

Native Elites and Nationalism: Reflections on I/indigenous Epistemologies and Decolonization

Troy A. Richardson
Cornell University

Often the engrained habits of reading and teaching in philosophy can easily lead to a misrecognition or failure to recognize the nuance of a different philosophical teaching. This all too often is the problem of not knowing what to listen for. Thus, I want to recognize the significance of the “reflexive check” occurring in the essay “Teacher Formation and the Epistemic Suppression of Borinquen,” as it fosters a powerful philosophizing of coloniality and decoloniality at the intersections of histories of imperialism, racialization, education, and the deeply personal.¹ This check, interpreted as *testimonio*, teaches through a moment of vulnerability that opens a space of imagining and enabling a shared world. To expand philosophical horizons in this form is precisely a decolonial move, crucial to a hemispheric interrogation of and vision for philosophy of education.

Through a recuperative exposition of one of the central figures of nineteenth-century Borinquen, Ramón Betances, Ariana Gonzalez establishes a world that enables alternative horizons for responding to questions of resistance, nationalism, privileged sites of education, and cosmopolitanism. In doing so, her essay provides for the best kind of decolonial project as scholarly investigation, prompting philosophical redirection for different modes of being and doing for oneself, a kind of intellectual reclamation that also serves as a teaching and invitation to others. Gonzalez’s discussion also poses difficult questions on “elite education” and the site of decolonial thinking: the who, how, and what that is left out of training in philosophy of education and what it is to unfold decolonial projects within such elite spaces.

In the spirit of learning through vulnerability, my comments reveal something of the ebb and flow of difference in and at times estrangement not only from philosophy as a discipline but, more tellingly, the very subfields from which I think my call for philosophical inclusion emanates — Indigenous Studies and the histories of the schooling experience of Indigenous peoples in the United States. Like Gonzalez’s location in Caribbean Studies broadly understood, we would both appear to share a commitment to the scholarly development of these fields, but we do so with a clear-sighted recognition of the many privileges associated with such a project. This is especially so given our investment in thinking *philosophically* — that is, with a disciplinary background in philosophy — in such sites about those like Betances, whose experiences and understandings seem to resonate so deeply with our own. By responding to Gonzalez from the space of Indigenous education and research, I hope my comments can be useful for further outlining the tensions and opportunities in the moment-to-moment work of decolonial thinking.

TRACING EPISTEMIC COMPLEXITY IN ENACTING DECOLONIAL HORIZONS

Let me attempt to draw out Gonzalez’s theme of epistemic suppression and epistemic reconstitution as it has been woven through the essay. U.S. colonial

policies for assimilationist education in Puerto Rico, including teacher training and curriculum, enacted epistemic violence upon generations of students. Not unlike U.S. practices of boarding schools for Native American youth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the schooling in Borinquen was designed (and learning overall conceived) as a project for a “ruthless dislocation,” to borrow a phrase from Gayatri Spivak.² There is no way to deny the calculated ruthlessness at work in these assimilative programs of the United States and the epistemic violence endured by too many students and their families. Moreover, I take it that in many areas of her text, Gonzalez would further agree with Spivak that, “great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which the other of Europe could cathect, could occupy (invest in) its itinerary.”³

Or maybe not. That is, it is unclear if Gonzalez would embrace the notion of the obliteration of Borinquen, as she also writes of figures like Betances as material for an epistemic reconstitution. Indeed, Gonzalez realizes her decolonial project and epistemic reconstitution through a reading of the life and writings of Betances. She writes in this regard that “[Betances] provides Antilleans, Puerto Ricans in particular, material for epistemic reconstitution.” Nevertheless, Gonzalez clearly subscribes to Spivak’s descriptions of the ways in which imperialist policies enacted the ruthless dislocation of the symbols and patterns of expression for the colonized peoples, even where I suspect she (Gonzalez) rejects the unqualified assertion that the textual ingredients for such a reconstitution have been obliterated. In such a moment, Gonzalez takes a position like that of many in the field of Indigenous education and research who speak of access to indigenous epistemologies — those very textual ingredients that Spivak argues have been obliterated.

