

# Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy



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APA NEWSLETTER ON

# Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy

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CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ, EDITOR

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## FROM THE EDITOR

Carlos Alberto Sánchez

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

An enduring question for us philosophical Hispanic/Latino/as in the US asks about our Latinidad, about what it means *to be* Latino/a. Much has been published on this question, but not nearly as much as the topic demands or has demanded over the past forty years. During this time, publishing or presenting on such themes fell to the brave few who dared pursue such questions, even if “on the side,” as something *in addition to* their primary preoccupation (meta-ethics, Kantian epistemology, logical theory, etc.). Thus, the inquiry was itself marginalized, kept from the spotlight of mainstream academic philosophy, oftentimes discussed in the context of another marginalized philosophical interest, i.e., Latin American philosophy. In this way, panels at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy would bunch together papers on Vasconcelos and Dewey, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, and the debate surrounding our use of Latino or Hispanic. I venture to say that our days of hiding in the shadows are (slowly) coming to an end!

As a case in point, this issue of the newsletter includes reports on two conferences dedicated to Latino/a (or Latinx) philosophy, culture, and identity. These conferences represent an affirmative moment in the life of Latino/as in US philosophy that points toward the normalization of inquiries into issues relevant to our modern-day cultural and existential predicaments. In the first communiqué, the organizers of the Second Annual Latinx Philosophy Conference inform our readers about their successful reunion at Rutgers University this past March. In the second, Rocio Alvarez reports on the inaugural conference of the Society for Mexican American Philosophy (SMAP) held at Texas A&M in May. As is clear from the reports, these reunions showcased a turn inward for Latinx philosophers in the US, a turn toward the more immediate concerns of Latinx philosophers in the US and away from more abstract and distant issues of either continental or Latin American philosophy.

This issue also includes three articles that exemplify the breadth and scope of Latinx philosophy in the US. In the first paper, “What the ‘Nina’ Film Shows about African Heritage in the Americas,” Susana Nuccetelli explores the moral and political controversies surrounding contemporary depictions in media of prominent African American artists such as Nina Simone. Nuccetelli reflects on the moral dimensions inherent in casting a light-skinned woman of

Dominican and Puerto Rican descent, Zoe Saldana, to play Nina Simone, an African American black woman who, in her music, rejected Eurocentric depictions of beauty and womanhood, which Saldana somewhat represents. The film is a foil, however, for more deeply philosophical questions that Nuccetelli explores. She considers the drastically differing reactions to the casting choices among the Hispanic and African American community. The reaction, or lack of reaction, by Hispanics, Nuccetelli suggests, could be due to a certain blindness toward anti-Black racism and an adherence to “a *mestizaje* model of Latin American identity a causal role in Afro-Hispanics’ perception of their own African roots.” The paper further explores this causal model of *mestizaje*.

In the second paper, Ivan Marquez questions the presumptions of postcolonial theory, especially its apparent monopoly on questions of the Other. Marquez suggests that postcolonial theory, in order to properly answer its own questions, must first overcome its own prejudices, including its apparent blindness toward philosophical difference. As he puts it by way of conclusion, “If postcolonial theory overcomes its anglophilia, discoursephilia, and historiographical amnesia, embracing instead richer and more encompassing theoretical alternatives to achieve their goals, like the ones exemplified by these Latin American thinkers, then their critical efforts might lead to greater actualization of developmental possibilities and yield greater emancipatory fruit.”

In the last of our scholarly papers, “Latinidad, Multiplicity, and the Time of Identification,” Jesús Luzardo examines the work of Cristina Beltrán, pointing out the shortcomings in her work and aiming to address them by appealing to the work of other Latina feminists such as Mariana Ortega and Gloria Anzaldúa. As he puts it, “I hope to show that the openness [Beltrán] attributes to collective political identity must be extended and deepened to our conception of selfhood, as demonstrated by Ortega.” Thus, the ultimate aim of Luzardo’s efforts is to augment Beltrán’s thesis so as to make it more inclusive of particular, not necessarily political, identities, “a conception of selfhood as multiplicitous, creative, and always open, and thus a conception of the individual that can deepen and support and be further developed by Cristina Beltrán’s view of Latinidad as similarly heterogeneous, and permanently open to future possibilities of solidarity and contestation.”

What these texts ultimately showcase is a definite *turn* in Latinx philosophy in the US, one which is more affirmative and self-conscious and less willing to remain in the margins of the US philosophical academy.

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## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* is accepting contributions for the spring 2018 issue. Our readers are encouraged to submit original work on any topic related to Hispanic/Latino thought, broadly construed. We publish original, scholarly treatments, as well as reflections, book reviews, and interviews. Please prepare articles for anonymous review.

All submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Electronic submissions are preferred. All submissions should be limited to 5,000 words (twenty double-spaced pages) and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and *The Chicago Manual of Style* formatting. All articles submitted to the newsletter undergo anonymous review by members of the Committee on Hispanics.

### BOOK REVIEWS

Book reviews in any area of Hispanic/Latino philosophy, broadly construed, are welcome. Submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Book reviews may be short (500 words) or long (1,500 words). Electronic submissions are preferred.

### DEADLINES

Deadline for spring issue is November 15. Authors should expect a decision by January 15. Deadline for the fall issue is April 15. Authors should expect a decision by June 15.

Please send all articles, book reviews, queries, comments, or suggestions electronically to the editor,

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### FORMATTING GUIDELINES

The APA newsletters adhere to *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use italics instead of underlining. Use an “em dash” (—) instead of a double hyphen (--). Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 90. See Sally Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?” *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.

## CONFERENCE REPORTS

### *The Second Annual Latinx Philosophy Conference*

Alexander Guerrero  
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Stephanie Rivera Berruz  
WILLIAM PATERSON UNIVERSITY

Edgar Valdez  
SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

The Latinx Philosophy Conference is a generalist philosophy conference that aims to celebrate and to engage with philosophical work by Latinx philosophers and philosophical work on issues of particular relevance to the broader Latinx community. The conference aims to bring together Latinx philosophers and those with interests in Latinx philosophy (two imperfectly overlapping groups of people!) to help build and support the broader Latinx philosophy community.

As part of that aim, the organizers of the Latinx Philosophy Conference have sought to bring together philosophers who often have not interacted with each other, due to their coming from different traditions and philosophical styles. The result over the first two years of the conference’s existence has been a wonderful philosophical mash-up of topics, methods, and ideas.

The most recent conference, held April 27-28, 2017, at Rutgers University–New Brunswick, is a perfect example. Francisco Gallegos (Georgetown University) opened the conference with a talk on the phenomenology of collective moods and the work of Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla, and Carlos Alberto Sánchez (San Jose State University) ended the conference with a talk on methodology in philosophy, focused on the method and proper understanding of Mexican philosophical historicism. In between those talks, Ernie Sosa (Rutgers University) spoke about suspension of belief and virtue epistemology; Andrea Pitts (UNC–Charlotte) provided a moving and insightful conceptual genealogy of the idea of “sanctuary” and the history of sanctuary movements; William Jaworski (Fordham University) defended a hylomorphic response to the mind-body problem; Carla Merino-Rajme (UNC–Chapel Hill) and Nilanjana Das (NYU–Shanghai) raised questions about whether self-locating knowledge is rationally defeasible; Jesús Luzardo (Fordham University) reflected on Cristina Beltrán’s concept of “Latinidad” in light of Mariana Ortega’s view of multiplicitous selfhood and the idea of *Becoming-With*; José Jorge Mendoza (University of Massachusetts Lowell) raised trouble and troubling questions about Whiteness, Latinx identity, and the possibility of majority-minority politics; César Cabezas (Columbia University) put pressure on Tommie Shelby’s views on the connection between racist ideology and institutional racism; and Javiara Perez-Gomez (University of Maryland) offered a sustained reflection on civic alienation and asked us to consider its

status as an emotion, a mood, and a moral response. A similar range of topics and approaches was present at the first Latinx Philosophy Conference, which included talks on Kant and mathematics, Aztec and Aristotelian views of the good life, Enrique Dussel's concept of "transmodern" rationality, a defense of ideal theory in political philosophy, and many other topics.

