

# Deconstructing the Grand Narrative in *Harry Potter*: Inclusion/Exclusion and Discriminatory Policies in Fiction and Practice

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*Literary criticism is generally considered too abstract for scholars dedicated to empirical research. Yet a deconstructionist analysis of Harry Potter reveals its strong relevance to political scientists and policy makers. This article focuses on how the stories of Harry Potter form a clear representation of the grand narrative of liberal values and multiculturalism. I show how this narrative is based on a masked, but nevertheless fundamental, contradiction that answers to the need of “absolute” identity, and that this generates discriminatory policies in both fiction and reality. The Harry Potter novels reflect how current racist, illiberal, discriminatory policies, such as the Arizona Immigration Law (SB1070), are not an aberrant contradiction of the liberal narrative. Rather, they are a direct product of it and therefore a result of its foundations identified in the exclusion of the other in the search for a sense of identity.*

**Keywords:** Grand Narrative, Deconstruction, Inclusion and Exclusion, Identity, Difference, Différance, Harry Potter, Colonialist Discourse, Binary Opposition, Discrimination.

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*Los académicos dedicados a la búsqueda empírica de resultados que tengan un impacto real y visible en el mundo, generalmente consideran que la crítica literaria es demasiado abstracta para ellos. Sin embargo, un análisis deconstructivo de Harry Potter revela la importancia de estas novelas para politólogos y hacedores de política pública. Este artículo demuestra como Harry Potter es una clara representación de la gran narrativa de valores liberales y de multiculturalismo. Argumento que esta gran narrativa está basada en una contradicción escondida que responde a la necesidad de identidad absoluta y que, debido a esto, la gran narrativa tiende a generar políticas públicas discriminatorias tanto en las novelas como en el mundo real. El análisis de Harry Potter demostrará como políticas racistas y discriminatorias, como la Ley de Inmigración del estado de Arizona (SB1070) la cual fue diseñada en un país liberal, no son una contradicción aberrante de la narrativa liberal. Más bien son el producto y resultado directo de la narrativa, y por lo tanto son el resultado de sus cimientos que se encuentran en la exclusión del Otro para encontrar un sentido de identidad.*

Literary criticism is generally considered too abstract for scholars dedicated to empirical findings that have a real and visible impact on the world. Yet a deconstructionist analysis of *Harry Potter* reveals the relevance of these novels, not only for children or literary scholars (Howard 2009; Ostry 2003) but for political scientists and policy makers too. In this article, I argue that the Potter series is a clear representation of the *grand narrative* or *grand récit*<sup>1</sup> of liberal values and multiculturalism, a narrative based on a masked, but nevertheless fundamental, contradiction that is constantly reproduced in the books by the actions of the magical world. As I show, for all its liberal drive toward toleration and inclusion, this grand narrative ends up generating discriminatory policies in the Potter saga in the same way it does in otherwise liberal democratic regimes in the real world. The novels exemplify how such liberal values—which ostensibly embrace an inclusive approach to difference—are grounded on subplots that constantly replicate and reproduce colonialist discourse; that is, discourse based on the perpetual exclusion of the Other. Individual, collective, and political action is informed by this grand narrative in Rowling’s stories, reproducing the contradiction: inclusive liberal values upfront, exclusive colonialist discourse in the background. The construction of the grand narrative and the reproduction of its problems respond to one fundamental objective: the search for an essential and transcendental identity. In the books, attempts to solve problems derived from the grand narrative tend to be unsuccessful, discriminatory and, at the policy level, irresponsible. The results are not too dissimilar in those cases where contemporary problem solving in “the real world” draws from that same grand narrative.

There is a wide array of Potter scholarship based on poststructuralist theory (Blackman 2008; Dresang 2002; Yocaris 2004) and literary criticism (Anatol 2003; Huls 2004; Ostry 2003). These analyses offer sound and compelling explorations of the meanings conveyed by the series. The present study turns the insights from this literature toward a more central examination of the political and practical importance of deconstructing *Harry Potter*. My central contention is that the Potter series offers a stark revelation of how the colonial discourse hidden in the liberal grand narrative generates policies that are profoundly discriminatory. These policies do not represent a dramatic disconnection and denial of liberal values, fueled by the reanimation of old, illiberal racist sentiments. Rather, in the stories as well as in the real world, they are the direct result and *product* of the liberal *grand récit* which is inescapably grounded in the inherent contradictions of liberal thought and practice. The antagonistic cycle of inclusion/exclusion found at the heart of the liberal project is never resolved in the books, since individual and collective action are unconsciously framed by the grand narrative. The problem of discrimination therefore prevails, very much as it does in our nonmagical world (see e.g., Jouma 2011).

