

Musing: Inhabiting Philosophical Space: Reflections from the Reasonably Suspicious

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INTRODUCTION

I came into the world of philosophy seeking the freedom to write, to think, and to engage in new methods for understanding the world. I was under the impression that *anybody* could do philosophy. Yet my arrival at graduate school indicated to me that only certain types of bodies were present in our academic spaces. I quickly noted that I was swimming in a sea of whiteness and maleness that was not pleased by my arrival. I looked around and I wondered to myself: ¿Como me pongo? Como me quieres...? reminiscent of Fanon's words: "Where do I fit in? Or, if you like, where should I stick myself?" (Fanon 1952, 93). I realized that the next couple of years were going to be difficult, but I never expected they would be deeply wounding. Surviving graduate school required that I acquiesce to the fact that my survival would require serious duplicity, some form of creative deception that would allow me to endure the heteronormative masculinity and the problematic whiteness. In a place where truth masquerades down the halls in white male bodies singing the praises of Eurocentric knowledge, I wondered how a child of colonialism, a product of globalization, a reasonably suspicious body keeps her soul and body in one piece. I remembered my lines, and I forgot my history. I remembered my context, but I forgot its effects.

2012 saw the publication of George Yancy's *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge* in which philosophers of color from diverse positions provided critical reflections on what it means to be a body of color in the discipline of philosophy and the implications this has for what it means for a subject to be appropriately philosophical. Most notably, José Medina's piece "Linguistic Hegemony and Linguistic Resistance: English, Spanish, and American Philosophy" calls attention to the fact that the English language is the most powerful hegemonic language because of the way in which it has become the normative form of expression in the academy. Yet what Medina finds most concerning is the fact that the English language is used hegemonically insofar as its use or lack of use creates unequal distributions of power and access to linguistic capital (Medina 2012, 344). In a similar vein, Linda Martín Alcoff's article "Alien and Alienated" discusses the experiences of alienation faced by Latinas/os in philosophy that result in a forced assimilation into dominant philosophical methodologies for survival (Alcoff 2012,

23). Juxtaposing Medina and Alcoff, we gain a sense that academic philosophy forces the adoption of an academic English language in expression and writing as a necessary condition for what it means to be an appropriate philosophical subject. This process can be understood as an instance of the assimilationist tendencies that Alcoff tracks in her essay, meaning that the process of being forced to speak and sound a certain way is such that it pushes one to resemble the larger dominant body of philosophy. In searching for solutions, both scholars look to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa for new ways of thinking about border identities, that is, identities (linguistic included) that function at the crossroads between different social, linguistic, and epistemic markers (Anzaldúa 1999).

Although I find Anzaldúa's contributions to thinking about borders and border identities extremely important, in relationship to academic philosophy we tend to pay more attention to the possibilities of resistance in her concept of border thinking than to the wounded outcomes that being at the crossroads can produce. Given the assimilationist necessities of the discipline of philosophy that Alcoff discusses, I offer this essay as a reflection of the underbelly of border identities in the spaces of philosophy that attempt not to assimilate, but are not offered the space to truly be border thinkers. What remains for the Latina graduate student? For the philosopher of color, not yet born?¹ Surviving graduate school for me did not necessarily mean assimilation, even though that certainly was an available option, but rather it entailed a duplicity that traversed forgetting and remembering who I was, and who I wanted to be.

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines duplicity as: "contradictory doubleness of thought, speech, or action ... the quality or state of being double or twofold." Duplicity in a very deep sense is a linguistic act available to a border identity, an identity that is double, multiple, or folded in on itself. Yet these folds or shifts function to conceal the very characteristics that make a frontier identity able to resist assimilation, that is, an identity that sits in between or at the collision between different facets of its identity.² Duplicity assumes a return or shift back to a genuine self that existed before the duplicitous act, but the truth remains that there is no original self to return to. So although duplicity functions as a methodology to resist the assimilationist tendencies that academic philosophy calls women of color to engage in, over time it violently negates the return to the subject you might have been before the deceitful act.³

It remains the case that despite championing the possibilities of neutrality and universality, philosophy is still not neutral or universal; rather it is male and white, and the bodies that fit or can pass within the molds of this space are not detained at any migratory checkpoints through its borders. Hence, being a nonwhite Latina in the spaces of philosophy has always been accompanied by the experience of being "out of place"—an experience that many women of color are all too familiar with. For Latinas in philosophy, the doubleness of speech or action is put forth as a method for resisting the alienation that comes with the discipline of philosophy. Alcoff notes that Latinas in philosophy "often live without the sort of cultural and social recognition that would provide an uptake or confirmation of our interior lives" (Alcoff 2012,

23). Given this circumstance, the options for Latinas are very grim, and attempting to “pass” within the spaces of philosophy often means translating our story, our history, our language, our bodily comportment to meet the normative standards of philosophical spaces. The comportment of our bodies has to shift in order to be read as appropriate philosophical subjects. One of the most notable sites of this shift can be found in and through linguistic exchanges.