Gonzalez’s focus on Betances is nonetheless revealing, which is to say he is supremely interpretable according to so many of the ways in which we are disciplinarily trained to read such figures. Indeed, Gonzalez’s reinterpretation of Betances is crucially important for the kind of liberatory imagination he described, rooted as it was in his critique of racialized slavery and the ideologies that upheld systematic forms of social and economic oppression. But it is also true that the private tutoring he received in his youth, along with his extended training as a physician in Paris, one would begin to recognize the complex role that elite education has in providing the philosophic and/or theoretic attitude that would seem essential to his work as an abolitionist, Parisian diplomat, physician, medical researcher, and scholar — as well as his creative writing. So, it must be said that the assertion of the importance of Betances as a philosopher of liberatory politics speaks to not only a resonance with Gonzalez as anti-imperialist but, just as importantly, a resonance with his intellectual culture. While accepting Spivak’s claims may not feel especially satisfying, and one can, I think, argue about degrees of obliteration, it seems to me that the philosophic and/or theoretic attitude realized through schooling is crucial to both Betances and Gonzalez in their similar and different imaginings of and enactments for decolonial projects *de Borinquen*.

Indeed, the pedagogical sites in which Gonzalez’s larger philosophical project of epistemic reconstitution is directed includes the enactment of a decolonial

teacher education. Where she asks “what does teacher education become when more attentive to context?,” the answer seems clear; decolonial education becomes focused on local, indigenous figures (great men and women) insofar as they model critical analysis of and strategic responses to the specific economic, historical, legal and, social situations of their own time. Recovering those figures and their works is a very important intellectual effort, translatable to curriculum at all levels that might contribute to fundamental shifts in how teachers and students conceive of themselves and the kinds of futures that can be made possible in their classrooms. But, as I have been suggesting, much care would have to be taken with regard to the textual ingredients and the philosophic and/or theoretic interpretive apparatus for any claims of a reconstituted epistemology *de Borinquen*.

While I look forward to a continuing dialogue with Gonzalez on these topics, I can only raise here in closing a few of the many questions her essay brought to the surface. In using the word “epistemology,” are we deploying it in the same way that we would describe differing belief structures? Here, Harvey Siegel, makes a good point when he states that, “if epistemological diversity is taken to refer to alternative beliefs or belief systems, the phenomena in question is uncontroversial, because all are agreed that beliefs and belief systems do indeed differ.”⁴ If, however, epistemology is being used to talk about the way an entire group of people share the same epistemological outlook, there is of course the issue of in-group difference. “There is just too much in-group difference in epistemological orientation,” writes Siegel, and assertions that would diminish these in-group differences to epistemic sameness are “dubious.”⁵ So, in terms of teacher education, Gonzalez’s project would not be one of *imposing* a specific epistemic reconstitution, correct? Doing so would have severe consequences for the very principles of an imaginary I take she assumes without question.

Given the cautionary dimensions of Siegel’s comments, what are we discussing when we speak of epistemic reconstitution through an intellectual endeavor? Here, it might be helpful to return to testimonial and the intersection of the deeply personal and the philosophical endeavor. Gonzalez has shown how the excavation of anti-imperial critiques provides for the ongoing unfolding of decolonial projects. As epistemic reconstitution, decolonial knowledges may not have guarantees but are nonetheless always already intricately informing our horizon. Our task as decolonial philosophers is to be vulnerable to and, thus, constituted by, that unfolding.

1. For a discussion of reflexive check, see Linda Martin Alcoff, “Educating with a (De)colonial Consciousness,” *Lapiz* 1 (2014): 78–93.

2. Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 75.

3. *Ibid.*, 75.

4. Harvey Siegel. “Epistemological Diversity and Education Research: Much Ado About Nothing Much?” *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 2 (2006): 4.

5. *Ibid.*, 5.