The first Latinx Philosophy Conference was hosted at Columbia University in 2016. It was the brainchild and product of three Columbia Ph.D. students: César Cabezas, Mariana Beatriz Noé, and Ignacio Ojea Quintana. The 2017 conference was hosted by Rutgers University and organized by Stephanie Rivera Berruz (William Paterson University), Alexander Guerrero (Rutgers University) and Edgar Valdez (Seton Hall University), all of whom attended the first Latinx Philosophy Conference.

The 2018 conference will also be at Rutgers University and will be organized by the same trio as the 2017 conference. Keep an eye out for the Call for Papers and Panel Proposals, which should go out sometime in November 2017, with the conference taking place in April 2018. We hope that the conference will continue to bring together a diverse and expanding group of philosophers and philosophical styles, in part to encourage and inspire Latinx undergraduates and graduate students in philosophy to see a wide range of topics that can be the subject of philosophical reflection and research. And if you have ideas or suggestions for the Latinx Philosophy Conference, either for this upcoming year or in future years, please email them to [latinxphilosophyconference@gmail.com](mailto:latinxphilosophyconference@gmail.com).

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## *The 2017 Society for Mexican American Philosophy Conference*

Rocio Alvarez  
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

On May 19 and 20 the Society for Mexican American Philosophy (SMAP) gathered for its very first conference at Texas A&M, "Cultivating Philosophical Space for the Future of Philosophy." Officially, the society is almost two years old, although several of its founding members have been collaborating for much longer. For the past two years, SMAP has organized panels at the Eastern, Central, and Pacific APA conferences. Last year it had a strong presence at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, and many members joined for the Second Biannual Conference on Mexican Philosophy. Although these panels have been great for SMAP, only a handful of its members are ever together at once. The conference held at Texas A&M was the first to provide a space specifically for the theme of Mexican American philosophy and, to our surprise, over forty philosophers (and non-philosophers) gathered to listen, speak, sing, and visually present their take on Mexican American philosophy. Speaking as an organizer, the success of this meeting went above and beyond my expectations.

In addition to myself, founding members and colleagues at the Texas A&M's philosophy department Andrew Soto and Dr. Gregory F. Pappas served as co-organizers. We were able to secure a wide range of sponsors for the conference, including the Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research, from whom we were awarded a generous grant; TAMU departments of Philosophy, History, English, International Studies, and Hispanic Studies; and several working groups such as the Social, Cultural, and Political Theory Working Group and the Glasscock Center Three-Year Seminar on Latino/a Identities and Civil Rights. We also received logistical support from members of the Graduate Students in Philosophy and the Hispanic/Latino Graduate Student Association who stepped up to help with registration and moderating panels. Needless to say, the conference was well supported by a variety of entities at Texas A&M that truly did cultivate philosophical space for the future of Mexican American philosophy.

Like SMAP itself, the conference was quite different from more traditional conferences. It began with a *Conocimiento*, led by Felix J. Alvarez, founder and director of El Teatro de los Pobres and the Center for Community Cultural Activism based in California. The *Conocimiento* provided everyone with an opportunity to introduce themselves and where they are from, and it also included a physical activity that demonstrated who had rhythm and who did not! This was followed by a welcome address delivered by Pappas, who stressed the importance of *familia*. As a self-described "tío" of the society, Pappas reminded us all that though we may disagree philosophically on important matters pertaining to the development of a Mexican American philosophy, we are a *familia*, committed to each other and this new field. As an example, Pappas talked about the "generations" of Latin American philosophers in the United States, who are sometimes at philosophical odds with one another, but are always there to provide personal and professional support that is critical for marginalized fields of philosophy done by marginalized people within the discipline.

Pappas's emphasis on *familia* was not just theoretical, but actualized at the conference through its participants that ranged from established scholars and rising stars in the field of Latin American philosophy, like Pappas, Amy Oliver, Jim Maffie, José-Antonio Orosco, Alejandro Santana, and Manuel Vargas, to a younger generation of scholars, like Kim Díaz, Lori Gallegos, Manuela Gomez, José Jorge Mendoza, Robert E. Sanchez, Jr., and Grant Silva. There were graduate students, like Julio Covarrubias, Francisco Gallegos, Adebayo Ogungbure, and Dalisto Ruwe, and a passionate panel of undergraduate students who reminded us all about the struggles of studying philosophy while being Mexican American or, more generally, as an "outsider." Participants came from major research institutions and four-year universities, community colleges and the community in general, in addition to international participants from Mexico and Costa Rica. Like a *familia*, the conference was well represented with a variety of personalities, at different stages in their academic lives.

Although there was no official theme to the conference beyond Mexican American philosophy, many of the presentations dealt with the very foundational questions of

what a Mexican American philosophy is, who it is intended for, and what its responsibilities are. "Los Gallegos," Lori and Francisco, in addition to Manuel Vargas tackled the first question in a panel, aptly titled "What is Mexican American Philosophy?" Several panels addressed the second question, such as Santana and Ogungbure in a panel titled "Disrupting Western Paradigms and Its Effects on Mexican Americans," and Díaz and Gomez's panel "Educating Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Chicanos on the US-Mexico Border." Silva opened the second day of the conference with a presentation titled "On the Politics (and Duties) of Doing Mexican American Philosophy in the 21st Century."

In addition to what may have been the organic themes of the conference, several panels addressed the intersections that Mexican American philosophy has with continental philosophies (Francisco Salinas Paz), Mexican philosophy (Oliver and Sánchez), and indigenous philosophies (Maffie and Covarrubias). Unlike anything I have seen at a conference, one of the final panels was entitled "Chicano Art and Philosophy," which included a visual presentation of Yesenia Gonzalez's artwork inspired by her undergraduate studies in Latin American philosophy (specifically, by Carlos Alberto Sánchez's recent book, *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy*) and a collection of *canciones* titled "Oralé Raza: One Voice for Justice," written and sung by Alvarez. Orosco and Mendoza delivered the keynote addresses respectively titled "César Chávez and the Civic Integration of the Undocumented" and "Two American Myths: The Melting Pot and the Minority-Majority Nation." The scholarship of all the participants generated healthy critiques, comments, and useful feedback.

On an academic level and as a step towards the development of this field of inquiry, the conference was clearly a success; but on the level of *familia*, in fulfilling the goals of familia, it was a triumph. This conference enabled those of us working in the fields of Latin American, Indigenous, Mexican, and Mexican American philosophy to gather in one place and at the same time. As scholars from every corner of this country, mostly working in these fields in isolation, this inaugural SMAP conference provided critical space for us to come together. We thought together, ate together, argued together, and celebrated together . . . just like a *familia*.

For those interested in viewing a recording of the conference, a video will be available in the fall 2017 issue of the *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*. For information on SMAP activities, please visit <https://smapphilosophy.wordpress.com/>.