<sup>1</sup> I use a rather loose understanding of “grand narrative” that ranges from Derrida’s (1993) and Mowitt’s (1992) “text” to the “metanarrative” of Lyotard (1984).

In the first section I use the Potter series to identify how the desire of absolute and transcendental identity creates a magical grand narrative that is founded on inherent contradictions. Drawing from deconstructionist and postcolonialist literature, in the second section, I outline the theoretical reasons underpinning the constant reproduction of the inherent contradictions in *Harry Potter* and in the liberal grand narrative. Here I establish how political action—stemming from both the inclusive side of liberal values and their necessary exclusive corollaries—generally follows the same *grand récit* in its attempts to escape the tensions created by the inherent contradictions of the liberal identity. In section three, I look at how recent practical policies reflect this same tension. Recently, there has been a surge of clearly discriminatory policies in liberal regimes in Europe and North America. Reactions to these policies tend to view them as an aberration of liberal values (see Maddow 2010), the result of a faulty or incomplete commitment to, and application of, liberalism, rather than a necessary expression of its internal contradictions. An examination of the grand narrative of liberalism, edified by deconstructing *Harry Potter*, nevertheless reveals the role of these policies in upholding an “absolute identity” that is far from stable.

Under these circumstances, it might appear that discrimination is a problem that is impossible to solve. Yet a deeper understanding of its origins may well permit a more responsible approach to “the Other” who is generally excluded from discourse. Responsible policy can only be generated with awareness of whom we exclude and finally affect (Spivak 1994).

### ***Harry Potter and the Magical Grand Récit: Inclusion or Difference***

What is magic? What is the magical? Is it at all important? The answers to these questions are far from obvious. There is nevertheless an intuitive sense of knowing the answers: we think we know what the magical is. We *relate* the magical to wonderful things and powers, to the noble and the superior, to the wise and knowledgeable. Still, *relating* is not the same as *knowing* the identity of the magical. This is exactly the problem that *Harry Potter* and his entire universe face: they believe their identity to be absolute, positive, stable, and transcendental because it is related to wonderful and admirable characteristics. A narrative is thus constructed to justify and legitimate all knowledge (Lyotard 1984, 37) created under the magical narrative. However, the identity that fuels the creation of the narrative is not transcendental or absolute. The fundamental contradiction of the magical narrative is that to sustain apparent absoluteness it requires difference and exclusion. Individual and collective action that is informed by the magical narrative tends to reaffirm identity by perpetuating the exclusion of the Other, but in a subtle manner, hiding discrimination in the background. Political actions reproduce this contradiction.

Carefully read, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (Rowling 1997) captures how there is no positive identity of the magical. We are never told what it *is*. Yet we assume a certain meaning from what it is not. Understanding what

is magical requires the production of clear-cut differences between the magical and the Other. The beginning of the book introduces the existence of two worlds—the magical and the nonmagical—and therefore to a primary binary opposition. The nonmagical world is represented by Harry’s Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon: very conventional and bigoted personalities who are unable to accept difference or even tolerate it. Harry (whom we already know does not belong to the nonmagical world), however, is portrayed as the honest, sincere, good-natured child whose lifelong mistreatment under the rigid rule of his aunt, uncle, and awful cousin Dudley generates sympathy. A further characterization of the magical world emerges with the arrival of hearty, forthright Rubeus Hagrid, the keeper of keys and grounds at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The scene where Hagrid encounters Uncle Vernon encapsulates the confrontation between the two cultures. This fundamental binary opposition frames the rest of the story.

Since Hagrid does not know the essential and absolute meaning of magical, his only means to convey what it is to Harry is through differentiating the magical world from the Other. It is clear from the characterization of the Other that this difference is far from being objective; it renders the magical identity as *superior* on several counts, and eventually as transcendental and absolute. Hagrid easily and comically forces Vernon into submission (by bending the barrel of his gun backward) and provides the referent which shapes the characterization of nonmagical people: muggles. The magical/nonmagical dichotomy is established by difference. The reader understands that wizards and witches are born with the gift of magic, a gene that allows them to perform spells that is not bestowed on every person, therefore permitting a separation of societies, of worlds. Hagrid makes this clear when he turns in shock after finding out Harry was never informed by his aunt and uncle about his past or his relationship to the magical world—the world reserved for some that not everyone can become a part of (Rowling 1997, 50).

A superiority and hierarchy of the magical over the muggle is thus established. Uncle Vernon negatively reacts to the idea of Harry going off to magical school and decides he is not going to go. To this Hagrid answers,

“I’d like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him,” he said.

“A what?” said Harry, interested.

