

Decolonising Critique: From Prophetic Negation to Prefigurative Affirmation

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Abstract In this chapter, Motta visions a possible answer to the question ‘how do we decolonise the practice of revolutionary critique?’ Emerging from a dialogue between her praxis with women in movement over the last 15 years and the work of black, decolonial and Chicana feminists, she first deconstructs the classic twentieth-century Prophetic figure of critique. She does this through engagement with Žižek’s work demonstrating their reproduction and complicity in the epistemological logics and rationalities of coloniality. She then begins to map some elements of decolonising critique through the figure of the storyteller, for whom critique is existentially grounded in the/our self-liberating and collective practices of healing as emancipation. Here, possibilities for multiple grounds of onto-epistemological becoming are opened as racialised women, who are denied knowing-subjectivity in coloniality, co-construct radical community, critical intimacy and speak in multiple tongues enflashing and thus reinventing revolutionary praxis.

Keywords Decolonising critique · Prefigurative epistemologies · Embodied emancipation · Critical intimacy · Pedagogies of becoming · Decolonial feminism · Black feminism · Chicana feminism

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Decolonising the epistemological frameworks of coloniality demands that the works of colonised peoples be read philosophically and not as mere appendages to Eurocentric traditions. In recognising these perspectives as philosophical, we are able to ask meta-theoretical questions which change the terms of the violent conversation that have structured the politics of knowing of capitalist-coloniality as opposed to seeking recognition and inclusion into its logics. They importantly force us to ask critical questions about who and what counts as an intellectual, what counts as critique and which practices are deemed as those which produce critical theory, demonstrating how the current contours which structure the subjectivity, production and performance of critique reproduce coloniality. These perspectives enable as Maldonado-Torres (2006a, p. 4) describes 'a new set of metaphors and lived realities to acquire existential and epistemological significance'. Accordingly, I will draw on the work of Maria Lugones, bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa in my critique of Žižek, as paradigmatic of the Prophetic knowing-subject of orthodox critique, and the task of conceptualising an affirmative decolonising praxis of epistemological emancipation beyond this figure of the Prophet.

I choose the metaphor of the Prophet as paradigmatic of the subject-of-knowing in both Analytic and Continental philosophies and thus underpinning many articulations of Marxist critique. Afro-American philosopher Cornell West (1993, p. 66) argues '[this subject] is continuous with the great and grand Jewish and Christian traditions of the prophetic in which "Thus says the Lord", or "Eternal truth speaks from on top". Such a subject enacts authoritative violence and, as I demonstrate, reproduces the dehumanising dualisms of the coloniality of knowing-subjectivity.

I develop my critique around three areas: the knowing-subject; the performance of critique and their relationship with the 'other' or popular, demonstrating how in each Žižek's critique is reabsorbed into the coloniality of knowing-subjectivity. I then vision a decolonising politics of knowledge through the figure of the storyteller from the epistemological margins.

THE COLONIALITY OF KNOWING

Decolonial theory demonstrates that coloniality¹ is the underside which co-created and sustains capitalism. To legitimate these logics, a particular politics of knowledge is naturalised and universalised. This coloniality of knowing is constituted through processes of subjectification which create

and (re)produce a particular knowing-subject – the Westernised and individualised subject encapsulated in Rene Descartes' articulation of the ego-cogito; the knowing-subject of 'I think therefore I am'. Yet, Dussel demonstrates how the Eurocentric ego-cogito was founded on the dualistic exclusion of the raced and feminised less-than-human other (Lugones 2010; Maldonado-Torres 2007).

This coloniality of knowing-subjectivity is embodied in the figure of the Prophet who comes to know through violent separation from this raced and gendered 'other' that is rendered invisible, mute and absent (Lugones 2010, p. 745). As Maldonado-Torres (2007) explains within these logics the experience of the *damné* is characterised by invisibility, the white gaze of suspicion and denial of the capacity of gift. Invisibility is constituted through the denial of knowledges to the raced and gendered other; suspicion is cast as the gaze in which the question is always asked 'are you like us', 'are you truly human', and the denial of the capacity of gift legitimises the idea that there is nothing to learn from the *damné* undercutting the conditions of dialogue, reciprocity and humanisation. The Prophetic figure of knowing of capitalist-coloniality is thus a Monological subject speaking for and erasing the other.