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## ARTICLES

### *What the "Nina" Film Controversy Shows about African Heritage in the Americas*

Susana Nuccetelli

ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY, MINNESOTA

#### I. THE NINA FILM CONTROVERSY

In 2012, a controversy about some moral implications of the biopic *Nina* arose when its director announced the casting of a light-skinned Black Latina actress, Zoe Saldana, for the role of African American jazz artist Nina Simone. That decision was met in the US with objectors demanding respect for Ms. Nina Simone's choice of self-identify as a Black African. Their objections began as soon as film producers announced that Ms. Saldana, an American of Dominican and Puerto Rican descent who identifies herself as Black Latina, would play the Simone character. US critics thought her unsuited for the role since Ms. Simone, until her death in 2003, had openly embraced her African roots. Soon afterwards, a photo showing Ms. Saldana walking to the studio with an Afro-wig, skin-darkening, and broader lips and nose scandalized many of Ms. Simone's fans who, by then, were already running a website against the casting decision. When the film's poster and trailer came out, the controversy intensified. Objectors had two moral criticisms in mind: the casting was disrespectful of Ms. Nina Simone and her legacy and, more broadly, was indicative of anti-Black discrimination.

In the meantime, no such reaction was evident in the Hispanic world. Latin American news outlets took no stand on the moral issues at stake. They reported the controversy with a certain detachment, simply rehearsing the reasons given by the US parties to the dispute. Ms. Saldana herself adopted a similarly detached attitude in an interview. Drawing on her childhood experience in the Dominican Republic, she downplayed the normative significance of being Black in that country.<sup>1</sup> But surely, African Americans are by no means the only people of African ancestry in the Americas who face disrespect or injustice, so it is no surprise that some US critics assigned to Ms. Saldana and other Afro-Dominicans the bias of colorism.<sup>2</sup>

I believe there are two related topics in this controversy that should not be conflated. One concerns how the casting of Ms. Saldana might have had moral implications for Ms. Simone, her legacy, or for African Americans more generally. The other concerns what best explains the contrasting reactions of African Americans and Afro-Dominicans to the controversy. Regarding the film's moral implications, Ms. Saldana's cosmetic alterations have, according to one objection, a connection with "black-face," where white performers in "minstrel" shows sing and dance with their faces painted black, as they attempt to parody the speech and demeanor of Black people, as seen through white racist stereotypes. Though the use of this practice in vaudeville acts persisted in the United States as late as the 1950s, no one today wants to defend

such blatantly racist displays. Black-face was nothing more than a crude attempt to entertain white audiences by morally objectionable means. If the same purpose fueled Ms. Saldana's cosmetic alterations, then they were straightforwardly morally wrong.

Another quite interesting objection focuses on respect for persons. Although it is difficult to support the claim that the film shows disrespect for Ms. Simone (after all, whether the dead can be disrespected, harmed, or treated unjustly are still unsettled questions in ethics), it can be argued that it shows disrespect for her memory. All available evidence points to the importance for Ms. Simone of her African American identity. Furthermore, during her artistic career she was fastidious about her appearance, rejecting Eurocentric ideals of female beauty which Ms. Saldana appears to realize to some extent. Among her songs, "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" and "Four Women" speak of an author who is militantly proud of her African ancestry and even holds an Afrocentric outlook.<sup>3</sup> In sum, according to this objection to the film, it conflicts with Ms. Simone's autonomous choices about her own racial and ethnic identity. She provided abundant evidence that the African roots of her identity amounted to a fundamental conviction concerning the meaning of life for her. Since the casting of Ms. Saldana failed to respect that choice, the film, then, shows a certain disrespect for Ms. Simone's memory. If you'll allow me to use a personal reference, compare this case: When I went back to Argentina recently after the death of a militantly atheist friend, I learned that her family had given her a Catholic funeral, and that her body now lies in a grave marked with Christian inscriptions. The wrongness of this arrangement seems similar to that in the *Nina* film: Why on earth would a light-skinned Black person be chosen to play Ms. Simone? Here too it seems that it's not the dead person but her memory that has been wronged.

Now let's consider the contrasting reactions of Afro-Dominicans and African Americans in the controversy. One account has it that the Afro-Dominicans' response is due to colorism, which they suffer to a degree greater than African Americans because of their country's uneasy relationship with Haiti.<sup>4</sup> This account leaves unexplained the absence of a strong reaction to the film by other Afro-Hispanics. But the alternative hypothesis I suggest below does explain that absence, for it assigns the *mestizaje* model of Latin American identity a causal role in Afro-Hispanics' perception of their own African roots. No comparably influential model has been in place in the US that is analogously inclusive of African Americans. As a result, descendants of Africans in each of the Americas sometimes have radically different attitudes about moral issues concerning their own collective identity. Since my hypothesis seems highly plausible in light of the historical evidence reviewed below, as I'll argue next, it is what best explains the contrasting attitudes displayed in controversies of the sort revealed by my discussion of what's morally wrong with the film *Nina*.

## II. TWO CONTRASTING VIEWS OF AFRO-IDENTITY IN THE AMERICAS

Cornell philosopher Nicholas Sturgeon famously attempted to support his preferred type of moral realism by taking what seem to be the blatant moral features of some actions

or institutions to be what best explains certain historical events. These included the fact that the West's most vigorous abolitionist movements against slavery occurred in France and Britain, roughly between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On Sturgeon's view, (1) France and Britain brought to North America a form of chattel slavery far worse than slavery in other regions of the world, "and much worse than slavery in Latin America"; and (2) this moral difference best explains the noted facts about the emergence of vigorous abolitionist movements.<sup>5</sup> After invoking other moral features that seem to best explain some historical events, Sturgeon concludes that moral features can, and do, play an indispensable causal role. Therefore, like the scientific properties of natural science, they have a reality independent of mind or language.

Although (1) is consistent with historical records,<sup>6</sup> since there may be alternative best explanations of the events invoked by Sturgeon, (2) does nothing to advance the debate with Sturgeon's anti-realist opponent. But his argument for realism is not my topic here. Rather, I wish to explore another historical difference between the Spanish/Portuguese- and English-speaking Americas with potential moral underpinning. It concerns the place of Africans and their descendants in these regions' respective models of racial and ethnic self-identity. My main goal here is to offer evidence for the crafting of an inclusive model in Latin America that appears to have no analog in North America. With roots traceable to the Iberian expansion of the sixteenth century, this model was fully articulated by 1815 and has been widely influential in the region since at least the 1920s. It is a *mestizaje* model holding that Latin Americans are a mix of some races and cultures—namely, the races and cultures of Africans, Amerindians, and criollos (i.e., Latin Americans of Iberian descent) who first met in the subcontinent during the Iberian modern expansion. On the other hand, the evidence suggests that North American nation builders produced *no* inclusive model of this sort. This, I submit, is a good candidate for what best explains some durable, contrasting attitudes of African Americans and Afro-Latinas and Latinos (hereafter, "Afro-Hispanics") on issues concerning their own identity as a people. The contrast was evident in a recent controversy about the casting of a light-skinned Afro-Hispanic actress in the film *Nina*, which I examine last.

## III. TRACING THE MAKING OF LATIN AMERICA'S MESTIZO SELF-IMAGE IN THE WORK OF LAS CASAS, BOLÍVAR, AND VASCONCELOS

According to the *mestizaje* model, Latin Americans are a new racial and ethnic group, the product of a "synthesis" of peoples of European, African, and Amerindian ancestries. On this model, three philosophical thinkers stand out for their impact on the regional philosophical thought and public policy: Bartolomé de las Casas (Spanish, 1474–1566) brought to it his pioneering recognition of the moral personhood of Amerindians and Africans. His arguments prepared the way for the early-nineteenth-century crafting of the *mestizaje* model by Simón Bolívar (Venezuelan, 1783–1830). About a century later, José Vasconcelos (Mexican, 1882–1959) gave the *mestizaje* model a novel normative force by arguing that Latin Americans' mixed identity is a strength to be celebrated, chiefly because it has already

given them a sense of moral value much preferable to that prevalent in North America.