“A Muggle,” said Hagrid, “it’s what we call nonmagic folk like them. An’ it’s your bad luck you grew up in a family o’ the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on.” (Rowling 1997, 52-3)

This short dialogue reveals the foundation of the hierarchical values within the magical/muggle antithesis. It is a violent introduction to value judgments of what is best and what is worst. However, such epistemic violence, as Spivak (2003, 318) calls it, is subtle, almost unnoticeable because it is applied by the story’s

dominant group. The characteristic of hierarchy is developed throughout all seven books of the series. We slowly internalize the greatness of the magical world with its castles, magic potions, tricks, and wonderful creatures and, by the end of the first book, the predominance of magical over nonmagical is accepted. There is no doubt that whatever is not magical is rendered either uninteresting or impotent and, by extension, not desirable and therefore excludable. The Ministry of magic designs policy toward muggles informed by this encompassing grand narrative, where magical is superior to muggle. And yet their policies require the magical world to be kept secret from the muggles. Why?

According to wizards, if muggles knew about the existence of the magical, they would want the wizards to use magic to solve all mundane problems (Rowling 1997, 65). The necessary implication is that muggles would recognize the superiority of the magical and would desire to be included in that world. Aunt Petunia (a muggle) and Argus Filch (a squib)<sup>2</sup> highlight this point, since both wished to be a part of the magical world but, as it was genetically impossible, they are constantly excluded.

In the construction of the magical narrative, magic is much better than nonmagic, and all who are not included are resentful, uninteresting, underdeveloped, and often ignorant. The discourse is constructed by the magical group; this is *their* perspective, how they see and perceive the world. After the differentiation has been completed and the magical obtained its identity and superiority, muggles are no longer important. All that is true, superior, and good will only come from the magical.

The magical narrative is thus established as an “institutional structure of knowing” (Mowitt 1992, 97) that legitimizes all structures, comparisons, studies, analyses, opinions, and binary oppositions that are informed by that narrative. New structures and hierarchies are established but only under the assumption of magical. Even though the magical derived its identity from its difference and opposition to the muggle, the muggle world is blurred to the point that the magical does appear absolute and transcendental, as if the muggles had never existed.

This absoluteness of structure is salient in how our knowledge of Other magical creatures, as well as policies toward them, is informed by the magical narrative. For example, the first novel divulges that there are several magical creatures (centaurs, unicorns, goblins, etc.), all of which have the capacity to generate their own collective identities. Our knowledge of them nevertheless greatly depends on how these Others serve the purposes of the dominating magical humans.

The depiction of goblins and centaurs as opposed to house elves exemplify this superiority. Goblins are characterized as short creatures who seem very smart although not necessarily friendly. This unfriendliness is further portrayed in the

<sup>2</sup> Squibs are the children of magical parents, who by an unfortunate quirk of the genetic lottery, were not born with the magical gene (see Rowling 1998, 145).

stories told by Ron's brother Bill and in the final characterization of the goblin Griphook. His help is fundamental for Harry to achieve his noble objectives. However, Griphook's behavior is calculating, opportunistic, self-interested, and eventually downright deceptive for he betrays Harry and his friends when they are about to escape from Bellatrix Lestrange's vault—a terrible act of treason, since Harry had rescued Griphook from Bellatrix's cruel tortures. A general feeling of cheating and lying pervades the representation of goblins from the wizards' point of view. Goblins are considerably different from wizards, and they hold beliefs about ownership and inheritance that diverge profoundly from any kind of human (Rowling 2007, 505-6). Most importantly, they resent inferior treatment and do not answer to any wizard master, in contradistinction to house elves (296). They clearly observe and accept the difference of the wizarding world from goblin society but do not accept or internalize inferiority, and this provides them with the "right" to act in their own interest and survival, independently of wizard well-being. These creatures act autonomously from how they are characterized by their putative dominators.

By contrast, house elves, represented primarily by Dobby, are enslaved to their masters for life unless liberated by the "master's" voluntary decision. Even though Dobby serves the house of Malfoy, he tries to help Harry, despite the internal conflicts this produces when he attempts to comply with his masters' directives. After Harry liberates him, Dobby is presented as "a free elf" who repeatedly demonstrates eternal gratitude to Harry, finally dying for him. Other house elves are introduced periodically and, although not all are sympathetic to Harry, they were certainly loyal to their masters. The magical human characterization of house elves, defined by loyalty, obedience, and inferiority, generates sympathy. The "bad" magical creature is against the noble wizard world; the "good" creature recognizes and subsumes itself under the supremacy of the Wizard, or, in the case of Dobby, the supremacy of wizarding values.

