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APA STUDIES ON

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FROM THE EDITORS

Lav McKittrick-Sweitzer
BUTLER UNIVERSITY

Desiree Valentine
MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

This edition of *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* is dedicated to celebrating and carrying forward the work of Talia Mae Bettcher in her 2025 book, *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy*. The issue features four invited commentaries on the book—from Amy Marvin and Isobel Bess, Javier Pitts Guzmán, Ray Briggs, and Tamsin Kimoto, respectively—followed by Bettcher's response. We are grateful to Bettcher and her commenters for sharing with us their trans philosophical works—which is more necessary than ever in a political climate of widespread and resounding anti-trans backlash. Considering our contemporary context, Bettcher asked, "Can my book make any difference, I wonder? And, if so, what would that difference be?" shortly after its release, in the *Blog of the APA*.[1] It is apparent from the following commentaries that both *Beyond Personhood* and Bettcher's ongoing, caring engagement in trans sociality have undeniably made—and will continue to make—a positive and lasting difference.

In "Trans Space is the Place," Amy Marvin and Isobel Bess explore the affinity between taking space seriously and understanding philosophy as ground-bound. Bettcher defines ground-bound philosophy as philosophy that is both responsive to oppression and takes as its starting point "the perplexity [experienced by those oppressed in a world] that arises when the common sense of a world makes no sense at all"—i.e., the existential WTF.[2] Marvin and Bess find that there is a lack of "textured detail" when it comes to spatial relationships between and within the dominant overworld and resistant underworlds as Bettcher presents them (see the summary below of "*Beyond Personhood* Beyond Sexuality" by Ray Briggs for a brief explanation of these worlds). They argue that if trans philosophy is to truly be a ground-bound practice, the ground on which it occurs is spatial; we must consider—with much greater specificity—how trans philosophy is done *in spaces* shaped by navigating the existential WTF together with others, across time.

In "Making Meaning from the Ground Up in *Beyond Personhood*," Javier Pitts Guzmán highlights a tension between Bettcher's characterization of interpersonal spatiality and her explicit appeal to María Lugones's ontological pluralism. Ontological pluralism commits us to "an ontology of the social that squares with everybody's experience of the social," and Bettcher suggests this "best captures the truth of trans and nonbinary misgendering," as "there's a multiplicity found in the tension between [the overworld] and trans underworlds."[3] Interpersonal spatiality is "the characteristic of admitting of closeness and distance,"[4] and while the boundary system in a particular cultural location is contingent, there being some boundary system at all is transcendentally required. Lugones, however, is explicitly critical of putting things into transcendental terms. This tension, if unresolved, threatens to undermine the ground-bound nature of Bettcher's account. Pitts Guzmán ultimately suggests a way out of this tension may be understanding interpersonal spatiality in a way that's still true to Lugones (and Anzaldúa) as instead emerging from "meaning-making in the cracks of worlds."

In "*Beyond Personhood* Beyond Sexuality," Ray Briggs explores the implications of Bettcher's characterization—which builds on the work of María Lugones—of intimacy in the "overworld" and "underworlds," for lesbian and gay underworlds in particular. The "overworld" is "a dominant system of concepts, practices, and social scripts that shapes who we are, what meanings we can express, and which actions are open to us," while "underworlds" are "alternative systems that let us access different identities, meanings, and actions." One key feature of the overworld is the heterorelational complex, which polices intimacy by upholding that men and women occupy complementary sex roles. Bettcher's work offers a novel explanation of the harms that the overworld and this complex visit upon trans people (especially trans women). Briggs builds upon this by comparing sex-representational systems across worlds, revealing how there are sites of resistance to the heterorelational complex in lesbian and gay culture, yet "disturbingly large swathes of it can survive the translation of intimacy from straight settings to queer ones."

In "Comments on Talia Mae Bettcher's *Beyond Personhood*," Tamsin Kimoto motivates three distinct lines of inquiry that offer opportunities for both expansion and complication of Bettcher's work. In their first line of inquiry, Kimoto expresses a curiosity about both the tensions and insights that we may gain regarding gender phorias from Bettcher's opening positionality statement about the perspective from which the book emerges. The second line of inquiry encourages considering the inhuman alongside dehumanization and the non-human animal. Kimoto explains, "the inhuman attempts to identify the ways in which that which might be human gets marked as mere resource for extraction," akin to a nonpersonal object for

Bettcher.[5] While this complicates Bettcher's reading of race, it also invites us to explore what "thinking from the standpoint of an object evacuated of humanity allows us to recognize both about the nature of anti-trans violence and oppression as well as the kinds of remaking of the human that trans theories already undertake." The third line of inquiry invites further expansion on theorizing trans sexuality and what else it might offer an account of interpersonal spatiality. This is prompted by Bettcher's book primarily (and understandably) attending to trans sexuality as a "domain of threat and violation."

The issue concludes with Talia Mae Bettcher's response to the commentaries, opening with how, despite its theoretical density, *Beyond Personhood* is a "gesture of intimacy in its own right," given the vulnerability of laying out her theory bare. With this gesture, she has invited readers to get up to some good trouble by joining or continuing the conversations of which this work is a part. She takes up each challenge and invitation from the commenters in earnest, occasionally offering multiple interpretations. Bettcher herself carries these conversations forward by highlighting work in development, questions to be taken up, and opportunities for future collaboration.

We are deeply appreciative of the care and understanding that Ami Harbin, Barrett Emerick, and Jordan Pascoe have modeled through their mentorship as we transitioned into our editorial roles. We also thank Imogen Sullivan for her support in the early development of this issue.

NOTES

1. Talia Mae Bettcher, "Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy," *Blog of the APA*, July 9, 2025, https://blog.apaonline.org/2025/07/09/beyond-personhood-an-essay-in-trans-an-invitation-an-invitation/.
2. Talia Mae Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), 259.
3. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 63.
4. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 260.
5. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 262.

ABOUT *APA STUDIES ON FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY*

APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy is sponsored by the APA Committee on the Status of Women and Gender. The newsletter is designed to provide an introduction to recent philosophical work that addresses issues of gender. None of the varied philosophical views presented by authors of *APA Studies* articles necessarily reflect the views of any or all of the members of the Committee on the Status of Women and Gender, including the editor(s) of the newsletter, nor does the committee advocate any particular type of feminist philosophy. We advocate only that serious philosophical attention be given to issues of gender and that claims of gender bias in philosophy receive full and fair consideration.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

1. Purpose: The purpose of *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* is to publish information about the status of women in philosophy and to make the resources of feminist philosophy more widely available. *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* contains discussions of recent developments in feminist philosophy and related work in other disciplines, suggestions for eliminating gender bias in the traditional philosophy curriculum, and reflections on feminist pedagogy. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on the Status of Women and Gender. Articles submitted to the newsletter should be around ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language. Please submit essays electronically to the editor. All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. References should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

2. Where to Send Submissions: Please send submissions and inquiries to the editors: Lav McKittrick-Sweitzer (they/them) at lmckittricksweit@butler.edu and Desiree Valentine at desiree.valentine@marquette.edu.

3. Submission Deadlines: Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1; submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.

ARTICLES

Trans Space Is the Place

Amy Marvin
HAMILTON COLLEGE

Isobel Bess
OTHER SPACES

INTRODUCING SPATIALITY

We have written this book review from several different spaces. Originally, we thought about our relationship with Talia Bettcher's new book *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy* from our apartment in Bethlehem, PA when asked to conduct a revision for a different essay. We did encounter other trans people while living there but mostly in a fleeting way, with much of our trans-related artistic and academic practices happening in cis-dominated spaces. After Amy shared a draft of this essay at a mostly-cis-kinda-trans space in a conference room at the Baltimore APA, we continued working on it in Syracuse, NY, between occasional trans potluck nights. Finally, and somewhat rushed, we tried to finalize the essay in the cis-dominated suburbs of Philly, where we were pleasantly interrupted by a trans woman who stopped by to chat about Linux distros and medieval cloaks. This was the place where Amy waged a childhood war to access transition, but later became a place we visit to help out her aging parents. Soon we ventured to New York City, which advertises itself as a special hub of

culture and safety for trans people who can afford housing in ever-shifting districts. All of this writing has taken place in the northeast of the United States of America during a time of rampant austerity, open corruption, governance by disaster oligarchy, crimes against humanity, and moral collapse. Our practice of writing about *Beyond Personhood* was consequently one that shifted through various spaces over time, shaped by cisness and transness in different ways, just as we were.

It is in these contexts that we encounter Bettcher's ground-bound philosophy, and we are interested in the relationship between her book and space. First, we reconstruct Bettcher's argument with a focus on her understanding of philosophy as a relational and interpersonal practice, bringing together her concepts of ground-bound philosophy, interpersonal objects, reality enforcement, realization, and worlds. We then attempt to locate space within her framework, finding that her approach does not provide textured detail about the relationships between cis space and trans spaces, or the relationships between trans spaces and other trans spaces. We conclude by reading space back in Bettcher's account of ground-bound philosophy, thinking about the complicated construction of trans philosophy over time and place.

THE INTERPERSONAL SPATIALITY OF TRANS PHILOSOPHY

At the conclusion of Talia Bettcher's *Beyond Personhood* she asserts that her work "provides a trans basis for trans theory for perhaps the first time."[1] She sets the stakes for this approach early in the book, calling her essay "a resistant sense-making exercise in the face of trans oppression."[2] Trans philosophy is engaged in the project of "making sense" in a dominant world that deploys its skewed "common sense" to cast trans lives as on some level deluded or doomed.[3] This common sense fails to totalize or even clarify trans experience, with trans philosophy emerging from a deeper engagement with an "existential WTF" that results from dominant reality repeatedly failing to answer the riddles of trans existence. The "existential WTF" emerges on the ground from experiences with oppression, and the resulting interrogation develops into a kind of "ground-bound" philosophy.[4] This ground-bound character of trans philosophy is crucial to Bettcher's framework. She asserts, "To the extent that philosophy remains a vibrant force in the world, it must be one that is a ground-bound practice. I say this out of necessity not only of resisting oppression but also of discovering deep truth."[5] Whereas much of the discipline of philosophy has taken ground-bound philosophy to be inherently biased in a way that never stuck to the Platos and Russells and Rawlses, Bettcher emphasizes that ground-bound philosophy is the main way that we should proceed as philosophers for the sake of better morality, politics, and inquiry.

Ground-bound philosophy, a necessary condition of trans philosophy, is contrasted with a table-gazing model of philosophy. The table-gazing model prioritizes a "self" or "subject" that is aware of itself being aware of objects outside itself, and prioritizes this kind of awareness over others.[6] This table-gazing model becomes abusive when denying the status of interpersonal objects: they are to be looked at and thought through by the observer-subject rather than considered interpersonally. If we consider the preface to *Trouble with Gender* by Alex Byrne, for example, he reassures the reader that his analysis of gender as a confused category (or at least confusing to him) is "not concerned with inflammatory social and political issues," choosing to conduct a distanced systematic philosophical engagement with trans people as a set of objects he can evaluate from afar.[7] Kevin Richardson argues, in contrast to Byrne's framing, that he is involved in a deeply political project that aims to globally introduce, spread, and consolidate anti-trans policies.[8] In the words of Zohran Mamdani, "For too long, those fluent in the good grammar of civility have deployed decorum to mask agendas of cruelty."[9] Bettcher writes,

> It's a dysfunctional relational state oddly touted in the table-gazing model as a paradigm instance of intersubjectivity. It is the appropriate mode to adopt when one wants to be polite, nice, distant, unengaged. It is a very thin form of interaction that has any possibilities of intimacy gutted. . . . What the table-gazing model doesn't capture is the depth of full relationality and the ways it can be absent.[10]

The table-gazing model, emerging through colonial modernity, risks totalization as the true disciplinary approach of philosophy. She continues,

> The table-gazing model is, of course, foundational to these ways of knowing, and it endorses full unfettered access to everything. Nothing is subject to boundaries. All must be stripped bare. In what ways is philosophy like that? To what degree does it confuse solitary investigation with dialogue and nonpersonal objects with interpersonal ones?[11]

Although Bettcher does not directly discuss arrogance here, her work is heavily influenced by the work of María Lugones, and we can helpfully relate her analysis with Lugones's famous extension of Marilyn Frye's arrogant eye. The table-gazing model arrogates the targets of a gaze, grafting their substance to the viewer without asking, while simultaneously distancing itself from its target.[12] To choose trans philosophy over the table-gazing model is to refuse arrogance and turn towards deeper relationality through philosophical inquiry. In conversation with Bettcher's earlier work, Hil Malatino points out many of the ways that trans bodies complicate philosophy through our intermeshed relationship with the world, troubling concepts such as intimacy, gender, autonomy, selfhood, agency, and naturalness.[13] We get beyond the use of our bodies "as a prompt for cis folks" when we extend these complications towards developing an ethos of care.[14] In this understanding, philosophy is as much about proximity, distance, and relationality as it is about premises and conclusions.

It makes sense in this context of ground-bound and table-gazing philosophy that Bettcher rethinks relationality and intimacy. Philosophers have become bewitched by

the Western concept of the self and the subject and the person into thinking that we are distinct from objects, but Bettcher holds this is not so. At a basic level, we are aware of ourselves not as primordial table-gazers but instead as objects for others. We are specifically a kind of interpersonal object, in that our objecthood relates to the negotiation of boundaries, and we are frequently active objects that engage in self-display with other objects.[15] Consequently, central to trans philosophy is the matter of interpersonal spatiality, the negotiation of "closeness and distance" among interpersonal objects.[16] This relates to the ethics of boundaries and intimacy, as well as capacities for the realization of identity in relation to other objects. Fused with ground-bound philosophy's affinity for ontological pluralism, we can consider how the meaning of our interpersonal objecthood—negotiated in relation to moral sex—varies between dominant spaces and more accepting subcultures.[17]

In contrast to Bettcher's emphasis on ontological pluralism, the dominant world that we currently live in imposes a narrow view of what reality must consist of in relation to sex. Reality enforcement is a process through which the meaning of our lives must be based on assigned sex at birth, grounded in a destiny derived from genital configurations that must follow one of two pathways. These pathways are also moralized, shaping how our bodies are interpersonally encountered by others. When someone departs from the expectations of the sex-representational system, their lives are cast as make believe, deception, mere appearance, or pretending, facing condescension or punishment according to how much they challenge the one true meaning that sex should confer.[18]

Though the dominant sex-representational system claims to be the only reality of sex and attempts to enforce itself as such, Bettcher reads ontological pluralism into the many ways that trans lives and community practices create a multiplicity of meanings beyond its grasp. She calls the world of the dominant sex-representation system an overworld, consisting of how most people are expected to tether the life of sex to two static, unchangeable, and non-negotiable origins. In contrast, she points to the existence of underworlds such as trans subcultures that present many possible ways to interpersonally navigate the social meaning of our sexed lives. Such underworlds provide a plurality of ways that sex can be achieved through self-recognition rather than external systematization, as well as different practices of conferring sex in the context of interpersonal spatiality.[19]

While reality enforcement involves a process of marking all bodies for all time according to an origin of assigned sex at birth and a twofold fate that must be followed based on this, Bettcher points to realization as a contrasting practice of becoming real in relation to others. Realization involves self-recognition and playing with the liminality of sexed appearance, which can be carried forward to the practices of interpersonal spatiality found in collective underworlds.[20] In a particularly fantastic passage, Bettcher explains,

> Far from deluded, I say, self-recognition is a profoundly perceptive apprehension. What is grasped, in part, is that the intimate significance of a proper appearance is not inevitable. It is, rather, entirely socially contingent. We grasp the possibility that the make-believe needn't be make-believe. We grasp the possibility of social transformation. We grasp the fragile state of this (un)reality. And we understand that whether this moment ends, is relegated to mere pretense, depends only on how we are received, how we are recognized, and that this is a contingent matter of the social.[21]

While overworlds attempt to fully determine us as sexed objects, it is possible to renegotiate these terms through underworlds that permit alternative and more expansive systems of meaning.

Ground-bound philosophy emerges from an underground, emphasizing the unfettered WTF of existence in its many possibilities beyond preset expectations. As a pivotal work of trans philosophy understood as a ground-bound practice, Bettcher's essay itself can be understood as a voice from the underground. Her book is not just a "when tables speak,"[22] but also a Persephonic offer to take philosophy and theory in new directions, engaged more deeply with each other every step of the way.

THE SPACE OF SPATIALITY

There is more to think about through Bettcher's account in relation to interpersonal spatiality, including overworlds, underworlds, and space itself. Bettcher rejects focusing on categories such as "cis" and "trans,"[23] but there are reasons to highlight these oppositions as they structure relationships between overworlds and underworlds. Categories such as "cis" may well be imperfect and hastily wielded, but they can also illuminate the ways that knowledge, institutions, language, histories, and spaces are constructed in opposition to trans life.[24]

Bettcher defends her choice to avoid framing transness in opposition to cisness by arguing that trans people are not mainly oppressed due to placement within the category "trans." For example, she writes,

> To put it crudely, it doesn't usually go down like this: "Hey, look, a transgender person! Let's go harass them!" It typically goes down like this: "Hey, look, a man in a dress! Let's go harass him!"[25]

It is important to not frame everything in terms of an unspecified transness. Mirha-Soleil Ross, for example, compellingly argued that overly general understandings of transphobia risk obscuring that violence against trans people has historically been violence against transfeminine sex workers.[26] It may also be true that transness was not so much the focus of oppression against us in the past compared to broader mechanisms of reality enforcement. Growing up in the 1990s, our introduction to transness was often an introduction to the ways that our lives would always be reducible to "really a man," as found in the films *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* and *Austin Powers*; or in the show *Jerry Springer*; or as repeated in the words of friends and family who enjoyed such media.

Even so, there is something more specific about the usage of "tranny" that indicates non-trans people beginning to consider us as a distinct type of person in opposition to their singularly proper way of life. A button held at the Toronto ArQuives made by Xanthra Phillippa MacKay and Mirha-Soleil Ross from around 1990 responds to its escalating use, reading "DON'T CALL ME TRANNIE SHITFACE."[27] Thinking of us as "trannies" also offered new ways of engaging with our lives, including serving as a unique type of person for sex. In the case of the trannie chaser, typically defined as someone who reductively seeks out trans people (usually trans women) for sex, we became not just "a man in a dress" but also "the best of both worlds."

Even if oppression did not organize directly against transness in the past, this does not mean that it will not do so in the present or future. We have been facing escalating opposition to "trans" since around 2018, ranging from US President Donald Trump's repeated complaints about "transgender for everybody"[28] to a headline from the UK's *Telegraph* declaring "This Must Be the Year Britain Finally Kills off Trans Ideology."[29] Drawing from Bettcher's framework, we could argue that this call to kill off trans ideology is an attempt by a dominant ontological system to shut off a more pluralistic approach to sex. The underworld has threatened the overworld. Reality has been challenged and now it must be reinforced. However, this misses the use of "ideology" as a polite decision to not spell out the relationship between trans ideology and trans life. "Trans ideology" is not a clear distinction from but instead a metonym for trans people, since we are taken to emanate such ideology through our mere presence and requests for autonomy and respect within cis spaces. Trans ideology and trans activism simply mean trans people with an added sneer, no matter what bullshit cis people spew about these distinctions.[30] It is for this reason that every trans person morphs into a "trans activist" in the hands of cis news media, since we are not distinguished from the perceived moves that we make to alter the proprieties of dominant society. At this point it is not a matter of disputing that many cis people want to restrict and eliminate *us* (rather than just our *ideology*), but instead a question of to what extent they are willing to execute this desire. In recent years there has been an escalating project to secure public and private spaces as cis, pushing trans people out or punishing us for remaining. This is not entirely a matter of ontological pluralism as interpersonal spatiality, but also of the spaces we find ourselves in: schools, bathrooms, nations, fields, states, street corners, prisons, airports, conferences, and anywhere we are forced to use identification documents.

In Bettcher's work, the spatiality of the dominant overworld is given several characterizations: a system of ontology and meaning;[31] a social fabric;[32] a network;[33] a context;[34] a folk system and social order;[35] a social reality;[36] a colonial gender/sex system imposed by white Europeans;[37] and part of a colonial capitalist system,[38] but this leaves much more to say about spaces and places in their many textures. Additionally, Bettcher only brings up "actual space" briefly in the sense of land.[39] Interpersonal spatiality is a concept through which "We move in space,"[40] but a portrait of such spaces is left largely undefined. Trans sex workers live precariously due to economic and institutional factors[41]—but the economic and institutional factors of where? Reality enforcement is described as "institutionalized"[42] but through the institutions of which place? In the sections on colonization, we do get more causal specificity: whatever these spaces of the overworld are, they are deeply shaped by the European ruling class[43] for the purpose of empire-building[44] that secures a "colonial capitalist system."[45] However, discussing space at the level of colonial empires and resulting capitalist systems, while important, still remains a bit too general without further elaboration.

When thinking about underworlds, Bettcher suggests they are "resistant subcultures" and "alternative ontologies,"[46] perhaps modeled after the specific practices of trans subcultures in Los Angeles in the United States.[47] But which subcultures? Los Angeles has many different trans people, many different ways they are organized in relation to each other, and many different associated practices. For example, Amy lived in LA in 2010, but her experience with trans subcultures and alternative ontologies was likely quite different, and she did not cross paths with Bettcher. If only! Elsewhere, underworlds seem to mean "countercultural practices" and related ontologies,[48] "different social fabrics of interconnected social and discursive contexts,"[49] resistant communities,[50] a friendly rather than hostile context,[51] or "new interpersonal spaces" with "as yet unfathomed creative possibilities."[52] It does seem like we are discussing specific spaces, but they remain unexplained in detail.[53]

One reason why we should consider spaces in a more specific way is because this can help us better understand their intricate dynamisms, histories, constitutions, and weaknesses. Relationality is central to a Bettcherian ground-bound philosophy, so it seems like collective constructions of spaces should be as well. For Perry Zurn in *How We Make Each Other*, worlds are made and destroyed through collective action, generating not only a sense of kinship but also changes to what kind of place an institution can become.[54] The spaces of the Five Colleges (as of this writing becoming Four Colleges) that he focuses on also run into limits of reworlding, tensions in policy, failures of intersectionality and coalition, and differences in tactics.[55] Additionally, Eden Kinkaid emphasizes that the presence of trans people frequently leads to a disorientation of cis spaces, indicating they are not so stable as they are often taken to be.[56] Focusing on trans spaces would consequently involve a more textured account of the ways that we build, navigate, disorient, and disrupt specific spaces.

While spatial metaphors can be useful for thinking with, they risk obscuring the real spaces in which we live our lives and the social processes by which those spaces are produced, contested, and transformed. We are trans in space, which is to say we're trans at home, we're trans on the bus, we're trans in the woods, and we're trans at the museum. In each of these and countless other spaces, being trans means something different. In a bathroom or on a sports field, our mere presence might be seen as a contestation that risks disrupting the foundational norms by which a given space is constituted. At a trans poetry reading, we might be briefly unremarkable, another trans woman in the crowd. Waiting for a cheeseburger at the

Olive Hill, Kentucky Dairy Queen, we might find ourselves given the stink eye by some rough ol' boys with violent intent. These contexts are not the products of a general system of interpersonal distance but of particular histories, materialities, and practices.

In the United States, we live under a fascist regime that actively seeks to eradicate visible trans life from public space. This battle is currently playing out unevenly across many fields, but it is clear where it ends. The prison and the concentration camp are also spaces where we are trans. We must think not only about how to navigate these spaces but how to contest them, disrupt them, abolish them, transform them. We must think about how to produce spaces of our own within and against a dominant society, a cis society, that opposes our continued existence. In order to do this, in order to even think about it, we have to be able to theorize space as it is lived and produced beyond the realm of metaphor and philosophical abstraction.

Considering the complexities of spaces would also complicate the relationship between underworlds and overworlds. Bettcher emphasizes that she does not wish to blur her concepts of overworlds and underworlds.[57] We are not so certain about this separation. Are overworlds not, through their dominant status and totalizing ambitions, at least partly constitutive of underworlds? Even now, we write this essay within a broader logic of the academy that may be characteristic of underworlds (trans, feminist), but also can in no way be fully separated from an overworld. When we do this work, are we in an overworld, an underworld, an overlap between the two, or are these demarcations not always determinant? Turning to underworlds, are they not capable of causing disruptions, however little they might be, within the overworld? Judith Butler famously emphasized that the coercive repetition of "natural" gender also produces its very instabilities and possibilities for becoming otherwise.[58] How stable is Bettcher's overworld? Does our collective writing in this space of philosophy not offer some little glimmer of possibility beyond the sad agentless account of sex that cis people seem to largely prefer? There is so much more to explore here if we think about the complexities of space.

Finally, underworlds are framed as resistant, but how might we think about differences between them? Bettcher adds the caveat that she thought about underworlds by considering specific trans communities in LA,[59] which seems to point towards a plurality of underworlds within her account. Trans spaces may offer resistance against dominant cis spaces, but it is unclear that they proceed with this resistance in the same ways. This gets especially complicated when thinking about trans spaces that are reactionary or ambiguously edgy. Are the trans connections found on Elon Musk's *X* a kind of resistant underworld? What about /lgbt/ on *4chan*? What about the practice by some New York City-online crossover spaces of kinda-sorta ironically taking up the typological categories of HSTS (heterosexual transsexual) and AGP (autogynephile)? We could respond that such places, though predominantly consisting of trans participants, are failing to be a resistant underworld in some key way. Or perhaps we could say that they participate in a mere regurgitation of overworld reality enforcement as a form of self- and other-harm. These are no doubt likely characteristics of such spaces. But what do we make of failure in this context? Is it always the case that failure to resist the overworld entails a failure to constitute an underworld? Or is it possible for underworlds to fail at resistance and still remain underworlds? Trans films such as Louise Weard's ongoing epic *Castration Movie* foreground these uncomfortable dynamics and perhaps contest clear demarcations between overworlds and underworlds since they are staged as bleeding into each other, often with painful, cringeworthy, and funny results.[60]

Unfortunately, while it moves us forward in many ways, it also seems that *Beyond Personhood* has situated us a bit too far beyond space. What would it mean to bring space back into the picture of trans relationality, meaning, and philosophy? In the conclusion we return to ground-bound philosophy to show what it might look like if more aligned with a sense of trans space.

CONCLUSION: GROUND-BOUND PHILOSOPHY AND SPACE

Let's populate ground-bound philosophy with spaces, places, and characters, set up more like a film than an argument. What are the spaces of this thing that some of us have called "trans philosophy," which finds itself in the subtitle of Bettcher's book? There are certainly ways that we can characterize trans philosophy as something like a method or a system of ontology and meaning. However, it also involves a kind of interpersonal spatiality that is situated in specific places. We have older generations meeting each other around LA, such as Bettcher and C. Jacob Hale. Loren Cannon is in LA too. Then we get beyond LA with Naomi Scheman and Miqqi Gilbert.[61] We have a conference put on by graduate students at University of Oregon (who were they again?). Then a conference series that sometimes gets associated with an ongoing organization of US trans philosophers, but this is partially an illusion of stability because specific people organize the conferences in specific places. The American University conference is distinct from the virtual UT Austin conference, which is distinct from the hybrid Goucher and Lafayette conferences, with different organizers, places, attendees, and talks that complicate the continuous narrative.

Meanwhile, there is a conference in Canada, a workshop in the UK, and several scholars working on trans philosophy in Japan and Australia. There are trans and travesti philosophers, theorists, and activists in South America, and many of them have been around longer than the US trans philosophers. There are trans writers on the internet who put out work that is just as good if not better than ours, but the lack of academic credentials means we can just dismiss them as interlocutors. There are zines to be found in all kinds of places.[62] Some of the philosophers move to other kinds of departments and are no longer housed directly in philosophy. Many of the trans people we've met have left or been pushed out of the academy, but they still exist and have ideas. Some people who don't even like the label of philosophy get roped into co-writing essays that are at least partially about it. Different departments and locations lead to different methodologies and interlocutors, challenging

the coherency of "trans philosophy" altogether. All of these interactions are shaped by broader geopolitical contexts, histories, institutions, and the everyday spaces where we live, breathe, and do our work. Trans philosophy doesn't really have any founders beyond the confused and scattered grounds that we find ourselves standing upon. This is, we think, the trans basis of trans theory.

If trans philosophy is a ground-bound practice, we suggest that this ground is spatial. We must consider not just our reckoning with the existential WTF, but also our navigation of the WTF that is being, working, and thinking with others. Bettcher has been an important figure in trans philosophy, not only because of her ideas and writing but also because she has given so much of herself towards care, mentorship, and commitments to community above and beyond what philosophy typically honors. In the words of Hil Malatino, Bettcher has consistently undertaken the "recurrent, habitual, and mundane practice of showing up" that both clears the ground and makes us not want to bury ourselves within it.[63] For Malatino, trans mutual care is distinctly grounded in the creation of spaces and places, and he likens it to collectively constructing a house: "building the new world in the shell of the old."[64] Perhaps trans philosophy has been one practice of this among many others.[65] Our organizers are (or at least should be) as important as our writers. Our practices of care and service are equal to our schools of thought. Our friends, lovers, co-conspirators, accomplices, rivals, and mutual online-only acquaintances are equal to our interdisciplinarity. Our institutional affiliations and titles are a mere trick of the light.

The spaces of ground-bound philosophy are deeply shaped by our ways of being with each other and the interpersonal work that we put in, including care, service, and friendship. This also includes the not-so-pleasant aspects of being with each other such as resentment, critique, bitter disagreement, conflict, and failure. These do not tend to appear in the pages of a philosophy book or a CV, but they are a part of interpersonal space. Don't get us wrong: these failures can also show up in our writing. Even in works of trans philosophy, trans people may fail to appear.[66] But navigating space is even more complicated than navigating the page. What are the different textures of the trans philosophy spaces we and others have made? How are they shaped, perhaps even in ways that we should avoid, by our attachment to the academy, the conditions placed on the funding we receive, and the academic presses where we send off our work? How do such philosophy spaces fuel our hopes and despairs as we persist through trans moments of visibility and annihilation? Considering philosophy in this way is not totally without precedence. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, wrote a kinda-sorta fictionalized account of publishing drama, post-war politics, and romance as it shaped philosophy in her 1954 novel, *The Mandarins*.[67] What historical, geographical, and interpersonal dramas has our writing and work been enmeshed within, situated as it is upon the ground? What if, like, trans philosophy is just the friends we made along the way? Even this cutesy phrasing creates its own tensions: How can we avoid that uncomfortable gray area between friends promoting friends and nepotism? How do we cultivate an interpersonal spatiality of making new friends and allowing new pathways, contentions, approaches, and methods to flourish?

We think there are many ways that this framework of trans philosophy could continue to shake up the philosophical world, what we consider it to be, and what it could become. Perhaps it should no longer even be philosophy, or at least philosophy understood as some special siloed discipline that holds itself with arrogance against other knowledge practices. What a disaster it's been, following their table-gazing patterns, that professional philosophers have somehow convinced polite (cis) society that they are the main authorities on doing ethics. We appreciate the many insights Bettcher has provided us over the years through her engagement with the existential WTF, and look forward to more conversations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Lav McKittrick-Sweitzer for helpful comments, suggestions, and a plan to bring Hil Malatino back to the party.

NOTES

1. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 253.
2. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 11.
3. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 12.
4. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 259.
5. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 255.
6. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 264.
7. Byrne, *Trouble with Gender*, vii; see also 4.
8. Richardson, *The End of Binaries*, 36.
9. Mamdani, "Inaugural Address."
10. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 250.
11. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 255.
12. Lugones, "Playfulness," 3-4; 19, endnote 1.
13. Malatino, *Trans Care*, 38–39.
14. Malatino, *Trans Care*, 40–43.
15. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 50.
16. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 260.
17. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 63.
18. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 18–21.
19. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 62–66.
20. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 164–67.
21. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 142.
22. Bettcher, "When Tables Speak."
23. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 265.
24. See, for example, Heaney, *Feminism Against Cisness*.
25. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 16.
26. Ross, "Interview with Mirha-Soleil Ross," 90–93.
27. MacKay and Ross, *DON'T CALL ME TRANNIE SHITFACE*.
28. METRO TV, "US Saudi Forum."
29. Moore, "This Must Be the Year."
30. See, for example, Byrne, *Trouble with Gender*, 5.
31. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 62, 66.
32. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 75.
33. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 117.
34. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 128.

35. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 134.

36. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 146.

37. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 178.

38. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 254–55.

39. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 197.

40. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 38.

41. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 28.

42. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 104.

43. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 246.

44. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 251.

45. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 254–55.

46. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 65.

47. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 67.

48. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 73.

49. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 75.

50. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 85.

51. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 128.

52. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 255.

53. Some of the page ranges found in this paragraph and the preceding one are discussed in our essay "Atmospheres of Conversion" since that is the initial essay where we considered what Bettcher means by spatiality. This has been significantly expanded upon here in a transformative way beyond that initial pass. See Amy Marvin and Isobel Bess, "Atmospheres of Conversion," *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of transContinental Feminism*, special issue on the atmospheric turn, co-edited by Lauren Guilmette and Ada S. Jaarsma, forthcoming 2026.

54. Zurn, *How We Make Each Other*, 214.

55. Zurn, *How We Make Each Other*, 216–23.

56. Kincaid, "Toward a Trans Theory of Space," 3–4.

57. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 171.

58. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

59. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 67.

60. Weard, *Castration Movie Anthology I* and *II*.

61. See Zurn and Pitts, "Trans Philosophy."

62. For a particularly well-made recent zine, check out Ding and Starr, *Being Trans in Philosophy*.

63. Malatino, *Trans Care*, 72.

64. Malatino, *Trans Care*, 71.

65. See also Kimoto, "APA Member Interview: Tamsin Kimoto."

66. See Kimoto, "What Does (Not) Appear."

67. De Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*.

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Making Meaning from the Ground Up in Beyond Personhood

Javier Pitts Guzmán

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHARLOTTE

It is truly an honor to comment on Talia Bettcher's work, an author who I consider a brilliant and kind friend in this profession. I have learned a lot from her over the years, and I have taught her work on multiple occasions. In fact, I recently taught Bettcher's new book to a group of graduate students, including master's and PhD students in a gender and sexuality studies course at my university. It was fantastic to hear the students' feedback and talk through their interpretative moves responding to Bettcher's very dense arguments in the book. More often than not, I found myself referring the students to its second chapter, "On Intimacy and Distance," where the author lays out the core thematics and concepts of interpersonal spatiality (and to the very helpful glossary of terms in the back of the book where she offers short definitions for the core concepts in the book).[1] Also, as I taught the book, I came to recognize how this book is nothing short of a masterclass on writing within the genres of academic philosophy. That is, it is a

quite technical read, operating with an unfolding logic and order that while theoretically abstract in some of its architecture, primarily seeks to track existential concerns within trans life. The book also dives into historical detail and argumentation in later chapters showing the breadth of the author as a scholar both of trans philosophy and early modern European philosophy, a field in which Dr. Bettcher is known outside of trans philosophy.

My comments here will pick up on themes related to Bettcher's engagement with the work of María Lugones and Lugones's conception of ontological pluralism, in particular. For those who know Bettcher's work, it will come as no surprise that the conceptual resources and methodological approaches in Lugones's writings play a significant role in this book. Bettcher's many published articles cite and engage directly with Lugones's work, often extending the Argentine feminist's work in interesting and provocative ways. For example, Bettcher's groundbreaking 2014 essay "Trapped in the Wrong Theory" begins with an epigraph from Lugones regarding the "hidden structures of meaning that countenance and constitute domination" and brings that account to bear on the experiences of trans people facing falsely dichotomized worlds of meaning and sense that reduce or obfuscate the dynamics of trans desire, self-understanding, and politics.[2] Moreover, Bettcher's 2022 interview states that around 2003 (right around when Lugones's *Pilgrimages* came out) she had the opportunity to spend time with María, including hearing each other's presentations and performances, sharing meals and conversations, and discussing, in Bettcher's words, "everything from transphobia to the intricacies of Lugones's work in women of color feminism."[3]

Bettcher's work appears deeply indebted (and explicitly so) to Lugones's conception of ontological pluralism, and indeed she prefaces much of her account of the value and ethical, aesthetic, and political valences of what she eventually calls "trans underworlds" in the book and "trans subcultures" elsewhere in her writings on Lugones's claims. Bettcher also relies on Lugones's claims regarding "a desideratum of oppression theory that the theory be liberatory[; that] if oppression theory is not liberatory, it is useless from the point of view of the oppressed person."[4] In this, Bettcher takes earnestly and carefully Lugones's view that "the very multiplicity of worlds is what makes resistance possible at all."[5]

Importantly, this metaphilosophical commitment or "desideratum of oppression theory," as Lugones calls it, is a core facet of Bettcher's "ground-bound philosophy." That is, while the argumentation is indeed demandingly technical, precise, and, at times, overwhelming given the scope and implications of some of the book's conclusions, it is nonetheless diligently in the service of creating well-fought-for conceptual spaces for gender variant existence in all our multitudinal social, cultural, and historical complexity.

I also take the form and genre of the book as a performative element of this multiplicitous strategy. This is, in part, because I was lucky to read previous versions of the book and had the joy of being in dialogue with Bettcher during the last couple years of this project. In this sense, I know that the voice and genre of this published version does not encapsulate the other forms of voice and genre that previous versions included. Namely, as in other parts of her life, there was once a very performative series of elements to this book, a staging as it were, of a dialogue between the philosopher and her interlocutors. Instead, this book pivots through a series of highly complex neologisms, offering an organizational structure that demands repetition and rereading, and concludes with, in the author's own words, "a buried lede" that is as much of a deconstructive dissolution of conceptions of modern/colonial European subjectivity, as it is an argumentative checkmate for analytic philosophers who prefer language games in that genre instead. And while I concur with my dear comrade Tamsin Kimoto that ground-bound philosophy requires more than bridging the Analytic-Continental Divide, this book *does the damn thing*, and shows rather than tells us how to do that. In this, Bettcher creates a performative frame for doing philosophy, also in its many valences, which puts various genres of philosophy into dialogue, contestation, and question.

On this last point, however, this is where Bettcher's appeal to ontological pluralism comes into some potential tension with specific forms of argumentation in the book (and perhaps with the genres she employs in the book as well). Notably, many of the canonical works of systematic European, AngloCanadian, and AngloAmerican philosophy have aspired to universalizing pretensions. Bettcher is, of course, familiar with those aspirations from Descartes to Hegel, and with the presuppositions of political philosophers analyzing the liberal nation-state who contend with difference as a problem to be solved, rather than a strength or virtue. Given Bettcher's commitments to Lugones's work, which included multilingual registers of philosophizing, the tarrying with colonial paradigms of meaning that create liminal sites for connection and dissonance among oppressed peoples, and so on, Bettcher's work is explicitly committed to ontological pluralism. She prefaces much of her argumentation in the book on the centrality of ontological pluralism.

However, there are places in the book where I wonder how to negotiate this commitment to ontological pluralism with some of Bettcher's claims about interpersonal spatiality. For example, when introducing Interpersonal Space in Chapter 2, Bettcher writes the following:

> Interpersonal spatiality is the capacity of all sensory and discursive encounters between us to admit of closeness and distance. Another way to put it is to say that all our encounters occur in interpersonal space.[6]

Notice that she qualifies "all sensory and discursive encounters" between "us" as part of this account, and that "all our encounters" occur within the kind of ontological account she will detail in the book. There are a number of ways to read this statement. Perhaps the "us" and the "our" is qualified here as well—"we" are modern/colonial subjects of US academia, and thus she circumscribes the account in the book as something like an imminent

critique of modern/colonial conceptions of self-awareness, selfhood, and personhood. All of this would be consistent with ontological pluralism, as those who engage with this book, this genre, and this particular set of arguments likely have some investment in the self and its normative limits, contours, and violations. Importantly, for trans audiences of the book, our own political defenses of a sense of our own bodies, our desires for how we would like to exist and be understood in the world, and so on, are often tightly wrapped with a firm commitment to political agency regarding our own selfhood, personhood, and meaning-making capacities. Bettcher, for all her boldness and careful argumentation, knows that she is taking on those very presuppositions and revealing them through a logic of colonial violence and associated forms of modern/colonial normative and aesthetic practice (nakedness, objecthood/objectification, etc.).

The account we read in her book, despite its ground-bound and WTF origins, would nonetheless require that readers locate themselves in the "ours" and "us's" of interpersonal spatiality, itself perhaps a kind of *overworld* among other pluralistic worlds of spatiality.

Yet, the book does not appear to qualify interpersonal spatiality in this particular way. Instead, in a debate with social constructionist theorizing (and again, I want to preserve the possibility for authorial distance and performativity here between the "I" as the narrator of this book and the author herself, who likely has other genres through which to philosophize), Bettcher writes:

> it is worth emphasizing the respect in which I depart from social constructionist positions. While I recognize that there are different boundary systems in different cultural locations—specific boundary systems are contingent—I also recognize that the demand that there be some such system is transcendentally required in the sense that who we are—how we experience the world—requires some such system. In this way, violation and disregard become wrongs not merely of a particular system but of the very values of intimacy and distance themselves.[7]

Notably, this language of "transcendental requirements" does begin to run astray from Lugones's own expressed views (although perhaps Bettcher has some interpretative claims to add regarding what Lugones claimed she did and what Lugones actually does in her work; I am not sure on this).

Lugones does not qualify her claims, even those of ontological pluralism, on transcendental terms. Rather she critiques such transcendental appeals in others. She writes critically in response to Victor Turner's account of liminality and critiques that author's appeal to a transcendental self.[8] She states regarding the use of the concept of structure/anti-structure, "if we use [those concepts], then we do not have to appeal to the ahistorical, acultural, asexual, without race or gender, without a system of production within which her productive activity has meaning transcendental to ego in order to understand liberation from oppression."[9]

For Lugones, she rejects Turner's understanding of "meaning transcendental to ego." In this, meaning too cannot be transcendental to a given self, which appears as a strong claim regarding Lugones's own views about active subjectivity throughout the book. For example, she writes of active subjectivity that "it does not presuppose the individual subject and it does not presuppose collective intentionality of collectivities of the same. It is adumbrated to consciousness by a moving with people, but the difficulties as well as the concrete possibilities of such movings."[10] This view, when embedded within ontological pluralism, strives to retain a semblance of shifting meanings for active subjectivity—adumbrated by other movements of "desire, belief and sign" within the relations between worlds.

This adumbration—when refracted through its Latin roots refers to sketches, shadows, and, the root of the word umbrage, suggesting the shade of trees—offers us something different than transcendental meaning. Instead, interpersonal spatiality may emerge precisely through the shadow worlds of meaning cast across the modern/colonial gender system, its folk variants that reverberate in machista patriarchal worlds as much as in white nationalisms and gender-critical feminisms. This is a play on liminality and on meaning-making in the cracks of worlds.

Gloria Anzaldúa described this process in her dissertation chapter "Geographies of Selves" in a section titled "Las Nepantleras: Alternative Senses of Self" in the following way:

> Those of us who live skirting otros mundos, other groups, in this in-between state I call nepantla have a unique perspective. We notice the breaches in feminism, the rifts in Raza studies, the breaks in our disciplines, the splits in this country. These cracks show the flaws in our cultures, the faults in our pictures of reality. The perspective from the cracks gives us different ways of defining the self, of defining group identity.[11]

She continues, "Like green saplings, new viewpoints push up through the cracks and later grow into trees with roots, dislodging foundations of previous beliefs. Perspectives from cracks offer us different ways of defining the self, of deciding group identity."[12] When referring to critiques of mestizaje in this same passage, she writes that new constructions of identity are "new versions [that will] cast new shadows."[13] In this way, Anzaldúa and Lugones share in the shadow-play between worlds of meaning and sense, even for those that emerge anew and are offered up, like green saplings, striving for life in the world. Neither of these views appear to shift to a register of transcendental meaning-making, and thus function without ontological sure-footedness, but as no less of a ground-bound philosophy about the world. In this, my queries ask how the reader should situate the book and its account of interpersonal spatiality within the cracks and shadows between worlds, how and where might her approach grow? And in which worlds does it seek to cast shadows, not to cast us into darkness, but perhaps to offer us reprieve from the harsh rays of the enlightenment and its attendant concepts of selfhood, personhood, and subjectivity?

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the students of my fall 2025 grad seminar titled "Trans Affect and the Coloniality of Gender" for always pushing the complexity and contours of our discussions in the course.
2. Bettcher, "Trapped in the Wrong Theory," 383.
3. Bettcher, "How I Became a Trans Philosopher," 153–54.
4. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 55.
5. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 65.
6. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 38.
7. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 42.
8. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 60.
9. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 61.
10. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 6.
11. Anzaldúa, *Luz en lo oscuro*, 84.
12. Anzaldúa, *Luz en lo oscuro*, 84–85.
13. Anzaldúa, *Luz en lo oscuro*, 85.

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Beyond Personhood *Beyond Heterosexuality*

Ray Briggs
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

[Content note: this paper uses transphobic quotes from writers and internet commenters to illustrate the assumptions underlying transphobia in queer spaces.]

1. INTRODUCTION

Transphobia is a complex phenomenon that admits of many sociological, anthropological, and philosophical explanations. *Beyond Personhood* adds to our collective understanding by providing a new explanation of transphobia—one that links it to the construction of intimacy in Eurocentric cultures, thereby illuminating mechanisms of oppression that frequently go overlooked.

