FROM THE EDITORS
Carlos Alberto Sánchez
Outgoing Editor’s Farewell

Lori Gallegos
Editor’s Introduction

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

INTERVIEW
Amy Reed-Sandoval
Interview with Joseph Carens

ARTICLES
Carlos Alberto Sánchez
Elsa Cecilia Frost: Culture and Nepantla

Héctor Herrera III
Latinx Identity in the United States: A Pragmatist Inquiry

Sergio Armando Gallegos Ordogica
The Foundations of a Mexican Humanism in Emilio Uranga’s Análisis del Ser del Mexicano

BOOK REVIEW
Amy Reed-Sandoval: Socially Undocumented: Identity and Immigration Justice
Reviewed by Luis Rubén Díaz-Cepeda

AUTHOR BIOS
FROM THE EDITORS

Outgoing Editor’s Farewell

Carlos Alberto Sánchez
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

Being an editor is very challenging work. This challenge is compounded when editing a “newsletter,” and this because of an implicit (and unwarranted) belief that a newsletter just doesn’t seem like a “legitimate” venue to publish work that may have to be scrutinized come dossier evaluation, job application, or proposal submission. There’s thus an extra level of aggressiveness required to fulfill our normal editorial responsibilities: One has to impose oneself on someone’s time and creativity, at times beg, while always assuring and reassuring possible contributors that their efforts will be worth the while, that the essay or interview or book review will be peer reviewed, that the formatting will be just right, and that the finished product will be of the highest quality. But these same challenges are also what make this job so rewarding. In the process of encroaching on someone else’s creative and philosophical space, I’ve had the honor of working with some of the brightest and most innovative Hispanics/Latin@s in our country; more than that, in pursuing philosophers for their philosophical merchandize, I’ve also been the first to see their work once it leaves the sanctity of their head-space. It’s as close as I can be to the ecstasy of discovery! (Or the joy of simply being there when something happens.)

I have been the editor of this Newsletter since 2013, having previously served as co-editor with Bernie Cantens beginning in 2010. My objective as co-editor and editor over the past decade has been to encourage and showcase work that represents the very best that Hispanic/Latin@ philosophers/thinkers have to offer. Perhaps this is the Newsletter’s greatest virtue: it is a place where new ideas can be tested, where new voices can emerge, and where new philosophical identities can be forged. Being its guardian has thus benefited me the most! I’ve witnessed the birth of new ideas, new lines of inquiry, the emergence of philosophizers, and the normalization of traditions. For this, I am forever grateful.

I published my first paper on Latin American philosophy here in 2007. That short essay went on to become my first book on Mexican philosophy. That first publication gave me the confidence I needed to get my decade’s long research project off the ground, and my hope is that I have helped others in a similar way.

It has certainly been an honor to work with the greatest minds of my generation, and I take my leave in these uncertain times confident that our future in philosophy is in good hands.

I leave the Newsletter in the capable hands of Lori Gallegos. She joins, as I did, a distinguished procession of editors that include Eduardo Mendieta, Gregory Pappas, Arleen Salles, Bernie, and others, who have sought to encourage, promote, and archive that which lends Hispanic/Latino@ philosophy its difference and its eternal value.

Editor’s Introduction

Lori Gallegos
TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

To open this issue of the Newsletter, we are honored to feature an interview, conducted by Amy Reed-Sandoval, of Joseph Carens, a leading theorist of open borders. Carens retired this year from his position as Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto. In the interview, Carens looks back at his career, reflecting on what has influenced his work and on the reception to his ideas by academic circles over the years.

Following the interview is a parting gift from co-editor Carlos Alberto Sánchez. Sánchez introduces English-language readers to the philosophy of Elsa Cecilia Frost, a thinker who is “one of Mexico’s most celebrated philosophers of culture,” but who is “critically overlooked” in the US. In his article “Elsa Cecilia Frost: Culture and Nepantla,” Sánchez offers a summary and analysis of two of Frost’s works, highlighting the development of Frost’s thought about Mexican culture over time. Sánchez concludes by reflecting on the failure of many Latin American philosophers in the US to recognize the contributions of women to the field.

Also translating from the original Spanish-language text, Sergio Armando Gallegos Ordorica makes a case for the most important work of the Mexican philosopher Emilio Uranga. In the article “Foundations of a Mexican Humanism in Emilio Uranga’s Análisis del Ser del Mexicano,” Gallegos Ordorica presents Uranga’s ontological analysis of Mexican being, or Mexicanness (lo mexicano). Rather than viewing themselves as substances, as Europeans do, Uranga proposes that Mexicans conceive of themselves as accidents (and, in virtue of this, eminently contingent and fragile). Uranga sees this self-awareness as the foundation of a new form of humanism, one which Gallegos
Ordorica argues is not underscored by the problems and shortcomings that affict the humanism of Jean-Paul Sartre.

In the third and final article for this issue, “Latinx Identity in the United States: A Pragmatist Inquiry,” Héctor Herrera III weighs in on the widely debated questions of how “our demographic” should refer to itself and why it matters. The article begins by drawing from the work of Robert Brandom to describe the purpose and importance of naming, proposing that “our language indicates our normative commitments in discursive practices.” Then, Herrera III considers three possible names, one proposed by Jorge J. E. Gracia, one by Linda Martín Alcoff, and one by Christine Garcia. The author finds that “Latinx” is the best name “given our current normative commitments.”

We conclude the issue with a review of Reed-Sandoval’s own book, Socially Undocumented: Identity and Immigration Justice. Reviewer Luis Rubén Díaz-Cepeda describes being able to personally identify with Reed-Sandoval’s main theoretical contribution—the identity category of “socially undocumented,” which Reed-Sandoval defines as people who “are presumed to be undocumented on the mere basis of their appearance [and in consequence] are subjected to demeaning immigration-related constraints.” Díaz-Cepeda’s review celebrates a number of the book’s theoretical contributions, but Díaz-Cepeda also wonders whether the identity category of “socially undocumented” is strong enough to elicit the commitment of its members.

**CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS**

The APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy is accepting contributions for the SPRING 2021 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, Lori Gallegos, at LoriGallegos@txstate.edu, or Department of Philosophy, Comal Building 102, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.

**FORMATTING GUIDELINES**


**INTERVIEW**

**Interview with Joseph Carens**

Joseph Carens, a leading theorist of open borders, retired in spring 2020 from his position as professor of political science at the University of Toronto. He is the author of six books, including, most recently, The Ethics of Immigration (OUP, 2013), as well as numerous academic articles dealing with philosophical dimensions of immigration, human rights, and social justice.

Amy Reed-Sandoval (ARS): Where did you grow up, and what were your childhood and adolescence like? What sparked your initial interest in philosophy?

Joseph Carens (JC): I grew up in Wellesley, a suburb of Boston, in a middle class Irish Catholic family. Each of my parents had attended college only for a year. My father was a businessman, and my mother began working as a secretary when I was in the seventh grade. So there were no other academics, and not much intellectual discussion, in my family. I was a very good student, but very conventional. I just tried to do well whatever the teachers told me to do. I was also very religious, deeply committed to the very traditional Catholicism of the 1950s. I became interested in philosophy in college primarily because of its links to theology, which was my real interest.

ARS: What drew you to political philosophy and the ethics of immigration?

JC: I became a political philosopher almost entirely by accident. I had entered a PhD program in religious studies at Yale, but by the time I had completed my third year and my general exams, I had stopped believing in God. Lots of people study religion for purely academic or intellectual reasons, but my interest had always been tied to my faith, and when that disappeared so did my desire to get a PhD in religious studies. I had no idea what I wanted to do. In normal times, I would probably have dropped out of school for a while and figured things out, but it was 1968-69, the
middle of the Vietnam War. If I dropped out, I would lose my student deferment and get drafted into the army. Since I was not willing to join the army, I would either have to go to jail or go to Canada. Those seemed like dire fates. (I know. My thinking of going to Canada as a dire fate is one of life’s little ironies.) So I decided to try to stay in school. Yale had a rule that permitted grad students to transfer from one PhD program to another without going through the normal application process. So I wandered about Yale looking for a department that might take me in. My passion for religion had been replaced by a passion for politics, and so I went to the Department of Political Science. At the time Yale was a bastion of behavioral political science, but the director of Graduate Studies was a political theorist. I was not really a likely candidate for admission to a PhD program in political science because I had never before taken a course in political science—any course—and for that matter, I had never before taken a course in any social science (unless you count a first-year course in the History of Western Civilization). All the rest had been humanities—Latin, Greek, French, English, theology, and philosophy (but not political philosophy). But the director of Graduate Studies saw that I had good grades in my religious studies program, and when he found that I did not need fellowship support because I had an external fellowship that could be transferred, he signed my form, and I officially became a political scientist (or at least a graduate student in political science).

I had no immediate interest in questions about immigration. I wrote a dissertation (which I subsequently published) about how one could use moral incentives to combine markets and income equality, a kind of egalitarian market socialism. In 1980 the American Political Science Association created a seminar on citizenship for junior professors, and the price of admission to the seminar was a promise to write a paper. I wanted to go just for the intellectual stimulation. I had not previously thought about citizenship at all. I began casting about for a topic. It was a time when lots of Haitians were seeking asylum in the United States. While many people on the left were arguing for the admission of these refugees, others were clearly worried that the arrival of large numbers of foreign refugees would have negative consequences for marginalized and dispossessed Americans. That was the link to my citizenship seminar—how to weigh the claims of citizens against the claims of outsiders in need. So I decided for the first time to try to think about immigration.

ARS: When you wrote your extraordinarily influential paper “Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders,” you initially struggled to get it published—an experience you describe briefly in your more recent book The Ethics of Immigration. Speaking more generally, what was it like trying to motivate an egalitarian “open borders” position in the 1980s (which is when your early “open borders” paper was eventually published)? How did people react to such arguments at conferences and in other academic contexts?

JC: Yes, definitely. First, there is the experience of the European Union. When I started writing about open borders, it was not uncommon to have people say to me that no sovereign state could have open borders, as though that were a fundamental conceptual truth. For some time now, I have been able to point out that the states in the European Union are more effectively sovereign than most states and yet they have open borders with one another. Recognizing that open borders is a possibility that we can imagine actually existing between states changes the discussion. It makes it easier to get people to see regulating immigration is not a necessary function of state sovereignty like having a legal system. Beyond that, whatever one thinks of the phenomenon of globalization, it is hard not to see that the world is much more interconnected today than it was in the past. Migration is part of that phenomenon. Of course, there are also ways in which borders have come to play a more important role than they did in the past, and restrictions on migration have become a much more salient political issue.