Each of these artifices of the *mestizaje* model was effective in challenging the received, Eurocentric model of Latin American identity. Las Casas did it within the framework of the Thomistic natural law theory of the mid-sixteenth century, learned during training as a Catholic priest. Given that theory, “humanity,” or moral personhood, hinges on rationality. All humans, as rational beings, have non-negotiable, natural rights. Like the basic values of life, knowledge, sociability, and reproduction that ground them, natural rights are absolute (have no exceptions), objective (apply to all persons alike), inalienable (cannot be given up), and self-evident (go without saying). The normative force of this theory of value is straightforward: actions, views, and institutions that hinder or destroy basic values are morally forbidden; those that promote them are morally mandatory; and those that do neither are morally neutral or permissible.

Unlike his peers, Las Casas drew the correct conclusion from this theory once he recognized the humanity of Amerindians and Africans. As we would say today, he saw that they have moral personhood—or full moral standing, which includes the rights to life and liberty. They could not give up these rights, even if they wanted to.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, since human slavery hinders, and even destroys, some of Aquinas’s basic values, the institution is morally forbidden. Accordingly, Las Casas first shocked fellow settlers in Cuba by returning to the local authorities his “encomienda” or “lease” of Amerindian slaves he had inherited from his father. (The Spanish Crown technically owned them in the encomienda form of slavery for Amerindians). Then he devoted the rest of his life to advocacy for the rights of Amerindians, arguing for radical changes such as their immediate manumission, restoration of their property, and Spanish withdrawal from tribal lands.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of Las Casas’s efforts, improvements in the natives’ conditions seemed unlikely, so Las Casas signed a petition to transport Christianized African slaves from Spain to Latin America (c. 1516). But reflection on the humanity of Africans committed him to the moral rejection of African slavery. After all, his natural law framework explicitly forbids intentional action aimed at a good effect (i.e., ameliorating the conditions of Amerindians) by means of a bad effect (i.e., enslaving the Africans). Thus he renounced his earlier, permissive position on African slavery in a series of publications that historian Helen Rand Parish considers the only public condemnation of African slavery of the century.<sup>9</sup>

Crediting Las Casas for his insight on the personhood of Africans and Amerindians, Bolívar’s “Jamaica Letter” (1815) and “Angostura Address” (1819) explicitly take it into account in their *mestizaje* views about Latin America’s collective identity during the Wars of Independence (roughly, from 1810 to 1824). The following passage makes clear what Bolívar has in mind:

We must keep in mind that our people are neither European nor North American; rather, they are a mixture of African and the Americans who

originated in Europe. Even Spain herself has ceased to be European because of her African blood, her institutions, and her character. It is impossible to determine with any degree of accuracy where we belong in the human family. The greater portion of the native Indians have been annihilated; Spaniards have mixed with Americans and Africans, and Africans with Indians and Spaniards. While we have all been born of the same mother, our fathers, different in origins and in blood, are foreigners, and all differ visibly as to the color of their skin: a dissimilarity which places upon us an obligation of the greatest importance.<sup>10</sup>

The alluded duty is one that follows from Bolívar’s own identity determinism and polity relativism, which hold, respectively, (1) a people’s race, history, culture, and environmental conditions determine their national and regional identity; and (2) the nations builders must find the form of polity that works best given their people’s identity, with no single polity being universally valid for all nations. These were not innovative doctrines at his time. But Bolívar’s attribution of a *mestizo* identity to Latin Americans was so radical that, for some (e.g., Carlos Fuentes<sup>11</sup>), it was what motivated the *criollos* to oust him as leader.

Nation builders of the nineteenth century shelved the idea of a *mestizo* collective identity inclusive of Afro-Hispanics and Amerindians. But a revolt against their Eurocentricism was on its way. It erupted in 1925 from an unexpected source, Vasconcelos’s *La raza cósmica (The Cosmic Race)*, a hybrid book combining amateur sociology, philosophy, and a utopian vision of Latin America’s role in world history. Sympathetic to continental philosophy, especially the doctrines of Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche, Vasconcelos was also a public figure known for his work in Mexico’s Ministry of Public Education (1921–1924), his dislike for North America’s hegemony in the continent, and his admiration for National Socialism in Germany. Yet on the issue of Latin American identity, his *Cosmic Race* gives no evidence of admiration for the Nazi cult of Teutonic racial purity. In fact, it regards Latin America’s mixed races, rather than purity, as a strength. It does so by means of observations about the actual racial and ethnic mix in Latin America together with the prediction that Africans, Amerindians, East Asians, and Europeans will eventually produce a “fifth” race in the Amazon region. This “cosmic” race will embody a universalist spirit representing higher aesthetic and moral values compared to the egoism and individualism of the Anglo-Saxons (especially North Americans). Since the cosmic race’s historic mission is to defeat the Anglo-Saxons’ hegemonic menace to the world, it will be a driving force in world history.

Putting aside the highly unrealistic elements of this narrative, it has, charitably construed, the force of a utopian celebration of Latin America’s racial and ethnic diversity. It vindicates, in its own way, the *mestizaje* that has already taken place in the region while encouraging further mixing of peoples and cultures. I know of no such celebrations of mixed races and ethnicities at comparable times coming from public figures in the US with a standing analogous to that of Las Casas, Bolívar, and Vasconcelos. In fact,

people of African descent seem to have been excluded systematically from North America's conception of its own collective identity. Although more needs to be said about this largely unexplored issue, I submit that it is this difference in the Americas' crafting of their own collective identity what best accounts, at least in part, for African Americans' and Afro-Hispanics' contrasting attitudes about some moral issues created by challenges to their own African roots.

**NOTES**

1. See, for instance, Lisa Respers, "Zoe Saldana, Nina Simone y la dolorosa historia del 'blackface'," *CNN*, March 4, 2016, <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2016/03/04/zoe-saldana-nina-simone-y-la-dolorosa-historia-del-blackface/>; and "El film sobre Nina Simone reanuda el debate racial en Hollywood," *El telégrafo*, April 25, 2016.
2. For an argument to this effect, see La Sha, "On Zoe Saldana, Nina Simone, Convenient Blackness and Colorism in the Dominican Republic," *Clutch* April 7, 2016, <http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2016/03/on-zoe-saldana-nina-simone-convenient-blackness-and-colorism-in-the-dominican-republic/>. Margaret Hunter provides useful data about colorism in Latin America in her "The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality," *Sociology Compass* 1, no. 1, July 3, 2007, <https://inside.mills.edu/academics/faculty/soc/mhunter/The%20Persistent%20Problem%20of%20Colorism.pdf>
3. Brent Staples, "Hollywood's Fake Version of Nina Simone," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2016.
4. La Sha, "On Zoe Saldana, Nina Simone, Convenient Blackness and Colorism in the Dominican Republic."
5. Nicholas Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," in *Morality, Reason and Truth*, ed. David Copp and David Zimmerman (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985), 64.
6. See, for instance, Michael L. Conniff and Thomas J. Davis, *Africans in the Americas: A History of the Black Diaspora* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Herbert S. Klein and Ben Vinson III, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
7. Later natural law theorists changed their minds about this, preferring a subjective view of natural rights according to which right-holders could abandon their rights. Thus amended, the theory was compatible with the institution of slavery.
8. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Witness: Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas*, ed. George Sanderlin (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 85-87, 159-67, and 169-73.
9. Bartolomé de Las Casas, "Las Casas' Condemnation of African Slavery," Addendum III, in *Bartolome de las Casas: The Only Way*, ed. Helen Rand Parish (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1552/1992), 201-02.
10. Simón Bolívar, *Selected Writings of Bolivar*, ed. Harold A. Bierck, Jr. (New York: The Colonial Press, 1951), 181.
11. Carlos Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1992/1999).

