engaged with profound political and cultural change (ibid., pp. 100–1). However, it is a collective political endeavour that the hegemonic Eurocentric paradigm is not only unwilling, but also ill-prepared, to embrace, entrenched as it is, to paraphrase Maldonado-Torres, in its will-to-ignorance ‘with good conscience’ (2004, p. 36).
20 Eurocentrism, Racism and Knowledge

Notes

1. The thesis of ‘immaturity for self-determination’ was contested by intellectuals within national liberation movements, such as Amilcar Cabral in his Political Texts (1974, p. 47).
2. In the last decade, in Europe, debates on slavery and history teaching were most visible in Britain, France and the Netherlands. In the Americas, Brazil, Colombia and the US (particularly the textbooks discussion prompted by the Texas State Board of Education) are illustrative of this.
3. Carter G. Woodson’s (1933) The Mis-Education of the Negro is a powerful example of an earlier challenge to the dominant canons of knowledge in education in the US.
4. Published originally in French in 1983 and a year later in English, Menchú Tum, a member of the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC), narrates in her testimony the massacres by the Guatemalan army in 1981–82 in hundreds of Mayan villages, as part of its counter-insurgency strategy in El Quiché region. She became a spokesperson for Indigenous rights, particularly for the Mayan peoples. Rigoberta Menchú Tum received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 and was a candidate in the 2011 presidential elections in Guatemala.

References


Index

Compiled by Sue Carlton

Page numbers followed by n refer to notes

Aborigines Protection Society 186
acculturation 76, 111
activism 81–2, 102, 103, 198
Afonso I (Nzingo Mbemba ruler of Congo) 182–3

Africa
colonial legacy 126–9
decolonization 114, 130, 187
and nationalism 124, 187
state failure 9, 129, 130–1

African Studies Association (ASA) 119, 121
Africanist scholarship 114–31
in Britain 120–1
and Cold War 114, 119, 123–4
in context of colonial rule 114, 115–18
in Europe 115–17
method 122–9
in US 117–20
and Western national interests 121–2, 123, 130

Africans
abduction and captivity of 25, 36, 168, 179, 180–1, 183–4, 189, 229
genocide/epistemicide 28
as people without a soul 36, 137, 180–1
aggression, and male sexuality 53
Al-Andalus, conquest of 23, 28, 29–30
Alpujarras trial 37, 44n
American Civil War, commemoration of 230, 232, 235, 239
Americas
conquest of 23, 30–8, 109, 180
and Eurocentrism 2, 110

Indigenous view of 142
in relation to conquest of Al-Andalus 30–8
Anderson, J. (former slave) 145
Angola 122, 154, 155, 162–3, 165
Angoulvant, G.L. 127
Anthropology 85, 116, 122, 123, 129, 140
anti-Semitism 30, 37, 44n, 82, 83, 106
Anti-Slavery Conference (Belgium 1889) 186–7
appropriation/violence dichotomy 2, 61
Arbenz Guzmán, Jacobo 56
Area Studies 8, 115, 118, 119, 120, 123
Arendt, H. 82, 84
Ashanti, King of 83
assimilation 76, 99, 170
Mexico 12, 209, 210, 222, 225, 226n
Association for Asian Studies 119
Association of Concerned African Scholars (ACAS) 122

Araujo 03 index   247

Balandier, G. 95
Basic Education National Conference (CONEB) (Brazil) 203
Bayart, J.-F. 8, 95, 96–7, 111, 112n, 126
behaviouralism 9, 122, 124
Belgium, colonization of Congo 185–7
Benna, Ziad 95
Berardi Bifo, F. 105
Berlin Conference (1884–85) 158, 163, 173n, 186
Bernasconi, R. 83