This Prophetic subject has particular embodied attributes and affective practices which constitute and are constituted by gendered practices, ways of being and social relationships. His detached, masculinised rationality can and ought to control the unruly and irrational feminised emotions and bodily desires and the irrationalities of all others named as disorderly and underdeveloped (hooks 2001, 2003). Emotional, embodied, oral, popular and spiritual knowledges are delegitimised, invisibilised and denied. Other ways of relating to the earth, each other, the cosmos and our selves are denied either through assimilation or coercive elimination (Lugones 2010).

These epistemological logics are not external to the colonised and oppressed subject. Rather the long process of subjectification to which she is object creates as Gil et al. (2012, p. 11) describe 'epistemological wounds and ontological wounds'. Such wounding becomes internalised constituting an internal and external exile from self and other. As Anzaldúa (2009, p. ix) articulates:

We (women of color) knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered 'normal'. And as we internalised this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other. Forever after we have been in search of that self, that 'other' and each other.

The colonality of knowing-subjectivity also underpins many traditions within Continental philosophy. Despite commitment to emancipation and attention to historicity this tradition reproduces a Eurocentric practice, subject and performance of critique which is self-referential and limited by its provinciality.² It is not however enough to particularise the claims of Continental philosophy because this invisibilises how the European 'Prophetic' knowing-subject has a dehumanising side which is co-constitutive of its very epistemological grounds of being. Accordingly, in what follows, I contribute to the task of decolonising critique through exposing the logics of colonality upon which the Prophetic figure of critique is produced through a focus on the works of Slavoj Žižek who was described recently as 'the thinker of choice for Europe's young intellectual vanguard'.³

ŽIŽEK: THE MAVERICK PROPHET

Žižek develops critique without compromise, both in form where he despises what he calls 'political correctness' and in content where he targets without mercy political and theoretical opponents. His political analysis berates the shortcomings of popular rebellions and mobilisations from the Greek uprising, Occupy, direct action, feminist politics, and the Arab Spring to name but a few. Undoubtedly his writing is passionate, prolific and daring (sf. Žižek 2012, 2013). Yet his negative critique has been labelled nihilistic and empty without ability to construct the horizons of an emancipatory left imaginary. However, more problematic than the emptiness of his negative critique, as I demonstrate, is its reproduction of the colonality of knowing-subjectivity.

Žižek enacts critique through negativity. As the maverick critic, he opens the possibility for 'real' acts/events by suspending and disturbing the hegemonic contours of current thinking, politics and ethics. As he argues:

the point is not the shift in relations of power and domination... but the very fact of transcending- or rather momentarily cancelling- this very domain, of the emergence of a totally different domain of collective will (Žižek 2008a, p. 31).

The political event/act must decisively differentiate itself from all that has come, not as substance and possibility of what could be, but as nothingness,

a form of ground-zero (Butler et al. 2000, p. 131; Žižek 2002a). Negative critique is thus characterised by violent differentiation from the norm which creates the grounds 'for antagonistic universality, of the universality as struggle which cuts across the entire social body' (Žižek 2004c, p. 29). Revolutionary politics are groundless, necessarily disembodied and appear out of the horizon of utopian possibility offered 'by the brief apparition of a future utopian Otherness to which every authentic revolutionary stance should cling' (Žižek 2000b, pp. 159–160).⁴

Unsurprisingly then, negative critique does not involve an embrace of the other (as body or embodied experience) but rather 'overcoming and subduing, annihilating even, the other... a logic of the struggle with an antagonist' (2004a, p. 186). Thus authentic political acts must be 'impevious to any call of the Other' (2001, pp. 111, 175). The author as the knower becomes a disembodied speaker who is beyond critique, enacting an anti-ethnic in the name of liberation, which is however premised on dehumanisation of the other through denial of their capacity of gift.⁵