Most of the work in *Beyond Personhood* goes toward describing and critiquing what Bettcher, following Lugones,[1] calls the "overworld"—a dominant system of concepts, practices, and social scripts that shapes who we are, what meanings we can express, and which actions are open to us. There are also "underworlds"—alternative systems that let us access different identities, meanings, and actions. Bettcher draws on trans-inclusive underworlds, centered on Los Angeles between 1994 and 2022. Since the overworld is heavily propped up by coercive state, military, and corporate power, it is an optimal site for her critique and analysis, which aims at explaining trans oppression and dysphoria.

The overworld that Bettcher describes is not only transphobic and racist, but also intensely heterosexist. Chapter 4 offers an account of the "sex-representational system"—a social structure that shapes the meaning of intimacy, maleness, femaleness, nakedness, sex, and romance. Bettcher's account focuses on the heterorelational complex, a version of the sex-representational system that constructs men and women as occupants of complementary sexual roles. She offers a novel account of the harms that the heterorelational complex inflicts on trans people, particularly trans women.

As I read Bettcher's account of intimacy, I found myself wondering how it might apply—or fail to apply—to the gay and lesbian underworlds where much of my intimate experience is grounded. On the one hand, gay and lesbian underworlds offer possibilities for resistance that are not present in the overworld. On the other hand, these underworlds have not eradicated transphobia or white supremacy, which suggests that liberating ourselves requires more than merely rejecting the heterosexuality of the heterorelational complex.

My hope is that by comparing and contrasting the sex-representational systems of different worlds, we can learn more about the modal features of trans oppression. For example, if some feature of the heterorelational complex is absent from the gay underworld, but misgendering is still a frequent occurrence there, then we can conclude that the presence or absence of misgendering doesn't depend solely on that feature. Conversely, if trans people enjoy possible modes of interaction in the lesbian underworld that are unavailable in the heterorelational complex, then we know more about when and how these modes of interaction are possible.

I will argue that while Bettcher's theory of intimacy in the overworld does not apply wholesale to lesbian and gay underworlds, disturbingly large swathes of it can survive the translation of intimacy from straight settings to queer ones. I identify some potential sites of resistance in lesbian and gay culture, as well as some surprising ways that the heterorelational complex persists there.

1.1. BETTCHER'S ACCOUNT OF THE SEX-REPRESENTATIONAL SYSTEM

The sex-representational system is part of the way that our society constructs intimacy—that is, the possibility of knowing and being known by one another, thereby becoming metaphorically "closer" to each other in "interpersonal space." Extending the spatial metaphor, Bettcher posits "pathways"—social scripts that tell us which sequences of gestures constitute an increase in intimacy. Every society needs some way of constructing intimacy, and therefore some pre-determined pathways or other, but the specifics are both contingent and culturally variable.

To experience any amount of intimacy with someone, we must first notice them; they must have an appearance. If we are not close—say, if we are strangers on the street or acquaintances at work—the expected appearance is *proper appearance*, which in Eurocentric cultures includes clothing. Intimate settings—particularly erotic ones—may call instead for *intimate appearance*.[2] In Eurocentric cultures, intimate appearance involves some degree of undress, and removing clothes signals an escalation of intimacy. The relationship between proper appearance and clothing is conventional and could be otherwise; Bettcher illustrates this by imagining a possible society that signals intimacy by putting on a special article of clothing.

As a matter of contingent fact, our society differentiates people by *moral sex*—their status as either men or women, which affects how we conceptualize both their bodies and their inner lives. Intimacy is structured differently for men versus women, and the structural differences are reflected by differences in intimate appearance. Male intimate appearance includes a penis, while female intimate appearance includes a vagina.[3]

The two types of intimate appearance are associated with different types of intimacy pathways; for instance, revealing a woman's nipples is considered a significant escalation of intimacy, while revealing a man's nipples is not. This creates an epistemic problem: if you can't assess someone's intimate appearance based on their proper appearance, but you want to become more intimate, how do you know which intimacy pathway to initiate?

Our culture solves this problem by using proper appearance to represent intimate appearance; a dress signals that a person has a vagina under their clothes, while a suit and tie signal that they have a penis. (If you think this sounds invasive, Bettcher would agree; society puts us in a double-bind by telling us that our genital status is something to withhold for privacy's sake, while also forcing us to disclose it via our clothes.) People assume that intimate appearance is "natural," while proper appearance is "artificial," but this isn't true any more than the appearance of a shaved dog counts as the "natural reality" underlying its usual fluffy appearance.

Within the heterorelational complex, female intimacy pathways are governed by the following mythology:[4]

1. The female naked body is imagined to be the source of male sexual desire.

2. Sexual desire is conceived of as something like a powerful force that, once set into motion, can hardly be stopped.

3. The female naked body is regarded as inherently subject to violation unless some mitigating cultural intervention occurs.

4. The preceding three are natural features of sexuality.

We might augment Bettcher's list with a few items about male intimacy pathways, in the same spirit.

5. Men are regarded as always desiring of and ready for sex.

6. The male naked body is regarded as inherently violating.

7. The preceding two are natural features of sexuality.

Assumptions 1–7 aren't true, and many people in the contemporary US would explicitly repudiate them, but they still shape everyday practice. Bettcher characterizes assumptions 1–4 as a form of "dialogical abuse,"[5] since they put women in a situation where they can expect continual boundary-crossing once they start down the pathway from proper appearance toward intimate appearance, regardless of whether they want their boundaries crossed. The assumptions also make women's inner lives appear shallow, since men can escalate intimacy by sharing their feelings and desires, while women's only way of escalating intimacy is allowing a partner sexual access.

Assumptions 5–7 are likewise abusive. Assumption 5 encourages men both to cross others' boundaries, and to accept disregard of their own boundaries without complaint, while assumption 6 makes it difficult—perhaps even unthinkable—for men to engage in intimate disclosure without violating others. Assumptions 5 and 6 also make it difficult to recognize when men are victims, rather than perpetrators, of sexual assault.

These myths of the heterorelational complex are closely related to (but not quite the same as) what Bettcher later describes as the *table-gazing model*,[6] which treats one's sensory access to a nonpersonal object, such as a table, as the basis for all forms of awareness. A table has no boundaries that must be respected: anyone can look at it, touch it, or access information about it at will. Within the heterorelational complex, female interpersonal objects have almost as little sexual agency as tables: they are there to be accessed by men. White women get a few more crumbs of agency than their women-of-color peers, since they are permitted to gatekeep male sexual desire, accepting or rejecting men's bids to escalate intimacy. But assumptions 1–7 make very little space for even the most privileged women to experience desire or to take positive, agential steps toward escalating intimacy themselves. (They also make very little space for men to be desired.)

In addition to being abusively sexist, Bettcher argues, the mythology of the heterorelational complex puts trans people—especially trans women—in an untenable position. The expected "natural" trajectory of erotic intimacy culminates in female nakedness, followed by heterosexual intercourse. But when a trans person begins down an intimacy pathway, their clothed proper appearance (for instance, the female proper appearance of a trans woman) is replaced with an intimate appearance that doesn't "match" (for instance, a trans woman's intimate appearance which is constructed as male).[7] Since proper appearance represents intimate appearance, the trans

person has misrepresented themselves according to the rules of heterorelational complex. And because there are entirely different scripts for the two sex-differentiated roles of the heterorelational complex, this misrepresentation has dire consequences.

For trans women, the result is a double-bind that exposes them to either ridicule and rejection or violent punishment. A man who perceives a trans woman as starting down an intimate pathway, either because she accepts him as an intimate partner or because he reads her public appearance as a signal of sexual availability, is likely to feel entitled to continue down that pathway. But when her proper appearance is replaced by an intimate appearance that doesn't match, he will find the expected intimacy pathway suddenly cut off. Reading the trans woman's proper appearance as an inaccurate representation of her intimate appearance, he will then interpret her either as a "make-believer" who is pretending to be a woman but fooling no one, or an "evil-deceiver" who has successfully "tricked" him into believing that she is a woman and deserves to be punished for this "deceit."[8]

This double-bind can be deadly for trans women, especially those who are otherwise at risk because of factors like race and poverty. Male sex partners may punish them for being trans with rape, battery, and murder. Even trans women who evade this outright violence suffer due to the double-bind. They may be treated as "dirty little secrets" because the pathways of the heterorelational complex don't permit a straight man to integrate a trans partner into his sexual and romantic life. They may face expulsion from intimate spaces like bathrooms and locker rooms, where they are assumed to be male underneath their clothes, and therefore already symbolically violating the cis women in those spaces, no matter how benign their actions are.

While Bettcher's discussion emphasizes harms to trans women, the heterorelational complex is also dangerous for trans men, who are sometimes violently assaulted for the "deception" of adopting a male proper appearance at odds with their female intimate appearance that "invites" violation per assumption 3. The murders of "Brandon Teena"[9] and Sam Nordquist[10] illustrate how deadly this violence can be. As with trans women, the harms are not limited to violent assault. While the assumption that trans men are female under their clothes prevents them from being seen as threatening, being seen as perpetually vulnerable is no guarantee of safety either. Recent bans on trans healthcare are rationalized by rhetoric that depicts trans men as vulnerable girls whose fertility is at risk. This rhetoric shows how the heterorelational complex is bound up with racism and ableism: the rhetoric implicitly presumes that trans men are white, tries to conscript them into propping up the institution of the white family by bearing children, and insinuates that they are unfit to make decisions for themselves because they are mentally ill.[11]

2. TRANS EXCLUSION IN LESBIAN AND GAY WORLDS

Lesbian and gay intimacy seem deeply at odds with the complementary male and female roles of the heterorelational complex. But unfortunately, gay and lesbian underworlds are not uniformly welcoming to trans people, and trans people who participate in those worlds may encounter transphobia. In this section, I will describe two forms trans exclusion can take in queer underworlds, one involving trans women in lesbian spaces, and another involving trans men in gay male spaces.[12]

2.1. TRANS WOMEN IN LESBIAN SPACES

Trans women have been a part of lesbian underworlds in the US since their inception. Negative attitudes toward trans women in lesbian communities can also be traced back at least as far as the 1970s. Janice Raymond's 1979 *The Transsexual Empire* is typically considered the foundational of trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF)[13] ideology, and its anti-trans ideas have influenced lesbian communities and beyond.

Being a lesbian in no way entails being a TERF: overall, lesbian cis women report less negative attitudes toward trans women than heterosexual cis women, and this remains true when comparing women with similar levels of feminist commitment.[14] Cristan Williams documents a long history of trans inclusion among lesbian radical feminists,[15] and a recent series of forty-nine in-depth interviews of lesbians by Baker A. Rogers revealed that not only did all respondents condemn TERF ideology, but the majority of them reported never having met a person who espoused it.[16] Nor is TERFdom the only form of transphobia: feminist-inflected transphobia now routinely cross-pollinates with conservative movements that are not even *nominally* feminist.[17] Still, several of the originators of TERF ideology considered themselves lesbian feminists, and the view remains influential with a small subpopulation of lesbians who consider themselves feminist or strongly feminist.[18] If transphobia is driven primarily by heteronormativity, it's surprising that such an ideology has any currency among lesbians, particularly those who are deeply committed to rejecting heteropatriarchy.

Yet TERF ideas are strikingly reminiscent of transphobia in the heterosexual world. Within the TERF worldview, we can identify the following mythologies:

8. Trans women are claimed not to be real women because of their "biology"; their claims to be women are viewed as make-believe or deception.[19]

9. Trans women are viewed as threats to cis women simply in virtue of existing. (Janice Raymond goes so far as to write, "All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves."[20])

10. It is seen as correct and fitting to exclude trans women from women's spaces.[21]

11. Trans women's sexuality and engagement in sexual acts is treated as suspect.[22]

2.2. TRANS MEN IN GAY MEN'S SPACES

Trans men are a long-standing part of gay men's communities. Lou Sullivan's diaries show that even in the

1970s and '80s, when doctors routinely denied treatment to trans men who failed to perform heterosexuality, it was possible for a trans man to participate in gay intimacy. Sullivan reports one casual sex partner who, on learning of his trans status and his lack of a penis, asks to confirm that he likes "getting screwed," then asks, "Well, then what's the problem?"[23]

In the intervening decades, trans men have made further inroads into gay culture. A 2019 study of trans men in Ontario, Canada found that while some trans men (particularly those who had not medically transitioned) avoided gay sexual fields for fear of rejection, others visited bars, bathhouses, and cruising apps with satisfactory results.[24] Participants who had been out for longer reported that trans men had accumulated increasing erotic capital over the preceding decade. One participant remarks: "Through porn, through political discussion, through a proliferation of images, cisgender men have started to notice that an FTM is a viable quantity. I'm speaking very capitalistic terms. An FTM is legitimately something you could fuck."[25]

The researchers note that "Interestingly, the fears that other trans men described in relation to accessing sexualized gay venues were largely unrealized among those who had taken the risk to visit them," though "This may be a matter of trans men correctly perceiving their erotic capital in such sites as it relates to gendered embodiment, and making decisions accordingly (i.e. those who are most likely to face rejection may be most likely to avoid such sites)."[26] Racialized, bigger-bodied, and feminine trans men reported more fear of rejection than their thin, white, masculine counterparts.

Records from Chicago's Leather Archives and Museum illustrate some common transphobic tropes in gay men's underworlds. I'll draw on the discussion surrounding Tyler McCormick, the first trans man to win the International Mr. Leather (IML) pageant in 2010. The comments under a brief 2010 article about McCormick's win, published on advocate.com, provide an illustrative cross-section of the transphobic ideas that were circulating at the time. In gay underworlds, as in lesbian underworlds, transphobia is not the consensus view; transphobic comments by some gay men are immediately challenged by others.[27]

Themes from the comments include the following mythological claims:

12. Being a Real Man is conceived as a matter of having a penis and testicles rather than a vagina. (Representative comment from "Rodney Moorcocke": "Tyler does not have a penis and balls and has never had them, so he's not a man . . . yet.")

13. Leather spaces are imagined as places where everyone is or should be sexually attractive to a presumed normative male spectator. (Representative comment from "Stephen Lane": "when i go to IML i used to know it would have thousands of hot leather men, sexy fucks, horny, hard dicks, etc. . . . like me. [. . .] as much as you all hate to believe this, IML should be a 'beauty contest' for Tom of Finland level entrants, the winner should make you drool, make you want to wear leather, make your dick, (if ya have one), hard.")

14. Vaginas are imagined to be repulsive, and repulsion by vaginas is seen as partly constitutive of gay masculinity. (Representative comment from "Ox": "If I wanted pussy, I'd be straight. Trannies feel they have the right to hit on me at parties clearly identified as Gay?")

The implicit acceptance of claim 14 is also illustrated by the online response to a recent workshop on vaginal play taught to an audience of gay men the Chicago Hellfire Club, by gay trans man and club member Kai Korpak.[28] The workshop went over well with participants, but received an incredibly hostile public reaction when an advertisement for it went viral. Internet commenters, many of them gay men, accused the presenter of being a straight woman and engaging conversion therapy, since supposedly, in the words of commenter "Peace-Automatic" on the Reddit forum "askgaybros," "NO gay man wants to engage in vaginal play. . . . And if they do, then they ARE NOT gay."[29] The stakes of this transphobic myth were real: people wrote Korpak threatening and harassing emails, and some of them tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to get him fired from his job.

3. EXPLAINING PATTERNS OF TRANSPHOBIA

What explains the transphobia that persists in gay and lesbian underworlds, and what does it tell us about the construction of intimacy?

Jillian Todd Weiss finds an explanation for gay and lesbian transphobia in the historic split between segments of the queer community that, until the 1950s, were typically lumped together.[30] From the 1950s to the 1970s, gays and lesbians gained visibility and a degree of legitimacy. Trans and bi became legible as distinct groups, and their ambiguity posed a threat to the perceived legitimacy of cis gays and lesbians. On the one hand, trans and bi people are "too queer," since they flout norms of masculinity and femininity in ways that go beyond choosing a sexual partner of the same gender, and therefore threaten the idea that queer people are "just like" their heterosexual peers. On the other hand, they are "not queer enough," since they sometimes "pass" as heterosexual, and therefore threaten the idea that homosexuals are easily distinguishable from heterosexuals.

All this suggests that aspects of the heterorelational complex persist even in queer underworlds. TERFs' focus on "biological sex" and the transphobic leathermen's focus on genitals immediately look like straightforward applications of Bettcher's concepts of *moral sex* and *moral genitals*.

The meaning of moral sex must be somewhat different in underworlds where partners cannot be divided into male and female roles. But while gay and lesbian underworlds present some challenges to the mythologies outlined in Bettcher's items 1–4 and my items 5–7, they do not

simply result in participants' rejecting the heterorelational complex wholesale. Instead, these underworlds exist in constant negotiation with the overworld. The overworld shapes the underworlds, which may incorporate parts of its mythologies even while challenging others.

While assumptions 1–7 are causally entwined, it will help to treat them as logically separable. This means clarifying assumptions 4 and 7, which cross-reference the others. What does assumption 4 amount to when assumption 2 is rejected as false (which would presumably entail rejecting 2 as unnatural)? I will interpret assumptions 4 and 7 as claiming that *whichever* features our mythologies attribute to male and female sexuality, these features are natural, and I will lump them together as "the naturalness assumptions."

3.1. LESBIAN CHALLENGES AND CAPITULATIONS TO THE HETERORELATIONAL COMPLEX

Lesbian underworlds create new possibilities for female sexual agency, allowing women to form identities as sexual agents rather than wholly passive table-like objects or mostly passive gatekeepers of male desire. In some ways, this challenges the picture of female intimacy pathways in the heterorelational complex, as captured by claims 1–7. For instance, sexual desire is typically *not* mythologized as a reason for a woman to coerce or assault others, which casts doubt on claim 2. While some lesbians do commit rape and domestic violence against their partners,[31] this kind of boundary violation is not typically constructed as a normal or natural part of lesbian sex. Insofar as lesbians view male sexual desire as contestable, this also casts doubt on claim 1; the female naked body cannot be the *sole* source of male sexual desire if part of the causal and moral responsibility for that desire lies with men.

While lesbian underworlds challenge the picture of *female* sexuality in claims 1–7, however, they do not necessarily challenge the corresponding picture of *male* sexuality. TERFdom arises from an ethos of lesbian separatism, which advocates keeping men out of women's communities on the grounds that men are dangerous.[32] Separatism is an understandable strategy for coping with an overwhelmingly misogynistic world—not only are lesbians vulnerable to misogynistic violence, but many are targeted specifically as *queer* women, using a range of violent tactics from battery that specifically targets masculine-appearing women, to social and economic pressure to partner with men, to "corrective" rape[33]—but it works largely by navigating around the dominant society's construction of masculinity, rather than by challenging it directly.

Lesbian separatism is wholly consistent with imagining that men are dangerous not for contingent cultural reasons, but because they differ naturally from women, in keeping with the naturalness assumptions 4 and 7. While some lesbian feminists have explicitly critiqued the claim that sexual difference is natural,[34] not all lesbian separatists internalized these critiques, and some strands of the movement remained attached to biological essentialism.[35]

The prevalence of naturalness assumptions would explain the TERF claim that trans women are not real women in virtue of their "biology," or moral genitals (claim 8). Furthermore, the mythology of female sexuality as inherently violable (claim 3) and male sexuality as inherently violating (claim 6), when combined with this naturalness assumption, would explain the TERF perception of trans women as threatening (claim 9), the desire to exclude them from women's spaces (claim 10), and suspicion of their sexuality (claim 11).

3.2. GAY MALE CHALLENGES AND CAPITULATIONS TO THE HETERORELATIONAL COMPLEX

Gay men's underworlds create new forms of intimacy for men, which allow them to be desired as well as desiring, and creates space for their intimate disclosure to be understood as a form of mutual sharing, rather than a way of violating others. This challenges the picture of male sexual pathways in assumptions 1–7. In gay male underworlds, the female naked body is not imagined to be the source—or even an object—of male sexual desire, which directly conflicts with claim 1. And in many venues, the male naked body is viewed as normal and desirable, which casts doubt on claim 6.

But other aspects of the heterorelational complex can easily go unchallenged by gay male underworlds. Gay life need not pose any deep challenge to the naturalness assumptions, when we read these as claims about the naturalness of sexual intimacy pathways *whatever they happen to be*. It is common in the US to believe that sexual orientation is inborn, unchangeable, and "joint-carving" in a way that makes it useful for grouping individuals and predicting other characteristics. Pointing out that gay sexuality differs from straight sexuality does not, by itself, challenge any naturalness assumptions about gay sexuality. These naturalness assumptions fit well with some gay men's endorsement of claim 12, which understands being a Real Man partly in terms of having the right genitals.

Claim 2 (which portrays sexual desire as a powerful force that's difficult to stop) and claim 5 (which portrays men as always wanting and ready for sex) are often in force in gay men's spaces, particularly venues like bathhouses and leather pageants where sexuality is at the fore. These assumptions would help explain gay leathermen's acceptance of claim 13, which treats sexual attractiveness as a requirement for participation.

In some ways, gay men's spaces challenge claim 3. Since women are not portrayed as sexually desirable in gay men's spaces, there is no incentive to begin or continue down an intimate pathway that involves crossing women's boundaries. But in the example of Tyler McCormick, the focus on his genitals does seem to be a kind of boundary-crossing motivated by misogyny. Some of the participants in the leather community seem to believe that such boundary-crossing is important as a way of excluding women, and perceived as feminine, from spaces that they see as masculine.[36] This aspect of misogyny seems to partly explain the fascination with vaginas and their supposed repulsiveness in claim 14.

4. CONCLUSION

Bettcher distinguishes between the dominant overworld and resistant underworlds to make an important philosophical point: trans liberation does not require us to rehabilitate concepts forged in the overworld and may require us to abandon them. But our underworlds are shaped by the overworld, with the massive heterorelational complex exerting a weird gravitational pull on our queer intimacies.

When building alternative realities, we must take care to explicitly challenge our overworld concepts, if we wish to make those realities truly inclusive of trans people and others who have been left out. The idea of natural sexual difference seems both particularly resilient, both in gay and lesbian transphobia, and in its appeal to right-wing transphobes.[37]

Beyond Personhood was written before the 2024 US election, when the situation for trans people took a sudden turn for the worse, both in the US and worldwide. This essay is not part of the project of describing the workings of fascism or the threat it poses. While that project is vitally important, I have no special expertise or novel insights that would connect it to Bettcher's book. Instead, I hope to contribute to another, complementary project that Bettcher builds toward: envisioning possibilities outside fascism, and outside the heterorelational complex. It is vitally important that the overworld not become the whole world.

NOTES

1. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*.

2. There is doubtless much to be said about non-erotic intimate settings, such as a parent nurturing an infant or a caregiver bathing a disabled adult. However, both Bettcher's chapter and my discussion focus on erotic intimacy.

3. This is not to say that someone's moral sex always corresponds to their actual genitals; for example, someone might count as a man despite having lost his penis due to a war injury. Moral genitals are the genitals that a person is supposedly entitled to, whether they have those genitals or not.

4. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 96.

5. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 98.

6. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 227–29.

7. What about trans people who have had bottom surgery? Bottom surgery may succeed in changing how someone's intimate appearance is read, but since moral genitals don't always match physical genitals, there is no guarantee. Someone who knows that a trans person has had bottom surgery, or who responds to other cues provided by their intimate appearance, may still perceive their proper appearance and their intimate appearance as mismatched.

8. See also Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers."

9. I refer to this person by the name most commonly used for him in the press, though this was not among the variety of names he used for himself. D'Erasmo, "Boy Interrupted."

10. Montiel and Reidel, "Here Is What We Know."

11. Randall, "Irreversible Damage"; Hsu, "Irreducible Damage."

12. There are, of course, other trans people in gay and lesbian spaces beyond the scope of this essay. Lesbian spaces often include trans men, gay spaces often include trans women, and many queer trans people don't fit neatly into the "man" or "woman" categories.

13. For a helpful history of the acronym TERF, see Williams, "TERF: What It Means and Where It Came From."

14. Worthen, "This Is My TERF!"

15. Williams, "Radical Inclusion."

16. Rogers, "TERFs Aren't Feminists."

17. See Thurlow, "From TERF to Gender Critical."

18. Worthen, "This Is My TERF!"

19. Hines, "Sex Wars."

20. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 104. It is not clear whether or how this claim is meant to apply to trans men. The section of the book from which the quote is drawn takes aim at trans women in lesbian communities.

21. See Drucker, "Sandy Stone," and Trigilio, "Complicated and Messy Politics," for two famous historical examples of such exclusion.

22. Currans, "Transgender Women Belong Here."

23. Sullivan, *We Both Laughed in Pleasure*, 313.

24. Scheim et al., "Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Trans Men."

25. Scheim et al., "Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Trans Men," 574.

26. Scheim et al., "Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Trans Men," 582.

27. Supportive comments include the observation that McCormick is not the first trans man to compete in IML, a proud comment from the owner of the San Francisco gay sauna EROS noting that trans men are welcome there, multiple comments from trans leathermen detailing their community involvement, a sweet story from a cis gay man about befriending a trans man ("I harbored some negative opinions regarding Trans-Leathermen. Then I met a Trans-Leatherman who opened my mind, not to mention my bodily orfices. . . . That man went on to become a good friend, with whom I have done many things aside from sex"), and an injunction from one of the judges to "GET A GRIP, MARY! It's a frigging contest."

28. Kai Korpak, personal communication, November 22, 2025.

29. u/Peace-Automatic, comment on u/bladebag138, "'Uncharted Pleasures: A Gay Man's Guide to Vaginal Play' WTF?" Reddit, r/askgaybros, April 14, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/askgaybros/comments/1jz7cue/comment/mn6gfki/.

30. Weiss, "GL vs. BT."

31. Miller et al., "Domestic Violence in Lesbian Relationships."

32. Heyes, "Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory," 1099.

33. See Kilbride, "'This Is Why We Became Activists.'"

34. See, e.g., Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"; Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman."

35. Clarke, "Revisiting the Legacy."

36. For discussions of gay male misogyny and its application to cis men perceived as feminine, see Hale and Ojeda, "Acceptable Femininity?"

37. Thurlow, "From TERF to Gender Critical"; Mathers et al., "The Limits of Homonormativity."

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Comments on Talia Mae Bettcher's Beyond Personhood: *An Essay in Trans Philosophy*

Tamsin Kimoto
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

INTRODUCTION

If the central concepts at work in *Beyond Personhood* are things like *interpersonal spatiality* and *intimacy*, then it seems prudent to name the forms of intimacy Talia generates and sustains in the broader life of her professional work in philosophy. In her *What Is It Like to Be a Philosopher?* interview, Talia spends a great deal of time extolling the virtues of the many people who've shaped her to be the philosopher she is today. In addition to her decades-long friendship with Jacob Hale, she points to two figures in her development:

> In general, I have to say that women like Sandra Harding and Ann Garry inspire me: The grey-haired powerhouses of the profession. I have a hard time naming role-models, whenever someone asks. They're really the closest I can get. I mean, they did it in seventies when second wave feminism was just breaking. They had to be far more intelligent, better philosophers, than everybody else. By far. They had to be tough as nails. They had to absorb such crap, and still persist. They leave me in awe.[1]

Incidentally, this is an incredibly apt description of Talia and her presence and impact in philosophy. I, like many other trans philosophers, am fortunate to count Talia among my mentors and role models in the field. She's less gray-haired but no less a powerhouse and certainly a better philosopher than many; however, what has always stood out to me most about Talia is how she shows up for those of us who are following trails she's blazed in the field and for those forging their own. She's joined dissertation committees (sometimes at the eleventh hour), written letters of recommendation and promotion, sat on the phone with us, talked through ideas, emailed back and forth, strategized, borne our complaints and frustrations, and just generally been present. I know she's done so at the expense of being able to do her own work, but I also know that all of that is part of the work for her, and I don't know that we can yet really appreciate the enormity of what that work has enabled. These are ways of doing the work that often go unacknowledged in a discipline like philosophy and so I wanted to name them here.

It is precisely because of this more invisible labor that it is a delight to be thinking with Talia's work in this issue and with Talia herself in celebration of her book *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy*. Being asked to comment on her book feels like a full circle kind of moment that I wish could be purely celebratory. Instead, what I can say is that reading and thinking with *Beyond Personhood* while we are living through the intensification of systems of elimination aimed at trans people alongside many others

feels necessary. I'm appreciative of what the text opens up for consideration and the forms of inquiry it engages in the process of doing so. My comments here are broken into three lines of inquiry that, while interlinked, are, I hope, distinctive enough to offer different opportunities for conversation or engagement. My first set of comments is motivated by my interest in the specificity of Bettcher's positionality statement at the beginning of the text and how it shapes the kind of philosophical inquiry she undertakes. My second looks to the question of race and how the archive she draws upon both informs and potentially limits the scope of her engagement with the human-animal-object. And finally, I'm interested in how engaging sexuality more thoroughly might complicate the picture of the (trans) object throughout.

LINE OF INQUIRY ONE: THE GROUND

Talia Bettcher's *Beyond Personhood* opens with a set of claims addressed at the frequent (willful) misunderstandings of whom she writes for, noting that she's not interested in appealing to transphobes and instead writes for "trans people, nonbinary people, and new friends . . . to make new friends who are differently oppressed" and to build "new practices with new friends."[2] This insistence on the generation of new practices is key to understanding the text overall, and so I want to sit with how an emphasis on practice underscores the distinction between what Bettcher refers to as *ground-bound philosophy* and its table-gazing other. I take Bettcher's account to be in line with what Kristie Dotson has referred to as a necessary shift to a "culture of praxis" in the discipline as opposed to a culture of (mere) justification.[3] Whereas a culture of (mere) justification relies on an often-unstated but rigorously enforced set of rules to determine whether or not a particular work really is philosophical, a culture of praxis requires us to make situated judgments about the philosophical merits of a work based on how a given work actually works for "our living"; such a shift requires a "recognition and encouragement of multiple canons and multiple ways of understanding disciplinary validation."[4] Linda Martín Alcoff similarly tracks how even within philosophy, intramural bickering has severely limited the scope of the kinds of work that has been able to even get off the ground and how a kind of "bridge work" has been undertaken largely within the subfields of feminist philosophy and philosophy of race.[5]

As Bettcher notes in her discussion of ground-bound philosophy, this kind of work requires more than simply bridging the Analytic-Continental divide; indeed, it requires moving beyond the boundaries of philosophy and toward the multiple canons to which Dotson gestures. This is precisely because, as Charles Mills argues, standard philosophical practice tends to rely upon ideal theorizing in precisely the pernicious ways that maintain philosophical practice as a space that is constitutively unable to grapple with its own investments in a problematic status quo.[6] The correlative effect of this, however, for those of us who occupy the subject positions at stake in the kinds of work carried out by feminist philosophers or philosophers of race or disability is what Bill Lawson has referred to as a kind of "philosophical playa hatin'" in which minoritized philosophers are denied even the status *philosopher* before we've even been able to demonstrate our work.[7] We are already doing philosophy poorly simply by showing up in philosophy in the first place, and the fact that doing our work might (will) require going beyond the properly philosophical risks endangering that status further. Thus, Bettcher's insistence that this essay emerges from "several Los Angeles trans subcultures, between the years 1994 and 2022" and from the subject position of "a white, middle-class, more or less abled-bodied trans girl from Canada" is philosophically important and epistemically brave, and it leaves me craving further development.[8]

The positionality statement is a familiar genre for those of us working in fields like Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and they're also a feature of much of Bettcher's published work in trans philosophy. Despite this, I'm embarrassed to say that it had never occurred to me to think through precisely how where and when I transitioned might have impacted my sense of gender beyond our less granular distinctions (e.g., Global North/Global South) in the way Bettcher's statement invited me to. It seems to me to be a form of what María Lugones describes in her articulation of resistant subjectivity as expressing itself "infra-politically . . . Infra-politics marks the turn inward, in a politics of resistance, toward liberation. It shows the power of communities of the oppressed in constituting resistant meaning and each other against the constitution of meaning and social organization by power."[9] If infrapolitics moves our attention from the scene of the public to something that move beneath or alongside it, then it seems to move us into the gendered underworlds to which Bettcher attends in her discussion of ontological pluralism. Indeed, Los Angeles moves to the fore here as Bettcher notes that when she transitioned, she was "welcomed into Los Angeles subcultures that had existed for many years and that had long-standing practices that had never even shown up on the radar of mainstream culture" and she "learned from trans women of color" ways of being trans that encompassed being a "full and complete woman without surgical or even hormonal intervention."[10]

As another trans girl, coming from a different set of geographic, demographic, and generational markers, I'm curious to think through more of what's present in the text that is specifically Angeleno alongside the double Anglos Bettcher's positionality statement references. Specifically, I'm curious about the tensions such a positioning might engender as well as the insights it generates. As someone who lived in Los Angeles and deliberately didn't transition while there because the girls served too hard, I kept searching for the intimate markers of how an Angeleno might make sense of trans that differed from my own sense, which is in many ways indebted to the US South and to ways of gendering that are explicitly shaped by Blackness as much as they are by my own racial identifications. Indeed, what I now recognize about my sense that I wouldn't be cunty enough to transition in Los Angeles is that my immediate context (living on the westside and studying in a conservative, Christian philosophy department) was shaped by the kinds of racialized reality enforcements Bettcher details in the last part of the text. For example, some of the negative gender phoria I experienced there and continue to experience is due to pervasive fatphobia. Standards of beauty and desirability are of course geographically and

racially situated such that fatness circulates and marks gender differentially based on where one is and who circulates around you.[11] This is not to say that the South is any more a haven for (trans)gender messiness than anywhere else in the US, but it is to think about how gender phorias are shaped by geography in precisely the way the text invites. My curiosity here is shaped by my sense that following this line of inquiry pushes us beyond where table-gazing forms of philosophy are most comfortable.

SECOND LINE OF INQUIRY: THE BURIED LEDE

I'm deeply appreciative of the work being undertaken in the final section of the book, "The Buried Lede: The Liminalities among Us" and, in particular, for the locution of the *coloniality of intimacy*. Throughout these final three chapters, Bettcher reminds us of the enormity of what must be rethought, reworked, or revoked in order to theorize transness transly. In particular, I am grateful for the grappling with the question of race, of what it might mean to think gender and perhaps *trans*gender as themselves racial projects. I particularly enjoyed Bettcher's reworking of her earlier work on the morality of nakedness in light of an engagement with literature on colonization and clothing. It's an insight we often forget that the body about which we theorize is, more often than not, the clothed body and so engaging with the politics and moralities of fashion and fashioning an embodied self is incredibly fruitful. Fashion is of course central to many ways of transitioning insofar as we attend to the affects produced by wearing certain forms of clothing rather than others.[12] In a longer history of clothing, as Bettcher notes, the "meaning of those artifacts place on the body so that the artifacts *became* clothing, devices of concealment, when they had not already been" and the politics of this concealment is deeply gendered and racialized.[13] Clothing, as a tool of concealment and therefore the very thing that produces intimacy as it conceals it, is bound up with the colonial projects of European societies and signifies a kind of personhood and the possibility of its violation through the kinds of invading gazes that then come to mark the practices of white supremacy; visual displays of Black suffering and their consumption by white viewers have been central to both progressive and conservative race politics.[14] The scopic availability, as C. Riley Snorton puts it, of non-white bodies is possible through the imposition and denial of being clothed.[15]

So, clothing becomes one of the ways in which the human and its other(s) come to be delineated in coloniality/modernity. Clothing might be one of those things that signifies the line between the human and the animal that runs through the archives of transatlantic anti-Black and settler colonial discourses. As a ground for rethinking personhood itself, this makes quite a bit of sense to tarry with; however, given the turn to the object, and particularly Bettcher's interest in interpersonal and non-personal objects, I wonder if there isn't room to complicate the analysis by adding to the discourse of dehumanization and the non(?)-human animal a consideration of the inhuman. If dehumanization names ways of being pushed beneath the category of the human into the merely animal, then the inhuman attempts to identify the ways in which that which might be human gets marked as mere resource for extraction[16] or what Bettcher might refer to as a nonpersonal object.[17] If we look, for example, to the archives of yellow peril and orientalism, what we will find are myriad references to the Asian as machine or robot-like in their capacity for labor.[18] So, in addition to the categories of human and animal as considered within *Beyond Personhood*, there is also, fascinatingly, the machine—and the associations between trans women and machines are of course well-known to this audience.

My interest in probing this is twofold. First, while I think it's generous of Bettcher to allow for the possibility that Europeans were exaggerating or making primarily analogical claims in denying humanity to non-white, non-European others,[19] I have perhaps spent too long elbow-deep in the racial science archives to think this is the case. The recognition of non-Europeans' species membership does indeed appear to have been hard fought and bitterly contested. Second, as a way of thinking about how trans people are figured, I wonder what thinking from the standpoint of an object evacuated of humanity allows us to recognize both about the nature of anti-trans violence and oppression as well as the kinds of remaking of the human that trans theories already undertake. The synthetic and animal histories of the estrogen I inject into my left thigh every week point to forms of intimacy that might refuse the seeming obviousness of the distinction between the interpersonal and nonpersonal objects you describe. It seems obvious, for example, that trans people are often treated as nonpersonal objects, but we are hardly the first category to be subject to that treatment and, moreover, I wonder about the capacities, practices, and knowledges we have generated about how to be a nonpersonal, interpersonal object.

LINE OF INQUIRY THREE: OBJECTIFICATION AND THE OTHER BURIED LEDE

As a final line of inquiry, I am deeply interested in how sexuality is or isn't at work in the text. Given her focus on developing an analytic account of the structures of transphobia, much of Bettcher's discussion of interpersonal spatiality focuses on violations of intimacy. For example, under the politics of pretense, trans women might be relegated to being "dirty little secrets" by their cis male partners, thus restricting that eroticism to a "form of deviant sexual role-play in which the trans person is merely pretending to be female."[20] This is a kind of intimate violation insofar as it is in light of her trans status that the trans woman in question is barred from the larger field of the heterorelational complex Bettcher describes. If she has expressed a desire to be public about the relationship and her partner refuses to be public because she is trans, but nonetheless continues to insist on sexual access, then he would seem to be treating her as a nonpersonal object and engaging in a kind of boundary violation. Indeed, anecdotal experience teaches many trans women in this sort of situation that these are precisely the sort of men who might be dangerous to be involved with given the possibility of violence often present in these situations. If he is determined to keep her a secret, then publicity is experienced as a calamity of intimacy and therefore a threat to be managed.

I take it that this is the negative side of this particular aspect of trans life, and it is an aspect that many of us have to grapple with regularly. It's dangerous to pretend otherwise. At the same time, it is noteworthy that sexuality appears largely as a domain of threat and violation in the text; *Beyond Personhood* presents a (perhaps rightfully) pessimistic take on trans sexuality. I cannot help but wonder about what the other sides of trans sexuality might have to offer an account of interpersonal spatiality. Bettcher gestures toward these possibilities in her brief mention of *intimate recoding practices* in which trans people and their partners reconfigure boundaries and bodies.[21] While it's easy to frame these practices as a kind of temporary reprieve from an oppressive sexual regime, it strikes me that they are also akin to the kinds of underworld gender practices previously mentioned in the text. For example, another pathway to internalizing the understanding that one can be a "full and complete woman without surgical or even hormonal intervention" might be learning how to recode one's body through intimate sexual experiences.[22] That is, asking or being asked how to refer to a body in dirty talk gestures towards other modes of sense-making for how to articulate both one's body and the boundaries of access to it that can extend beyond just sexual intimacy. Given that sexuality is a domain of life in which it is difficult to deny that one is an object for others, it seems like closer attention to the variety of sexual experiences might enable a more thorough account of how objectification and experience of being an object for others works in relation to interpersonal spatiality.

NOTES

1. Cliff Sosis and Talia Mae Bettcher, "Talia Mae Bettcher," *What Is It Like to be a Philosopher*, May 2020, https://www.whatisitliketobeaphilosopher.com/talia-mae-bettcher.
2. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 10.
3. Dotson, "How Is This Paper Philosophy?"
4. Dotson, "How Is This Paper Philosophy?" 17.
5. Alcoff, "Philosophy's Civil Wars."
6. Mills, "Ideal Theory as Ideology."
7. Lawson, "Philosophical Playa Hatin'."
8. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 7.
9. Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 746.
10. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 67.
11. Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*.
12. Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body."
13. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 182.
14. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection;* Wanzo, *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised*.
15. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.
16. Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.
17. Cheng, "Ornamentalism."
18. Roh et al., *Techno-Orientalism*.
19. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 191.
20. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 106.
21. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 106.
22. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 67.

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"You Can't Have Everything . . . Where Would You Put It?":[1] *Responding to Tamsin, Javier, Ray, and Amy, and Isobel on* Beyond Personhood

Talia Mae Bettcher

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

As Javier notes, this book was a lot more playful in its earlier instantiations. It interwove, with the theory, intimate sharings of my own life in Los Angeles over the decades. It included fun dialogues. It engaged in marked performative turns. It was creative AF. But, then, one day I decided to "shut it down, shut it *all* down." What remained—what I finally came up with—was a text that tittered between the merely dense and the outright impenetrable.

If any playfulness remains at all in the book, I suppose it's in its subversion of the old, "grand" European treatises. In some respects, the *Essay* reads as kindred to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* or Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. And it seems perversely appropriate to my attack on the foundational modern concepts of person, self, and

subject that the book plays with this genre. Not to explain my "jokes" but calling the book an "essay" is hardly an accident, of course.

Unlike these philosophers, however, I regard the work that theory accomplishes as multiple, worldly, and above all, dialogical. Theory can provide illumination in the WTF. Or, it can engage in warfare with hostile forces. Or, it can accomplish some other tactical aim. In this particular case, the theory was supposed to not just be *about* intimacy, it was supposed to *enact* a gesture of intimacy. Indeed, even though I wasn't sharing my story understood literally, it should be noted that the book has the form of a narrative—with a beginning, a middle, and an end. (There's even an initiating "event" at the end of Chapter Three.) Again, not to explain my playfulness. But, I guess, *to explain my playfulness*.

I don't know whether this was the right decision, ultimately. But I can tell you why I made it. First, my own life had taken some dark turns, and I just didn't feel all that playful anymore. So, if the book was going to be playful, that playfulness had to be hard won and a little perverted and grim. Fun! Second, ironically, I found that all the intimate stories I had originally planned on sharing, all the creative performativity, were simply ways of hiding. Oh. It is *so* easy for me to share personal details in public. To fuck around theatrically. After all, I'm trans, and I've been trained into it. It's what I call an "intimate deadening" in the book.[2] No vulnerability at all. What truly terrified me was simply putting out the theory itself, entirely naked, as a gesture of intimacy in its own right. True vulnerability requires the possibility of rejection, of taking a leap.

And this was certainly a leap. After all, I was returning to the philosophical issues that had tormented me just prior to my coming out and transitioning in 1995. I was trying to describe, in a theoretical way, something about my gender phoria for which, I felt, there were no adequate concepts and, indeed, which seemed to go against what philosophy had to say about self and subject. At the time, when I tried to write about this stuff at UCLA, I just ended up feeling increasingly isolated, weird, and opaque—disconnected from reality. This is precisely why I turned to (or was, by others, guided into) early modern conceptions of self. I needed the distance between myself and the content. To take another stab at it—to try to articulate this messy stuff in words—to put it out there—well, *that* was fucking vulnerable.

Now imagine receiving a letter from me—perhaps by email, perhaps by "snail mail." The letter is mailed from Los Angeles in 2025. Perhaps you receive it in 2025. Or 2026. And perhaps you are reading it somewhere in Berlin. Or somewhere in Tijuana. Or in Toronto. Or in Lima. Perhaps you are my friend. Perhaps you want to be. Or, perhaps you dislike me or have no interest in me. Or perhaps you have a prurient interest in the sordid details of a trans life and are about to be sorely disappointed.

This letter comes to you as an intimate gesture in case you are interested in beginning or deepening our connection (if you have no desire for connection, the letter will thwart your efforts to draw anything of value from it). And you must decide what to do with it. This will likely require some interpretive work on your part. In fact, it will probably require that you add something to the letter that was not there. And, in the end, you will have to decide whether you are even going to reply to it or not, and if so, how. You might merely acknowledge the gesture. Or, you might share of yourself too. And how you share yourself, how much, in what way. Well, that's a decision too.

I imagined this book, at any rate, as an intimate gesture, saying. "Hi! This is where I'm coming from. Wanna make some good trouble?" As such, I regarded it as merely part of an evolving process—a contribution that joined into a longer conversation or, rather, plurality of conversations, that had already been unfolding and would continue to unfold long after. Of course, those of us who do this sort of work know that there is never one "audience." We are always writing for different people, situated differently in terms of motivation, politics, culture, geography, time, and, of course, much more. So, I was trying to have different conversations with different people, and these conversations were intimate or distant in varying degrees. In fact, I was trying to start up new conversations across barriers of mutual unintelligibility. How to create, interpersonally, new meanings—new possibilities for intimacy and distance? These were the aims that shaped my "Essay."

REPLY TO MARVIN AND BESS

Understanding the intention of the book thusly is important in addressing what I take to be, in various ways, a shared concern among all my interlocuters—namely, that I do not provide as much attention as they would like to specific contexts involving specific people located in specific locations at specific times. This concern is, I think, pressed the most vigorously in Amy and Isobel's remarks about my failure to attend to literal (actual, material) space in any detail. As they put it, the book "has situated us a bit too far beyond space."[3]

There are two ways to understand their worry. One concerns the role of literal space with regards to my theory of interpersonal spatiality. The other concerns the question whether I attend to people, situations, places, and contexts with enough specificity and, if not, whether this has any theoretical implications.

My reply to the first version of the worry is simply to agree with it. There is much more to say about the relation of intimacy/distance to space than is said in the book. This is because I did not have enough "space" in the book to include everything I wanted to say about space in the world. I was working against a word limit, and I had to make choices.