Copyrighted material – 9781137292889
Bhabha, H. 98
Black Power 77, 240
Boston University, African Studies programme 121
Bouteldja, H. 95–6
Braidotti, R. 105–6
Bratton, M. 126
Braudel, F. 43n
Brazil
anti-racist education 192–207
ethno-racial quotas in universities/colleges 194, 199
in-service teacher training initiatives 195, 200, 201, 202–3
Law 10.639/03 187, 192, 193–5, 198, 199, 200, 201
implementation 194, 199, 203–5, 206–7
Law 9394/96 (LDB) 193, 194, 195, 197, 200, 206, 207
National Curricular Directives 194, 199, 200, 205–6, 207n
National Plan 193–4, 203, 204, 205–6
regional dialogues 205–6
research about diversity in schools 203–5
since 2003 199–206
Statute of Racial Equality 194
Black movement 11, 193, 194, 196, 197–8, 205
Black struggles for education 195–8
Brazilian Black Front 195
Buell, R.L. 118
bureaucratic-legal rule 125, 127–8
Cadena, M. de la 59
Callaghy, T. 126, 128
capitalist accumulation 2, 35, 36, 38–9, 44n, 123
Caracoles 41
Cardoso, Fernando Henrique 198, 199
Caribbean and Americas, and enslaved labour 180, 183–4
Carnegie Foundation 8, 117, 118, 119
Cartesian philosophy 25–8
Carver, George Washington 233
Castellanos Guerrero, A. 210
Castro-Gomez, S. 27, 98
Catholic Action (AC) 57, 63n
Césaire, A. 3, 96–7, 110
Ceto, Pablo 57
Chabal, P. 126
Chakrabarty, D. 108, 128–9
Chan Santa Cruz 55
charisma 125
Charles V, King of Spain 136–7
child labour 187–8
Christianity 32
and Christendom 43–4n
conversion to 29–30, 34, 35–6, 173n
Cípaos 162
Cisneros, Cardinal 31
citizenship 68, 76, 78, 160
exclusion from 75, 76, 161, 173n
Clapham, C. 126
Clichy-sous-Bois, mosque incident (2005) 95
clientelism 124, 125–6
Code of Rules of Indigenous Labour (1899) (Portuguese colonial policy) 160–1, 173n
cóndices 31
Cold War 15, 187
and Africanist scholarship 114, 119, 123–4
post-Cold War era 188–9
Coleman, J.S. 124
Colonial Development and Welfare Acts (1940 and 1945) 117
Colonial Social Science Research Council 117
colonialism 1, 3–4
five dimensions of 145–7
modern 155, 156, 157, 158–9
occupation of space and time 73, 75
public commemoration of 16–17
and slavery 13–14
and violence 50–1
see also Dutch colonialism; Scientific Colonialism
coloniality 2, 80
of being 39
forgetfulness of 3
of knowledge 40, 42
of power 7, 65, 66, 97
and violence 5–6, 47–62
Index 249

colonization 94, 145–6, 160, 184, 215
destruction of history of oppressed peoples 155–6, 158
justifications for 50, 157, 158
and labour as resource 158–60
modern 158–9, 173n
principle of effective occupation

and visceral reactions 49, 50, 51–3, 60, 62
see also Al-Andalus, conquest of; Americas, conquest of
'The Colour of Culture' (Roberto Marinho Foundation) 200
Columbus, Christopher 30–1, 32, 136, 180
Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars 122
Comparative Politics 9, 123, 124, 128
Conference against Racism (2001) 198
Congo, Belgian colonization 185–7
Coordination of Ethno-Racial Relations in Education (Brazil) 201
Cordoba library, burning of 31
Cortés, Hernan 31
Costa, E.A.F. 160
Côte d’Ivoire, nationalism 124
Craft, Ellen 233
Cruz, M.S. 195
Cruzoob (followers of the Cross) 55
cultural studies 19, 80, 94, 97–9
cultural syncretism 218–19
dannés 51–2
Davis, A. 4
de Man, Paul 83
decolonial ‘deconstruction’ 87–8
decolonial liberation 65
decolonial struggles in France 65–78
decolonial studies 8, 108–9
decoloniality, and violence 48–9, 61–2
Decolonizing The Mind (DTM) 9, 143
analytical nature of studies 143
dimensions of colonialism 145–7
and moral values 150–1
and reparations 149–50
use of statistics 144, 147
democracy 3, 41, 106
imposing 47–8
myth of racial democracy 197, 207
Derrida, J. 8, 98, 101–4, 108
Descartes, R. 25–6, 39, 45n, 51, 138
development 63n, 123–4, 128, 130, 139
developmentalism, and Mayan communities 56–7
Dias, L.R. 196
discrimination 75, 95, 96, 97, 138, 223
combating and challenging 69, 76, 204, 241
gender 224
in Mexico 216, 218, 223, 224, 225
racial 44n, 75, 155, 192, 216
religious 30, 36–7
see also racism
diversity 4, 70, 172, 213, 223
cultural 3, 102, 198, 202, 210, 211, 225
epistemic 41–3
ethno-racial 11, 192, 194, 195, 201, 203, 205
in Europe 101
Diversity in College Programme (Brazil) 199–201, 203, 206
‘Diversity in Schools National Research’ 204
Douglass, Frederick 230, 233
Drescher, S. 148
Du Bois, W.E.B. 233
Dussel, E. 2, 23, 27–8, 40–3, 45n, 48
Dutch colonialism 9, 142–50
descriptive versus analytical approaches 143
implicit and explicit questions 144
and statistics 144–5
two schools 142–3
see also Decolonizing The Mind (DTM); Scientific Colonialism (SC)
East African Campaign (WWI) 157
Eden, Anthony 120
Eurocentrism, Racism and Knowledge