ARS: You have argued that we need both “realistic” and “idealistic” approaches to immigration ethics, and you illustrate both approaches in The Ethics of Immigration and other works. Does it concern you that the “realistic” and the “ideal” seem, at least in many important respects, to be growing increasingly distant from one another in the realm of immigration politics? Has this “distancing” impacted your metaphilosophical views on immigration ethics?

JC: The increasing antagonism towards immigrants in the United States and in many European states certainly concerns me, and that may be taken as one illustration of an increasing gap between the real and the ideal. On the other hand, in some respects the gap has narrowed.
For example, almost no European state today thinks it can have a citizenship policy based purely on descent as many did in the past, most democratic states have significantly narrowed the differences between the rights of residents and the rights of citizens, no democratic states adopt the kind of openly discriminatory admissions policies that were common in the mid twentieth century (even if they sometimes try to sneak them back in under another guise), and so on. So I’m less pessimistic about the overall trend than your question.

From a metaphilosophical perspective, even the negative developments have reinforced my view of how important it is to get clarity about the reasons why we may advocate for or against particular immigration policies. In my view, to act effectively in politics, it is crucial to have a realistic view about what is possible and what is not possible in a given time and place. So it may be wise to limit the political demands that we advance in the area of immigration. Nevertheless, an adequate philosophical approach has to be able to recognize when the limitations on what is possible stem from deeply entrenched injustices. I think there is a real danger of legitimating policies and practices that we cannot change here and now for contingent but deep political reasons by treating these constraints on change as though they flow from the human condition.

ARS: You have done a considerable amount of high-profile public philosophy. How has this been challenging, and in what ways has it been fulfilling?

JC: I guess I am glad to see you say this, especially the “high-profile” part, but I’m not sure I agree with the premise. I do not really think of myself as a public intellectual. I try to write in a way that is accessible to ordinary people and I try to write about real issues, but I do not write many op-eds or have a blog or even a Twitter account, and I do not very often comment on current political issues. In part this is simply a matter of temperament and personality. I tend to be a perfectionist. (It took me thirty years to finish my book on immigration.) That is not a good trait when one is facing a deadline or, worse, many deadlines. Also, I normally dislike polemics. I do not object to argument and critique, and in fact I like talking to people with whom I disagree, but I want it to be a real conversation, not an exchange of talking points. Finally, I do not have the kind of thick skin that is needed for public engagement. I have been struck on a number of occasions by comments from newspaper columnists about the kind of hate mail they have received for articulating their views. My work has certainly been criticized in academic contexts, but I cannot recall ever receiving hate mail of any sort or even rude and antagonistic communications, and I am glad about that. None of this makes me well suited for most places in the public arena.

ARS: Do you have any advice for other philosophers seeking to do public-facing work?

JC: Given my previous answer, it would have to be something like do as I say, not as I do, but only if your temperament is different from mine. I do want to make clear that I am not being critical of those philosophers who seek to reach wider public audiences. On the contrary, I think such efforts are important, and I admire those who engage in that sort of work. I’m just not very good at it myself.

ARS: Though you were born in the US, you have spent the majority of your academic career in Canada. To what extent, if any, has living in Canada influenced you as a philosopher and public intellectual?

JC: Coming to Canada had a huge impact on me because Canada is so much like the United States in many ways that the differences between the two countries really stand out. Quebec and its distinct identity are one obvious example. Equally important, Indigenous peoples are much more visible here in Canada than they are in the United States. One of the things that distinguishes my views on open borders from those of some others who support open borders is that I am not just arguing from a liberal individualist perspective. I think that communities and collective identities really do matter morally. I think that is compatible with a deep commitment to open borders, but whether I am right about that or not, I have no doubt that one of the main reasons why I take context and culture so seriously is because of the experience of living in Canada.

ARS: What philosophical works have made the strongest impact on you?

JC: Reading the later Wittgenstein had a huge impact on me because it made me wary of abstract conceptual debates and made me want always to see whether there was anything of real substance underlying such debates. Like many in my generation and succeeding ones, I have been deeply influenced by Rawls, but I have also been influenced by Walzer whose theorizing is almost always directly connected to real world issues in ways that I try to emulate even when I disagree with his substantive views. Finally, political theory in political science departments tends to put a lot of weight on the history of political thought, and even though I have not written about that history, I have devoted much of my teaching to it. So I am often thinking of that tradition when I write. For various reasons, Plato, Rousseau, and Hegel are my favorites. I won’t mention how much I dislike Nietzsche because I know how popular he is.

ARS: Looking back on your career, what makes you the proudest? What, if anything, might you have done differently?

JC: Parts of the Catholic upbringing stick, even when the belief in God goes, and so I find it difficult to talk about what I am proud about. Let me try this. I am very grateful that Jerry Cohen liked my book on moral incentives and so rescued it from the obscurity to which it was otherwise doomed. I am certainly pleased that my “Aliens and Citizens” article has received so much attention and that I can re-read it without wishing to change much. I am very glad that I finally finished my book on the ethics of immigration and would have deeply regretted it if I had not managed to do so. On the other hand, I do not really regret not publishing it sooner, even though it would have
been professionally advantageous to do so, because I did finally write the book I wanted to write. Finally, what I have most wanted to do, apart from producing good work of my own, was to be a door opener rather than a gatekeeper in carrying out my professional responsibilities with respect to younger scholars. I think that I have usually managed to do that. More generally, in my engagement with others, in whatever capacity, I have tried to err on the side of generosity. The times when I have failed to do that are what I wish I had done differently.

ARS: What are your plans for after your retirement?

JC: I plan not to work as hard as I did before and to say “no” to (almost) all future review requests of any kind. But I do have a couple of writing projects in mind: a book about how to do political theory (though one that is not as prescriptive as that sounds) and a book about utopia (which is more about the questions we need to ask than the answers to those questions). We will see if either of these come to fruition. I will be happy if they do but not devastated if they do not.

ARTICLES

Elsa Cecilia Frost: Culture and Nepantla

Carlos Alberto Sánchez  
SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

Recognized throughout Latin America as a brilliant historian and linguist, Elsa Cecilia Frost (1928–2005) became one of Mexico’s most celebrated philosophers of culture. What follows is an introduction to this critically overlooked Mexican philosopher via a summary consideration of two of her most significant contributions to philosophy, Las categorías de la cultura mexicana [The Categories of Mexican Culture] (her first published work, written between 1952–1957 and published in 1971), and “Acerca de Nepantla” [“On Nepantla”] (her final, major public address, delivered November of 2004). With the first, Frost engages in a careful and deconstructive analysis of certain concepts that have been used to think about Mexican culture as culture, concepts that she ultimately finds insufficient to capture the complex hybridity (i.e., mestizaje) of Mexican cultural life. With the second, that is, her final address, Frost returns to the dynamics of Mexican culture and denies her previous assertion regarding the nature of Mexican culture as a “mestizo” culture, offering a less rigid concept in its place, the Nahua concept of “nepantla.” She argues in “Acerca de Nepantla” that modern Mexican culture is, given its cultural and historical complexity, a nepantla culture.

WHO IS ELSA CECILIA FROST?

Frost received her graduate education in philosophy in 1954 at El Colegio de Mexico and UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) under the tutelage and guidance of two of Mexico’s most significant twentieth-century philosophers, José Gaos and Edmundo O’Gorman, as well as the famed historian, Miguel Leon-Portilla. At that time, her research focused on the history and philosophy of colonial Mexico. She was especially interested in the processes of indoctrination and acculturation central to colonization itself, paying particular attention to the role of the sixteenth-century Franciscan missionaries. According to Frost, Franciscans were particularly adept at ritualizing the sublation, or simultaneous erasure and preservation, of indigenous cultures in acts of evangelization that would eventually come to create new culture and ways of being. In post-Conquest Mexico, that is, evangelization was key to acculturation and identity formation.

Frost’s post-graduate career was dedicated to teaching and writing philosophy, obtaining an international reputation as editor and translator of texts from Mexico’s colonial period while working at the Fondo de Cultura Economica (Mexico’s state-funded, non-profit, publishing conglomerate). However, her most valuable contributions were to history and philosophy; she taught both at the Center of Historical Studies at the College of Mexico and at the Department of Philosophy and Letters at UNAM until her death in 2005.

Elsa Frost gained one of the highest academic distinctions in Latin America when in 2004 she was inaugurated into the prestigious Academia Mexicana de la Lengua [Mexican Academy of Language]. (It is her inaugural address that we discuss below, “On Nepantla”). Frost became only the sixth woman elected to the Academy and the first to occupy the Academy’s fourteenth chair. An offshoot of the Royal Academy of Spain, founded in 1713, the Mexican Academy of Language was incorporated in 1875. Since that time, only the most prominent intellectuals have been installed as chairs, including Justo Sierra, Antonio Caso, Juan Rufio, Carlos Fuentes, Luis Villoro, Miguel Leon-Portilla, and Octavio Paz, to name the most recognizable.

Esteemed for her intellectual and philosophical acuity, Frost was a voracious reader (according to her advisor, José Gaos, she read at least fifty books in the first semester of her master’s program in 1952, in five languages, and all on the nature and the philosophy of culture), a profound thinker, and unequaled in her ability to “penetrate the cultural heritage of a people to such a degree that [she] came to know its origins, its influences, its evolution, its literary, architectonic, musical, religious, academic manifestations.” Frost spoke seven languages and came to translate some of the most important texts in twentieth-century philosophy, including Nicolai Hartmann’s Aesthetics, Heidegger’s Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, Michel Foucault’s Words and Things, and twenty-one other works in European philosophy.

2. CATEGORIES OF MEXICAN CULTURE (1972)

“[T]he criterion for the establishment of a Latin American person’s humanity is her capacity for culture.”

– Frost, Categorías de la cultural Mexicana

Since its publication, Frost’s Categories of Mexican Culture has served as “a classic text for [students] in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters” at UNAM. The ambitious work—written as her master’s thesis in 1954—seeks to analyze
Western “categories that up till now have been applied to Mexican culture.” Mexico’s unique historical situation as a space of encounters and convergences between radically different worlds (both pre-Colombian indigenous and European) make it so that its “culture” is hard to categorize. This difficulty gives rise to the temptation to homogenize or totalize the culture with rigid designations or concepts that do not clearly fit Mexican cultural reality. Western concepts such as “Hispanic,” “creole,” “hybrid,” “imitative,” etc. are deployed by a Westernized intellectual elite in an effort to bring that reality under familiar, and otherwise useful, terms. In her work, Frost considers these deployments, interrogating the cultural concepts as to their contribution to an adequate and accurate interpretation of Mexican cultural reality.

