

Chapter 13: Structuralism / Deconstruction

Introduction: Movements

By including *deconstruction* with what this book calls *approaches*, we have already made an assumption and given a definition: deconstruction is an approach. The term "approach" implies that a given theoretical and methodological construct moves towards something, approaches it, draws to it, navigates the scholar towards what is approached. The object thus approached is an object because we can approach it. It is somewhere, it has delimitations and a location, we can be far from it or near, even if it is an elusive thing like the meaning of a text or even "American Studies". Approaches carry us nearer to the things we want to know something about, and our methods associate nearness, closeness and intimacy with the things we study. We might execute a "close reading", or a "thick description", to discover intimately the meanings of a text. Approaches are interpretative movements towards nearness.

Deconstruction in this way might not be an approach, as it makes things stranger to us, disintegrating and dissimulating them in a dangerously intimate undoing of what they are. Interpretations help us to tell one thing from the other, to pose the question of what a particular thing is for itself (what is the meaning of this text?) and to maybe advance a definition. Deconstruction however quarrels with definitions. The interpretative movement of deconstruction challenges us to ask what a particular thing is not, and to work out how that not-being brings about what it is. Philosophically

speaking, it works to upset ontology. That is, deconstruction is less about approaching X in order to find out what it is, than it is about precisely undoing X.

This might be confusing to you, and deconstruction - or poststructuralism, as it is also called - was just as confusing to the academic world when it developed from *structuralism* in the 1960s: people decried deconstruction as "intellectual gibberish" and "obscurantist theory". Some just called it "French theory", because like its structuralist foundations it originated within the French academy. A brief look into the historical development is useful clarify why and how deconstruction impacted confusingly on the university.

Structuralism 101: Saussure and Signs

Structuralism (also called *semiology*: the study of signs) originated as a method of linguistics developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 20th Century. Saussure posited that language is a *differential system* in which the meaning of a word ('cat') stems not from a direct relation to the thing ('that furry animal on my lap'), but rather emerges from the word's differential relation to all other words. Saussure argued that language is made up of *signifiers/signs* (the spoken/written words) and *signifieds* (the mental concepts to which words refer), and the arbitrary relation between these. Arbitrary in this instance means "not natural", but agreed upon by convention. The actual things in the world (Saussure called these 'referents') bear no

connection to language at all: there is, simply, no real cat in the dictionary, nor is there one in your head when you think of one. As thought is shaped by language, says structuralism, the meaning of signs is produced within language itself. Meaning is an effect of the *structure* of language, emerging from the sign's differential relation to other signs. Every sign evokes the whole network of other signs and its differences from them in order to mean something. 'Cat' means something because it is different from 'dog', 'horse' (conceptual difference), and because it differs from 'can', 'car', 'hat' (linguistic difference). The evocation of this structure of differences is what produces a sign's meaning.

To analyze how meaning comes about, structuralism focuses on systems of signification, or simply structures. Important are the relational differences between a structure's elements, not fixed and isolated definitions. The method resonated with many disciplines in the 1950s and 60s, and the focus on *structures of meaning* influenced psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan), political theory and Marxism (Louis Althusser), history of knowledge (Michel Foucault), and studies of literature, culture and practical meaning-making in societies. For example, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who also introduced *structuralism* as a methodological term, held that cultures, like languages, can be viewed as systems of collective signs and symbols. A culture can be analyzed through the structural relations among its elements and especially its central binary oppositions. These oppositional pairs that organize societies are for example male/female, public/private,

nature/culture, family relations/social relations, or cooked/raw. Lévi-Strauss postulated that for example family relations are not meaningful in themselves, but carry meaning by being different from other social relations.

Structuralism 201: Mythologies

Roland Barthes, a French literary scholar, used the structuralist idea to develop a theory of *Mythologies* (1957) in popular culture: a myth - a "secondary semiological system" - in his view is constituted by a system of signs which in their totality evoke the notion of a simple truism, a thing taken for granted, or a popular myth. Barthes analyzed popular texts like advertising, wrestling, cars, or Mankiewicz's film *Julius Caesar* of 1953. In this latter historical drama (or 'swords & sandals' movie), he notes the exaggerated sweatiness, undulated hair and stilted performances of white American actors Marlon Brando and James Mason. Barthes reads these as *signs* producing the myth of "Roman-ness", the popular notion of what Ancient Rome was like. The function of myth for Barthes is to depoliticize and dehistoricize what is presented by mythologizing it as natural and eternally true: the film's signs of "Roman-ness" (sweat, hair, pathos) are artificial and conventional cinematic devices, but they convey Hollywood cinema as a medium of timeless accuracy and true representation: this is what Romans were like, it is readily apparent. Barthes called this evocation of the true or common-sensical the *ideological function of myth*.

