(De)colonizing Critiques
Critical Pedagogy, *Currere*, and the Limits of the Colonial Mentality

RAFAEL V. CAPÓ GARCÍA
University of British Columbia

IN A 2020 INTERVIEW leading up to Puerto Rico's general elections, Alexandra Lúgaro, the newly formed party *Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana*'s (*MVC*'s) candidate for Governor, stated that her potential defeat could be attributed to a lack of education. *MVC* represented a progressive challenge to the three-party system dominated by the narratives of Puerto Rico's political status—statehood, commonwealth, and independence. *MVC* set that debate to the side and focused on promoting policies of economic and social justice, yet Lúgaro insisted that ignorance would be to blame if she did not come out on top. These statements were understandably not well received, yet they moved me to acknowledge my own unchecked possession of truth. In the same way she viewed the Puerto Rican people as incapable of understanding the transformative change only her party could provide, I had also condescendingly deployed critical pedagogical stances through my teaching and activism. Assuming the learner to be an empty vessel that lacks any agency over his or her actions, I consistently framed them as requiring critical intervention that I, apparently free from the shackles of oppressive ideologies, could provide. In the context of colonial Puerto Rico, I had fallen into the trap of labelling others who did not share my liberatory aspirations as ignorant and suffering from the colonized mentality. The allure of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi's taxonomy was hard to resist as I struggled to cope with why the majority of Puerto Ricans refused to desire what I desired most, political independence for the archipelago. My praxis, as an educator and an activist, stemmed from a selfish thirst for that which I was denying the other, freedom.

In this paper, I explore my ontological topographies through autobiographical writing in hopes of acknowledging the limitations of critical praxis. While postmodernist critiques of critical pedagogy (e.g., Lather, Ellsworth, Pinar) have helped me see the arrogance and oppressive tendencies of my teaching and curriculum theorizing, I argue that the subjective reconstruction of the self in colonial contexts, while important, is ultimately insufficient in "extricating oneself psychologically from interpellation by the colonizing regime" (Pinar, 2011, p. 40). My life experiences as an activist, teacher, and colonized subject have helped me realize that a decolonizing Fanonian mental process is marred by the same messianic and unencumbered mindset that only colonized peoples are aptly equipped to either (un)problematically (de)ploy or

skeptically (de)construct as I intend to do throughout this paper. I argue that, while the colonial condition does arguably exert psychological oppression upon imperial subjects, its enunciated critique deterministically imposes dialogical control through pseudo-scientific discourses that strip the colonized of their agency and divisively disrupt honest engagement between colonized individuals. I believe we should do away with the narcissistic and paternalistic discourse of the "colonial mentality" in order to develop a truly dialogical pedagogy and critical praxis that starts with an honest deconstruction of the self through auto-ethnography in order to move towards a collective decolonial future.

Autobiography as Method

In the summer of 2017, I, along with 6 of my high school students, worked on a grassroots community project called *Enlazarte*. We developed a summer program for underprivileged youth aimed at fostering critical consciousness through the visual arts. The reflections written by my students and co-researchers revealed how much the experience helped them overcome their insecurities, but something was lacking as I read through each of them. Their reflective practice was rooted in what Hongyu Wang (2010) calls external time; we only analyzed a linear period of about 6 months where we directly worked with the project. I realized that this form of reflection is insufficient and myopic; what was missing was an exploration of our internal time, meaning a non-linear approach to our lived experiences (Wang, 2010). Where did our insecurities stem from? Why didn't we value our own ideas previous to the participatory project? According to Wang (2010), *currere* offers an ideal method for reflecting on life experiences as it "encourages participants to confront difficulty in order to loosen its grip" (p. 279), and it "blurs the boundary of past, present and future to encourage an inner experience of time that enables a transformative re-entry into the present" (p. 282). For Wang and her students, writing *currere* "led to a sense of agency and transformed … daily praxis in both … personal and professional lives" (p. 282). *Currere* can alter our interpretation and remembrance of past private experiences, which will unavoidably trickle down to our public and professional lives. It can "build bridges between difficult emotions (such as shame, guilt, fear, anger)" (Wang, 2010, p. 280) and provide teachers, activists, and researchers with a method for uncovering the sources of our insecurities and our internalized oppressions.