I am, however, quite interested in how interpersonal boundaries are sensitive to things like buildings, rooms, notions of inside and outside. Sex, for example, is allocated to "inside" in the dominant world, and, consequently, fucking "in public" is constituted as transgressive. Proper appearance, likewise, is sensitive to literal space. Try showing up to a summer barbeque in a tuxedo. Try showing

up to a church in a bikini. All of this would have been theorized had I had enough "space." But I didn't.

Happily, however, this essay is part of a much larger body of work that I have been developing over decades. And I hope to continue to develop it for at least a little while longer. I expect that I will write on the topic at some point. That said, there is absolutely no reason why somebody else couldn't take what I've already said and simply develop it for themself, in their own way. At any rate, I never, for one minute, said this was the final account. This is why I wrote in the Preface, "So here it is. Yet another provisional attempt at articulating an idea that will have to be further articulated down the line."[4]

The second version of the worry is more concerning to me—namely, that I do not attend to people, situations, places, and contexts with enough specificity. Is the worry that the theory has not been *informed* by such specificities and that it is therefore inadequate? For example, they write, "we are trans in space, which is to say we're trans at home, we're trans on the bus, we're trans in the woods, and we're trans at the museum. In each of these and countless other spaces, being trans means something different."[5] On this version of the worry, the idea is that my account cannot accommodate this.

However, my account is specifically designed to be able to handle these concerns. First, as I said, interpersonal boundaries are sensitive to entities and places that exist in social space as well as the individuals with whom we interact and the character of the relationship (or lack thereof) that we have with them. Second, because I understand systems of interpersonal spatiality in terms of María Lugones's account of worlds, a contingency and variability is precisely to be expected in certain shifts in the social.

Perhaps, however, their worry is simply that the book ought to have expressly included more details about specific people, situations, places, and contexts. One obvious reply to this worry is that this is just not that kind of book (it's a theory book) and there is no reason to expect that all projects be alike. Or, at least, I don't *think* all projects should be alike, if we endorse methodological pluralism in trans philosophy, *as we should*. In any event, one can't do *everything* at once without writing a very, very, very long book and, as a consequence, the expectation that all trans philosophical investigations deal solely or even mostly in concrete detail would undercut the ability to develop trans theory to any meaningful degree. I'm pleased to say, however, that they will find precisely that sort of work in my forthcoming co-authored chapter "Reality Enforcement as Structural Violence in Lima, Peru." My hope is that others might also find the theory useful, find practical applications for it as it is pertinent (or not pertinent) to their specific situations.

Here, however, we also ought to acknowledge that the methodology involved in philosophizing specific contexts involving specific people located in specific locations at specific times is scarcely innocuous. Does one set oneself up as the outside observer, the witness? How, then, does one avoid academic extractivism? If, on the contrary, one writes as a member of the community, how does one share one's own stories without sharing the stories of one's friends? (This was one of my many problems with the book in its earlier state. Many of my stories involved other people—mostly friends—and I felt that it was not appropriate to share something so intimate. Indeed, in some cases, the stories seemed like they weren't my stories to tell.) In both strategies—from outside and from the inside—one faces very similar challenges. How does one avoid turning lives into useful case studies? How does one avoid profiting from the experiences of others? How does one avoid making public intimate events when one has no right to do such a thing? I am *not* saying that these challenges can't be surmounted. I *am* saying that they need to be acknowledged as a feature of this approach.

Let me conclude this reply by returning to a critical feature of the book—namely, it is not supposed to be only a theory book about intimacy. On the contrary, my hope was to enact a gesture of intimacy *through* the book (or rather various gestures) and to thereby pave the way for actual encounters. To put it differently, philosophy occurs *in the world* and the sharing of and attention to ideas, their transformation, their return back to sender *is* quite particular. *Like the writing and reading of a letter, this book affords actual encounters*. I wanted the writing and reading of the theory, the responding to it, to themselves constitute *specific moments of intimacy*. That is, I wanted to help *engende*r specific interpersonal situations at specific times, cultural milieus, and spatial locations. And *this* is what we are doing *right now*.

On this point, I am grateful to Amy and Isobel (and also Tamsin) for talking about the larger context of trans sociality in which I have participated and continue to participate. It is true that I try to show up and to help build community to the best of my ability. I learned from my early experiences in trans community in the nineties that this is absolutely critical for our survival and flourishing. What is the point of even doing trans philosophy if we are not there for each other? I agree that quite often this "being there for each other"—this trans sociality—itself constitutes a kind of trans philosophical practice. Indeed. How else could we philosophize?

So, it is precisely within this larger context of trans sociality that I hope this essay is received. I hope that it is understood as an offering to others—trans and otherwise oppressed others—an offering of a trans theory that is, hopefully, applicable and useful. However, I also hope that it is understood as an expression of part of my existential identity, to those willing to receive it.[6] These ideas have been in the works over a long period of time. And they do not come from an armchair. Rather, they have been developed over time through hard work and community building, within the context of my life lived with others. Sharing these ideas with you is about as naked as I can get.

REPLYING TO PITTS

Javier's understandable question about this book is whether it exhibits a universalizing tendency that runs contrary to my commitment to Lugonian ontological pluralism.[7] One way of taking this concern is as a point about the theory

of interpersonal spatiality as well as the new concepts that I deploy within that theory. Am I not proposing a universal account that is not sensitive to the multiplicity of worlds, and more than that, the movements in-between worlds, the grasping and attending, that occurs in the moments of creating new meaning, new possibilities? There's a lot here in the worry.

There are multiple ways I'd like to address it. First, I think it's important to keep in mind the metaphilosophical project that I outlined at the beginning. It is within the spirit of this project that the actual theory of interpersonal spatiality is offered. While the theory itself may come off as "this is the way it is," it is not actually intended as an account of the life, the universe, and everything as if it were a grand European treatise. It is, rather, an opening up on my part—"This is what I've come up with in trying to make sense of my experiences. What do you think? Do you find it useful? Can I be made sense of?" It's *personal*.

Second, I think that concepts like "interpersonal spatiality" go no further than Lugones's own concepts of "ontological pluralism," "active subjectivity," and "complex communication." After all, Lugones offers them as if they were simply true and accurate characterizations of how things are. Is her own notion of 'active subjectivity' supposed to apply universally? Is Lugones at risk of taking her own reflections, limited by her location(s), and then transforming them into a total vision that is, rather than universally applicable, local and limited? No doubt. But, then, again, I understand her concepts in the same way that I understand my own—namely, offered up in the hopes that they will be useful from a liberatory standpoint. The litmus test is surely a pragmatic one. Do they work? To what extent?

Let's dig into the notions of interpersonal spatiality a bit. Let me start by clarifying what I mean by "transcendental." By "transcendental," I did *not* mean to suggest any agreement with Victor Turner who, unlike Lugones, posits an ego outside of the social. Nor do I mean to suggest that there exist entities such boundaries, pathways, and the like, outside of the social. On the contrary, I insist that all boundaries, pathways, and the like, are fully immanent in the social and, in particular, gestures of intimacy and distance. By "transcendental" I meant only to flag a particular way of arguing: In order for x to be possible, it is necessary that y. In my case, I argued that in order for interpersonal spatiality to be possible, it is necessary that there be something like boundaries, etc. This may or may not be right. But that's it. That's all that "transcendental" comes to. So, let's dig down deeper.

One of the presuppositions of the book is, of course, that "we" all experience each other through modes of closeness, distance, and in-between. Who is the "we"? Human beings? Perhaps that's a good first approximation. However, the very concept "human being" is political, philosophical, and stained with blood. I certainly wouldn't want to unreflexively presuppose the concept in a work intended to investigate it. Instead, I understand the "we" as an invitation to engage. It is open to whomever can engage with it. This openness is corroded, no doubt, by the fact that the book is written in English and not (yet) available in other languages. The worry at present, however, is the book *presupposes* a capacity for intimacy and distance. That is, the worry is that the book purports to universalize a capacity for intimacy thereby risking dangerous foreclosure. On this point, however, I agree with Lugones, who also expressly links intimate interactions and resistance.[8] I simply don't know what it would be to engage in resistance, forms of coalitional relations with others, without possibilities of intimacy. I don't know how to go beyond it.

The question of the validity of the specific theory, however, is another matter altogether. My theory posits notions such as interpersonal boundaries, gestures of intimacy, pathways, strips, and the like. And it could well be that this theory is biased by my own cultural locations. First, it could well be that the theory I unfold includes elements that are, rather than features of interpersonal spatiality per se, features of the specific worlds I inhabit. This distortion is something I acknowledge. And I can only express my hope that the ideas I offer are taken up as a shared project that can be corrected and improved. That is the intent.

Second, however, it could well be that the very notions I deploy (e.g., "boundary") are themselves useful only in worlds relatively local to my own. In this case, it may be that there are different forms of intimacy—some that are well accommodated by my theory, and others that are not. For instance, I think it is fair to speak of an intimacy with nonhuman animals—the shared warmth of bodies in contact. And while relations with pets, for instance, are governed by boundaries in particular systems of interpersonal spatiality, the intimacy I speak of now (shared warmth) is not captured by boundaries at all. In this case, I think I would simply acknowledge that existence of this sort of intimacy and then clarify that it is not the sort of intimacy I aim to explain. The one I purport to explain is shot through with interpersonal constraints—constraints that are not inherent in the more basic, visceral one. Crucially, the one I purport to explain is quite close to Lugones's way of thinking of intimacy—namely, as interwoven social life among people who are not acting in an official capacity.

I *do* think my theory could get into trouble should it turn out that there are worlds in which interwoven social life and resistance do not involve interpersonal boundaries at all. In such a case, my theory would have to be rejected as it stands. We would need to ask whether it could be rethought in a way that better accommodated modes of regulated intimacy for which the notion of boundaries, etc., prove inadequate. And if it couldn't, we would need to ask what of use could be preserved in it, if any at all. Here, the book could be regarded as a box of philosophical ideas that could be used, modified, or rejected. My hope, of course, is that it would still have some value.

There is yet another way of understanding Javier's concern—one that connects more closely with the notion of worlds, the phenomenon of existing between worlds, and the very capacity for worldly creation. Javier suggests that the book is written from the perspective of the dominant world, and if they mean by that "solely," then I don't think that's true. The book is written from my location

as informed by experiences in Los Angeles subcultures, from that vantage point of double perception, that can recognize both dominant and resistant worlds. I would add that I think that the very representation of the "dominant world" is going to depend upon one's resistant location—that is, where one is located in the limen. Quite expressly, then, the book is written from that limited perspective, with an intention to engage.

However, it may be that Javier is worried that, because I focus so much on *systems* of intimacy (both dominant and resistant), I do not allow for the possibility of intimacies and distances *between* systems and the possibility for the creation of new intimacies. If so, I think the worry is misplaced. The crucial notions of *anticipatory vulnerability* and *infraintimacy*[9] as well as my development of complex interpersonal spatiality, modeled on Lugones's complex communication[10] are intended precisely to capture these inter-worldly and world creative possibilities. And they are central to my project. Let me discuss a few of these notions now.

By "anticipatory vulnerability" I mean the vulnerability one experiences in being open to different interpretations in different worlds. For instance, when a trans person is open with a nontrans person sexually, their body (or, rather, "intimate person") is exposed not only within a system of interpersonal spatiality in a trans friendly underworld, but, also, open to uptake within the abusive system of the overworld. To achieve intimacy in such a context requires not only that one's partner not subject one to such uptake, but, also, that one's partner understand one's complex vulnerability. By the "infraintimate," I mean to capture the way in which unintelligibility may function as a form of protection from exposure to another. To the oblivious member of the overworld, for instance, the sort of vulnerability discussed here is not available. Consequently, the trans person, while invalidated, has maintained a sort of privacy through this obliviousness.

I regard such notions as central to both the content and operations of the book. First, in what is the turning point of the book, I attempt to explain pre-transition self-recognition in terms of what I call the blank open—an idea that turns crucially on the notion of the infraintimate. The very event of recognition—apparitional liminality—is all about existing in a state that anticipates resistant modes of intimacy and distances, in-between one's constitution in the dominant world and the plethora of anticipated possibilities. Here, one is in-between one's structural constitution as merely make-believing, "make-believe" as a veritable opening to new socialities.

This section is particularly important as it involves making sense of my own transitional experiences. As such, it constitutes a return to my failed, vulnerable-making attempts to do the same, back in the nineties. Here, I reach out to the poetic theorizing of Anzaldúa for help, as I grasp for answers.[11] Here, in this crucial moment, I find myself in "cracks and shadows between worlds." And it is here, also, that I find inspiration for understanding and perhaps even achieving complex intimacies and distances (i.e., interpersonal spatialities) across a thick limen in which we are multiple in multiple ways. Not to quote myself. *But to quote myself*:

> I would like to further suggest the structural invisibility of another's liminality—precisely their unintelligibility—provides for their infraintimate privacy and protection, their sense of containment. Like the state of the blank open, so central in pretransition self-recognition, a pause in recognition of a hidden depth holds the anticipation of intimate gestures—gestures not predetermined [by some system, my insert] but perhaps, resonant, formed in the crucible of the infraintimate. Here, we must start with the presumption of unfathomable existential depth—a capacity for intimate vulnerability far beyond one's ken. It is precisely through this recognition that a permeable boundary can be recognized—not a block but an observation, a deep breath necessary for self-display and therefore intimacy.[12]

REPLYING TO BRIGGS

My reply to Ray could be very short. If it were, it would go something like this: *Thank you, Ray. I agree with pretty much everything you say.* However, such a brief reply would be grossly unfair to Ray who has clearly put in a lot of work trying to make sense of my views, as well as deep thought into taking the views in new directions. I do want to begin by saying thank you to Ray, though. I felt very much understood in their account of my views. I felt seen and reflected in their words.

Before I dive into what I think Ray contributes and why I think they're largely right, I also want to point out that one of the ways I felt understood by Ray is simply by their recognition that they should feel free to pick up what I was saying, change it, add to it, determine whether and, if so, how it could be applied to more specific contexts than discussed in the book. I felt that they were trying to figure out what they could get out of the thing and how they might use it for their own investigations. This is indeed what I hope for this Essay—namely, that it might be useful, might be expanded, corrected, further developed, applied, and the like. I don't see it as my property.

Now, to understand Ray's project, it's crucial to begin with their understanding of "world," which is largely the same as my own understanding and which is, I hope, largely the same as Lugones's. The relevant point for our purposes is this: Just because some world is an underworld, formed in tense resistance to some form of oppression, doesn't mean that it isn't oppressive in other ways. In fact, it doesn't mean that it doesn't retain some aspects of the very oppression it is attempting to resist. This has to do, in part, with the way intermeshed oppressions show up as (or are treated as) separate vectors which build implicit privilege within those vectors. In other words, this is Crenshaw 101.[13] Let me note that this is in part what Javier has in mind when they worry about "cracks and shadows between worlds." Such cracks and shadows are necessary when one is confronted by worlds that invariably oppress in one way or another. It is there, if anywhere, that creative resistance will be possible and it is why coalition across multiple oppressions is crucial.

Now, Ray's analysis focuses specifically on the mythology surrounding the "physical person" and sexual desire that I describe in the book. What might be called the core mythology is this: Intimate appearance, unlike proper appearance, is "natural" and "pre-cultural." It is the thing (the "naked body") which exists *underneath* clothing—clothing which then serves to block sensory access to this pre-cultural thing. In extending my analysis of the folk system, I begin to provide an account of the "heterorelational complex."

In this complex, the core mythology is extended to link male and female intimate appearances to notions of sexual desire. Specifically, I posit the following beliefs: (1) The female naked body is imagined to be the source of male sexual desire. (2) Sexual desire is conceived of as something like a powerful force that, once set into motion, can hardly be stopped. (3) The female naked body is regarded as inherently subject to violation unless some mitigating cultural intervention occurs. (4) The preceding three are natural features of sexuality. To this list, Ray adds the following for men: (5) Men are regarded as always desiring of and ready for sex. (6) The male naked body is regarded as inherently violating. (7) The preceding two are natural features of sexuality.

I am grateful for these additions as I think they make the mythology clearer. Sketching out the mythology embedded in a system is challenging because one must rely on one's own limited experiences and also because this mythology is itself often obscure and even incoherent. Let me explain that the reason the mythology, as I outlined it, concerned only women is because I wanted to emphasize the way in which women are marked as intimate while men are regarded as standard. My thought was that only in the presence of women does the mythology become explicit (for men). So, I thought that this mythology was more closely associated with the female physical person and that the male physical person was simply read in terms of that mythology reciprocally when the mythology was activated.

Regardless of whether this is right, it is clear that the mythology as I outline it is not sufficiently precise. I think that, drawing on Ray's (6), (3) should be modified by inserting "by men." Thus, (3*) The female naked body is regarded as inherently subject to violation by the male naked body unless some mitigating cultural intervention occurs. This would incorporate Ray's (6) while also making it more precise too by specifying that the male naked body is only regarded as inherently violating *to female naked bodies*. (Think of men in a shared shower or locker room.)

Ray's (5) is a crucial addition. I think I vaguely thought that something like the "always ready to go" notion was included in my (2). But it's actually not, and it does need to be explicitly mentioned. Moreover, Ray's specification that this is *male* sexual desire and not a universal sexual desire points to an issue that I was attempting to skirt somewhat. (2) says "Sexual desire is conceived of as something like a powerful force that, once set into motion, can hardly be stopped." But this is clearly more applicable to men than it is women. I formulated it universally, however, because I was also thinking of the way in which women are sometimes mythologically regarded as repressing an almost terrifying (to men) libido that once released turns women into insatiable sex fiends. This mythology, of course, plays a significant role in blaming the victim in cases of sexual assault (by men). That said, such mythology is not always in play. Other times women are represented as less sexually desirous than men. So, we find here a case in which the folk mythology is variable and possibly inconsistent.

Ray's question is this: How comes it that even though gay and lesbian underworlds reject the heterorelational complex, transphobia still persists there? And their answer is that some of this heterorelational complex is retained in these worlds, even though it is rejected in other respects. To explain this, Ray turns to the heterorelational mythology discussed above. Ray is more cautious and sophisticated in their answer, but if I were to put it crudely, it would go like this. In lesbian communities what we often find is that while (1) and (2) are rejected, (3) and (6) are retained. In gay male communities, what we often find is that while (1) and (6) are rejected, (2) and (5) are accepted (and (3) is possibly accepted).

I think I mostly agree with this. My one caveat would concern (1). While it is true that in both lesbian and gay communities, the linkage between female naked bodies and male sexual desire is shattered, there is a deeper feature of (1) that is retained. This is the very idea that the naked body can be a source of desire at all. I say this because the naked body is itself a mythological entity. It doesn't exist. On the contrary, sexual desire, I argue, concerns the culturally constituted intimate appearance. Or, rather, it concerns *both* the proper and intimate appearance and the movement of the former to the latter.

I want to conclude my discussion of Ray's comments by expanding their investigation as a conversational response to their expansion of mine. For me, what is important is not only the mythology at work in the folk system, but also the organized social practices. I am interested in the way folk mythology motivates engagement in certain social practices while, at the same time, both obscuring their true character and contributing to their very constitution. For example, the false belief in a naked body that exists prior to cultural intervention obscures the existence of intimate appearance as a social phenomenon. In light of this, it is important to stress that the main reason that reality enforcement and the deceiver/pretender representations continue to exist in lesbian and gay underworlds is because sex-differentiated proper appearance continues to represent sex-differentiated intimate appearance—a practice that does exist in many trans underworlds.

I say this not as a critique of Ray who, no doubt, recognizes this. I say it because it opens up further avenues of investigation concerning the nature of sexual practices in gay and lesbian underworlds—how they depart, how they do not from the straight overworlds. For example, how is homosocial space (e.g., locker rooms) altered in gay contexts? How is intimacy eroticized in different ways? What movements of intimacy are eroticized and what movements are not? How do these practices replicate the heterosexual

sexual practices and how do they not? How do the beliefs that constitute the operative mythology motivate these practices while obscuring their true character? These are interesting questions, I think, that ought to be pursued.

REPLYING TO KIMOTO

Tamsin opens up three lines of inquiry in her comments, which I'd like to take in reverse order. The first (or last) concerns trans sexuality. I understand Tamsin's comments as an invitation to say more about sexuality—both the ways in which trans people are perniciously objectified and the ways in which we use sexual practices resistantly to affirm and reconstitute ourselves. I agree that so much more can be said on this topic than is said in the book and that saying it is an important project. In earlier versions of the essay, my discussion of sexuality was more extensive. Alas, given the word limit, I needed to make cuts and this discussion needed to be shortened. This is indeed a topic I plan on exploring in greater depth. In fact, I have already started with the forthcoming co-authored essay "Fucking Hopeless Romantics: Trans Women, (Nontrans) Men, and the Failures of Intimacy." This essay looks specifically at the various forms of eroticism that motivate nontrans men to seek out trans women, the obstacles that undermine actual relationships, and the types of harm that are inflicted on us. Notably, rather than focusing on "objectification" as an overarching harm, we provide more specificity by describing what we call "de-realization," "fetishization," and "sexualization."

Admittedly, I do tend to dwell on the negative. And Tamsin is right that more needs to be said about positive, resistant forms of sexuality. Tamsin says that my brief discussion of trans sexual recoding practices makes it seem that they are mere temporary reprieves rather than crucial underworldly practices. If I do unintentionally make it seem like that, I need to clarify that I actually agree with Tamsin's take. In fact, I regard these sexual recoding practices as operating in tandem with the more public practice of disconnecting proper appearance from intimate appearance, so that the former no longer declares, in advance, not only the morphology of the individual, but also the location and nature of their boundaries. Leaving the boundaries unknown and indeterminate, allows for a new sort of intimacy—namely, the discovery of the boundaries or even the mutual creation of the boundaries within sexual contexts via intimate gestures along pathways—pathways that may well be laid down in the moment.

Let me conclude this part of the reply by noting that I have a powerful resource for pursuing a deeper investigation of trans sexuality, both the negative and positive variations—namely, the concept of "erotic structuralism" which I develop in the essay "When Selves Have Sex." Here I argue that the content of eroticism has a structure which includes oneself, another, and the relations and activities between. More specifically, I argue that the most basic form of eroticism (at least in the folk system) involves the eroticization of increased intimacy between oneself and another. One of the important upshots of this view is that recoding can occur not only via intimate gestures but through eroticism itself—particularly overlapping eroticisms in intimate encounters. At any rate, as Tamsin notes, there is so much to be investigated here. Who knows? Perhaps we can pursue some of this together?

A second line of investigation that Tamsin pursues concerns my views on the coloniality of intimacy. In this section, I connect the mythology of clothing and naked body to racist colonial views about the alleged primitivity or animality of non-Europeans. Tamsin points out that there are different ways to be viewed as not human besides being viewed as an animal. "If we look, for example, to the archives of yellow peril and orientalism," she notes, "what we will find are myriad references to the Asian as machine or robot-like in their capacity for labor."

Tamsin suggests that this complicates my analysis. I sort of agree with that, although I would prefer to say, "enriches." One of the key points I try to make in my discussion of racist dehumanization is precisely that it is quite complicated. Not all colonizers held the same view; claims about humanity were varied and contested. Further, the views themselves did not treat the colonized as homogenous; West Africans were viewed differently than indigenous Americans. Finally, the very concepts of human and person were undergoing profound transformation and generative pressure. Tamsin is opening a line of investigation that does complicate what I think is already complicated.

While I can't do justice to the sort of inquiry Tamsin proposes, I can introduce a few speculations about the relationship between the inhuman and clothing. Here, as always, we must distinguish between the mythology and the actual constitution of pathways and persons that this mythology both obscures and enables. Starting with this former—one difference between the primitive or animal is that there is a perceived failure to achieve a level of culture that they ought to achieve (they ought to be dressed and civilized, but here they are naked and savage). In the case of robots, there is no such failure because there is no expectation in the first place. Think, for instance, of the robotic hosts in HBO's *Westworld*. When they are being built or repaired, they are invariably "naked" but in a way that suggests that whether or not they are clothed is entirely irrelevant. One might as well view clothing as parts of the machine or even mere accoutrements. Turning to the latter, the question is how such mythology tracked differential treatment in terms of interpersonal boundaries. Did it lead to different forms of abuse in the way that while white women were subject to intimate disregard (i.e., unreciprocated vulnerability) those who were viewed as mere animals were subject to outright boundary violation? And if so, what did the differences amount to?

I'll conclude this part of my reply by noting that in reality, we are all, in the folk system, different sorts of "vestorg" (on the analogy of cyborg). Instead of a fusion of flesh and metal, however, we are a fusion of flesh and fabric. That is, socially constituted artifacts partially constitute what we are. In light of this, I think that Tamsin's remark about "the synthetic and animal histories of the estrogen I inject into my left thigh" fits beautifully.

Tamsin's final (i.e., first) line of inquiry concerns my opening positionality statement linking me to underworlds

in Los Angeles (between 1994–2022). Here, Tamsin invites me to share more of "what's present in the text that is specifically Angeleno" and to examine some of "the tensions such a positioning might engender as well as the insights it generates." Tamsin shares about her own time in Los Angeles, noting that she didn't feel comfortable transitioning there because "the girls served too hard." (I wonder if she thinks that somehow I did manage to serve hard enough. LOL.) And she asks for "the intimate markers of how an Angeleno might make sense of trans that differed from my own sense, which is in many ways indebted to the US South." Before I try to answer this invitation, I want to note an important insight offered by Tamsin. The insight is that the character of trans gender phoria is, at least to some extent, shaped by geography. (While Tamsin is right that my text invites this idea, I must confess that I hadn't thought of it with the sort of clarity that Tamsin has articulated it.) Now, on to my answer.

Part of my answer is simply that bringing out the specificity of Los Angeles was never my intention. Rather, I had simply wanted to locate myself, my experience, and my work to prevent "universalization" and to give credit where credit was due. The other part of my answer is just "I don't know." I've never experienced trans in the South, so I wouldn't know how to draw out the differences. To put it differently, the idea of something that is "specifically Angeleno" doesn't make sense to me without some sort of contrast (much in the way that "accents" rely on contrasts). Either that, or one must draw on stereotypes about locations—for example, Los Angeles holding very high (normative) beauty standards because of the "industry."

The truth is—the Westside is very different from the rest of Los Angeles. And I lived in West Hollywood and Hollywood. (There was a marked tension between the gay upwardly mobile West Hollywood and the Hollywood where trans women worked at night.) I also found the worlds of trans women to be divided along racial lines and associated with distinct organizations that provided HIV-prevention services. (Meanwhile, trans men had worlds linked to community organizations they had grown themselves.) And feminine beauty standards differed significantly among different racialized worlds.

My own relationship to these worlds was complicated not only by my whiteness, but by my class privilege and affiliation with a university (both as a grad student and as a professor). Connections were made first on the basis of a shared commitment to activism and on the basis of shared experiences with harassment and dating challenges. That said, age, quasi-passability, and relative attractiveness no doubt played a role as well. But, then again, that was so long ago. My experiences in Los Angeles span decades, and things change over time.

I don't know whether there is anything that is a distinctively Angeleno trans experience. But I do know that Los Angeles is a city that has no center. Rather, it has many centers. And the way to find one's way there is to build one's own LA through friendships and other connections. In this respect, I suppose Lugones's ontological pluralism made so much sense to me because it was so characteristic of the multiplicity I experienced in trans worlds and in the city in general. There were so many worlds. And I could, in some ways, help build new worlds. *But, then again, that was so long ago, she said, waxing nostalgic.*

Alas, this discussion of space and, in the end, Los Angeles, is ironic. As some people may know, I made the decision recently to leave behind what was my home for over thirty-five years. Given my status as a trans woman, a green card holder, and an outspoken academic, I was no longer feeling safe in the United States. Because of this, I returned to my first home—Canada—leaving the life I had built behind. While I am beginning to find a new life here, I am also mourning the loss of so much of myself. So much of who I am, was, as a trans woman. And as a philosopher. And as a friend. And human being.

I think that one day, I will be able to write about this most recent transition. And when I am able, I expect that I will have quite a lot more to say philosophically about space, place, and time. How much I will share about the details of my private life and the lives of my friends, however, is an open question that really depends on so many factors, of course. Until then, however, I will simply try to live my life. On to the next chapter.

NOTES

1. Steven Wright "one liner."
2. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 51.
3. Marvin and Bess, "Trans Space Is the Place," 6.
4. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, x.
5. Marvin and Bess, "Trans Space Is the Place," 5.
6. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 170–71.
7. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*.
8. Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 743.
9. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 85.
10. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 171–73.
11. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/la frontera*.
12. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 173.
13. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection."

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Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy

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AUTHOR BIOS

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APA STUDIES ON

Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy

LORI GALLEGOS, EDITOR

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FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

Alexander V. Stehn
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

This special issue of *APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* includes eight articles about how the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) has undertaken historic work to become a place where students can take philosophy courses that are bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate. From 2023 to 2024, our work was accelerated by the "Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands" project sponsored by the APA's Diversity and Inclusiveness Grant Program, the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP), and six organizational units at UTRGV: Philosophy Department, College of Liberal Arts, Faculty Success, Office for Bilingual Integration, Center for Bilingual Studies, and College of Engineering & Computer Science. Our localized aim was to integrate Spanish-English bilingualism and Mexican American biculturalism into a regular rotation of a dozen philosophy courses designed and taught by a team of eight UTRGV faculty. We also thought that our project could demonstrate "proof of concept" for PB3: Philosophy (P) courses designed to cultivate bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy (B3) may be feasible wherever there is at least one B3 philosopher and enough B3 students. Given the twenty-five-year history of *APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* and at least 631 Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the US (21 percent of all colleges and universities), we hope to inspire other philosophical imaginations and experiments by sharing what we have learned and done in the borderlands of South Texas.

Five articles were authored by the UTRGV faculty who wrote the APA grant proposal and report: Alex Stehn, Danny Marrero, Cynthia Paccacerqua, Christopher Gómez, and Dahlia Guzman. One article was written by Mariana Alessandri, another UTRGV faculty who, along with Melisa Vivanco and Bradley Warfield, joined the grant's authors to participate in its core activities. Carlos Sánchez, Professor of Philosophy at San José State University and former editor of this journal (2010–2020), contributed a written version of his keynote address that publicly kicked off our project in 2024. Sara Azúa, who has taken multiple PB3 courses as an undergraduate majoring in both Philosophy and English while minoring in Mexican American Studies, contributed an article exploring the life-changing impacts of B3 courses.

The articles appear in the following conceptual order, but each is self-contained if readers prefer to skip around: 1) An article that Cynthia Paccacerqua and I co-authored—"*Una historia oficial*: Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands"—provides an institutional and departmental history of what happened before and leading up to the grant; 2) Carlos Sánchez's "*Vivir, pensar y filosofar en español*: Philosophy, Interpretation, and the Failures of Translation" reflects on the value of thinking and philosophizing in Spanish by considering English translations, why we need them, and what is lost through them; 3) Mariana Alessandri's "Introduction to Latin American Philosophy in 2011 and 2026: Notes from a Bilingual Ungrading Neophyte" compares the mostly monolingual and graded course she taught in 2011 with the bilingual and more "ungraded" 2026 version; 4) Danny Marrero's "Teaching Feminist Jurisprudence in the US-Mexico Borderlands" foregrounds place-based and culturally relevant considerations for teaching in conversation with Latin American and Latina Critical Feminisms; 5) Dahlia Guzman's "Bilingual *Bildung* on the Border: Teaching Philosophy in Spanish and English" links the philosophical relevance of Spanish-English bilingualism and Mexican American biculturalism to ancient Greek education and modern German ideals of ethical self-formation; 6) Christopher Gómez's "Teaching Philosophy Bilingually through *Ser y Estar*" demonstrates how Spanish-speaking students have certain affordances built into their everyday language that can be drawn out to teach them to philosophize; 7) Sara Azúa's "*Mi lengua es mi hogar*: A Chicana's Reflections on Language, Identity, History, and the Self" is a powerful *autohistoria-teoría* that reveals what is at stake in a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate (B3) education, especially for Hispanic, Mexican American, or Latinx students; and 8) my article "Practicing Philosophical Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Biliteracy (PB3): A Collective Transformation" further narrates and explores the transformations I have witnessed in my colleagues and experienced myself through our PB3 project.

On behalf of the UTRGV philosophy faculty and students participating in the "Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands" project, I wish to thank Lori Gallegos for her support in putting this special issue together and invite our readers to join us in the work of pluralizing philosophical languages and cultures.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy is accepting contributions for the spring 2027 issue. Our readers are encouraged to submit original work on that topic

or on any topic related to Hispanic/Latinx thought, broadly construed. We publish original, scholarly treatments, as well as syllabi, conference reports, book reviews, and interviews. Please prepare articles for anonymous review.

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

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
The deadline for the spring issue is November 15. Authors should expect a decision by January 15. The deadline for the fall issue is May 1. 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, Department of Philosophy, Comal Building 102, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.

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

ARTICLES

Una historia oficial: Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands

Cynthia M. Paccacerqua
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Alexander V. Stehn
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

La historia oficial nunca acaba de revelarse. Pero hay que empezar desde un momento y un lugar para poder contarla como una historia viviente. En esta ocasión contamos una historia oficial juntos.[1] *Somos colegas desde hace dieciséis años, y aunque con experiencias muy distintas, se puede decir que vivimos estos años en tándem. Nos une un momento histórico del antes y después en una misma capacidad de* Assistant Professor *en la facultad de filosofía. No nos conocíamos de antes y nos sorprendió que habíamos escrito sobre las obras de Enrique Dussel.* There was no longer the need to imagine that two tenure-track philosophers with expertise in Latin American Philosophy could be hired in 2010 by the same US university.

In what follows, we take our hires as a historical reference point to develop a story that shows how the broader initiative to apply for the APA's Diversity and Inclusiveness Grant came about. The funded proposal—"Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands" (2023–2024)—and report on its immediate curricular, pedagogical, scholarly, and community outcomes are available on the APA website.[2] But there were institutional and departmental steps that laid the groundwork for the project's possibility. And from the moment we arrived, we began to assemble other accidental coincidences with intentional, strategic acts born out of thoughtful deliberation and collaboration with not just other philosophers but also an interdisciplinary group building a vibrant Mexican American Studies program on campus.

Cynthia: "The original intent of this argument, which I presented at our grant's public launch on February 9, 2024,[3] was to establish how our Philosophy Department had long been doing the type of work that The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) later recognized and supported under its B3 (Bilingual, Bicultural, Biliterate) Institute. I wanted our efforts to be recorded in our institution's history and dispel the myth that philosophy is inherently uninterested in pluralizing its languages and cultures. In this co-authored iteration, however, the significance of this past changed in ways that we are still processing."

Alex: "We are now reaching much further back, but also forward and wider, toward communities that are further from us in both time and space."

Cynthia: "Deleuze's *immemorial* comes to mind. It names the form in which past events constituting our present are accessible, that which can only be remembered and yet we have no first-person memories."[4]

Our article is divided into two major sections. In the first, we focus our story on the ongoing (re)founding of our institution—its students, faculty, and curriculum—using both local archives and available scholarship to fill in details chronologically. In the second, we also draw upon our own memories to tell the story of our more direct and intentional efforts at "Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands" from 2010 to present.

I. AN IMMEMORIAL PAST

A. EDINBURG COLLEGE (1927–1952)
In 1927, when Edinburg College was founded near UTRGV's present-day Edinburg campus, the Spanish-speaking and increasingly bilingual ethnic Mexicans of the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) had been here much longer than the English-

speaking and mostly monolingual Anglo newcomers. Yet despite the further fact that ethnic Mexicans also constituted a numerical majority, the Anglo founders of this regional junior college would have almost certainly considered the RGV's Mexicans to be "foreigners" who spoke Spanish as a "foreign language,"[5] since Texas Anglos frequently racialized and othered Texas Mexicans in ways that severely restricted their educational opportunities.[6] The 1927 "Announcement of Plans, Objectives, Faculty and Courses" said that Edinburg College was dedicated to "Bringing Higher Educational Advantages to Every Young Man, and Every Young Woman of the Valley," but less than 10 percent of students enrolled during its first decade were Mexican American, and ethnic Mexicans comprised an average of 14 percent of each graduating class for the first twenty-five years despite consistently outnumbering Anglos more generally across the region.

As the first period of segregated education for ethnic Mexicans (1900–1950) ended,[7] the US government instituted inter-American and intercultural educational programs that moderated but did not radically change the dominant Anglocentric ideology. In 1950, Edinburg Regional College announced plans for expansion to our much larger present-day campus a few blocks west from the original four-acre site based on the tremendous enrollment increase following WWII.[8] President Roger Ward asked students for their help in establishing what he called a "Pan-American Regional College" that would "extend good-neighbor policies and blend the cultural, artistic, and helpful elements of our two great cultures and civilizations."[9] At least rhetorically, this is the first reference to what might be feasibly called "bicultural" education at one of UTRGV's legacy institutions. Black students were also admitted for the first time, although they were segregated from "Latin" and Anglo students.[10]

B. PAN AMERICAN COLLEGE (1952–1970)

In 1952, Edinburg Regional College became Pan American College (PAC), a four-year college that published its inaugural course catalog (1952–1953) in both English and Spanish, an institutional feat that has never been repeated.[11] Although Mexican Americans constituted 70.7 percent of Hidalgo County's overall population in the 1950 census, Mexican American enrollment at PAC in 1952 was still only 38 percent of the student body.[12] And, since this occurred during the second period of Chicano education in the era of segregation (1950–1965),[13] the educational opportunities offered to Mexican Americans were less progressive than they might appear at first glance. The recent admission of Black students and increasing ethnic Mexican enrollment coincided historically with the creation of two separate tracks, "one in vocational education or 'Industrial Arts' and the other in traditional academics becoming almost two colleges."[14]

Most students enrolled in the vocational track that included trades like carpentry and auto mechanics were Mexican, whereas Anglos predominated in the traditional academic track. The further fact that Spanish was presented as a "second language" in the traditional academic track—even though it was undoubtedly the first language of most people in the RGV, i.e., Mexican Americans—further indicates the Anglocentrism of the curriculum. Twelve years of PAC Bulletins (1953–1954 to 1964–1965) contained this statement: "In the second language of this region 'where two cultures blend,' we say 'Bienvenido.'"

By 1968, the year that Gloria E. Anzaldúa graduated from PAC, Mexican Americans finally constituted a numerical majority, 59.6 percent of the student body,[15] but it would take the Chicano movement, not just PAC's geographical location and majority Mexican American student enrollment, to change the curriculum during "the militant and reformist era" (1965–1975) of Chicano education.[16] Below, we draw upon local archives to provide chronological glimpses of these shifts.

1960 – From 1960 through 1977, Theodore Clark (BA, Mississippi College; BD, ThM, ThD, New Orleans Baptist Seminary) served as PAC's sole faculty member in Philosophy.

1966 – From 1966 through 1977, PAC's annual catalogs featured a full-page mission statement under the heading PHILOSOPHY: "Pan American College is a democratic institution which is dedicated to the preservation and extension of responsible human freedom and to the enlightenment of the Rio Grande Valley community." It named PAC's obligation "to help perpetuate the best American cultural heritage and to blend with it the outstanding features of Latin-American culture, and to propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." But it also placed more emphasis on the belief "that every student should be stimulated to know and cherish his American heritage." As with Spanish being positioned as a "second language," it also appears that the "outstanding features of Latin-American culture" were desirable provided that students, the majority of whom were Mexican Americans, understood their culture's (second) place.[17]

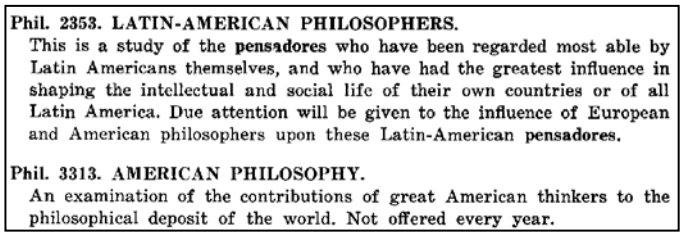
1966 – PAC establishes the Inter-American Institute to coordinate and promote "all activities and programs in the Inter-American field" and establish PAC as one of its outstanding centers.

1967 – PAC begins offering an interdisciplinary BA in Inter-American Studies whereby students develop "a wide general background in the history, geography, economics, languages, and literature of Hispanic America, and of Mexico in particular."[18] However, the degree is still framed in Anglocentric terms, especially with regard to Spanish: "Special emphasis will be placed upon achievement of sufficient knowledge of the Spanish language [. . .] to open the doors of cultural understanding and appreciation of Latin America to non-native speakers."

1968 – PHIL 2353 Latin-American Philosophers appears for the first time, right above PHIL 3313 American Philosophy.[19] Inter-American Studies students must choose between PHIL 2353 and GEOG 3333 Latin-American Geography.

Note how the Inter-American Studies approach still ignores or covers up PAC's majority Mexican American student body insofar as the Anglocentric geography of reason is extended to Latin American countries and their

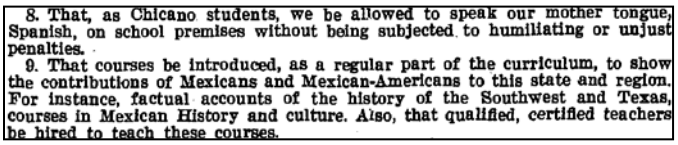
pensadores, especially as they are influenced by "European and American philosophers," leaving Mexican Americans outside the philosophical project by implicitly positioning them as neither Latin American nor American.



Phil. 2353. LATIN-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS.
This is a study of the **pensadores** who have been regarded most able by Latin Americans themselves, and who have had the greatest influence in shaping the intellectual and social life of their own countries or of all Latin America. Due attention will be given to the influence of European and American philosophers upon these Latin-American **pensadores.**

Phil. 3313. AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY.
An examination of the contributions of great American thinkers to the philosophical deposit of the world. Not offered every year.

1968 – In Edcouch-Elsa, roughly fourteen miles east of PAC, approximately two hundred high school students walk out of their classes after the superintendent refused to meet with them. Among their fifteen demands, the eighth and ninth are particularly relevant:[20]



8. That, as Chicano students, we be allowed to speak our mother tongue, Spanish, on school premises without being subjected to humiliating or unjust penalties.
9. That courses be introduced, as a regular part of the curriculum, to show the contributions of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to this state and region. For instance, factual accounts of the history of the Southwest and Texas, courses in Mexican History and culture. Also, that qualified, certified teachers be hired to teach these courses.

1969 – The 1969–1970 PAC Bulletin lists a new eighteen-hour Minor in Philosophy.

That same year, issues of *The Pan American*—the official student newspaper of UTRGV's legacy institutions in Edinburg from 1954 to 2015—report early attempts to bring together the Inter-American Studies [Area Studies] and Mexican-American Studies [Ethnic Studies] approaches. For example, PAC's Inter-American Institute hosted its annual conference on "The Role of the Mexican American in the History of the Southwest."[21]

At this conference, three University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) students presented on how they had worked with faculty to start a Mexican American Studies program at UTEP. Under the headline "'Chicano' Studies?'" in *The Pan American*,22 Richard Codina reported on the UTEP students' post-presentation meeting with Tony Balderas, PAC's senior class president, which resulted in "the creation of the Texas Board on Mexican-American Studies, made up for the time being by Pan American College and University of Texas El Paso." A second column by Codina covered the "newly-formed Pan American Student Committee for Mexican-American Studies" led by Balderas, which was working "to assemble a practical [MAS] program suitable for Pan American."

Two weeks later, this newly formed committee spoke with Dr. Severo Gómez, Assistant Commissioner of Education with the Texas Education Agency (TEA).[23] Dr. Gómez's presentation on bilingual education posited that, without a corresponding bicultural component, many Mexican Americans will still feel "different and inferior." He thus argued for college-level courses that "deal with the Mexican-American from the historical, social, psychological, political, educational, and cultural perspectives" to encourage "Mexican-Americans to take a pride in themselves and their way of life." Courses that help all students "to be comfortable in both the [A]nglo and Mexican-American cultures" and recognize "the dynamic and always changing [. . .] exchange of cultures," made PAC "the ideal institution to launch a bicultural and bilingual program."[24]

1970 – A MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) chapter is officially established at PAC. In "MECHA Hopes to Promote Culture," Richard Codina explained that the fledgling student organization hoped "to establish a cultural centre, a multi-purpose facility which would house art, music, and literature which have contributed to the Mexican-American culture."[25]

PAC's Board of Regents approves a Mexican American Studies program. As with most ethnic studies programs nationwide, PAC's program was the direct result of local student activism.

C. PAN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY (1971–1989)

1971 – PAC is renamed Pan American University (PAU) upon achieving university status. After forty-four years, the catalog finally offers one academic program pitched directly at "the Mexican-American student." An interdisciplinary Mexican American Studies minor promised to give "the Mexican-American student a more appreciable understanding of the heritage of his ancestry and its contribution to his present environment."[26] Three new courses "which deal specifically and directly with the Mexican-American" appear: HIST 3373 Mexican-American Heritage, ENG 3316 The Mexican-American in American Fiction, and SOC 4323 The Mexican-American People. These new "Impact Courses" supplement the pre-existing "Support Courses," which are "concerned with Mexico, aspects of its culture, and Spanish."

1976 – *El Sol*, an independent PAU student newspaper, publishes its first edition. Readers can feel the weight of the existing cultural conditions and the self-awareness of the extraordinary collective power and will involved when the editors write: "we are willing to go to the extreme of creating our own newspaper" for the purpose of meeting Mexican American needs both inside and beyond the boundaries of the university in the community at large. *El Sol* is somewhat English-dominant, but unlike *The Pan American*, *El Sol* seamlessly integrates Spanish articles from the very first issue without positioning Spanish as a "second" or "foreign" language.