In a general sense, Categories offers a summary view of the philosophy of culture up to the mid-twentieth century. Frost reviews Oswald Spengler’s “biological theory of culture,” whereby cultures “are like plants, ‘tied by life to the ground from which they spring’.”1 Max Scheler’s “sociology of knowledge,” whereby culture is a “constant process of renovation and innovation” that tends toward “making us all human”; Ernst Cassirer’s “Neo-Kantian, symbolic” theory of culture, whereby culture is “a result of symbolic activity”; and, finally, José Ortega y Gasset’s broad and multifaceted circumstantialist philosophy of culture, whereby culture is thought as an accomplishment of vital reason, vital history, and the work of the biological subject on his/her circumstances and always for the sake of human progress.

Frost finds that these philosophies of culture have one thing in common, namely, they assume that cultural identity is constant in some specific sense; or, that cultural identity easily gives itself to these concepts. Mexican culture challenges the assumption because its cultural profile is not clear-cut; as a culture, the profile of Mexican culture is sedimented, one culture sitting atop another, layering itself through the years, making it difficult for the cultural critic to identify a precise cultural essence. Nonetheless, in a move that Western sensibility would call uncontroversial, the most reasonable assumption about Mexican culture is that it is a dependent culture or a “culture of imitation”—reasonable, that is, when the premise is that a culture will imitate the culture on which it depends (Europe in this sense). In this case, the category of “imitation” fails to capture the complexity of Mexican historical reality.

The concept of a “creole culture” most closely approximates this “new historical reality” which is Mexican culture. However, the concept of “creole,” referring to a mixture and hybridity, is, ultimately, demeaning of Western culture. According to Samuel Ramos, creole culture “conserves the European feel, but modifies it—or better yet, impoverishes.”12 since it “has nourished itself from other cultures.”13 As Frost explains, the creole was the son of the metropolitans—Spanish or French—that were born in the colonies. . . . However in giving them this designation, it meant that by being born in the colony the individual’s race was modified and that result was a certain degeneration, a certain impoverishment . . . [Creoles] were inept, defeated, and not very rational, in sum, inferior.15

In seeking to capture the nature of Mexican culture, i.e., to see it in its historical richness, Frost notices that thinkers have been stumped by a pernicious philosophical bias for purity and essence, a prejudice that will necessarily lead to understanding Mexican culture as “inferior.” She thus wants to move away views resembling Ramos’s negative appraisal and simply understand what it is about “creole” culture that makes it distinctive. What she finds is that a culture which is creole has gone through a process of “transculturation,” whereby the key aspect of the culture is not the original, “found,” culture, but the people that come into it, changing it to fit their needs.16 In this process, the original culture is subjected to violence and erasure for the sake of transforming it into a culture that colonizers will find familiar, or at least, fitting. A creole culture is thus a mix or hybrid culture where an essential element of the original culture remains silent, in the background, as what was deposed or transfigured by the culture that imposes itself on it or over it. There is nothing essentially negative about “creole” culture—the negative comes from the philosophical bias underlying it.

The other major designation that has been applied specifically to Mexican culture is that of “mestizo culture.” The term “mestizo” comes from the word “mixed, what results from a mixing . . . with that which is impure.”17 The person who is a mestizo (or mestiza) is the product of an “exogenic union,” but one that is particularly “between a white person and a person of color . . . an inferior race.”18 Indigenous peoples were people of color who belonged (in the eyes of the Europeans) to an inferior race, hence in mixing with Europeans, their offspring are mestizo/as. “Correspondingly, we could give the name [mestizo] to a culture that is a product of a mixing between a superior culture (the European) and an inferior culture (aboriginal).”19

In Mexico, mestizos are the norm. However, the idea that Mexican culture itself is a mestizo culture does not easily follow from the mestizaje of the people. The culture itself must reveal this mix—it must reveal both the subordinating and the subordinate culture that makes it mestizo. For centuries, mestizos believed that all cultural remnants of Indigenous culture had been destroyed, thus linking their mestizaje to the destruction of the Indigenous by the Spanish. However, the Indigenous culture, rather than being destroyed, persevered with the Indigenous people themselves. Their strategy for survival was one of pretending to be invisible: “The Indian . . . decided ‘to obey, but not to comply.’”20 That is, Indigenous people merely feigned assimilation, all while preserving their culture behind their apparent obedience. The mix of cultures necessarily followed the apparent assimilation; however, soon the dominant culture began to take on aspects of the culture it sought to dominate due to the latter’s ability to adapt and persevere.

The ability of Indigenous cultures to survive despite their subjugation reveals their strength and, also, the weakness of Spanish culture, which was itself forced to adapt to the
particularities of its conquest. In this sense, Spanish culture proves its inferiority to the ideal of a conquering culture. The mixing that results is thus one between a culture thought to be inferior and another actually inferior.

The resulting mestizo culture thus preserves elements of both cultures in its final profile. This means, however, that mestizo culture "implies a certain impurity, a certain degeneration... in sum, it implies an incomplete and contradictory being." According to Frost, what happens is that both the Spanish and the Indigenous elements are silenced in the mix, revealing a new entity, a mestizo "born of the consciousness of the negative, which is the Indigenous, and the degraded, secondariness of the Spanish in relation to the European in general." Ultimately, the difference between "creole" and "mestizo" culture rests on the intensity of the Indigenous presence in the culture. That is, the difference rests in the degree of visibility of the negative in the resulting culture. In creole culture, the negative other is muted, silenced, and invisible in relation to that which is presumed as positive (the Spanish or European), which is affirmed and highlighted; in mestizo culture, the Indigenous other is absorbed by the Spanish, but since they are both either negative or degraded, their synthetized negation constitutes a new element, a new entity, which is neither one nor the other, but both simultaneously.

Ultimately, Frost recognizes that either concept, creole or mestizo, cannot fully capture the historical nuances of Mexican culture itself. She thus seeks a more fluid, dynamic taxonomy. Looking at the four “basic sectors of culture”—i.e., politics, as seen through the lens of post-revolutionary Mexico; religion, as seen through the lens of the anti-Christian moment of 1928; literature, as seen through the lens of the novel and the music of the Revolution; and, finally, the plastic arts, as seen through the muralist movement—she finds a uniquely distinct Mexican culture as emerging in the twentieth century, which is the century wherein, according to Frost and her generation, "Mexicans discovered Mexico." Frost’s Mexico, however, overdetermines and overwhelms the concepts “creole” or “mestizo,” demanding a new conceptualization.

Thus, we have Mexican culture as a dynamic culture—neither Indigenous nor European, but creole and mestizo. This mixture of mixtures eliminates all purity. As creole, it contributes “the Indigenous element that has been reduced to something subconscious.” or silent, and as mestizo, it adds the sense of a “persistence of an Indigenous tradition, in spite of all modifications.”

But even after their diffusion into a new synthetic relation, these two assignations, however, are totalizing in that they delimit the field. We end up with the following: “Culture is, then, the attitude before the challenge of the circumstance, but, since the circumstance is variable and human life has the ontological privilege to relocate, it is not possible to maintain that there exists an absolute culture, but that many have existed and many do exist.” In her final address, she steps away from these objectifying concepts and decides on nepantla as the appropriate category.

3. “ON NEPANTLA”
Frost’s inaugural address for the Fourteenth Chair of the Academy of the Mexican Language lends a panoramic view of Frost’s philosophical agenda. Given less than one year before her death (November 11, 2004), “On Nepantla” proposes the idea—one grounded on history and historical texts—that not one single conception of culture can capture the complex and historically nuanced constitution of Mexican cultural life. She suggests, rather, that Mexican culture is “nepantla”—it is a nepantla culture.

Before getting to that, however, Frost points out an “unease” prevalent amongst intellectuals in regards the state of Mexican culture; an unease, or anxiety (“inquietud”), that begins with the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century. Philosophers who sought to figure out Mexican culture asked about its nature and definition. In line with contemporary cultural theory, the standard view of Mexican culture sought to align it with more general cultural concepts such as “Latin American,” “Iberian,” and “Hispanic,” but could not fully make Mexican culture fit the experiences that these other concepts sought to capture. Their conclusion, echoing the prominent view of Samuel Ramos, was that Mexican culture was a “culture of imitation,” a verdict that to Frost “leaves this [Mexican] portion of humanity in pretty bad standing.” Opposed to this standard view, Frost suggests that while Mexican culture cannot be equated with Latin American, Hispanic, or Iberian culture, it is certainly not a culture of imitation, and the struggle to grasp exactly what it is simply means that it is “something quite distinct.” The problem with those early evaluations of Mexican culture was, ultimately, that they accepted the Western philosophical perspective as the authoritative perspective, as the perspective that lent validity to all philosophical pronouncements; they sought an objective ground of culture and an objective concept to grasp it, and believed that Western philosophy could supply that.

However, examining the mid-sixteenth-century chronicles written by Franciscan missionaries, who admittedly set out to produce an “objective” history of the Conquest, the colony, and their own missionary efforts, Frost concludes that the desired objectivity never stood a chance in Mexico—the Mexican experience itself made objectivity impossible. In “all of [the sixteenth-century chronicles],” Frost observes, a “characteristic passion” accompanied every account. It was as if life in Mexico could not be recounted by the evangelizers without, on the one hand, “shameless self-promotion,” and on the other, a felt need to demean those to whom they ministered, to “denigrate their adversaries [the Indigenous peoples].” However, in adopting this subjective approach, Franciscan chroniclers denied history its objectivity; the chronicles of the colonization, that is, are one-dimensional and one-sided. This means, for Frost, that what the chronicles reveal is, in fact, a more accurate representation of what Mexico meant for the conquerors—that is, these subjective chronicles constituted the first phenomenological accounts of the Mexican experience ever put on paper. The Franciscans were able to shun objectivity, moreover, because no one in Europe could verify what they pronounced as true or real. This allowed the chroniclers to submerge themselves in their experience in an intimate and biased way; however,
in this way, Frost says, the conquerors were “conquered by their conquest.”

What does it mean to say that the writers of the “last great theory of the West,” as Frost describes the narrative of colonization and world-building created by New World historiography, were conquered by their conquest? Simply, it means that they began to lose themselves in their experience. And in this “losing of oneself” there emerges a crisis of identity, a loss of belonging, a loss of memory, and a loss of attachment to an old way of being. The Spanish began to experience a similar transition to what was being experienced by the Indigenous peoples—a transition to an unknown and uncertain cultural future. By the time the Spanish friars and soldiers realized what was happening to their sense of identity, the process of nepantla had begun.

