

The Philosophers' Magazine

Issue 94, 3rd Quarter 2021
UK £6.99 US \$8.99

Spinoza's Bookshelf
Environmental Racism
How We Argue Now
Material Girls

The Politics of Language



Alex Guerrero, Off The Beaten Track

Interview by Jean Kazez

Jean Kazez: A year ago a student complained to me that she had been assigned to read Mill and Aristotle in three classes each, but had never been assigned any Chinese or African philosophy. You've been trying to rectify philosophy's parochialism. Have you found that philosophers are receptive to this?

Alex Guerrero: Yes, for the most part. I have heard horror stories from others about negative, even racist reactions they have received when they mention teaching work from African, Chinese, Indian, Latin American, Native American, and other "non-canon" philosophical traditions, but I have not personally encountered that. This might be in large part because my own work and training has not been in these areas, and so people are less defensive (and, as a result, less offensive) in response. I get the occasional eye-roll and some people clearly aren't interested, but most people react more with surprise than anything else. I also think the profession is changing, both at a demographic level, and at an intellectual level. More philosophers are embarrassed by their ignorance of other traditions and would like to do something about it, rather than just assuming that if they don't know about it then there is nothing there to know.

For example, I've now been running a reading group on African, Latinx and Latin

American, and Native American and Indigenous Philosophy for two years now, first with Rutgers PhD students, now with faculty and graduate students from around the world (thanks, Zoom!). There were quite a few Rutgers PhD students who were interested in learning more about this philosophical work and there have been 20-30 philosophy professors who have participated regularly in the reading group this Spring. I think many people want to work to address



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their own parochial limitations, particularly in how they are teaching the next generations of philosophy students.

JK: How have you been moving your own courses off the beaten track?

AG: Well, the big move in that regard was creating a new course on African, Latin American, and Native American Philosophy and getting it approved as an official regular course at Rutgers. (This process was surprisingly easy and the philosophy department was very receptive to the idea; I'd be happy to talk with anyone interested in trying to create similar classes where they teach.) The course is an introduction to philosophical work from Africa, Latin America, and the indigenous peoples of North America, covering topics in ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, aesthetics, social philosophy, and political philosophy. The course covers philosophical views from the Ahnishinahbæótjibway, Akan, Aztec/Mexica/Nahua, Dogon, Igbo, Lakota, Mexican, Navajo, and Yoruba traditions, among others. There is more material than one could possibly cover in one course, but I attempt to give students something of an overview of some of the important themes and threads of discussion as well as engaging with common meta-philosophical issues that emerge with work from all three areas.

Are these subfields of philosophy? How do we make sense of the idea of African (or Latin American, or Native American) Philosophy as a field? Are there philosophically important differences between oral traditions and written traditions? What kinds of texts and artifacts can present philosophical views? How should we understand ethnophilosophy and cultural worldviews as

philosophical contributions? How should we distinguish philosophical views from religious ones? How do these traditions engage discussions of identity, autonomy, and post-colonialism, including in the production of philosophy itself? Should this work be incorporated into the mainstream philosophical canon? I really want students to get into the substantive philosophical views offered by people working in these traditions. Having done that, it makes responding to these meta-philosophical questions both easier and, perhaps, makes doing so seem less pressing and less interesting.

The profession is changing

JK: These are great meta-philosophical questions, but I can see how we could get bogged down in them, instead of diving into the work itself. But let me play the skeptic for a second. Are you reading and teaching this material for the sake of inclusion and diversity, or for philosophical insight?

AG: Well, that might be something of a false dichotomy (I think both are part of my motivation), but it is certainly true that I wouldn't be teaching this material if I didn't think it contained a wealth of important philosophical ideas and insights.