1979 – Sociology faculty Dr. Chad Richardson starts the "Borderland Research Project" whereby PAU students conduct bilingual and bicultural research on local social and cultural groups. Twenty years later, Richardson integrated this student-conducted research in *Batos, Bolillos, Pochos, and Pelados: Class and Culture in the South Texas Border*.[27]

1983 – The newly founded Latin American Studies Center reforms the old Inter-American Studies BA, replacing it with a Latin American Studies major "to permit students to combine Humanities and Social Sciences" with "professional areas" like Business and Health.[28]

1985 – *El Sol's* September 16th editorial addresses the US's "internal cultural imperialism" with this poignant example: "Chicanos have for years challenged the school system in the Southwest, to allow Spanish to be spoken alongside English in the classroom. Also, that the dominant society also learn the Spanish language so that Anglos and Chicanos can better understand each other. But no, the dominant people have a complex of superiority that is an obstacle in creating a truly bilingual and bicultural society in the Southwest U.S.A. Cual es la onda? porque nosotros tenemos que aprender Ingles, y ellos no quieren aprender el Español, cual es la diferencia? Si vamos a coexistir necesitamos que entendernos."[29]

1987 – The History Department submits a "Proposal for a Major in Philosophy" with the only full-time Philosophy faculty, David K. Carter, listed as the primary contact.[30] As part-time faculty "borrowed" from other academic areas, the proposal identifies Raymond Welch from History as well as Mark Glazer, an anthropologist and folklorist whose research and teaching are locally grounded and aimed at serving the South Texas borderlands.[31] The proposal notes a growing demand for "philosophers in the United States who are Mexican American" and suggests meeting "the educational and cultural needs of both the local and wider community" through "development of its activities in the area of Latin American Thought."[32]

1988 – A BA program in philosophy appears for the first time with two full-time faculty: 1) David K. Carter (Yale PhD, 1982) and 2) Robert L. Frodeman (Penn State PhD, 1988).[33] Sixteen PHIL courses are listed, half offered only "on demand."

D. UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PAN AMERICAN (1990–2010)

1990 – By joining the University of Texas System, PAU became the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA). Its initial Mission Statement echoes PAC's liberal arts tradition by linking an educated citizenry to a free democratic society and calling for "full awareness and appreciation of the multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-faceted world in which we live."[34]

Philosophy is now named in the "History and Philosophy Department." The major requires Intro, Logic, Metaphysics, Ethics or Social Philosophy, Theories of Knowledge or Advanced Logic, and a three-course History of Philosophy. For the next fifteen years, the number of full-time philosophy faculty (three) and courses (sixteen) remains roughly the same. Noteworthy faculty hired in the 1990s include Kenneth L. Buckmann (1992–2015) and Thomas Pearson (1994–present).

2004 to 2006 – To meet steadily increasing demand for philosophy courses as a result of changes made to General Education Requirements, UTPA begins a streak of tenure-stream hiring that includes Gregory Gilson (2004–present), Cynthia Jones (2004–present), Stephen Leach (2004–2025), Susana Nuccetelli (2005–2007), Gary Seay (2005–2007), Julian Cole (2006–2008), and Cory Wimberly (2006–present).[35]

2006 – Cory Wimberly began hosting philosophers to give talks that reflected Anzaldúa's legacy. The idea of doing something to honor her had been under discussion among junior faculty across the College of Arts and Humanities for some time.[36]

2006 to 2007 – Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay host an NEH Workshop: "Humanities Perspectives on Latin American Thought and Philosophy." Nine full-day sessions featuring outside scholars including Jorge Gracia, Ofelia Schutte, and Ilan Stavans are held at UTPA.[37]

Gregory Gilson, who participated in this NEH Workshop, becomes Interim Editor of the *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* (Spring 2007 to Spring 2008) and calls for a special issue on teaching Latin American Philosophy. The Fall 2007 issue contains ten brief articles and/or syllabi for teaching Latin American Philosophy.[38]

2007 – These curriculum changes and continuities appear in the 2007–2009 UTPA Catalog:

Cory Wimberly creates PHIL 3376 Feminist Theories cross-listed with Women's Studies, which offers a minor. This is the first time "feminism" appears in Philosophy's catalog, the curricular threshold across which feminist philosophy enters UTPA's philosophy program by name, but without explicitly including Chicanas or any other ethnic identity.

The cross-listed HIST/WMST 3375 Women and History specifically lists "Mexican American-Chicana History and Latina History" as suggested topics in "the growing and diverse field of women's and gender history."

"Latin American Studies" continues to be offered as an interdisciplinary BA in the College of Arts and Humanities, with optional concentrations in "Culture, Society and Health," "International Relations," or "Mexican and Border Studies." PHIL 3380 Latin American Thought is an elective, and two courses (six hours) are required in "Intermediate Spanish for Native Speakers" above and beyond the single language course (three hours) that meets UTPA's language requirement.

"Mexican-American Heritage," also sometimes identified as "Mexican-American Studies,"[39] continues to be offered as an interdisciplinary BA with required courses in History (twenty-four hours), Sociology and Anthropology (twenty-four hours), and Spanish (eighteen hours)—making it unusually credit-intensive (fifty-six hours) compared to traditional humanities majors like Philosophy, which required thirty-six hours of philosophy courses. However, no PHIL courses are included in the Mexican-American Heritage major.

2008 – Adriel Trott is hired as Assistant Professor (2008–2013) and creates the "Gloria E. Anzaldúa Speaker Series in Philosophy" after obtaining the formal legal rights to name the series after Anzaldúa.[40]

2009 – PHIL 2380 Latin American Philosophy, PHIL 3379 Chicana and Latin American Feminisms, and PHIL 3381 Latin American Positivism appear in UTPA's 2009–2011 catalog.

PHIL 2380 Latin American Philosophy replaced PHIL 3380 Latin American Thought, listed since 1979. Susana Nuccetelli, who was born in Argentina, bilingual in English and Spanish, and a specialist in Latin America Philosophy, successfully advocated to change the course name. The department renumbered it as a lower-division course and successfully added it to UTPA's core curriculum. Nuccetelli's 2007 departure left the department without anyone qualified to teach it.

PHIL 3379 Chicana and Latin American Feminisms was created by Cory Wimberly. The department requests an additional tenure-track line to teach the course going forward.

PHIL 3381 Latin American Positivism was created by Greg Gilson to focus on "the main philosophic movement in Latin America from the early 1800s to the 1900s," although he never taught the course.

2009 – UTPA begins searches for two tenure-track faculty to begin in Fall 2010:

Alex Stehn is hired for the position listing "AOS: American Philosophy (Pragmatism and/or Latin American)" and begins teaching the American and Latin American Philosophy courses that had been on the books in one form or another since 1968, as well as Latin American Positivism.

Cynthia Paccacerqua is hired for the position "in the fields of Feminism and/or Kant," with a preference for candidates whose work also "reflects an interest in Chicano or Latin American studies." In Spring 2011, she teaches PHIL 3379 Chicana and Latin American Feminisms.

To summarize conditions during the academic year of our arrival, there was a Philosophy program with: 1) one lower-division and two upper-division courses centered on Latin American Philosophy, one of which explicitly brought out the intellectual contributions of Chicanas from under the Latin American umbrella; 2) one Feminist Theories course whose description made no reference to other intersectional identities; and 3) the "Gloria E. Anzaldúa Speaker Series in Philosophy." Beyond the Philosophy program, UTPA also offered: 1) a Latin American Studies BA that included PHIL 3380 Latin American Thought; 2) a Mexican American Studies BA that included PHIL 3379 Chicana and Latin American Feminisms; and 3) an interdisciplinary approach to Mexican American anthropology and folklore embodied by the work of Mark Glazer.

However, as far as we know, none of these courses were taught bilingually and biculturally.

II. OUR MEMORIAL PAST (2010–PRESENT)

We hit the ground running and began taking intentional steps to earn tenure through our research, teaching, and service. The APA grant is neither possible nor legible without this period. The team of eight bilingual philosophy faculty, who integrated Spanish-English bilingualism/biliteracy and Mexican American biculturalism into a regular rotation of a dozen PHIL courses with APA grant support,[41] grew in part through our direct and intentional efforts from 2010 to present.

Cynthia: "Necesito retomar el tema anterior. Mis credenciales correspondían perfectamente al anuncio: Feminism and/or Kant, with preference for 'an interest in Chicano or Latin American studies.' Pero lo que yo traía no era solo un interés, sino también una formación vivida como hija de argentinos que emigraron a este país para trabajar, primera generación como muchos de mis estudiantes. I had found Anzaldúa and Chicana/o thought through Latino Studies with Renato Rosaldo at Stanford while writing on Enrique Dussel. My Latina identity was both transnational and bicultural. I carried these borderlands tensions into a curriculum with only one course to receive them. My 'qualifications' to teach Chicana and Latin American Feminisms bilingually were questioned despite my bilingual background, graduate coursework in both Latino and Latin American Studies, and published academic translations. My rewrite of the course description was lost to confusion over differences between Chicana, Latina, and Latin American feminisms. Though grateful for the opportunity to teach Feminist Theories, I was tracked into feminism, reframing my philosophical identity. Un sentido común bilingüe y bicultural no existía en filosofía, pero lo creamos con mis estudiantes—dentro del aula, en los *movie nights*, grupos de lectura, estudios independientes. Nos fuimos dando coraje."

Alex: "Hasta aquí hemos hablado como si fuéramos dos, Cynthia y Alex, pero en realidad éramos tres porque yo llegué con Mariana Alessandri, mi esposa y colega. Nos conocimos en Penn State en 2004, nos casamos en Nueva York en 2007, y nos mudamos a Coyoacán, México (2007–2008), a Salamanca, España (2008–2009), y de regreso a Penn State (2009–2010). Cuando me ofrecieron el puesto en UTPA, Mariana se estaba entrevistando para otro puesto de Assistant Professor a más de 2,000 millas de distancia. Yo tenía que responderle a la universidad antes de que Mariana recibiera una oferta, así que decidimos mudarnos juntos a Texas. Thanks to luck, careful strategizing, hard work, Mariana's tenure-track job offer elsewhere, and supportive colleagues, she went from Part-time Lecturer (2010–2012) at UTPA to Visiting Assistant Professor (2012–2013) to Assistant Professor through a job ad seeking expertise in 'Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Philosophy, Mexican-American Studies and/or Religious Studies.' As early as Spring 2011, Mariana taught PHIL 2380 Introduction to Latin American Philosophy."[42]

Beyond the philosophy program, Mexican American Studies (MAS) was where we—Cynthia, Alex, and Mariana—encountered the most faculty and student energy for culturally relevant curricula, teaching, and learning. Technically, the Mexican American Studies program was housed in the Department of History and Philosophy, but with approximately twenty-five full-time faculty in History compared to ten full-time faculty in Philosophy,[43] Philosophy was overshadowed by History, and Mexican American Studies received even less departmental support with zero full-time faculty lines and a budget of $2,000 contingent upon majority faculty approval. In 2008, a self-appointed committee of untenured Latina faculty including Stephanie Alvarez (Spanish), Emmy Pérez (English), and

Sonia Hernandez (History) began working to overhaul and revive the BA program in MAS, which had only graduated three students between 1980 and 2009. The faculty would have called the revitalized program "Chicano/a Studies," but UTPA students expressed a clear preference for "Mexican American Studies" when they unofficially approved the new degree plan at UTPA's 2009 Festival of International Books and Arts.[44]

By 2011, the new MAS Minor, BA, and Graduate Certificate programs were just getting started, and student enrollment had already increased substantially to more than twenty majors. As a unique and evolving area of academic inquiry with its own body of scholarship, epistemologies, and pedagogies, the reinstitutionalization of MAS took place through the creation of: 1) a MAS course prefix; 2) three foundational courses: MAS 2301 Introduction to Mexican American Studies, MAS 4300 Learning through Reflective Service, and MAS 4392 Special Topics; and 3) greater curricular flexibility since any course with "a minimum of 50% MAS content" could now count as a MAS elective.[45]

Unfortunately, just as MAS was becoming a more autonomous and successful degree program locally, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) threatened to eliminate the BA in MAS due to its low graduation numbers. This led UTPA's Mexican American Studies Club to create the Tejan@ Movement for Education, which protested the elimination by organizing student walkouts, faculty teach-ins, and a campus event featuring local poets and activists on March 31, 2011. In response, UTPA President Robert Nelsen committed to establishing and modestly funding a Mexican American Studies Center, forty-one years after students had first requested a program on campus. By 2013, the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS) was open; the THECB had decided not to eliminate the MAS BA, which now had over fifty majors; and a new Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS) degree with a concentration in MAS became available.

From our 2010 arrival through the transition to UTRGV in 2015, Cynthia, Mariana, and Alex became increasingly involved in the institutional advancement of MAS, each in varying capacities: yearly retreats to draft the program's mission and build community among faculty and students; drafting strategic plans and degree proposals; hosting external reviewers and job candidates; mentoring the student research assistants who digitized *El Sol* and revived the *Rio Bravo* journal; assisting with the coordination of *Trae tu Lonchera and El Retorno*. What matters most here is not what each of us did individually, but the collective energy generated, and the way that energy flowed back into Philosophy. We intentionally designed and cross-listed our courses to meet the 50 percent MAS-content minimum, contributing curriculum for MAS students to take. In 2013, Cynthia also became coordinator of the Anzaldúa Speaker Series. With support from CMAS, we began shaping it into more of a public forum where people could philosophize about and/or from the social, economic, linguistic, and cultural circumstances of Mexican Americans and others who live in transnational and transcultural borderlands.

On August 31, 2015, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) began offering courses as the result of a merger between UT–Pan American, UT–Brownsville, and a new medical school. From the outset, UTRGV publicly committed to becoming a *Bilingual, Bicultural, and Biliterate* (B3) university, institutional language that slowly renamed and reshaped the work some of us were already doing while opening new possibilities. For UTRGV's Philosophy Department, this was decisive in two ways: 1) it provided new resources, recognition, and professional development opportunities for B3 courses; and 2) it reactivated the cyclical pattern we have observed throughout this article, as formal institutional recognition and limitation of local bilingual and bicultural practices and aspirations repeatedly appear, are partially withdrawn, and reemerge in a new form: *border setting–shifting–resetting*.

2015 – UTPA's Philosophy program gains new autonomy as UTRGV's Philosophy Department. Since every single course that existed in UTPA's catalog had to be recreated and reapproved for UTRGV's catalog, the department undertook many acts of curricular housekeeping like creating, deleting, renumbering, and/or renaming courses. These included: PHIL 1305 Introduction to Latin American Philosophy, PHIL 3365 Chicana and Latin American Feminisms, and PHIL 4305 Special Topics in Latin American Philosophy, which replaced the narrower upper-division course on Latin American Positivism.

The department also began growing on the Brownsville campus, where institutional commitments to bilingualism and Spanish were historically stronger. Whereas the University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB) did not offer a Philosophy minor or major and only had one philosopher (Angelika Potempa, 1999–2015), UTRGV committed to offering the minor/major in Brownsville, which led to four faculty lines in Brownsville, all later participants in the work funded through the APA grant.

2016 – UTRGV's B3 Institute that "facilitates the process through which the university becomes a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate institution" begins offering faculty development and pilot programing in bilingual or "translanguaging" course sections labeled with an "E" to indicate that e*spañol* is welcomed and encouraged.[46]

2017 – For the first time, Cynthia teaches PHIL 3365 Chicana and Latin American Feminisms with the "E" prefix designating it as a bilingual course. At the graduate level, Alex offers an unofficially bilingual PHIL 6399 Independent Study: Philosophies of Liberation and Education.

That same year, UTRGV's Philosophy Department co-hosted a conference—*Philosophy Across the Americas: Thinking La Frontera* in partnership with South Texas College. As conference co-organizers with new faculty member Ian Werkheiser (2015–present), Alex, Cynthia, and Mariana intentionally placed sessions "in the community" (downtown McAllen) and "on the border" (Old Hidalgo Pumphouse with a view of the border wall), drawing in speakers and audiences who, in many cases, were encountering for the first time a philosophy program whose linguistic and cultural pluralism and localism were not a

polite gesture but a structural commitment. Conference co-organizing and co-sponsoring with philosophers Andrés Molina-Ochoa and Aaron Wilson at South Texas College also modeled a form of philosophical work attuned to the RGV's institutional ecology, not just the discipline as imagined from elsewhere.[47]

UTRGV's Philosophy Department also continued to expand and revise its curriculum, cross-listing many courses with Mexican American Studies (MAS) to better reflect our intellectual genealogies and pedagogical orientations. For example, we created PHIL 4345 Mexican/Mexican-American Philosophy as well as a graduate version (PHIL 6345) for the MAIS degree. Annual PHIL retreats, annual MAS retreats, and interdisciplinary working groups organized through CMAS provided key contexts for curricular planning and strategizing alongside faculty from MAS, History, English, Spanish, Creative Writing, Bilingual Education, etc.—much as the curricular turns at PAC had relied on cross-departmental coalitions and student energy a half-century earlier.

2018 – The most consequential shift was in hiring. The department crafted job advertisements and shaped search processes to attract applicants who could serve a bilingual, bicultural, biliterate philosophical community. The language varied according to evolving department needs and institutional rules, but the first such ad stated: "We are especially interested in candidates with experience in or who can demonstrate potential for program building in philosophy and/or religious studies, community engagement, outreach, and/or contributing to the bilingual, bicultural, biliterate mission of UTRGV, which is a Hispanic-Serving Institution with a 90% Hispanic student body."

Through this ad, Dahlia Guzman was hired as a full-time lecturer. She grew up in the Rio Grande Valley and graduated with a BA in Philosophy from UTPA in 2007, returning as faculty on UTRGV's Edinburg campus with a Kent State MA (2010) and a University of South Florida PhD (2018).

Alex also began serving as the Associate Director of UTRGV's Center for Bilingual Studies, which operated under the B3 Institute. This part-time administrative position provided him a broader way to understand and institutionalize B3 programs from pre-K to UTRGV.[48]

2019 – A tenure-track search was conducted with an open AOS/AOC, but with a commitment to philosophical pluralism and bilingual teaching as non-negotiable expectations in the job ad: "Our department is pluralistic in terms of philosophical approach [. . .] The faculty hired for this position will be expected to teach philosophy courses in two languages; some courses are to be taught in English and others in Spanish [. . .] to further cultivate and enhance the diverse cultural and linguistic assets of our university and the Rio Grande Valley."

The successful candidate, Remei Capdevila Werning, arrived in 2019 with a BA, multiple MA degrees, and a PhD in Philosophy from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Fluently quadrilingual in Catalan, Spanish, German, and English, she taught UTRGV's first all-Spanish philosophy course in Spring 2020: PHIL 1301E Introducción a la Filosofía.

2020 – UTRGV took approximately five years to develop a consistent framework for listing B3 courses across the undergraduate curriculum. By 2020, clear criteria and processes were in place for faculty to designate their course sections as bilingual (X), Spanish (E), and/or taught using Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP).

2021 – Christopher Gómez, originally from Mexico City, joined the department as a full-time lecturer with a PhD from the Universidad Veracruzana (2017) after teaching for three years at South Texas College, where he asked his department chair about the possibility of teaching bilingually and was met with a negative reply.

2022 – Danny Marrero, originally from Bogotá, Colombia, was hired to develop and lead Philosophy's new Pre-Law concentration with a PhD from the University of Arkansas (2014). The PhilJobs ad sought candidates with an AOS in Philosophy of Law (broadly construed) whose work "might engage with the Rio Grande Valley and the U.S./Mexico border" or "with linguistically diverse communities."

2023 – Melisa Vivanco, originally from Mexico City, with dual PhDs from the Universidad Autónoma de Mexico (2017) and the University of Miami (2022), joined the department in a tenure-track position between the Philosophy of Technology and Applied Ethics. The ad asked candidates to discuss how their work might support both UTRGV's research-institution ambitions and its B3 mission.

None of the areas of specializations or concentration sought in these searches necessarily overlapped with philosophical traditions or areas of inquiry that would assume bilingualism or biculturalism. And not all the hires made by UTRGV's Philosophy Department have been bilingual or bicultural. Nevertheless, the department's preexisting commitments to cultural, linguistic, and philosophical pluralism in conjunction with UTRGV's new B3 mission enabled us to assemble a critical mass of faculty whose intellectual and pedagogical orientations were capable of cultivating philosophical bilingualism, biculturalism, and bilingualism (PB3).

A reader might reasonably ask why a grant was needed at all, given that we already had eight PB3 faculty who could teach PHIL courses in an institutional B3 framework. Above all, what we needed to develop was a bilingual culture in our department: a setting in which speaking Spanish was normalized and habitually woven into the practice of philosophizing together. The infrastructure existed, but the *sentido común* did not. The grant's central labor was therefore not designing new E/X/CSP courses to create a PB3 course rotation (although those were the "deliverables") *sino más bien el fomento de un sentido común—a new common sense* about what philosophy can sound like, what languages it can think in, and what publics it can address.

This new *sentido común* began to germinate in the *grupo de lectura* and *noches de cine* well before the PB3 summer seminar and course-development workshop. Each was structured to practice the PB3 culture we sought to deminoritize: most sessions were conducted

primarily in Spanish, with Spanglish and English also welcome; bilingual discussions about Spanish-language or indigenous-language films opened bilingual philosophical conversation to students who might never have entered a philosophy department lecture hall in any language; faculty designed bilingual syllabi together rather than alone.

It is worth reiterating that none of the transformations we have described would have been possible without a substantial Mexican American student body that was and is ready for a philosophy program that recognized, theorized, and developed its own languages (Spanish, English, and Tex-Mex), its own histories (from precolonial pasts to decolonial futures), its own place (the Rio Grande Valley as a borderlands connecting the Americas), and its own forms of philosophical thought.

III. FUTURE

At this stage our story is still writing itself, but we wanted to share *una historia oficial* to help readers better understand what we have built and will continue building. We also hope to entice you to consider new possibilities for philosophical bilingualism, biculturalism, and/or biliteracy in your own communities and institutional contexts.

NOTES

1. Each of us contributed equally to conceptualizing, researching, and writing this article. When one of us speaks as an individual, our first name appears in italics, followed by a colon and our words in quotation marks.

2. Alex Stehn et al., "APA Grant Proposal for *Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands*," American Philosophical Association, 2023, https://www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/grantproposals/diversity_grant_proposals/2023/pluralizing_philosophical_la.pdf; Alex Stehn et al., "APA Grant Report for *Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands*," American Philosophical Association, 2024, https://www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/grantreports/diversity_grant_reports/2023-2024/pluralizing_languages_and_cu.pdf.

3. A revised version of Carlos Sánchez's keynote address from this event—"*Vivir, pensar y filosofar en español*: Philosophy, Interpretation, and the Failures of Translation"—appears as the next article in this special issue.

4. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, 1994).

5. The inaugural course catalog of Edinburg College provides direct evidence for these Anglocentric views. For example, the three-year sequence of Spanish courses was clearly aimed at non-Spanish speakers, since the first course was "SPAN 113 Beginner's Spanish" followed by "Second Year" and "Third Year" courses, all taught by two Anglo faculty members, Mary Lucy Marberry and Carrie E. Wright. Below the course descriptions for the Spanish Department, a Spanish Club is described as having been "organized for the purpose of extending the student's acquaintance with the language, customs, and traditions of the Spanish-speaking people." Edinburg School District, "EC Announcement of Plans, Objectives, Faculty and Courses 1927–1928," 1927, University Course Catalogs (Edinburg), UTRGV Digital Library, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/edinburglegacycatalogs/. Subsequent references to this same collection of catalogs from UTRGV's legacy institutions will provide only the document names.

6. The 1930 US Census—incidentally, the only one in which "Mexican" was a possible response for the question of "race" assigned by census enumerators—estimated the RGV's Mexican population at 54 percent, a percentage that only increased in subsequent decades when "Mexican American" was more commonly viewed as an ethnicity. See Brian Duncan and Stephen J. Trejo, "Which Mexicans Are White? Enumerator-Assigned Race in the 1930 Census and the Socioeconomic Integration of Mexican Americans," *ILR Review* 78, no. 1 (2025): 62–85.

7. Our periodization comes from Gilbert G. Gonzalez, *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation* (University of North Texas Press, 2013).

8. See Raymond P. Welch, *Struggle and Progress in the History of Pan American University: 1927–1987* (Division of Institutional Advancement, University of Texas–Pan American, 1987), https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/digitalbooks/15. Welch writes, "By 1952–53 . . . enrollment had soared to 1537, including day, night and summer classes; the registrar reported an ethnic breakdown of enrollment for the first time: 953 Anglo and 584 Latin" (20).

9. Rolando Avila, *University of Texas–Pan American: The First 75 Years, 1927–2002* (CreateSpace, 2020).

10. Alberto Rodriguez, "The Making of the Modern Lower Rio Grande Valley: Situating and Reframing Race, Class, and Ethnicity in Urbanizing South Texas, 1930–1960" (PhD diss., University of Houston, 2011), https://www.proquest.com/docview/887100391.

11. See Pan American College, "Boletín de información general Colegio Panamericano, parte I, 1952–1953"; Pan American College, "Pan American College Curricula and Course Catalog, Part II, 1952–1953."

12. Avila, *University of Texas–Pan American*, 67.

13. Gonzalez, *Chicano Education*.

14. Rodriguez, "Making of the Modern Lower Rio Grande Valley," 141.

15. Avila, *University of Texas–Pan American*, 67.

16. Gonzalez, *Chicano Education*.

17. Pan American College, "PAC Bulletin 1966–1967."

18. Pan American College, "PAC Bulletin 1967–1968."

19. Pan American College, "PAC Bulletin 1968–1969."

20. Reproduction of demands clipped from *Equal Educational Opportunity: Hearings Before the Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity of the United States Senate, Ninety-First Congress, Second Session on Equal Educational Opportunity, Part 4—Mexican American Education* (Superintendent of Documents, US Government Printing Office, 1971), 2485.

21. Isabel Flores, "Latin Conference Opens Nov. 17," *The Pan American* (ELIBR-0072), November 6, 1969, UTRGV Digital Library, https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/panamerican/660.

22. *The Pan American* (ELIBR-0072), December 4, 1969, UTRGV Digital Library, https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/panamerican/659/.

23. Dr. Severo Gómez also "traveled extensively through Latin America as a member of the Committee on Latin American affairs of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools conducting programs in bilingual/bi-national schools in Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Colombia and Guatemala. As an advocate for bilingual education in the United States, Dr. Gómez is also known for his involvement in planning, organizing, and serving as Chairperson for the very first National Conference on Bilingual Education held in Austin in 1972." "Severo Gomez," Texas State Cemetery, accessed May 11, 2026, https://cemetery.texas.gov/locate-a-plot/plotholder/severo-gomez.

24. Richard Codina, "Gomez Leads Discussion," *The Pan American* (ELIBR-0072, December 4, 1969, UTRGV Digital Library, https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/panamerican/659/.

25. Richard Codina, "MECHA Hopes to Promote Culture," *The Pan American* (ELIBR-0072), May 7, 1970, UTRGV Digital Library, https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/panamerican/661/.

26. Pan American University, "PAU Bulletin 1971–1972."

27. Chad Richardson, *Batos, Bolillos, Pochos, and Pelados: Class and Culture on the South Texas Border* (University of Texas Press, 1999).

28. Pan American University, "PAU 1986–88 Catalog."

29. *El Sol*, September 16, 1985, https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/el_sol/27/.

30. "Proposal for Major in Philosophy to Be Presented to the Coordinating Board, Texas College and University System," 1987, University Archives—Academic Affairs, ELIBR-0073, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Special Collections and Archives, Edinburg Campus.

31. UTPA catalogs list Mark Glazer as faculty in anthropology/philosophy (1977–1984), faculty in anthropology (1984–2009), director of Latin American Studies (1986–1990), and associate dean

for University College (1986–1996). He also established the bilingual Mexican American Folklore Collection that contains over 100,000 folk beliefs, proverbs, folktales, recipes, jokes, riddles, etc., collected by his students through fieldwork. See "Mark Glazer's Mexican American Folklore Collection," Border Studies Archive, UTRGV Digital Library, https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/tmafglazer/.

32. "Proposal for Major in Philosophy."

33. Pan American University, "PAU Catalog 1988–1990." David Carter joined PAU's philosophy faculty in 1980 and retired from UTPA in 2005. Robert Frodeman left UTPA in 1990.

34. University of Texas–Pan American, "UTPA Catalog 1990–1992."

35. Faculty names are from University of Texas–Pan American, "UTPA Catalog 2007–2009," with years of service drawn from online CVs.

36. See Cynthia M. Paccacerqua, "The Story of a Vision," *Anzaldúa Speaker Series in Philosophy*, https://anzalduaspeakerseriesphilosophy.org/history-of-the-series/.

37. Susana Nuccetelli discusses this workshop and the prevailing North American interest in Latin American philosophy in "Report from the Chair," *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2007): 1.

38. See Gregory Gilson, ed., *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2007).

39. University of Texas–Pan American, "UTPA Undergraduate Catalog 2007–2009."

40. See Paccacerqua, "Story of a Vision."

41. For a more detailed discussion of the grant's core faculty and activities, see Alexander V. Stehn, "Practicing Philosophical Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Biliteracy (PB3): A Collective Transformation," the final article in this special issue.

42. For a comparison of this course before and after the APA grant, see Mariana Alessandri, "Introduction to Latin American Philosophy in 2011 and 2026: Notes from a Bilingual Ungrading Neophyte," in this special issue.

43. These are the full-time faculty numbers according to UTPA's 2009–2011 catalog.

44. Our history of MAS here and further below draws upon Stephanie Alvarez and Mario Garza, "History of MAS at UTRGV: 55 Years of Resistance & Epistemic Justice" (presentation, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, April 27, 2026).

45. These changes went live in 2011 but first appeared in University of Texas–Pan American, "UTPA Undergraduate Catalog 2013–2015."

46. The criteria and labels for UTRGV's bilingual, Spanish, and culturally sustaining course designations continue to evolve, but for an early discussion of a translanguaging or bilingual version of UNIV 1301 Learning Framework taught in 2016, see Dagoberto Eli Ramirez and José L. Saldívar, "Untaming the Wild Tongue: Reconocimiento and a History of Linguistic Terrorism on the U.S.-Mexico Border," in *Teaching Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Pedagogy and Practice for Our Classrooms and Communities*, ed. Candace de León-Zepeda and Norma E. Cantú (University of Arizona Press, 2020).

47. The CFP and keynote flyer for *Philosophy Across the Americas: Thinking La Frontera* are available at https://anzalduaspeakerseriesphilosophy.org/philosophy-across-the-americas-conference/.

48. See J. Joy Esquierdo and Alexander V. Stehn, "Strengthening Partnerships Entre Las Familias, Las Escuelas, y La Universidad for Dual Language Bilingual, Bicultural, Biliterate Education (DLB^{3}E)," *Journal of Latinos and Education* 24, no. 5 (2025): 1283–300.

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Vivir, pensar y filosofar en español: Philosophy, Interpretation, and the Failures of Translation

Carlos Alberto Sánchez
SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

Revised from an invited keynote address delivered at UTRGV on February 9, 2024.

In his "Letter on Humanism," Martin Heidegger famously proclaimed that "language is the house of being." One understanding of this statement has it that if we're looking for the meaning of being—or, we may even say, the meaning of life—we must look at our language. However, Heidegger also suggested that *not all languages* could serve as an ontological home in this way. Only certain languages could house being: especially Greek and, of course, German. If we pay attention to the German (and Greek) words he said, we could find being hiding there, lurking in the phrases of poets and the articulations of philosophers.

Asked by the Chilean philosopher Victor Farías about the capacity of Spanish to house being, Heidegger supposedly rejected the notion, suggesting that Spanish is not a proper philosophical language.[1] In other words, the language we know as Spanish is incapable of revealing being or truth; it is a superficial language, limited to, perhaps, the practical business of life but without depth or philosophical profundity.

Now, for those of us who speak Spanish or for whom Spanish is a *first* language, this is clearly a ridiculous position. When Juan Gabriel sings that "la costumbre es más fuerte que el amor," we are faced with a truth that some of us would rather not face: *habit is more powerful than love*. But notice the translation: *habit is more powerful than love*. It *feels* different; it doesn't translate properly. There is a prima facie truth that jumps out of "la costumbre es más fuerte que el amor" that simply does not in "habit is more powerful than love." The lyric's emotional effect diminishes in translation, but it's there in Spanish, hitting you in the face, gut-punching you. Or, take a philosophically loaded term, one from Mexican philosophy: "zozobra." Zozobra, from the Latin *sub* and *supra*, over and under, reveals a truth about existence as profound anxiety; our lives are zozobra when we struggle to make sense of things, when we feel like we're drowning, or struggle to catch our emotional breath. Neither angst nor anxiety do this feeling justice. There's no proper equivalent in Greek or German for zozobra. My point is that Heidegger was wrong when he said that Spanish was not a philosophical language.

In what follows, I will talk about Spanish as a philosophical language in a somewhat roundabout way. I'll first talk about translation, why we need it and why it turns out that we don't. I'll discuss translation as a thankless task, precisely because scholars who are serious about the texts I translate almost always turn to the Spanish original, leaving my translations unread—a cruelty that, nonetheless, points to the very fact that Spanish is always already a philosophical language! Next, I'll talk about the significance of thinking in Spanish—*pensar en español*—especially if what we want to think about has a certain profundity. Third, I'll talk about what *we lose* in translation, when we are discouraged from thinking in Spanish, which happens quite a bit; a discouragement that, ironically, makes the *business* of translation possible. Finally, I'll reflect on the significance of UTRGV's project of offering students the chance to think and philosophize in Spanish.

1. WHY WE NEED THEN DON'T NEED TRANSLATIONS

I have been translating filosofía mexicana into English for many years. My focus has been on the work of the mid-century philosophical group Hyperion (1947–1952). Translating this work has never been an enjoyable experience. It has actually been pretty terrifying. On this front, Heidegger is right: *there's a lot riding on language*. Not only must I get the sense right, but also the context in which the sense makes sense, and also the tone, and the feeling, and especially the philosophical punchline, whatever that may be. The entire process scares me and fills me with dread and zozobra. But I keep doing it. I began doing it for professional reasons; now my reasons are more existential than professional.

I'm almost ashamed to admit that I think translation work has existential value. There are certainly more important things to worry about than translating words like "relajo" or "accidentalidad" into comprehensible English. But, for me, translation is tied to existence, and death. What I mean is that without translation work, Mexican philosophy *outside* of Mexico cannot survive; translation work sustains Mexican philosophy *outside* Mexico—and to a certain extent, *inside* Mexico, as well. If I don't keep going in spite of the terror, then what I have been working for all these years will cease to exist. (Now, this is not just my anxiety talking. This is an idea that has been hammered into me by the US philosophical establishment itself. I've been told time and again that the reason why more folks are not studying Leopoldo Zea and Jorge Portilla and Rosario Castellanos is not because they don't deserve to be studied, but because they are relatively unknown, and they are relatively unknown because their works have not been translated into English.)

The cruel irony, however, is that most people who are interested in Latin American philosophy or Mexican philosophy, when they really get into it, do not read in translation. For instance, the past six or seven years have seen a surge of papers on the work of Jorge Portilla. However, those working on Jorge Portilla avoid citing my 2012 translation and instead go straight to the Spanish source! I call this phenomenon the "nostalgia for origins"

(I've appropriated this phrase from Uranga, who uses it to describe the Mexican attitude toward death). A version of the hermeneutics of suspicion, it happens when, in an effort to project seriousness and rigor, scholars mistrust translations and cite from the original texts, translating relevant passages along the way. Of course, there's nothing wrong with that; we need more seriousness and rigor. But this phenomenon relocates translations to the margins of a tradition. They are seen as secondary and peripheral, rather than as *founding* or *co-founding* these traditions. Nostalgia for origins is quite prevalent in philosophy. If you want to be a serious scholar of Greek philosophy, you will read it in the original Greek, regardless of how good the existing translations may be. While writing my dissertation on Hussurl for my PhD, I had to learn German. Husserl is widely translated, and the translations are very good. But my advisors wanted me to read the German original and quote it in the dissertation, all the while doing my own translations that were not as good.

We see then that translations are signposts that something truly profound is taking place. Ultimately, the Nostalgia for Origins Phenomenon is both centering and marginalizing: it centers a subject matter (Mexican philosophy) while undermining the efforts of translation (because once interested, scholars will look at the original). The irony is that without translation, no one would notice that something is there in the first place.

What does the displacement of translations tell us? It tells us that Spanish is already a philosophical language, that it is already revelatory and profound, and that translations are ultimately inessential, even though they may establish a particular tradition by leading us to the well to drink (by serving as "signposts"). If we think of Mexican philosophy in the US as a tradition, for example, the appearance of translations points to the existence and value of *filosofía mexicana*. But once the tradition is found and attended to, the existence of translations seems unimportant; they appear more like a provisional ladder that can be kicked off. In other words, scholars of Mexican philosophy inevitably realize that the Spanish original is richer in meaning than its translation could ever be.

So why do I persist in my own translation efforts? A lot of my motivation to translate comes from my experiences as an undergraduate student. I had no idea that Mexican philosophy existed until I finished my PhD. Never in my undergraduate career at San José State University did I encounter a book on Mexican philosophy or anything written by a Mexican philosopher—not in the library, not on a table somewhere. I couldn't even go to the library and check out a book on it, not my libraries, anyway. Why? Because of a lack of translations. So, I know that there is a need. There are currently students, both undergraduates and graduate students, who very much appreciate my work and read it. It makes it easier for them to get into the subject, and this thought keeps me going, even if I also know that once they start publishing in academic journals, they'll go straight to the Spanish.

Another reason as to why I persist in the act of translation is that given the richness of the Spanish original, my translations will only be interpretations, and I find a great deal of joy in interpretation. This is related to my idea that translation as we commonly understand it is not possible. And I say this because while we can perform literal translations of philosophical terms easily, it is almost impossible to translate a philosophical idea from one language to another without losing something. I can't precisely point to what that "something" is, but I suspect it is a historical, circumstantial, or cultural surplus that we are forced (by language itself) to *pass over in silence*. So when I "translate" I'm usually interpreting. Unlike simply saying what a word in Spanish is in English, I am telling you what I think this word means in the context in which I find it.

Take a word that long ago caused me so much stress: *relajo*. There's no equivalent English word, and Portilla didn't mean anything like what the word prima facie tells us it is: *relaxation*. *Relajo* meant something else. Portilla defines it as a "suspension of seriousness," among other things. But if this is what it means, how do I translate it? I couldn't figure it out. At one point I tried "fucking around." But would any academic publisher publish that? I'm not Henry Frankfurt, so no. Ultimately, I decided not to translate it and leave it as an occasion for interpretation—for thinking. I do the same with *zozobra*, *nepantla*, *corazonada*, and so on. The hard-earned lesson here is that, at the end of the day, if you really want to get to the true sense of a Spanish term, you just have to read it and *think* it in Spanish.

So that's why I persist with the work. My unspeakable truth, however, is that I would rather not do that sort of work and just read and think in Spanish. When I think in Spanish, I am able to immerse myself not only in the language, but in the history, culture, and spirit of its context. Luis Villoro calls this *pensar en español*.

2. PENSAR EN ESPAÑOL

My parents have been living in the US since the early 1970s—first "illegally" and now with a questionable degree of "legality." That's more than half a century. In all those years, they've never learned English. They've never seen the need. While English may be the "lingua franca" of philosophy, Spanish is the "lingua franca" of everyday life in central California. Having spent most of my childhood in Michoacán, Mexico, I didn't learn how to read or speak English until well into my teens, a few years after moving back to the US. In the eighth grade I was still considered an ESL (English as a Second Language) student. I didn't write a paper in English until high school, a paper on the Champagne region of France. I remember my first proper English class—we read Steinbeck and Shakespeare, and I remember thinking that the English language was beautiful and profound. I dreamt of being a writer and saying deeply existential things like Hamlet and writing long, tragic, novels like Steinbeck. There was just one problem: I couldn't stop thinking in Spanish. This meant that I would think about something beautiful but by the time I translated it in my head and then translated it again into written signs, it had lost its beauty. My thoughts in Spanish never materialized into English sentences. What I saw in my head and what I would end up writing were two different things.

The disconnect convinced me that I needed to *stop thinking in Spanish*. And this conviction was reinforced by curricular and academic demands in high school and again in college. As a result, I did, for the most part, stop thinking in Spanish. To this day, however, I still *count* and do simple arithmetic in Spanish—*veinte menos tres*, *dies y siete* . . .

Looking back, however, I wonder why it was so easy for me to *agree* with societal and academic expectations that I needed to stop thinking in Spanish. I think it has to do with how I associated Spanish with my improvised circumstances, with desperation, with who I was not—Spanish, I thought, was not going to improve me. Of course, when I agreed that I needed to quit thinking in Spanish, I had not yet come across Cervantes, Juan Rulfo, or Gabriel García Marquez. This would come later, encounters that would fill me with self-loathing and regret at having doubted the profundity of my *first* tongue. And I was filled with self-loathing and regret because I came to realize that Spanish has a depth that rivals German and Greek and every other language in which beautiful or profound things have been said and continue to be said. More importantly, although it is a language with a violent colonial history, as the language of conquest and colonization, it is now the language that speaks my being, that houses my being, in ways that Heidegger's Eurocentrism could not allow him to see.

The Mexican philosopher Luis Villoro says that *español* is, ironically, the *lingua franca*, not of philosophy but of conflict.[2] We know that in the history of Latin America, Spanish has been the language of displacement, of erasure and extermination. However, as it displaced, it also replaced, over time becoming the language of the voiceless, the oppressed, and the terrorized; as such, historical processes eventually transformed Spanish into a language of reform, revolution and resistance—or, the language of "conflict." Villoro also refers to Spanish fittingly as the language of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl-turned-Spanish word that is now the language of the "other" who is always in-between the center and the outside, the past and the future, the living and the dead, inside and out. Spanish, in other words, is the language of existence, a living language that communicates a multitude of experiences, lives, and worldviews *in conflict*.

We are not merely talking about speaking in Spanish, however, but *thinking* in Spanish, which comes before the speaking and accompanies us even in silence. Villoro calls it *pensar en español*, a thinking that refuses its own erasure by appropriating the power that originally summoned it for other purposes. Villoro says,

> We can welcome a thinking in a language that, although it was at one time the language of the oppressor (Spanish), can now express the demands of all the cultures and languages that were once oppressed, but which today also speak Spanish.[3]

We could read this as a case of the oppressed turning the weapons of the oppressor against him. But it is far more than that, according to Villoro:

> This would no longer be the language of the Spanish oppressor; it would be the languages of the oppressed—but in a manner that would express the conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed. Are these not the languages with which—with multiple accents and nuances—Spanish is practiced as it is spoken in Latin America? It is no longer Spanish as it is expressed in Spain. These are the languages that have their origin in conflict.[4]

The point is this: Spanish is no longer the language of the conqueror and oppressor, but the language of the survivor who nonetheless still exists in a zone of conflict and *nepantla*. Spanish is itself multifaceted. Its accents and its inflections evidence a multiplicity and a community that thrives in difference. So *pensar en español* is also *pensar* in and through difference and overcoming. Every accent represents a historical clash; but, at the same time, it also represents survival, victory, and historical resilience. And every time we speak and think in that accent—or dialect or language—we validate that story and that history. So, there's not just one Spanish, but many, each one a window into conflict and its overcoming.

The idea of different Spanishes being connected to different worlds became personal for me not long ago. I was at a conference on Mexican philosophy hosted by the UNAM's *Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas* in Mexico City. I was part of a small delegation of US-based scholars that work on this tradition, so we're all familiar with each other and well-known, liked, (or tolerated) by our Mexican counterparts. Within our group, there are several noticeable accents—most are varieties of *pocho* or US-born Spanish-speaker Spanish. Now, although my Spanish has suffered some deterioration over the past forty years due mostly to my geographical and professional entrapments, I can still speak it well enough to speak it with a regional Mexican accent. Nonetheless, it came as a surprise one evening when a colleague based in Mexico asked:

> "Carlos, can I say something about your Spanish?" (they said in English).
>
> "Claro que sí," I said, "aunque me ofendas," I said jokingly (as we Mexicans do).
>
> "No, no . . . es que, es muy lindo cómo lo hablas." This caught me off guard. *What does that mean?* "Es que hablas un español de rancho, muy curioso." As she said this, several of my Mexican colleagues nodded their heads in agreement, saying "sí, sí!"

Un español de rancho. As opposed to what? To *un español de cuidad* or *un español de . . . qué*? I wasn't offended. Although I should say that my subsequent retellings of this story have offended other people, who find the observation regarding my *rancho Spanish* somewhat demeaning. The offense is based on the fact that "español de rancho" suggests that the Spanish I speak is an uneducated, unsophisticated Spanish, which in turn implies that their Spanish is sophisticated and educated. But worse, it implies

that there's a *right* kind of Spanish, *un español correcto*, that no one associates with ranches.

But, again, I wasn't personally offended. For one simple reason: the Spanish I speak is my parents' Spanish. It is a Michoacán Spanish. My Spanish has the accent of immigrants with a third-grade education. It carries the inflection of people who survived and thrived in the worst of conflicts. It is the dialect of victory. And now I go to the metropolis, and I speak it to those who would not expect that accent *there*, in their halls of learning, as an authoritative voice. I wasn't offended, I was proud.

