

# Decolonizing the Westernized University: Interventions in Philosophy of Education from Within and Without (Grosfoguel, Hernández, & Velásquez)

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Review of

# *Decolonizing the Westernized University: Interventions in Philosophy of Education from Within and Without*

by Ramón Grosfoguel, Roberto Hernández, and Ernesto Rosen Velásquez (Eds.). London, England:  
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## Introduction

Reading *Decolonizing the Westernized University*, edited by Grosfoguel, Hernández and Rosen Velásquez, I was reminded of one of the more provocative passages in *This Is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy* by Anishnabe political philosopher Dale Turner. Turner writes there that “the process of decolonization [is] difficult to imagine,” (2006, p. 109). It is a curious comment, one that I have puzzled over many times given how much of Turner’s text, on my reading, provides something of a clearly articulated, multi-pronged approach to not just disrupting colonialism but effecting decolonization broadly understood. Nevertheless, I understand the immediate context for his statement given his interpretations of several leading indigenous theorists within American Indian and indigenous studies. Namely, the two principal reasons Turner claims that the process of decolonization is “unimaginable” are, first, that the rights of indigenous peoples are inextricably bound up with U.S., Canadian and international legal contexts, and, secondly, echoing T. Alfred’s (1999) point, that “colonialism has influenced virtually every aspect of indigenous people’s daily lives: language, religion, sexuality, art, philosophy and politics” (Turner, p. 109). Thus, for Turner, indigenous peoples of North America are caught in an inextricable dialogue with/in colonialism on the issues of Indigenous sovereignties, self-determination and socio-cultural traditions, all of which foster his difficulties in imagining decolonizing.

I have appreciated Turner’s questions and the precision with which he makes the argument that the primary intellectual work of indigenous academics—and, by extension, their allies—is the defense of First Nation and Native American sovereignty and self-determination. Even where I differ with some of his critiques of decolonization and the role of indigenous knowledges in higher education, I generally agree with a more cautious approach toward the incorporation of indigenous intellectual traditions into the classroom environment. Moreover, I also believe it is the case that to defend these rights is to be able to comprehend and teach the very colonial architecture of law in particular so as to both point out

its functions toward dispossession and diminishing of self-determination, yet also use the law in strategies to defend the rights of First Nations peoples. So I agree with Turner that it is imperative that we remain politically and philosophically vigilant because “it matters *how* indigenous knowledge is brought into courtrooms, political negotiations and university classrooms” (p. 112). That is to say, an overemphasis on the knowledge traditions of Native peoples in university classrooms has a high risk of being decontextualized from community practices and thus instrumentalized for the needs of a university research effort perhaps ultimately only benefitting dominant society. If this is how Native knowledges are brought into the classroom, what may likely follow is the obscuring of a pedagogical effort to interrogate and challenge the laws that constrain First Nations and indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination. These questions are crucial for philosophers of education in the Canadian and U.S. contexts who seek to interrogate and disrupt structures of settler colonialism through critical engagements with indigenous intellectual traditions, yet are concerned with the ethical complexities of this in practice.

I open here with some brief recollections of Turner’s *This Is Not a Peace Pipe* because in many ways it may serve as a better reference point for *Decolonizing the Westernized University: Interventions in Philosophy of Education from Within and Without* (hereafter *DWU*) than the field of philosophy of education. That is, contributors to *DWU* move quickly to the question of how a process of decolonization might occur and, more specifically, how indigenous intellectual traditions and knowledges within marginalized communities more broadly initiate or otherwise guide a decolonizing of higher education. Rosen Velásquez uses much of his introduction to make the point: There is a role for minoritized intellectual traditions in thinking carefully and philosophically about crucial issues in the world, yet the overwhelming formulations of philosophy of education continue to undervalue these kinds of intellectual traditions (see pp. ix–xii).

In this way, the criticisms and concerns of Rosen Velásquez, like those of Turner, are important and generative, especially for exposing the limits of certain philosophical orientations and recurring blind spots in the relationships between structures of settler colonialism as they inform racism, classism, gendered relations and so on. While it is certainly true that the questions of First Nations and schooling, recognition and reconciliation are well-established and familiar questions within discussions of political philosophy in Canada, decolonization as a project has a smaller and perhaps less common set of interlocutors. Compared with Turner, however, Rosen Velásquez calls for a more robust, full-throated use of indigenous knowledges to transform universities and a diminishing of the Eurocentric core of higher education. Given the ways in which “Centres for Indigenous Knowledges” have emerged in several universities in the Canadian context, *DWU* provides a good comparative reference for philosophers of education on emerging and established institutions in the Mexican and South American context, with special attention to those centered on Aymara knowledge (chapters 3, 5, 6, 7). Thus, Rosen Velásquez likewise emphasizes the importance of how to do the work of decolonization.