Žižek is unable to develop an affirmative politics of knowledge that enacts ways of becoming, otherwise to the dehumanising underside of Prophetic knowing-subjectivity. Indeed the tendency in Žižek's enactment of critique is to 'speak over' multiple perspectives in the name of achieving 'real' acts (Dabashi 2011). This practice of critique fetishises the event as *the* political, reinforcing the colonality of Prophetic-knowing in which the 'knowing' subject has the right and duty to silence 'others' (sf. Žižek 2002b). Such a representational epistemological stance universalises a particular politics of knowledge and knowing-subjectivity constructed in and through onto-epistemological violence.

Performing the Prophet

The affective attributes and embodied norms of Žižek's Prophetic critic are violent passionate antagonism, opposed to sentimentality and tenderness. For Žižek this subject is tensed, ready to pounce on such weaknesses. The gendered norms of colonality are reinscribed in a new 'revolutionary' dualism of violent passion versus sentimental superficiality, strength versus weakness, hardened bodies versus relaxed soft bodies. For Žižek, if we succumb to the latter we reproduce the contours of the hegemonic present. Creating emancipatory possibilities involve 'crushing' the individual to produce a New Man (Žižek 2000b, p. 131). The boundaries of critique are thus constructed as a traumatic awareness of the other, destruction of

the self and violent separation from the repressed Real. This normalises and naturalises a Monological masculinised knowing-subject who must close off to receiving and listening to the feminised and racialised other and re-enact the traumatic encounter of coloniality.

Žižek's conceptualisation of the affective and bodily attributes of the critic naturalises a one-sided articulation of human possibility, connection and practice. Such a performance of critique reinscribes the divisions between masculinised mind and feminised racialised body that characterise the affectivities of the knowing-subject of coloniality. Thus critique remains as a moment of disembodied and empty negativity, disruption and violence against the repressed Real. It therefore becomes the mirror image of this repressed Real, unable as a subject or a practice to produce a knowing-subjectivity which transcends the logics of coloniality.

Relationship with the Popular

Unsurprisingly, Žižek paints the terrain of common understanding as one of the repressed Real. This legitimises a politics of Monological knowing and an epistemology of blindness and deafness. 'Revolutionary politics is not a matter of opinions but of the truth on behalf of which one is compelled to disregard the opinion of the majority and to impose revolutionary will against it' (Žižek 2000a, p. 123). Accordingly, the Prophet has the right to suspend the ethical in the name of a glimpse of utopian possibility (Žižek 2004b, c, p. 517).

For Žižek, therefore, politics which begin from the embodied experiences of oppression and seek to prefigure liberation can only enact 'a desperate strategic retreat from the hopelessness of any approach based on the more global cognitive mapping of the situation' (2004d, p. 312). Such practices for Žižek are the antithesis of a revolutionary critic who must distinguish himself violently from the *herd* and their affective, embodied and cognitive attachments (Žižek 2006). As he explains (referencing Nietzsche), 'such moral sensitivity (to the experience of oppression) culminates in the contemporary Last Man who fears the excessive intensity of life' (2004d, p. 297).

In sum, Žižek constructs critique through negativity and demystifies elements of hegemonic thought and practice. However, his practice of critique is embedded in the denial of the damne's capacity of gift. It thus produces a Monological subject of knowing who has the duty to speak

over and name others' for their recuperation into capitalism. His affective commitments are those of violent differentiation and event production through the external imposition of the theorist's truth as an act of trauma. The critic is disembodied and de-subjectivised, beyond critique and necessarily blind and deaf to receiving from the other. A particular form of politics and of thinking the possibility of emancipatory critique becomes universalised as the very ontology of critical thought. Žižek as subject and practice of Prophetic negation becomes the mirror image of Enlightenment politics of knowledge and thus trapped in the coloniality of knowing-subjectivity.