This episode happened before I came across Villoro's reflections on *pensar en español*. But I can say with Villoro that every accent and inflection of the language is a point of pride, evidence of resistance, a marker of conflict and overcoming. Translated into English, Villoro writes:

> "Thinking in Spanish" would then mean expressing the plurality of cultures in conflict throughout our history—between indigenous cultures and Western culture, and between Western culture and the resistance against its imposition. Only then would "thinking in Spanish" no longer express the Spanish of Castile, but rather that of all Latin America. And only then would it express our reality.[5]

This is what thinking, living, and philosophizing in Spanish is all about: *expresar nuestra realidad*—something that living, thinking, and philosophizing in a language not our own can actually obscure, sterilize, or deny. But even if English doesn't obscure, sterilize, or deny *nuestra realidad*, even if it is faithful to it, being forced to think in English when our natural inclination is to think in Spanish is still an act of violence, what Jorge Portilla once called "the terrorism of the social" (*el terrorismo de lo social*).

3. LOST IN TRANSLATION

Ultimately, Heidegger's suggestion that Spanish is not a philosophical language is political. It's no different than what I hear these days about English being the "lingua franca" of philosophy. In nominating English in this way, what is meant is that English is the way philosophical truth is disseminated, which means, in turn, that it is the language of power, of the center, of validity, and rightness. And so, those of us who find value in *pensar en español* are ultimately forced to center our philosophy, to translate it into the language of power. These efforts, however, only get us so far.

I said before that I don't think that translation, as we commonly think about it, is possible. The American philosopher W.V.O. Quine already pointed this out in the 1960s. According to his "indeterminacy of translation thesis," all translation will always be, that's right, indeterminate, incomplete, unsatisfactory. A translated text will always lack that *umph* that lends it mood or heart and even truth.

What I mean is that there are Spanish texts that upon reading them hit you in ways that are, at least for me, emotional and humbling—and indescribable. Emilio Uranga called these confrontations between texts and hearts "corazonadas," and described them as the experience of reading a text in "its pure form." The Spanish transterrado, Juan David García Bacca, referred to corazonada as a "sentimental shock," a non-rational experience of bare existence. So besides indeterminacy, another casualty of translation is the possibility of losing the opportunity to be sentimentally shocked, touched in the heart by reality, truth, or bare existence in *its pure form*.

I'm reminded of my own experiences reading Juan Rulfo. Reading Rulfo in Spanish always involves, for me, an experience of profound, indescribable nostalgia. It's a nostalgia that I can't place. But it refers me to a truth about existence—not only my own, but existence in general. Consider Rulfo's short story, "¡Diles que no me maten!" from 1951. I really don't think you need context for this, but it is a story about the brutality of regret and the omnipresence of death. What always gets me is the beginning:

> —¡Diles que no me maten, Justino! Anda, vete a decirles eso. Que por caridad. Así diles. Diles que lo hagan por caridad.
>
> —No puedo. Hay allí un sargento que no quiere oír hablar nada de ti.
>
> —Haz que te oigan. Date tus mañas y dile que para sustos ya ha estado bueno. Dile que lo haga por caridad de Dios.
>
> —No se trata de sustos. Parece que te van a matar de a de veras. Y yo ya no quiero volver allá.
>
> —Anda otra vez. Solamente otra vez, a ver qué consigues.
>
> —No. No tengo ganas de ir. Según eso, yo soy tu hijo. Y, si voy mucho con ellos, acabarán por saber quién soy y les dará por afusilarme a mí también. Es mejor dejar las cosas de este tamaño.
>
> —Anda, Justino. Diles que tengan tantita lástima de mí. Nomás eso diles.[6]

Now, George Schade's published English translation is great. But there's just something about it that does not do justice to the speaker's words, to his emotions, to his accent, and to his life; we know, just based on this short passage, where he is *not* from, we know he is in pain and we know what he has lived without—namely, privilege and hope. His Spanish is *un español de rancho*, and that says a lot. Here's the English:

> "Tell them not to kill me, Justino! Go on and tell them that. For God's sake! Tell them. Tell them please for God's sake."
>
> "I can't. There's a sergeant there who doesn't want to hear anything about you."

> "Make him listen to you. Use your wits and tell him that scaring me has been enough. Tell him please for God's sake."
>
> "But it's not just to scare you. It seems they really mean to kill you. And I don't want to go back there."
>
> "Go on once more. Just once, to see what you can do."
>
> "No. I don't feel like going. Because if I do they'll know I'm your son. If I keep bothering them they'll end up knowing who I am and will decide to shoot me too. Better leave things the way they are now."
>
> "Go on, Justino. Tell them to take a little pity on me. Just tell them that."[7]

What do we lose in this translation if not an entire context, a history, and a pathos? The sentimental shock is muted, dulled, and it is no longer shock but understanding—we understand what's happening, *but we don't feel it*. Moreover, in losing the sentimentality, the corazonada, that the Spanish gives us, we lose contact with a hidden truth, perhaps the opportunity to think in Spanish with Juvencio—the condemned man's name. In my own very particular case, every time I read a translation of Rulfo, I lose an opportunity to think with my grandfather, whose Spanish I *hear* in Rulfo's writing. Rulfo's is *un español de rancho* that communicates more than words possibly can.

4. FILOSOFAR EN ESPAÑOL AT UTRGV

All of this to say that what you are attempting to do here at UTRGV is truly a threat to the Anglocentric paradigm. Teaching philosophy in Spanish, or bilingually, in a US university is not what you're *supposed* to be doing. But here you are, doing it. And there's so much to gain—including new ways of thinking, of living, and of philosophizing.

What excites me most is the idea that students will be allowed to *pensar en español*, and in some cases to have these thoughts as they're reading philosophical texts originally written in Spanish. And that's the right word here, "allow." We have not been allowed to *pensar* in Spanish because, besides scaring nativists and xenophobes, besides the political noise, Spanish has been deemed as incapable of housing being, it has been deemed unable to reveal truth, especially in the schools and universities of the US. But we know this to be false, as Rulfo demonstrates. It is our duty, then, to defang this myth, and allow our students to look under the floorboards of this house and uncover truths that live only under this house. Truths with an *s*, because *pensar en español* will reveal a multiplicity of experiences that can only enrich our own, as Villoro tells us. We may finally come to a place where we do not have to go through the leveling process of translation, where meaning is lost and truth takes a hit, where corazonadas are forever lost. We can go straight to the source and find truth in a reality motivated by the tone and inflection of the words on the page—even if it marginalizes translations, humbling prideful translators in the process!

Moreover, while I think translations will always be valuable in and of themselves, I look forward to a future when "a lack of translations" no longer excuses people from *not knowing* the work of Villoro, Portilla, Rulfo, Castellanos, and so on. And I'm hopeful this future will come, if the model that you've outlined here is replicated more widely, a future that can't come soon enough.

The famed Chicano intellectual, José Antonio Burciaga, concludes his amazing bilingual book *Drink Cultura*, with the following lamentation: "no learning experience was more painful or damaging [for me] than the silence imposed on our Mexican culture, history and our beautiful Spanish language."[8] I can say the same, and add that the time has come to reverse the damage done by this silence. And that reversal begins here, today.

NOTES

1. Víctor Farías, *Heidegger et le nazisme* (Éditions Verdier, 1987).

2. Luis Villoro, "Pensar en español," *Arbor: Ciencia, pensamiento y cultura* 184, no. 734 (2008): 977–78.

3. "Podemos invitar a pensar en una lengua que, aunque haya sido, en un tiempo, la del dominador (el castellano), pueda expresar ahora las demandas de *todas* las culturas y lenguajes que fueron dominados, pero que también hablan ahora castellano." Villoro, "Pensar en español," 977.

4. "Ésta no sería ya la lengua del dominador español, serían las lenguas de los dominados, pero de manera que expresara el conflicto entre los dominadores y los dominados. ¿No son ésas las lenguas con que, con múltiples acentos y matices, se practica el español tal como se habla en América Latina? Ya no es el español tal como se expresa en España. Son las lenguas que tienen su origen en el conflicto." Villoro, "Pensar en español," 977.

5. "'Pensar en español' sería entonces, expresar la pluralidad de culturas en conflicto en nuestra historia, entre culturas indígenas y la cultura occidental, entre la cultura occidental y la resistencia frente a su imposición. Sólo entonces, 'pensar en español' ya no expresaría el español de Castilla sino el de toda América Latina. Y sólo entonces expresaría nuestra realidad." Villoro, "Pensar en español," 978.

6. Juan Rulfo, "¡Diles que no me maten!," in *Pedro Páramo* y *El llano en llamas* (Editorial Planeta, 2002), 165.

7. Juan Rulfo, "Tell Them Not to Kill Me!," in *The Burning Plain and Other Stories*, trans. George D. Schade (University of Texas Press, 1967), 99–100.

8. José Antonio Burciaga, *Drink Cultura: Chicanismo* (Joshua Odell Editions, 1992), 40.

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Introduction to Latin American Philosophy in 2011 and 2026: Notes from a Bilingual Ungrading Neophyte

Mariana Alessandri
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

I taught my first Introduction to Latin American Philosophy in spring 2011 as a part-time lecturer in philosophy at The University of Texas–Pan American. That fall, I published "Phil 2380: Introduction to Latin American Philosophy" in the *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy*.[1] It was a short piece on what it was like to teach that class, including the readings on my syllabus. Fifteen years later, I taught the course again with two pedagogical innovations: 1) ungrading and 2) flexible bilingual pedagogy. This essay reflects a "then" and "now" comparison, a portrait of growth and struggle in equal measure. It can serve as a model for 1) tentative "ungraders," that is, people who want to get away from the punitive and demotivating traditional grading system, but who fear that the beautiful lake they see in the distance might look like a dirty marsh up close; and 2) tentative "bilinguals," that is, people who want to stop teaching monolingually but fear that they (or their students) may not have what it takes.

SPRING 2011

In the spring of 2011, I taught two sections of Phil 2380: Introduction to Latin American Philosophy. Then and now, my university's student body is over 90 percent Hispanic or Latino (nearly all Mexican and/or Mexican American), and roughly 73 percent of all students are the first in their families to go to college. The vast majority of students commute, and they often live in multigenerational homes. Almost all work part time or full time while taking five or even six courses (fifteen to eighteen credit hours) each semester, a courseload that my university incentivizes by capping tuition at four courses (twelve credit hours).

In my 2011 article, I wrote about the twenty-nine class sessions we had, beginning with Julio Cortázar and ending with the Zapatistas. "My goal was to choose readings that would resonate with the students in order to have productive discussions," I wrote, noting also that 50 percent of their final grade came from weekly two-page papers, 25 percent from "attendance and attention," and 25 percent from "reading comprehension."[2]

What I like about my 2011 syllabus is that we took our time. We spent two weeks on Octavio Paz and Rigoberta Menchú, and one week each on Leopoldo Zea and Carlos Vaz Ferreira (their favorite), Gustavo Gutiérrez, José Vasconcelos, José Carlos Mariátegui, and the Zapatistas. We watched a film and had one-off class sessions on Juan Bautista Alberdi, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Simón Bolívar, and Bartolomé de las Casas. I ran the course as a discussion, with occasional groupwork. For my first time teaching this class and with very little teaching experience, it was a success.

For my 2011 APA essay, I thought about what could be improved for next time. My brain stretched far enough to notice that some countries were overrepresented and that others were underrepresented. What I did not see, and would not see clearly for some time, was that I had squandered my students' unique language abilities as well as my own. So, my essay didn't mention Spanish, English, or language even once. I, a bilingual teacher who had recently lived for a year each in Mexico City (2008) and Salamanca (2009), taught an entire Introduction to Latin American Philosophy to a population of bilingual students in the South Texas Borderlands, all while somehow overlooking the fact that we could have read and discussed the Spanish texts in their original language. After some fits and starts in the intervening years, deliberate and sustained attempts to exercise our collective bilingualism would not happen until 2024, when the APA awarded our department a grant to bilinguify our courses. Looking back on the last fifteen years, it's clear that we (Cynthia Paccacerqua, Alex Stehn, and I) had been planting the bilingual seeds since our arrival in 2010, but the fruit on my bilingual tree did not ripen until 2026.

SPRING 2026

In the spring of 2026, I taught roughly forty students across two sections of Introduction to Latin American Philosophy, which we had renumbered as PHIL 1305 and added to the general education core curriculum when UTPA became UTRGV in 2015. Through the PB3 Summer Workshop, I had officially designated my course sections with an "X" for "bilingual," so we spoke English, Spanish, and Spanglish in class.

In 2026, like in 2011, we began with Julio Cortázar's "Axolotl." But this time around, some students read in English, some in Spanish, and some in both languages. I was less certain that I understood the meaning of the story, so I let the students do much more imaginative work in groups that spoke English, Spanish, and Spanglish. We then spent two weeks on Nahua philosophy, and since the entire course pack was bilingual, we could challenge the translation from Spanish to English. Why was Miguel León-Portilla's *La filosofía nahuatl estudia en sus fuentes* translated as *Aztec Thought and Culture*? Did the English-speaking editor refuse to believe that the Aztecs or Nahuas did philosophy? In 2026, I kept Las Casas, Bolívar, Sarmiento, Alberdi, Martí, Mariátegui, Gutiérrez, Menchú, and the Zapatistas. I dropped Rodó, Vasconcelos, Zea, and Paz. Most importantly, I added Gloria Anzaldúa, who graduated from our campus in 1968, became famous after the publication of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and was never invited back to give a lecture.

In 2011, my students completed weekly writing assignments in English. In 2026, they completed four PB3 projects: 1) a presentation of their family's Language-Culture Story, 2) a *Plática*, or recorded philosophical conversation, 3) a Community-Learning Project, and 4) a final Digital *Testimonio* or *Autohistoria-teoría*.

A Language-Culture Story is an audiovisual representation of a person's linguistic and cultural heritage. Students investigated where they, their parents, and their

grandparents came from, their language(s), and how they identified, culturally speaking. Each student created a PowerPoint with photos and maps, and they narrated their slides in English, Spanish, and/or Spanglish. We began each class period by listening to one student's Language-Culture story and asking them follow-up questions. Some students identified as Mexican, and others Mexican American, and more than one student said they felt "in between" cultures. Sometimes these presentations elicited tears, in one case because I had "allowed" students to present in the language that felt closest to their heart, Spanish, and in another case because they felt they were finally embracing their indigenous roots.

For the *Plática*, students chose a class reading to discuss with a family member or close friend. They recorded at least ten minutes of conversation and wrote a reflection on the experience of talking about philosophy with someone outside of class. I enjoyed listening to these conversations, and most students said they would do it again.

The third project was based on Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz's *filosofías de la cocina*. When church authorities took away her books, Sor Juana found herself observing, studying, and philosophizing while cooking and doing other household chores. I asked my students to do the same: learn something about Latin America in the RGV by looking and listening and touching and tasting. They had to learn something that a student in Michigan could not learn using the internet. Students wrote proposals, met with me as a group, and set off to do their experiential investigating on topics like the influence of Latin America on Catholic churches around the RGV, native plants and the wisdom of the women who use them, local perceptions of mental illness, local music's Latin American roots, historic sites threatened by the border wall, Latin American food, and the use of Spanglish in the region. They showcased their work in the Student Union, where passersby asked questions about their posters or, in one case, video. One week later, students turned in a reflection paper on the project and what they learned through the Sor Juana-inspired process.

For the final assignment, students could choose between making a Digital *Testimonio*, which is a philosophical video about an important life event that includes narration, music, and photos, or an *Autohistoria-teoría*, a Gloria Anzaldúa-inspired "personal essay that theorizes" that draws upon their personal experiences in conjunction with either *Borderlands/La Frontera* or "Speaking in Tongues."[3] In one student's *Autohistoria-teoría*, titled "Who am I?" he reflected:

> When I was younger I was always told to follow this American side of me as it would make me prosper and lead to success. But with all of this all I felt was a missing piece. I felt uneven and was leaning and never walking straight where I needed to be. So, I wondered what it meant to be Hispanic.

This student recounted his journey through reading Anzaldúa and coming to realize that having two languages and cultures is not wrong or shameful, but beautiful. He continued, now writing directly about languages:

> Even though I use slang, or even use the "no sabo" language even though I try to speak proper Spanish I know that it is our Tex-Mex language that many adopt yet look down upon because of it being "Improper" but for me it shows one clear and vital thing. That it is me, I live, speak, and breathe this language.

Finally, this same student, who had been shy about using Spanish in class for four months, wrote:

> ***Yo soy una persona que vive con dos vidas, uno en las fronteras de México donde vive mi familia de mi padre y mi mama.*** I also have one in the United States, where I live now and have my family here, where we go and celebrate the culture here and from Mexico [. . .] I live in the borderlands, where all my culture is set into one. One that not many get to experience but luckily for me it is not a burden, but a power that is given to me that allows me to admire so much more of both cultures that not many can in theirs.

This is just one example of a student reflecting on how language is tied to identity; many students wrote similar things about embracing what Anzaldúa called a third language from a third culture.

UNGRADING AND BILINGUIFYING THE CLASSROOM

My dabbling with "ungrading" came unexpectedly, but in hindsight it grew out of my commitment to teach the course bilingually. By making my syllabus, course pack, assignments, and classroom bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate, I was saying to the students, "I see your full linguistic repertoire and your full self, not just half of you." I had students shuffle their chairs around daily. I told them to face each other and be loud in all their languages. I brought them tea and told them to get up anytime to help themselves. I wanted to create a community out of strangers across languages, so we spent most of our time in groups or partners or a big circle. One of the practices I liked best was writing six concepts on the board in English and Spanish and then asking students to stand by the one that they wanted to think more about. They formed groups with whoever else was interested in the same topic, and they re-read the pertinent passages to talk it through. After fifteen minutes, we would discuss the concepts one by one in a big group. Midway through the semester, I stopped giving written quizzes and instead started walking around the room to see if students had annotated their texts. I was surprised at how many of them did the reading faithfully, whether in Spanish, English, or both, but I wished that even more had.

The semester went well overall, but there were bumps along the way of ungrading and bilingualizing, which I offer to you in the form of journal entries I wrote throughout the semester.

JANUARY 13, 2026

I don't feel good about this class. I have no narrative arc. I don't have a story that I am trying to teach them about Latin American philosophy, and that's what I believe you are supposed to have. There are mini-stories about conquest and discovery, about language and rebellion and keeping the *velita* burning, about not knowing which side of the glass you are on. Will my students turn into *ajolotes*, or realize that they always already were? *Me convierto en estudiante. Y ellos se convierten en profesores.*

FEBRUARY 5, 2026

I have read or skimmed a lot of pedagogy books lately, including Daniel Coyle's *Flourish: The Art of Building Meaning, Joy, and Fulfillment* and Susan Blum's edited volume *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*.[4] I am trying to put into action Coyle's "rule of the beautiful mess," activating cues, rule of surprise, panned-out attention span, ceding control, icebreaker-as-psychological-disbarment, jig-sawing, practicing reading with them, low-stakes grading, quizzes, high standard/high support, human-ing, and disequilibrating. I am alive and full of ideas about the classroom and how to improve the uptake in my class. More focus on *what* we are doing (learning), less on *how* they are doing (grades).

Good things so far:

- Everyone brings the text. We all have it and refer to it regularly across languages.
- I call on people during circle or groups. Not directly yet but it's fair game.
- We have done different groupings; in pairs I practice their names.
- I have learned that groups of three are better than six.
- The material is really interesting. I am not forcing myself to do history or to overcomplicate it. I always refer to *el ajolote*.
- Spanish comes easily and I feel the depth of the class expand. All you need are a couple of Spanish speakers who are willing to hold the line. I will ask them if they will do it more. It's not about my Spanish but about theirs. I don't want to teach a class here that ignores Spanish ever again.
- I gave a bilingual quiz and asked them to tell me if they are using their nondominant language.

FEBRUARY 10, 2026

Yesterday all the Language-Culture Stories were due, even though people will only present them one by one. This is a good idea, because the late people can still catch up. The first student presented and did not read from a script. I like it this way. Maybe I will grade them one by one, instead of all at once.

FEBRUARY 23, 2026

We are speaking a lot of Spanish in both sections. They had to think like Sor Juana, who did philosophy in the kitchen. I had them identify a subject they would like to study for the LA-RGV project and find people who were also interested. One group is going to eat their way through the Valley. Others are still looking for their people. I need to give it more time in class another day. We collaborated on a due date for the proposal: March 10. I put it in their hands. *What do you want to understand more? I can guide you. I have examples in my office. Find Latin America in the RGV. Not just book learning. Learn from experience.*

They seem relaxed and understand that I want them to enjoy learning. We really don't talk about grades. I keep realizing that my job is to create the structure for learning to take place. I need to put my foot down and organize the chairs, etc., not just ask them. Think: architect, design. *Pero en español también.*

FEBRUARY 27, 2026

Tears have been shed during the Language-Culture Stories, with students saying how happy they feel to present in Spanish, or wanting to learn Spanish, or feeling moved to be able to celebrate their roots publicly. Jacinto[5] is not from the Valley, but he is Mexican American. He said that although he has lived in many other places, none are so welcoming as the RGV. When a student presents in Spanish, he asks questions in Spanish; when they present in English, he asks in English. It is clear that his Spanish is not "perfect," which is a dream for me because it should make others more daring.

The students met in class to form groups. I gave them one whole class period and twenty minutes the next day. I told them we were following Sor Juana's example. When they took away her books, she started philosophizing by observation and curiosity. They ought not to begin by Googling "Latin America in the RGV" but, like Sor Juana, with an egg, or a toy, or a game. They are interested in food, music, religion, nature, driving culture, and psychology, so far. I will have them consult with their groups again to write their proposal, which must revolve around a question, like:

- Why is there a piña in my taco?
- Why is this punk band playing Tejano beats?
- Why do so many people get Our Lady of Guadalupe tattoos?

MARCH 3, 2026

I feel like I am on the cusp of assigning purpose-driven projects. I am not there yet and can't get there fast enough. I am reading both *Ungrading* and David Yeager's *10 to 25*,[6] and I know that I can get these students to do something in the community, but I cannot see it yet. I am so slow, but this passage from Yeager seems right:

> Our purpose experiment showed that if you encourage a meaningful purpose for learning—one that involves both contribution to others and the status and respect one can gain from having

> stronger skills—then you can motivate young people to show the discipline and hard work that adults usually fail to see when they follow a conventional approach.[7]

It's not just "What interests you?" but "What can you teach people about Latin America in the RGV that they might not know?" I am trying it now. Deep breath. Baby steps in ungrading and purpose-driven classes.

Observations:

- Section 2 speaks so much Spanish! About half the class reads in Spanish.
- Section 1: We're down to one student speaking consistent Spanish. How to get this back up? I need to work harder to put the text in Spanish for them on the board.

MARCH 11, 2026

Today's class was really good. I told them to imagine that they were the US and wanted to colonize Mars and the Martians who already live there. I gave Mars a flag and a language (Martian) and a currency (Martinicos). I put them in groups of 3–4 and had them make a list of things they would do to colonize the place and its people. Both classes were animated and interested in the project. They were thinking for themselves and with each other, not trying to get "inside teacher's head." When we came back together, I asked for one idea from each group. They talked across groups about how their strategies were related. We called "Plan A" coming in peace and tempting the Martians into submitting to us. But if that fails, they wanted to go with "Plan B": use force. In one section they agreed that although the first generation of colonized individuals might not like their colonized state, their grandchildren and great grandchildren would love being American. Then we talked about Pedro Albizu Campos, how he was jailed for twenty-six years, how he called the annexation "The US Invasion of Puerto Rico," and how he thought that a moral argument to get the US out of Puerto Rico would not work.

I should tell them at the beginning that they will grade themselves. Maybe. I don't know about this—would that make them not work hard enough? It's an experiment. I don't know how to handle these things without grades: a) attendance, b) lateness, c) quality group work/LA-RGV. I don't worry about going gradeless with: a) Language-Culture Story, b) *Plática*, c) Proposal, d) Digital Testimonio.

I like focusing on feedback for the proposals. I told them not to do the project until they come talk to me in my office. How will I grade the poster board? When will I grade it? Will it just be: Did you do it? How do I stop people from slacking? Is this the wrong question?

My worries:

- People won't come to class if you don't compel them.
- People will slack if you let them.
- I want to incentivize them to do a good job. What does this even mean?
- What makes people come to class if not attendance?
- How to convince people that the class is the content, that they can't "make it up?"
- Should I have individual conferences with students?
- *Pláticas* are due on the last day of Spring Break. I hope this is a good idea. I will give them feedback. How can I tell them about ungrading without them feeling like it's a blow-off class?

I am afraid to cede authority. How can I genuinely motivate someone? Why should they show up on time? Why shouldn't they? After reading their mid-semester evaluations, I made this list. My goals/hopes/dreams for my students in this class are that they will:

a) Feel comfortable speaking in Spanish
b) Dare to speak/write the language out of their comfort zone
c) Appreciate the languages used in the classroom
d) Know their family/culture better through their language-culture story
e) Enjoy hearing each other's language-culture stories
f) Enjoy the work they do for the class
g) Get better at philosophical reading
h) Get better at philosophical thinking
i) Value their abuelas' filosofía de la cocina
j) Learn more about themselves/family
k) Feel their history/knowledge and backgrounds/languages belong in college classrooms
l) Feel respected/treated as equals
m) Connect the RGV to Latin America
n) Learn from each other
o) Connect with each other
p) Look forward to coming to class
q) Feel belonging at UTRGV
r) Think critically about many subjects

s) Feel competent to take more philosophy courses

t) Become more curious

u) Think about taking a(nother) Mexican American Studies course

v) Think about getting the B3 Scholar Seal

w) Make good memories in college

x) Make a friend in this class

y) Feel pride in their cultures and languages

z) Feel that this is more than just a class

MARCH 14, 2026

For the second half of the semester, I will write and speak more in Spanish. They got scared? Convinced that I was kidding? Too complacent? I can't put my finger on it. I seem to be devoting more mental energy to ungrading than to teaching bilingually, but they are related. I want to bring Spanish back up.

I am giving feedback on their project proposals. Since this is an experiment, I am trying not to grade too harshly but see what they come up with and take notes about how to fix the instructions for next time. Multiple deadlines help, like when to *entregar* the proposal, the meeting with me, the reflection, etc.

MARCH 27, 2026

I love this class. I am listening to the *Pláticas* and I love them. The reflections are great too. I am not as frustrated as I usually am with assignments, papers, etc. I feel like I am ungrading.

APRIL 16, 2026

I am feeling so-so about the class. It's "that time" in the semester, so students are not showing up like they used to. I had two students crying in my office today about things that were going on in their lives, apologizing for not being present but wanting me to know that they respect me and felt bad for underdelivering. Neither wanted more points—they always impress me with this. Spanish is a struggle in the first section.

APRIL 28, 2026

I am caught between grading and ungrading, authoritarianism and collaboration. I'm an infant in a suit. I find myself embarrassed, asking myself what standards even are, or when we were supposed to have set them and explained them to students. I am ashamed to admit that I don't know what mastery looks like. I am disoriented and daily conclude that I have no business in a classroom. I set out to teach them cool things and make sure they did some creative, less AI-vulnerable assignments to learn about Latin American philosophy from experience rather than a computer. I wish I had known these things fifteen years ago. Besides the mandatory SLOs, I don't know what I am trying to teach these people. Maybe it's my list of twenty-six things I want for them, in which case any talk of measuring is out. I am convinced by almost everything Alfie Kohn says in his books and podcast,[8] and yet I am caught between worlds: theory and practice, faith and action.

I have been told that I am too hard on myself. My class evaluations tend to be high, but I always want to make classes better, more connected to student life. I see colleagues do this, and I want in. So, although I might label this class a "success" as a sweeping assessment, I see the cracks and the places to improve: more design, more autonomy, more reflection. *Más español*.

NEXT TIME: FALL 2026

In my 2011 article, I wrote that I was thinking about including Che Guevara on my syllabus "in order to be able to systematically compare three (very different) sites of Latin American revolution." I haven't done this, and it no longer strikes me as necessary. What I needed, which I did not know then, was to get closer to home, not further away. I needed to include Anzaldúa and the Rio Grande Valley, to show them that Latin America is not foreign, that Spanish and Tex-Mex are also American languages.

Some of the changes I want to make:

- Make my expectations clearer. High standards, high support.
- Speak more Spanish.
- Let them decide what they want to read—give them more options than fit the syllabus. In general, more collaboration, more choice, more autonomy.
- Try pass/fail daily quizzes and more in Spanish. I can also have a minimum standard for annotations. Or get rid of quizzes and mandatory reading. This would feel like jumping off a cliff.
- Projects can be feedback-only and self-assessed. This, too, feels scary.
- Make them do reflections and self-evals for each project.

Despite my best efforts at design, I don't think that I alone have the means to combat their other demands: work, their more authoritarian classes, life, sleep, and yes (but only finally) social media. If reading and attendance were voluntary, and I were to use all my muscle to make the class worth their while to come and want to learn; if it were up to me and class design to flip on their internal motivation switch—even were I to do all this, I still do not believe they'd read or show up. I am not made of magnets; I cannot draw them to class by sheer personality. I am no match for cars that break down, grandparents whose wounds open in the middle of the night and need to be taken to the ER, younger siblings who need my students to work full time because one parent is incarcerated and the other is gone, nor for less overtly dramatic reasons like sleep deprivation, senioritis, and burnout. Students have been raised on external motivation; I have watched them triage classes and assignments based on what's "mandatory."

I will need years to connect the dots of what I have been doing for my fifteen years of teaching. I find myself returning to quite fundamental questions: What is philosophy for? What is it good at? What do I want my students to be able to know or do that they couldn't when they started? Who are they and what do I want them to become? How will I/we measure these things? Finally, what does language have to do with it? I am sure it's the way in, but I am not sure to where. Teaching bilingually feels way bigger than language.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Although I would say that the 2026 version of the course is more student-centered, place-based, and linguistically/culturally reparative than it was in 2011, I want it to be even more transformative for more of my students. Teaching bilingually is not a parlor trick; it comes from deep respect for our students' languages and cultures and a willingness to go out of my comfort zone, to take the role of student to them, make them my *profes*. Philosophizing bilingually is transformative for many of them, even the ones who think their Spanish is poor. One student who hinted at linguistic trauma told me that the class helped fuel her desire to speak Spanish without shame. Using two languages in the classroom is a powerful leveler, especially when I get a word wrong. This semester I confused "calificación" [grade] with "calefacción" [heater] to our collective delight. Ungrading and teaching bilingually both signal to the student: we are equals; we are co-creating knowledge as we go. In a bilingual and ungrading classroom, there is room for error, growth, and care.

NOTES

1. Mariana Alessandri, "Phil 2380: Introduction to Latin American Philosophy," *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2011): 15–17.

2. Alessandri, "Phil 2380," 15.

3. See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (Aunt Lute Books, 2012); and Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 165–74.

4. Daniel Coyle, *Flourish: The Art of Building Meaning, Joy, and Fulfillment* (Bantam, 2026); Susan D. Blum, ed., *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (West Virginia University Press, 2020).

5. Student names have been changed to protect their privacy.

6. David Yeager, *10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People: A Groundbreaking Approach to Leading the Next Generation—and Making Your Own Life Easier* (Avid Reader Press, 2024).

7. Yeager, *10 to 25*, 225.

8. Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999). Kohn's podcast is called *Kohn's Zone*.

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Teaching Feminist Jurisprudence in the US-Mexico Borderlands

Danny Marrero

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

> A significant part of the feminist project is to educate the non-feminist, so to speak, to make clear the significance of patriarchal influences where they commonly go unrecognized.
>
> —Patricia Smith[1]

On May 23, 2012, while I was pursuing my doctoral studies in the United States and experiencing what felt like the promise of the American dream, a brutal act of gender-based violence unfolded in Colombia, my country of origin. Rosa Elvira Cely, a thirty-five-year-old street vendor, was raped, tortured, and murdered in a secluded area of Bogotá's National Park.[2] As a middle-class male citizen, I remained largely unaware of the depth and systematic nature of such violence until, after completing my doctoral studies, I worked at the Office of the Attorney General of Colombia. There, through collaboration with prosecutors and forensic teams, I encountered multiple criminal investigations involving *feminicides*, a term used by Latin American feminists to describe extreme violence against feminized individuals, including girls and cisgender and transgender women.[3] The epistemic lucidity of the grieved and the still alive was a transformative experience that helped me to understand the perverse ubiquity of the continuum of sexual violence.[4] Today, as an assistant professor and director of the Philosophy Pre-law Concentration at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), I understand feminist pedagogy as the deliberate cultivation of this epistemic lucidity. So, when I teach Philosophy of Law or my Special Topics Course on Femicide/*Feminicidio*, I try to embody and model a bicultural commitment to learning from the situated knowledge of those women who grieve, survive, and resist, rather than from abstract legal ideals alone. Since I understand feminist pedagogy more broadly as a commitment to learning from students, especially students who identify as women, I will provide anonymous testimonies from my students throughout my paper as evidence of my claims.

Student testimonies on the philosophy of law and domestic violence

> *When I signed up for this philosophy and law class the last thing I expected to learn was about domestic violence and the survivors/victims' stories. I was enlightened and surprised by how much I did not know about domestic violence.*
>
> *One in four women will encounter domestic violence by their significant other in their lifetime. With a statistic as powerful as this, it is extremely hard to ignore the topic of domestic/sexual violence once enlightened. Unfortunately, like many others, I went very long before I had the chance to properly educate myself on this subject.*

My goal in this paper is to advance feminist and culturally relevant approaches to teaching jurisprudence in the borderlands.[5] As I recognized when creating a Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) version of my Philosophy of Law course as part our APA grant "Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands,"[6] the difficulty of this task is twofold. On one hand, feminist jurisprudence, like all jurisprudence, is devoted to the analysis of fundamental legal relations, concepts, and principles.[7] On the other hand, the "borderlands" is not only a geographical region that, in this case, refers to the border between the United States and Mexico, but also a cultural and existential reality shaping the languages and identities of both me and my students.[8] Given jurisprudence's alleged level of necessary abstraction, teaching can easily reproduce a hierarchical structure in which a well-versed specialist claims epistemic authority over fundamental legal relations, concepts, and principles, positioning students in a passive role marked by depersonalization, decontextualization, and distance from lived experiences. In a borderlands context like UTRGV where most students are bilingual, bicultural, and identify themselves as women, monolingual and monocultural instruction focused exclusively on male Anglophone jurisprudence—the hegemonic "standard" across the US—would only increase this depersonalization, decontextualization, and distance.

I adopted three major strategies to prioritize bilingual and bicultural women's perspectives in my course. First, I reorganized and improved the curriculum of a traditional philosophy of law course by including readings on feminist jurisprudence and Latina Critical Feminism. Second, I used an experiential learning activity designed by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence called *Caminando en sus Zapatos: Living with Domestic Violence*.[9] Finally, since I am convinced that theoretical knowledge should follow practical action, and that practical action should produce theory for further action, I asked my students to undertake service-learning projects with Friendship of Women, Inc., a local nonprofit organization in Brownsville, TX that seeks to empower individuals and families affected by family and sexual violence by providing comprehensive, survivor-centered services that promote safety, health, and well-being.[10]

The feminist critique of the classroom challenges both what is taught and how the selected materials are taught.[11] Convinced that decisions about course content profoundly shape the conditions under which teaching takes place, the first section of my paper shows how I revised the philosophy of law curriculum to better reflect and include a wider range of voices and experiences. The second and final section explores some pedagogical strategies that emerge from a substantive reconfiguration of the canon in dialogue with Latin American and Latina feminist scholarship. Recognizing that each classroom is situated within its own institutional and social contexts,[12] my aim is not to impose a particular way of teaching, but to share my experience with the hope that some of the principles of feminist and culturally sustaining pedagogy discussed here will be useful to a broader community.

1. CHANGING THE CURRICULUM

Most textbooks and readers in philosophy of law marginalize feminist jurisprudence, either by excluding it entirely[13] or by confining it to a few pages,[14] in contrast to the extensive treatment given to mainstream approaches such as legal naturalism or legal positivism.[15] However, when women's perspectives only appear in the periphery, if at all, the canon could potentially maintain structures of oppression.[16] These editorial choices are not neutral. They operate as a hidden curriculum by signaling whose experiences count as jurisprudentially relevant and what kinds of questions qualify as "real" legal theory. When women's perspectives appear only at the margins, students are trained, implicitly but nevertheless effectively, to regard gendered power as an optional topic rather than a structuring feature of legal concepts, institutions, and practices. This would be particularly pernicious in institutions like UTRGV, where women constitute 58.2 percent of the student body.[17]

A similar problem arises in Hispanic-Serving Institutions, where Hispanic or Latinx students constitute a substantial portion of the student population.[18] Although these students are demographically central to the university—e.g., they comprise over 90 percent of UTRGV's student body—the canon through which philosophy of law is taught remains distant from their legal realities and experiences. Dominant approaches to jurisprudence present themselves as universal and context-neutral, yet this universalism frequently abstracts away the experiences that structure my students' everyday notions of the law.[19] As a result, Hispanic students may encounter a form of marginalization analogous to the one experienced by women in traditional legal education: not necessarily exclusion from the classroom, but exclusion from the sources of philosophical meaning that are treated as theoretically relevant and authoritative.

Addressing these forms of marginalization requires expanding the canon to include feminist jurisprudence and Latina Critical Feminism as relevant and even central sources of jurisprudential analysis.[20] In my Philosophy of Law course, feminist theories receive the same sustained attention and rigorous analysis as more traditional frameworks, including legal naturalism, legal positivism, legal realism, and critical legal studies. Students examine liberal feminist jurisprudence's struggles for equality through authors such

as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg,[21] dominance feminism's account of sexualized subordination through authors such as Catherine MacKinnon,[22] and relational jurisprudence's analysis of the qualitative features of women's suffering and its implications for law through authors such as Robin West.[23] Equally important, students learn with Angela Harris that feminist legal theory can become "essentialist" when it speaks in the name of a unitary category of woman, thereby treating the experiences of white, middle-class women as universal.[24] Following these essentialist critiques, and recognizing the borderlands context in which my course is taught, I devote some class sessions to Latina Critical Feminism. Texts such as Berta Esperanza Hernandez-Truyol's "Las Olvidadas—Gendered in Justice/Gendered Injustice: Latinas, Fronteras and the Law"[25] or Margaret Montoya's "*Mascaras, Trenzas, y Greñas*: Un/Masking the Self While Un/Braiding Latina Stories with Legal Discourse"[26] are engaged with the aim of helping my students find themselves within the canon of jurisprudence. Although this course is not officially designated as bilingual, the Spanish at the beginning of these titles speaks directly to my students' bilingualism and biculturalism, flagging them as relevant to the philosophy of law.

Student testimonies on feminist jurisprudence and Latino/as

> *Feminist jurisprudence provided a valuable framework for understanding the issues we addressed in this project. Catharine MacKinnon's concept of "difference and dominance" helped me see how power dynamics play out in abusive relationships.*
>
> *The reason why I relate essentialism to my experience during Service Learning is that we live in the Valley, an area whose population is basically non-white (particularly Latino), and the population that we were addressing during the presentation was Latino in its entirety. . . . [T]here is inevitably a feeling of underrepresentation, not only by the mere fact that the law underrepresents women's issues in itself but also due to the generalization of their issues.*
>
> *Hernández-Truyol's discussion of Latinas as "Las Olvidadas," or the forgotten ones, deeply resonated with me as I contemplated the myriad economic and social challenges many women in our community face. . . . According to Hernández-Truyol, Latinas suffer compounded discrimination due to the intersections of their gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, leading to alarmingly high rates of poverty, limited access to education, and disproportionate vulnerability to domestic violence. These realities are particularly significant in Brownsville, where a substantial portion of the population lives below the poverty line, grappling with insufficient access to essential resources.*

2. CHANGING THE WAY OF TEACHING

From a feminist perspective, teaching philosophy of law should not only be about an abstract analysis of fundamental legal relations, concepts, and principles, but also "a specific sociopolitical and human story that affects real women."[27] This pedagogical claim has critical implications for course design: it calls for a component that moves students from conceptual analysis to situated engagement. It is in this spirit that I built a service-learning project into my course with four increasingly engaged objectives:

1. Explain how adopting a gender perspective reshapes legal doctrine and the operation of legal institutions.

2. Evaluate legal rules and practices from the standpoint of women and girls, including those who may not conform to cisgender norms.

3. Integrate analyses of gender inequality into concrete legal and social contexts (e.g., institutions, policies, case narratives, and community practices).

4. Implement a community-engaged and culturally relevant intervention that works toward feminist social change.

To achieve these goals, we partner with Friendship of Women, Inc. (FOW), an organization whose mission is "to provide leadership and comprehensive services to empower and promote safety, health, and the overall well-being of adults and children impacted by family and sexual violence."[28] In the service-learning project, students support FOW's vision of "ending violence against battered women, men, and their children." In teams, students propose, plan, organize, and carry out a community-engaged activity aligned with FOW's priorities. With FOW's guidance, students use the Close to Home framework, which moves them through four phases that build on one another: 1) Assess, 2) Talk, 3) Build, and 4) Act.[29]

In the Assess phase, students become curious and take time to learn about and better understand domestic and sexual violence, which fits with Menkel-Meadow's characterization of the feminist critique, which should start "from the experiential point of view of the oppressed, dominated and devaluated."[30] Students are introduced to this perspective through our partnership with FOW and through the experiential learning activity, *Caminando en sus Zapatos: Living with Domestic Violence* that helps give students the time and space they need to gather, learn, and understand local knowledge about domestic violence with help from FOW. For instance, students learn that nearly 50,000 women and girls were killed by their intimate partners or other family members during 2025, which means that 60 percent of the 83,000 women killed in 2025 were murdered by their intimate partners or other family members. In other words, an average of 137 women and girls worldwide lost their lives every day at the hands of their partner or a close relative.[31] In the United States alone, between 2020 and 2024, law enforcement reported more than 11,000 domestic violence homicide victims and an additional 1.1 million victims of domestic violence, nearly 75 percent of whom were female.[32] At the same time, to avoid giving the false impression that nothing can be done about these statistics, students learn about FOW's survivor-

centered services, which include emergency shelter, crisis intervention, and legal advocacy, as well as community-facing prevention work that expands public knowledge about family and sexual violence through awareness presentations and trainings.

Since studying legal relations, concepts, and principles from a feminist perspective "includes a real, concretized, contextualized, and experiential dimension,"[33] I bring the experiential dimension into the classroom using the learning activity developed by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence: *In Her Shoes®*. Designed as a simulation grounded in the narratives of real survivors, this activity invites participants to follow the trajectories of individuals living within abusive and controlling relationships as they navigate legal, medical, economic, and social institutions. Rather than presenting domestic violence as an object of abstract analysis, this activity situates learning in an encounter with the structural constraints, limited choices, and institutional barriers that shape survivors' lives.

To make the activity more culturally relevant for our students while engaging the broad spectrum of their bilingual abilities, I use an adapted version of *In Her Shoes®* called *Caminando en sus Zapatos: Living with Domestic Violence*. Rather than being a mere translation, this adaptation was written in Spanish and centers on the experiences of Latina and Latin American women, especially immigrant and refugee survivors. For instance, an activity prompts students to examine the aftermath of domestic violence through the experiences of women such as Cristina Rivas, a thirty-two-year-old Salvadoran single mother who met her husband before immigrating to the United States as a refugee; Guadalupe Correa, who moved to the United States after her mother died to live with her oldest brother; and Sandra Puente, a college student from Mexico who came to the United States to study. After adopting the first-person perspective of a survivor, students are put in situations where abuse happens to their characters. Then, they choose among options such as visiting a doctor, talking with family members, contacting their religious communities, or calling the police. Depending on the suboptimal yet realistic reactions of supporting institutions like these as well as the subsequent decisions students make, their character's story develops in ways that demonstrate the dangers, challenges, and misunderstandings that survivors of domestic violence face as they exercise their agency.

Precisely because the simulation requires students to make choices and then live with their consequences, it becomes a setting in which they can begin to ask not only what the law is, but what it should do for survivors—and where, in practice, it falls short. As Bridget Crawford and her coauthors suggest, "Feminist judgments in the classroom can help students in a myriad of ways, but especially in developing their own roles in addressing what they perceive to be the gaps between law and justice."[34] In *Caminando en sus Zapatos*, students begin to develop feminist judgments through role-play by testing their assumptions about safety, agency, and institutional responsibility against a sequence of constrained, often no-win decisions. The exercise pushes them to notice how survivors' options are structured by coercive control, economic precarity, immigration and language barriers, and the uneven responsiveness of medical, familial, religious, and legal systems. The learning is visible in students' reactions, especially their frustration, when the simulated survivor cannot act as they expect, or when institutions fail to provide the help students presumed would be available, thereby making the distance between law's promises and survivors' lived realities harder to ignore and more obviously important to the philosophy of law and jurisprudence.

Student testimonies on experiential learning and domestic violence

> *Caminando en sus Zapatos holds a very special place in my heart because I feel as if no college courses offer much hands-on learning anymore, especially with online-heavy assignments and resources. Thanks to this activity, I was able to get insight into what typical domestic abuse cases look like, which can make all the difference.*
>
> *The simulation, based on real-life stories brought by the survivors or friends and family of victims, made me feel the fear, frustration, and helplessness that many victims of domestic violence endure daily.*
>
> *When I started the activity, I narrow-mindedly thought finding safety from domestic violence meant finding physical safety, but I quickly learned it wasn't just about finding physical safety—it was about rebuilding a life amidst fear, stigma, and systemic barriers.*

After experiencing the simulated aftermath of domestic violence using *Caminando en sus Zapatos*, students transition to the second phase of the Close to Home framework: Talk. As Abrams notes, "Feminist action begins with building community and experience sharing,"[35] which is why students in this phase form groups to expand and deepen their conversations about domestic violence. To resist hierarchical, top-down structures of knowledge, I invite students to choose the collaborators they feel comfortable working with and to practice participatory, inquiry-based learning rather than passive note-taking. Everyone is expected to engage in critical and creative thinking about how their work can support FOW's mission locally. In doing so, I am following feminist teaching methods that "foster a more open and flexible understanding of the many ways problems can be solved. Building trust, collaboration, engagement, and empowerment [are] the pedagogical goals, rather than reinforcing the competition [and] individual achievement."[36] The group discussions culminate in a proposal aligned with FOW's mission, which students present to FOW and then refine based on the organization's feedback to ensure the project is viable, appropriate, and genuinely useful. Students clarify what the activity will accomplish, who it is for, what resources it requires, and how it aligns with FOW's survivor-centered priorities.