Currere, which literally means "to run the racecourse," embraces a lived curriculum rooted in our subjective experiences. It was popularized by Madeleine Grumet and William Pinar (1976) in the 1970s reconceptualization of the field of curriculum studies. According to Patrick Slattery (2017), *currere*

> emphasizes the individual's own capacity to reconceptualize his or her autobiography. The individual seeks meaning amid the swirl of present events, moves historically into his or her own past to recover and reconstitute origins, and imagines and creates possible directions of his or her own future. (p. 190)

Currere allows us to trace our life histories by salvaging memories our subconscious minds have refused to forget; we arduously dig for them like precious metals, eventually striking gold as our subjectivity surfaces, abashedly naked and opaque from the dirt within which it was buried. *Currere* strives to "accomplish a critical distancing that is at the same time an engagement with

the self" (Pinar, 1995, p. 12). It is divided into four phases where individuals go back and forth in a non-linear re-construction of a "memory of the memory … a memory of my own remembering" (Neumann, 1998, p. 425). Wang (2010) concisely summarizes these steps in the following manner:

> The regressive step is about the free associative remembrance of the past. The progressive step is the meditative pondering of the future. The analytical step is about the analysis of what one uncovers in the first two steps in relation to one's present biographic situation. The synthetical step is about pulling oneself towards a higher level of knowing and being. (p. 276)

This "complicated conversation" with oneself reveals moments and experiences we have taken for granted and helps us see why we are the way we are and why we are not who we say we are.

Currere has proven to be a valuable method for prospective pedagogues in teacher education programs. Wang (2010) argued that *currere* allowed his students to revisit memories they had taken for granted, and "as a result of this remembering, (their) worldview was expanded and changed" (p. 277). Like some of my colleagues in *Enlazarte*, one of Wang's students "gained confidence in herself and grew the courage to challenge authority" (p. 280). *Currere* can be an empowering method for educators, and I believe that activists could benefit in the same way. Emotions run high when we recall and reconstruct painful experiences from the past, but in this process, "the attachment to those emotions is loosened so that moving beyond them is possible" (Wang, 2010, p. 278). Nicholas Ng-A-Fook (2015) draws on *currere* "as a reflexive framework for grappling with our autobiographical-intellectual self-understandings of becoming teachers in and for the world" (p. 123). *Currere* helped Ng-A-Fook confront his own insecurities, as he reflected on the idea of westernizing his name "in order to be accepted within the discursive, intellectual, material, and political regimes of higher education" (p. 131). He goes on to ponder,

> what kinds of insights might we provoke in terms of studying our life histories in relation to our academic studies? How might autobiographical research provoke teacher candidates to open up the possibility of transforming their cultural values and ideological orientations in relation to a city of youth? And by attempting to answer each of our autobiographical-intellectual and curricular questions, what are the implications for self-understanding our subject formations as teachers? (p. 132)

Both Wang (2004, 2010) and Ng-A-Fook (2015) echo Pinar (1976, 1994, 2004, 2011) in seeing the potential of *currere* for teachers as "it provides a space to rethink and recompose the private familial dynamics of our subjectivities within and in relation to the public sphere" (Ng-A-Fook, p. 144). There is nothing standing in *currere*'s way except our internal fears and insecurities of what we might look like from a distance. I will now use *currere* to run the racecourse of my own internal time and become a stranger as I hopefully encounter myself on the journey home (Wang, 2004), bare, but not afraid.

Subjective (Re)construction

I recall a summer afternoon in 2016; a comrade had prepared a workshop on Fanon and decolonization. Around 15 people showed up as we gathered at the entrance of the United States

Federal Court in San Juan, Puerto Rico, which we had occupied in the name of political independence and economic justice. My comrade, who we shall call Víctor, shared his reading of Fanon and the ways the colonized, even after achieving political independence, continue to be victims of colonialism. We reflected that, even if our grassroots movement, known as the *Campamento Contra la Junta*, achieved its lofty political and economic goals, we would proceed to reconstruct the world in the fashion of the old—a mirror of the order we had worked so hard to topple. At the end of the lecture, Víctor asked participants to identify ways in which we, the Puerto Rican people, display symptoms of the colonial mindset. A man spoke up; I remember he identified himself as a dock worker, a union man, and he immediately spoke of cabotage laws and the Merchant Marine Act impeding Puerto Rico's commercial growth. The audience applauded his remarks as others spoke of local businesses struggling to compete with U.S. multinational companies. Víctor was clearly frustrated; the conversation could not escape the limits of political and economic liberation. Even after Víctor's clear attempts to redirect the conversation towards psychological decolonization, the participants were simply unable or unwilling to see past the prototypical symbols of colonialism; this was a learning experience. I have never forgotten this moment nor the arrogance with which I perceived its absurdity. Was my supposed clairvoyance indicative of a haughty sense of immunity to colonialism?