Roland Barthes's popular mythologies demonstrate a vital feature of the structuralist method: on the one hand, structuralism shows that meaning is not a property of the sign itself, but that meaning is evoked by the sign's difference to all other signs. On the other, mythologies demonstrate that structures of signification often hide this very *emptiness of the sign* and the *relationality of meaning*: their effect is one of universal truth, of plain and obvious meaning. The underlying work of differences - one sign means something because it is different from all other signs - is obscured, and the mythological structure produces the effect that ondulated hair and sweat indeed are what makes the Roman.¹ The popular myth is what Barthes calls a *totalized structure*, in which many signs work to produce one meaning ("Roman-ness") that appears as simple, unequivocal, natural, universally true, readily apparent. The method of structuralism tries to expose the structure of differences which is obscured by the meaning-effects of that same structure.

The point of the *structuralist critique* is not that hair-styles do not have anything to do with Romans, and some other attribute would be more accurate. Its point is that the meaning of representations is evoked by arbitrary significations, which create the notion of obviousness or common-sense. The structuralist question is not: what do Romans (really) look like?; but rather: how does a sign-structure work to create the effect of obvious

1. Indeed, the hairdo of Marlon Brando only signifies "Roman-ness" because it is different from all other hairdos in all other films, and the audience has learned to understand his curly locks as signifiers of "Roman-ness".

Roman-ness? In other words, structuralism does not prove a particular representation wrong or at fault, but rather makes things stranger by showing how they are constructed from signs. In the structuralist approach, we do not look at things themselves, but we decypher the structures and processes of signification through which things become what they seemingly are.

Towards Deconstruction

In our movement towards how deconstruction works, we have already covered a lot of ground, and we might feel a little bit stranger and estranged. Deconstruction works, like structuralism, as a mode of *reading* a particular text, a structure of signification. This reading does not look for a meaning - or even *the* meaning - of the text, but rather traces the terms of how this meaning (or any meaning) is produced within the textual structure. Deconstruction's central presupposition is that there are no things that are not textual - thinking is structured by the differential terms of language.² The eminent protagonist of deconstruction, the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, therefore postulated: "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" - there is no outside of the text, since there is no outside to language that we can think. Consequently, there is no end to reading.

Jacques Derrida's work in this sense is the extension of reading, of analysing textual structures not for their meaning, but for the internal

2. Of course, the world itself (think of the cat) might not be textual. But, we have no way of grasping or approaching the world that is not based on language. The concepts with which we grasp what is in the world, are tied to systems of differentiation and signification ('cat' is not 'dog' or 'can').

processes of meaning-production. Unlike the structuralists however, Derrida read and analyzed not advertising or novels (though he did that, too), but the great texts of Western philosophy. To put it simply, Derrida applied the structuralist principle - meaning emerges from systems of difference - to the philosophical tradition of metaphysics. Metaphysics is no less than the ongoing project from Plato to (at least) Immanuel Kant to think the basic principles of the world, and to think the question of being. Metaphysics is the thinking of what everything is. This project sounds terrifically huge, and it is, but Derrida's reading found help in other philosophers who had criticized metaphysics before, such as Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Derrida's argument departs rather simply from two thoughts, and we know the first already from structuralism: the meaning of a philosophical concept like *presence* is not given, but rather is produced by the concept's difference from another concept, *absence*. Absence is necessarily a part of the definition of presence, as - we can hear structuralism knocking - words and concepts have no meaning on their own, but only within a structure of differences. Philosophy, as an operation only possible in language, is such a structure of differences, and built on fundamental binary oppositions such as *presence* and *absence*, *being* and *not-being*, *identity* and *difference*. Secondly, Derrida argues, metaphysics is not only made up of these binary oppositions (presence/absence), but privileges one over the other. His case in

point is the opposition of *speech* and *writing*, and we will take a closer look here.