How can we create learning spaces in ways that are oriented to a positive decolonial project, guided by notions of *pachamama*, *buen vivir* and other Afro-Indigenous horizons from around the world, where there are other centers of meaning, some which seem to move beyond the white political and ethical fields? (p. xii)

Let me turn to three of the responses *DWU* provides to this question—namely the works of Dussel, the projects of ethnic studies and the role of indigenous intellectual traditions. Philosophers of

education can thus read *DWU* as weaving together these three crucial threads for how decolonial projects in higher education take place: one thread on how to receive and give time for differences; one on how ethnic studies (chapters 2, 3, 4, 11), *escuelas normales* and *la Universidad de la Tierra* (chapters 12, 13) are crucial sites of its pedagogical and curricular formulation; and one thread on indigenous knowledges and the threats against it (chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13).

## The Reception of Difference, Pedagogical Time and Ethnic Studies

Most if not all of the contributors to the volume are deeply informed by the philosophical work of Enrique Dussel. Díaz-Cepeda gives Dussel perhaps the fullest treatment as a philosopher committed to reworking both philosophy and higher education with and through the intellectual traditions of minoritized and marginalized peoples. Dussel's development of analectic method provides the contributors a way to think through expanded possibilities for social movements, their public pedagogies, ethnic studies, and newly formulating educative possibilities (university or otherwise) more generally. Speaking of dialectics as a closed (that is, Eurocentric) system, Díaz-Cepeda elaborates Dussel's definition of the analectic method as open to exteriority, whereby works and ideas from outside European foundations are engaged. Thus analectics allow for "other realities, such as the Latin American one, [and] other classes such as farmers and indigenous peoples," that "bring new forms of resistance that are of use to a larger class struggle" (p. 237). Interpreting and elaborating the Levinasian interventions in ontology, Díaz-Cepeda emphasizes how Dussel clarifies an ontological opening that provides the initial moment of reception of the difference of the other as crucial for how decolonization proceeds. The analectic method, Díaz-Cepeda writes, "opens the dialectic through alterity" (p. 236).

There is much to be appreciated in Dussel's extension of Levinas's claims for the irreducibility of otherness that "cannot be contained by the categories of being" (p. 236). Yet Turner's caution on how indigenous knowledges are put to use in higher education returns with some force. That is, the irreducibility of indigenous "otherness" may or may not be operable or usable for the "larger class struggle" Díaz-Cepeda seems to direct it toward. So despite the analectic method as opening to alterity, how such knowledges are employed toward decolonization entails questions about instrumentalization and, relatedly, decolonization for whom. In other words, Díaz-Cepeda and the majority of contributors to *DWU* are silent on the right of self-determination by First Nations and indigenous peoples more broadly. In staying silent on the discussion of rights of indigenous peoples to land in particular and to political, economic and cultural self-determination, Díaz-Cepeda and other contributors appear to provide a process of including indigenous knowledges in the classroom that runs the risk of appropriation. Indeed, some attention to what is actually said by indigenous peoples regarding rights and topics such as regional, national or international economies are crucial to a pedagogy and curriculum that would claim to be decolonizing.

Noroozi is an especially important contributor to *DWU* to place in dialogue with Díaz-Cepeda and others from the text on this point. For Noroozi, an accelerated time has been and remains fundamental to the practices of settler colonialism as integral to the common sense of pedagogy, in the guise of efficient teaching. The speed of thinking is, as Noroozi continues, "found or founded on oversimplification; [a] sense of epistemic hurriedness in order to reach a predefined conclusion in favor

of one structure of thought” (p. 139). Thus university-based pedagogies participate in a settler structure of oversimplification through this speed of thinking. And, returning to Dussel, Noroozi writes in an expanded sense that “it was a simplified accelerated logic against radical otherness that—among other things—cushioned colonization in the first place” (p. 140).

Philosophers of education and their students in the Canadian and U.S. contexts can benefit from an engagement with Dussel’s analectic method as a philosophical formulation of receiving and transforming higher education through the pedagogy of time elaborated by Noroozi. *DWU* thus provides many prompts for careful thinking on the formulations of reception, curricula of indigenous knowledges and rights within the complexities of coalitional solidarities around class struggle in contexts different from Bolivia, Mexico, Ecuador and Columbia. Yet as many readers of *DWU* will recognize, universities often do have an ongoing reception of such knowledges in the form of Native American/indigenous studies, African and African American studies, Latin(x) studies, Asian American studies as well as feminist and gender studies. Perhaps it may be better to say there is *inclusion* here, but that most universities provide a limited *reception* to these knowledges insofar as many of these programs often have fewer resources and garner less currency within the institution at large. This is so even as ethnic studies has historically and continues to provide for curricular, research and theoretical innovation in the university, which leads to the second concern for how to imagine decolonization in *DWU*: If Dussel’s analectic method disrupts the closed system of dialectics, ethnic studies, many *escuela normales* and *la Universidad de la Tierra* become the sites in which that difference becomes a curricular and pedagogical practice. Most of *DWU* orients itself precisely to these components, thus outlining how a decolonial university takes up the philosophies and knowledges of indigenous and marginalized peoples in addressing crucial questions for contemporary societies.