These examples not only provide knowledge about the Other; they also demonstrate the construction of the magical narrative in response to a need for absolute, or fully constituted, identity. The fundamental contradiction is clear: magical identity was never absolute, transcendental, independent, self-constituted; it is derived from, and maintained through, difference and opposition *vis-à-vis* the Other—a difference that is simultaneously resisted but required. If the Other disappeared, or was annihilated, the magical would be everything and nothing at the same time. The stability of the magical identity fundamentally depends, not on the total annihilation of the Other, but on its constant exclusion: the Other is simultaneously required, but marginalized.

This contradiction is reproduced by the characters openly or covertly. Since the magical narrative and identity agenda informs their actions, even the members of the magical human community are never beyond exclusion and discrimination. Harry and Hermione, for example, are muggle raised, which gives them the opportunity to reestablish the equality of muggles; but they never do it.

The moment Hermione and Harry were accepted into Hogwarts and got to know the magical world, most of their efforts were directed toward full acceptance into that world: the sorting hat realizes that Harry has a thirst to prove himself (Rowling 1997, 121); and Hermione's entire character is defined by being the best at every magical subject. Both understand the dichotomy, but are oblivious that they are progressively and voluntarily embracing the superiority of one side over the other. After living with wizards, Harry and Hermione's desire is to fully belong to this group, to have what appears to be an absolute and essential identity that overwrites (excludes) their muggle roots. Harry suffers whenever he has to return to the muggle world, but feels happy and free when he is finally rid of his muggle family. Something similar happens with Hermione, who has a much closer relationship with her parents who are more open to difference than Harry's Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon. But, at the end of the day, they are mundane dentists of the muggle world. She spends a lot of her holidays at the Weasleys and casts a memory charm on her parents so they can forget her and go on to live safely in Australia—indicating a strong preference for the magical over the nonmagical, and a rejection of her muggle roots.

The contradictory tension in the magical grand narrative is closest to the surface in Hermione's character and emerges in her activism for the inclusive, nondiscriminatory policies she promulgates in her Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare (SPEW), SPEW's objective is to liberate elves from enslavement (Rowling 2002, 224), but Hermione's solutions are unsuccessful and contradictory—while attempting to promote liberty, they actually produce further exclusion and discrimination. When others criticize her efforts, arguing that house elves are happy the way they are, she answers in desperation that they only seem happy because “they're uneducated and brainwashed” (239). Hermione assumes elvish needs and values mirror her own, and so she fails to ask the elves their own opinion of their needs, or hear them when they are voiced. Her value preferences, based on magical human discourse, consequently reproduce the view that house elves are inferior in that they are incapable of constructing their own meanings of freedom and happiness, in this way reinforcing the superiority of her newly adopted magical human identity. Hermione's approach to resolving difference and thus fully constituting a magical identity in many ways mirrors the inclusive solutions proposed by philosophical liberalism and, as I show later on, the very same difficulties she experiences apply to real world policies.

Voldemort's solution to difference contrasts with Hermione's strikingly, yet his political actions are also informed by the magical grand narrative's search for a fully constituted, transcendental identity. Believing that excessive inclusion and equality threatened to dilute into oblivion the meaning and value of possessing a wizarding identity, his overtly exclusive and ultimately violent ideology acknowledges the necessary exclusionary dynamic of identity construction far more than any other character. He does not assume that liberty and equality are possible while at the same time maintaining magical as transcendental, or



“pure.” The exclusionary tension is thus embraced, celebrated, and ultimately institutionalized as a method to openly reinforce the pure magical identity, rather than hidden, denied, and unsuccessfully struggled against. Nevertheless, on this model magical identity cannot be fully self-constituting (i.e., independent of the Other, and thus fully pure) either, since difference is required, if only by virtue of its continuous exclusion.

Given that Voldemort only understands magical purity through the tension created by continuous exclusionary practices, had he not been defeated, his policies would have necessarily become increasingly exclusionary of more and more groups. If Voldemort had been successful in his ultimate objective of fully subjugating—or even obliterating—the Other, rather than achieving his aim of absolute identity, he would have achieved its opposite: the pure magical identity would cease to be. Attempting to overcome difference by annihilating it thus fares no better than solutions that endeavor to resolve difference by including it.

In both Hermione’s and Voldemort’s approaches, difference is not resolved but perpetuated because the ideas of transcendental meaning, origin, and identity require it even as they aspire to transcend it. In the Potter narrative, discrimination in the foreground and background ensues. Jacques Derrida has argued that this search for transcendental meaning characterizes Western thought and the narratives it constructs (Sarup 1993, 37). Despite its wondrous characteristics, the magical world of *Harry Potter* fiction is not so dissimilar from the real world.