One of my favorite things about philosophy is how it allows and encourages us to step back from what everyone around us might think about something and ask basic, probing questions about how we should live, what we should believe, what exists, what makes something what it is (now and over time), what our place in the world is

and ought to be, how we do and should reason, and much else. I think there are better and worse answers to these questions, maybe even true and false answers to them. If one joins me in that, one might start to worry that we – like many before us – will be overly influenced by the answers given to these questions by our local, parochial cultures and societies. If we rely just on our judgments and those thoughts that seem “natural” or “plausible” to us, we might end up not doing all that much more than offering commonsense, parochial views, dressed up a bit more neatly than usual. But then how well we are doing at offering better or even true answers to these philosophical questions is going to be dependent on how close our local culture already was to having the good or true answers to these questions. It is hard to have unusual let alone radical thoughts. But I think those are necessary for philosophical advance and genuine insight. An easy way of avoiding at least some worries about parochiality is to consider what has been said by people who are not (or not just) members of one’s local culture or society. This can push us and open our minds in really useful, exciting ways.

One of the best parts of teaching this material is seeing this happen for students as they encounter Wub-e-ke-niew’s views on the relationship between ethics and physical place, or Nkiru Nzegwu’s description and defense of the dual-sex systems of governance in pre-colonial Igbo society, or James Maffie’s presentation of the Aztec/Nahua monistic metaphysical view concentrated on the concept of *teotl*, or Gloria Anzaldúa’s ideas about the relationship between identity and borders and distinctive identities of those who exist in literal and metaphorical

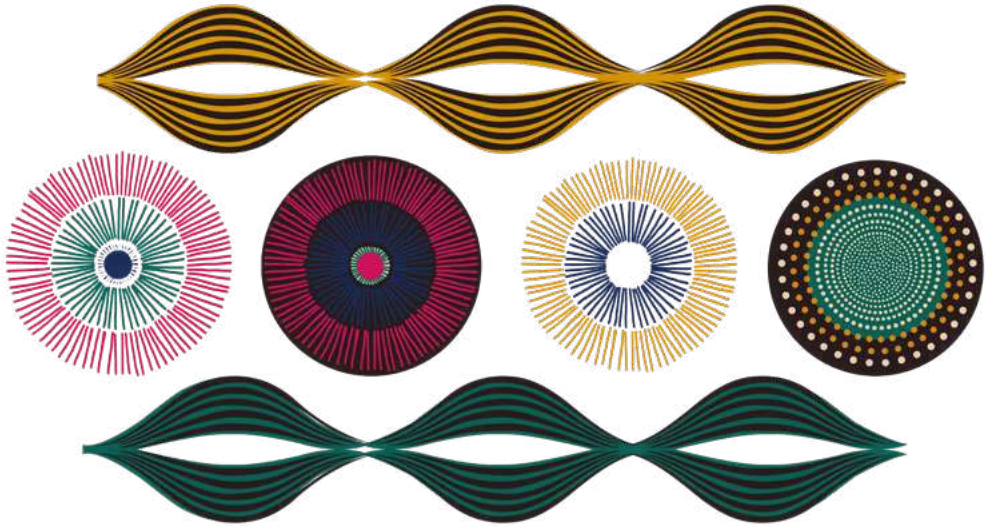
borderlands, and on and on.

I do think the exclusion of this philosophical work from mainstream philosophical discussion is the result of some combination of racism, Eurocentrism, and culpable negligence. And I think this exclusion has contributed to philosophy remaining among the worst academic fields in terms of continued racism, exclusion, and racial imbalance. (Some evidence of this is that when I have taught this course, it has had a much higher proportion of students from underrepresented backgrounds than any other course I teach.) But these strike me as kind of “second-order” reasons to teach the material. The first-order reasons are that it’s just really interesting philosophy; the reasons we don’t already know that this is interesting philosophy are typically really bad reasons.

*More philosophers
are embarrassed by
their ignorance*

JK: In looking for new, non-canonical readings to add to my own courses, I have struggled a bit, partly because I want the readings to align with the philosophical questions I already cover. To draw from more cultures, do you think we need to be willing to shift to new philosophical questions, and not just to new answers? Or are the basic questions pretty universal?