Deconstruction 101: Logocentrism

In his 1967 book *Of Grammatology*, Derrida traces how philosophical texts have consistently privileged speech over writing: From Plato to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, all philosophy agrees that speech is nearer to truth. This is apparent in the central philosophical concept of *logos*, the Greek word for word, logic, reason, and speech (in theology, *logos* means "word of God"). The spoken word is associated with *reason*, *presence* and *identity*: the speaker is present, his³ identity is certain, and he is conscious of his words' meaning. Against *logos*, philosophy downgrades *writing*, which it defines as merely a representation of speech, a secondary and insufficient substitute for *speaking* the truth: unlike speech, the written word lacks *presence* (the speaker is not there, we cannot verify what he might have meant) and *identity* (the author is absent from the text and he has to distance himself from himself in order to write thoughts down). We can see how this simple opposition between *speech* and *writing* already calls forth a structure of associated differences (presence/absence, identity/difference), and further, how these attendant oppositions are hierarchically organized. One is always original, the other derivative: *speech/presence/identity* are

3. I am using the masculine form here for particular reasons. As we will later see, the implied subject of metaphysical philosophy is male.

original, foundational and associated with truth; *writing/absence/difference* are secondary, derivative, and only supplementary to the original.⁴

Putting these two observations together, Derrida argues that the hierarchical order of the metaphysical pairings *presence/absence*, *identity/difference*, *speech/writing* is not a natural given, but an effect of the structure of language. Presence carries meaning because it is defined against absence, and the necessary evocation of absence in defining presence is obscured when philosophy posits presence as original and absence as secondary and derivative. Dealing with the binary opposition *speech/writing*, Derrida's argument develops its full force: while the philosophical tradition of metaphysics necessarily exists as *language*, *writing* and *text* (hence, *difference*), Derrida argues, its primary undertaking is to constantly evoke the *logos* – meaning *speech*, *reason*, *presence* – as its origin (hence, its identity). Metaphysics is therefore caught up in a movement against itself: while it always already is and must be a textual undertaking and an operation within a differential structure, it also must incessantly define *text*, *writing* and *difference* as secondary and derivative to the original *logos*.⁵ Derrida argues that this the paradox of Western metaphysics, to be necessarily divided against

4. One of the philosophers Derrida reads, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, compared speaking philosophy to being in the presence of his lover, while writing down thoughts was like masturbation - merely a substitute for "real love". This may indicate how far-reaching the alignment of oppositional pairs reaches.

5. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida finds traces of this paradox in the texts of many philosophers from antiquity to the Enlightenment, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Plato, or Hegel. They invariably describe *writing* as the necessary supplement of metaphysics, and simultaneously as the undermining of its central project of the *logos*, or reason.

its own terms, to be caught up in a constant undermining of what it argues. While it denounces difference and privileges the *logos*, it can do so only within the differential terms of language.

What follows from Derrida's observation of this paradox, what is the point of his reading? Again, thinking back to Roland Barthes critique of the popular myth, an analysis of how meaning is produced by differences does not result in that meaning being wrong or at fault, and something else being more accurate – for example that writing is closer to truth. The point of a deconstructive reading is rather to show two things: first, the conditions of meaning-production, the work of differences so to speak. And second, how the structure that produces meaning always obscures its own differential work, so that the meaning produced seems natural, original, and unequivocally true. Deconstructive readings therefore *destabilize* and *denaturalize* the meanings a particular text or sign-structure produces. Derrida does this with metaphysics, in order to show how *logos* (the foundational concept of thought, reason, speech) does not carry meaning in itself, but rather is constructed from a series of differences - which is the exact opposite of *logos*. At the same time, the work of metaphysics consists precisely in the systematic denouncing and deprivileging of difference in order to erect the *logos* as its origin. Derrida therefore regards metaphysics as a project of *logocentrism*, the systematic privileging of presence, identity, reason, and speech, in order to obscure its reliance on difference and structures of signification.

We can see how deconstruction is not an approach that brings us *nearer to an understanding* of metaphysics, but rather a process of reading the paradoxical and privileging structures of its operation: reason, identity, and presence become stranger and estranged to us – they emerge not as the natural and self-explaining center of thinking (things as they are in themselves), but rather as products of a *privileging rhetorical operation* that obscures its own reliance on difference. Generally speaking, deconstruction's work would thus be the critique of "centrism", of these illegitimate and inevitable obscurations of difference in order to produce presence, origin, the universal. As literary scholar Barbara Johnson explains:

[...] deconstruction is a form of what has long been called a critique. A critique of any theoretical system is not an examination of its flaws or imperfections. It is not a set of criticisms designed to make the system better. It is an analysis that focuses on the grounds of that system's possibility. The critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal, in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being what they are, their effects on what follows from them, and that the starting point is not a (natural) given but a (cultural) construct, usually blind to itself. (Johnson, xv).