THE STORYTELLERS

In this final section, I vision decolonising critique around the figure of the storyteller, a metaphor that exceeds the coloniality of knowing-subjectivity for it captures, as Christian (1987, p. 54) argues in relation to Afro-American women:

how our theorising (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative form, in the stories we create, in the riddles and proverbs, in the play with language. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries and our very humanity?

Our storytelling is a meta-epistemological task which is deeply rooted in the existential questions and realities of those who have been denied knowing-subjectivity and internalised the external categories of being less-than human (West 1989, pp. 223, 165). In the process, those dehumanised affirm their existence and articulate a new epistemological orientation for decolonising practices of knowing, knowledges and knowing-subjectivities.

Bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa and Maria Lugones practice negative critique but in a way which is itself prefigurative, collective and constructs the revolutionary affirmative through possibilities of becoming other in thought, practice and as embodied subjects. Thus the orthodox practice of critique as negation is not enough. To remain within this move is to reinscribe the colonised into the coloniser's logics of representation and to assume that, as Lugones (2010, p. 748) describes, 'global capitalist colonial system is in every way successful in its destruction of people's knowledges,

relations and economies'. Rather we must remember that it is her belonging to impure communities that gives life to her agency; that she is:

a being who begins to inhabit a fractured locus constructed doubly, who perceives doubly, where the sides of the locus are in tension, and the conflict itself actively informs the subjectivity of the colonized self in multiple relation' (Lugones 2010, p. 748).

Building upon the fracture in the colonial locus means that as bell hooks (1990, p. 15) argues:

[that] in that vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become- to make oneself anew... That process emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one invents alternative habits of being and resists from marginal space of difference inwardly defined.

Thus, for the storyteller to transform capitalism is a praxical task which implies a stepping inwards to the contours of everyday life and inhabiting the fractured locus between processes of subjectification and active processes of decolonising subjectivity.

The methodologies of the storyteller become methodologies of everyday life that enable her to facilitate processes of critical intimacy as opposed to the groundless distance of the Prophet (Motta 2014). To step inwards involves committing to developing knowledge processes in which we collectively bring to awareness how systems of oppression wounds us and become embedded in our bodies, distort our emotions, separate us from our souls and limit our creative capacities (Levins Morales 1998). Critique for the storyteller, is not merely a process of contesting power relationships 'out there', or decrying the ignorance of the other and building the conditions for a nihilistic authentic act of truth as in Žižek, but of unlearning social relationships, subjectivities and ways of life and learning new ones.

How might the storyteller enact such a stepping inwards through critical intimacy? As I have demonstrated, the twentieth-century Prophetic figure of critique reinscribes the coloniality of knowing-subjectivity who expresses strength through mastery and control over the unruly emotions and irrational racialised body and cannot express his vulnerabilities or his loves for these are viewed as weaknesses. The storyteller is a figure who moves away from such patriarchal and racist enactments of masculinity towards a caring

and nurturing self who is able to participate in, and contribute to the building of, community. This involves transgressing the one-dimensional Prophetic subject constituted through splitting in which the knowing self is separated from, and/or gains control over, the feminised heart and body. The multidimensional storyteller is intensely embodied in the present and processes of (their) bodies and thus attentive to the rootedness of community in history, spatiality, cosmology, culture and social relations.

This subject could not seek to enact Žižek's violent differentiation as monologue, death and annihilation of the other (as self and community) as critique. Rather, they create the conditions of embodied communion through dialogue because, as Paulo Freire (cited in Cortes 2013, p. 112) describes:

Dialogue is an existential demand and enables a form of meeting which fosters reflection and action... Dialogue is the terrain which grants meaning to desires, aspirations, dreams, hopes and makes possible an exchange of ideas and critical conversations that emerge from reality... To exist humanly is to speak the world... Dialogue is the meeting of people mediated by the world, which enables such a speaking of the world.