### **Construction of the Colonial Discourse: The Arrival of a Grand Narrative**

If the Potter narrative reflects important elements of the real world, we should be openly worried about how the construction of identity fuels discrimination. We should also be concerned with the fact that discourses of domination and exclusion are not necessarily evident, as is the case of the liberal narrative of Western thought (in the books personified in Hermione’s inclusive approach where rationalism solves everything, or at least appears to on the surface). How could liberal values of freedom and equality lead so inexorably to their opposite: discrimination and exclusion? Two different approaches contribute to the answer to this question given here. The first, based on Derridean deconstruction, theoretically explains the construction of discourse and narrative in such a way that it requires exclusion to provide an apparent absolute or transcendental identity, in this sense the narrative is doomed to reproduce the contradiction. The second approach uses similar theoretical principles, but attempts to apprehend the internal contradiction of liberalism historically, by identifying its occurrence in the construction of colonialist discourse. That discourse was eventually excluded as part of the creation of the liberal narrative.

### Derrida and Différance

One of the most fundamental criticisms Derrida made of Western thought concerns its deep obsession with discovering “transcendental” truths that could not be questioned (Derrida 1976; Sarup 1993, 37). In this sense, the creation of a grand narrative or “text,” as Derrida and Mowitt (1992) call them, derives from what appear to be essential or “transcendental” truths which, in turn, provide structure to understand the world (Zehfuss 2009, 139), and determine thought and epistemological structures. Through deconstruction, Derrida has shown that these “transcendental” truths are fictional (Derrida 1978; Sarup 1993, 37). In order for them to be transcendental, they would have had to be *a priori*, which is not the case; they are constructions.

The basis of construction of these “truths,” for Derrida, requires the exclusion and discrimination of the Other (Other realities, Other signs) in order to derive identity. The Other is found on the opposite side of a binary opposition. This idea of identity through difference is drawn from Saussurean linguistics where signs (words or units) are provided identity (meaning) and value through their binary *opposition* (De Saussure 1974). De Saussure (1974, 120, emphasis in the original) claimed that “in the linguistic system there are only differences *without positive terms*”—in other words, we understand something by what it is not. In this sense, identity is never positive but generated by what it differentiates itself from: mother–father–daughter, magical–nonmagical.

Value is awarded through two fundamental characteristics of the dichotomy. The first is that the terms of the opposition are mutually exclusive (one is differentiated from the other, and therefore derives identity), something or someone is either one or the other, but never both (Zehfuss 2009, 139). An example would be the dichotomy magical/muggle, one can only be either wizard or muggle, but not both at the same time. The second feature of the dichotomy is that there is an integrated, albeit subtle, hierarchy of one term over the other (139). In the binary opposition magical/muggle, one prefers magical over muggle. Value is therefore established in the preference of one over another and that an entity can be only one of the concepts of the dichotomy. The dichotomies that are structural and not derivative establish, through this hierarchy of value, particular paradigms or hegemonic structures that derive from the preferred concept, eliminating the realities of the Other (Belsey 2002; Sarup 1993, 37). With time, and sometimes coercive means, the second word of the antithesis becomes obsolete leaving a “transcendental” sign from which all other binary oppositions derive and from which a stable grand narrative is constructed.

Nevertheless, deconstructive work has shown that these “superior” identities are anything but stable (Bhabba 1995, 32), since they are founded on what Derrida (1978) calls *Différance*.<sup>3</sup> *Différance* implies that signification or

<sup>3</sup> *Différance* is also a Derridean concept that refers to difference and to deferral. The space of difference and deferral between and among signs is where the possibility of identity and difference is found. See Jacques Derrida (1978, 95).

meaning is determined by difference but also is constantly deferred and never fully present. For example, the identity of the magical is derived by the oppositional difference of the Other. As it is a derivative identity it can never be absolute and essential, it emerges from and is constituted by a series of differences and, as such, is always dependent on that system of differences. It follows that the identity of the wizard is constantly deferred—just like understanding “mother” requires an understanding of “father,” “daughter,” “son,” so understanding “wizard” requires Other identities (muggles and magical creatures). This implies that even though the wizard might desire a fully constituted identity by completely eliminating the Other, this is not possible. The wizard’s identity cannot be understood without the Other on account of their difference, and because this difference left a trace on the identity of the wizard. Finally, magical identity can only be stable by perpetuating the Other precisely in the place of the Other, never redeeming its equality or liberty.

Othering and difference create illusions of full and essential identities which appear “transcendental.” But deconstruction reveals how the transcendental is actually the derivative and functions on the basis of the existence of the Other it so much tries to exclude. This encompasses the fundamental contradiction of a grand narrative: the Other is simultaneously resisted but required—not fully embraced and included but not fully eliminated either. Processes of discrimination that reflect this resistance and requirement are therefore crucial to give an appearance of stability to the desired identity.