As my following historical contextualization of the impact of Derrida's deconstructive efforts will show, the French philosopher was not the only person interested in reversing the 'natural' order of things and pointing out

blind spots in dominant systems of thought. Indeed, while Derrida's textual critique of metaphysics is a singularly important and sophisticated project, much of deconstruction's importance for American Studies stems from the fruitful connections it established with other modes of thinking. These were less interested in the paradoxes of Western philosophy, but in political change.

Deconstruction 201: Political Uses

Deconstruction made its first arrival in the United States in 1966, when Jacques Derrida attended an all-male symposium at Johns Hopkins University, featuring protagonists of what was seen as old (Jean Hyppolite, Rene Girard) and new French theory (Paul DeMan, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan). His lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" was later published in a book entitled *The Structuralist Controversy* (1970), generally regarded as the publication to bring structuralism and deconstruction to American academic audiences. In the following year, Derrida also published three books in France, which were soon translated into English: *Speech and Phenomena* (1973, translated by David Allison), *Of Grammatology* (1976, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) and the essay collection *Writing and Difference* (1978, translated by Alan Bass). The important *Dissemination* (translated by Barbara Johnson) in English followed in 1981. These books, dealing mostly with texts of the

Western philosophical tradition, laid out the tenets of deconstruction and introduced the term as such to the American academe.

Derrida's terminology and practice of reading texts against themselves initially resonated strongest with a group of literary scholars, including J. Hillis Miller and Geoffrey Hartmann at Yale, who were interested in dislodging the then-reigning approach of *New Criticism*. Known as the *Yale School of Deconstruction*, these critics argued that literary texts carried multiple, highly ambiguous and self-contradicting meanings, a view running counter to New Criticism's focus on establishing the single best and most unified interpretation of a text through rigid, formalist reading. However, while the Yale School was deconstructing and disrupting unified interpretations of literary classics from Milton to Faulkner, American universities were experiencing ruptures of a more far-reaching kind.

It is important to realize that the 1960s and 70s are a period of unprecedented political upheaval in the United States: in 1968, Martin Luther King is shot in Memphis, Tennessee; feminists hold the first public speakout against abortion laws in New York City; American troops in Vietnam commit the My Lai-massacre, killing hundreds of civilians; a year later, the customers of a gay bar in Christopher Street, New York City fight back against homophobic and brutal police methods in the Stonewall Riots. The Civil Rights Movement, the movement of Second Wave Feminism, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles and the Gay Liberation movement are acts of civil unrest protesting against the violence and discrimination

with which the white, male, imperialist and heterosexual mainstream marginalized and oppressed people, cultures, practices and ways of living. These protests equally ruptured and restructured academic culture, largely through the efforts of protesting students and teachers: the first *Black Studies* program was organized at San Francisco State University in 1968; the first accredited course in *Women's Studies* was held in 1969 at Cornell University; *Chicana/o Studies* were borne of the efforts of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF)⁶ student strike at UC Berkeley the same year, which resulted in the establishment of an *Ethnic Studies* department at that university.

So, as Derrida was providing analytical tools to deconstruct the privileging structures of *metaphysical logocentrism* in the 1970s (which the Yale School applied to literary texts), political activists, academic study groups and social protesters were working to dismantle and overturn structural privileges within the academy, the exclusionary practices of capitalist and patriarchal society, and of U.S. (and European) imperialism. While the Yale School's interpretative experiments are fascinating to follow and would have provided this article with many interesting examples to explain how deconstruction in literary studies might work, I think that deconstruction's interaction with these political struggles is much more important and helpful to understand what the theory might mean to students of American

6. The Berkeley TWLF was composed various student organization, such as the Mexican American Student Confederation, Asian American Student Organization, the Native American Students Union, and the African American Students Union.

Cultural Studies today. Imagine the situation: here's Derrida's sophisticated reading taking apart the binary oppositions in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), executed in the philosophical high-language of the Sorbonne in Paris – there are groups of students being arrested for protesting the discrimination and exclusion of women in the academy, the imperialist politics of the Vietnam War, or the racial prejudice implicit in the absence of African American literature in their curriculum. What do these critical movements have in common?