## Postcolonial Theory: Much Ado about Nothing/Noting?

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The end of the Second World War saw the emergence of multiple independence movements in the former European colonies in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. After independence, the new postcolonial nations grappled with the socio-cultural aftermath of their colonial histories as part of an effort toward decolonization. Intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon,<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said,<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,<sup>3</sup> and Homi K. Bhabha<sup>4</sup> engaged in sustained reflection, polemic, and critique of this legacy. Their work became foundational to what has come to be called postcolonial theory.

At the heart of postcolonial theory, there is a concern with the Other, both in cultural representations as well as in individual and collective lived experience, specifically, the dynamic between the dominant one and the subordinate other.

The aim of this article is three-fold: (1) to show that the concern with the other can be found throughout the history of Western philosophy and, thus, it is not original to postcolonial theory; (2) to argue that postcolonial theory lacks adequate tools to fulfill its own ultimate critical goals; and (3) to point to a handful of Latin American thinkers who are leading the way toward the kinds of theorizing that are needed to deal effectively with the problems of otherness.

### 2. THE OTHER IN THE HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

It is obvious that postcolonial theory did not discover colonialism. Perhaps less obvious is that postcolonial theory did not discover the Other. Traditional Western philosophy would say that it was Plato who discovered the Other in his discussion on the relationship between the one and the many in the *Parmenides*, especially, his concluding remark, where he says,

[W]hether one is or is not, it and the others both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear all things in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other. (166c)<sup>5</sup>

Or maybe it was really the Pre-Socratics, Parmenides and Heraclitus, who first discovered the Other in their reflections on *Logos*, with Parmenides, the seemingly bad, affirming a One that apparently admits no opposites—no "Others," so to speak, while Heraclitus, the seemingly good, affirming a One that is a contradictory unity of opposites.

As Parmenides puts it,

[T]he One, that it is and that it is not possible for it not to be,

is the path of Persuasion (for it attends upon Truth),

the other, that it is not and that it is necessary for it not to be,

this I point out to you to be a path completely unlearnable,

for neither may you know that which is not (for it is not to be accomplished)

nor may you declare it.

. . . For the same thing is for thinking and for being.

. . . [The One] being ungenerated it is also imperishable,

whole and of a single kind and unshaken and complete. (Fr. 2, 3, and 8)

And conversely, as Heraclitus puts it,

Things taken together are whole and not whole, something which is being brought together and brought apart, which is in tune and out of tune; out of all things comes a unity, and out of a unity all things.<sup>6</sup> (B10)

As the same thing in us is living and dead, waking and sleeping, young and old. For these things having changed around are those, and conversely those having changed around are these.<sup>7</sup> (B88)

Cold things warm up, the hot cools off, wet becomes dry, dry becomes wet.<sup>8</sup> (B126)

But what about the possibility that postcolonial theory did not discover the Other but discovered that (1) the Other and the One are mutually implicated, (2) the Other cannot be fully reduced to the One, and (3) the oppressive potential of being in the position of being the Other of One? None of these important philosophico-existential insights have their genesis in postcolonial theory. The claim that the Other and the One are mutually implicated is Heraclitean in origin and can also be seen in the work of Hegel.<sup>9</sup> The claim that the Other cannot be fully reduced to the One can be seen in the later F. W. J. Schelling's critique of G. W. F. Hegel's notion of the Absolute<sup>10</sup> and arguably also in Edmund Husserl<sup>11</sup> and Martin Heidegger.<sup>12</sup> The claim about the oppressive potential of being in the position of being the Other of One comes from Hegel and from the subsequent phenomenological-existentialist tradition, especially Jean-Paul Sartre,<sup>13</sup> Simone de Beauvoir,<sup>14</sup> and Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>15</sup> I would argue that, concretely, this last claim has roots in Left Hegelianism, in general, and Karl Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question" (1844),<sup>16</sup> in particular—the "Jew" as the first self-conscious Other and as ontic placeholder for any other Other.

Let us continue to narrow the scope, then. Perhaps the insight of postcolonial theory is that it offers a critique of the totalizing threat of Western modernity as a cultural movement and concept. But that would not be a first of postcolonial theory either because this already is present in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944),<sup>17</sup> and arguably in Husserl's *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936).<sup>18</sup> In fact, the study of the problem of a "totalizing totality" that consumes everything or subsumes it to itself—the phagocytic nature of Western metaphysics—had been taken up by post-structuralism and deconstruction, before the advent of postcolonial theory, and can be seen in the works of Michel Foucault,<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida,<sup>20</sup> and Jean-François Lyotard.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, maybe the novelty or uniqueness of postcolonial theory lies in actually explaining or at least showing how the Other gets subsumed into the One, particularly, how this operates at the levels of ideology, culture, art, and criticism. But even here there are founding-generative sources, for example, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology* (1846),<sup>22</sup> Antonio Gramsci,<sup>23</sup> Georg (György) Lukács,<sup>24</sup> and even Walter Benjamin.<sup>25</sup>

I think that what remains as the core of postcolonial theory as practiced in US academia is the application of kinds of post-structuralism and deconstruction to the study of the construction of selves and others in the different cultural media of literature, film, television, painting, and music, specifically within social, political, economic, and cultural contexts that exhibit significant power differentials between different individual and collective subjects and agents—a power differential that has historical roots and that is partly maintained by the very same signifying structures that constantly are being produced and reproduced—and circumscribed to the global, geopolitical landscape in modern and contemporary history, characterized by imperialism, dependency, and globalization.

Therefore, after this preliminary analysis, it appears that postcolonial theory acquires its identity and uniqueness not from any originality with regard to theoretical content or mode of critique but from the phenomenon, issue, or theme that it investigates.

### 3. THE POVERTY OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

In what follows, I will briefly try to do three things: (1) I will say why I believe that postcolonial studies, as practiced in the US, is too narrow in scope and too poor in methods to adequately promote its own critical goals; (2) I will mention the kind of critiques that I think are needed; and (3) I will point to a few significant contemporary Latin American thinkers who are doing these kinds of critiques.

As I have already made clear, I believe that the general and central problem of postcolonial theory is the problem of the Other, which, by definition, is really a problem with the One, with the Absolute, with totalizing totalities. Right now, the solution could be defined, negatively and modestly, as a continuous effort to disrupt all totalizing totalities and, positively and more ambitiously, as the promotion of the conditions that would sustain non-

totalizing totalities, specifically, non-totalitarian systems of life-thought.

Postcolonial theory scholars are committed to critique that, at least, breaks the crust of convention and that, at most, makes things happen, and their critical attitude spans the whole spectrum between nihilism, cynicism, knowingness, irony, suspicion, enlightenment, condemnation, interpellation, reform, liberation, revolution, and even salvation.

But the postcolonial problem is not only a mental problem. It is also a life problem. So breaking the crust of convention, by itself, will not do. Critique will have to enable people to think differently and also to act differently. What critically minded people seek are changes in both subjectivity and agency, individual and collective. But if this is the case, then our critique has to go beyond the "text" and encompass the whole dynamics of daily life. Hence, in addition to "cultural critique," what is needed are analyses that try to elucidate both the discursive and structural aspects of portions of social reality and, keeping the wants and needs of particular groups in mind, to try to show which are the possibilities for individual and collective cultural, social, economic, and political agency that will lead to a social transformation that will best promote the interests of that particular group.