AG: This is an important question. I think there are universal philosophical questions about ethics, social and political life, our place in the universe, what exists, and many others. Many neglected philosophical tra-



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ditions offer clear, interesting answers and discussions of these universal canonical philosophical questions, and those are easy to include and incorporate. There are also other, more particular philosophical questions that have at least important local variation, even if they connect to more universal ideas. Consider the question of whether there is a distinctive Mexican identity, raised and discussed by Leopoldo Zea, Emilio Uranga, and others after the Mexican Revolution. This question might be interpreted in a sociological or anthropological mode, requiring a certain kind of empirical investigation. But it also might be asked in a more philosophical register, drawing on empirical investigation, but also engaging questions of how people who live in societies with complex intermixture and intertwining should understand those influences and their relation to their own identity and that of their community; how a person can have both

Spanish ancestry and European and Catholic cultural heritage, while also having Indigenous ancestry and Aztec/Nahua/Mexican cultural heritage, and how this can present internal conflict and tension in thinking of who they are and how they should identify; how a person can and should respond to the realization that they are the product of forces and conflicts that are both deeply regrettable and unsettling, while also constituting creative and distinctive fusions and attempts at personal reconciliation and integration; how we should think of authenticity and representation and membership regarding these different identity categories; and so on. Presented in one way, these can seem far from universal concerns. But in my experience, almost everyone can see how similar questions arise in their own personal experience and self-conception, even if the details differ. So, I see many of these traditions as helping us to notice universal philosophical

questions that we may have not previously seen, or which may help us to see more familiar questions in a new light. This might require some alteration in how things are taught or how questions are framed, but I don't think it requires moving away from "universal" philosophical questions.

It's just really interesting philosophy

JK: Are you also incorporating new material into your other courses?

AG: Yes. I have brought material from these areas into Introduction to Philosophy, a course on Death and Dying, and courses in Social and Political Philosophy. Once one becomes more familiar with the work, I have found it easy to see natural opportunities to include material from these traditions in a way that feels organic and even makes it hard to imagine doing things any other way.

JK: After my student complained, I added some non-canonical readings to a course I teach on the good life and the meaning of life. One worry I had about doing this is that the cross-cultural flavor of my new syllabus might make people feel reluctant to engage in the kind of criticism and debate that's normal in a philosophy class. Maybe students would have the sort of relativistic, deferential attitude they're taught to have in an anthropology class. What's your experience in that regard?

AG: I have found that, as with other readings and topics, something of a two-stage process helps. Stage one: make sure we understand the view or argument clearly and

as accurately as possible, having taken the time to present and charitably reconstruct the view or argument, and, if necessary, to provide relevant social or historical context. This can be hard and requires significant skill in its own right. Stage two: raise questions or identify potential objections to the view or argument. What can be harder with views or arguments that emerge from very different background social or cultural or historical contexts is that one can sometimes be uncertain whether a question or objection makes sense or "is fair" given one's ignorance of the broader context. One also might not want to be critical in a way that is dismissive or disrespectful. Those are both healthy instincts. I find that if I have done enough on the stage one side of things, it helps a lot with enabling students to be thoughtfully critical. I also try to communicate that failing to take arguments and views seriously enough to merit critical engagement is its own kind of disrespect. As the Ahnishinahbæótjibway philosopher Wub-e-ke-niew brilliantly quips at the end of the acknowledgments section of his book, "If the reader has compliments, please send them to the publisher, but address arguments to the author: Wub-e-ke-niew, P.O. Box 484..."

JK: Brilliant! I'm excited to read some of the authors you've mentioned. Could you suggest a few books or articles for readers who would like to explore Native American, African, and Latin American philosophy?

AG: There are many excellent readers and edited collections that have been put together covering these areas, but here are ten books that I have found particularly wonderful.

Reading List

📖 Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (Stanford University Press, 1986)

This is a remarkable book examining Yoruba epistemological concepts and how they differ, or don't, from epistemological concepts in English. There is a sophisticated and detailed discussion of their distinctive, naturalistic, linguistically-informed philosophical method. W.V.O Quine writes a short Foreword and they discuss issues of translation and conceptual equivalence along the way.