During the life of the *Campamento Contra la Junta*, we constantly talked about decolonizing Puerto Rico, but we rarely spoke of decolonizing ourselves. In this thoroughly horizontal participatory setting, we had all entered as individuals but had committed to the collective; I think I stopped being an individual for quite some time. I now wonder how I could have spoken of decolonization when I had never questioned my own montages. Most of my insecurities revolve around my privilege, which is contextualized or framed through colonialism. Colonialism hovers over me like a dark cloud—no—like a spotlight revealing and drawing attention to my privilege for everyone to see. I cannot escape the multiple brandings it has gifted me. During my years as an undergrad in Oberlin, Ohio, and now as a doctoral student in Vancouver, Canada, I have been constantly interrogated over the whereabouts of my accent. Answering this question is never an easy task; it requires a complicated conversation first with myself and then with the interrogator. I never take this question as a compliment; I interpret it as a sign of suspicion. How can this person have possibly grown up in a Spanish speaking country and know English as well or perhaps even better than I do? The interrogation of my accent forces me to confront my own identity and the facets I have chosen to conceal; it reveals the insecurities that I have carried with me throughout my life and that have most probably shaped the teacher and activist I am today.

I never know how to react or what to answer to interrogations about my identity. Maybe it's all the cartoons and video games I played as a child or my education in one of the island's most prestigious private Catholic schools. Another possibility, the one I least like to consider, is rooted in the fact that I was born in Washington D.C. and spent my infancy in the imperial capital. Revealing this to a stranger or a colleague is not something I am usually willing to do. Other times, when I say I am from Puerto Rico, I get asked, but were you born there? This question, like the previous one, usually signals, once again, suspicion; the interlocutor feels they are on to something. Perhaps they suspect I am a fraud, a poser, or a phony. I reluctantly answer this question and feel obligated to explain that my entire family is from Puerto Rico and that I was in fact raised on the island. I even feel that need right now, as I write this regressive text, which perhaps only a handful of people will ever read. I feel the need to clarify my identity and put the reader's suspicions to rest. I have been confronted with these questions my entire life, as I filled out questionnaires and

government and registration forms. Every time, I would scroll down and shamefully click on my origin story, but at least I've never had to explain myself to the computer. When I travel the world, I use my U.S. passport to identify myself; it legitimizes my existence and provides access to strange places while making me a stranger in my own estranged reality.

My colonial badges constantly remind me of the different paths my life's racecourse could have taken and force me to consider what could have been if my father hadn't tragically died that February morning in 1991. We would have probably stayed in D.C. for a longer period, and my formative years would have been spent far away from Puerto Rico. My engagement with my father, for whom I was named, has mostly been limited to the books he left behind. Most of them revolve around his work as a legal aid to then Vice-President of the United States, George Bush, Sr., whose picture, taken alongside Bush's wife Barbara, my mother, and my father in the White House (see Figure 1 below) sits atop a shelf in the library as a constant reminder of what if.

Figure 1
Photo of Parents with President Bush and First Lady

God and Man at Yale, *The Power Game: How Washington Works*, *Who's Who in in American Politics*, and *Statehood is for the Poor* are some of the books that have my father's handwritten signature on the inside (a further selection of books from his library have been listed at the end of the References section). He was an ambitious man with lofty political aspirations; his network of Yale graduates, connections to the Republican Party, and presence in D.C. politics would have most likely secured his rise through the ranks of Puerto Rico's pro-statehood party. Holding his books brings me closer to him, but at the same time, they drive us further apart. He was an agent of imperialism and a complicit, proactive collaborator of colonial rule. As a conservative, Republican, pro-statehood, Puerto Rican lawyer and politician, he would have made an interesting subject for Fanon. For me, my father is a man I do not remember, a man who embodies almost everything I stand against. I carry the burden of his memory and the privilege of his life's work everywhere I go.