Maldonado-Torres provides several important characteristics for ethnic studies as a decolonizing activity that are shared by other contributors to *DWU* “What we have come to call ethnic studies,” he writes, “is one of the most important interventions in academic settings and ... it challenges the division of knowledge based on the primacy of explanation and understanding and the European and US American-oriented humanities and sciences” (p. 45). For Maldonado-Torres, this is so because it is an “expression of a project that precedes the formation of ‘ethnic studies,’” namely the “unfinished project of decolonization” (p. 40). Here he articulates a reading of the institutional formation and ongoing developments of ethnic studies in the U.S. context common among contributing authors: a site of insurgence, a threat to the normative orientations of university research and scholarship. Together these authors of *DWU* emphasize in ethnic studies how the 1) inter-disciplinary approaches, 2) explicitly critical and transformative agenda, 3) foundational relationships to various social movements and 4) effort to empower the communities from which ethnic studies emanates can reorient *all* of the humanities and research practices within universities. This is a shared set of visions describing nothing less than how to foster an ongoing decolonization of the university, shifting it away from a Cartesian epistemological orientation (p. 27–30), Eurocentric ontology (p. 84–87), neo-apartheid (p. 39–49) and systematic regulation of race by the European state through the university curriculum (p. 20–25).

Extending the discussion of ethnic studies, several contributors make the point that *escuela normales*, or teacher education schools, also have a founding vision committed to dialogue with indigenous and marginalized communities. Reed-Sandoval’s contribution to *DWU* in particular outlines the decolonizing impulse of contemporary *escuelas normales* in Mexico, and in the region of Chiapas in particular, and the resistance by local and national political and economic interests.

Arriving at a popular *escuela normal* in Oaxaca's capital city, indigenous Oaxacans from across the state of Oaxaca entered into dialogue about the ways in which Oaxacan indigenous ideas could be translated into a political philosophy of indigenous survivance in Mexico. (p. 220)

Attending to the horror of the disappearance and murder of forty-three students of the Raúl Isidro Burgos normal school in Ayotzinapa, most of whom were indigenous, Reed-Sandoval clarifies how violence continues to be one of the primary responses to the transformative decolonial educational processes these teachers sought to carry out. Reed-Sandoval and Díaz-Cepeda highlight in complementary ways the activist dimensions of these teacher education programs as central not only to pedagogical or curricular tasks, but also to broader decolonizing social movements and political organizing. Indeed, their commentaries echo other contributors to *DWU* who highlight similar foundations and trajectories in ethnic studies as integral aspects of the project of decolonizing higher education. From a comparative perspective, *DWU* thus provides opportunities for philosophers of education to foreground the relationships, or lack thereof, that colleges of education and higher education more generally have with social movements for equity and justice. And returning to the theme of indigenous knowledges, in places different from Oaxaca, La Paz and highland Ecuador, how and upon what premise *would* philosophers of education orient pre-service teachers to indigenous intellectual traditions as both foundational to social movements and necessary to a decolonizing of colleges of education?

### Concluding Comments, Extending the Conversation

Returning to Turner, there is a way in which the contributors to *DWU* articulate the justification for a decolonial project in higher education: through a robust ethnic studies, deep consideration of pedagogy and the defense of indigenous thought and practices. Turner in this instance would agree and applaud the efforts. Nonetheless, there are significant lapses in *DWU* regarding this process. Firstly, contributors obscure and (re-)marginalize a significant collective of philosophical thinking on these very same topics from Aotearoa/New Zealand, Hawaii, Samoa and what is now Australia, Canada and the US, as well as from the Sami in far northern Europe. These are representative of robust and well-established, valuable insights on the ongoing projects of reformulating westernized universities. Unfortunately, philosophers of education will not be able to turn to *DWU* as a single volume able to provide that rich, diverse comparative discussion on indigenous peoples realizing their own formulations of higher education, what their challenges are and how they overcome them using indigenous intellectual traditions and research protocols.

Secondly, many of the contributors would benefit from clarifying the kinds of methodological interventions they have enacted in their philosophical, historical or educational research practices insofar as they more often than not tell their readers what is the case—they do not show us how indigenous methodologies change their interrogative practice. Relatedly, there is also the important work of providing greater engagement with specific influential figures in the various ethnic studies traditions. Here Turner might still say that the *how* of decolonization remains unclear, but that the need for critical attention to different forms of coloniality is a significant contribution even where the rights

of indigenous peoples may be less visible. I would again partially agree, but extend the point to include that *DWU* succeeds in providing important glimpses of some of the most pivotal dimensions of decolonization occurring in Central and South America. Moreover, many of these contributions provide critical work for a philosophy of education whose boundaries have been blurred and whose promise is a welcome gesture toward decolonizing potentialities in higher education.

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## About the Author

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