Edinburgh University, Centre for African Studies 121
education, and racism, see also Brazil, anti-racist education; Mexico
Education for All (SECAD/UNESCO) 200
Education and Ethno-Racial Diversity Forums (Brazil) 200–1
ego cogito (I think, therefore I am) 5, 25–8, 39, 50, 51, 138
go conquis (I conquer, therefore I am) 5, 27–8, 50, 51, 53
Eisenhower, D.D. 119
Eisenstadt, S. 126
Emmer, P.C. 145, 150
encomienda 36, 180
Engerman, S.L. 145
Eniymba, M. 138
Enlightenment 110, 137–8, 139, 140
Ennes, A. 158–9
epistemicide 23
see also genocide/epistemicide
equality
claim for 69, 76–7
and European values 97, 101
and pluralism 15, 225
Erickson, P. 139
Escobar, A. 61
ethnic cleansing 29, 62
Eurocentred Modernity 40–1, 42, 128
Eurocentrism 1–5, 7, 13, 15–16, 103, 104, 157
and Africanist scholarship 114 in education 12
Wittgenstein’s implied critique of 82, 83–90
Europe
and reception of post-colonial and decolonial ideas 93–111
and slavery and slave trade 180–1, 184
European Constitution 100–1, 102, 104
European identity 97, 99–106
formation of 99–100
and imperial-colonial past 103–4
post-nationalist 105–6
Experimental Black Theatre (TEN) (Brazil) 197
Fabian, J. 129
Fanon, F. 51, 52, 53, 94, 155
Fassin, E. 73
Federici, S. 38–9, 44–5n
Felipe Carrillo Puerto 31
feminization, and domination 51, 53
First African Baptist church (Savannah) 230
foco-theory 58
Fogel, R.W. 145
Ford Foundation 8, 117, 119, 120
Fort Mose (Florida), reconstruction of 230
Foucault, M. 8, 37, 44n, 98, 108
France
2005 uprisings 70, 95–6
abolition of slavery 104
anti-racist struggles 65–78, 95–6
impact of post-colonial immigration 69
and Iraq War 104
power relations and coloniality 65–7
racial segregation 74
sociologists 71–3
state control of Muslims 69
as White republic 68–71
Frazer, J. 85
French Republic 95–6
French revolution 35, 105
Gamio, Manuel 222
Gascoyne, General Isaac 183
genocide 23, 62, 63n
genocide/epistemicide 28
against Africans in the Americas 36
against Indigenous peoples of Americas 31
against Indo-European women 28, 38–9, 44–5n
against Muslims and Jews 28, 29–30, 31
consequences of 39–43
Germany
and African troops in WWI 164, 166, 170
guerrilla strategy 165–6, 174n
and Iraq War 104
threat to Mozambique 164, 165
Index
251