I once considered becoming a lawyer just like him, my mother, uncles, and every talentless classmate with whom I grew up. I chose history and teaching instead—a purposeful decision in rejection of bourgeois values and an embrace of working-class virtues, which I yearned to embody. I wanted to descend the ladder of social mobility and leave behind my father's legacy, my educational privilege, and my colonial scars of language, birthplace, and citizenship. I wanted to serve my people, and I found teaching to be an honest career where I could labor proudly and not directly serve private interests. I enrolled in a master's program in the History of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean at the Centre for Advanced Studies of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean in San Juan. I was determined to reconnect with my culture and embrace the side of history my Catholic school upbringing had purposefully omitted. I was determined to know more than everyone else and overcompensate for my visibly perceivable colonial scars.

My first experience as a public-school teacher came during my practicum at a specialized public school. I remember asking José, my supervisor, hard questions, such as how to approach creationism in the classroom and the sensual decadence of Ancient Greek civilizations. His response was timid, and I remember sensing trepidation. A couple of days after our conversation, he asked me to go to the Principal's office, where I was told that I was a difficult person and sent home. I was visibly angry and enraged that, in the 21st century, my rejection of Catholicism had jeopardized my career. I found another school and finished my program, got certified, and eventually made my way back, ironically, to the same school that had once labeled me as problematic. I worked alongside José, who at one point became the school Principal, the same José who was tasked with nurturing a young critical teacher but who chose to flee instead. We never spoke about the incident as we passed each other every day in the hallways for five years. I wonder if he ever reflects on his actions; I wonder if he felt threatened by my conviction to social justice and secularism; I wonder if I was, in fact, a difficult and problematic person.

There is a common narrative thread connecting the stories I have reconstructed in my regressive writing. My internal time is non-linear and goes beyond my participation in the *Campamento Contra la Junta* and *Enlazarte*. *Currere* reaches deep into my semi-conscious past and traces an intellectual topography of highs and lows, of valleys and mountains, that frame the coloniality of my being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The root of my framework, the sources of my epistemologies, stem directly from the life experiences I have revealed, which have been highly influenced by the coloniality of power (Quijano, 1997). My colonized mind yearns for liberation; it seeks authenticity and sovereignty in spite of imperialism's best efforts to neutralize my identity. The regressive phase forced me to reflect on difficult memories that have left me feeling naked and vulnerable, but this process is meant to be painful, frustrating, yet consequentially rewarding.

I agree with Yatta Kanu and Mark Glor (2006) that "the opening up of ourselves and our professional practice to examination will proverbially shine light into many of the spaces that perhaps educators are uncomfortable to acknowledge need inspection" (p. 111). As I re-read my regressive reflection, I realize that "the autobiographical act is not complete until the writer becomes its reader and the temporal fissure that has opened between the writing and the reading invites negation as well as affirmation" (Grumet, 1991, p. 73). My colonial tattoos, unerasable, remind me and others that my incalcitrant *independentismo*, critical pedagogy, participatory mindset, and existentialist approach to life is very much rooted in colonialism; they are badges I bare nakedly as I walk along the racecourse.

The Limits of Critical Pedagogy

Currere and autobiographical writing are not without their critics. Michael Apple (1999, as cited in Smith 2013) "for instance, supports autobiography and the value it has for education but is critical of the potential individualism. He goes as far as to suggest that such a method caters to, 'the white, middle-class woman's or man's need for self-display'" (p. 6). Bryan Smith (2013) agrees and adds that "if autobiography is left uncritically examined, it risks becoming the self-indulgent endeavor alluded to by Apple" (p. 6). Pinar (2004) himself has acknowledged "the dangers of exhibitionism and exposure" (p. 36) in *currere*, and Grumet (1981) recalls the method's "stigma of narcissism and privatization" (p. 116). Initially, I too thought this method was a self-indulgent form of naval gazing. As a self-proclaimed critical pedagogue and pro-independence activist, I have always believed that individuals need to step outside themselves in order to foster collective action. As a teacher and activist, I strove to build a sense of community consciousness rooted in the common good, which in retrospect rendered individuality and personal experiences irrelevant. I realized, much like Laurie MacGillivray (1997), that in my effort to construct a participatory, critical, and liberatory atmosphere I have resorted to many of the same hierarchical methods I sought to disrupt. MacGillivray (1997) accepts that her "unacknowledged biases/expectations sabotaged" her pedagogy (p. 470), much like my own unacknowledged insecurities/complexes have hindered my praxis.

As Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) learned through her adventures with critical pedagogy, "confronting unknowability" (p. 321) and acknowledging that a multiplicity of these knowledges can and will be contradictory is a necessary and desirable process for any setting. Ellsworth reflects on the experience of teaching an anti-racist course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a critical pedagogical framework. It is worth quoting Ellsworth at length, as she discusses the difficulties she faced while navigating the practical side of critical pedagogy and attempting to empower her students:

> The contortions of logic and rhetoric that characterize these attempts to define "empowerment" testify to the failure of critical educators to come to terms with the essentially paternalistic project of traditional education. "Emancipatory authority" is one such contortion, for it implies the presence of or potential for an emancipated teacher. Indeed, it asserts that teachers "can link knowledge to power by bringing to light and teaching the subjugated histories, experiences, stories, and accounts of those who suffer and struggle." Yet I cannot unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light when I am not free of my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism. No

> teacher is free of these learned and internalized oppressions. Nor are accounts of one group's suffering and struggle immune from reproducing narratives oppressive to another's —the racism of the Women's Movement in the United States is one example. (pp. 307–308)

Ellsworth is conscious of the assumptions she made before entering the course and her false sense of invulnerability. This protective arrogance led her to realize that Shor and Freire's (1987) conception of "emancipatory authority," where teacher "knows the object of study 'better' than the students," (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 308) is rooted in a false sense of critical consciousness. Ellsworth claims that, given her positionality of "white-skin, middle-class, able-bodied, thin privilege and institutionally granted power" (p. 308), she did not know racism better than her students. Ellsworth believes that critical pedagogy reproduces the same repressive myths it seeks to overcome.

Patti Lather (1998) critiques the field of critical pedagogy for its inclination "toward dominance in spite of liberatory intentions. Concepts of 'transformative intellectuals,' ideology-critique, a voluntarist philosophy of consciousness, and pretensions toward 'emancipating' or 'empowering' some others are marked as an inadequate praxis" (p. 494). Pinar (2011) suggests that critical pedagogues could benefit from *currere*, asserting that, "unaddressed, the interpellated 'I' re-enters 'critical scholarship' as an unproblematic commonsensical self, an 'I' evidently unencumbered by the political forces reproduction and resistance theories depict as omnipresent and determinative" (p. 35). Critical pedagogy's arrogance is revealed as "the split-off 'I' asserts itself as a unitary context-free cohesive self, reserving for itself the agency evidently eluding everyone else" (p. 33). Autobiography and *currere* can offer a way to address the incongruence of critical pedagogy and potentially address the "I" of ideology critique, especially if that "I" sees itself as "unencumbered" by the ideology itself. Autobiographical writing can potentially return agency and subjectivity to people alienated by Neoliberalism's standardization of daily life. It can reconnect individuals to their professions and each other by fostering an eclectic collective narrative of exploitation and colonization.

Lather (2017) questioned whether "our very efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance" (p. 98). She critiques Peter McLaren's messianic impulses and "redemptive agendas as ever deeper places for privilege to hide" (p. 233). For Lather (2001), critical theory is too confident in itself, and she concludes the following:

> Implementing critical pedagogy in the field of schooling *is* impossible. That is precisely the task: to situate the experience of impossibility as an enabling site for working through aporias. Ellsworth calls this "coming up against stuck place after stuck place" as a way to keep moving within "the impossibility of teaching" in order to produce and learn from ruptures, failures, breaks, and refusals (Ellsworth 1997, xi, 9). This is in contrast with the experience of plenitude that underwrites McLaren's call for a "revolutionary socialist project for education." (p. 189)