The problem with postcolonial theory's approach to the problem of postcolonialism is that it overemphasizes language/discourse and deemphasizes other material conditions as constitutive elements of social reality, in general, and of culture, in particular.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries exhibited two philosophical developments that are still with us, the linguistic turn and the naturalistic-materialist turn. The problem with postcolonial theory is the same as the problem with linguistic-centered analytic philosophy, post-structuralism, and deconstruction: the three embraced the linguistic turn but not the naturalistic-materialist turn.<sup>26</sup> Consumed by language, they miss the rest of life. In the three of them, language might constitute and be connected to institutions, but it is not fully integrated into other aspects of life. Culture ends up being connected to consciousness, subjectivity, and even agency, but estranged from both the materiality of life and nature of which it is a part.

Postcolonial theory does well to appropriate post-structuralism and deconstruction for its analyses. However, the functions of post-structuralism and deconstruction are badly in need of expansion. Post-structuralism must be not only about understanding how discourse, truth, and power relate, and how subjectivities and agencies are shaped by it. It must also be about how to get to be otherwise within contingent discursive and material structures.<sup>27</sup> Deconstruction must be not only about indeterminacy, incommensurability, undecidability, and possible silencing and erasure. It must also be about exploring discursive and material possibilities of being-in-the-world, and how certain possibilities preclude others, and how certain actualizations of possibilities preclude other possibilities while enabling still other ones.

At the highest level of generality, the problem we now face is the problem of figuring out what are the formal and material conditions and possibilities for the dynamics of an ever-developing non-totalizing totality, which, in turn, is linked to humanity's three most important concerns in the twenty-first century: globalization (being-one-in-many), democracy (being-many-in-one), and sustainability (being-for-ever).

Let us move to a lower level of abstraction. Former colonies are contending with modernity. But the term "modernity" needs to be unpacked to be of any use. I suggest that we separate three meanings of modernity: (1) modernity as historical period, (2) social modernization, and (3) cultural modernism. Furthermore, we should naturalize culture and thus break down the culture-nature divide. Postcolonial theory should then supplement its emphasis on the narrow fields of literature, linguistics, literary theory, and criticism and embrace anthropology, geopolitical economy, sociology, and biology.

#### 4. LATIN AMERICAN THEORETICAL ALTERNATIVES

Five contemporary Latin American thinkers, I believe, have done this kind of theoretical work with good results. First, the Brazilian political scientist Evelina Dagnino brings Gramsci to bear on her development of a framework that moves away from the seemingly monolithic and static "ideology discourse" to the dynamics of hegemony and marginalization in what she calls "the cultures of politics and the politics of cultures."<sup>28</sup> Second, the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar has elaborated what he calls a "political ecology" that tackles issues of redistribution, recognition, and representation in a globalized modernity from the point of view of (human and non-human) biodiversity, local knowledges, local self-determination, bio-cultural geography, sustainability, and questioning the evolutionary model of Western developmentalism as applied to the "Third World."<sup>29</sup> Third, the Argentine philosopher and anthropologist Néstor García Canclini has developed the notion of "material cultures," integrating the core insights of Bourdieu on social reproduction<sup>30</sup> with Gramsci's hegemonic struggles. What emerges are cultures that are permanently hybridized in the normal transactions of everyday life that produce them and reproduce them, and a definition of culture that is dynamic, fully embodied, and enmeshed in practices and traditions that are made within/by human transactions with themselves, with others, with artifacts, and with nature.<sup>31</sup> Fourth, the Spanish-Colombian philosopher, anthropologist, and semiotician Jesús Martín-Barbero has contributed to the notions of "material cultures" and "hybridization" with his move away from a study of media and toward a notion of mediations, thus developing a version of reception theory of communication that explores how different people appropriate cultural products, making them their own, and, thus, how the battles of, with, and for hegemony are fought in daily life by the so-called masses.<sup>32</sup> Fifth, and finally, there is the work of the Argentine philosopher and theologian Enrique Dussel who combines Kantianism, phenomenology, existentialism, and Marxism to elaborate a Levinasian ethical foundation for metaphysics and philosophy, in general, and a material ethics of human

flourishing, in particular, within the contemporary context of exclusionary-totalizing globalization and Empire.<sup>33</sup>

If postcolonial theory overcomes its anglophilia, discorsephilia, and historiographical amnesia, embracing instead richer and more encompassing theoretical alternatives to achieve their goals, like the ones exemplified by these Latin American thinkers, then their critical efforts might lead to greater actualization of developmental possibilities and yield greater emancipatory fruit.

**NOTES**

1. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).
2. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).
3. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, ed. Charles Lemert (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009).
4. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2010).
5. Plato, *Parmenides* in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).
6. G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).
7. David W. Graham, "Heraclitus," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>.
8. Ibid.
9. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
10. See F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).
11. See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1960).
12. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Marquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962).
13. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Methuen & Co., 1957).
14. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).
15. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).
16. See Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Marx: Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Joseph J. O'Malley with Richard A. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28-57.
17. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997).
18. See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006).
19. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).
20. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

21. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
22. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976).
23. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).
24. See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1972).
25. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).
26. See, Richard Rorty's three essays in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard M. Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
27. See Nancy Fraser's *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
28. See Evelina Dagnino, "Culture, Citizenship, and Democracy: Changing Discourses and Practices of the Latin American Left," in *Cultures of Politics/Politics of Culture: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*, eds. Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).
29. See Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) and "Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise: The Latin American modernity/coloniality research program," in *Cultural Studies* 21 (2007): 179-210 for an overview of this.
30. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984).
31. See Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
32. See Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*, trans. Elizabeth Fox and Robert A. White (London: SAGE Publications, 1993).
33. See Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta, Camilo Pérez Bustillo, Yolanda Angulo, and Nelson Maldonado Torres (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

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## Latinidad, Multiplicity, and the Time of Identification

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In her 2010 monograph *The Trouble with Unity*, Cristina Beltrán provides a rigorous, wide-ranging analysis of Latinx politics and political theory that revolves specifically around the question of "Latinidad," the term she uses to refer to the pan-ethnic identity of Latin Americans, as well as their descendants, in the United States. In an early chapter that provides the argumentative thrust for Beltrán's text as a whole, she compellingly argues, via a reading of various Third World and Latina feminists as well as democratic theorists, that Latinx people must refrain from seeking a pan-ethnic identity that would claim to provide or serve as a foundational model or set of interests for political action. Instead, following Sheldon Wolin, we must

conceive of Latinidad as “fugitive,” that is, as an ephemeral, transgressive moment in which multiple, heterogeneous forces and interests come together as one.

Given the scope of her project, Beltrán’s analysis remains focused on collective political identities, and thus little attention is paid to the conception of selfhood, or the individual’s own self-identification, operating implicitly within her analysis. Though she briefly mentions the fact that her conception of Latinidad is “linked to a rethinking of subjectivity,”<sup>1</sup> this possibility remains underdeveloped in her argument. Thus I would like to suggest here a possible connection between Beltrán’s reading of collective Latino identity and Mariana Ortega’s conception of multiplicitous selfhood as presented in her recent monograph, *In-Between*. Working from views of identity and selfhood by Latina feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Maria Lugones as well as the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, Ortega conceives of individuals—especially women of color—as existing between different, sometimes contradictory, “worlds,” that is, different sets of norms, practices, and communities defined by them. Thus, for Ortega, the multiplicitous self is “characterized by *being-between-worlds, being-in-worlds, and becoming-with*.”<sup>2</sup> Though such a position of “in-betweenness” is a result of exile, oppression, and marginalization, Ortega does not posit multiplicitous selfhood as a problem to be solved via a synthesis of these various worlds and identities but instead sees her multiplicity as providing the grounds for creative possibilities of individual and collective resistance against oppression.