globalization 4, 222, 223
Gobineau, A. de 140
Goldstein, J. 53
Gomes, N.L. 206–7
Goméz Izquierdo, J. 210
Gonçalves, L.A.O. and Gonçalves e Silva, P.B. 196
Gramsci, A. 98, 106
Granada library, burning of books 31
Grosfoguel, R. 108, 137, 139, 141, 180
Guatemalan civil war (1960–96) 49, 56–61
Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity’s (URNG) 58
Guerrero, Vincente 215, 220
Guevara, Che 58, 63n
Guha, R. 106, 107–8
Guidotti-Hernández, N. 49, 52
Habermas, J. 101–4
Hailey, W.M.H.B. 117, 118, 121
Haitian Revolution 3, 104
Hall, S. 94, 98, 99
Hatuey (Taino chief-Hispaniola) 141–2
Hayter, Sir William 120–1
Hazard, P. 99–100, 110
Hegel, J.W.F. 83
Heiderg, M. 82–3
Heijer, H. den 144
Hernández de la Cruz, F. 54
Historia de México (Treviño Villarreal-2003) 212, 214, 215, 216, 217
Historia del Hombre en México (Jiménez Alarcón-1995) 212, 214, 215, 216
Historicism 9, 128–9, 131
History
Eurocentric conception of 73, 171–2
and legacy of colonialism 3–4
Hochschild, A. 182–3, 186–7
Hofwyl-Broadfield Plantation Historic Site (Georgia) 236–7
Human rights 3, 97, 105
humanity 2, 29–30, 39, 44n, 52
and soul 34–6, 37, 138
see also people with religion; people without a soul
Humboldtian university 40
Hyden, G. 131
Ibo landing (Georgia) 230
Ideal type (Weber) 126–8
Indigenism 222, 225, 226n
Indigenous people of the Americas genocide/epistemicide 31
and a soul 134–7
see also Americas, conquest of;
Brazil; Mexico
Indigenous of the Republic (France) 5–9, 78n, 111–12n
Indio permitido 58–9
Individualism 102, 103, 118
Indonesia, forced labour 185
Institutes of Social Research (Uganda and Nigeria) 117
Integrationism 7, 75–7
Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) 199–200, 206
Inter-Ministerial Working-Group for the Valorization of Black Population (Brazil) 198
Interculturality 12, 14, 61, 209, 210, 212, 217, 222–3, 225
see also multiculturalism
Interdepartmental Commission of Enquiry on Oriental Slavonic, East European and African Studies 120
Internally colonized 65, 74–5, 78
International African Association 186
International Association of the Congo 186
International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IIALC) 116, 118
International Labour Organization (ILO) 187
International Relations 63n, 122, 126, 130
Iraq War 101, 104
Islam 29, 37, 141
and feminism 41
Islamophobia 30, 34, 36, 68, 69–70
Jackson, Andrew 233
Jackson, R.H. 124, 126, 130–1
James, C.L.R. 94  
Jefferson, Thomas 233  
Jews  
genocide/epistemicide 28, 29–30, 31  
see also Judeophobia
Jiménez Alarcón, C. 212, 214, 215, 216  
João III, King of Portugal 182–3  
Johnston, Harry 115, 116, 117, 130  
Judeophobia 30, 34, 36  
see also anti-Semitism
Kant, I. 40, 82, 140  
katunic prophecies 54, 62–3n  
King, Martin Luther 233  
Kiong 165  
Knight, A. 210, 213  
knowledge  
decolonization of 23, 25, 42  
see also Decolonizing the Mind  
destruction of 23  
see also genocide/epistemicide  
founded on racism and sexism 25–8  
scientific 1, 2, 14, 115, 116, 118, 136–8  
situated and unsituated 26–7  
knowledge production 23–5, 115–19, 122–3, 130, 136–8  
based on theology 35, 136–9  
and historicism 128–9  
Kukulkán (Quetzalcóatl) 54  
Ladinos 57–60  
Laney, Lucy 233  
Las Casas, Bartolomé de 35–6, 136–7, 142, 180–1  
Latapi de Kuhlmann, P. 213, 218, 219–23  
Latin America 106–11  
vViolence and coloniality 5–6, 47–62  
see also Guatemalan civil war; Yucatán Caste War  
see also Brazil; Mexico  
Latin American Subaltern Studies Group 106, 108  
Le Vine, V. 126  
Lee, Robert 233  
Leibniz, G.W. von 100, 111  
Lemarchand, R. 125–6  
Leopold II, King of Belgium 185–6  
Lettow-Vorbeck, P. von 165, 166, 170  
liberation struggles 4, 6–7, 15, 17, 161, 197  
and border strategy 77–8  
see also France, anti-racist struggles; Zapatistas  
Libraries, burning of 31  
López Fontes, J. 214  
‘lost cause’ ideology 238, 239, 243, 244n  
low-intensity warfare 47, 52  
Lugard, F.J.D. 116, 121, 127, 130  
Lula da Silva, Luiz Inácio 193, 198, 199  
Machuca Ramírez, J.A. 210  
Malcolm X 66–7  
Maldonado-Torres, N. 3, 20  
coloniality and violence 48, 50, 51, 53  
social classification 32–3, 44n, 138  
Mamdani, M. 127  
Marranos 29, 31, 36–7  
Mayas  
1847 revolt 54–5  
see also Yucatán Caste War  
cosmovision 54  
impact of Guatemalan civil war 56–61  
women combatants 60–1  
Médard, J.-F. 126  
Menchú Tum, Rigoberta 18, 20n, 58  
Mendieta, E. 98  
Mérida, siege of 54  
mestizaje 12, 14, 16, 60, 210, 213, 217–19, 223, 225  
Mestizos 57, 209  
Mexico  
assimilation 12, 209, 210, 222, 225, 226n  
education reforms 211–12, 220  
national identity 12, 209, 211, 217, 225  
race and racism in history  
textbooks 209–26  
1993 reform textbooks 212, 213–18, 224