“Wow!” he said as he found out I did not grow up in the continental United States. “How is it possible that you don’t have an accent? Your English is good! You would never know you are not from here....” Not from where, I wonder? It is in those all too familiar moments I am reminded that even the very use of my larynx, tongue, mouth, and throat is soaked in assumptions about the “appropriate” philosophical voice, the sound of that voice, and where it comes from—not my body. What hurt me the most, however, was not the fact that I had adapted my voice to sound a certain way, but rather that after years of doing this my Spanish had lost its grounding, and my body slowly forgot what it sounded like to speak a language besides English. It was always a strange experience to talk philosophy in Spanish. The opportunity rarely occurs, but in those hard-to-come-by moments, the very act of uttering words like “genero,” “raza,” or just “filosofía” made me feel eternally distanced from my own body. This was the cost of duplicity, a high price to pay since in those moments I felt swallowed by the fact that the use of English in an “academic” way was the only language that provided me linguistic entry into academic philosophy. Yet these philosophical forms of linguistic exchange in certain moments failed to capture my experiences in the world, experiences that were often expressed through constant shifts between English and Spanish. Yancy notes a similar experience in regard to African American language; he writes: “My experiences were in excess of what standard American English (SAE) could capture. Some forms of knowledge become substantially truncated and distorted, indeed erased, if not expressed through the familiar linguistic media of those who have possession of such knowledge” (Yancy 2012, 297).

The pressure on a young Latina scholar to perform within the normative standards of philosophy is wounding. In the world of philosophy it is not just the case that philosophy is male and white (a descriptive claim), but also that in order to be appropriately philosophical you *must* orient your work around the assumptions of whiteness and maleness (a prescriptive claim). This prescription severely limits and impedes women of color and their theoretical productions from having uptake within the borders of philosophy. So I wonder how am *I* to be understood in a world that does not open itself to having the appropriate tools to capture my experiences of being non-white, nonmale, and nonheterosexual. What I am suggesting here is not that the tools don’t exist, but rather that the discipline of philosophy often thwarts the use of these theoretical tools because the tools themselves are not considered philosophical.

Tejaswini Niranjana’s article “Colonialism and Translation” discusses how methods of translation function to create the process of subjectification. Niranjana defines subjectification as “the construction of a subject through technologies or practices of power/knowledge, technologies necessarily involving some notion of translation”

(Niranjana 1994, 35). The processes of becoming a subject require some form of translation that is mediated through linguistic exchange. For instance, in an attempt to highlight to a dissertation committee member the importance of the dominant bodies that occupy philosophical space, I was told that highlighting white male bodies is to use “a blunt tool with no theoretical force.” In that moment, I attempted to translate my subjective experiences into theoretical terms in order to provide a criticism of what I take to be a very problematic facet of philosophy. However, this attempt was stonewalled because there was no rhetorical space that could make sense to a white man in a dominant philosophical position of this translation of my experiences. The problem with translation, as Niranjana notes, is that when we try to understand or make sense of an experience, we often seek a foolproof method that bridges the gap between the incommensurable elements of language, experience, and culture (36). It is here that the work of Ofelia Schutte becomes extremely useful in thinking about what is lost in translation when linguistic exchanges occur in asymmetric power relations. Schutte notes that communication (including cross-cultural communication) requires that we pay attention to two aspects of communicative exchange. On the one hand, we have to understand what is being said, and on the other hand, we have to be able to relate to a set of signifiers that make the statement uttered comprehensible even if these signifiers remain unstated (Schutte 1998, 62). In moments like the one I have shared, it can be said in Schutte’s terms that: “the actual problem may not be incoherence, but the lack of cultural translatability of the signifiers for coherence from one set of cultural presuppositions to the other” (62).

The question for me then became how to “pass” within the confines of academic philosophy while still managing to hold onto a sense of my own experiences that could not be appropriately expressed in most philosophical spaces. This created a sense of an extreme bipolarity that is difficult even to express as I write this piece. The conditions of academic philosophy, at the moment, don’t leave women of color many options, and it seems that if you are not forced to completely assimilate, you are forced into duplicity in order to survive. One might even say that the type of duplicity or deceitfulness that philosophy pushes on women of color requires some manifestation of assimilation, otherwise in any attempt to be heard as a woman of color you will continue to be incomprehensible to the very people who determine whether or not you are an appropriately trained philosopher. So much is lost in this process for women of color, so much of ourselves that we may never get back once we finish our degrees.