Thus, rather than a critique of Beltrán’s analysis, I hope to show that the openness she attributes to collective political identity must be extended and deepened to our conception of selfhood, as demonstrated by Ortega. In doing so, I also hope to show the relevance of Ortega’s analysis of a coalitional politics, based on the process of *Becoming-With*, for our understanding of democracy and political identification. I will begin by providing a brief overview of Beltrán’s critique of Latinidad as it is often conceived, followed by her ambivalent but ultimately positive engagement with Third World feminists and her subsequent appropriation of Wolin’s concept of “fugitive democracy.” I will then explicate Ortega’s conception of the multiplicitous self, its creative potential, and its participation in collective coalitional politics via the process of *Becoming-With*. I will conclude by showing that the concept of *Becoming-With* points to the ontological dimensions of the democratic moment as explained by Beltrán and Wolin.

Beltrán begins with a brief history of the Chicano and Puerto Rican political movements of the 1960s and ’70s, which “continue to serve as emotional and strategic touchstones” for all further Latina/o political movements.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while she laments their later transition to a more elite electoral model predicated on the idea of a homogenous “Latino vote,” Beltrán claims that such a homogenous view of political identity was already present within these early movements. Citing *El Plan de Aztlán*, Beltrán explains the movement’s belief that “unity would emerge through culture and national origin rather than shared class interests.”<sup>4</sup>

It was this focus on ethnic unity as the foundational principle for these movements, argues Beltrán, that led to a rejection of internal dissent and deliberation, as shown in their negative reaction to feminist critiques from their own party members. Beltrán appropriately uses her problematization of these early movements to transition to her reading of Latina feminism and democratic theory, as it allows her to wage a double-sided critique. If these early movements inefficiently attempted to enforce unity from within their ranks, Beltrán accuses others of attempting to impose it from without. In an attempt to call attention to and to empower Latinx and other minorities against more dominant, hegemonic identities, she explains, many white democratic theorists, such as Iris Marion Young, ultimately end up obscuring their heterogeneity. Thus, in recognizing such communities as different from and excluded by the norm, such theorists fail to recognize the many differences *between* members of these communities.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to these homogenizing views of Latinx and other minorities, Beltrán presents a critical reading of various Third World feminists, whom she nevertheless praises for “building bridges while simultaneously challenging the exclusion and silences that exist within all forms of community.”<sup>6</sup> Given that Latina feminism serves as the main influence and site for Ortega’s text, it is in this discussion that the two thinkers come closest, though, as will be shown below, Beltrán’s analysis is largely focused on collective identity and on Third World feminists’ approach to it.

Beltrán spends a substantive portion of her short reading of Third World feminists on what she takes to be their principal pitfall, namely, their presumption of and desire for homogeneity. After quoting Chela Sandoval’s own citing of various Third World feminists, such as Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, as thinkers who exist in liminal spaces and have thus helped develop a common theoretical standpoint, Beltrán explains that the problem with such a claim is not “the attempt to find common practices and perspectives—it is the presumption that a deeper, more organic form of consensus and identification exists at the site of this community.”<sup>7</sup> Beltrán also cites the examples of Moraga’s foreword to the second edition of the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* and Bernice Johnson Reagon’s “Coalition Politics” as further examples of what she refers to as the “democratic despair” that arises from the inability to achieve a complete community. Beltrán engages with these two texts differently, but her critique remains largely the same. That is, Moraga’s lamentation over the internal strife found in Third World feminism as well as Reagon’s defiant dichotomy between the contestable space of coalitional work and the nurturing space of the “home” continue to use harmony and unity as both a standard by which to judge spaces and a goal to be achieved. Thus, as Beltrán states of Reagon’s dichotomy, both thinkers leave “little room for the pleasures of difference.”<sup>8</sup>

Beltrán, however, finishes her engagement with Third World feminism by showing its ability and its potential to contest the very idea of home, and thus the very idea of harmony. Beltrán provides a lengthy quotation by Anzaldúa, in which she describes the feeling of moving from space to space, feeling both welcomed and estranged—and for

different reasons—in each of them. “Moving at the blink of an eye, from one space to another, each world with its own peculiar and distinct habitants, not comfortable in any one of them, none of them ‘home,’ yet none of them ‘not home’ either.”<sup>9</sup> It is this reconception of the home as something that can be and yet not be, as something that can never be completely reached or achieved, that Beltrán takes to be the most productive contribution of Third World feminists towards our conceptions of both Latinidad and democracy.

Beltrán then moves to her conception of democracy, which is most heavily influenced by the political theorist Sheldon Wolin. In his 1994 essay “Fugitive Democracy,” Wolin seeks to distinguish between a pure conception of democracy and the modern system of constitutionalized democracy. Real democracy, he argues, is necessarily devitalized by any notion of system or form. Thus democracy “needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being . . . doomed to succeed only temporarily.”<sup>10</sup> Democracy emerges in a transgressive act, a moment in which and “by which the demos makes itself political,”<sup>11</sup> and, Beltrán explains, “in which ordinary individuals contest forms of unequal power and, in doing so, *create new patterns of commonality*.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, in its transgressive suspension of norms, interests, and political identities, democracy provides a moment to configure and transfigure them into new formations, which can (but don’t necessarily) become systematized in an attempt at institutionalization and sustainability. Similarly, and quite importantly, such moments have no guarantee of taking place or successfully transfiguring political formations: “[It] is a rebellious moment that may assume revolutionary, destructive proportions, or may not,” Wolin explains.<sup>13</sup>

Thus Beltrán concludes that Latinidad, too, must be conceived as fugitive. That is, rather than emerging from a common foundation or moving towards a common fate, Latinidad must be thought of as always open to future and always contingent possibilities for new political formations. Such a conception of political identity, furthermore, brings into question the temporality of the democratic moment and of the movement or action produced therein. Given that it transgresses current norms, patterns, and formations, the commonality that emerges in such a moment cannot be explained or justified by an appeal to these norms. Beltrán, following Alan Keenan, thus concludes that such formations must be self-constituting. After all, “the effort to call a people into being involves speaking and acting prior to the consent of those for whom they claim to speak,” for it is only this moment of identification that makes the possibility for consent available in the first place.<sup>14</sup> “The legitimacy of such actions,” much like the consent of those it seeks to unite and represent, “can only be determined retroactively.”<sup>15</sup> In Beltrán’s view, this is precisely what successfully took place in the form of the Chicano and Puerto Rican movements, and, thus, their “fundamental flaw,” she explains, “was not their specific instances of sectarianism and exclusion—it was the assumption that closure was itself a goal to be achieved.”<sup>16</sup>

Beltrán’s analysis is compelling and rigorously resists the temptations of closure and unity. However, her views on the identity and the subjectivity of the individual remain

underdeveloped. Despite her citation of Anzaldúa—and her experiences of the many spaces that are not “home” and yet none of which are “not home” either—as a principal example of the agonistic and open views of Latinx identity to be found within Third World feminism, her analysis only gestures towards the internal strife, the unhomeliness that Anzaldúa feels, not just externally in relation to the various spaces she navigates, but internally, within herself, between the many cultures and identities she encompasses. For Ortega, however, this is precisely the point(s) of departure for a conception of a multiplicitous self, whom she describes as *being-in-worlds*, *being-between-worlds*, and *becoming-with*.