Simply speaking, these endeavors were *moving* against a dominant system (of thought, of society, of politics) that rested on and enforced differences but constructed itself as universal and self-evident. Let's take the feminist struggles of the 1960s and 70s as an example: one central demand of feminist politics was crystallized in the slogan "the personal is political". This slogan was termed in reaction to the dominant patriarchal view that women's concerns over discrimination were more pertaining to the private realm, meaning that the questions of women's rights pertained only to individual women and their personal problems, not to society or politics as a whole. Domestic violence against women was regarded as a problem of the woman and her husband (and mostly the wife's fault), not an issue of general society, or of universal concern. Feminism countered this rationale by simply – and deconstructively – stating that the distinction between *private* (individual, female) and *public* (general, universal) concerns is an artificial construction of patriarchal, male power: patriarchy relegates the feminine

to the particular and private, while it defines itself as self-evidently universal and of public concern, thereby obscuring its own reliance on a politics of difference. The name of this construction is *sexism*. The slogan "the personal is political" therefore not only reverses the privilege of terms (private is more important than public), but challenges the distinction *private/public* or *particular/universal* itself as one caught up in patriarchal, male-centered and sexist politics.

A similar example can be given concerning the anti-racist struggles of the Civil Rights movement, also met with the mainstream attitude that they concerned only the problems of African Americans, not of society in general. African American critics rightly pointed out that the distinction between *marginal* and *universal* concerns itself is an operation of white racism, which privileges being white as the universal position, and relegates the "race problem" to African Americans – thereby obscuring how the idea of *general society* (not concerned by racism) itself rests on racial difference (it is thought as consisting of non-African Americans).

Constructive Alliances

In as much as the idea of *universality* should now feel stranger to you, you might also begin to get a feeling of how the deconstructive critique of dominant systems works. It is important to stress that neither the central concerns of Feminism nor the Civil Rights movement were inspired by Derrida. These movements formulated their points of critique much earlier,

and markedly with the intent of not only textually deconstructing, but *abolishing the oppressive structures* of sexism and racism. However, it seems like deconstruction's technique of structural dislodging of universality reflected a common aspect of these political projects. For the alliance of feminism and deconstruction, Seyla Benhabib described the discovery "of affinities in the struggle against the grand narratives of Western Enlightenment and modernity" (27). These affinities lead to one important moment of confluence between political activism and deconstructive theory: as the political changes brought about by feminism and the Civil Rights movement caught traction in the universities with the institutionalization of new programs and departments, deconstruction offered an analytical language and procedure for these new, activist disciplines to argue and contend with the often hostile high-intellectual climate of the academy. Deconstruction and aligned theories like Michel Foucault's critique of discursive power, provided an important *critical idiom* for these new disciplines.

But the alliance between politically informed disciplines, such as academic feminism, and deconstruction remained somewhat uneasy. Cultural analyst Rey Chow (1995) retrospectively notes that, while deconstruction shared with feminism a politics that was animated by a concern for the marginalized and the deprived, and likewise carried a very strong anti-status-quo edge, it nevertheless presented a hyper-literate, hyper-theoretical "literary" language developed in some of the most elite and privileged academic institutions in the world. Such critique was voiced from within

the disciplines themselves, such as in Barbara Christian's important essay "The Race for Theory" (1988) which criticized deconstructionism of invoking (while deconstructing) a fundamentally white-European tradition, and therefore marginalizing other traditions of theorization in African American scholarship and culture. It goes almost without saying that mainstream academia was rather happy about these theoretical controversies within the new disciplines: had they before attacked the new fields of Feminist/Women's Studies and African American Studies for being "too political" and not capable of producing "scholarly sound analysis", they now denounced the activist scholars that had taken on deconstruction as being "too abstract" or "high on theory".

Despite these tensions, deconstruction was embraced by important protagonists of these disciplines, such as Henry Louis Gates, Houston A. Baker, Hortense Spillers (African American Studies), Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha (Postcolonial Theory), Barbara Johnson or Joan Scott (Feminism and Women's Studies). It also instilled a resurgence of radical theoretical and methodological (self-)reflection in humanities scholarship. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for example, who had translated *Of Grammatology* in 1976, emerged as one of the major theorists of postcolonial theory in the 1980s. One of Spivak's radical points of (self-)critique was the fundamental question "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988): given the complicity of Western universities with an imperialist and neo-colonial politics of discourse and knowledge production, Spivak's question reflected on the very possibil-

ity of anti-colonial politics from within US-American academic structures. Concisely, deconstruction's questioning of the very terms in which thinking and interpretation operates provided vital instruments for these critical disciplines to reflect their own transition from movement to academic discipline, and to critique the implicit binary opposition between activism and scholarship informing this transition.