📖 Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu, *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (SUNY Press, 2006)

A fascinating book working to excavate pre-colonial Igbo ideas about gender, politics, and society out from the colonial and patriarchal sediment under which they've been buried, and to consider the philosophical merits of dual-sex governance systems which were a central part of the social

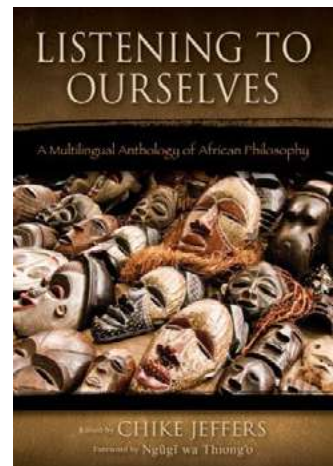
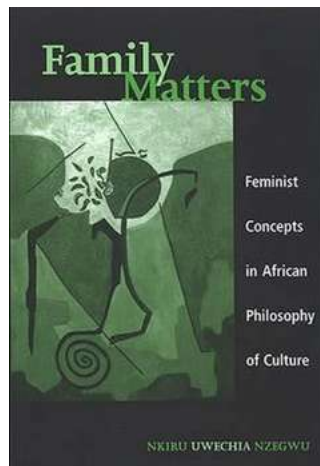
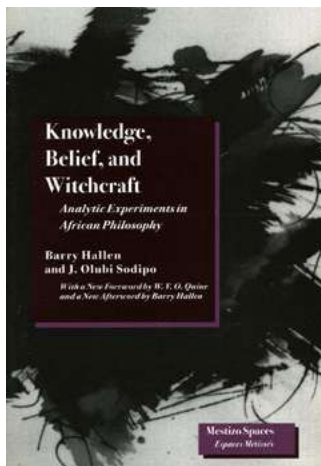
organization of pre-colonial Igbo society.

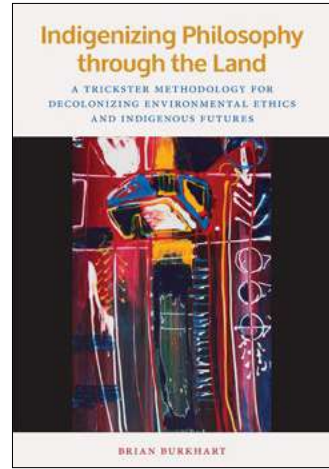
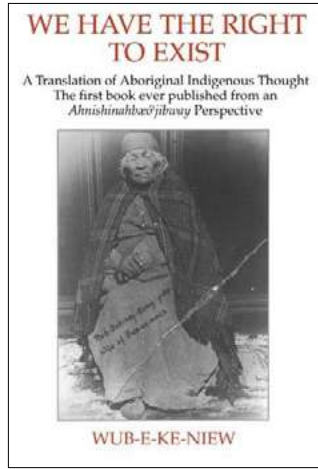
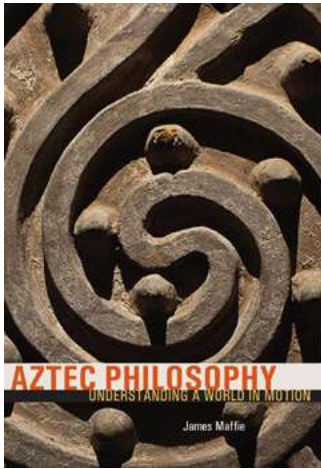
📖 Chike Jeffers, editor, *Listening to Ourselves: A Multilingual Anthology of African Philosophy* (SUNY Press, 2013)

A wonderful collection of philosophical work written in indigenous African languages by seven leading African philosophers with English translations on the facing pages. The topics include the nature of truth, philosophical conceptions of time, naming practices, linguistic status of proverbs, gender equality and inequality in traditional society, the relationship between language and thought, and whether morality is universal or culturally variable.

📖 James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (University of Colorado Press, 2014)

A groundbreaking, detailed work looking at the philosophical views of the Aztec/Nabua with a focus on their monistic metaphysical view and the core idea of teotl.





📖 Wub-e-ke-niew, *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought* (Black Thistle Press, 1995)

In this epic work, Wub-e-ke-niew provides a comprehensive presentation of the Ahnishinahbæóijibway perspective on a variety of philosophical topics: identity, tradition, language, ethics, space and time, social and political life, and much else. It is also a partial autobiography; a carefully researched history of centuries of abuse and genocide of the indigenous people of North America at the hands of the United States government, and a personal and moving account of the way in which forced education and physical abuse by members of the dominant culture attempted to eliminate a whole way of living and thinking about the world.