Dialogical construction breaks the domination of Monological thought, practice, and being as it opens up the space for multiplicity, for doubts, questions, and discontent with the world as it is (both internal and external). To foster such dialogical spaces involves turning towards the other and co-constructing the conditions for voice, speaking and listening. The storyteller 'knows' that those who have suffered multiple oppressions are often silent because of the inability to speak, the refusal/inability of others to listen, the risks involved in speaking truth to power and/or from the insufficiency of representation, the fact that some things cannot be spoken in words. She therefore comes to learn to take seriously these often invisibilised dynamics of power, dynamics which mark who is heard and who speaks and conversely who and how some are silenced. As Anzaldúa (2009, p. 75) explains:

If I'm talking to you but not really listening or observing your body language and I'm not really empathic with you, I don't really hear or see you. It's a multilevel kind of listening... You listen with both outer ear and inner ear. This is the spiritual dimension... which combines activism with inner, subjective listening.

Thus the storyteller develops practices which facilitate inner voice and active listening; disalienating the internalisation of the denial of her/our capacity to gift, and in the process creates the grounds for opening towards critical intimacy. Through this, communities come to value and nurture their inner life, their knowing and their truth as they (we) begin to build the conditions for collective and critical readings of the world that enable their (our) transformation. As Anzaldúa (2009, p. 49) describes this is 'a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society'.

Accordingly, this capacity for affirmative decolonising critique as Lorde (cited in hooks 1990, p. 19) reminds us, cannot be forged with the master's tools for 'these tools will never dismantle the master's house'. Rather we need to reimagine critique away from its embedding in the coloniality of knowing-subjectivity which universalises one form of knowing, knowledge and knower towards an embrace of multiple epistemologies, multiple subjects of knowing and multiple practices of creating knowledge.

A way which she might enact such a reinvention is through the co-creation of prefigurative epistemologies (Motta 2011). Prefigurative epistemologies are embedded in the collective construction of multiple readings of the world in which we speak in multiple tongues, rethinking and creating what it means to speak, to write, to theorise. As Anzaldúa (2007, p. 81) describes in relation to her experience – and eminently applicable here – 'I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing; I will have my voice... I will have my serpent's tongue- my woman's voice'.

Prefigurative epistemologies are inherently pedagogical, in that they involve the development of practices of (un)learning that enable decolonising practices of transformation. Critical to emancipatory pedagogies such as these are an overcoming of the dualism between mind and body, theory and practice and knower and known. As suggested above, key to this is a politics of dialogue – as opposed to Monological silencing practices and rationalities of the Prophet – in which all become co-constructors of knowledge, our social worlds and our selves.

This enables a disruption of the Prophet's illusion, as Mignolo and Walsh (2002, p. 19) argue 'that knowledge is disembodied and de-localised and that it is necessary in all parts of the planet to follow modernity's epistemology'. Through decentring these logics of knowledge of coloniality those on the margins become resisting subjects rather than objects of enquiry, actively

engaged in the creation of knowledge and in their own destinies finding our voices through renaming and recreating the world (see Freire 2000).

Performing the Storyteller

The storyteller embraces a full and multiple emotional palette. She is able to share and make visible her vulnerabilities as the epitome of strength and solidarity. She co-constructs spaces of dialogue through nurturing safety and recognition. As hooks (2003, p. 216) explains, 'We cannot really risk emotionally in relationships where we do not feel safe'. Central to such performance of critique is an ethics of love. Love not in its individualised, commodified and bourgeois form as lover of possessions, power-over and the disembodiment of desire but love as an ethics of affirmation of power-with and power-within.

This enables a stepping through anger towards self-love and love for the other. Such a transformation of the pain and anger of denial and devaluation into relationships of becoming, opening and integrity involves crossings into the borderlands. For Anzaldúa, such crossings are multiple and take us to our borders of self and certainty. As she describes (2007, p. 47), 'every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again'.