Nepantla is not unfamiliar to students of twentieth-century Latina feminism. Gloria Anzaldúa famously makes it a centerpiece of her own critical theory. She writes:

[N]epantla, a psychological, liminal space between the way things had been and an unknown future. Nepantla is the space in-between, the locus and sign of transition. In nepantla we realize that realities clash, authority figures of various groups demand contradictory commitments, and we and others have failed living up to idealized goals. . . . In nepantla we hang out between shifts, trying to make rational sense of this crisis, seeking solace, support, appeasement, or some kind of intimate connection . . . we fall into chaos, fear of the unknown, and are forced to take up the task of self-definition.

However, the appearance of the term “napantla” in the historiographical record is much older than Anzaldúa’s deployment. In the Chronicles, it goes back to the sixteenth century, in the writings of the Dominican Friar Diego Durán. Frost recounts the familiar anecdote taken from Durán’s (1537–1588) History of the Indies of New Spain (1581). Durán records an exchange with an Indigenous man who, after being rebuked for what Durán thought was a frivolous waste of his hard-earned money, reassures the Friar by telling him that they (the Indigenous people) cannot think or behave as he does because they are not yet bound to Durán’s social and cultural norms or individualistic economic imperatives, nor are they any longer bound to their ancient customs, which are, at that time, going through an aggressive process of erasure. Indigenous life, Durán is told abruptly, is in a state of transition (from the old to the new), in transit toward an unknown “yet,” suspended “in the middle” of a paradigm shift, moving always farther and farther from familiar ground. “Father,” the Indigenous man says, “don’t be alarmed, we are still nepantla [todavía estamos nepantla].”

To be nepantla, Frost tells us, echoing Durán, is to be “in the middle of the road . . . not fully Christian nor fully idolaters. Without fully belonging to either world.” While Durán was angered by the Indigenous man’s response, calling it an “abominable excuse” to hold on to pagan traditions, Frost recognizes the emancipatory tone of the proclamation, one that announced a silent victory of the Indigenous people over the Spanish “fathers”: “the Indigenous man knew that he was better than Durán, who did not even know that the Spanish were also nepantla.” An interesting historical example of how the Spanish became nepantla is tied to food. On arrival, the Spanish refused to eat Indigenous foods, but as time wore on, they grew accustomed to it, so long as they could use European spices to flavor the local dishes; eventually, neither Indigenous nor Spanish foods were consumed on their own, and the combination was not a mix or a hybrid food (this would be “mestizaje”), but a food in constant process, in perpetual transition to becoming something else entirely, a new dish.

According to Frost, this points to the origins of Mexican culture’s self-consciousness as neither Indigenous (since that had been supplanted) nor Spanish (since this had done the supplanting), but as something other. This self-consciousness instigates the move to find, in the vernacular of Western thinking, the concept that would define its culture. Here we see the origins of referring to Mexican culture as either “mestizo” and “criollo.” However, these rigid concepts try to capture what is non-rigid, what is moving, in transit, always “in the middle”—an impossible task! Frost asks, “Could we not apply nepantla to culture itself?”

A nepantla culture is thus a culture that is neither here nor there, neither this nor that, but always in transition, always fluid and dynamic, uncommitted to one deterministic way of life over another or others. In contemporary culture, Mexican American, Asian American, or Philippine American cultures are all nepantla cultures. For example, Mexican American culture is conscious of itself as transitional, as always in the process of becoming “American” while never quite getting there; it is suspended in between a place of origin (Mexico) and a promised ideal (the ideal of the American way of life); and it knows itself as always moving farther and farther away from that origin (linguistically, in the practice of cultural customs, in the naming of their children, and so on). According to Frost, nepantla is perfectly suited to capture not only the individual who lacks a firm ontological ground, but a culture that can no longer affirm a definite identity. While the Indigenous man who frustrates Durán with his spry remark may seem as though he expects to, one day, eventually, be fully what Durán wants him to be (he says, “todavía estamos,” which means that we are still being, signifying that perhaps one day they will no longer be), Frost tells us that nepantla should be understood to refer, not to mestizaje, but to a “futureless hybridity”—a mestizaje that is always in the process of becoming and has no end goal or purpose. Driving her point home, Frost tells us:

The colony was inhabited by Indians that no longer thought themselves as such and Spaniards who slowly ceased being so. Both different than their parents and, at the same time, creators of a new way of living that in the last instance is what we call culture.

In the end, it is Frost’s remarkable way of appealing to historical texts that lends her philosophical pronouncements
weight and significance. Nepantla is not only an abstract concept useful for the analysis of Mexican culture after the late sixteenth century, but a living concept that we find in the movement of culture itself, in its identity, one traced back to the historical encounter between the West and its Other. Its grounding in historical fact lends it the sort of validity we require in order to transpose the concept to our own time, and apply it to real life, flesh and bone, peoples and cultures of the twenty-first century.

4. A NOTE ON FROST’S PLACE IN MEXICAN PHILOSOPHY

When North American philosophers speak of twentieth-century Latin American Philosophy one immediately notices an obvious absence in the historiographical account: women philosophers. While those of us who teach Latin American philosophy, who write about it, and research it, are now well-equipped to pontificate at length on the philosophical contributions of Antonio Caso, José Vasconcelos, Augusto Salazar Bondy, José Carlos Mariategui, Samuel Ramos, Luis Villoro, Leopoldo Zea, and so on, we fail miserably to speak about the contributions of women to this field. Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz is a notable exception, but then we ask her to represent all Latin American women. We place blame for our failure on the lack of translations and a lack of secondary sources that would fill the void in our histories. Perhaps this is a factually adequate excuse as to why our accounts are incomplete. The real reason, however, is that, in spite of our anti-colonial tendencies, our preconception of what philosophy is continues to cloud our judgment and blinds us to those philosophical women that have been there all along—even those who did not write “philosophy” as we understand it, as our Eurocentric concept of philosophy allows. This is the case with Elsa Frost. She is thought of as a historian, although her degrees and teaching are in philosophy. A Google search on Mexican philosophy completely misses her. One obvious reason for this could be her emphasis on history; however, it is this historical starting point which distinguishes her from her male counterparts, which makes her conclusions even more illuminating because they are embedded in a true, and empirical, historical understanding.

Women are, for the most part, ignored in most standard accounts of influential twentieth-century Mexican philosophers. Frost is only one of two women included in Antonio Ibarüengoitia’s Suma Filosófica Mexicana, which is the only account, in fact, that mentions her (along with Juliana González Valenzuela). What Ibarüengoitia’s inclusion makes clear, however, is that Frost’s place in twentieth-century Mexican philosophy should not be overlooked: she belongs to a lineage of great Mexican thinkers that sought to highlight the value and significance of Mexican culture on a global level. In general, her contributions to philosophy should help us better understand the heterogeneity and diversity of our modern world.

5. FURTHER READING

With Categorías, Frost’s other works include Educación e ilustración en Europa (SEP, 1986); El arte de la traición a los problemas de la traducción (UNAM, 1992); Franciscanos y mundo religioso en México (UNAM, 1993); Este nuevo orbe (UNAM, 1996); Testimonios del exilio, (Jus, 2000); La historia de dios en las Indias (Tusquets, 2002). In these works, Frost lends clarity and analysis to Mexican culture, philosophy, Church history, and the process of evangelization in the New World. She also treats of several historical personalities with the same critical profundity that she treats philosophical themes, including Bartolomé de las Casas and Alonso de la Veracruz.

NOTES

1. A more comprehensive discussion of her various interests in found in Patricia Escandon (ed.), De la Iglesia indiana, homenaje a Elsa Cecilia Frost (Mexico: UNAM, 2006).


9. Ibid., 17–19.

10. Ibid., 19–22.


12. Ibid., 96.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 99.

17. Ibid., 121.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 122.

21. Ibid., 126.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 7.

24. Ibid., 196.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 29.

27. All references are to the Inaugural Address, “Acerca de Nepantla,” published online, August 27, 2018, http://www.academia.org.mx/noticias/item/acerca-de-nepantla-por-elsa-cecilia-frost.


Latinx Identity in the United States: A Pragmatist Inquiry

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In this paper I will investigate and explicate demographic names attributed by different philosophers to the community that is from Latin America and now lives in the United States: For “Hispanic,” I will turn to the watershed work in Latinx philosophy, Jorge J. E. Gracia’s Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective;1 Linda Martín Alcoff foils Gracia with a preference for using the word “Latino/a” in her work “Latino vs. Hispanic: The Politics of Ethnic Names;”2 and for “Latinx” I will look at the work of Christine García, “In Defense of Latinx.”3 It will come as no surprise, given the diction I have and will implement, that I believe that “Latinx” is the best name candidate for our demographic given our current normative commitments. I will rely on the analytic pragmatist philosopher Robert Brandom’s philosophy of language found in his succinct and erudite work, “Action, Norms, and Practical Reasoning” (ANPR) follows the inherited distinction that can stand the test of time. Or, to put it in a more philosophical way, Wittgenstein writes in the Philosophical Investigations,4 a main source of our failure to understand is that we don’t have an overview of the use of our words. Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in “seeing connections.” Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate links. The concept of a surveyable representation is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters.5

The purpose of this essay is to find the newly invented conceptional intermediate links that help build bridges and insights into the beauty of the created world around us when our past grammar and language fails to proclaim and embrace its grandeur. It begins by taking language and its implementation seriously.

Brandom’s position in “Action, Norms, and Practical Reasoning” (ANPR) follows the inherited distinction that Kant makes between sentience and sapience—the thing that distinguishes people from other animals.

What distinguishes judgment and action from the responses of merely natural creatures is neither their relation to some special stuff nor their peculiar transparency, but rather that they [i.e. judgment and action] are what we are in a distinctive way responsible for. They express commitments of ours: commitments that we are answerable for in the sense that our entitlement to them is always potentially at issue; commitments that are rational in the sense that vindicating the corresponding entitlements is a matter of offering reasons for them.6

Brandom shows that linguistic practices are inherently normative. Using concepts is a social practice for which we are held responsible. We are held responsible by a particular community. “The overall idea is that the rationality that qualifies us as sapients (and not merely sentients) can be identified with being a player in the social, implicitly normative game of offering and assessing, producing and consuming, reasons.”7 “We are those who inhabit ‘the space of reasons,’ and in that space we express (make explicit) what was implicit in our practice and hold one another accountable to the inferences assumed therein. It is these sorts of obligations that bind us to one another. Such are the obligations of being rational—they free us to be human and social.