### **Colonialist Discourse**

In the second process, Derridean Différance is clear. One of the fundamental characteristics of the colonialist discourse is that its development answered primarily to the needs of the colonizers. These needs range from the moral justification of their actions (Janmohamed 1985, 63) to identity in opposition to the other (Loomba 2005, 45). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said’s (1978, 40) argument suggests the European opposition to the Other was fundamental to their self-conception, and so the roots of colonialist discourse are found in binary oppositions (143). The first difference that is the most evident to the senses is physical, in terms of skin color, height, physical strength etc., as is the case with the wizards and goblins or house elves. The predominant group posits their characteristics as superior to the Other largely on the basis that they were able to subjugate them. Therefore, the physical distinctions are transferred to moral and even metaphysical levels as Janmohamed (1985, 61) argues, which begins the conversion of a narrative into a grand narrative.

At this point, the dichotomy Western/native encompasses several other dichotomies such as dominator/dominated, civilized/uncivilized, good/evil, superior/inferior, developed/underdeveloped, etc. The assumption of superiority, of one culture over another, forms the first step toward the construction of colonialist discourse. It is important to note that this alleged superiority is a fiction created by and for the dominating groups’ need of an

essential identity. Discourse exalted the “superior” characteristics of the dominators to fuel their own self-conception; therefore this imagery was transmitted primarily among themselves. An example of this inner-group transmission is found in literature. Literary works of nineteenth-century Britain<sup>4</sup> contained important imagery of England’s imperialism (Said 1993, 62), and as such they were cultural representations of the English self, which in turn were distributed or directed to a primarily English audience (Spivak 1985, 243). Colonialist discourse and its binary oppositions were not yet internalized by the colonized peoples.

Colonialism ended, and processes of decolonization began. Nevertheless, colonialist discourse was maintained and apparently internalized by the “postcolonial subjects” (Janmohamed 1985, 62) or, as Frantz Fanon (1995, 153) puts it, the colonial efforts “delay the crystallization of national consciousness for a few years.” On this model, the native peoples, after so many years of domination, finally accept the colonialist discourse and integrate the moral, political, economic, and social values of the West (Tyson 2006, 419), subjugating their own values.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the postcolonial subject has been “taught” and has learned to desire the position and life of the colonizer (Bhabba 1994, 117). The grand narrative is established.

Gayatri Spivak (1990) argues the grand narrative informs Western knowledge and therefore is completely biased: it only represents history from the Western colonialist point of view, eliminating Other realities, and establishing paradigmatic structures and knowledges (Kinvall 2009, 319). This is the case of the Enlightenment project from which a paradigm of knowledge derived. The rational, knowing, enlightened subject is primarily a white man (Loomba 2005, 60). A vast number of postcolonialist studies (Bhabba 1995; Said 1978, 1993; Spivak 2003; Suleri 1992) have concentrated on this very kind of “colonial violence” (Loomba 2005, 51), for example, the implementation of English literary education, institutions, and systems of government in the British colonies.

With the predominance of liberal thinkers in Europe and North America, including John Locke, J. S. Mill, Immanuel Kant, and James Madison, the Western narrative changed to adopt liberal values of inclusion, liberty, freedom, and equality. Even though these values were considerably different from those promoted by colonialism, they were still embedded in the supremacy of Western over native and therefore in discrimination and exclusion of the Other.

It is not surprising, given this Western construction, that postcolonial subjects experience deep frustration when they realize they can never achieve full inclusion, they stay native and will never be a Westerner (Bhabba 1994,

<sup>4</sup>Two examples provided by Said (1993) in *Culture and Imperialism* are Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*.

<sup>5</sup>This is particularly important for Gayatri Spivak since she identifies that feminism and feminist norms are, by definition, European. See Spivak (1985).

117). This frustration is precisely the social fuel of revolts, anticolonialist movements, and nationalisms all of which form clear examples of the rejection of colonial violence by ex-colonies. They are also a salient expression of the instability of the assigned identity.

A similar phenomenon is observed with Western liberal identity, which is also unstable insofar as it requires a continual investment in the perpetual exclusion of the Other to gain stability. The problem is that liberal values are based on tolerance and inclusion, but in order for these to be considered transcendental truths, they require an Other to be excluded. In other words, tolerance and inclusion lead to intolerance and exclusion. Among other things, the contradiction plays itself out in terms of policy design and implementation.

### **Policy in the Liberal State: Perpetuating the Contradiction**

The liberal grand narrative informs knowledge and therefore individual, collective, and political action. At the same time, this knowledge brings with it the contradictions on which it was built to further its search for identity and to establish and maintain this identity as absolute and transcendental. To trace this process in terms of state policy, the following examples can be categorized into two main forms: pro-liberal and anti-liberal values. Both are designed within liberal regimes, and both are the product of the same contradiction.