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Entry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>213, 218–24</td>
<td>2006 reform textbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>213–14, 217, 219, 224</td>
<td>African and Asian populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>214, 219–20</td>
<td>African slavery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>211–12</td>
<td>discourse analysis methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>214, 219–20</td>
<td>indigenous people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>220–3, 224–6</td>
<td>multiculturalism and interculturality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209, 210–11, 212, 217–19, 223–4, 225</td>
<td>209,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>México en el Tiempo (Plá and Sosenski-2010) 213, 218, 220–3</td>
<td>Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) 122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mielants, E. 137, 180</td>
<td>Mignolo, W. 109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernity 1–6, 8, 73, 109–10, 123, 221</td>
<td>and colonialism 48, 66, 73, 105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eurocentred 40–1, 42, 128</td>
<td>see also Transmodernity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modernization 12, 56, 103, 225</td>
<td>theory 9, 122–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monk, R. 83</td>
<td>Montt, General Ríos 63n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morales, Evo 58</td>
<td>Morelos, José Maria 215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moriscos 29, 31, 36–8, 44n</td>
<td>Moura, C. 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mouzinho de Albuquerque, J. 163</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modern colonialism 155, 156, 157, 158–9</td>
<td>and labour laws 159–62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transport infrastructure problem 172n</td>
<td>police forces 164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prazos da coroa 162–3, 174n</td>
<td>and WWI 154, 155–6, 162–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>actors on Mozambique front 162–5</td>
<td>forces involved 166–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>war theatre in 165–9</td>
<td>multiculturalism 12, 14, 15–16, 76–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Mexican history textbooks 209, 210–11, 212, 217–19, 223–4, 225</td>
<td>see also interculturality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multitudes (French journal) 104, 105–6</td>
<td>Munanga, K. 192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>genocide/epistemicide 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>see also Islam</td>
<td>Nation of Islam 66, 234, 240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nation-states</td>
<td>imperial 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>origin and formation of 4, 11, 30, 66, 189</td>
<td>National Black Awareness Day (Brazil) 193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Conference of Education (CONAE) (Brazil) 203</td>
<td>National Curricular Directives for the Maroon School Education 194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Curricular Parameters (PCN) (Brazil) 198</td>
<td>National Defence Education Act (US-1958) 119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>national identity 3</td>
<td>Mexican 12, 209, 211, 217, 225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Network of Continuing Education for Basic Education Teachers (RENAFOR) (Brazil) 201</td>
<td>National Technical Commission of Diversity for Subjects Related to Education of Afro-Brazilians (CADARA) 201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nationalism 124, 187</td>
<td>European 106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and violence 15, 49</td>
<td>Nazi 82, 102, 151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebaj 57</td>
<td>Netherlands 9, 137, 178, 185, 188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colonialism see Dutch colonialism</td>
<td>new anti-slavery movement 187–8, 189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new states 124, 125</td>
<td>Ngungunhane (Ngune ruler-Mozambique) 163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niassa Company 10, 162, 163, 166</td>
<td>Nimako, K. 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nimako, K. 146</td>
<td>non-Christians/non-Whites, inferiority of 37, 39, 50, 110, 139, 140–1, 160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-governmental organizations (NGOs) 187, 200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eurocentrism, Racism and Knowledge