The affective attributes of enabling such a practice of love cannot involve practices of shaming, ridicule and denial, as in Žižek. Rather, she nurtures critical practices of affirmation and emotional opening that foster practices of emotional alchemy which are 'difficult... painful' but which enable the transformation of our wounds into sources of joy, courage and love, 'without which there can be no wholeness' (hooks 2004, p. 156).

The ethics of love involve a commitment to creating affective and embodied interactions, connections and relationships enacted through the loving eye, the tender touch, the attentive ear and the knowing heart. Here song, dance, ritual in which our bodies, hearts, minds and souls meet are the epitomes of the storytellers practice in which through each thread of our weaving we remember and honour our histories and rework novel structures, conceptions of self and social relationships. As hooks (1990, p. 8) describes such practices:

expressed in writing, teaching and habits of being [are] fundamentally linked to a concern with creating strategies that will enable colonised folks to decolonise their minds and actions, thereby promoting the insurrection of subjugated knowledges.

Relationship with the Popular

The storyteller unlike the Prophet does not seek aesthetic, epistemological and linguistic separation from the popular. The storyteller imbues the margins and our embodied experiences of oppression with sacredness for as Anzaldúa (2007, p. 60) describes those who are pushed out and have faced multiple oppressions are most likely to develop *la facultad* – the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities. The ones possessing this sensitivity are ‘excruciatingly alive to the world’ and from critical collective remembering, recreating and rewearing these experiences can develop the most complex and multiple forms of liberatory praxis.

The storyteller makes an active choice of and from the margins as a ‘location of radical openness and possibility’. She comes to this space through her experiences of suffering, survival and practices of healing, and invites dialogue between and within our wounded selves and communities (Motta 2015). The storyteller, unlike the Prophet, does not herald their message as a truth to be followed but creates spaces of radical community and critical intimacy from which we can bear witness and remember. She is one yet multiple; open yet with clear boundaries of affirmation and dignity, able to create ‘a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world’ (hooks 1990, p. 153). Thus the storyteller unlike the Prophet does not frame, re-present and silence the oppressed ‘other’ but rather enacts a (collective) speaking of truth to power which in its practice creates us anew.

FROM PROPHETIC NEGATION TO PREFIGURATIVE AFFIRMATION

It is time to dethrone Žižek and the fetish of Prophetic negation from its epistemological privilege at the heart of twentieth-century critique, for this practice can only lead to a deepening of our moment of crisis not its transcendence. Such a dethroning is an invitation to self-reflect, unlearn dominant knowledge practices and subjectivities, and enact epistemological decolonisation.

The sketch of the figure of the storyteller I have drawn offers a beginning to think about practices of epistemological decolonisation. At its heart is a commitment to co-create spaces of radical community which honour experiences of oppression with epistemic privilege. The storyteller enters in her nakedness in such spaces not as the liberated or the liberator but as a participant in practices of healing. Her practice is embedded in an

ethics of love and enacts a stepping inwards to the other, within and without thus moving beyond Monological forms of knowing-subjectivity premised upon the dehumanisation of the raced and gendered other. Instead our epistemological horizons are opened to dialogical grounds of becoming through multiple knowledges, multiple subjects of knowing and multiple practices of creating knowledge. Here the storytellers are one and many, self as other, and speak, write and become in multiple tongues. The storytellers decolonise critique by reclaiming the revolutionary affirmative through prefigurative epistemologies.

NOTES

1. Coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism. Thus coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday (Nelson Maldonado Torres 2007, p. 243).
2. For a critical analysis of this tradition’s spatio-temporal limitations see Maldonado-Torres 2006b, and for a critical analysis of its epistemological provinciality see Mignolo 2009.
3. <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jun/27/slavoj-zizek-living-end-times>.
4. See also for a critical analysis of this form of disembodied Prophetic critique West, 1989, p. 239.
5. See also for similar critiques of the anti-ethics of the politics of knowing of coloniality, Morgensen 2011; Mendoza 2013.

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