#### **Subtle Discrimination: Silencing the Other**

Policy designed by international institutions, particularly the World Bank, exemplifies the first case. Created in 1944 to help reconstruction efforts after the Second World War, today the World Bank's main objective is to reduce poverty "through an inclusive and sustainable globalization" (World Bank 2012). This objective appears highly coherent with the liberal values it represents: eliminating poverty promotes both liberty and equality. However, Spivak (1990, 1994) argues that the World Bank policies are generally informed by the liberal grand narrative, and therefore it (re)presents and silences the Other (see also Morton 2008, 60). Without asking the Other what they needed, and therefore silencing the Other, the World Bank has designed policies derived from the *dominant thought* of what is best. In this light, Spivak (1994) makes a strong criticism of the World Bank's Food Action Plan, which was organized to aid the peasantry of Bangladesh. This "Megaproject" was designed to help the citizenry deal with the floods that come every year (48). The plan generated discomfort in several Bangladeshi communities since they had already developed their own methods of dealing with these annual disasters and, instead of providing useful assistance, the Megaproject undercut other important activities in the zone (48).

The World Bank Food Action Plan conference allowed the possibility of voice to the subaltern as it was organized as a dialogue. However, Spivak (1994) argues that the Other—in the case of this conference, Abdus Sattar Kahn—was

only given 20 minutes to speak and was subsequently mistranslated (61). For Spivak, the implication is a silencing of the subaltern. The policies were designed with the best liberal intentions, but Spivak's deconstructive analysis highlights how groups were silenced in the very process that appeared to "give" them a voice. The parallels with Hermione are obvious. Such exclusion through silencing primarily responds to the liberal grand narrative's search for identity. By silencing the Other, the liberal structure of knowledge is justified and legitimized as absolute and transcendental—an arena to voice interests and perspectives and thus promote inclusive freedom and equality is provided for, but the voice itself is not wholeheartedly taken into consideration. Pro-liberal policies informed by the liberal narrative tend to be unsuccessful as they continue perpetuating exclusion in the background, while claiming inclusion upfront.

### **Overt Discrimination: Preventing Identity Dilution**

Following the earlier contrast between Hermione and Voldemort, the more dramatic second kind of policy is openly discriminatory. In this particular case, I take the example of the Arizona Immigration Law (SB1070) and recent related legislation in other U.S. states that have emerged within a country that self-identifies as a defender of liberal values, and as leader of the free world. The Arizona legislation has been considered as profoundly antimigrant since it looks to reduce or, if possible, eliminate all illegal immigration from the state in two main ways. First, the law awards the state police force power to investigate any person whom they have reason to suspect is not legally in the country (see Mayer *et al.* 2010, 31), which is conducted through the racial differentiation of migrants. The second way is through attrition: that is, making the lives of illegal migrants miserable, so that they will be discouraged to travel illegally to the United States (Waslin 2012). This is most notable in the 2011 Alabama legislation (HB 56).

The reasons behind this spate of legislation have been seated in the growing violence that Arizona has experienced due to an increase of illegal migration. Also, the concern of these states is that Mexican drug cartels will enter the state and promote more violence. However, as Winograd (2012) argues, these two reasons are based on myths that cannot be proven, and even if they could, are not sufficient to promote exclusion and discrimination in a way that is consonant with the liberal values that inform many other U.S. policies. In this sense, the Arizona law seems to be the opposite of liberal values, a completely disconnected aberration. One could argue that this legislation represents the creation of a new discourse attempting to deny or rival liberal values, fueled by old racist sentiments reanimated by increased violence or economic troubles. This is not the case (see Beck 2009).

Arizona's claims are based on the fundamental difference that is required by the liberal grand narrative: we (Americans) are good and liberal, the Other (illegal migrants from Mexico and elsewhere) are bad and violent (see Rushing 2010). This binary opposition is necessary to maintain a transcendental identity

(Dodge 2012) that does not make much sense anymore. The liberal narrative based on freedom, equality, liberty, and inclusion brought about several social movements from the Black Panthers to the Chicano movements of the 1960s, demanding the application of these values to their particular minorities. Likewise, several migration policies, designed in the 1970s and 1980s, included in their package reunification of migrants with their families,<sup>6</sup> and awarded green residency to illegal migrants that had been in the country for a certain amount of time.<sup>7</sup> Not unlike Voldemort's resistance to measures that greatly increased inclusion in the Potter narrative, such inclusive measures also affect how difference is perceived and risks its declarification. From a deconstructionist perspective, the transcendental liberal identity risks losing its meaning because it risks losing its ascendancy: those who were previously the Other were being included. The openly discriminatory approach of Arizona law is nevertheless informed by the liberal narrative: the creators of the Arizona law continue to believe in the Liberal as absolute, but that necessarily requires the Other to be excluded. The current reaction derived from the grand narrative seems to be to go to a full-out state and social battle to reinstate it (see Briggs 2011).