Inasmuch as deconstruction assisted a new wave of academic self-reflection and cultural theory with a capital T, it also aided American universities to remake themselves as institutions pledged to social and political activism. Notably, as the scholarly engagement with the ideas of deconstruction facilitated the transformation of the academic landscape, the explicit politicization of its theoretical tenets also communicated back to the initial protagonist of deconstruction: Derrida in his later work rewrote "logocentrism" as "phallogocentrism", acknowledging the feminist work (for example, of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous) that had worked out the male-centered, phallic implications of Western metaphysics and its exclusion of femininity from the domain of reason. He also later noted the colonial connotations of the term "Eurocentrism", which had been analyzed by post-colonial critics such as Edward Said (1978) or Spivak. Much of Derrida's work since the 1980s was concerned with eminently political and ethical questions, and followed impulses from the activist uses of deconstruction which influenced his own continued readings of Western philosophical texts. There are surely many ways to tell this story of intellectual develop-

ment and exchange, but I think that the many politicized carriers and critics of Derrida's deconstruction – working in feminism, postcolonial critique or critical race studies – put the approach from off its head, on which it was standing, and placed it upon its feet.

Deconstruction 301: Complication and Caution

Historically speaking, the deconstruction's first wave of influence is part of a fundamental restructuring of American universities and of critical discourse in the 1970s and 80s. Its critique of structural blindneses and privileges not only lend itself to political projects and their academic implementation, but also helped to tranform the terms of these projects themselves. A concise example of this longer reach of deconstructive analysis can be found in the ongoing remaking of *Feminist* and *Women's Studies* towards *Intersectionality Studies*, and *Gender* and *Queer Studies*, on which you can read in the following chapters of this book.

Let's briefly look into the critiques later labelled as *intersectionality*: Arguing the universalizing and generalizing construction of "Woman" in Women's Studies, scholars and activists like Adrienne Rich (1980) or The Combahee River Collective (1977) criticized how the *shared identity* implied by then institutionalized Women's Studies obscured its own privileging of whiteness and straightness, and the marginalization of racial difference or difference in sexuality as *secondary issues*: not all women are white, nor are they all heterosexual. Consequently, these scholars remarked

the ongoing marginalization of *the interdependence* between constructions of gender, race and sexuality, and called for a deconstructive tackling of Feminism and the notion of gender difference – thought of as more important than racial difference, and sexuality – itself.

While these interventions not all explicitly referred to deconstruction, they nevertheless recalled one of its vital claims: In order to denaturalize and destabilize the organizational power of a central binary opposition such as *men/women*, or *heterosexual/homosexual*, a deconstructive critique has to view the *whole structure* of attendant and related oppositions that lends this central difference its totalizing force. As a means to recapitulate the processes of deconstruction, compare the following two deconstructive approaches to *homo/heterosexuality*. In 1981, literary critic Harold Beaver writes in his article "Homosexual Signs":

The aim [of a deconstructive strategy] must be to reverse the rhetorical opposition of what is 'transparent' or 'natural' and what is 'derivative' or 'contrived' by demonstrating that the qualities predicated of 'homosexuality' (as a dependent term) are in fact a condition of 'heterosexuality,' far from possessing a privileged status, must itself be treated as a dependent term. (115)

Beaver's deconstruction of the privilege of heterosexuality, enabled through the view of homosexuality as derivate, pathological or deviant, is particularly apt: "heterosexuality" as a term was coined much later (1960s) than homosexuality (its definition emerged from sexual science in the late

19th century). This historical argument opens up a perspective how the alleged *default-status* of "being straight" depends on the marginalization and pathologization of other sexualities and lifestyles, and views of sexual object-choice as fluid or changing. Adrienne Rich called the cultural system that installs straightness as natural, and all other forms of sexual affirmation as deviant or marginal, *compulsory heterosexuality* (1980) and her critique shed light on the vast number of social practices and conventions (from child education to tax law) at work to not only construct homosexuality as deviant, but also to make heterosexuality appear as a "natural" feature of a society built on gender difference.