North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), Report on the Americas 122

Oostindie, G. 149, 151
Ornellas, Ayres de 162–3
other
absence of view from 9, 141–2
based on race 138–9
and collaboration 146
concept of 18, 33, 137, 138–41
and inferiority 139, 140–1
misrepresentation of 15, 16
see also non-Christians/non-Whites

pariah 84
Party of the Indigenous of the Republic (PIR) 8, 65, 95
parvenu 84, 86
patrimonialism and neo-patrimonialism 9, 124–7, 128, 130
Péllissier, R. 162
people without religion 32–4, 180
people without a soul 33–4, 35, 36–7, 137, 138, 180
philanthropic foundations (US) 8, 117–19, 130
philosophy/philosophers and biography 83
and racism 82–4, 86
Pineda, F 210
Plá, S. 213, 218, 220–3
plantation museum sites (US) 230–1, 234–7, 240–1
Political Science 122, 126, 130
Portugal 48
and African troops 156, 157, 163–9
and anti-Portuguese feelings 166
and coloniality 154, 167–9
forced recruitment 168–9, 171
and modern colonialism 155, 156, 157, 158–9, 163
labour laws 159–62, 174
and WWI 155, 156–7, 164–9
see also Berlin Conference
post-colonial studies 93–4
and cultural studies 97–9
and decolonial studies 8, 108–9
Latin America and Spain 106–11
post-colonialism and post-coloniality 80–1
and post-Westernism 109
resistance to in Europe 93, 94–7
post-modernism 80, 93, 108
post-slavery 185, 186, 189
post-structuralism 8, 83, 98, 105
Postma, J.M. 181, 182
power and coloniality 7, 65–7
and knowledge 2, 3, 8, 62
see also knowledge
Prosser, Gabriel 234
purity of blood 28, 29, 30, 33, 37
Quijano, A. 2
racial state 68–9, 88
racial struggles 65–7
and humanistic universalism 72–3
as struggle for power 67, 71–3, 74
White and Indigenous political fields 73–5
see also France, anti-racist struggles
racism 2–4, 238
biological 35, 138–9, 141
colour 33, 36
cultural 35, 141
institutionalized 11, 36, 37, 142
in Mexican history textbooks 209–26
naturalization of 5, 6, 50–1
and preservation of racial privileges 4, 6, 17, 68–9, 75
religious 33–4, 36, 37, 44n
see also Marranos; Moriscos
scientific 37, 44n, 139, 140
White working class and 68–9
racism/sexism, epistemic 5, 25–8, 39–40, 43
rape 51, 52
regulation/emancipation dichotomy 2, 61
reparations 149–50
Republican pact (social-national-racial pact) 68–9, 70
Rivera Cusicanqui, S. 58–9