After FOW's approval, students assemble the practical pieces during the Build phase. Team roles and

responsibilities, a workback timeline with milestones and check-ins, materials and scripts, and a communication plan are clarified and executed. This helps students ensure that their project can be carried out consistently and responsibly. Because the work addresses domestic and sexual violence, this phase also includes basic harm-reduction practices: clear boundaries about confidentiality, guidance on responding to disclosures, referral pathways to services, and attention to language and format. Students exchange skills and ideas with FOW staff, revise the scope and outreach strategy to fit community realities, and ensure their intervention supports prevention, safety, and empowerment rather than reproducing stigma or risk. Finally, in the Act phase, students implement the project in partnership with FOW and engage in a guided debrief that asks them to name what they learned from the organization's situated expertise and from the constraints of community work. Some of these narratives were reproduced here in this paper as student testimonies.

Returning to the service-learning objectives of the course, the sequence of phases described above—Assess, Talk, Build, Act—clearly demonstrate how feminist jurisprudence can be taught as both conceptual critique and situated practice. By immersing students in simulations of the barriers many Latina survivors face—including linguistic obstacles, economic precarity, and the institutional gatekeeping that shapes access to safety and legal remedies—students learn to see how gendered power operates through the everyday routines of legal and social institutions. In turn, they are better able to 1) explain how adopting a gender perspective reshapes doctrine and institutional practice; 2) evaluate legal rules and responses from the standpoint of women and girls, including those outside cisgender norms; 3) connect analyses of gender inequality to concrete contexts and constraints; and 4) work with FOW to implement a community-engaged intervention oriented toward feminist social change.

Student testimonies on service-learning and feminist praxis

> *The Voices for Justice project has been one of the most transformative, educational, and eye-opening experiences of my life. Partnering with FOW, our goal was to create a presentation that raised awareness about domestic violence and informed the community about resources available to survivors. This process not only helped me better understand domestic violence as a multifaceted issue but also allowed me to develop valuable skills such as teamwork, adaptability, and public speaking.*
>
> *Embarking on the service-learning project for this course was an experience that taught me much more than I anticipated. At first, it was about finding the path of least resistance and going with our first option. But as we moved forward with our project, we were met with challenges and realizations. It wasn't just about checking a box for a class assignment or volunteering a few hours anymore—it was about connecting with my community, reflecting on societal issues, and learning how I, even as a student, could make an impact.*
>
> *This experience also allowed me to connect what I was learning in class with real-world applications. I was able to apply feminist theories we discussed, like the importance of empowering women and challenging patriarchal structures, to my service work. It showed me how feminist ideas can be used to make a big difference in the lives of individuals and communities, particularly when it comes to providing support for those facing violence or oppression. It also encouraged me to think critically about the role of law and advocacy in addressing social issues, helping me see how my work in this area could contribute to broader efforts for justice and equality.*

CONCLUSION

Returning to the case of Rosa Elvira Cely clarifies why feminist jurisprudence should not be taught as if gender-based violence were peripheral to legal life or as if abstraction were an innocent methodological choice. My own recognition of the continuum of sexual violence, made possible by learning from the epistemic lucidity of those who grieve, survive, and resist, has become the pedagogical task I now set for students. This paper has argued that teaching feminist jurisprudence in the borderlands requires treating students' cultures, locations, histories, languages, and community infrastructures as central to what counts as jurisprudential inquiry and designing classroom practices that move from conceptual critique to situated engagement.

To that end, I presented a sequence of culturally sustaining course features and pedagogical interventions that belong together. Re-centering feminist jurisprudence and Latina Critical Feminism in the syllabus challenges the hidden curriculum of the canon by making women's and Latinas' experiences sources of theoretical authority. The simulation *Caminando en sus Zapatos* then confronts students with the constrained, often no-win choices through which surviving domestic violence is lived and through which institutions reveal their limits. Finally, the service-learning partnership with Friendship of Women, Inc. transforms students' newly acquired philosophical insights into accountable practice as students plan and implement community-facing work under the guidance of those who respond to violence every day. Although no single course can resolve the structural conditions that sustain sexual and domestic violence, we can cultivate forms of feminist judgment that help students recognize these conditions, critique law's role in reproducing them, and undertake theoretically informed and community-accountable responses in partnership with local organizations.

NOTES

1. Patricia Smith, "Feminist Jurisprudence," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Law and Legal Theory*, ed. Dennis Patterson (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 296.

2. Julián Ortega Martínez, "Colombia: The Brutal Rape and Murder of Rosa Elvira Cely," *Global Voices*, June 5, 2012, https://globalvoices.org/2012/06/05/colombia-the-brutal-rape-and-murder-of-rosa-elvira-cely/.

3. See Danny Marrero, "Safeguarding Bodies That Matter: Inequal Grievability and Sexual Terror in Butler's Analysis of Feminicidio," *Acorn: Philosophical Studies in Pacifism and Nonviolence* 24, no. 1 (2024): 46–50.

4. For the concept of the continuum of sexual violence, see Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Polity Press, 1988), 74–96.

5. I take seriously the claim that the feminist pedagogical agenda remains unfinished and adapts to new manifestations of century-old challenges. Jamie R. Abrams, "Feminism's Transformation of Legal Education and Unfinished Agenda," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminism and Law in the United States*, ed. Deborah Brake, Martha Chamallas, and Verna L. Williams (Oxford University Press, 2021), 497.

6. Our grant report to the APA includes my revised syllabus for PHIL 3307: Philosophy of Law. See Alex Stehn et al., "APA Grant Report for *Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands*," American Philosophical Association, 2024, https://www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/grantreports/diversity_grant_reports/2023-2024/pluralizing_languages_and_cu.pdf.

7. Smith, "Feminist Jurisprudence," 290.

8. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3; Chad Richardson and Michael J. Pisani, *Batos, Bolillos, Pochos, and Pelados: Class and Culture on the South Texas Border*, rev. ed. (University of Texas Press, 2017), 223–58.

9. The webpage of this experiential learning activity is https://wscadv.org/training-kits/in-her-shoes/.

10. The homepage of Friendship of Women, Inc., is http://www.fowinc.com/.

11. See, for example, Carrie Menkel-Meadow, "Feminist Legal Theory" *Journal of Legal Education* 38, nos. 1–2 (1988): 77; Abrams, "Feminism's Transformation," 499.

12. Ruth Colker, "Teaching from a Feminist Perspective: An Occupational Hazard?," *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law* 1 (1993): 174.

13. See Jules L. Coleman, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Law* (Routledge, 2013); Andrei Marmor, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Law* (Routledge, 2012); Mark C. Murphy, *Philosophy of Law: The Fundamentals* (Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Raymond Wacks, *Philosophy of Law: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2014).

14. See John Arthur and William Shaw, eds., *Readings in the Philosophy of Law*, 5th ed. (Routledge, 2009); Brian H. Bix, *Jurisprudence: Theory and Context*, 9th ed. (Carolina Academic Press, 2023); George C. Christie, Patrick H. Martin, and Adam MacLeod, *Jurisprudence: Text and Readings on the Philosophy of Law*, 4th ed. (West Academic Publishing, 2020); Keith C. Culver and Michael Giudice, eds., *Readings in the Philosophy of Law*, 4th ed. (Broadview Press, 2026); Laurence Houlgate, *Philosophy, Law and the Family: A New Introduction to the Philosophy of Law* (Springer International Publishing, 2017); Jeffrie Murphy and Jules Coleman, *Philosophy of Law: An Introduction to Jurisprudence* (Routledge, 2018); Mark Tebbit, *Philosophy of Law: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2017).

15. Some exceptions are Susan Dimock, *Classic Readings and Cases in Philosophy of Law* (Routledge, 2016); Robert L. Hayman Jr. et al., *Jurisprudence, Classical and Contemporary: From Natural Law to Postmodernism*, 3rd ed. (West Academic Publishing, 2021); Raymond Wacks, *Understanding Jurisprudence: An Introduction to Legal Theory*, 6th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2021).

16. Paula A. Monopoli, "Feminist Legal History and Legal Pedagogy," *Virginia Law Review Online* 108 (2022): 94, https://virginialawreview.org/articles/feminist-legal-history-and-legal-pedagogy/.

17. Across the US, 47 percent of women ages twenty-five to thirty-four have a bachelor's degree, compared with 37 percent of men. Kiley Hurst, "U.S. Women Are Outpacing Men in College Completion, Including in Every Major Racial and Ethnic Group," Pew Research Center, November 18, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/11/18/us-women-are-outpacing-men-in-college-completion-including-in-every-major-racial-and-ethnic-group/.

18. A Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) is a college or university where at least 25 percent of the full-time undergraduate enrollment is Hispanic. During the 2024–25 academic year, there were 631 HSIs in the United States. Most of them are in Arizona, California, Florida, and Texas. *Excelencia* in Education, *Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) Factsheet: 2024–25* (*Excelencia* in Education, 2026), https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/publications/hispanic-serving-institutions-hsis-fact-sheet.

19. For Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, this "perspectiveless" approach to education nullifies the values, experiences, and worldviews of minoritized students. See "Toward a Race-Conscious Pedagogy in Legal Education," *National Black Law Journal* 11, no. 1 (1988): 2.

20. According to Catharine A. MacKinnon, there is feminism in education when "women and women's point of view is represented and respected in texts and in class." "Feminism in Legal Education," *Legal Education Review* 1, no. 1 (1989).

21. Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Barbara Flagg, "Some Reflections on the Feminist Legal Thought of the 1970's," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989).

22. Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination," in *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Harvard University Press, 1987).

23. Robin West, "The Difference in Women's Hedonic Lives: A Phenomenological Critique of Feminist Legal Theory," *Wisconsin Women's Law Journal* 15 (2000).

24. Angela P. Harris, "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory," *Stanford Law Review* 42, no. 3 (1990).

25. Berta Esperanza Hernández-Truyol, "Las Olvidadas—Gendered in Justice/Gendered Injustice: Latinas, Fronteras and the Law," *Journal of Gender, Race & Justice* 1 (1998).

26. Margaret E. Montoya, "*Mascaras, Trenzas, y Greñas*: Un/Masking the Self While Un/Braiding Latina Stories and Legal Discourse," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 17 (1994).

27. Menkel-Meadow, "Feminist Legal Theory," 81.

28. "Friendship of Women, Inc.," accessed March 11, 2026, http://www.fowinc.com/.

29. "The Close to Home Approach," Close to Home, accessed March 11, 2026, https://www.c2-home.org/overview.

30. Menkel-Meadow, "Feminist Legal Theory," 61.

31. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and UN Women, *Femicides in 2024: Global Estimates of Intimate Partner/Family Member Femicides* (United Nations Publications, 2025), 4.

32. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Domestic Relationships and Violent Crimes, 2020–2024* (US Department of Justice, 2026), 2, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/resources/reports/Domestic%20Relationships%20and%20Violent%20Crimes%202020-2024.pdf.

33. Menkel-Meadow, "Feminist Legal Theory," 80.

34. Bridget J. Crawford et al., "Teaching with Feminist Judgments: A Global Conversation," *Law & Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 38, no. 1 (2020): 3.

35. Abrams, "Feminism's Transformation," 500.

36. Menkel-Meadow, "Feminist Legal Theory," 81.

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Bilingual Bildung *on the Border: Teaching Philosophy in Spanish and English*

Dahlia Guzman
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

In this paper, I take up the philosophical concept of *Bildung* broadly defined as ethical self-formation in order to show its ongoing philosophical relevance. With some revision, I believe it is a solid way to foster a mutually beneficial relationship between a community and its youth, thus making it meaningful and productive for students and instructors. From my perspective, an especially interesting and productive version of *Bildung* that I call bilingual *Bildung* is embodied in the work that my colleagues and I are doing as philosophers and instructors at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) through what we like to call the PB3 Project—Philosophy (P) in a Bilingual, Bicultural, and Biliterate (B3) institution.

Viewed historically, the concept of *Bildung* has contributed to the rise of the humanities and the goals of higher education, which not only teaches students the skills necessary to work towards their own goals and define their own happiness as authentically as they can but also helps them form themselves as ethical persons. In this way, we all benefit from this seemingly individual work. This articulation of *Bildung* is optimistic despite the fact that, at times, it has also been used to bind teachers and their pedagogical strategies to false and limiting images of the American student that have effectively excluded various populations or attempted to erase and/or devalue certain identity-defining features of minoritized cultures

and languages. At the same time, *Bildung* has been a mainstay of our educational system as a pedagogical aim and approach that necessarily responds to changes in US society and its expectations. Rather than seeing *Bildung's* historical contingency as a negative, it opens a space to revisit the concept and define it anew.

In the case of UTRGV, we are a public university that serves the southernmost tip of Texas where a majority of our students are bicultural, bilingual, and biliterate to varying degrees. The PB3 Project is our attempt to create a version of *Bildung* that recognizes and valorizes the self-formation of students who speak, consume culture, experience, and think about the world in more than one language and culture. Our "typical" student is not a nineteenth-century German, but a Mexican American like me. I will therefore explore how teaching philosophy bilingually or in Spanish in the South Texas Borderlands contributes to two positive outcomes: 1) the department can analyze and reinvent institutional assumptions and philosophical values, and more importantly, 2) students can experience educational opportunities to see and value both the plurality and the uniqueness of their experiences, cultures, and languages to aid them in their ethical self-formation. Defining and applying *Bildung* bilingually helps our institution and our department see the communities we serve in a different light and develop a more pluralistic vision of what it means to be educated.

In the first section, I will discuss the historical origins and development of *Bildung* to frame the goals of our PB3 Project. In the second section, I discuss both a renewed philosophical interest in *Bildung* and the academic study of heritage language learners to show how these ideas fit into the broader goals of a liberal arts education. In the third section, I provide some examples of PB3 course design, assignments, and expectations regarding languages and cultures in the classroom.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF *BILDUNG*

In her book, *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition*, Jennifer Herdt asserts that *Bildung* should be understood as an orientation rather than a concept,[1] and I draw heavily from her work in what follows. The concept of *Bildung* grew out of Pietist theology, which posits that each individual has an ethical responsibility to cultivate one's own skills and talents since humans are made in the image of God, and those skills and talents are God-given. While *Bildung* has a theological foundation, the trajectory of its development was radically shaped by the Enlightenment, which tied the concept of *Bildung* to the more secular rationalism of that time. This process repeats itself historically, each time adding and subtracting different aspects of *Bildung's* definition depending on the changes in a society, and the goals that constitute "the common good." These changes, in turn, bring about changes in the institutional goals of universities as well as our pedagogical aims in the classroom,[2] which is why it makes sense to speak of *Bildung* as an educational orientation.

The viability of the *Bildung* tradition is tested by how institutions respond to big and small changes within society. Hans-Georg Gadamer described *Bildung* as a founding principle to explain "the rise of the humanities" and the evolution of "new aesthetic and moral standards and ideals, [that] also challenged the orientation towards a narrow Enlightenment in the name of the rounded *Bildung* of the individual."[3] I find this brief description of the changes in the concept of *Bildung*—its Pietist beginnings, the pull toward Enlightenment rationalism, and the evolution of that rationalism through industrialization—to be a useful way to illustrate the historical persistence and variability of *Bildung*. While the idea of *Bildung* has persisted, its meaning has changed in light of the changes in a given society's values, standards, and ideals. The fluidity expressed here is a pivotal point about *Bildung* and, I assert, the most beneficial way to understand it. Herdt's work successfully captures the viability of this tradition by underscoring the resources it affords us as inheritors of not only the German *Bildung* tradition but also the Greek *paideia* tradition. In other words, long before we arrive at "bilingual *Bildung* on the border," *Bildung* must be understood as always already bilingual and bicultural.

BILDUNG AND *PAIDEIA*

Although the concept of *Bildung* comes out of an eighteenth-century theological idea, Herdt rightly ties it to the ethical task of becoming a good human being, which has an even older history. With philosophical roots in Ancient Greece, *paideia* expresses the two-sided responsibility the Greeks saw as imperative. On one side, there is the responsibility a person has to become "fully human." On the other side, there is the responsibility of a society to help the individual in that process because becoming human is not a singular task but a collective or communal one. Why? Because the impacts of individual formation extend far beyond the individual. Herdt offers three assumptions that frame *paideia*: one, we are not born fully human. This is supported straightforwardly by the fact that we begin as infants and mature into adults. Two, the process of becoming human is not automatic; becoming human requires time and practice with the influence and guidance of role models. Finally, while we do need help and guidance, each of us is ultimately responsible for making ourselves human.[4]

Drawing *Bildung* and *paideia* together provides a basis for looking at the concept of *Bildung* anew from the South Texas borderlands. Understood historically and contextually, *Bildung* can be bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate because its German pietist inception was already rooted in other languages and cultures, including the Attic Greek of Plato and the Koine Greek of the Christian New Testament. To see the possibilities of bilingual *Bildung* on the border demands that we see the educational and ethical responsibilities we are facing from both sides of the US-Mexico border using both languages (Spanish and English) that are widely spoken in our community. As educators at UTRGV, we continue to justify our department's foundational role and place in the general education core curriculum using Herdt's second and third assumption. Becoming human is not automatic, and philosophy can help. Some of the major goals of our discipline are to introduce students to philosophy and give them opportunities to grapple with philosophical ideas when what's at stake is the very meaning of their lives.

BILDUNG, HERITAGE LANGUAGES, AND THE GOALS OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

While framing *Bildung* in an optimistic manner, I acknowledge that history reminds us of the many ways it has gone wrong. For example, as a Mexican American woman, I recognize that when Edinburg College was founded in 1927, people like me were systemically excluded from receiving the very sort of education I am offering my students today. Nevertheless, I reiterate here the well-trodden understanding of a liberal arts education as an education that helps a free person learn and practice the skills necessary to participate in a democracy: critical thinking and rational judgment. The problem with such as education is not the education itself, but the societal attempts to limit which sorts of people have access to it. "The common good" is another term I use to think through the connection between my responsibilities as a philosophy teacher and citizen of the Rio Grande Valley. The common good is about fostering and maintaining the ethos of a people, community, or society so that it may flourish. Herdt asserts that *Bildung* provides a common and coherent identity for a group of people that nevertheless respects individuality.[5] Such an ethos encompasses values, ideas, and standards that inform and are informed by the cultural, religious, and economic conditions of a group. Changes in an ethos can be terribly slow—as in the case of women and other minoritized groups gaining access to higher education. At other times, an ethos quickly evolves or develops new facets in response to something significant, like the bilingualism and biculturalism of students that were highlighted in new ways when UTRGV was founded in 2015.

The point of this broad understanding of the common good is that it affords us a view of how the ethos of the United States changes and shapes how education contributes to the common good. Through general education core curriculums, the variety of disciplinary course offerings, and differences in pedagogical practices, institutions of higher education define and measure ethical self-formation and educative growth. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, for instance, requires that courses in "Language, Philosophy and Culture" section of the core teach not only Critical Thinking and Communication Skills but also Personal Responsibility and Social Responsibility, traces of the longstanding *Bildung* tradition. Essentially, there is no one, singular common good; but whatever the conception of that common good is projected to be by the people in power, it is eventually expressed in our educational system.

The PB3 Project gives students a chance to learn philosophy in English, Spanish, and Spanglish in order to help them intellectualize their particular place here in the South Texas borderlands as generative and meaningful to their sense of self. As a vision of ethical self-formation and philosophizing that is bilingual, biliterate and bicultural, bilingual *Bildung* on the border reflects some of the unique characteristics of our students.

Bildung and *paideia* also dovetail in the mission of the PB3 Project: we want to help our students incorporate their bilingual and bicultural selves and languages as they learn how to live an engaged life whereby they contribute positively to a pluralistic society where multiple languages and cultures have value. At the same time, the PB3 Project continues to maintain our institution's core education objectives referred to as Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). At UTRGV, and other public universities across Texas, they include the four learning objectives mentioned above, along with Empirical and Quantitative Analysis, and Teamwork. There has been much institutional success with students achieving these SLOs, but as noted previously, there has also been marginalization and minoritization of large numbers of students. The SLOs can be limited by a set of monolingual, monocultural, and monoliterate assumptions about how these skills should be taught, how they should be measured, and how they are best achieved. Most of our students are capable of thinking critically in two languages, English and Spanish, but schools have historically taught and measured them in only one: English. This fact itself calls for critical thinking. Similarly, it makes very little sense to teach and measure the development of Communication, Personal Responsibility, Social Responsibility, Empirical and Qualitative Analysis, and Teamwork in only one language when the vast majority of students operate *outside* the classroom in two (or three): English, Spanish (and Spanglish).

Ideological assumptions like English-only education can effectively brush away or diminish the distinctive aspects of any given student population. In contrast, the PB3 Project wants to highlight and further develop these distinctive aspects of our students' identities and skills. Ideally, SLOs are pedagogical goals meant to teach concepts and skills in a way that students can learn new ideas for themselves, identify and pursue their own interests and strengths, and choose from a cache of activities and opportunities that help them grow as individuals and contribute to society through forms of active learning like mentoring, shadowing, and internship programs that help students develop practical knowledge and skills. This process points to the overall aim of helping individuals become flourishing members of a community that can prosper in the world and be active contributors to society. The drawback has been that, at times, the pursuit of these SLOs in narrow ways has made all students fungible in the process. This can be mitigated by recognizing the linguistic and cultural richness of the UTRGV's student population, which is 90 percent Hispanic or Latinx and comes from an incredibly bilingual region where 80 percent of households speak Spanish at home.

REINTRODUCING STUDENTS INTO THE CURRICULUM

The renewed scholarly interest in *Bildung* has revealed some interesting possibilities that emerge from its multiple conceptual, cultural, and linguistic origins and trajectories. Contemporary discussions address the conceptual language from Humboldt's era in educational psychology, the way *Bildung* continues to connect education to political and economic requirements, and the scholars who continue to explore its viability as a pedagogy that can benefit students.[6] My aim here is to highlight some scholars who focus on the value of communication in its various forms, since they provide conceptual support for our PB3 efforts.

In the article, "Is *Bildung* possible in the Classroom?" authors Kim, Morrison, and Ramzinski describe *Bildung* as construction of self and an "inner life," but also as a way to "cultivate [oneself] into a balanced whole through active engagement with the world around [oneself]."[7] The authors pursue a "*Bildung*-centered" pedagogy for both students and themselves. Their focus has been to create active engagement with students, each understood as an "organic whole," by experimenting with an autobiographical assignment that includes the individual's environment as the backdrop for personal reflection. Autobiographical writing is a straightforward way to reintroduce students into the curriculum while practicing the ancient Socratic maxim to know and care for oneself. Autobiography effectively fosters and nurtures a movement through and beyond knowledge and skill to self-formation. There is multi-level interaction through memory (a recognition of who one is or a specific impactful experience), meditation (writing as a conduit for reconnecting to said memory) and lastly, a reflexive thinking on and writing about the first two stages of the exercise that ideally leads to transformation.[8]

The approach taken in autobiographical writing further underscores the importance of seeing students in a particular linguistic and cultural context. In "*Bildung* and Educational Language: Talking of the Self in Anglo-American Education," Friesen reiterates the concern for selfhood and its continued development in the classroom. Friesen asserts that there has been a move to exclude selfhood in the definition and practice of *Bildung* that should be reinstituted. The initial, practical aim of *Bildung* was to uphold "a particular quality of selfhood" that manifests as a concern for freedom and agency.[9] This is born out in the work of Wilhelm von Humbolt who, in creating university curriculums, spoke of how much more an education should promise beyond knowledge and skills. In a letter to the King of Prussia, Humbolt describes an approach to education that echoes the discussion of both *Bildung* and *paideia* that should at once encourage individuality and benefit all citizens:

> There are undeniably certain kinds of knowledge that must be of a general nature and, more importantly, a certain cultivation of the mind and character that nobody can afford to be without. People obviously cannot be good craftworkers, merchants, soldiers or businessmen unless, regardless of their occupation, they are good, upstanding and—according to their condition—well-informed human beings and citizens.[10]

While forming selves, "Bildung-centered" education has also always aimed at external realities. Friesen suggests that a recovery of cultural and historical connections found in early twentieth-century educational psychology would be useful, for example, on John Dewey's conception of self as a consciousness that is an "active unity" that makes connections between the individual and others, the world, and its objects, achieving unity through both cognition and choice.[11] In the words of Gert Biesta:

> The concept of *Bildung* brings together the aspirations of all those who acknowledge—or hope—that education is more than the simple acquisition of knowledge and skills, that it is more than simply getting things "right," but that it also has to do with nurturing the human person, that it has to do with individuality, subjectivity, in short, with "becoming and being somebody."[12]

Since most students at UTRGV are bicultural and bilingual, it is fitting that our concern with their "becoming and being somebody" take place through B3 courses.

BILINGUAL/BICULTURAL LEARNERS

In this final section, I will describe my own B3 course design, and describe a sample assignment used in my bilingual Intro to Philosophy course that represents my initial attempt to create a space for both students and myself that exemplifies bilingual *Bildung*. The aforementioned core SLOs, when presented and practiced bilingually, give our students the opportunity to make more connections between their languages, cultural traditions, and the concepts that define our discipline. Through immersive assignments and culturally sustaining texts provided in English and/or Spanish, students come to see their bilingual abilities as well as their Mexican American experiences and cultural traditions through a philosophical lens. Students are encouraged to achieve their own insights about these things and themselves in English, Spanish, or both (Spanglish or Tex-Mex).

One way to conceptualize this is to see some of our students as heritage language learners. In *Spanish as a Heritage Language in the United States*, editors Beaudrie and Fairclough introduce the significance of teaching Spanish as a heritage language. Here, I aim to explicitly make the connection to bilingual *Bildung* or *paideia*. In a US context, a heritage language learner is someone raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken. Students are considered bilingual if they can speak or at least understand the heritage language.[13] This describes the vast majority of our student population at UTRGV perfectly. However, many heritage language learners fear judgment about their language competency and may experience anxiety, which I have found to be evident in the classroom and experienced myself.

In "SHL Learners' Attitudes and Motivations: Reconciling Opposing Forces," Cynthia Ducar describes the motivation to learn and/or become more fluent in a non-English language. There is an intrinsic motivation—e.g., learning a language is fun—and extrinsic motivation, which includes an individual's "desire to become a part of the target language community."[14] Many of my students express this extrinsic motivation because they feel like outsiders in relation to the Spanish language, even though for many of them, it was their first language. Much of the time, the negative judgments of others become a part of what prompts them to discontinue their studies. Ducar asserts that what research needs to grapple with are "how individual, social and cognitive factors interplay to create motivation." In her discussion of research on anxiety, attitude, and motivation in Spanish Heritage Language learners,[15] I see more clearly the opposing forces at work in our students' experiences with Spanish and education. In the Rio Grande Valley,

Spanish is the most common language spoken by children when they first start school. But there is also the stigma associated with the language from both the dominant English-speaking community, the overwhelmingly English (if not English-only) curriculum, and the "internal stigmas" that come from speaking varieties of Spanish that have arisen in the US rather than Spain or Latin America. A major goal of the RGV's educational system, like most of the US, is to transition Spanish-speaking children into English-only classrooms as soon as possible.

Social stigmas related to language are evident in many of the journal entries my students wrote in response to the prompts related to Anzaldúa's chapter "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. One student wrote:

> I feel like Anzaldua's experience is similar to my own because I feel embarrassed or made to feel less because I do not speak Spanish very well. When we were little, my cousins called me a "No Sabo" kid. It was the same with the kids at school . . . especially the ones who speak Spanish well. It all made me self-conscious. Unless I am talking with my grandparents, I don't speak Spanish.

Our version of bilingual *Bildung* must take these stigmatized aspects of language into account and develop specific strategies to deal with them. Ducar makes it clear that assigning journal prompts and writing assignments about language provides a space where student attitudes about language can change and develop. She cites research showing that as students learn about the different varieties of Spanish, they develop more positive attitudes towards the variations of Spanish spoken, which encourages them to see the value of speaking Spanish, including its local varieties, and its continued role in their self-formation. Outcomes like this, which linguists often characterize as "critical language awareness"[16] are related not only to *Bildung* and *paideia* but also to the SLOs discussed above, especially Critical Thinking, Communication Skills, Personal Responsibility, and Social Responsibility.

PB3 COURSE DESIGN AND ASSIGNMENTS

During the summer of 2024, my colleagues and I organized and participated in a PB3 seminar and course development workshop that resulted in the creation of new philosophy courses that would be taught in Spanish or bilingually or using culturally sustaining pedagogies. We spent time sharing our cultural and linguistic heritages and experiences, then worked together to discuss, develop, and design our courses. In addition to including course materials in both Spanish and English, we talked about designing activities and assignments that give students the chance to think about philosophical concepts in relation to their cultural and linguistic histories.

In my case, I created a bilingual and culturally sustaining Introduction to Philosophy course. My goal was to design assignments around texts that gave students opportunities to explore and create spaces within the study and practice of philosophy that drew on their Spanish-English bilingualism and Mexican American biculturalism. The Introduction to Philosophy course I created had an overall trajectory of learning about different conceptions of self—what it is, how it is shaped, and its impact on other important facets of human experience, including ethics, friendship, love, and death. For a substantial part of the semester, we studied philosophers who argued for different conceptions of self. While talking about the heritage of the Western philosophical canon, I aimed to orient the course and our class discussions around Walter Kaufmann's idea that one could see the history of philosophy as a history of heresy.[17]

I created a variety of in-class writing tasks, half of which specifically asked about the role of language(s) in philosophical reflection and conceptions of self. In the very first writing task, students were asked to give their own cultural and linguistic histories and to describe how much (or how little) these histories shaped their identities and/or sense of self. Initially, most students saw language matter-of-factly, as a means of communication. Similarly, more than half the students did not seem to think language had any bearing on their sense of self.

Each of the philosophies we studied were introduced in terms of the heretical nature of their ideas. By the middle of the semester, although six or seven students (20 percent of the class) were comfortable enough to submit assignments in Spanish, most of our class discussion was in English. In the penultimate writing task, I brought copies of a chapter from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) by Rio Grande Valley native, Gloria Anzaldúa, entitled "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." Anzaldúa draws a tight connection between language and identity: "So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language."[18] For the in-class writing assignment, students responded to the following questions:

1) Which of Anzaldúa's languages do you speak and/or understand? Do you have strong feelings (negative or positive) about any of these?

2) How does Anzaldua's cultural and linguistic history shape her sense of self?

3) What parallels do you find between Anzaldua's story and your sense of self or your cultural and linguistic history?

I put students into groups to discuss their own responses. As they reported their answers, it became clear how strongly their identity was shaped by a self-perceived lack of skill in their heritage language or the shame and/or embarrassment they had experienced due to that lack. During our discussion, we thought together about why language was not included in the previous and more canonical discussions of self. The discussion itself was hushed, people speaking softly and, in a sense, treading lightly, since it was clear this was very personal and often very painful.

In fact, my experiences of growing up in the Rio Grande Valley—including my own experience of language anxiety and shame—are remarkably similar despite the generational gap (my students position me somewhere between their

moms and their *abuelas*). Being part of the PB3 Project has opened up many different feelings for me, including the return to my language anxiety that has accompanied me while teaching a philosophy course bilingually. I suspect that one of the reasons why my students are so kind to me about this is because they have their own experience of that anxiety. The students who are Spanish-dominant were also very helpful and overall, by the end of the semester, roughly one-third of the students were regularly turning in some assignments written either entirely in Spanish or in both English and Spanish. I suspect that the issue of language anxiety and shame will always be present, but every time we do this kind of assignment, we pave a way for students to see their language and cultural heritage as fundamental to their concept of self and to their self-formation through the process of bilingual *Bildung* on the border.

SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSES

I include here just a handful of student responses from the in-class writing assignment described above, especially the third question about the parallels students saw between Anzaldúa's experiences/sense of self and their own.

> My experience with language is similar to Anzaldua's because I also know a few different versions of English and Spanish. The importance of knowing both languages is always stressed. We're different because I was embarrassed speaking Spanish as child while Anzaldua seems prideful.
>
> Language isn't considered a trait for a concept of self because not everyone feels a connection with the languages they speak. Maybe . . . it holds no emotional connection.
>
> Unlike Anzaldua, I was encouraged to speak Spanish because it meant more opportunities. My experience was also kind of similar because I grew up hearing "Don't speak Spanish outside, only English." "Go back to your country" I don't hear it in person too much, but I still see comments like that online in different outlets but it's the same ignorant people. I think it's a fine line, even though language makes us who we are, many people don't see it as a special thing that makes them unique.
>
> For me, I don't see how it matters—I love my grandparents, no matter what language I speak. But it has made me try harder to connect with them and ask them to correct me.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I describe a discussion with my colleague, Alex Stehn, who conducted a peer observation of teaching focused on this particular class session. As he rightly pointed out, when my students and I philosophize in English, Spanish, and Spanglish from the perspective of our Mexican American heritage, and as we explore the possibilities that PB3 education might offer us, we are being heretical. The pedagogical practice of bilingual *Bildung* demands that we empower our students to see the value in their personal, familial, and community histories while assuming their rightful place in the heretical practice of philosophizing in languages other than English.

In a 2002 anthology that Anzaldúa co-edited, *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, the heretical nature of her philosophy shines throughout her chapter "now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts." She begins with the concept and experience of the *arrebato* or earthquake. Anzaldúa defines it as a "rupture" that shakes the foundations of her philosophizing, giving value to her marginalized place as well as her multilingualism.[19] In essence, she ruptures the usual business of philosophy—that is, a practice that non-neutral people told us requires neutrality in order to find the underlying truths in things. She speaks in tongues from a specific cultural and linguistic place, the borderlands of South Texas and Northern Mexico, unwilling to relinquish her/our richness and contradictions for the sake of neutrality. My hope is that our students, who have so much in common with Anzaldúa, will follow her lead and see how much our history and context bring to the practice of philosophy understood as bilingual *Bildung* on the border.

NOTES

1. Jennifer A. Herdt, *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 1.

2. Herdt, *Forming Humanity*, 2.

3. Josef Bleicher, "Bildung," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, nos. 2–3 (2006): 364.

4. Herdt, *Forming Humanity*, 27.

5. Herdt, *Forming Humanity*, 112–13.

6. I cite and discuss three such articles below. See also Yuichi Miyamoto, "Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Bildung* Theory and Educational Reform: Reconstructing *Bildung* as a Pedagogical Concept," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 54, no. 1 (2022): 1–17; Carol A. Taylor, "Is a Posthumanist *Bildung* Possible? Reclaiming the Promise of *Bildung* for Contemporary Higher Education," *Higher Education* 74 (2017): 419–35; and Ninni Wahlström, "Do We Need to Talk to Each Other? How the Concept of *Experience* Can Contribute to an Understanding of *Bildung* and Democracy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42, no. 3 (2010): 293–309.

7. Jeong-Hee Kim et al., "Is *Bildung* Possible in the Classroom? Autobiographical Writing as Philosophical Exercise (*askēsis*) for Developing One's *Bildung*," *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 16, no. 3 (2019): 243.

8. Kim et al., "Is *Bildung* Possible in the Classroom?," 246–47.

9. Norm Friesen, "*Bildung* and Educational Language: Talking of 'the Self' in Anglo-American Education," in *Making a Difference in Theory: The Theory Question in Education and the Education Question in Theory*, ed. Gert Biesta, Julie Allan, and Richard Edwards (Routledge, 2013), 100.

10. Karl-Heinz Günther, "Profiles of Educators: Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835)," *Prospects* 18, no. 1 (1988): 132.

11. Friesen, "*Bildung* and Educational Language," 102–3.

12. Gert Biesta, "*Bildung* and Modernity: The Future of *Bildung* in a World of Difference," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21 (2002): 343.

13. Sara M. Beaudrie and Marta Fairclough, eds., *Spanish as a Heritage Language in the United States: The State of the Field* (Georgetown University Press, 2012).

14. Cynthia M. Ducar, "SHL Learners' Attitudes and Motivations: Reconciling Opposing Forces," in Beaudrie and Fairclough, *Spanish as a Heritage Language*, 163.

15. Ducar, "SHL Learners' Attitudes and Motivations," 164.

16. Norman Fairclough, ed., *Critical Language Awareness* (Routledge, 1992).

17. See Walter Kaufmann, *The Faith of a Heretic*, updated ed. (Princeton University Press, 2015).

18. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 59.

19. Gloria Anzaldúa, "now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (Routledge, 2002), 546.

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Teaching Philosophy Bilingually through Ser y Estar

Christopher J. Gómez

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

El ser se dice de muchas maneras.

–Aristóteles, *Metafísica*, Libro IV

This essay is a first attempt at seeding some ideas about the possibilities that the Spanish pair *ser/estar* offers to Spanish-English bilingual students of philosophy as "tools" for understanding both "Being" generally and human existence more specifically. Although partially premised on the philosophically revelatory dimensions of the Spanish language, this is not so much a linguistic analysis as it is a pedagogical essay about teaching philosophy bilingually with a focus on ontology, existentialism, and phenomenology.

By rooting my understanding of some concepts in their everyday or colloquial use, I am assuming that such use already implies the concepts. My "analysis" will thus analogize between common uses of *ser* y *estar*—sometimes triangulating with the English verb *to be*—to argue that as a predicative particle, *ser* tends towards *conditional*, *normative*, and/or *stipulate/definitional* statements, exhibiting a tendency to conceptualize. *Estar*, on the other hand, has several meanings (and hence instantiates several different concepts) both in its standalone and copulative grammatical uses. These concepts include presence, location, relative position, temporal state, health, price, etc.[1] Here, I will emphasize the *presence* meaning. I will also argue that as a predictive particle, *estar* tends towards *extensional*, *temporizing*, *existential*, and *instancing* statements. To sum up their general tendencies, Ser commonly *conditions or defines* while Estar commonly *extends*.

As a standalone concept, and perhaps even in most contexts, *Ser* can be fairly translated as *Being*, but I will argue that, ultimately, we should understand the *ser* y *estar* pair as good examples of what W.V.O. Quine calls inherent indeterminacy of translation.[2] In other words, both *ser* y *estar* are inherently indeterminate in English, and, as I will defend in this essay, neither *ser* nor *estar* are grammatical functions of the verb *to be*. The main upshot is that bilingual philosophers like me and my students should worry less about translating *ser* y *estar* into English and get more interested in cultivating philosophical bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy (PB3). *En otras palabras, deberíamos aprovechar el hecho de que somos bilingües, biculturales y "biletrados" para filosofar*.[3]

In what follows, I will argue that considering three widespread use cases of *ser* y *estar* can quickly help a fluent Spanish-speaking philosophy student grasp the following philosophical concepts:

1) Philosophical distinctions between correlative opposites like substance-modality, necessary-contingent, substance-accident, type-token, essence-existence, concept-instance and similar pairs are implied and embedded in the distinctive everyday uses of *ser* y *estar*.

2) The philosophical distinctions of moral vs. non-moral objectivism and moral vs. non-moral relativism are implied and embedded in the common use of the adjective *bueno*, or good, depending on whether *bueno* is preceded by *ser* or *estar*.

3) *Estar* in its first-person form, *estoy*, has common uses that reflect phenomenological and existentialist categories that can be used as a tool to teach Descartes' *cogito* argument and undermine its mind-body dualistic consequences: the first by arguing how *estoy* functions as a "hidden" premise in the *cogito* argument, the second by adding the dimension of the *sui-generis* relation between self and her/his body.[4]

Ultimately, as a native Spanish speaker and fluent heritage speaker of English who regularly teaches philosophy courses in English, Spanish, and bilingually at UTRGV, I want to argue that the very existence of the problems of usage surrounding *ser* y *estar* that plague English-speakers learning Spanish as a second language suggests that the distinction has something to teach the world of mainstream Anglophone philosophy. This is not an entirely novel strategy. For example, Diana Perez has worked the distinction between *saber* and *conocer* in the context of analyzing Bertrand Russell's "knowledge by acquaintance."[5]

Moreover, the fact that learning certain philosophical concepts may be easier for native Spanish speakers suggests the philosophical value of bi- or multi-lingualism as opposed to the "insularity of Anglophone philosophy" that Eric Schwitzgebel and his coauthors have recently established empirically beyond any reasonable doubt.[6]

1. MAKING CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN CORRELATIVES THROUGH *SER/ESTAR*

For non-native Spanish speakers and teachers of Spanish as a "foreign language," *ser* y *estar* are widely recognized as one of the most problematic pairs, i.e., closely related terms, usually with only one obvious English translation—in this case, "to be"—that Spanish learners struggle to distinguish and use properly.[7] Simply put, beginning and intermediate students of Spanish who are native English speakers experience great difficulty knowing when to use *ser* and when to use *estar*. To explain this difficulty, some scholars writing in English have decried "the apparent irrationality of the uses" and claimed that "no one underlying principle suffices to explain all the uses of *ser* and *estar*."[8] In contrast, I believe that this "problem" arises because *ser* y *estar* are not direct grammatical functions of the verb *to be*. As we are about to see through some examples, they do not neatly map onto the uses of the English verb *to be* because the concepts they imply are sometimes different. And although *ser* y *estar* are typically translated to and from the English verb *to be*, they instead seem to me like good examples of what W.V.O. Quine calls indeterminacy of translation.[9] Both *ser* y *estar* can be translated, but they are inherently indeterminate in English.

Ser y *estar* are both what linguists call autosemantic and copulative.[10] That is, they can have standalone meaning, or form part of a word compound when associated with other predicative particles like verbs, adverbs, or adjectives. I will borrow two uses outlined in the previously referenced article by Luque Nadal while homogenizing the examples she provides by using the same subject and adjective and adding my own bracketed English translations: 1) "Nexus of defining attribution": *María es feliz* [Maria is a happy person] and 2) "Nexus of statutory attributions": *María está feliz* [Maria is happy at the moment]. Although both can be translated as "Maria is happy," the meaning of the Spanish differs depending on whether *ser* or *estar* is used. *Ser* tells us that Maria is always or usually happy, while *estar* tells us that Maria is happy at the moment or in some moment if the tense of the verb changes, i.e., Maria's being happy is only for some limited time.

Ser can also emphasize the predicated object while *estar* can emphasize the predication. George DeMello showcases this difference with the following examples: "a) *¿Dónde es la fiesta* (the event)? b) *¿Dónde está la fiesta* (the partying group)?"[11] Both can be translated as "Where is the party?" Hence, the different senses are quite literally lost in a typical translation, but I will restore them here in a way that is somewhat forced. *¿Dónde es la fiesta*?: "Where is the *entity-event*, *party* located?" *¿Dónde está la fiesta*?: "Where is the *location* of the party?" The first emphasizes the *thing* (party), the second one emphasizes its *place*.

So, while an English speaker can colloquially ask about the location of the party, there is an affordance in colloquial Spanish to ask for the location of "the thing we call a party." In some contexts, "¿Dónde es la fiesta?" can even be translated as "Where is *a* party?" whereas "¿Dónde está la fiesta? is restricted to "Where is *the* party?" In English, the type-token distinction in this example is made using the articles *a/the*, whereas Spanish sometimes uses the verbs *ser*/*estar* to make the distinction. Hence, when teaching, examples like this make it easy for native Spanish speakers to grasp type-token and other related conceptual distinctions. Moreover, English-Spanish bilinguals can concretely grasp different ways that natural languages make such distinctions colloquially.

In sum, the type-token distinction is an example of a philosophical concept that is readily available to fluent Spanish speakers through the distinctive uses of *ser*/*estar*, which further reveals that type and token are "ways of being" that correspond to "ways of speaking" not just arbitrary linguistic stipulations. This example further demonstrates how *ser* can condition an individual with reference to its type, species, or group, i.e., using some concept. *Ser* can also sometimes portray personal (moral or behavioral) traits while *estar*, when preceding the same adverb or adjective, renders it extensional-physical. For example: *Vanesa es fría* [Vanesa is cold] would usually

mean that Vanesa is a cold-hearted person. In contrast, *Vanesa está fría* [Vanesa is cold] would mean that Vanesa feels cold or that her body has a low physical temperature. Also, in this example, *es* made the copulative particle *fría* function as an adjective, whereas *estar* made it an adverb—demonstrating the common "definitional" aspect of *ser* and common "way-of-being" or "extensional" aspect of *estar*. In section two below, we'll have more to say about the normative and subjective-objective distinctions *ser* and *estar* can naturally convey.