But Lather does not fall into solipsistic relativism; rather, she understands the limits of reflexivity, as it "authorizes itself by confronting its own processes of interpretation as some sort of cure toward better knowing, while deconstruction approaches 'knowing through not knowing' (Visweswaran, 1994, as quoted by Lather, 2017, p. 252). Lather and Ellsworth (1996) believe in the importance of "deconstructing moments in classrooms when 'things go wrong,' pedagogical

meltdowns are used to foreground the limits, the necessary misfirings of pedagogy" (p. 70). These "meltdowns" and "stuck places" are rarely addressed by critical scholars in their research, especially those who employ participatory and critical pedagogical methodologies. Liberation and decolonization appear to be forgone conclusions, the assumed and unavoidable results of critical praxis that reveal themselves as inevitable consequences of collective action. Unfortunately, in challenging social reproduction, many times these groups fail to address and highlight what oppressive forces they might have reproduced and failed to resist (Brown, 1996).

The "Colonial Mentality"

While Pinar (1994, 2013) is highly critical of critical scholarship, this doesn't mean he has completely dismissed the field. Pinar (1976) sustains that *currere*

> starts with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and with the major themes in that book. The first is that human vocation, ontologically, is humanization; the second is that to pedagogically act in accord with this meaning of the human endeavor is to dialogically encounter one's students; the third is to so encounter our students as to cultivate thought and action, a sort of *praxis* Freire terms "*Conscientização*." (p. 8)

Freire (1968/1995) believes the oppressed must first understand their own oppression in order to challenge the structures that facilitate their subjugation, and Pinar, as we shall see in the following section, seems to agree. *Conscientização* and *currere* conceive of action as the goal behind raising consciousness. In other words, a liberatory, dialogical, and critical praxis must start from within, questioning one's own oppression to gradually manifest into political action.

In *The Character of Curriculum Studies*, Pinar (2013) argues that critical pedagogy strips individuals of their agency, leaving educators "paralyzed by reproduction, left to cry 'resistance' without the subjective means to enact it" (p. 35). Critical pedagogues tend to argue that the oppressive class structure along with its bourgeois ideology is reproduced through schooling and that teachers must help students develop strategies of resistance. Pinar (2013, quoting Benjamin, 1998) argues that this "ideology critique established 'an indissoluble position of identity from which to attack exclusion and unmask power, as if it were free of it'" (p. 38). Critical scholars and pedagogues believe themselves to be strategically positioned at a certain vantage point from which they can unproblematically identify the obstacles faced by, though not yet perceived by, others. The critical pedagogue is a sort of spiritual medium whose clairvoyance enables them to listen to what others cannot hear, observe what others cannot see, and imagine what others cannot yet conceive.

According to Pinar, revolutionary praxis, thus, requires first and foremost a subjective, introspective, and individual reconstruction of the self. Pinar (2013) develops this idea by praising Fanon's acknowledgement of the perils of the colonial mentality and his "psychoanalytic language of demand and desire" (p. 46). Pinar agrees that "colonialism produced reverberations the colonial powers could not escape," along with "the violent practices, attitudes, and institutions exported by the colonizing bourgeois ruling classes"(p. 46). Fanon's psychological framework allows Pinar to emphasize the importance of engaging one's repressed self before venturing out into collective action.

My critique of Pinar's reliance on Fanon is two-fold: (1) he assumes that individuals can actually free themselves from colonial ideologies, and (2) it ends up reserving for itself, the subjectively reconstructed individual, a sense of agency not afforded to other "colonized" peoples. This critique uses Pinar's own critique of critical pedagogy to reveal how subjective reconstruction is, much like critical liberatory praxis, a narcissistic inclination. Pinar might be unaware of this because his own subjectivity is framed within a white-settler society, and although he privileges marginalized voices, he might not be contextually attuned with how the discourse of the "colonial mentality" has, in many of these communities, fueled pseudo-scientific, patriarchal, and condescending jargon that negates the agency of everyone who does not possess the truths of creole intellectual anti-colonial elites and "non-colonized" individuals. In the same way that Pinar critiques critical pedagogues for their arrogant sense of ideological immunity, his belief in the subjective reconstruction of the colonized subject ends up reserving for the subjectively reconstructed individual the agency and freedom not afforded to those who have yet to reconstruct their subjective colonial submission.