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19/12/2014 14:26
Rockefeller Foundation 8, 117, 118, 120
Rodney, W. 179
Rodrigues, T.C. 197
Romilly, Sir Samuel 183
Rorty, R. 82–3, 90n
Rosberg, C.G. 124, 126
Roth, G. 125
Rovuma river (Mozambique) 165, 174n
Royal African Society 115
Said, E. 94, 102
Sanford, Henry 186
Sanjinés, J. 50, 53
Santos, S.A. 197
São Paulo, Black press 196
Sarkozy, Nicolas 70
Sartre, J.-P. 82
Satī ritual 112n
School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) 118
Schutztruppe 166
Scientific Colonialism (SC) 9, 143, 145
contrast slavery with colonialism 145
describe nature of studies 143
emotion versus logic 147–50
and idea of reparations 150
as ideology 151
and moral values 143, 150–1
and use of statistics 144, 147
Scientific knowledge see knowledge, scientific
Scramble for Africa 173n, 187
Secretariat of College Education (SESU) (Brazil) 201
Secretariat of Continuing Education, Literacy, Diversity and Inclusion (SECADI) (Brazil) 198, 199, 201, 203
Secretariat of Continuing Education, Literacy and Diversity (SECAD) (Brazil) 198, 199, 201, 202
Secretariat of Racial Equality Promotion Policies (SEPPIR) (Brazil) 198
Secretary of Indigenous Affairs (Mozambique) 160
Sectorial Programme of Education (Mexico) 210
secularization 25, 35, 44n, 102, 104
Sepúlveda, Juan Ginés de 35, 136–7, 180–1
Ser en la Historia (Latapi de Kuhlmann-2008) 213, 218, 219–23
Sklar, R. 128
slave cabins 230, 231, 235, 236, 237, 240–1
slavery and slave trade 48, 129, 139–40, 178–90, 229
abolition 3–4, 104, 146–9, 150–1, 183, 229
and reinvention 185–8
addressing legacies of 189
case for 137
chattel slavery 185, 189
comparison with Jewish Holocaust 151
concepts of ‘slave’ and ‘trade’ 179–80, 184, 188, 189–90
earlier forms of servitude 185
eligibility for enslavement 184
importance of knowledge about past 241–4
and involvement of African rulers 181–3
modern slavery 179, 187–8
new anti-slavery movement 187
as partial aspect of colonialism 145–7
statistics 144–5, 147
US public history of 229–44
and violence 183, 185
Small, S. 142–3
Smock, D.R. 120, 121
social classification 30, 32–3, 44n, 138
Social Science Research Council (SSRC) 119, 122
sociocryonics 127
solipsism 26
Sosenski, S. 213, 218, 220–3
Sousa Santos, B. de 2–3, 156
South Africa 62n, 66, 122
South Asian Subaltern Studies Group 106–8
Souza, A.X. 206–7
Spain 48, 106–11, 136–7
Spinelli, A. 105–6
Spivak, G.C. 48, 49, 98, 108, 112n
Stanley, Henry 186
statistics, and lying 144–5
Stephens, Alexander 233
structuralism 98
subaltern, use of term 106, 107
subaltern studies 106–8
Sutton, F.X. 120, 121
Táíwò, O. 127
‘Talking Cross’ 55
Taracena, A. 55
Taylor, Zachary 233
Technical Cooperation Term (UNESCO) 199
Tedlock, D. 61
Téllez, M. 214
theology, and knowledge production 35, 136–9
Title VI Africa National Resource Centres 122
Transmodernity 25, 40–3
Traoré, Bouna 95
Treviño Villarreal, H.J. 212, 214, 215, 216, 217
Trexler, R. 51
Trouillot, M.-R. 3
Tsil, Ysidro 54
Tubman, Harriet 233
Turner, Nat 234
Tutino, J. 215
txitzi’n (deep pain) 60–1
Uniafro (programmes for college students) 201–2
United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) 187
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 187
United Nations Truth Commission 56
United States (US) interstate slave trade 229
public history of slavery 17, 229–44
African American museums 232–4, 238
Black voices 239–40, 241
on ‘great men and women’ of slave era 233, 235, 236
lives of Black women 233–4, 237, 239
markers of Black resistance 234, 240
monuments and museums 230, 231–44
National Slavery Museum project 234
plantation sites 230–1, 234–7, 240–1
remaining physical infrastructure 229–31, 234–7
representations of Civil War 230
separation and segregation of knowledge 238–40, 242
slave auctions 234
slave quarters 231, 235, 236–7, 240–1
slave rebellions 234
and symbolic annihilation 236
Underground Railroad 230, 234
strategic interests in former European colonies 123
and violent interventions 47–8, 49
University Grants Committee, report (1959) 120–1
Valladolid Junta of the School of Salamanca 35, 36, 136–7, 141, 180
Van der Walle, N. 126
Van Dijk, T.A. 215
Velázquez, M.E. 214
Vessey, Denmark 234
violence and coloniality 5–6, 47–62
and decoloniality 48–9, 61–2
and desire 49
as exercised by hegemonic elites 49–51, 52, 53
naturalization of 50–1, 52
as visceral reaction of colonized subjects 49, 50, 51–3, 60, 62
see also Guatemalan civil war; Yucatán Caste War
viscerality 50, 51–3, 54, 60, 62
Wallerstein, I. 43n, 110
Washington, Booker T. 233
Washington, George 233
Weber, M. 125, 126–8, 141
Welfare State 68, 69, 102
Western superiority 1, 2, 24–5, 39, 108, 110–11, 140, 147
Westernized university 5, 18, 23–5, 27, 39–40, 42–3
White, L. 156
Wilder, Douglas 234
Williams, E. 105, 147–8, 185
Williams, R. 106
Wittgenstein, L. 81–90
women
burnt as witches 23, 28, 38–9
and indigenous knowledge 38–9
rights movements 4
Woodson, Carter G. 233

World Social Forum 59
World War I
African participation 154–7, 162–71
see also Mozambique, and WWI;
Portugal, and WWI
Wynter, S. 2, 3, 214, 215, 217, 219, 224, 225

Yucatán Caste War 49, 53, 54–6
Zambesi valley military campaigns 162–3
Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) (Zapatistas) 41, 42, 209, 210, 216, 222–3
Zolberg, A.R. 124
Zumbi dos Palmares March against Racism 198