Thus, any kind of reason giving is fundamentally social. So, inference is not rooted in reference; to the contrary, reference is one kind of inferential game we can play, and ultimately what counts as a good inference is bound up with a community of know-how, a community of practice. One cannot just get away with inventing rules of inference. Brandom introduces material inference, over and against the sort of “formal” rules of inference that we normally associate with analytic logical analysis. Formal rules of inference are associated with what we usually call validity. Reasoning and inference are described as valid when the form of the inference conforms to what are taken to be universal rules of logic abstracted from any particular content. This line of reasoning he ascribes to orthodox Humeans and the influential philosopher Donald Davidson.8 “We need not treat all correct inferences as correct in virtue of their form, supplying implicit or suppressed premises involving logical vocabulary as needed.”9

Material inferences are rules of inference that are bound up with the specific matter at hand. His examples of the material inferences that can be drawn from statements related to Pittsburgh and rain prove his point: “Pittsburgh is to the west of Philadelphia” to “Philadelphia is to the east of Pittsburgh,” and “It is raining” to “The streets are wet.”10 It is the contents of the concepts “west” and “east” that make the first a good inference, and the contents of the concepts raining and wetness, as well as the temporal concepts, that make the second appropriate. “Endorsing these inferences is part of grasping or mastering those concepts, quite apart from any specifically logical competence.”11

APA NEWSLETTER | HISPANIC/LATINO ISSUES IN PHILOSOPHY

PAGE 10 FALL 2020 | VOLUME 20 | NUMBER 1
What counts as a good material inference cannot be separated from familiarity with material realities, like where Pittsburgh is and where Philadelphia is. The truth of such inferences is not the sort that can be abstractly and formally reduced to Ps and Qs in some universal syllogism. The Pittsburgh and Philadelphia case highlights how material inferences are dependent on the contingency of historical entities and a concrete know-how regarding the matters at hand. The truth of such inferences is dependent upon the contingent, historical settlement of both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Brandom’s pragmatic semantics follows the pragmatist heritage, which states that the meaning of a concept is determined by its use. Concepts are applied to cases and connected to other concepts in inferential patterns that are licensed or rejected by other concept users. The way that concepts and inferences become meaningful is through the ongoing social practices of concept application, inference, and discursive accountability.

Brandom’s account of material inference can be a helpful supplement in understanding how group identity can function. What counts as a good inference is bound up with the matter that is under discussion. The evaluation of whether to affirm one particular identity over the other is not a matter that can be settled by propositional logic. A good material inference is inextricably bound to the matter of the community of practice. The community’s social practices formulate the fruit of the community. It is the practice of the community that “makes explicit” the norms that were previously unsaid. Names for communities are discursive doxastic commitments, and it’s the community of practice that discerns what counts as a faithful name and practice.

Brandom is helpful in getting the social dimension of normative discourse right, even though he has little to say about power differentials and domination. What are the conditions in which people can have access to participate in normative discourse? Whose voice is being heard and which voices are left out of the discussion? What are the contingent historical and political factors that subjugate one community and exalt the other? Not all communities who participate in discursive practices have the same amount of power in normative deliberation. So what can be done? I recommend that we speak for ourselves following the Latinx philosopher José Medina:

[The abandoned] are taking up the burden of developing a view from elsewhere. Speaking from elsewhere can be negatively characterized as speaking from a not-yet recognized discursive context and with a not-yet recognizable voice. But it implicitly involves a struggle for recognition; and it can be positively characterized as contributing to the creation of new discursive contexts and opening up spaces for new voices that have not been heard yet.¹⁴

The question remains: What words will we use when we speak?

Jorge J. E. Gracia has been a pioneer in the philosophical discussion of the philosophical foundations of identity and is a central figure within the controversies around race, ethnicity, and Hispanic/Latino identity.¹⁵ Gracia’s first objective in Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective is to argue that Hispanic/Latino identity is not a set of commonly held properties. Gracia believes that all essentialist positions are deeply flawed because there does not exist a property that is contained and shared by all Hispanic/Latinos at all present and past times.¹⁶ He develops his critique of essentialism in light of the discussion of the appropriateness of the words “Hispanic” and “Latino” as names for ethnicity. Gracia analyzes an amalgam of statistical, historical, philosophical, and political arguments against any justification for use of the labels “Hispanic” and “Latino” that appeals to common properties. The upshot of his investigation is that the identity of this group is heterogenous and dynamic. This is foundational to García’s work—if there is going to be a Hispanic/Latino identity, it must begin with a non-essentialist conception of ethnic identity.

The core of Gracia’s view is that Hispanic identity should be understood historically, that is, as the identity of a historical family formed by “a unique web of changing historical relations.”¹⁷ His view can be positioned in terms of a familial-historical position: “The unity of Hispanics is not a unity of common properties, but a unity of common community, “a historical identity founded on relations.”¹⁸ It begins with a series of the complex historical events that ties “our Hispanic family” at the knot of “the encounter” between the Iberian peninsula and the Americas in 1492. “Our family first came into being precisely because of the events which the encounter unleashed.”¹⁹ Gracia argues that the only word that pays homage to this encounter is the word “Hispanic.” It is the only name that encapsulates our historical family because it is the only category that can unite the Iberians and Americans who have come to share an identity as a result of this historical collision.

Gracia’s familial-historical position allows for identity to have the ability to account for diversity and change as axiomatic aspects of Hispanic identity. His view depicts Hispanic identity as something fluid that is ever changing and cannot be boxed into a static location. Gracia’s depiction of Hispanic identity accents the importance of historical contingencies that have contributed to the emergence of our Hispanic identity, and it emphasizes that the future of our Hispanic family is a task for which we are responsible in its future formation. Gracia concludes, “The future is always open and can be different. We are not trapped in our identity.”²⁰

Gracia’s familial-historical position also underscores the non-homogeneous character of Hispanic identity. Hispanics only share “family resemblances” and their identity “is bound up with difference.”²¹ His examination of ethnic people groups as historical families demonstrates that the homogeneity of a group identity is a myth, for families are heterogeneous wholes composed of individual elements. Gracia states, “They include contradictory elements and involve mixing. Indeed, contradiction and mixing seem to be of the essence, for a living unity is impossible without contradiction and heterogeneity.”²² This is the Hispanic family—a community that has been forged with divergent cultural characteristics from art, music,
religion, language, and cuisine. “Hispanic” is the only word that truly incarnates the unity of our community through the historical contingency of the Iberian and American collision and its aftermath of different cultural expressions.

The philosopher Linda Martín Alcof challenges Gracia’s conception of “Hispanic” in “Latino vs. Hispanic: The Politics of Ethnic Names.” Her argument begins by claiming that the choice of ethnic names is in itself a political action, although she qualifies her position by amending,

The process of choosing a name cannot be reductively political or opportunistic, as if these concerns trump any considerations of descriptive adequacy, because the political effects that a name has depends heavily on its capacity for descriptive adequacy, its ability to gel lived experience, to sound right, to make sense of things. . . . There is always more than one story that can be given that gels to some extent with the diversity of lived experience. . . . This underdetermination both calls for a political solution and makes a political solution possible in the sense that it makes a space to interject political considerations in the discussion, as one consideration whose importance will vary depending on the strength of other factors.

Alcof finds a middle way between a strict political constructionist view of ethnic categories (all naming is merely political moves in conflict due to power differentials) and one that allows for some non-political considerations and applies it to the use of ethnic names.

Alcof’s argument has two parts. She first presents the advantages of implementing the term “Latino,” and then indicates the disadvantages of the implementation of the term “Hispanic.” Alcof states,

The term Latino signifies and is itself marked by that moment of crystallization [i.e. 1898] in the colonial relation between, not Spain and Latin America, but the USA and Latin America . . . this historical genealogy of the term brings to the fore the idea that present-day Latinos are those peoples who have been constituted largely in and through a colonialism that has not yet left us.

There should be a preferential use for the term “Latino” rather than “Hispanic,” because the Latino has an implicit commitment in making current colonialism explicit, while “Hispanic” does not have such a commitment to present-day colonialism. This colonialism contrasts one group of people, Latinos, with another group of people, Anglo-Saxons, and by implication Latin America and the United States.

In the second part of the argument, Alcof argues specifically against the use of the term “Hispanic.” Alcof says that in 1965 “the new immigration law in the United States ended the previous quotas on immigration from South and Central America and the Caribbean, bringing millions of people and changing forever the cultural and political face of the United States.” This opens the way for the later introduction of “Hispanics” by the United States Census bureaucracy in 1970 to encompass peoples from different countries from Latin America residing in the United States. She claims that the term “Hispanic” is a cultural, rather than a national, term, and it is one that links those named by it to Spain. This is crucial for Alcof because as a consequence of using the term “Hispanic,” this group of people have been de-nationalized, de-linked to the multinational region of the world that represents their group interests and history, in favor of a term that places the emphasis on culture and language. “Hispanic” binds the people to a past and impotent colonialism of the collision and domination between the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas of the fifteenth century and not to the urgent and blatant colonialism that is currently present in the relationship between the United States and Latin America.

Latinx has been around since 2004 but it has not caught the attention of the Latinx intelligentsia until recently. One of the best arguments for the implementation of the term Latinx is found in Christine Garcia’s “In Defense of Latinx.” For Garcia, “Latinx” is a “term meant to be used by gender fluid and gender nonconforming people, LGBT persons, cisgender men and women, and those taking a political stance that ethnicity and gender exist on a spectrum and are not dichotomous.” It goes beyond the bounds of a gender binary both in the conception of male and female but also in the Spanish’s use of the feminine and masculine: there is no need to struggle between “a,” “o,” “a/o,” “o/a,” or even “@.” The “x” opens the imagination to conceive of an intersectional reality where people who do not fit into the false dichotomy of binary gender categories and are of Latin American descent can embrace a name like Latinx. It is a name that recognizes and embraces more members into a welcoming family. Garcia also suggests that the “x” can be in defiance of the romantic Euro-Hispanic roots and embracing more Afro-indigenous languages, which more readily implement the use of “x” in their language.

Whatever the case may be, I take her conclusion to heart: “Whether Latinx is a temporary buzzword, as some detractors claim, or the springboard for further acts of linguistic decolonization, the term is proof positive that language is alive, evolving, and is a tool and a reflection of our humanness.” “Latinx” may not be the final destination as a term to define a group of people who have a shared history, have been and still are colonized, and affirm the LGBT community, but it is a term taking the right steps towards the end of welcoming those whom we call family.