📖 Brian Burkhardt, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures* (Michigan State University Press, 2019)

A fascinating philosophical work that reveals the importance of bringing discussions of thought,

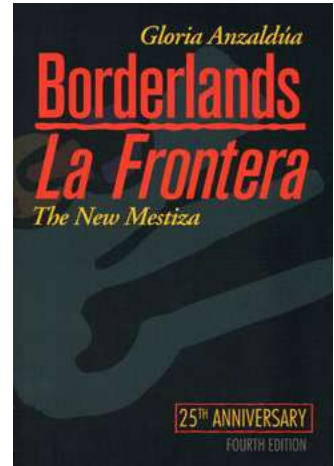
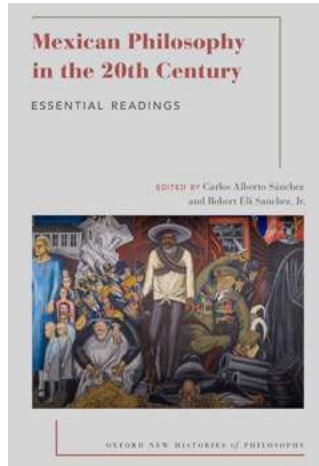
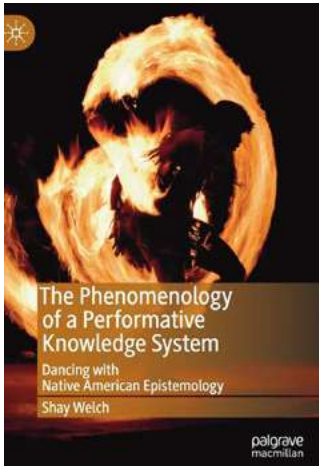
language, being, knowing, value, and ethics into connection with land, locality, and place.

📖 Shay Welch, *The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

A brilliant, creative sustained argument that Native dancing practices have epistemic properties, both constituting and communicating truths and, further, that in some cases these practices are superior than alternative epistemic practices. Challenges ordinary ideas about epistemology and value, and draws on and engages work in indigenous studies, dance studies, phenomenology, and epistemology.

📖 Carlos Alberto Sánchez and Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr. (eds.), *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century: Essential Readings* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

An important collection of philosophical works, many newly translated into English, taking up a wide range of philosophical topics and issues, many of which connect to issues of identity, exis-



tence, and the possibility of Mexican philosophy.

📖 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987)

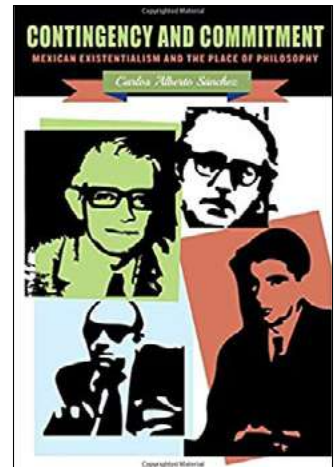
A hugely influential, powerful, difficult work that has helped create and shape several academic fields and is very central in some philosophical worlds, but should be known by and engaged with even a broader philosophical audience.

📖 Carlos Alberto Sánchez, *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy* (SUNY Press, 2015)

Engaging, fascinating introduction to and interpretation of Mexican Existentialism, focusing on the key figures of the Hyperion group, including Emilio Uranga, Luis Villoro, Leopoldo Zea, and Jorge Portilla.

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JK: What a fantastic list. I'm excited to look at some of this material. Thanks so much for an extremely interesting discussion.



Alexander Guerrero is professor of philosophy at Rutgers University - New Brunswick, specializing in political philosophy, moral philosophy, legal philosophy, and epistemological issues that intersect with those areas. He has a book, Lotocracy: A New Kind of Democracy (forthcoming with Oxford University Press), in which he argues for using lotteries, rather than elections, to select our political representatives.

Jean Kazez is the editor of this issue of The Philosophers' Magazine. She teaches philosophy at Southern Methodist University.