As mentioned before, Ortega largely derives her conception of selfhood from critical readings of Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Heidegger. All three thinkers, she notes, share an opposition to a Cartesian view of the self as a thinking substance, and instead seek to represent the self as she exists in the world amongst others. Such a self, furthermore, is always “in the making.”<sup>17</sup> Ortega’s concept of beings-in-the-world specifically combines Heidegger’s ontological analysis of Being-in with Lugones’s understanding of the various “worlds” the self traverses. Put succinctly, “Being-in-worlds is meant to convey the condition of the multiplicitous self as being able to inhabit as well as access various worlds.”<sup>18</sup> By “Worlds,” Lugones means a framework of meaning and practices, that is, a “construction of life,”<sup>19</sup> and these various worlds are also variously conditioned and formed by different power relations. Thus, while Ortega clearly states that her conception of multiplicitous selfhood is not exclusive to oppressed minorities,<sup>20</sup> her main break with Heidegger’s analysis is in her claim that the world-traveling of oppressed individuals is more precarious, reflective, and is characterized by “a thick sense of not-being-at-ease.”<sup>21</sup> That is, unlike the subject of Heidegger’s analysis, who tends to exist in the world practically and non-reflectively, the oppressed minority can easily find her existence disrupted by the oppressive conditions of the worlds in and through which she travels.

This is precisely the eponymous condition of in-betweenness, the position of liminality across the various worlds accessed by the oppressed individual. But, to bring Ortega closer to Beltrán’s critique of the presumption of unity amongst Third World feminists, this position of liminality is not experienced equally by all oppressed people, nor is it even experienced equally across all possible worlds. “For many multiplicitous selves,” Ortega explains, “their condition of in-betweenness is highlighted and felt acutely given different conditions of marginality.”<sup>22</sup> These conditions of marginality themselves emerge based on the many intersecting social identities the multiplicitous self has. As Ortega explains, “the multiplicitous self has multiple social identities in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and other social markers, and this self must negotiate such identities while being between-worlds and being-in-worlds.”<sup>23</sup> Given this multiplicity of social identities and their countless negotiations within the worlds and liminal spaces through which the self traverses, Ortega explains that the multiplicitous self “must be understood as decentered,” which is to say that none of its many

worlds or social identities can be taken to be a priori or foundational.<sup>24</sup>

Ortega here presents us with a complex, heterogeneous view of the individual. But here we must ask how the multiplicitous self appears in the realm of political action and identification. Is such a conception of selfhood not rendered futile, or at least far too scattered? While Ortega mentions and engages with other thinkers for whom this lack of internal coherence would foreclose the possibility for concrete political action and coalition building, she instead takes the multiplicity of selfhood to unlock diverse and heterogeneous possibilities for action. Thus, she explains that the multiplicitous self “does not *necessarily* need to be fully integrated.” Rather, she continues, “the multiplicitous self can shift or . . . *highlight* different identities in different contexts.”<sup>25</sup> These highlights or deployments of various permutations of social identities, Ortega warns, can be and are limited by material conditions and power relations. Certain deployments may simply not appear as possible or available in certain, or perhaps in any, worlds.

But beyond material conditions and power relations, our ability to recognize and to deploy our identities is also determined by our relations to others. Ortega here wishes to dispense with the view that a politics based on identity must exclude collective, coalitional work between various groups. Like Beltrán, Ortega explains that coalitions cannot be built based simply on shared and already possessed identity markers, on *Being*, but must also allow for heterogeneity and for *Becoming*.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, coalitions must find similarities in both the forces that oppress them and in the tools of resistance that they have in common. Nevertheless, Ortega says, “coalitional politics depend on an acknowledgement of the need for us to work with the heterogeneity of members *within* our group as well as with other resistant groups.”<sup>27</sup>

It is only in accepting internal and external differences between our groups, identities, and coalitions that we can *become-with* one another. The process of *becoming-with* does not entail simply working together towards a common goal; rather, it entails a collective transformation in which our separate interests come to be shared. Here we find a crucial connection with Beltrán, who criticizes not just the idea that Latinidad can represent and encompass Latinx people’s diverse and often contradictory interests, but also a conception of interests that she takes to be too static in the first place. Rather than an observable “*thing* that social groups possess,” Beltrán defines interests as “an activity in which subjects engage.”<sup>28</sup> Thus Beltrán explains that, much like their identities, “Latino interests are multiple, crosscutting, and periodically opposed to one another,” and similarly *become* collective interests via an ongoing process of contestation and participation.<sup>29</sup> This process, for both thinkers, is never guaranteed to yield this transformation, and its results nevertheless need not become institutionalized or become retroactively foundational.

Further, the process of becoming-with is not meant to erase differences, but rather to lead us to understand them, and ourselves, differently. Such a process involves

an embodied knowing which “can be connected to social movements, and our participation with others in such movements allow for the possibility of feeling otherwise, of experiencing joy and freedom from oppression.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, rather than a mere exercise in empathy, becoming-with is an active, embodied process, and can be seen to take place in collective participation and identification, in which resistant identities may become highlighted, worlds may become aligned, and new possibilities may emerge in a moment of self-constituting solidarity amongst multiplicities. If indeed the material conditions and power relations of our various worlds can render certain deployments of our many identities and certain coalescences of our various interests unavailable, the democratic transformation of becoming-with one another does not reveal such possibilities but, rather, *creates* them. In this process, “I become-with you, and we remake each other.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus we find in Mariana Ortega’s text a conception of selfhood as multiplicitous, creative, and always open, and thus a conception of the individual that can deepen and support and be further developed by Cristina Beltrán’s view of Latinidad as similarly heterogeneous, and permanently open to future possibilities of solidarity and contestation. It is notable that the last sentence in Wolin’s “Fugitive democracy” is a warning about the limits of heterogeneity and the eventual need for homogeneity. Wolin clarifies that homogeneity “[requires] understanding what is truly at stake politically: heterogeneity, diversity, multiple selves are no match for modern forms of power.”<sup>32</sup> Yet in Ortega and Beltrán’s work, we find the tools, the *need*, to reject this view. In a time in which social and political identities themselves have been transformed into mere consumer data and branding, in which our main channels of communication and participation are themselves made possible by the very forces that oppress us, in which the only models for homogeneity available to us have been shown to be of no avail—we must accept, explore, link, and de-link our differences in the hopes that a moment of unity may come about to show us whom we must be. The time for identification, more than ever but always, is now.

NOTES

1. Cristina Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 70.
2. Mariana Ortega, *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self* (New York: SUNY Press, 2016), 3.
3. Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity*, 13.
4. *Ibid.*, 42. Though similar charges of nationalism and a resistance to dissent applied to Puerto Rican groups such as the Young Lords, Beltrán makes it clear that Puerto Rican movements had a more explicit class-based philosophy, and were more open to feminist and gay critiques from its members.
5. *Ibid.*, 57.
6. *Ibid.*, 62.
7. *Ibid.*, 64.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Gloria Anzaldúa, “Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar or Island: Lesbians-of-Color Haciendo Alianzas,” in *Bridges of Power, Women Making Alliances*, ed. Lisa Albrecht and Rose Brewer (Philadelphia: New Society, 1990), 218.
10. Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” *Constellations*: 23.

11. Ibid., 18
12. Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity*, 155, emphasis mine.
13. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 23.
14. Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity*, 70.
15. Ibid., 70.
16. Ibid., 73.
17. Ortega, *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, 52.
18. Ibid., 67.
19. Ibid., 65.
20. Ibid., 71.
21. Ibid., 63.
22. Ortega, *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, 68.
23. Ibid., 74.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 164.
27. Ibid., 165, emphasis mine.
28. Beltrán, *The Trouble with Unity*, 164.
29. Ibid., emphasis mine.
30. Ortega, *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, 169.
31. Ibid., 168
32. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 24.

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