I recommend that we take our language seriously. Words not only communicate our explicit normative commitments, but also our implicit ones. “Latinx” is the best candidate that we have, given our current state of affairs and the normative commitments that our group holds in the United States. Our people from our community should know that they belong and that we are ready to accept them for who they are with open arms—just with our name. Let us embrace those who have been marginalized and implement the use of the term Latinx.
NOTES
1. This community would include those who crossed the US border and those whom the US border crossed.
6. "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name." Genesis 2:19 (New Revised Standard Version).
9. Ibid., 81.
10. Ibid., 82–84.
11. Ibid., 84. (Emphasis added)
12. Ibid., 85.
13. Ibid., 52.
17. Ibid., 49.
18. Ibid., 50.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 190.
21. Ibid., 33.
22. Ibid., 50.
24. Ibid., 400.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 402.
27. Ibid., 403.
31. Ibid., 210.
32. Ibid., 211.
33. Ibid.

**The Foundations of a Mexican Humanism in Emilio Uranga’s Análisis del Ser del Mexicano**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, proposals that aim to defend humanism, such as that of Jean-Paul Sartre in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, emphasize the importance of the view that all human beings are not ends-in-themselves, but rather that they are constantly out of themselves and that it is through the constant transcendence (dépassement) and the projection of their selves beyond themselves that they can exist. Though this conception of humanism defended by Sartre is prima facia appealing, it is potentially problematic insofar as it can be interpreted, in virtue of the universalistic and egalitarian ambitions that accompany it, as inadvertently supporting and legitimizing a Western colonialist project in which Europeans aimed to project themselves over the world and shape it in accordance with their ambitions in a way that flattened differences and homogenized experiences. In light of this concern, the main goal of this paper is, parallel to the work that Kathryn T. Gines and Robert Bernasconi have done developing a critical reading of Sartre’s position on humanism (particularly, of Sartre’s engagement with Frantz Fanon’s views in “Black Orpheus”), to argue that we can find conceptual resources in the work of Mexican philosopher Emilio Uranga (1921–1988) to develop a form of humanism that partially transcends some of the problematic consequences of the universalizing and egalitarian ambitions of Sartre’s conception of humanism.

To make this argument, I offer in my paper a brief exposition and analysis of one of the most important works of Uranga, *Análisis del Ser del Mexicano,* which was strongly influenced by French existentialism, but also by Heidegger’s thought. I proceed in the following fashion. After presenting in Section Two of the paper a more detailed review of the conception of humanism as Sartre characterizes it in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* and highlighting some of the main problems and shortcomings that it exhibits in my view, I move on in Section Three of the paper to present and discuss Uranga’s proposal. In particular, I introduce first in this section the gist of his proposal, which involves offering an ontological analysis of Mexican being, or Mexicananness (lo mexicano), and pointing out that what distinguishes the ontology of Mexicanness from the ontology of Europeaness is that while Europeans view themselves as substances, Mexicans conceive of themselves as accidents. Therefore, since the being of Mexicans is accidental (and, in virtue of this, eminently contingent and fragile), Uranga then claims that this very state of affairs constitutes the basis of developing a new form of humanism to the extent that
2. SARTRE’S HUMANISM IN EXISTENTIALISM IS A HUMANISM

Let me present briefly some of the central characteristics of Sartre’s humanism as it is presented in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. After characterizing in the first part of the essay the notion of existentialism and highlighting the core features that are common to the main strands (in particular, the religious strand of Kierkegaard and Marcel and the atheistic strand articulated by Heidegger and himself), Sartre proceeds in the second part of the essay (where he considers some potential objections to his view) to examine in what sense his existentialism constitutes a humanism. To do this, Sartre distinguishes two ways in which an existentialist view can be characterized as a humanism by differentiating two notions of humanism in the following passage:

Actually, the word “humanism” has two very different meanings. By “humanism” we might mean a theory that takes man as an end and as the supreme value. For example, in his story *Around the World in 80 Hours* Cocteau gives expression to this idea when one of his characters, flying over some mountains in an airplane, proclaims “Man is amazing!” (. . .) But there is another meaning to the word “humanism.” It is basically this: Man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized; and, on the other hand, it is in pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist. Since man is this transcendence (dépassement) and grasps objects only in relation to such transcendence, he is himself the core and focus of his transcendence.5

After distinguishing these two conceptions of humanism, Sartre maintains that the existentialism that he adopts is a humanism in the second sense, and he takes such a humanism to be a good attitude since its adoption enables us to bear in mind that we are self-creating entities and that we can only fully realize our humanity by constantly striving to transcend or surpass ourselves:

This is humanism because we remind man that there is no legislator other than himself and that he must, in his abandoned state, make his own choices; and also because we show that it is not by turning inward, but by constantly seeking a goal outside of himself in the form of liberation, or of some special achievement, that man will realize himself as truly human.6

Though this is prima facie a quite attractive conception of humanism, a thorough examination of Sartre’s words reveals some potential problems. Indeed, when we consider how the notion of “transcendence” might have been understood by Sartre’s European readers at the time, one possible interpretation of Sartre’s words is that the humanist drive to “transcend” is primarily or paradigmatically manifested in the Western colonial enterprise through which Europeans aimed to project themselves over the rest of the world in order to shape it in their image.7 Now, though Sartre would probably have rejected this interpretation of his words insofar as he sympathized deeply with anti-colonial movements and advocated on their behalf, it is important to notice that some passages in Sartre’s work involve some troublesome undertones:

And, as diverse as man’s projects may be, at least none of them seem wholly foreign to me, since each presents itself as an attempt to surpass such limitations, to postpone, deny or to come to terms with them. Consequently, every project, however individual, is of universal value. Every project—even one belonging to a Chinese, an Indian, or an African—can be understood by a European. To say it can be understood means that the European of 1945, though his situation is different, must deal with his own limitations in the same way, and so can reinvent within himself the project undertaken by the Chinese, of the Indian or the black African. There is universality in every project, inasmuch as any man is capable of understanding any human project.8

This passage is problematic because, though Sartre claims that the humanism that he subscribes to is one in which “every project, however individual, is of universal value,” he also contends that “every project—even one belonging to a Chinese, an Indian or an African—can be understood by a European” and that “any man is capable of understanding any human project.” These claims are troubling in two respects. First, Sartre manifests here, in spite of his vigorous denunciation of anti-Black racism and white supremacy in other places, a trait common to many European thinkers, which is, in Charles W. Mills’s words, “the centering of the Euro and later Euro-American reference group as constitutive norm.”9 Indeed, as the passage suggests, some projects seem to be more remote or foreign than others vis-à-vis a particular standard, which is provided by Europeans of 1945. Second, the claim that “any man is capable of understanding any human project” is also unsettling because, given the prior context (which stresses the possibility that Europeans may reinvent themselves in the projects undertaken by others), it strongly suggests that Europeans can easily understand (and, thus, potentially take over and carry out) any other human project. This involves re-inscribing in the humanism that Sartre articulates a white epistemic normativity as a kind...
of benchmark, which partially undermines the claim about the universal value of each human project. Considering this, it is then patent that the humanism advocated by Sartre is partially shaped by certain Eurocentric biases and assumptions. These biases and assumptions are also at work in Sartre’s examination of négritude in “Black Orpheus,” where he writes the following:

In fact, négritude appears as the minor moment of a dialectical progression; the theoretical and practical assertion of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of negritude, as an antithetic value, is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself and these blacks who make use of it know this perfectly well; they know it aims at preparing the synthesis or realization of the human in raceless society. Thus, négritude is for destroying itself, it is a passage, and not an outcome, a means and not an ultimate end.10

Thus, in light of the fact that Sartre’s humanism is one which conceives certain anti-colonialist projects (such as the one advocated by négritude proponents such as Senghor) as “moments of negativity,” one can then appreciate that it exhibits a clear failure to understand the nature and the importance of the lived Black experience since Sartre advocates for its eventual elimination.11 Given the existence of these problems that are created by Sartre’s ignorance of the suffering of Black people (and of the practical knowledge derived from this suffering), one should then examine if other philosophical projects within the existentialist tradition are better positioned to articulate a more inclusive framework. In the next couple of sections, I turn to examine the humanism articulated by Emilio Uranga, and I argue that it provides, in some respects, a better alternative than the humanism of Sartre since it does not fall prey to the same objections.

3. URANGA’S HUMANISM IN ANÁLISIS DEL SER DEL MEXICANO

The best exposition of Uranga’s humanism is offered in his most important work, Análisis del Ser del Mexicano. In this work, Uranga’s main goal is to offer an ontological analysis of Mexican being (lo mexicano). For Uranga, this analysis should not be considered as a philosopher’s abstract intellectual exercise, but rather a key social task to accomplish to the extent that, as he stresses in the Introduction, it is aimed to ultimately transform the moral and social condition of Mexicans:

To clarify what is the mode of being of the Mexican is just a step—a necessary one—to operate subsequently a reform and a conversion. Rather than a sterile rigorous meditation about the being of the Mexican, what drives us to this type of studies is the project of operating moral, social and religious transformations on this being.13

For Uranga, the project of undertaking a moral and social transformation of the Mexican is justified by the fact that, in spite of the fact that Mexico achieved its independence in 1821 and if that underwent a civil war in the second decade of the twentieth century (i.e., the Mexican Revolution) that undid many of the colonial structures that had endured during the nineteenth century, the Mexican society of the late 1940s and early 1950s remained in various respects very dependent on foreign economic and cultural forces and internally torn apart by different competing aspirations. Thus, in order to undertake a viable project to transform Mexican society in order to address its problems and shortcomings, Uranga then proposed as a first step to analyze in detail Mexican being. And this analysis, for Uranga, had to be ontological rather than historical or sociological. The central reason to undertake this type of analysis is laid out by Uranga in the following passage:

The ontological analysis is, then, of a very particular kind. Its categories, or most general concepts, are the broadest possible designations of the kinds, types, or modes of being. It is only when we stick to these categories that the analysis is correct. If the analysis is not done in these terms, it takes the form of an image or a metaphor.14

After justifying in the Introduction the need to perform an ontological analysis of the Mexican, Uranga then proceeds to put forth his proposal. To do this, he first reminds his readers that one of the crucial ontological categories discussed within the Western tradition is that of accident. In fact, to be more specific, Uranga maintains that the notion of accident has been traditionally studied in opposition or contrast with the notion of substance along the following lines: While the notion of substance has been understood as a primary or fundamental mode of being (i.e., as providing “the bedrock of reality”), the notion of accident has been understood as a mode of being that is dependent on substance (and, in light of this, as a mode of being that is secondary, fragile, or transitory). On this issue, Uranga writes this:

The accident is always projected, or projects itself from or towards the outside, and it is never exhausted in the present thing, but it constitutes itself in the horizon and the halo that surrounds things, in the out-of-focus of their presence. Pushing in this vein, the accident is primarily that which is leftover, the remainder, the excess (super-esse). In another respect, the accident is that which is fragile and brittle, that which is equally rooted in the being and in the non-being.15