1.1 ESTAR *AND ITS IMPLICATION OF OPPOSITE/ CONTRADICTORY PAIRS AND CHANGE*

Contingency, accidentality, and change are basic philosophical concepts. To continue my pedagogical argument, I posit that these concepts can be taught to Spanish speakers through their colloquial use and understanding of *estar*. To establish the connection, I'll explain what I call the CB theory and its sophistication. Luis Crespo and William Bull posit theories on the use of *estar*.[12] According to Dwight Bolinger, Crespo, and Bull essentially posit the same theory.[13] In what follows, I abbreviate their combined theory as CB for convenience and focus on two of its basic principles: 1) *Estar* in its copulative use is limited by the contradiction or opposite of the modified word, usually an adjective or adverb, that the noun/subject can change about, for, or into; and I'll add: 2) often the change expressed by *estar* is from a more "normal" or permanent attribute to one that is temporary or impermanent. In other words, according to my interpretation of the CB theory, the use of *estar* implies the idea of possibility, and by extension, contingency, accidentality, and change. In its first-person use, *estoy* portrays a dynamic ontology of dialectics: being is change and change is being. Neither *ser* nor the English verb *to be* are capable of expressing this in their common uses. After all, in both dynamic ontology and in dialectics, contradictions are only apparent and a matter of being solved or synthesized in time. For example, Crespo exemplifies the theory with the correlative opposites: life/death.[14] When confronted with the supposed fact that death is permanent and that the seemingly temporal form *estar* is used to say someone is dead, Crespo argues for a premise of the CB theory, which I will paraphrase: *Está muerto* at minimum implies that the subject was previously alive. In other words, it implies its correlative pair (*vivo*) in a way that *ser muerto* would not.

Let's offer an example from the bilingual philosophy classroom. We might ask the students: What is the difference between *Miguel es muerto* and *Miguel está muerto*? Both of these would be translated as "Miguel is dead," so the distinction is once again lost to the English monolingual dependent on translations. Whereas the Spanish-speaking student might look quizzically at the instructor, since *es muerto* is not a common expression at all. It would need an article to "sound right"—*Miguel es un muerto*—and even then, when referencing a person like this, at least in Mexican Spanish, it would most likely be taken as slang for "Miguel is a deadbeat." However, this is one of the delights of teaching philosophy. Imagine that you keep asking your students: what seems to be implied more generally by *es un muerto*? A student is likely to reply that it means there is some dead person, as if answering the question, "What's out there?" *Es un muerto*, in this context, means that there is some discovery going on as if to say: "The thing out there that we didn't know the identity of is now revealed to us as a (human) corpse." Then ask them again: what does "*estar muerto*" mean? It means that something or someone that was alive is dead. In other words, the Spanish-speaking student can intuitively realize that *ser* is making a reference to the (usually previously unrevealed) entity: the corpse. And *estar* is making a reference to the body's present state: Miguel is in the state of being dead, but obviously, he wasn't always dead. Here, the philosophy instructor can walk students through the difference between an analytical and a contingent statement. And hence, students can also learn to associate definitional-truth with one type or mode of being and contingent truth with another. After all, the (necessary-conceptual) state of a corpse is to be dead. Otherwise, it's not a corpse and we instead have something else like a body in a contingent or non-definitional or accidental state. According to CB theory, *Miguel está muerto* is implying that "Miguel was alive and that's how we recognize his identity" even as it makes explicit that "Miguel is *now* dead." We can also consider the other term in the correlative pair: *Miguel está vivo* [Miguel is *now* alive] seems to point to mortality as an existential background condition in its native colloquial use.

This pedagogical strategy is also sound when teaching the so-called Argument from Opposites and the Argument from Forms in Plato's *Phaedo*.[15] The Forms argument concludes that since the concept "life" can never have "death" as a defining property, then whatever is alive (the soul) can never be dead. The Opposites argument concludes that since opposites beget each other (e.g., warmness begets coldness and vice versa), and since death obviously (empirically) comes from life, then life must come from death. Plato avoids the seeming contradiction by distinguishing between the concept Life—*lo que es la vida* [what life *is*]—and being contingently alive in the moment—*estar vivo* [some entity is currently alive]. Again, Plato's distinction is already implied in the colloquial use of *ser vivo* [an instance of the concept *life*, literally a living being] and *estar vivo* [being alive at the moment].

1.2 TRIANGULATING WITH THE ENGLISH VERB TO BE *USING THE AGE EXAMPLE*

To further exemplify why *ser* y *estar* are not functions of the grammatical uses of the verb *to be* while further highlighting their *conceptual* and *extensional* implications, you can ask your bilingual students, first in English: "What does it mean to *be* a particular age?" It's probable that lower-division philosophy students will immediately answer with some empirical associations, like being young means being free or being eighteen means that you can vote. Then ask "the same" question in Spanish: "¿Qué significa ser de tal edad?" The bilingual student who is paying careful attention might immediately pick up that there is no such thing as a "meaning" that is inherently associated with being a certain age, precisely because the association is contingent and context dependent. I'm young as a twenty-year-old if I'm a human, but I'm ancient if I'm a dog. Age is not ontologically grounding, but using *ser* strongly implies that it should be.

If you ask bilingual students to say how old they are, first in in English and then in Spanish, they will say, for example: "I *am* 20 years old. *Tengo* 20 años." Notice the difference? Neither *ser* nor *estar* are used to express someone's age in Spanish but rather the possessive verb *tener*. "*Tengo* 20 años" would thus literally be translated as "I have 20 years," but this is also a bad translation since it clearly means "I *am* 20 years old."

Keep going. Ask your bilingual students: "In Spanish, why don't we ever use *ser* or *estar* for a statement of age in numbers of years? Why do we use the possessive verb *tener* instead?" A clever student might reasonably point out that *estoy viejo* is used [I am old but I wasn't always old], and *soy viejo* [I'm old, full stop] is perfectly natural. But *soy 40 años* or *estoy 40 años* is like nails on the chalkboard of the native speaker's mind. Of course, we could simply say that Spanish speakers are not used to these expressions, but this seems to me like a lazy and fallacious explanation that begs the question and can end in an infinite regress. This is the beauty of having bilingual students. Even if their Spanish or their English is "limited," they can quickly puzzle over the question of why "I *am* 40" in English pero "*Tengo* 40 años" in Spanish. There's a red-flag categorical jump going on in the mind of a native Spanish speaker listening to *soy 40 años* or *estoy 40 años*. As mentioned above, I'm assuming the common linguistic use already implies certain philosophical concepts, even if only implicitly in the mind of the philosophically untrained speaker. So, what is this red-flag categorical jump?

To simplify, I'll stick with a first-person example. Let's say I'm 40 years old. *¿Estoy 40 años?* Not at all. I am not extended across 40 years, nor am I an extension of the number 40 nor of the concept "40 years." My age number will change because time passes, not because 40 has any opposite or contradictory number it can change into. (Recall the CB theory above and its Gumiel-Molina sophistication in note 14). For the Spanish speaker, my 40 years are included in me, for the time being. In Spanish, years are like passengers that accumulate in you, but they are not *you*. "Tengo 40 años" thus means something like "I have accumulated 40 years."

But what about "Soy 40 años"? This also clashes for the Spanish speaker, since "being" 40 years is neither necessarily nor sufficiently conditioning my identity nor is it totally determining my behavior, nor is it an ontological definitional trait. "I equal 40 years" is a patent absurdity. This is why I merely "have" 40 years in Spanish. Is there any specific ontological condition or set of ethical norms that applies only to 40-year-olds? Of course not. While "being" an age in English might be an important part of my identity, Spanish helps us reflect upon the fact that a given age never sufficiently or necessarily defines us.

2. *SER/ESTAR* IN RELATION TO NORMATIVITY, SUBJECTIVISM, AND OBJECTIVISM

A similar bilingual strategy can also be used to teach about moral vs. non-moral objectivism and moral vs. non-moral relativism. Start with the question "*Cual es la diferencia entre ser bueno y estar bueno?*" (But be careful to give a little warning beforehand since *estar bueno* is not appropriate in polite usage when referencing a person, and we are about to see why.) The answer you'll get from most native Spanish speakers, at least the Mexican-Spanish ones who I am most familiar with, would be *Soy bueno* means "I'm a good person" in a normative or ethical sense, whereas *estoy bueno* usually means "I'm hot" or "I'm sexually attractive." When learning the distinction between non-normative and normative standards, the usage of *ser* can be analyzed as a way of being that frequently implies some normative conditions. When the subject is a human being, *Es bueno* means that the subject is morally good and behaves normatively. *Estar bueno* however, objectifies and essentializes a human as sexually attractive, driving his or her agency, subjectivity, responsibility, freedom, and complex humanity away with the simple change from *ser* to *estar* in its copulate function with *bueno*.

So, *ser bueno* is normative and, in most cases, moral if referencing a subjectivity. It means that the person meets a behavioral, normative standard that is understood, at least in some sense, as objective. Alternatively, if *ser bueno* is said of a non-agential object, it similarly means that the object adequately meets an objective standard, i.e., it has some properties or meets some condition(s) that make it a good example of what it is. *Ella es buena* can thus be adequately understood as "She is a morally good human being." In turn, *Su carro es bueno* can be understood as claiming that her car is adequately meeting a standard: "Her car is good."

Let's now consider a non-agential object. For example, I might use the example of a movie and ask my students, "What's the difference between saying *la película está buena* and *la película es buena*?" Once again, this distinction is impossible to make without further context in English, since both questions could simply be translated as "Is the movie good?" *¿Está buena la película*? is asking for a merely personal opinion on the movie, usually in a relative (or subjective), uncritical way. So, the proper translation would have to provide the extra meaning built into the choice of *estar* over *ser*: "Is the movie good *for you*?" In contrast, the question *¿Es buena la película?* is asking if the movie is somehow absolutely (or objectively) good from a more critical perspective. *La película es buena* states that the movie is good according to certain standards or conditions, e.g., good according to X's critical methodology or Y's recognized expertise. In contrast, "It's a good movie" in English is underdetermined. Without further context or clarification, it's unclear if we mean that the movie is good in a conditional/measurable/objective sense, or if we mean that it is good in a nonconditional/taste-based/subjective sense. Again, this possible confusion is easily and elegantly avoided in everyday nontechnical yet philosophical Spanish using the affordances provided by *ser* y *estar* as they copulate with *bueno*.

3. DESCARTES'S *COGITO* AND THREE PHENOMENOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF *ESTOY*

When teaching Descartes's *cogito* argument in English, the student reads this conclusion that follows from Descartes's hyperbolic doubt about everything: "'I am, I

exist' is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind."[16] In our contemporary context, I then ask my students: "What if an AI wrote: 'I am, I exist'? Would it also be necessarily true that it exists?" Students are usually divided, but for the most part they seem to agree that a computerized voice uttering "I am, I exist" does not necessarily mean that there is some existing "being" or "subject" behind the utterance. So, what would make Descartes's *cogito* argument necessarily true then, besides the fact that he wrote, uttered, or conceived these statements/arguments in Latin and later in French? Some students immediately posit that the difference is Descartes's mind, his subjectivity, or his experience of self. In Thomas Nagel's terms, the "what it is like to be something."[17]

In Descartes's argument, the presence of being is revealed to itself. The I that is self-aware is the missing and implied premise in Descartes's "I think, I am" argument. "Thinking" leads to "existing" precisely because there is a presence that can be aware of itself through its thinking. I believe that this presence, which many philosophers of mind argue against, is necessary for the *cogito* argument to work. Without this added phenomenological premise, the argument does not seem formally sound. At best it would be an enthymeme, an argument with an implied hidden premise. I therefore propose the embedded concept of presence in the use of *estoy* as "I have, or there is, aware-presence here" as the missing premise. Without this added premise, thinking just magically jumps into existence in an enthymemic, incomplete argument. Descartes's statement/premise "I think" can only lead to the conclusion "I am" if thinking is at least potentially self-reflective, as the first-person dimension of *estoy* suggests. *Estoy* names a self-awareness that knows it is before it thinks it is, or else thinking would not be able to immediately make the Cartesian *cogito* move.

I suggest that the Spanish-speaking student can grasp the implied presence in *estoy* [*aquí*] in a way that is more difficult to grasp in the English translation of the *cogito* as "I am." The *witnessing* or *subjective experiencing* of the mental event is necessary for the argument that thinking necessarily implies a thinker. In other words, the *cogito* argument requires the premise of a potential self-recognizing presence to my thoughts for them to be recognized as my own. At least for the time being, it seems to me that AIs are lacking this, this awareness and presence of being, this *estoy*.

As the reader probably knows, Descartes's argument establishes a dualism between mind and body since, as Descartes seems to convince us, my *cogito* is essential to me and my body is not. This dualism has been extensively attacked and argued against for more than three centuries, but no airtight argument has fully refuted it. Some contemporary philosophers of mind still debate this dualism as the so-called "hard problem of consciousness."[18] Now, I don't mean to suggest that the added premise of *estar/estoy* to the *cogito* argument would outright refute the dualistic consequences, but I believe it can seriously undermine them. *Estoy* implies a self-aware presence, in the argument, by recognizing that it is thinking and hence existing. But the implication is not only one of being self-aware of my thoughts but also of myself through the self-perception of my body. In this way, I believe that *estoy* can further be used to establish the *sui-generis* relation that a self has with its body. When used colloquially, *estoy aquí* usually means, I'm in this geographical-physical location, or, in other words, my body is in some place. But *estoy* can also imply an *aquí*, a here, a way of being within my body. So, since *estoy* (*aquí*) means the *aquí*, the here, both explicitly as being in a location and implicitly as being a presence in a (my) body, the Spanish speaker can help themselves to argue the unique, *sui-generis* relation. I, as a conscious being, am both *in* my body, as a sort of passenger, but also, at the same time, I am *extended* and hence identified with my body. Wherever I am, *estoy* in my body. And wherever my body *está*, I'm there as well. *Estoy ahí también*.

4. COROLARIO Y UN MENSAJE FINAL

Un mensaje que quisiéramos comunicarle a nuestros alumnos, implicando la tercera dimensión del estoy que solo menciono en una nota al final, es que se vale pensar en español y en cualquier idioma en que la gente descanse su mundo de sentido. Estamos en el Rio Grande Valley y nuestra estancia aquí nos ofrece una posible dimensión para desarrollar nuestro ser o, para los hijos de esta zona entre quienes no me cuento, un sentido de identidad. Así mismo, con la tercera dimensión del estoy, creo se abre la posibilidad de argumentar una teoría de la identidad no esencialista.[19] Sin embargo, este no es el lugar para desarrollar tal teoría. Finalmente, este artículo es tan solo una mínima contribución para que hablantes nativos del español puedan ser guiados a su encuentro con la riqueza filosófica de su idioma, muchas veces desdeñado como primitivo e intelectualmente insuficiente, aunque nunca con algún argumento convincente.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive list of the autosemantic and copulative uses of *ser* and *estar*, see Lucía Luque Nadal, "*Ser* y *Estar* as a Semantic Problem in Spanish: Polysemy and Polyfunctionality of *Ser* y *Estar* in Constructions with Adjectives and Participles," *Language Design* 24 (2022): 81–99.

2. See W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (MIT Press, 1960).

3. The distancing quotation marks around "*biletrados*" reflect an internal debate at UTRGV about whether the Bilingual, Bicultural, Biliterate (B3) initiative should be translated using three Bs in Spanish. *Bilingüe* y *bicultural* are well attested, but *biletrado* scarcely appears except in Spanish translations from English originals, and since "literate" in Spanish is *alfabetizado*, *bialfabetizado* might make more sense, but it is also exceptionally rare except as a translation from English. In short, both *biletrado* and *bialfabetizado* sound funny—perhaps even incorrect or "illiterate"—to Spanish speakers from places where Spanish is not just spoken but also regularly taught in school.

4. I believe there is also a third dimension to this philosophical fleshing-out of *estoy*: a geographical and social-linguistic one. Given length constraints, I do not work out this dimension in this paper, but it is worth mentioning that other philosophers have given a philosophical-social perspective on *estar/estoy*. See Rodolfo Kusch, "La emocionalidad y la lengua," in *Obras completas*, vol. 4 (Fundación Ross, 2003); and Sergio Holas, "Rodolfo Kusch's *Estar* as Seen from the Systemic Perspective of Humberto Maturana as a Way of *Corazonar* Coexistence," *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 47, no. 1 (2018): 64–72.

5. Diana I. Pérez, "Languages for the Analytic Tradition," *Philosophical Papers* 47, no. 1 (2018): 49–69.

6. Eric Schwitzgebel et al., "The Insularity of Anglophone Philosophy: Quantitative Analyses," *Philosophical Papers* 47, no. 1 (2018): 21–48.

7. See Theodore V. Higgs, "*Ser* or Not *Ser*: That Is the Question," *Hispania* 68, no. 2 (1985): 407–11.

8. William E. Bull, "New Principles for Some Spanish Equivalents of 'To Be,'" *Hispania* 25, no. 4 (1942): 433–43.

9. See Quine, *Word and Object*.

10. Luque Nadal, "*Ser* y *Estar*," 85.

11. George DeMello, "The Semantic Values of *Ser* and *Estar*," *Hispania* 62, no. 3 (1979): 338–41.

12. Luis Crespo, "Los verbos *ser* y *estar* explicados por un nativo," *Hispania* 29, no. 1 (1946): 45–55; Bull, "New Principles," 433–43.

13. Dwight L. Bolinger, "Still More on *Ser* and *Estar*," *Hispania* 30, no. 3 (1947): 361–67.

14. There is a sophistication of this theory in Silvia Gumiel-Molina, Norberto Moreno-Quibén, and Isabel Pérez-Jiménez, "Comparison Classes and the Relative/Absolute Distinction: A Degree-Based Compositional Account of the *Ser/Estar* Alternation in Spanish," *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 33, no. 3 (2015): 955–1001. On this account, *estar* implies not only a correlative pair but a comparison class flanked by opposite and often contradictory correlative pairs: a class containing degrees of opposing meaning, not only discrete pairs. However, the example we are about to see, life/death, does not seem to contain degrees of separation but counts as a genuine non-gradable discrete pair.

15. Plato, "Phaedo," in *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. John M. Cooper, 2nd ed. (Hackett, 2002).

16. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 3rd ed. (Hackett, 1993), 18.

17. Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–50.

18. See, for example, David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1996). What is mainly debated in this hard-problem-of-consciousness version is the possible logical incompatibility between a fundamental psychological theory and a fundamental theory of consciousness.

19. For another example of a non-essentialist theory of identity that focuses on the case of Hispanic identity, see Jorge J. E. Gracia, "What Makes Hispanic/Latinos Who We Are? The Key to Our Unity in Diversity," in *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century: The Human Condition, Values, and the Search for Identity*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Prometheus Books, 2004), 289–310.

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Mi lengua es mi hogar: A Chicana's Reflections on Language, Identity, History, and the Self

Sara Azúa

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

I remember the first time I walked into my Intro to Latin American Philosophy class in spring 2024. I was nervous. I knew the class was going to be taught bilingually (in English and Spanish), and I wasn't sure how well I'd do, nor how much I was going to understand. English is my first language, and my Spanish was limited. Before signing up, I was reassured by the instructor, Mariana Alessandri, that any level of Spanish was welcome. She told me that even complete beginners in Spanish could take this course, but the instructor changed to Alex Stehn a few weeks before classes started, so I still wasn't quite sure what to expect. Looking back, I'm so glad I did the brave thing and stuck with the class. I was intrigued by the course title, and I was itching to learn from more diverse perspectives in philosophy. Most philosophers I had studied up until that point were primarily European and Ancient Greek philosophers, and while many Latinos have European roots too, I knew the class was going to be very different from anything else I had been exposed to before. And it was!

Taking Intro to Latin American Philosophy, particularly a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate (B3) section of it, was life-changing for me. What the course allowed me to discover about myself, my languages, my family histories, and my roots as a Chicana fundamentally redirected the course of my educational journey afterwards. On our first day, Dr. Stehn gave us the choice to get either an English or a Spanish course packet. These packets, which he printed and paid for out of pocket, had the syllabus and all of the course's readings, available either entirely in Spanish or entirely in English. However, in case we wanted to see the syllabus or try our hand at the course readings in the

language we didn't choose, we could do so. Everything was uploaded to Blackboard in both languages. I was very English-dominant at the time, but something that I still can't quite explain compelled me to pick up the Spanish packet. I was drawn to it.

Although I frequently had to look at our Blackboard's English versions of course readings to fully understand what was going on, I don't regret the choice I made to get the Spanish course packet. Now, it's a physical reminder of the very first bilingual class I ever took at UTRGV, something I will always treasure. On our first day of class, Dr. Stehn also polled us about our languages and identities. The survey included questions such as: *What was your first language? What language(s) do you predominantly speak at home? What language(s) do you feel more comfortable reading and writing in? Do you have Latin American roots? Do you consider yourself bicultural or multicultural?* I was intrigued by this survey; it was the first time anyone had ever directly asked about my language and identity stories. I also felt a little embarrassed to be one of the only people who put "English" as their first language. As a Chicana, it felt like I didn't have the same birthright as my peers did to the Spanish language; it wasn't passed down to me in the same way it was for my classmates who spoke it as their native tongue. This was a sad feeling, for sure.

So was the feeling of not always being able to understand my peers and Dr. Stehn when they spoke Spanish. Don't get me wrong, I understood more than I expected. Growing up in a region as bilingual as the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, you're bound to pick up some Spanish, but there were countless moments where I felt the sharp sting of not knowing. As a Chicana, this pain felt even sharper—it took me back to when I was kid, sitting beside my Spanish-monolingual grandparents at the kitchen table, or in their home or at a restaurant, and my lack of Spanish would stump me, stop me in my tracks, because I could not respond to or even understand them. It's a kind of pain that never leaves you, a particular kind of sting to not be able to understand someone so physically and biologically close to you, someone you know in your heart that you love dearly yet simultaneously feel so far away from. It was quite literally a language barrier, a border between us.

As the class progressed, the shame and sadness of my lack of Spanish didn't quite leave, but something new was growing within me, too: my curiosity was becoming a drive. A curiosity about Latin American history (and the origins of just how exactly the US came to be such a Spanish-speaking place yet without a reputation as one) became a drive to learn not just Latin American philosophy or more Spanish, but more about my family history as a whole. For one of our first projects, Dr. Stehn asked us to interview a family member (or someone like family to us) and simply ask them, "What's your story? What languages did you grow up speaking? What was your education like? What kind of life did you live?" or any other questions we might have. The goal was to connect our family histories to the histories we were learning in class, to see ourselves as a part of Latin American and US history rather than disconnected from it. It worked. I interviewed my dad, and he confirmed something, which previously only felt like a vague whisper from our past. I hazily recalled him telling me when I was younger that, when he was in school, he saw kids who spoke Spanish get their mouths scrubbed out with soap. He wasn't one of them, but he saw it.

Yet it had been so long ago that I wasn't sure if I had just imagined him telling me this, or if it was indeed real. My interview with him confirmed that yes, it was real. This happened to my dad while he was going to school in Harlingen, TX, in the late 1960s and early '70s. Looking back on it, it's crazy to think that I would have lost that piece of my family history if I hadn't interviewed him. For one of the first times in my life, college was finally acting as a bridge between me and myself, me and my family history. I had never been in a class that felt so personal, at least not in the way this one did. Because of that, I felt more internally motivated to do our course's readings. Dr. Stehn also externally incentivized it with bonus points on our pop quizzes if he could see that we highlighted or annotated our course packs. At first, I annotated for the extra points on those quizzes, but it eventually became something I wanted to do for its own sake. I wanted to have clearer and more independent thoughts on the readings, better understand Dr. Stehn's lectures, and be more present for and engaged with what my classmates would share as well.

Towards the end of that semester, my family and I took a trip to New York City. We were visiting a cousin of mine who goes to college there, but mostly, we were just going because it was Easter, and we wanted to go. I remember being in New York on one of our first days there, and excitedly writing an email to Dr. Stehn, saying: "Look, I found statues of Simón Bolívar and José Martí!" They were philosophers we had read in class just a couple of weeks prior, and I casually ran across them as we were taking a walk in Manhattan. I understood their significance, knew a piece of their role in the history of Latin America and the world as a whole, and I couldn't help but light up because of it. On one of our last days in NYC, I remember I was scrambling to find a coffee shop where I could sit down for a few hours and read Rigoberta Menchú, who we were going to discuss in class once I got back. I woke up early in the morning to find this coffee shop, and on the plane ride back to Texas, I was still reading *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, taking detailed notes and highlighting the text in at least three different colors.

These memories stand out not only because I now somehow remarkably associate Rigoberta Menchú with New York City and consider Simón Bolívar and José Martí to be philosophers of "Nuestra America," but because this all happened near the end of the semester, the point where I usually check out, the point where it starts to feel like, "What's the point? I'm burnt out and tired." But not this time. This time, I found myself feeling driven and motivated; it had been a long time since I had been this excited about a class. The best way I can describe it is by saying that this class was the spark that ignited something within me, something deeply ancestral, profoundly rooted in the past, yet simultaneously forward-looking. It ignited a recognition and a revolution within me. The recognition was of the connections between my present and generations

past: our shared languages, cultures, histories, embodied memories, knowledge, and philosophies. The revolutionary power of these recognitions was rooted in how I could see these legacies of the past shaping my future, and not just that, but my autonomy in continuing or changing them.

Although my spark *was* this class, just as much learning happened outside of it. It started with me going out and doing my own informal interviews with people, mostly friends and coworkers who were kind enough to share their time with me for free. I also wanted to present at UTRGV's Engaged Scholar Symposium for the 2024 school year, but I initially had no idea what I wanted to present. At this symposium, undergraduate students can present their research, creative works, or service-learning projects. Intro to Latin American Philosophy became the catalyst for a research idea to present at the symposium: like the interview I had done with my dad for class, I went out and conducted more informal interviews with people, asking them about their linguistic, cultural, and educational experiences. I let them know ahead of time that I was going to use these interviews for my symposium presentation but clarified that I wouldn't mention anyone by name or give out any other personally identifiable information. In just under a month, I got ten people to do these informal interviews with me.

These interviews were also happening in the background while I was in New York. I was sending thank you letters to the people I had already interviewed, scheduling interview times for when I got back, or actively conducting "asynchronous interviews" where people typed out their answers to my questions or recorded voice notes with their answers and sent them to me. It was dynamic and fun, and I collected a mix of in-person, Zoom, and asynchronous interviews. I didn't plan to publish this research or do anything with it besides presenting it at the symposium. I mostly just wanted to learn more about the people in my community by gathering their linguistic, cultural, and family stories. To my surprise, I found a lot of people with stories like mine, people who felt disconnected from their roots as Mexicans and Mexican Americans because they didn't grow up speaking Spanish or because they lost it or felt alienated from it over time due to school and other factors. I learned from both the stories that were similar to mine and the ones that were very different, and I found more company and community than I had ever expected to. In a concrete and very real way, I genuinely started to feel less alone.

After I gave my presentation at the symposium, which Dr. Stehn attended, we had a conversation in his office. He said something like, "You know you could be getting paid for doing this type of research, right?" and proceeded to introduce me to UTRGV's Engaged Scholar and Artist Awards (ESAA) program, which funds student-driven undergraduate research projects among other things. Dr. Stehn and I spent fall 2024 working together on an ESAA application—"Language and Identity: Investigating the Impacts of B3 Courses on Students' Senses of Selves" — and a corresponding IRB application, since this time I would conduct, record, transcribe, and analyze formal semi-structured interviews with participants, and we wanted to be able to publish the results. Here's the "Methodology" paragraph from my approved ESAA award:

> The purpose of my project is to investigate the connection between language and identity by interviewing UTRGV students in B3-designated Intro to Latin American Philosophy (PHIL-1305X) courses. I will interview a total of 10 students enrolled across two sections of Dr. Alex Stehn's PHIL-1305X courses during the Spring 2025 semester. To investigate the impact of this B3 course on language and identity, I will conduct two interviews with each participant, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. These semi-structured qualitative interviews will consist of questions about the students' language use (their bilingualism and their use of language at home, at school, etc.), their cultures, their racial and ethnic identities, and whether they see these facets of their lives as interconnected and central to who they are. I am interviewing students at the beginning and the end of the semester to see if any noticeable change has occurred throughout the duration of the course (observing what effect these classes have, if any) on students' perceptions of these aspects of their lives.

Even after my Intro to Latin American Philosophy ended, I kept building on everything I learned there, not just through the spring 2025 ESAA award described above, but also through an additional fall 2025 ESAA award that paid me to finish transcribing the interviews and begin a more careful philosophical analysis of them for a co-authored publication with Dr. Stehn. I also immediately began to actively go out and search for more B3 classes. Two out of four of my fall 2024 classes were officially designated as bilingual by UTRGV's Office for Bilingual Integration: ASTR-1402X Intro to Astronomy II and MASC-2301X Intro to Mexican American Studies. A third class I took, ENGL-3370 Intro to Border Languages, was also taught using culturally sustaining pedagogy (its official designation) and was unofficially bilingual. In other words, it wasn't labeled as a bilingual course when I registered for it, but upon showing up for class, the professor told me and my classmates: "Puedes hablar o escribir en español para esta clase si quieres."

I subsequently learned that faculty can apply to have these "Spanish optional" courses officially recognized under UTRGV's "Flexible Bilingual Pedagogy Endorsement" without ever requiring Spanish. Even if these "undercover" bilingual classes like Intro to Border Languages tend to skew more towards English, there's nevertheless something deeply comforting about this freedom of language, this freedom to explore my Spanish si quería hacerlo.

At the same time, outside of university, I made an active effort to continue growing my Spanish. As I watched Netflix and other streaming platforms, I slowly started changing the language of my shows from English to Spanish, or I would watch them in a bilingual way as a bridge between the two languages: Spanish audio with English subtitles, or vice versa. I played video games, listened to music, and read poetry in Spanish, and little by little, I picked up more

and more. I also kept asking my family about their stories. I learned, for example, that my maternal grandfather was also punished (and saw other kids getting punished) for speaking Spanish when he was a child. My grandfather is Tejano. He and his family have lived in the Rio Grande Valley for generations, dating all the way back to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, or so our family lore goes. Kids who spoke Spanish at school, from what my grandfather told me over the phone one day, would have to sit at the front of the class with a hat that said "Dunce" on it.

They'd submit to going through that, or else they'd be sent away to another classroom, segregated from their peers. Because my grandfather's first language was Spanish, he told me that he would hardly speak at school *at all*. He quickly learned English and became both biliterate and bilingual, but it came at a profound psychological cost, just like it did for my dad. You don't walk away from experiences like that unscathed. Although my mom, thankfully, doesn't have a story about getting punished for speaking Spanish (and/or seeing other kids get punished) like my grandfather and my dad do, my maternal grandmother recalled how she was bullied by her peers for not knowing English when she and her family moved to the US from Mexico when she was a teenager.

Despite being incredibly smart, she was also held back multiple grades. Instead of seeing her Spanish as something to maintain or as a valuable form of knowledge to build upon with the *addition* of English as a second language, the school instead framed her as unintelligent and held her back: punishing her for a *lack* of English rather than building upon an *abundance* of Spanish. But when intelligence is only measured through the English language, as it so often is within the United States, we all suffer. Language shaming carries political, historical, and cultural weight. Often, it masks thinly veiled prejudice, usually against marginalized groups (such as Mexican Americans, like my grandmother). The personal baggage we carry because we were *made* to feel ashamed of our languages is not limited to us but has multi-generational ripple effects that span far beyond ourselves, contributing to societal-wide losses of languages and cultures that have just as much right to be here and to be called *American*.

My paternal grandparents, who were both Spanish monolinguals, unfortunately did not live long enough to see me grow into my Spanish and finally feel confident enough to ask them for their stories in Spanish, but I'd like to hope that, wherever they are now, they'd be proud of me. And even though it's not quite the same, I'm still learning parts of their stories through my dad and my tíos. As the years passed and I finally started learning more about my family history, I also started to feel less shame about my languages. When I was growing up, I stayed away from Spanish because I was ashamed. I was ashamed that I couldn't talk to my grandparents on my father's side, ashamed that pieces of my family history might die because of me, ashamed that I couldn't understand my family or community members when they would suddenly flip their conversations from English to Spanish or tell a joke in Spanish and expect me to laugh. I always felt like, somehow, I wasn't enough.

But, as I went through classes like Intro to Latin American Philosophy, Intro to Border Languages, and lots of Mexican American Studies coursework, as I started hearing more of my family and friends' language stories, I also started realizing that the problem of intergenerational language loss is widely shared by both immigrants and indigenous folks. Among Chicanos, Latinos, and the many peoples who have called and still call Abya Yala home before it was ever called America, the United States of America, Nueva España, or México, the twin problems of racism and linguicism are systemic, shared, and communal. These problems of language, identity, and history are the embodiment of "the personal is political" because the linguistic and cultural realities of the home are reflections of larger political and social conditions. It is not a simple matter of personal failure to have lost a language within a family after a few generations. It a systemic issue when all people who speak non-English languages throughout the United States are systemically rewarded for becoming English-monolinguals or English-dominant speakers. Conversely, they are systemically punished and marginalized for speaking non-English languages, especially if they dare to do so in ways that are loud, proud, and public.

This realization is what truly liberated me. As the things I had learned from B3 classes, from family and friends, and from the peers who I interviewed took root within my mind, heart, and soul, my shame took the back rather than the driver's seat. No quiero mentir y decirles que mi vergüenza ha desaparecido por completo, pero ya no me controla como lo hacía antes. Ahora escribo y hablo español—y cometo muchos errores, por supuesto—pero eso no puede detenerme. Hablar español es mi forma de resistencia en un país que tiene un presidente que dijo que el inglés es el único idioma que deberíamos hablar aquí, a pesar de miles de años y millones de personas que hablan y han hablado diferentes idiomas, tales como el español y incontables lenguas indígenas. Ahora, voy a reclamar mi espacio aquí, el lugar que mi familia ha llamado hogar durante incontables generaciones, como persona y también como hablante de inglés, español, y spanglish.

I have also learned how to give myself grace when I find myself defaulting to English. I am still English-dominant, as you can see through this work, but at the same time, I'm fortunate enough to live in a community as bilingual as mine, lucky enough to have friends who continuously support my journey to grow my Spanish, lucky enough to have mentors who went out of their way to teach their classes in two languages or invited their students to speak in more than one language (at no added pay, just out of sheer determination and the kindness of their hearts). Admittedly, my experiences taking explicitly bilingual classes at a college campus in the United States—classes that are not labeled "foreign language classes" but general education classes like astronomy, philosophy, and Mexican American studies where we learn in Spanish just like we learn in English—are rare. El crecimiento de mi español es un esfuerzo tanto personal como comunitario, and it is my sincerest hope that other college students across the US eventually get to have experiences like mine—thoughtful and liberating experiences with their languages, cultures, and histories—that reconnect them with their roots, teach

them new things about themselves, and widen their sense of community.

Practicing Philosophical Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Biliteracy (PB3): A Collective Transformation

Alexander V. Stehn
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY

> The marginalization of persons and modes of thought within gatherings that stand in for the field of philosophy in the United States speaks to the politics of these acts. Their underlying vision delimits the fate of alterity in our discipline: the silencing of persons whose lives may necessitate or invite thinking ignored realities, inhabiting unrecognized traditions, and/or working with alternative methodologies, conceptual tools, and symbolic forms.
>
> —Cynthia Paccacerqua, "A Collective Vision, A Political Act"[1]

Si puedes leer esta frase en español, your bilingual abilities and identity are probably being ignored, dismissed, or underutilized by most of the philosophical spaces you inhabit. In the *Hypatia* article from which the epigraph is drawn, Cynthia Paccacerqua explored how the academic field of philosophy in the US simultaneously perpetuates itself and creates its others (*not*-philosophy and *not*-philosophers) through ritualized and normalized practices across classrooms, publications, and conferences. Paccacerqua did not explicitly name the exclusive use of English as responsible for the "marginalization of persons and modes of thought," but she did describe the Roundtable on Latina Feminism as a space that "critically fosters affective relations" to build an "alternative collective vision for philosophical thinking." The inaugural 2006 Roundtable founded by Mariana Ortega and keynoted by Maria Lugones also made a deep impression on me as the first Spanish-English bilingual and Latinx bicultural philosophical space that I ever encountered.[2] It thus became part of the story of how I came to participate in the collective transformation at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) where we have begun to practice philosophy differently by living, thinking, teaching, learning, and philosophizing in Spanish, English, and Spanglish.

By "we" I mean the philosophy faculty and students participating in the "Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands" project sponsored by the APA, UTRGV, and Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP).[3] Our project's deliverables included Spanish, Bilingual, and Culturally Sustaining PHIL courses designed by a group of eight UTRGV faculty. Besides working together to conceptualize, design, teach, and improve these courses, we have also sustained *un grupo de lectura que se reúne para conversar sobre filosofía escrita en español*. In our institutional shorthand, we call this project of cultivating philosophical bilingualism, biculturalism, and bilingualism "PB3" as a way of mapping the project of philosophy (P) onto UTRGV's institutional framework for recognizing student achievement in Spanish, Bilingual, and/or Culturally Sustaining courses across the undergraduate curriculum with the Bilingual, Bicultural, Biliterate (B3) Scholar Seal.[4]

In the preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa mapped the tensions of the borderlands or *nepantla* that we are navigating and reweaving:

> The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.[5]

Like Anzaldúa, I want to navigate these borderlands in ways that might produce spiritual transformations in myself, other people, and the world through philosophical storytelling.[6] Or, to put things in the more secular methodological terms of "qualitative research," what follows is a "narrative inquiry" into philosophical transformations conducted through "a dynamic process of living and telling stories, and reliving and retelling stories."[7] My overarching aim is to show how practicing PB3 can help people who exist on the spectrums of bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy (or plurilingualism, pluriculturalism, and pluriliteracy) recognize their wholeness and experience new connections.

In the sections below, my essay explores 1) the coloniality of the English language as the background—global and local, disciplinary and institutional—that simultaneously haunts our efforts and gives them their extraordinary significance; 2) the transformations I have witnessed in my colleagues and experienced myself through our PB3 project; 3) the linguocultural stories of faculty that established the pre-PB3 background conditions for our transformations; and 4) an example of pluralizing philosophical languages and cultures that serves as an invitation to build a new sense of community.

1. CONTESTING THE GLOBAL AND LOCAL COLONIALITY OF ENGLISH

The coloniality of the English language in the contemporary discipline of philosophy is rarely recognized yet difficult to overstate. Eric Schwitzgebel et al. established "the insularity of Anglophone philosophy" through quantitative analyses that found that 97 percent of citations in articles from elite Anglophone philosophy journals are to works originally written in English, and ninety-nine out of the one hundred most-cited recent authors in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* wrote primarily in English.[8] In contrast, "philosophy articles published in elite Chinese-language and Spanish-language journals cite from a

range of linguistic traditions, as do non-English-language articles in a convenience sample of established European-journals."[9]

A handful of philosophers including Hans-Johann Glock have argued that the "Anglicisation of (analytic) philosophy" is actually desirable and "does not *per se* amount to an injustice" insofar as it establishes a *lingua franca* that can make philosophy more "global and cosmopolitan."[10] But it is worth reminding those who celebrate what Glock calls the "trend toward English monolingualism" in philosophy that roughly 80 percent of the world's population does not speak English. Moreover, the most powerful and influential Anglophone philosophers are disproportionately *native* English speakers, who comprise merely 5 percent of the world's population. Philosophers like Saray Ayala-López are right to highlight how the condition of being "a non-native speaker of English" interacts negatively with "the practice of philosophy" through an accent bias that creates "the same sorts of effects on perceptions of philosophers' competence as biases against gender or ethnicity."[11] A recent international survey of philosophers by Uwe Peters et. al ($N = 1{,}615$) also showed that 88 percent of non-native English speaker respondents reported that their extensive use of English had reduced their ability to discuss philosophy in their native language.[12] But in marked contrast to the important research and pedagogical reforms dedicated to analyzing and improving unequal power relations along the intersectional axes of race, gender, sexuality, and/or class, there has been comparatively little said or done about the coloniality of language[13] that underwrites the increasingly hegemonic practice of philosophy in an English-only mode.

The case of bilingual (or multilingual) faculty who are pressured to publish and/or teach philosophy monolingually in English parallels the fact that most students at UTRGV are bilingual, but almost none of them have received meaningful academic opportunities to develop their bilingualism/biliteracy or explore their bicultural identities. The US educational system has typically treated them as though they were half-persons rather than whole bilingual and bicultural persons. US schools have educated only their "American" *not* their "Mexican" half, only their English-speaking half *not* their Spanish-speaking half. But if these Mexican and Spanish-speaking dimensions of our students' identities and abilities have value—and they most certainly do!—then the "educational opportunities" they have received can also be counter-narrated as "miseducation" or "subtractive schooling."[14]

Here's how we put the point in our APA grant proposal:

> While much of our students' meaningful experiences (i.e., family life, friendship, recreational time, etc.) are lived in Spanish or Spanglish, their academic life takes place exclusively in English. In other words, there is a gap between some of their most meaningful experiences and their academic means of engagement and expression. This gap is not experienced by students whose existential experiences are only in English and whose only academic language is English because they can express themselves wholly in their only existential and academic language (English). In contrast, while our students are prima facie linguistically and culturally competent in two languages (English and Spanish), their formal education excludes much of their lived experiences, their abilities in Spanish and Spanglish, and their bicultural communities. For many, academic discourse does not function as a means of illuminating their daily lives but as a blade cutting their lives in two. Academic, English-only discourse serves as a formal, culturally valued, and authoritative body of knowledge that excludes Spanish and overlooks Mexican American and Latino/a/x cultures.[15]

Alongside our bilingual students who suffer a systematic narrowing of their academic potential, our bilingual faculty have been habituated to teach under the same institutionally-sanctioned form of academic apartheid that historically excluded the use of Spanish or the study of Mexican American history from the classroom, unless "safely" restricted to the Department of Spanish or Mexican American Studies. Against this backdrop, our PB3 project aimed to make UTRGV's Philosophy Department the first in the fifty U.S. states and D.C.[16] to integrate Spanish-English bilingualism/biliteracy and Mexican American biculturalism into a regular course rotation.

2. TRANSFORMACIONES A TRAVÉS DE LA LECTURA Y LAS CONVERSACIONES EN ESPAÑOL Y ESPANGLISH

For seven years, Cynthia Paccacerqua, Mariana Alessandri, and I were the only philosophy faculty who could speak Spanish, but after strategic hires made in 2017, 2018, 2021, 2022, and 2023, the eight UTRGV faculty who now teach PHIL courses designated as B3 finally got to know each other better in Spanish through the biweekly gatherings of the *grupo de lectura* during the spring 2024 semester. A few of us were already teaching bilingually or in Spanish,[17] but most of our bilingual faculty were still teaching monolingually in English, and virtually none of our departmental existence was bilingual. To take a simple but vivid example, I did not have a complete conversation in Spanish with Cynthia Paccacerqua for the first fourteen years that we were faculty! But finally, at the first meeting of *nuestro grupo de lectura*—the first PB3 activity that we institutionalized under the APA grant—*hablamos por primera vez y me di cuenta de que había toda una dimensión de Cynthia que yo desconocía*. I appreciate the Spanish verb *desconocer* because it marks an epistemology of ignorance with a single word: a *not*-knowing that is ritually enacted and normalized even among people who might greatly benefit by daring to act otherwise, transforming themselves and each other in the process. *En nuestro grupo de lectura, nos conocimos en español* by discussing readings that focused on philosophical production or teaching in Spanish.[18] We also hosted five *noches de cine* for both students and faculty that featured Spanish-language films (with English subtitles) followed by bilingual philosophical discussions. These were philosophy reading group (or film) events, so they were cognitively demanding, but two further facts made them unusual and more potentially transformative: 1) the original language of philosophical (or cinematic)

production was Spanish and 2) the language of our philosophical discussion was Spanish (or bilingual).

Each participant's affective experience was shaped by the interpersonal setting and our collective aims. We were not just reading (or watching) Spanish books (or films) as individuals, but as part of a more intimate group meeting regularly in the homes of faculty members and on campus. These shared experiences were thus uniquely moving *porque dio lugar a una forma diferente de convivir, de pensar y hablar entre nosotros*. By calling these experiences "moving" and "shared" I do not mean to suggest that they affected participants in the same ways but rather that they were "liberating" in multiple ways.[19] For those of us who were more comfortable speaking Spanish in other settings, the liberating dimension involved the freedom to speak Spanish in a context where it was ordinarily forbidden, effectively even if not expressly. For those of us who felt more anxious speaking Spanish in other settings, this departmental setting was perhaps uniquely challenging or scary, but it was still liberating insofar as philosophizing with colleagues in Spanish required the exercise of a certain degree of bravery, or at least vulnerability. Whether speaking a "private" or "home" language—namely, Spanish—in an academic and public setting, or speaking a "second" or "heritage" language—namely, Spanish—in an academic and professional setting, participants in the *grupo de lectura* and the *noches de cine* began to experience and reimagine a world in which more of their worlds and words fit.

3. SOMOS UN EQUIPO: PERSONAL, AFFECTIVE, AND LINGUOCULTURAL BACKGROUND CONDITIONS

In summer 2024, eight faculty created or re-designed PHIL courses to be taught bilingually or in Spanish using culturally sustaining pedagogies. After being certified as B3 courses by UTRGV's Office for Bilingual Integration, our PB3 team began offering a rotation of twelve such PHIL courses on a three-year cycle in fall 2024. The courses and rotation were the institutional product, but the process was deeply personal for each and all of us. Before we explored UTRGV's requirements for B3 course designations, before we theorized the relationship between bilingual courses and culturally sustaining pedagogies, before we discussed how we would use Spanish in our classes, before we developed B3 course materials, before we shared B3 assignments, before we drafted B3 syllabi—we spent the first two full sessions of our PB3 Course Seminar and Workshop reflecting on our diverse positionalities and sharing our linguocultural stories. This was both liberating and spiritually transformative in Paccacerqua's Anzaldúan sense of "*volverse una*/becoming whole that is grounded in an active receptivity of sensibility and facilitated by affective technologies for transformation."[20] In an intimate setting of active listening and affective receptivity, we revealed intimate aspects of our identities, families, and histories that are typically excluded from the professional practice of philosophy. Drawing upon these sessions, I developed brief linguistic/cultural profiles of each PB3 faculty, which I share here with their permission.

