

Refusing the University, But Not Philosophy

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It is an honor—and challenge—to respond to John Hopkins’ “Speaking with an Indigenous Voice of Survivance: Genuine Conversations, Refusal, and Decolonizing the Contact Zone.”¹ The panel discussion with philosophers of education on one side and indigenous scholars on the other—along with Hopkins’ analysis of the event—is riddled with complexity, history, emotion, and loss of land, life, and liberty, among many other dimensions. Thinking through these dimensions and experiences and considering a fruitful way forward while not forgetting the past is likewise dynamic, troublesome, and confusing. In truth, engaging with this thinking—this living and breathing phenomenon we call Indigenous studies (in other words, Indigenous ways of being and arts of living)—mixed with the notions of survivance, refusing the university, and the necessity of engaging colonialism, feels almost a bit too close to home for me. I too identify as Native. I am Gwich’in (Athabaskan): the Indigenous people of interior Alaska and Canada. Furthermore, I am not (yet) an authority on Indigenous studies, decolonization, survivance, or refusal. So, for many reasons it is challenging to keep the important but dynamic elements in mind while fruitfully contributing to the conversation and to the survivance (which may indeed sometimes be mutually exclusive). Accordingly, I am fully open to further discussion, action, and creation.

Indeed, for me (as for many others), colonialism’s omnipresence is palpable; it is in the room, haunting, confusing, and painful. In truth, I have felt aspects of colonialism’s weight and complexity since childhood. Reflecting on these memories and experiences of how the phenomenon of colonialism has shaped the person I am and the structures around us illuminates—on a global and personal level—inequity, unfairness, greed, power, pain, and so on. But it also points to many loves and joys of life, many happy times—eating traditional food; heading off down the river; playing games; dancing; telling stories; learning to fish, trap, and hunt; and so on.

Nevertheless, thinking about joy can be sad. This melting pot of emotions, along with the hidden structures of the university itself, may be part of what the philosopher, in Hopkins' exposition of the event, failed to account for in raising his question pertaining to the philosophy of religion.

Nevertheless, I find the question by the philosopher very interesting. It is complex; it is metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, aesthetic, agentic, aporetic, historical, political, but also painful. The philosopher's ontological question was meant to explore the many dimensions of religious belief (and history) in Indigenous thought. The question was meant to be illuminating and edifying; the main goal seems epistemic and moral; it is to understand the Indigenous perspective. However, capitalizing on the pain-stories of Indigenous and other marginalized peoples is in line with capitalizing on wealth, land, and body; it could be the material for the manifest destiny within the university system, which itself has benefitted from slavery and Indigenous elimination.

However, the main aim of decolonization, survivance, and refusal is not epistemic; it is not simply an endeavor to illuminate the ethics of colonialism; it is not about raising awareness or consciousness alone. Rather, its goal is actively to change the effects of colonialism and the ongoing structures at play; the endeavor is creation and poesis. It is not simply a genuine conversation—the act of decolonizing philosophy in the contact zone is a physical act. It is a resistance to the established norms that have perpetuated global domination and environmental degradation. Furthermore, people cannot resist by playing a game that is set up for them to lose. In this way, refusing to engage in genuine conversation sometimes seems necessary.

In response, though, I wonder if Hopkins' analysis may situate the philosopher and the Indigenous scholar too far apart, and philosophy and the university too close together. He writes, "Our panelists were not philosophers of education by training, and the philosophers were relatively unfamiliar with Indigenous education." Accordingly, it is possible that all present at the panel were not feeling like one community, that was coming together in communion and sharing a common goal.

This points to a similar misstep with the colonialist disposition, that of sowing division and segregation, acting with force on the mistaken belief that our differences are more important than our similarities. Moreover, foreclosing conversation and policing epistemic goods are colonialist tactics. Indeed, Indigenous people have loved wisdom since time immemorial. They have had their own philosophies: ontologies, epistemologies, ethics, aesthetics, social philosophies, philosophies of education, and so on. To believe otherwise dehumanizes Indigenous people. Indeed, the harms of colonialism did not come from genuine conversation but rather from the policing of genuine conversation between Indigenous people and others via forced assimilation, epistemicide, and death of language (among many other ways, such as forced schooling). In other words, the harm came from policing traditional ways; this is an act of not allowing the love of indigenous wisdom to thrive. Hopkins writes, “Decolonization is a political strategy utilized by Indigenous peoples to interrogate and challenge the domination and exploitation of their minds, bodies, and lands.” However, what are the roles of allies, accomplices, and co-conspirators (and what is the role of philosophy of education)? Presumably, some (if not all) of the philosophers present during the panel could have been actively engaging in decolonization in some form in their own work.

Accordingly, what about affirming the work of scholars that are allies and accomplices? How about the work of Miranda Fricker on epistemic injustice?² What she calls “testimonial injustice” is the unfair phenomenon that occurs in our world when prejudice causes someone to marginalize the credibility of another; what she calls “hermeneutical injustice” occurs when groups of people are unfairly denied the interpretive resources to flourish in our epistemic environment. What about Anthony Simon Laden’s book *Reasoning: A Social Picture*, which offers a more equitable logic (a movement away from domination and elimination)?³ What about Ian James Kidd’s work on epistemic and educational corruption?⁴ What about Martha Nussbaum’s work in *Anger and Forgiveness*?⁵ None of these philosophers are speaking from an Indigenous frame, but their subject matters squarely relate to the Indigenous perspective and ongoing experience (at the very least my own). Presumably, these live

philosophical questions—along with the powerful religious question from the original scenario—cannot simply be refused from the Indigenous perspective because these questions are not distinct to those works but rather belong to us all. Indeed, many Indigenous people internally and externally struggle with the specific philosophical questions that Western religion presents. Accordingly, when and what should we refuse? When and what should we affirm? And with whom? More specifically, what about this very engagement between Hopkins and myself? This paper seems to be a genuine conversation that Hopkins, and others, continue; is this present philosophical conversation worth refusing? What can we learn here? Rather than erasing Indigenous culture, it is arguable that some modern scholastic practices seem to aid in survivance.

Lastly, I worry about facilitating the death of genuine conversation and its relationship with the hatred of study. Namely, it is too easy to get carried away into the dark recesses of human vices when one holds that logic and studying—the norms of genuine conversation—should be refused. It is true that schooling has been used as a tool against Indigenous people, but we cannot suppose that Indigenous people are haters of study. Though perhaps existent in Indigenous communities, misology is not Indigenous but rather a reaction to colonial practices of schooling. This gives education and the love of wisdom a bad name, but it need not.

It is important to remember that the Indigenous scholars in Hopkins' account (and Indigenous people from time immemorial) love wisdom and practice philosophy throughout their practical and theoretical lives. If this is true, then the love of wisdom is autochthonous (it is pre-academic and pre-scholastic) and transcultural; it is *indigenous* with a lowercase, and *Indigenous* with an uppercase. The Indigenous voice of survivance can refuse the university and the school, but not philosophy.

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1 John Hopkins, "Speaking with an Indigenous Voice: Genuine Conversation, Refusal, and Decolonizing the Contact Zone," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue). Throughout this paper, in an act of survivance, I will attempt to limit my citations; cf. the politics of citation: Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne, "Citation Matters: Mobilizing the Politics of Citation toward a Practice of 'Conscientious Engagement,'" *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 7 (2017): 954-973.

2 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

3 Anthony Simon Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4 Ian James Kidd, "Epistemic Corruption and Education," *Episteme* 16, no. 2 (2019): 220-235.

5 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).