On the basis of this characterization of accident, Uranga moves on to argue that the notion is of paramount importance to his project since “the accident, defined in accordance to these abovementioned notes, will help us to explain or account for the Mexican.” The reason that he gives to deploy the notion of accident as a key ontological category in the analysis of Mexican being is that, in virtue of the long history of colonization by Spaniards, Mexicans have not been traditionally seen as fully human, but rather as exhibiting humanity in a partial, incomplete, or accidental way. In virtue of this, since Spaniards traditionally considered themselves as fully and substantially human (in contrast to the original Amerindian inhabitants of Mexico
and to the different racially mixed groups that emerged during the colonial period), Uranga writes that the notion of accident is of central importance in his ontological analysis of Mexican being because the notion of “substance” is tied to an explicit attempt to devalue non-Europeans as less than human:

Every interpretation of “man” as a substantial creature seems inhuman to us. In the origins of our history, we had to precisely endure a devaluing in virtue of our dissimilarity to the European “man.” In the same spirit, we return this qualification and disavow as “human” the construction of the European that grounds human dignity on some substance.\(^\text{15}\)

Given the problematic undertones attached to the notion of substance, Uranga forcefully advocates using the notion of accident to develop an ontological analysis of Mexican being for two reasons. It not only reflects the historical conditions in which Mexicans emerged as a group, but it also mirrors core features of the human condition, which are our mortality and our contingency:

The being of man is perishable, mortal, doomed to die and to end. Being a man involves having an “obligation,” a “duty,” an ontological “imperative” to die or end. The same thing happens with the accidental being. In this case, we deal with a being that must turn himself into an accident, that must put himself in a radical situation where he does not know what to expect, marked by insecurity and unpreparedness.\(^\text{17}\)

Uranga proceeds to use the notion of accident to offer an analysis of Mexican being given that the notion appears to be an appropriate tool for this task in light of the previously mentioned remarks. In particular, one of the uses that Uranga gives to it consists in articulating a different notion of humanism. Now, as we saw previously in Section Two, the humanism that Sartre develops is one that is grounded in the constant drive to transcend and also that has universalistic and egalitarian aspirations for all projects (although these are partially thwarted by the fact that Sartre seems to assume that certain projects are more transcendent than others or more foreign than others vis-à-vis a particular European standard). In stark contrast, the Mexican humanism that Uranga proposes is not grounded on the drive to be outside of oneself or transcend, but rather on the feelings brought about by the visceral realization that there are certain features (e.g., vulnerability and finitude) that are impossible to transcend:

The “feelings” of abandonment, needlessness, fragility, oscillation, and embarrassment among others, which are familiar to the Mexican as the fabric or “matter” of his being, offer a unique basis upon which humanism can be grounded. At the most extreme limit, the Mexican views himself as “accidental and anguished,” which entails that he opens himself to the human condition at its deepest level.\(^\text{18}\)

In virtue of this, the humanism that Uranga proposes is one which is rooted in certain distinctive psychological features of the Mexican. These features make him, according to Uranga, open to the human condition precisely because the human condition is one which is crucially marked by mortality, finitude, and accidentality. In virtue of this, Mexican being provides a basis for a type of inclusive, compassionate humanism since it offers Mexicans a way to relate to and understand other human experiences in a way that connects with their fragility and anguish:

The Mexican understands other humans by transposing the meaning of his own life. The compassion of which he makes such a frequent use in all the expressions of his conduct . . . is the visible expression of this continuous operation through which he transfers the meaning of his own life to other things.\(^\text{19}\)

Consequently, the humanism that Uranga proposes appears to be different from the one proposed by Sartre insofar as it involves, not an attempt to transcend or surpass by projecting oneself outside of oneself, but rather an attempt to humanize others by relating them to one’s condition of accidentality and anguish (zozobra). What I want to show in the next section is that, precisely because of these features, Uranga’s humanism is not subject to the same type of problems that arise in the case of Sartre’s.

4. SOME ADVANTAGES OF URANGA’S MEXICAN HUMANISM

As I mentioned above, I want now to briefly examine how Uranga’s proposal is able to escape some of the limitations or drawbacks that affect Sartre’s proposal. To do this, it is important to remember that the humanism that Sartre advocates for is one that is crucially shaped by egalitarian and universalistic aspirations in which “every project, however individual, is of universal value.” However, it is precisely because of this ambition that Sartre fails to realize that we are always situated, that our respective situatedness makes our projects incapable to be fully understood and carried out by others (and, conversely, that makes the projects of others unable to be fully understood and carried out by us) and that, consequently, the egalitarian and universalistic ambitions of his humanism threaten to flatten differences and homogenize experiences.

In contrast to Sartre, Uranga acknowledges that, even though “the openness to everything that is human, the mixing and tangling without fear or reservation seem to create between the Mexican and other men an unlimited communication wherein equality stands out as a supreme aspiration,” he also maintains that “despite this undeniable communicability, there is an insuperable limit.”\(^\text{20}\) Because of this barrier, our projects cannot be fully understood and carried out by others (and we cannot expect to fully understand and carry out the projects of others). Considering this, Uranga proposes a humanism that does not aspire to an ideal of universal equality in which any human being can understand any project, but to an ideal of “coupling” (emparejamiento), as he makes clear in the following passage:
Rather than a feeling of equality with respect to others, there is in us a feeling of “coupling” and in the nationalist one of “difference.” Not every humanism is built upon the structure that we have highlighted. Generally, one believes that humanism presupposes the affirmation of equality and that, without it, there is no possibility of humanism. But this is nothing but a prejudice. 21

After stressing this point, Uranga then maintains that it is possible to articulate a humanism that bypasses the egalitarian demand and substitutes it with a “coupling” that he describes in the following terms when he analyzes how Mexicans conceive the relation between life and death:

One usually thinks that the “difference” between life and death is the indispensable premise for every theory of life and death. But we have seen that this is not the case. The Mexican “couples” them highlighting their similarities until they reach “equality.” The same thing happens with humanism. The human is familiar to the Mexican because it follows him throughout life as the other pole with which it establishes a communication of meaning ... a transference of meaning that allows him to explain his own life as human and, at the same time, the human as Mexican. 22

As this passage shows, Uranga’s humanism avoids the shortcomings of Sartre’s to the extent that it does not emphasize the equality of all projects (or even equality as a regulative ideal), but rather articulates an alternative based on the notion of “coupling,” which involves pairing or juxtaposing what seem to initially be entirely different phenomena (e.g., life and death) and highlighting progressively their resemblances and similarities through a process of transference of meaning until they become mixed or entangled while remaining distinct. In other terms, the humanism of Uranga is characterized by being rooted in the nationalist one of “difference.” Not every humanism is not the most consummate exposition of Sartre’s thought but rather a circumstantial piece that he wrote in a specific political context. In particular, see Edward Baring, “Humanist Pretensions: Catholics, Communists and Sartre’s Struggle for Existentialism in Postwar France,” Modern Intellectual History 7, no 3 (2001): 581–609, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000247. In light of this, some readers might wonder why I focus on this book rather than on later works such as Search for a Method or Critique of Dialectical Reason. The reason for this is that, while Sartre does indeed offer more developed discussions of humanism in these later works (in particular, a critical discussion of European humanism, which was built on the dehumanization of Amerindians, Africans and Asians), he does not offer an explicit critical assessment of Existentialism Is a Humanism in these later works. Part of what I want to do here is to offer such an assessment using the conceptual tools developed by Uranga.

5. CONCLUSION

Let me conclude. I have argued that Uranga’s conception of humanism is able to avoid some of the problems and shortcomings that Sartre’s exhibits. This is due to the fact that, though Sartre’s conception of humanism has egalitarian and universalistic aspirations, it is partially shaped by certain Eurocentric biases. In contrast, insofar as the humanism defended by Uranga is rooted in “feelings” of abandonment, needlessness, and fragility (which, according to him, are constitutive of the Mexican), it allows Mexicans to open themselves to the human condition and to understand others as human while preserving a limit or difference that prevents Mexicans from being able to “equalize” or “substitute” themselves with them (and vice versa). In light of this, the notion of humanism proposed by Uranga appears to be better suited than Sartre’s to develop a more inclusive approach to all human projects that genuinely respects them and does not flatten or homogenize them as Sartre’s does in virtue of its universalistic and egalitarian aspirations. This raises a central question: Is Uranga’s humanism also better suited in the respects previously mentioned in contrast to the humanisms of other European figures such as Jaspers, Heidegger, and Beauvoir? I intend to examine this issue in future work.

NOTES


4. Some scholars have pointed out that Existentialism Is a Humanism is not the most consummate exposition of Sartre’s thought but rather a circumstantial piece that he wrote in a specific political context. In particular, see Edward Baring, “Humanist Pretensions: Catholics, Communists and Sartre’s Struggle for Existentialism in Postwar France,” Modern Intellectual History 7, no 3 (2001): 581–609, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244310000247. In light of this, some readers might wonder why I focus on this book rather than on later works such as Search for a Method or Critique of Dialectical Reason. The reason for this is that, while Sartre does indeed offer more developed discussions of humanism in these later works (in particular, a critical discussion of European humanism, which was built on the dehumanization of Amerindians, Africans and Asians), he does not offer an explicit critical assessment of Existentialism Is a Humanism in these later works. Part of what I want to do here is to offer such an assessment using the conceptual tools developed by Uranga.


6. Ibid., 53.

7. Such an interpretation by European readers at the time is not implausible given the fact that, at the time Sartre wrote Existentialism Is a Humanism, Descartes’s way of doing philosophy was considered as a model to be emulated and Sartre was deeply critical of this approach as some commentators have observed. See, in particular, Stuart Hampshire, “Sartre the Philosopher,” in Sartre: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Mary Warnock (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1971), 59–62. In particular: “Sartre accuses Descartes of representing men as metaphysical Robinson Crusoes, outside the world of things which their consciousness partially reconstructs,” ibid., 60.

8. Sartre, Existentialism, 42–43.


11. When Gines considers Sartre’s efforts to defend the complete eradication of race in the name of the egalitarian and universalistic ideals of his humanism, she worries about some potential serious drawbacks of Sartre’s proposal. See, in particular, Gines, “Fanon and Sartre 50 years later,” 67. “What would come of the ‘collective memory’ of black people in a society that erases race? This collective memory, a source of heritage and even resistance and empowerment, becomes endangered.”

12. On this issue, the analysis that Bernasconi offers of Sartre’s ignorance vis-à-vis Fanon is remarkable. See, in particular, Bernasconi, “On Needing Not to Know,” 236-337: “If Sartre had not been white then he could not have forgotten how the black suffers in his or her body. A black person could not forget it. Sartre’s knowledge of this suffering is a memory of what he has been told, but the black person’s knowledge is like phronesis in this regard; phronesis, as Aristotle explains, is not learned nor can it be forgotten.”