A similar case has recently occurred in Great Britain, where multicultural values had promoted the inclusion of Other cultures. In 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that all cultural groups that do not promote universal human rights, democracy, liberty, and freedom have to be cut from any governmental funding (Kuenssberg 2011). From a deconstructionist perspective, the promotion of multiculturalism is providing a serious challenge to the absolute identity of "Britishness" (Kuenssberg 2011).

However, preserving the grand liberal narrative involves mechanisms that focus on internal as well as external maintenance. It is not surprising that Derrida (1992) paid much attention to educational institutions. Like Hogwarts, they are one of the primary locations where the dominating structures of the grand narrative are reproduced. In 2010, the state of Arizona passed HB 2281 which primarily legislates a ban against ethnic studies in state programs (Amster 2010). A main criticism to this legislation is that it "takes the teachings of one culture—the colonizer's—and makes it the standard version of history while literally banning other accounts, turning the master narrative into the 'normal' one, and further denigrating marginalized perspectives" (Amster 2010). Amster's criticism is accurate; however his response that solidarity and equality will counteract such legislation successfully is questioned by a deconstructionist account. These "perverse" laws are not the product of inherent bigotry and injustice, or the last gasp of

<sup>6</sup>The Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 set important emphasis on the reunification of families.

<sup>7</sup>Even though the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 harshened penalties for employers who hired illegal immigrants, it also provided amnesty for 3 million illegal immigrants.

anachronistic discriminatory values that liberalism has been unable to fully squash, yet one day aspires to eliminate for good. The perspective offered here is that they are the product of actions informed by a grand narrative that is founded on inherent contradictions rooted in the Enlightenment quest for transcendent universal truths, values, and identities (Liberal Democrat Voice 2009). On Derrida's account, insofar as that quest continues to promote the ideal of absolute identity, the contradiction will continue to be reproduced.

### Conclusions

Derrida (1976, 1978) labels such contradictions—like the ones identified in the Harry Potter series and in the policies discussed in this article—as “*aporias*.”<sup>8</sup> These *aporias* are an “insoluble logical difficulty” (Bass 1978, xviii). The stories of *Harry Potter* exhibit a number of *aporias*, such as the unseemingly reaffirmation of a colonial discourse in the background of a primary plot based on upholding human rights and liberal values. *Aporias* are a starting point, not to know, but to think (Derrida 1993): to think about these contradictions, to think about the discourses and beliefs that generated them, and to think about the problems they represent.

This task is an urgent one. The contemporary world has apparently found transcendental truths on the value of human beings, the environment, communities, the originality of traditions, etc. Institutions, ranging from the state to international organizations, design policy with the interest of furthering these “transcendental” truths. However, contradictions are present, and this can lead to policies reaffirming transcendental truths and identities structured in a discourse of domination and not necessarily dialogue. This does not mean that human rights, tolerance, or self-determination are values that are not worth pursuing, it only warns against their origin and defense as truths. Deconstruction of liberal or other values does not imply *destruction*, it implies awareness, consciousness, and responsibility. In this sense, whatever the purpose of policy overall, it must be responsible to the Other, and this responsibility cannot be achieved without thinking and without awareness of the discursive and linguistic origins that exclude the Other, overtly or otherwise.

Some objections have been raised against the use of deconstruction as a starting point for policy–design analysis, including the worry that global problems and threats require political tools to solve them and not post-structuralist, including deconstructionist, thinking (see Spivak 1990, 24). It is nevertheless important to stress that immediate solutions without sufficient reflection can lead to the continuity and reproduction of narratives that actually contribute to the problems. The point of deconstruction, as Spivak uses it to analyze World Bank policies, is to unravel hidden discourses that contribute to

<sup>8</sup> *Aporias* are considered the blindspots, the roadblocks or contradictions of philosophical truth (see Morton 2008, 43).



the problems policies are directed to solving. Without a textual understanding of the origins and evolution of discrimination, it seems unlikely any real solution can be designed. As with other theoretical approaches, deconstruction contributes toward responsibility in policy design and political action. Responsible policy can only be achieved by denying the temptation of Othering, of constructing the Other under our own values, and allowing the possibility of a real ethical engagement to understand the Other and not to construct or use the Other (Morton 2008, 63).

### About the Author

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