Ramón Grosfoguel (2003) wrote about this phenomenon in relation to Puerto Rico where,

> nationalist discourses … fall into the trap of a colonialist underestimation of Puerto Rican agency and subalternity. Puerto Rican nationalist discourses portray the "Puerto Rican masses" as "colonized," "docile," and "ignorant" because of their consistent rejection of "independence" for the island and the "ambiguity" of their political and identification strategies. (p. 9)

For Grosfoguel, this elitist discourse contends that "'people do not know any better'; they are ideologically 'colonized' and as such are in need of a nationalist vanguard to enlighten the 'masses'" (p. 10). Grosfoguel is somewhat of an oddity in that he is a decolonial scholar who favors statehood for Puerto Rico, which though theoretically posing no contradiction, hasn't been the norm for critical and leftist Puerto Rican scholars who have traditionally supported independence. Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel (2008), together with other scholars, coined the term "radical statehood," which advocates for a progressive form of statehood imbued with socialist principles and condemns independence as a form of (neo)colonialism without the marginal benefits of colonialism. These scholars argue that independence has always been rejected by the majority of the Puerto Rican people and that economic justice can only be obtained through annexation into the U.S. in order to further the adoption of working-class protections and legislations. Their critique of pro-independence movements is largely focused on their white and elitist intelligentsia who have traditionally viewed the independence-rejecting "masses" as uneducated and colonized victims of U.S. imperialism.

While, as a pro-independence activist, I agree with most of these arguments, I believe they suffer from a misplaced trust in the United States that elicits the imagery of Manifest Destiny. These scholars view the U.S. as the harbinger of progressivism and social justice, yet the recent Trump administration, and previous ones as well, have highlighted how this is far from reality. Radical statehooders are extremely apprehensive of local white elites, whose unfettered capitalist extractive desires, they argue, can only be checked by federal legislation. Their distrust is warranted, yet their faith in Empire is myopic and misplaced. Their arguments and postulates are outdated and in dire need of a recontextualization to take into account recent natural disasters and the federal government's response, the COVID pandemic, the Trump administration, and yet most important of all, the pro-independence movement's shift in ideology. Contemporary political

movements that advocate for political independence have shifted the struggle from the political arena and into the streets and have done so through decolonial, feminist, and innovative ideological frameworks. While the breadth of this paper does not allow me to discuss these movements, collectives such as the now defunct and pioneering *Campamento Contra la Junta*, along with active organizations such as *Jornada se Acabaron las Promesas* (*JSLP*) and *La Colectiva Feminista en Acción*, have changed the narrative behind the struggle. Both of these groups have avoided the pitfalls of cataloguing society as conditioned by colonialism. Instead of constituting a vanguard, *JSLP*, for instance, stresses that alternative methodologies of community building already exist in society and that they, as an organization, do not exist to decide what a decolonial future might look like. Rather their aim is to magnify and aid these already functional projects.

Final Thoughts

In colonized communities, subjective reconstruction is impeded by the perceived effects of psychological dependency through years of imperial domination. Popular pedagogues and critical scholars have frequently labeled detractors as "ignorant" and "disinterested" "masses," incapable of liberation due to their colonized mentality. Through no fault of their own, these "victims" lack the awareness and agency to act upon the world in "truly" liberating ways. This pathology necessitates the critical intervention of liberated and decolonized entities whose clairvoyance impels them to help others move past the colonial condition. This pseudo-scientific and quasi-psychological discourse has impeded thoughtful and honest dialogue between the different factions of colonized civil societies. It has thwarted conversations around the possible economic and neo-colonial perils of independence as well as the historical amnesia, erasure, and naivety of annexation. Instead of poetically and condescendingly invoking Fanon and Memmi to label everyone who hasn't reached my pro-independence and socialist conclusions as lamentably conditioned by modernity, I have moved towards a pedagogy of relation, difference, and understanding that respects the other as a legitimate producer of knowledge. Revealing the scars of our colonized bodies through autobiographical writing and auto-ethnographic exploration will hopefully lead to dialogical relationships that allow for honest interactions with ourselves and others. Building these relationships through honesty and respect can potentially foster a decolonial future where political alternatives aren't myopically and deterministically seen as magic wands capable of solving all of our problems. Acknowledging these limitations could potentially allow teachers, students, activists, researchers, etc. to welcome critiques without renouncing their convictions; to entertain the possibility that their answers and truths aren't perfectly and completely decolonial or decolonizing; and to acknowledge that nobody is free from the Empire's gaze.

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