13. Uranga, Análisis, 34: “Poner en claro cuál es el modo de ser del mexicano es tan solo una premisa—eso sí, necesaria—para operar a continuación una reforma y una conversión. Más que una simple logorufía sobre el ser del mexicano, lo que nos lleva a este tipo de estudios es el proyecto de operar transformaciones morales, sociales y religiosas con ese ser.” All translations of Uranga from the original Spanish text are mine.

14. Ibid., 34: “El análisis ontológico es, pues, de índole muy peculiar. Sus categorías, o conceptos más generales, son designaciones las más amplias de clases, tipos o modos de ser. Sólo cuando se habla ateniéndose a estas categorías el análisis es propio. Si no se hace en estos términos, todo toma el aspecto de metáfora e imagen.”

15. Ibid., 53: “El accidente está lanzado siempre, o se lanza siempre, desde o hacia un más allá, y nunca se agota en la cosa presente, sino más bien se constituye en el horizonte y halo que rodea a las cosas, en lo desafocado de su presencia. Extremando en esta dirección el accidente es lo que está de sobra, lo que está de más, el excedente (super-es).” Por otra de sus dimensiones, el accidente es lo que es frágil y quebradizo, lo que con igual originalidad es en el ser y no en el él.”

16. Ibid., 45: “Toda interpretación del hombre como criatura sustancial nos parece inhuma. En los orígenes de nuestra historia tuvimos que sufrir justamente una desvalorización por no asemejarnos al ‘hombre’ europeo. Con ese mismo de espíritu desarrollamos hoy esa calificación y desconocemos como humana la ‘diferencia’ entre los dos fenómenos. Pero la ‘diferencia’ entre los dos fenómenos es la premisa indispensable de toda teoría sobre la vida y la muerte. Pero hemos visto que no es así. El mexicano ‘la empareja’ extremando su semejanza hasta ‘una igualdad.’”

17. Ibid., 53: “El ser del hombre es perecedero, mortal, esta avocado de la muerte, al acabamiento. Ese ser se asume como ‘obligación,’ ‘deber,’ ‘imperativo’ ontológicos de morir o acabar. Lo mismo sucede con el accidente. Se trata en este caso de un ser que tiene que accidentalizarse, que ponerse en la situación radical de un ‘no saber a que atenerse,’ inseguridad e improvisación.”

18. Ibid., 60: “Los ‘sentimientos’ de abandono, gratuidad, fragilidad, oscilación, pena entre otros, que son familiares al mexicano como el trámado o ‘materia’ de su propio ser, ofrecen la única base en que asentar al humanismo. En su punto más extremo y radical, el mexicano se concibe ‘accidental y zozobrante,’ lo que quiere decir que se abre a la condición humana en su estrato más profundo.”

19. Ibid., 60-61: “El mexicano comprende lo humano ajeno por transposición del sentido de su propia vida. La compasión de que hace uso tan frecuente en todas las manifestaciones de su conducta...es la expresión visible de esta continua operación por la cual se está transfigurando el sentido de la propia vida al ajeno.”

20. Ibid, 62: “La apertura a todo lo humano, el mezclarse y revolverse sin temor y sin escrúpulo parecen crear entre el mexicano y los demás hombres una comunicación ilimitada en la que la igualdad uce como ideal supremo. Pero, a pesar de esta innegable comunicabilidad, hay un limite infranqueable.”

21. Ibid., 63: “Más bien, pues, que un sentimiento de igualdad frente a los demás hay en nosotros un sentido de ‘emparejamiento’ y en el nacionalista de ‘diferencia’. No todo humanismo se construye a partir de esa peculiar estructura que hemos puesto de relieve. Generalmente se cree que el humanismo supone la afirmación de la igualdad y que, sin ella, no hay posibilidad de humanismo. Pero esto no pasa de ser un prejuicio.”

22. Ibid., 63: “Lo mismo se piensa relativamente a la vida y la muerte que la ‘diferencia’ entre los dos fenómenos es la premisa indispensable de toda teoría sobre la vida y la muerte. Pero hemos visto que no es así. El mexicano ‘la empareja’ extremando su semejanza hasta ‘una igualdad.’”


24. Ibid.

BOOK REVIEW

Socially Undocumented: Identity and Immigration Justice

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There are so many great aspects to Socially Undocumented: Identity and Immigration Justice that it was hard for me to decide which ones to talk about, given the limited space. Acknowledging, then, that some merits will be left out, I start by giving a very brief description of the structure of the book. It seems to me that Socially Undocumented: Identity and Immigration Justice is divided into two parts. In the first part, Reed-Sandoval aims to understand from an egalitarian point of view the injustice of undocumented migrant oppression. In order to prove her point, she first distinguishes between the legally and the socially undocumented. She then presents and defends a political understanding of a social group and discusses how this understanding bears upon what it means to be socially undocumented. In the second part, she introduces strategies to resist this oppression. Among them are the attentiveness of non-state actors, a focus on the perspectives of socially undocumented people themselves, and strategies of everyday resistance by migrants.

I want to draw your attention to Reed-Sandoval’s main theoretical contribution, the category of socially undocumented, which Reed-Sandoval defines as people that “are presumed to be undocumented on the mere basis of their appearance [and in consequence] are subjected to what I call ‘demeaning immigration-related constraints’ or ‘illegalizing forces’ (that is, they are ‘socially illegalized’) on that very basis” (14). As a Mexican national who has lived, studied, and worked lawfully for twelve years in the United States, I completely identified with the description from Reed-Sandoval. For example, when I drove a car with Mexican license plates, the police continually stopped me. But once I got a car with Texas license plates, I magically...
stopped committing traffic errors. This, of course, is nothing compared to the hazardous life of farm workers, but it still may constitute an instance of socially undocumented identity.

Next, I want to call your attention to Reed-Sandoval’s ability to see beyond the usual open borders debate. This approach has allowed her to open up new dimensions in immigration research. She proposes, for example, that in addition to race and gender, social class should also be taken as a component of the “visible identity” of migrants. As Reed-Sandoval says, “Bourdieu’s descriptive account of habitus/class embodiment demonstrates that class identity is, indeed, a ‘visible’ and ‘real’ social identity [. . .] Like racial and sex/gender identities, class is also embodied. It is the source and site of an interpretive horizon, affecting both how one sees and is seen” (99). I believe this is quite important because most discrimination against immigrants is done towards those that are perceived to be working class. As José Jorge Mendoza has pointed out, most of the same people that discriminate against poor immigrants would be very happy to have Jennifer Lopez or Selena Gomez as their neighbors. Class plays a role on what kind of migrant can cross borders without any harassment and live in the receiving countries without any great problem, because they are not perceived as a threat to the way of life. Since Hispanic upper-class foreign citizens tend to be more light-skinned and bilingual, it is easier for them to be part of the melting pot in the category of people that will easily adopt the American way of life. In consequence, they are more likely to be accepted in the receiving community, regardless of their immigration status.

I move now to what I think is very perceptive of Reed-Sandoval: showing migrants not as passive or fainthearted social actors, but, on the contrary, as courageous and creative people able to navigate and resist the system. Elaborating on the day-to-day forms of resistance immigrants use to alleviate their immediate circumstances under the structural conditions that keep them oppressed, the author brings us close to the lives of migrants. Based on her ethnographic work, Reed-Sandoval documents the use of tandas as a way that migrants improve their living conditions by acquiring low-interest rate loans and building community bonds. She goes even closer—all the way to migrant bodies—in Chapter Four, with her discussion of Salma, a Mexican-national pregnant woman who legally crosses the border looking for prenatal care in El Paso, Texas. When asked the purpose of her visit to the United States, she lies and tells the immigration officer that she is going “to shop at Walmart” (24). It is important to highlight again that Salma crossed the border under a visa and that it is not illegal for pregnant women to receive prenatal care or for her son/daughter to be born in the US. Yet, she did not say so, because if the immigration officer were not a “good one,” he could have used any other excuse to prevent her from coming to El Paso for prenatal care. By giving the Walmart answer, Salma was able to receive prenatal care and give birth in El Paso.

Besides economic and obstetric oppression, another token of unfair living conditions are the derogative stereotypes that are used to portray immigrants. It seems to me that from the very beginning of the book, Reed-Sandoval shows that the fight for legality has been extensively studied, has not been successful, and, what’s more, had it been successful, it may not amount to an end to discrimination against Hispanics; for even if certain immigrants held lawful status, they still may be the recipients of unethical practices based on their physical appearance. As the author claims, “Of course, we are not reduced to the already-existing social meanings attached to the social identities we have been involuntarily ‘assigned,’ and we are free to try to reject these labels or redefine their significance” (71). Yet, as their bodies are trapped in a colonial structure, removing those negative stereotypes would require long and sustained efforts, such as the counter-stereotypical aim of Cheech Marin’s Chicano art collection.

Finally, I am wondering if the undocumented immigrant social identity is strong enough to group immigrants. I agree that from an outside perspective they are seen as one unit. I also agree “that to speak of social identity is often to speak in terms of self-description and very intimate, lived experience” (80). Yet, as symbolic interaction theory proposes, the identity of a person is inspired, but not completely determined, by the social interactions where a person intermingles. In Stryker’s words, the “transsituational concept of identity salience implies the at least partial independence of behavior including role-related choices, from demands of immediate situations of actions.” This is to say, when there is a conflict of commitment, the group that a person has more loyalty to is the one that is more likely to win a person’s attention. It is important to notice that commitments are dynamic; they may change according to personal circumstances such as moving to a different city, losing or acquiring a job, etc. When challenging circumstances appear, a person’s preferred identity will raise and reveal itself as the dominant identity.

I have the feeling that Reed-Sandoval’s answer would be yes, social identity is strong enough to group them, for this identity is not chosen, but given. And she will be right. This is to say with certainty nobody would opt for a social identity that does not reflect their full potential, but, on the contrary, places them in a subordinate position. By this same rationality, a socially undocumented migrant would not choose this identity, for it brings discriminatory practices upon them. Yet, in a colonized world, such as the one we inhabit, poor, dark-skinned migrants will be placed in an unfavorable position by virtue of their physical appearance. They will be identified as undocumented, regardless of how they may perceive themselves.

In closing, by calling our attention to the bad practices that socially undocumented migrants suffer, but also to their forms of resistance, Reed-Sandoval opens the debate on migration to new and very needed dimensions, where legal status is necessary, but not sufficient, to reach immigration justice.

NOTES

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