Rich's critique of heterosexuality, whose *naturalness* or *self-evidentiality* is produced and upheld by a whole network of social conventions, is echoed by literary critic and queer theorist Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, whose book *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) elaborated on this complex structure of minute differentiations necessary to produce the effect of *natural straightness*:

[...] the homo/heterosexual definition has been a presiding master term of the past century, one that has [...] affected our culture through its ineffaceable marking particularly of the categories secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, discipline/terrorism, canonic/noncanonic, wholeness/decadence, urbane/provincial, domestic/foreign, health/illness, same/different,

active/passive, in/out, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, utopia/apocalypse, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntary/addiction. (11)

Sedgwick argued that a deconstructive approach must not only inspect this whole web of binary oppositions which lend the *master term* its meaning, she also questioned whether the reversal of these binaries would really disable their oppressive work. To *expose contradictions* and *reverse orders* (a rhetoric common in many deconstructionisms), she states, has also been a privileged gesture with which new knowledges and better terminologies have always asserted themselves, and not always to an emancipatory end. The destabilization of structures by tracing their self-contradicting operations, she cautions, therefore cannot be *identified with* a liberating politics in any easy way. Rather, the perspective of decentering that opens up structures to instability is open to both inclusionary and anti-inclusionary movements, and sometimes simply leads to the restructuring of oppressive effects:

[...] a deconstructive understanding of [...] binarisms makes it possible to identify them as sites that are peculiarly densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulations – through precisely the mechanisms of self-contradictory definition or, more succinctly, the double bind. Nor is a deconstructive analysis of such definitional knots, however necessary, at all sufficient to disable them. Quite the opposite: I would suggest that an understanding of their irresolvable instability has been continually available, and has continually lent

discursive authority, to antigay as well as gay cultural forces of this century. [T]here is reason to believe that the oppressive sexual system of the past hundred years was if anything born and bred in the briar patch of the most notorious and repeated decenterings and exposures" (10-11).

With Sedgwick's cautionary remark, acknowledging that power and oppression frequently emanate through the *uncovering of definitional knots* within culture, the approach itself may appear a bit stranger to us. Its very terms of destabilization, decentering and deconstruction – aiming at the undoing of X – do not guarantee a liberating critique, but its reversals work both ways. In order to conclude this article, deconstruction's necessary work therefore also entails a problematization of *approaches* themselves.

Activist Conclusion

So, the first move in an article on deconstruction as an *Approach to American Studies* would be to deconstruct what "approach", "American" and "Studies" mean, and that is to think about what things, concepts and politics are excluded and obscured by the seeming simplicity and self-evidentiality of these terms. As I have tried to show, this work of deconstruction is less a clear methodology or approach that gets us nearer to things. It is not an explication of a static sense of the world, of culture, or of texts – it is also not a particular politics. Rather, deconstruction is the *work* of Amer-

ican Studies to make itself and its objects strange and difficult, to undo (and retrace) the very meaning-making structures we operate in.

As *work*, it is – like the political critiques of feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism and critical race theory, to which American Studies owes itself as a discipline – an activity, an activism. It is what we do, in order to avoid erecting and naturalizing specific meanings of culture. It is the work necessary to maintain a view of culture and politics as things that are fluid, vital, changeable, complicated, historical, diverse and in need need of being worked through again and again. And in as much as there is no end to culture or politics, and no end to their complications and complexities, there is no end to work.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses". In: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971 [1970]. 121-76.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972 [1957].
- Beaver, Harold. "Homosexual Signs", *Critical Inquiry* 8.1 (1981): 99-120.
- Benhabib, Seyla. "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance". *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. Ed. Seyla Benhabib. Routledge: New York and London, 1995. 17-34.
- Chow, Rey. *Ethics After Idealism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1988): 67-79.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa". *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-893.

Combahee River Collective. "A Black Feminist Statement". *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Eds. Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981.

Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena. And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973 [1967].

–. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974 [1967].

–. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978 [1967].

–. *Dissemination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 [1972].

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1977 [1966].

–. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 1977 [1975].

–. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon, 1978 [1976].

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985 [1974].

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969 [1964].

Macksey, Richard, and Eugenio Donato, eds. *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". *Signs*, 5.4 (1980): 631-660.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1994 [1978].

de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977 [1916].

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1990.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?". *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988: 271-313.