The spring of 2013 witnessed my second time teaching Latin American philosophy. It was my hope, before I began teaching, that the need to shift between translating my insights into the terminology of a dominant philosophical group, and comfortably engaging in analysis that took its starting point to be non-Western perspectives, would be eased. I thought that because I would be in a position as an instructor to direct a course that questioned the very things that I have found to be concerning about the discipline of philosophy I would find a place of academic freedom. I begin the course with Aztec thought as a way to introduce students to different philosophical methodologies; this is followed by a historical chronology that

documents colonialism and nation-building. A few weeks into the semester, one of my students came to talk to me in regard to the course. He is the first philosophy major I have ever had in any of my classes; this should have been the first red flag. With an extremely concerned look on his face he proceeded to ask me how the course is “philosophy” because the works from the Aztecs did not seem to be coming from a place of *reason*. He followed this concern with a criticism of the historical framework of the course. He wondered why “we” simply could not apply concepts like that of utilitarianism to the material in the course since that would be more philosophically germane. He did not view historical context as an important aspect for thinking about philosophy. He continued to struggle with the content of the course and vocalized these concerns from an entitled speaking position that indicated to me, as the instructor, that what I was doing with this course was *not* philosophy because there was no philosophical discourse present in any of the readings we were covering. This claim translates to an indictment of the works of Simon Bolivar, José Martí, Samuel Ramos, Jorge J. E. Gracia, Linda Alcoff, and Frantz Fanon as not being appropriate philosophical subjects to cover in a Latin American philosophy course. It was not surprising to find my course evaluation to be glowing with amazing reviews, with the exception of one reviewer who indicated that my course was at best a political science course because philosophical discourse was just not present in the course. This was followed by the claim that *I* needed more philosophical training in order to qualify to teach this course because the course lacked sufficient materials from the “West.” I wondered what it would mean for me to be more “philosophically” qualified to teach a course on Latin American philosophy? What would it truly mean for me to teach a “real” Latin American philosophy course? This experience reaffirmed the fact that “to be philosophical is to be bound by European philosophical tradition” (Curry 2010, 315). Hence, Latin American philosophy and the Latin American subject are not philosophical if they do not rely on European and American concepts.

Alfred Arteaga notes in “An Other Tongue” that the United States is a location of polyglossia, which is a site of interaction for multiple voices. However, the culture of the United States espouses a “single language ethos; it strives very actively to assert a monolingual identity” (Arteaga 1994, 13). The problem then becomes that monolingual identity leads to monological methodologies for apprehending the world. Hence this comes with the assumption that there is only one way of seeing the world and one appropriate way for expressing our orientations in the world. This logic thwarts dialogue and is itself soaked in a history of colonialism that takes the Western subject to be the all-knowing universal subject, and requires that all others justify and demonstrate their rationality. It is from this locus of enunciation that my student was speaking and hence felt appropriately located and informed to criticize what he (from his perspective) did not see to be suitable philosophical course material. He was not attempting dialogue, but rather was calling for assimilation into European thought in order to read Latin America through a European lens. With regard to African American philosophy, Tommy J. Curry has termed this phenomenon epistemic convergence: the methods by which “black cultural perspectives are

only given the status of knowledge to the extent that they extend or reify currently maintained traditions of thought in European philosophy” (Curry 2010, 320). Similarly, the experiences of Latinas/os and their respective worldviews and philosophy could only be translated, or made suitable subjects of philosophical study, for my student by the use of white, male, European perspectives. Because I resisted this act of translation to the best of my abilities, my identity, as well as my area of study, could only be understood as a philosophical failure. This seemed to be the price that I paid for attempting to engage in a strategic critical engagement that sought to subvert epistemic convergence and assimilation into European readings of bodies of color. As the semester came to a close, I wondered if this teaching experience was worth its wounds.

In her essay “Now Let Us Shift,” Anzaldúa describes the process of *conocimiento* as “the aspect of consciousness urging you to act on the knowledge gained” (Anzaldúa 2002, 577). Part of the process of *conocimiento* involves sharing a “sense of affinity with all things and advocates mobilizing, organizing, sharing information, knowledge, insights, and resources with other groups” (571). She contrasts the concept of *conocimiento* to *desconocimiento*: a wounding, willful ignorance of knowledge gained. In my reflections on what it has meant for me to be a Latina in philosophy, I have found that the current conditions of academic philosophy have pushed me to painfully straddle *conocimiento* and *desconocimiento*. On the one hand, I find myself eager to *conocerme y conocer el mundo*, and at the same time I feel pushed to *desconocerme* and become willfully ignorant of my identity and circumstance. This deceitful doubleness is no way to find a philosophical home. As I come closer to finishing my doctorate in philosophy, I recognize that my body is aching, my voice is shaky, and I am tired. I have heard this story before from many women of color in philosophy, from Chicanas in the United States, from the backs that built an empire and still continue to build bridges. So in closing I want to offer this piece to my readers as an attempt to break my own duplicity and embark on a path of *conocimiento*, considering honestly what it means to be a Latina in the discipline of philosophy.

NOTES

1. Yancy 2012 is dedicated to philosophers of color not yet born.
2. In a lot of respects, we all have frontier identities. That is to say that identity is multifaceted, and at times parts of our identity conflict with one another. However, this experience of collision, *el choque*, as Anzaldúa calls it, is experienced deeply by those of us who are constantly standing at the crossroads between cultures, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.
3. The central thrust of this piece comes from my personal experiences as a queer Latina in philosophy. However, this is not to dismiss the lived experiences of other marginalized groups in philosophy: queer people, men of color, and women in general. Furthermore, this piece is not trying to universalize my experiences, as I do recognize that being marginalized in philosophy can take on a variety of manifestations.

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