MARIANA ALESSANDRI

Mariana spoke English as her first language and self-identified as "a Latina who grew up thinking I was white." As "the daughter of two upper-middle-class immigrants from Chile," she is "a first-generation US-American citizen." She also "grew up with a Guatemalan *niñera* who spoke only Spanish," but Mariana would respond to her in English. Nor did Mariana grow up speaking Spanish with her parents, since the teacher of an older sibling had advised them to stop speaking Spanish with their children. Spanish was simply presumed to be "getting in the way" of them learning English. As a result, Mariana and her siblings "grew up thinking we were white because we spoke English with no discernable accent; we were vaguely ethnic, like everyone in Queens with dark hair but not dark skin." Only when she arrived at Penn State to earn her PhD in philosophy was Mariana informed by the graduate director that she represented the department's "diversity." At UTPA, she went from part-time lecturer (2010–2012) to visiting assistant professor (2012–2013) to assistant professor and is now full professor at UTRGV. Mariana characterized her own commitment to creating a bilingual Intro to Latin American philosophy course in terms of justice for our students, who "deserve to learn in their language," but she also emphasized that "it's a challenge for me to teach a bilingual course. It does not come naturally, and I know it will be a lot of work. But I feel grateful that I am able to, and grateful to have help from this group in the construction of it."

CHRISTOPHER GÓMEZ

Chris's first language is Spanish, and he characterized English as his "heritage language." He shared that his "whole world was thrown upside down" when he moved to New York City from Mexico City at age four: "I was put in a sort of day-care kindergarten where the caretakers would verbally and morally punish me for trying to talk to them in Spanish." Before long, he returned to Mexico City where his mother taught him to read in English while school was teaching him to read in Spanish. Chris said: "I'm not exactly a Mexican American but more like a mestizo-hybrid Mexican with two passports, a Chilango who happens to have an American mother." Besides having older Mexican roots in Celaya, Guanajuato, Chris's family tree defies any simple story with ties to many languages—German, Yiddish, Dutch, French, Spanish, English—and many peoples crossing borders: Ashkenazi Jews who fled Germany, Scottish Methodists who moved to Argentina, a Spaniard who ended up in Mexico as a refugee from the Spanish Civil War, a mother from Brooklyn who has lived in Mexico for the last fifty years. All of Chris's formal degrees (*licenciatura*, *maestria*, *doctorado*) have been earned in Spanish, and he joined UTRGV as lecturer in 2021. Chris wants "our students to believe that they can contribute to humanity from where they stand, from who they are, and from their roots that have been largely hidden from them." Since Spanish has shaped Chris's philosophical and existential outlooks, he described his calling as "helping the ones that have been terrorized into believing that Spanish is a second-class language and Mexico a second class-culture to stop believing that, not only epistemically, but also, I would dare say, existentially." He sees this as "a way for them to reconnect with themselves."

DAHLIA GUZMAN

Dahlia grew up in Indiana eating Mexican food at home, speaking only English, attending a Black Baptist church, and only hearing Spanish from the TV shows that her parents watched in their bedroom with the door closed. Traveling to visit family in the RGV during the late 1960s and early 1970s, she remembers that "we slept and ate in the car because no one would rent us motel rooms or sell us food." In contrast, life back in Indiana was "comfortable [and] I neither had (nor have) any feeling of negativity or lack." This changed when Dahlia moved to the RGV at age ten: "The first three months of school were horrible. I was punished every day by students in my grade for speaking the way I did and for not knowing Spanish." Dahlia started learning Spanish to talk to her grandparents, aided by summer trips "with my *Tía Nena* and her family who had a *ranchito* just outside of Rio Bravo. My cousins helped me expand my vocabulary even as they teased me about my Spanish pronunciation. They were very loving and kind though." She found RGV schools to be segregated with "the white kids and the rich Mexican kids enrolled in AP courses," while "the rest of us poor Mexican kids were pushed to take 'practical' courses—typing, steno, Spanish, wood shop, home economics, etc." Dahlia "had to argue with that counselor every damn year to take the upper-level courses: English, Civics, Science, and NOT take Spanish." Like many other twenty-year-olds, Dahlia wanted to "move beyond the Valley—away from its provincialism, sexism, and homophobia." Then, after more than a decade working in banking, Dahlia earned three philosophy degrees—a BA (UTPA, 2007), an MA (Kent State, 2010), and a PhD (University of South Florida, 2018)—and accepted a lecturer position at UTRGV. Dahlia said that she is now "more bilingual than I've ever been" and wants to help her students think critically about how they "have been taught that their way of living and interacting (in Spanish or in a borderland) is not valuable to philosophical reflection when obviously, that's false."

DANNY MARRERO

Danny compartió su historia con nosotros en español, su lengua nativa. Creció en Bogotá, donde empezó a aprender el inglés después de cumplir veinte años. Después de terminar su maestría en derecho, fue honrado con una beca Fulbright para continuar sus estudios de postgrado en Estados Unidos, pero la Universidad de Arkansas solo le aceptó provisionalmente con la condición de estudiar inglés por seis meses intensivos en su International Language Center. In 2014, Danny earned his PhD in philosophy from the University of Arkansas, and he joined UTRGV as an assistant professor in 2022. Before the APA grant, he taught an all-Spanish version of Critical Thinking at UTRGV with the hope that his "estudiantes de pensamiento crítico en español tengan una experiencia enriquecedora como la mía." He still finds being able to teach philosophy classes in both English and Spanish astounding. Teaching in English was "unthinkable when I started my journey," whereas teaching philosophy in Spanish in the US was unthinkable given his previous cultural and linguistic stereotypes about the US. When Danny taught Pensamiento Crítico at UTRGV, he asked his students to share their stories of how they knew Spanish. When one student simply replied, "Es porque crecí en Texas," Danny se quedó muy confundido, hasta que se dio cuenta de que en algunas partes de Texas, incluso en el RGV, hablar español en casa es aún más común que hablar inglés. That said, very few of our students have had any formal academic opportunities to learn in Spanish. Por eso, Danny sigue entusiasmado no solo por impartir clases de pensamiento crítico y otras materias de filosofía, sino también por ayudar a nuestros alumnos "a explorar algunos de los tesoros culturales que el español nos brinda."

CYNTHIA PACCACERQUA

Cynthia was born in Baltimore, MD, to Argentine immigrants who had been welcomed by an Italian-born aunt. Whenever relatives gathered, Italian threaded through English and Spanish. Cynthia attended an English-language school from pre-K through first grade, then moved with her mother and sister to Rosario, Argentina. Having settled into English, she could no longer recall having spoken Spanish and "was just left to figure it all out with my cousins and then at school." At age twelve she began private British English lessons with a *vecina* and later took a TOEFL-prep course to apply to college in the US. As a first-generation student now reading and writing in English as a foreign language, she never thought to take a college Spanish course "under the false impression that those courses were to learn Spanish only, which I already knew." Her bilingual speaking took place in the Latino community outside the university. Disappointed with working in local politics, Cynthia applied to MA programs in Latin American Studies to learn Latin American philosophy and intellectual history. At Stanford, she wrote her first graduate-level essay in Spanish on Ernesto Sábato's existentialism and found her way into Chicano and Latino Studies where friendships, coursework, and Gloria Anzaldúa's writings echoed her split sense of self as both Argentine and Latina. Cynthia discovered Enrique Dussel's still untranslated works for her thesis through conversations with Manuel Vargas, who at the time was a PhD student teaching Latin American philosophy. When Cynthia began her doctoral program at Stony Brook in 2000, the requirement to translate a previously untranslated philosophy text could not be satisfied if the original language was Spanish, so she took summers to study French and then German, continuing at the Bergische Universität Wuppertal while a dissertation research fellow. In the end, Stony Brook accepted her Spanish-to-English translation of an article by Reyes Mate, after hiring Eduardo Mendieta. She also sustained her bilingual self with peers from other departments and NYC universities. In 2010, UTPA hired Cynthia as assistant professor and "a renewed period of border-setting-shifting began, this time finding echoes of my philosophical self and languages in classrooms where the compass for clarity and opaqueness is itself a discovery project."

ALEX STEHN

I am a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate philosopher, not by heritage but by accident and choice. I grew up in Aransas Pass, TX, as a monolingual English speaker. My parents are both immigrants to Texas (from Wauwatosa, WI, and Port Jefferson, NY) born to immigrants from other places. In the racial terminology of Texas, I am Anglo, but both my own family lore and a DNA test show that I am roughly a quarter Jewish (Ashkenazi from Ukraine), Scotch-Irish, English, and German. Since my nearest kin were thousands

of miles away from South Texas, my parents depended on babysitters to take care of me and my younger brother after school, first an elderly woman and then her daughter. Both were Mexican American and bilingual, although they never spoke to me or my brother in Spanish, even though I grew up calling them *Nana* [Nanny]. I studied American Philosophy during my PhD program at Penn State, which was gender-conscious and race-conscious, but it was mostly organized around a black-white binary that did not fit my hometown where most people identify as white and/or brown. After marrying someone who thought she was white but who I saw as brown (Mariana Alessandri), we moved to Mexico City, where I learned to see the history of Latin American philosophy through the eyes of Enrique Dussel and his students. My dissertation put what I learned about Latin American liberation philosophy into dialogue with US-American pragmatism, so I was thrilled when I landed a job at UT Pan American. Later, by raising children with Spanish as their first language, I came to see how much "linguistic terrorism" there still is in the RGV. This is why Mariana and I founded our nonprofit, RGV PUEDE, whose mission is to advocate for dual-language bilingual education programs from pre-K to twelfth grade across the RGV, so that every child has the educational opportunity to become proudly bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate.[21]

MELISA VIVANCO

Melisa compartió su historia con nosotros en español, su lengua nativa: "Mi herencia lingüística y cultural está profundamente arraigada en México, con una historia familiar que abarca varias generaciones de mujeres trabajadoras. Hasta donde sé, mi familia siempre ha hablado español, y aunque no tengo información específica sobre nuestra herencia indígena o europea, el rico, colorido y un poco ruidoso tapiz de la cultura mexicana ha sido una influencia significativa a lo largo de mi vida." While earning her undergraduate degree in Mathematics at the UNAM, Melisa took a few English courses, but she emphasized that her "verdadera interacción con el idioma comenzó cuando fui estudiante visitante en el MIT durante mi doctorado." UTRGV hired her as assistant professor in 2023, after we had already submitted the APA grant, but we were able to fully incorporate her among the PB3 faculty thanks to extra funding from UTRGV's College of Engineering and Computer Science, which wanted to invest in a bilingual version of the course that Melisa regularly teaches: PHIL 2326 Ethics, Technology and Society. Although her primary areas are philosophy of mathematics, logic, and philosophy of technology, Melisa has found her bilingualism especially valuable for her work in philosophy of language "donde contrastar perspectivas de diferentes idiomas ofrece ideas perspicaces y análisis con más matices." In terms of biculturalism, she also emphasizes "el español y la cultura mexicana como formas legítimas y valiosas de expresión que tienen mucho que ofrecer en la construcción de una sociedad diversa e inclusiva." Although Melisa did not contribute an article to this special issue due to other publishing commitments, she has been working as a Service Fellow for UTRGV's Office for Bilingual Integration, helping to organize and emcee the annual B3 Scholar Seal Ceremony, which is conducted primarily in Spanish to celebrate the accomplishments of our B3 Scholars and their families.

BRADLEY WARFIELD

Brad studied philosophy because he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father, who taught high school mathematics for thirty-two years, as well as his professors at Salisbury University who showed him "the profound impact that a transformative educational experience can have." Dr. Grace Clement's feminist philosophy course and Dr. Jerome Miller's African American philosophy courses "marked a radical departure from everything I had previously known and taken for granted." Outstanding Spanish professors also convinced him to declare Spanish as his second major, building upon the fact that Brad had begun studying Spanish in seventh grade and completed Spanish 5 during his senior year, one of very few students in Wicomico County, MD, to do so. As an undergraduate, Brad studied abroad for five weeks in Málaga, Spain, and became the first Salisbury student to complete a semester at El Centro de Estudios Interamericanos in Cuenca, Ecuador, where he took classes entirely in Spanish. Unfortunately, from that moment of peak fluency, Brad's Spanish deteriorated from lack of practice until he was hired by UTRGV in 2017 as lecturer and "began rejuvenating and improving my long-neglected Spanish." Among the eight PB3 faculty, he was the most apprehensive about his own linguistic ability in Spanish, but he shared that "teaching an Introduction to Philosophy course bilingually is important to me because of my commitment to exposing students to various perspectives, my sensitivity to the fact that most of my students are Mexican American, and my emphasis on the importance of helping my students name the world and take ownership of ideas."

4. PLURALIZING PHILOSOPHICAL LANGUAGES AND CULTURES AND A NEW SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Through the activities of the APA grant, the PB3 faculty theorized the more pluralistic world we wanted to create together with our students, *un mundo en que quepan muchos mundos*.[22] We began developing a new sense of community—*y también un nuevo sentido común*—through which we could experience and embody our roles as bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate philosophers in ways that were more whole by philosophizing together in Spanish, or more accurately, Spanishes, since group members acquired their Spanishes while living a variety of places including Bogotá, Cuenca, Cuidad de México, Rosario, New York City, Salamanca, Salisbury, Sherman, and the Rio Grande Valley.

Among the many things we read and discussed together, I will share one as a transformative example of pluralizing philosophical languages and cultures. I should also mention that UTRGV faculty member Kevin Jobe occasionally joined our *grupo de lectura*, which included two April 2024 meetings that were dedicated to discussions of Carlos Lenkersdorf's *Filosofar en clave tojolabal*.[23] Lenkersdorf's introduction begins: "Filosofar en clave tojolabal es un tema fuera de lo común, porque no se suele hablar del filosofar al referirse a los pueblos indígenas." Nor is it customary for professional philosophers in the US to think that the native language, Spanish, of most students in the South Texas borderlands can and should be used to philosophize. Karl Heinz Herman Lenkersdorf Schmidt grew up in Germany

but moved to Mexico where he earned his licenciatura (1964) and doctorado (1966) in philosophy at the UNAM and became better known as Carlos Lenkersdorf. In 1972, he had his first encounter with Mayan pueblos in southern Mexico and later accepted the Bishop of Chiapas's request to translate the New Testament into Tojolabal, a project that took five years working with a group of more than seventy *tojolabeles* representing twenty-five communities. They maintained ultimate authority over the translation: "si algún texto, según su juicio, no reflejaba el evangelio, no lo traducían. Es decir, no eran traductores autómatas sino conscientemente críticos, según el encargo de sus comunidades."[24] Working from the original Greek, Lenkersdorf would produce a version "en un español tojolabilizado o, si quieren, 'tojspañol'" that they would then translate into "el tojolabal que se hablaba en las comunidades," a process that helped Lenkersdorf deepen his understanding of their language while leading the *tojolabeles* to request that he teach them Spanish.[25]

This story illustrates the pluralization of philosophical languages and cultures through a pluricultural process that moves from Ancient Greek to Spanish to Tojspañol to Tojolabal, with the *tojolabeles* maintaining authority over what the gospel written in Ancient Greek should say. South Texas is admittedly a long way from Southern Mexico (Chiapas), just as Spanglish is a long way from *tojspañol*, pero al leer juntos a Lenkersdorf, nos parecieron poderosas y convencedoras sus reflexiones sobre "la vinculación íntima que existe entre lengua y cultura." After reading these words, "Un pueblo que ha desarrollado un idioma tiene, a la vez, su manera de filosfar incluida en su lengua,"[26] we began discussing what kind of philosophizing we might be able to do together or with our students in Spanish or Spanglish that we might not be able to do together in English. Lenkersdorf "philosophizes in the key of tojolabal" by exploring group identity and the importance of the *we*, *nosotros*, or *-tik* (a verb-ending in Mayan languages like Tzeltal and Tojolabal that indicates "we" or *nosotros*). Like the *tojolabales*, many UTRGV students and faculty "hablan su lengua aunque en la actualidad hay más y más personas bilingües" (20), something that both enriches and complicates what we mean when we say "we." Moreover, "La presencia de tojolabales que no hablan su idioma es una señal muy clara de que el modo tojolabal tiene raíces más profundas que el idioma"—a point that we thought could also be applied to Mexican Americans who speak only English.

Philosophizing in tongues—e.g., Greek, English, Español, Spanglish, Tojolabal, Tojspañol—widens and deepens our philosophical range, whether we are exploring our own native culture(s) and language(s) or learning the cultures and languages of others until "no describiremos aquello que sea ajeno o extraño para nosotros, sino aquello que nos ha transformado y llenado de ideas, vivencias e imaginaciones que desconocíamos antes."[27] This process, which Lenkersdorf calls the "*nosotrificación* de los hablantes" takes place in distinct but related ways across cases ranging from the indigenous Tzetzal girl who begins properly employing *-tik* at two years old,[28] to a German like Lenkersdorf who became a Mexican Spanish speaker then a German-Mexican Tojolabal speaker.

Del mismo modo, nuestro equipo PB3 empezó de nosotrificar a través de nuestro grupo de lectura. At the end of our first meeting discussing Lenkersdorf, Danny asked: "¿Como podemos ayudar a nuestros estudiantes pensar y expresar sus vivencias y experiencias en español o bilingüemente?" Danny no dijo, "How can I help my students . . . ?" sino más bien "Como podemos . . . ?" I had not yet read Carlos Sanchéz's assertation that the Mayan concept of *tik* "could serve as an aspirational ideal for both Mexican Philosophy and for ourselves," but in a passage where he translates Lenkersdorf into English, Sanchéz writes: "We do not negate the I, we do not erase it but the very I and the Thou only exist thanks to the existence of the *we* that gives these opportunities for them to develop."[29] In a way that resonates with our PB3 team, Sánchez further characterizes *tik* as indicating "a *plurality of minds*, one that is not the collection of each reduced or synthesized into one, but a plural mind that retains each individual contribution gathered and oriented toward a common Good."[30]

Sanchéz's Mexican American English translation of a German Mexican philosopher "in the key of Tojolabal" points to a kind of community that is difficult, beautiful, and rare—quite likely beyond our reach—but I hold onto it as a spiritual ideal. It also echoes Paccacerqua's rendering of φιλοσοφία as a "call to think differentially with others" animated by "the desire of the Just and the Good to infuse our relations with those persons who in one way or another stand beside us."[31] I was already teaching B3 PHIL classes before we formed a PB3 team with support from the APA grant, but our discussion of Tojolabal philosophy pointed me toward the incompleteness of "I" without community. In the context of such a community, our individual differences become complementary rather than contradictory. As Lenkersdorf writes, "plurality [. . .] not only implies subjective differences but leads philosophizing to demand the *diversity* by which it achieves success."[32] I therefore invite the readers of this special issue of *APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* to join us in the collective transformational work of pluralizing philosophical languages and cultures.

NOTES

1. Cynthia M. Paccacerqua, "A Collective Vision, a Political Act: Φιλοσοφία in the Roundtable on Latina Feminism," *Hypatia* 31, no. 2 (2016): 437–39.

2. Over the past twenty years, I have only sporadically participated in the annual Roundtable on Latina Feminism, which became the Latina/x Feminisms Roundtable in 2018, but I mention it here to acknowledge my philosophical debts.

3. See Alex Stehn et al., "APA Grant Proposal for *Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands*," American Philosophical Association, 2023, https://www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/grantproposals/diversity_grant_proposals/2023/pluralizing_philosophical_la.pdf.

4. See Katherine Christoffersen and Dania López García, "The B3 Scholar Seal: Designing and Implementing an Alternative to the SoBL at a Hispanic-Serving Institution in South Texas," in *The Seal of Biliteracy in Higher Education: Harnessing Students' Cultural and Linguistic Strengths at Colleges and Universities*, ed. Kristin J. Davin and Amy J. Heineke (Routledge, 2024).

5. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, ed. Ricardo F. Vivancos-Pérez and Norma Elia Cantú, critical ed. (Aunt Lute Books, 2021), 49.

6. If the word *spiritual* turns you off, you can substitute *linguistic, cultural, personal, social, communal, human, etc.*, but Anzaldúa

complained about those who de-spiritualized her work: "The 'safe' elements in *Borderlands* are appropriated and used, and the 'unsafe' elements are ignored. One of the things that doesn't get talked about is the connection between body, mind, and spirit." Kakie Urch et al., "Working the Borderlands, Becoming *Mestiza*: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 4, no. 1 (1995): 85.

7. D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), xiv.

8. Eric Schwitzgebel et al., "The Insularity of Anglophone Philosophy: Quantitative Analyses," *Philosophical Papers* 47, no. 1 (2018): 21.

9. Schwitzgebel et al., "Insularity of Anglophone Philosophy," 21.

10. Hans-Johann Glock, "The Awful English Language," *Philosophical Papers* 47, no. 1 (2018): 123, 148.

11. Saray Ayala-López, "Philosophy and the Non-Native Speaker Condition," *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (2015): 2–9.

12. Uwe Peters et al., "Epistemic Challenges Faced by Non-Native English Speakers in Philosophy: Evidence from an International Survey," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 16, no. 4 (2025): 1197–233.

13. See Gabriela Veronelli, "The Coloniality of Language: Race, Expressivity, Power, and the Darker Side of Modernity," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies* 13 (2015): 108–34.

14. As early as the 1960s, scholars and activists denounced the "miseducation" of bilingual and bicultural children in the US Southwest and argued that "a new focus on the bilingual child could well serve to trigger an important revolution in American education." See Chester C. Christian, "The Acculturation of the Bilingual Child," *Modern Language Journal* 49, no. 3 (1965): 160. The term "subtractive schooling" names the ways that US schools subtract the Mexican identities and Spanish abilities of Mexican American students. See Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* (SUNY Press, 1999).

15. Stehn et al., "APA Grant Proposal," 3.

16. I do not claim that UTRGV's PB3 program was "the first in the U.S." because Puerto Rico is a US territory, and Puerto Rican universities generally support bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy. See Catherine M. Mazak et al., "Professors Translanguaging in Practice: Three Cases from a Bilingual University," in *Translanguaging in Higher Education: Beyond Monolingual Ideologies*, ed. Catherine M. Mazak and Kevin S. Carroll (Multilingual Matters, 2017). I have also seen online syllabi from courses in *Filosofía* (FILO) across the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) system that assign both Spanish and English texts as readings and include Latin American, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican philosophical traditions.

17. See Alexander V. Stehn, "Philosophizing in Tongues: Cultivating Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Biliteracy in an Introduction to Latin American Philosophy Course," *APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2022): 7–16.

18. A partial list of readings from our *grupo de lectura* is available in Alex Stehn et al., "APA Grant Report for *Pluralizing Philosophical Languages and Cultures in the South Texas Borderlands*," American Philosophical Association, 2024, https://www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/grantreports/diversity_grant_reports/2023-2024/pluralizing_languages_and_cu.pdf.

19. I think about "liberation" through an Inter-American philosophical lens. See Alexander V. Stehn, "Toward an Inter-American Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Liberation," *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2011): 14–36.

20. Cynthia M. Paccacerqua, "Gloria Anzaldúa's Affective Logic of *Volverse Una*," *Hypatia* 31, no. 2 (2016): 334.

21. RGV PUEDE, "Padres Unidos para una Educación Dual de Excelencia | Parents United for Excellent Dual Language Education," accessed October 28, 2026, https://rgvpuede.org.

22. This expression is one of many distillations of the Zapatistas' famous articulation of a new and better order: "El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan muchos mundos." See Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, "Cuarta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona," 1996, https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/1996/01/01/cuarta-declaracion-de-la-selva-lacandona/. Although articulated in Spanish, the EZLN's declarations drew upon Mayan languages, concepts, stories, and philosophies. See Gustavo García Rojas, "Doble traducción y contagio de cosmologías: Marxismo y cultura indígena maya en el EZLN," *Península* 8, no. 1 (2013): 25–46.

23. Carlos Lenkersdorf, *Filosofar en clave tojolabal* (Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2002).

24. Lenkersdorf, *Filosofar en clave tojolabal*, 8.

25. Lenkersdorf, *Filosofar en clave tojolabal*, 8.

26. Lenkersdorf, *Filosofar en clave tojolabal*, 9.

27. Lenkersdorf, *Filosofar en clave tojolabal*, 28.

28. Lenkersdorf, *Filosofar en clave tojolabal*, 66.

29. Carlos Alberto Sánchez, *Mexican Philosophy for the 21st Century: Relajo, Zozobra, and Other Frameworks for Understanding Our World* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 127.

30. Sánchez, *Mexican Philosophy for the 21st Century*, 130.

31. Paccacerqua, "A Collective Vision, a Political Act," 438.

32. Lenkersdorf, *Filosofar en clave tojolabal*, 115; translation mine.

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AUTHOR BIOS

Mariana Alessandri is professor of philosophy at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She teaches the history of philosophy, especially existentialism, and variations on the vexing theme of how to be a person. She is the author of *Night Vision: Seeing Ourselves Through Dark Moods* (2023) and *The Arrow of Shame: How the World Makes Us Feel—and How to Stop Blaming Ourselves* (forthcoming in May 2027).

Sara Azúa, a Chicana born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley, is an undergraduate student at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), majoring in English and philosophy with a minor in Mexican American studies. As a student assistant for PUENTES: A Cultural Wealth Model for Student Success, Sara also co-organized the inaugural Ethnic Studies Humanities Conference at UTRGV in 2026.

Christopher J. Gómez is lecturer in philosophy at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He teaches a wide variety of philosophy courses and specializes in philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, and Mexican philosophy. He's published in Spanish in these three areas. Recently, he was part of the grant-writing team that was awarded an APA grant to design Spanish, Bilingual, and Culturally Sustaining Philosophy courses.

Dahlia Guzman is lecturer in philosophy at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). She earned a BA in philosophy from University of Texas–Pan American (one of UTRGV's legacy institutions), MA from Kent State University, and PhD from the University of South Florida. She has written about epistemic practices, philosophical pedagogy, and the philosophical study of genocide.

Danny Marrero is assistant professor of philosophy and director of the department's Pre-Law Concentration Program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. His work explores questions at the intersection of law and philosophy, with interests in philosophy of law, feminist philosophy, and ecojurisprudence. He holds a JD and LLM., as well as a BA, MA, and PhD in philosophy, reflecting his interdisciplinary training.

Cynthia M. Paccacerqua is associate professor of philosophy and faculty affiliate in Mexican American studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). She is a Gloria Anzaldúa scholar who specializes in social, political, cultural philosophy and in Kant's theoretical works. She teaches pre-law and Bilingual, Bicultural, and Biliterate philosophy courses. Honors include being twice elected UTRGV Faculty Senate President (2020–21 and 2023–24) and the Provost's nomination to the 2024–25 Texas Academic Leadership Academy. Since 2025, she serves in a dual-role appointment as UTRGV's Faculty Ombuds.

Carlos Alberto Sánchez is professor of philosophy at San José State University. He writes primarily on Mexican philosophy and has published a number of books on the subject. His two most recent publications are *Blooming in the Ruins: How Mexican Philosophy Can Guide You Toward the Good Life* (Oxford University Press, 2024) and *Mexican Philosophy for the 21st Century* (Bloomsbury, 2023). He is the co-founder of the *Journal of Mexican Philosophy* and associate editor of *Journal of World Philosophies*. Born in California, Dr. Sánchez was raised in Michoacán, Mexico, and King City, California. www.drcarlosalbertosanchez.com.

Alexander V. Stehn is professor of philosophy and faculty affiliate in Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He specializes in US-American and Latin American philosophies and teaches Philosophy as a Way of Life (PWOL) and Bilingual, Bicultural, and Biliterate (B3) courses. His recent honors include SAAP's Inter-American Philosophy Award (2026) and the David W. Concepción Prize for Excellence in Philosophy Teaching (2025) from the APA, AAPT, and TPA.

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THE QUEER AGENDA

CALL FOR PAPERS

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FROM THE EDITOR

Queers of the World, Unite! On Losing, and Fighting Anyway

Carolina Flores
UNIVERSITY OF LISBON

Dear reader,

I was recently at an outdoors party after a protest with a group of queer friends. We were sitting around a table hungrily gulping down cachupa (a Cape Verdean bean stew). All of us were tired from hours marching and shouting, but the atmosphere was festive. Some people who had just met were blatantly flirting, old friends chatting, introverts just soaking in the music and crowd at the party. Suddenly, S. points at the banners around us—with anti-racist, queer, feminist, climate, or housing rights slogans—and asks, "Guys, doesn't all of this make you sad? All of us marching down today, organizing, fighting, and we are losing." S.'s body tensed up, her eyes darkened, her voice shook. "I've been fighting my whole life, and we are losing. I'm done!" And she burst into tears. "I'm done! I'm done!" she shouted.

A friend later blamed this breakdown on S.'s recent heartbreak, and we all know the ravages of dyke breakups can take us to dark places. Still—with everything going smoothly in my life, thank you very much—I related to her outburst. I too often feel like we are losing. This "we" includes multitudes that I will not pin down; for the purposes of this special issue, I'll stick to the claim that I have moments where I feel that LGBTQ+ people (especially trans and gender non-conforming people) are losing, as the authoritarian far-right takes power and relentlessly reduce the space for queer life, attempting to shove us back into the closet.

This issue starts precisely from this place of disorientation, of not knowing how to fight back. The call for submissions was more articulate than this, but what I really was trying to do was ask into queer philosophical ether: What do we do now? How do we hold, protect, and stand by each other? How do we fight back?

Queer ether, it turns out, has excellent reception. Or rather: seven fantastic LGBTQ+ philosophers answered my plea (cough, call for papers) with beautiful pieces on resistance and solidarity. They come at my questions from different angles and with their own distinctive voices (you won't get bored reading them), while uniformly bringing the best philosophy can offer: a combination of rigor, care, and insight.

My recommendation is that you sit down—ideally, on a pastel-colored velvet couch, drinking kombucha, a guava sour beer, or another gay beverage of your choice—and read all the pieces in order. But, in case you have narrower interests or never enough time, here is a roadmap.

First up, a conversation between Qrescent Mali Mason and Shaeeda Mensah. Qrescent and Shaeeda are Black queer philosophers whose work draws extensively on the Black feminist tradition—a deep well of thought about resistance and solidarity under entrenched injustice. They are also friends. Their friendship has been a lifeline navigating a profession that is overwhelmingly white and straight. And their conversation ranges further, into the limits of white allyship, the value of being an insider/outsider in philosophy, and how philosophy can contribute to resistance.

After this, Cal Howland asks what comes first: resistance and solidarity, or understanding? In doing so, Cal responds to a hubristic insistence on individual understanding as a prerequisite for joining collective action that the "anti-woke" intellectual movement has made its banner. By examining the strategies of ACT UP, the revolutionary queer collective that fought on behalf of people with HIV during the AIDS epidemic, Cal argues that personal understanding is more often the fruit of deferring to marginalized others and resisting on their behalf.

Lauren Lyons also draws on ACT UP, as well as on the Compton's Cafeteria Riots in San Francisco in 1966, on Dean Spade's reflections on mutual aid, and on a number of other recent queer books. This isn't just a service to those of us who wish we could read everything. Lauren asks: What strategies of resistance should we adopt now? In doing so, she convincingly shows that this question is philosophical through and through. She has exciting concrete ideas for how to organize that I won't spoil—go read the essay!

Resistance isn't only something to study historically. Cat Saint-Croix was in the middle of it. She witnessed firsthand (and participated in) the mass protest actions after ICE officer Jonathan Ross murdered Renée Good in Minneapolis. Cat attentively documents the violent occupation of the city by an armed state militia—and, strikingly, the role of gamification in motivating ICE officers. But her real focus is on what she learned in the protests—and by reflecting on

queer chosen family—about the roots of solidarity and its potential to remap the self.

Where gamification can grease the wheels of state violence, play is a crucial tool for queer resistance—or so argues C.R. Muller. You'll meet them biking across a stage on a tiny tricycle with a cat puppet named Pussy, and follow that image into a theoretical journey through Lugones, Nguyen, and others toward a compelling account of how queer play is not only good for identity discovery, but also for creating communities of resistance. In the midst of despair, we need to carve out space for play.

Last but not least, Maëlle Roussel calls our attention to an urgent locus of resistance: action against climate change. This may seem remote from LGBTQ+ concerns. Maëlle argues it isn't. LGBTQ+ people have increased vulnerabilities to climate disaster and can fall through the cracks of institutional responses. But we also have resources to bring to the fight: skills at building alliances, producing spectacular visibility, and moving us toward a more accurate conception of nature, reclaiming it from traditionalist associations.

Read side-by-side, these essays bring to light how much everyone has to learn from LGBTQ+ organizers and thinkers. These essays teach us that, instead of operating under the fantasy of a hermetically sealed self, we need to recognize that we are already entangled with one another, shaped, even constituted, by those relationships. This is one reason why, against the recurring charge that identity politics fragments solidarity, LGBTQ+ politics has produced a trove of resources for us to collectively resist, care for each other, and build new worlds together. I hope these essays give you resources for hope—and something to say to your friends when they burst into tears and announce they're done.

Editing the *Studies* has meant building something with a distinctive character: a venue for mid-length essays that combine analytic rigor, personal experience, and stylistic experimentation. Philosophy needs more spaces where we can engage in serious play, where careful argument can coexist with personal voice and political urgency. I am proud of this work, and even more so of having collaborated with brilliant philosophers. But I have decided to step down from my editorial role. The reason is simple: I have now moved back to Lisbon from the US. Given that this is a publication of the *American* Philosophical Association, I feel that it would be better for this publication to be edited by someone who remains in the US—and for me to focus on my community here in Lisbon. I don't yet know who the next editor will be, but I am sure the *Studies* will be in capable (probably ring-studded) hands.

Thank you for reading!

In solidarity,
Caro

CONVERSATION

We Inside/Outside: A Conversation between Qrescent Mali Mason and Shaeeda Mensah on Queer Black Feminist Friendship

Qrescent Mali Mason
HAVERFORD COLLEGE

Shaeeda Mensah
MCDANIEL COLLEGE

In the following edited interview, queer Black feminist philosophers Qrescent Mali Mason and Shaeeda Mensah discuss friendship as a form of Black feminist solidarity and its relationship to navigating the profession of philosophy in the United States.

Qrescent is an associate professor of philosophy and Chair of Philosophy and Africana Studies at Haverford College who works in Black feminist autotheory and phenomenology and is currently working on a memoir for bell hooks, *Seducing Simone*. Shaeeda is an assistant professor of philosophy at McDaniel College, whose work examines contemporary life to explore social and political structures, marginalized identities, and Black feminism. In this conversation, the two friends examine the limits and possibilities of intragroup solidarity and how understanding themselves as "inside-outside" the profession of philosophy offers them avenues toward queer liberation.

Qrescent: Somebody reached out to me years ago to do a publication for a queer journal, and I was like, "Oh, I can't do that, because I don't identify as queer…" At the time, I identified as bisexual, and I used to feel very strongly about being very clear that that was where I fall on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. I don't know how I feel so much now. . . .

Shaeeda: There was one time, in a Facebook group or something, people were identifying themselves, and I said I was queer, and someone asked me, what did that mean? And it was an interesting moment for me to grapple with why I'm deeply committed to saying I'm queer. I wouldn't call myself a lesbian, for example. I think for me it is about broad-scale existing outside of particular kinds of norms. And so, I think of myself, not only existing outside of the norm of heteronormativity, but also trying to break certain gender norms that might be oppressive. So, for me queerness is representative both of my sexuality, but also of my positionality to heterosexuality itself. And my thinking about the ways that gender structures can be oppressive. I also like queerness because I see it as a way to ask more questions. I think the ambiguity of "queerness" for me is deeply philosophical and important because it doesn't have a set definition, so I think it invites us to ask questions about what do we mean when we identify as queer?

Q: Do you think there's a relationship between your queerness and your situatedness within philosophy?

S: Yeah, I think they're deeply intertwined. One of my entry points into thinking about queerness, and this was before I ever dated a woman, was reading Cathy Cohen's work, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." It was this idea that we conflate being in same-gendered relationships with being queer. Cohen proposes this idea that queerness is a commitment to existing outside of the norm and, in particular, normative systems that we might find oppressive. And I go back to something I was taught at Spelman that was such an important part of helping me identify my queerness. I went to an institution where Blackness and womanhood was at the center of all that I learned and I think of that as such a clear kind of queer in the sense of disrupting the norm of how so many of us are educated.

Q: I like the idea of queering. I have a commitment to queering. But even the "queering" has to be specific. What is this opening up to? I guess this comes from lived experience. I dislike the idea that there is some kind of fantastical queer landscape that resolves ideological issues. As a person committed to ambiguity in relationships, one realizes that queer community ain't utopia, either.

S: Again, I can just think of Cohen as making it so concrete when she points to gay white men as having emerged as a paradigm of queerness and then calling out the ways that paradigm is heteronormative. Then she points to welfare queens or women who have children out of wedlock as queer. For me, that really disrupted this idea that queerness is about one's sexuality. It could be about one's positionality, one's orientation, how one stands in proximity to or from a standard that is set up and what happens when you fail to meet that standard. So I don't see queerness as providing an answer. I see it as opening the space to ask more questions.

***

S: I'm pretty sure we connected through the Collegium of Black Women Philosophers. I don't know. I can't pinpoint it. I feel like I've known you forever.

Q: Well, that's a good feeling. For me it started at the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute.

S: Yeah. "Diverse Philosophical Perspectives on Sexual Violence," I think, was the title of it.

Q: Were there other Black women who were there?

S: I think we were the only Black people there, period.

Q: I take that experience as a strong lesson in thinking about how the term diversity is employed in a variety of ways. It was such an interesting experience to me because it betrayed the philosophical approach to sexual violence. There were all sorts of affective registers being triggered. I think a lot of that solidified our bond because we were trying to say are you seeing what I'm seeing? And how do we get out of here?

S: I speculate that part of that also was about both having gone to Spelman. We know that philosophy can be done otherwise and are uniquely positioned to know that there is an otherwise. And I wonder sometimes if that is accessible to some people.

Q: Can you say more about that in relation to the experience at the Summer Institute?

S: I realized that a lot of the things that I learned in undergrad and approaches that I had access to as an undergrad are not available to a lot of people until they go to grad school or sometimes even after grad school when they're in a reading group.

Q: That helps to underline the frustration that coalesced our relationship, or at least gave us something to speak around. And having that same foundation and being Black women in that space also contributed. I'm thinking about how solidarity functions particularly for queer Black women in philosophy. I think it's very valuable to think about the notion of flight or marronage as a way that solidarity shows up in this discipline. When I think about you in the context of solidarity, our way of showing up has often taken the form of just having a space of safety. Not having to code switch and also coming from a similar orientation with regard to critiques of the discipline and folks in the discipline. One of the things that we did during NEH Summer Institute was that we went to a party together. I didn't have transportation, so I was stuck.

S: It's so interesting that you bring up escape because I didn't stay in the dorm. I actually brought my son and my grandmother down and they stayed at my aunt's house and I commuted. I'm inside and outside, and it's intentional. For me, there's something important about being outside of the field that feels like it gives space for refreshment. We weren't escaping the field all together, but I think we were able to escape the kind of hegemony of what was happening.

Q: I even think about how we, at times, have found escape in each other. There was a particular moment at the NEH thing where you asked a critical question that alerted me to, like, oh, okay, I see what Shaeeda is on. It's something very special about having a friendship with someone who thinks in the mode of philosophy. It allows that thing about inside-outside. I can think alongside you about ideas. And also be foolish and use my colloquial language and also be talking about my relationship and also be talking about your babies and also…. Something about the fluidity of that for me is related to queerness. It's only possible by virtue of the ways we find ourselves situated. You, for me, have been a kind of queer utopia. I was the only Black woman in my program [at Temple University], so my experience was colored by feeling isolated and marginalized in the field. That's why it's so funny to me that you think we connected at the Collegium [at Pennsylvania State University] because my experience at Collegium was like, oh, here, is a group of [Black women] who have each other.

S: I think grad school was a little bit similar to undergrad, where there were a lot of Black women, but I sometimes still felt like an outsider because of class. I'm gonna misquote the data, but I think some overwhelming 90 percent of people with PhDs have a parent with a PhD. My mother didn't finish high school. I started grad school when my older son was ten months, and that really shaped my experience of graduate school. There was absolute solidarity in the sense that many of those Black women helped me raise my son. Everybody was an auntie. And I will be forever grateful. Sometimes I felt a little lonely navigating grad school as a parent, as the only one with a child because I had certain limitations on my time. But even before then, I've always gone to predominantly Black schools. I grew up in the projects in the Bronx. Everyone was pretty much Black, Puerto Rican, or Dominican, and so I didn't grow up with whiteness as a standard for much of anything. I think that was hard for me because I do think that I went into certain spaces assuming, oh, we're Black and we're women; we're navigating the world in all the same ways. So that offered an important lesson in thinking about the fact that Black women's experiences are not a monolith.

Q: That's one of the key lessons of going to Spelman, right? You've mentioned the role of class a few times. Can you relate it to the position of Black women in philosophy?

S: I think there's this way that the life of the mind is one of privilege, right? I think the ability to spend hours thinking and theorizing and not laboring can be a privileged position. I've always loved to read. I've always loved books. I've always loved learning. But I do think there is a way that I constantly felt the pull of, there are things I probably should be doing instead of thinking. I should probably be working. I should probably be laboring. I should probably be using my body rather than my mind. So it was a major sacrifice that I spent ten years in grad school instead of ten years working. I think that when you don't come from a certain background, there are consequences for not doing that labor and not making that money because you might find yourself behind the curve without a soft landing spot if things don't work out. Those things are at the forefront of my mind because of my class background, in ways that I think is not necessarily a lived experience of all Black women.

Q: I mean, it does relate to market conditions, right? Being in philosophy is also a profession. I think a function of solidarity, even in our relationship, is thinking about how to navigate those market conditions. As Black feminist philosophers, we have to be clear that our areas of specialization are not central in the field. We're not getting all the jobs. I don't think that's necessarily specific to you.

S: I just wanted to make sure I didn't over-generalize it because I do think that some of the things I experience are reflective of being from a working-class background, and anyone from a working-class background and having a PhD is going to be a minority.

Q: I do think it means that certain people are going to make the decision that it's not the path to take. And some of those people are absolutely well suited to do it and bring in extremely important perspectives. And they get more and more filtered out as the career goes on, when we think about tenure-track jobs, associate professorships. . . .

It seems to me that the kind of choices that you're describing are also in line with certain Black feminist philosophical and political commitments. Black feminists being like, this career is not my entire being; there is also the investment that I am making in understanding myself as a whole person. This reflects a kind of holistic orientation to what it even means to be a philosopher. Those kinds of decisions that I hear you describing are, for me, not ham-fisted decisions, but conscious decisions being made about the kind of person you understand yourself to be.

S: Absolutely! I was thinking about the distinction between saying, I am a philosopher, and I'm in philosophy, or, I do philosophy. No one has to remind me to go back to my community and teach the things that I learned. I'm not gonna spend my whole life sitting in a room, thinking and theorizing. I think of philosophy as what I do, but not who I am because it feels like to say I am a philosopher, I have to cut off so many other parts of my life that are so essential, even, to how I do philosophy.

Q: What would it mean to say, I am a philosopher outside, as well as inside? What does philosophy bring to bear on your outside life?

S: I think the reason I love philosophy is because of the ability to ask questions and to get answers and then ask them again. I think there's something really important for me about the kind of philosophical trajectory of not assuming some big T truth. I think about a feminist epistemological approach of all these little t truths and putting those together to get us to some bigger version of truth. Looking at something, but then trying to shift one's gaze to figure out, what did I miss when I looked at it the first time? What might happen when we come to terms with the fact that we are looking at something in very different kinds of ways?

Q: I just always want to know, why are we doing this? What is going on? In organizing and political work, I often find myself being the person who asks, what's the structure of that? Or what's the logic that we're following here? I've devoted my life to studying this stupid thing and I want to know how I can change the world on the outside for queer folks, Black folks, women. The actual folks in my neighborhood. What does this bring to bear? How do I use any of this so I don't feel so split up?

S: I will say that there are times where I feel kind of full. Even if I'm not speaking at a protest or as involved in activism as I want, hopefully some of the ideas that I'm passing on get taken up by students who then get dispersed in the world and do a variety of things.

Q: I do wish sometimes there were more opportunities to confirm that.

S: My hope is that the person who goes and becomes a kindergarten teacher, or a lawyer, and someone leading a

chapter of a BLM in some other city, that some of those ideas get transferred and dispersed. But I just have to hold on to the thought of it.

Q: I think I'm personally losing faith in the power of the classroom. I used to feel like when I was introducing students to ideas, maybe they'll go on to be and do whatever. But now I worry about how the ideas that I'm trying to introduce are ultimately taken up or not taken up.

Going back to the scene of us going to this party together at NEH. I am thinking about embodiment in philosophy and how there is something philosophically important about the fact that I have danced with you. . . .

S: Where we could just be Qrescent and Shaeeda, not philosophers. And yet, we're always philosophers.

Q: Yes, yes, exactly. What is the special need for a kind of, like, friendship of solidarity in these contexts that we've described? Because racism, sexism, classism, etc., exist in the academy, in the classroom, in the professional space, in hiring decisions, right? So these are not just subjects we're thinking and teaching about, but also something we're simultaneously experiencing in the profession itself, right?

S: I'm very much interested in this idea of being an accomplice rather than an ally. Like, yes, I'm willing to maybe get into a little bit of trouble with you.

Q: And affirm the kinds of things that you are seeing. And I'm not just gonna be like, I'm sorry you're going through that, but also like, how do we work together to address these things? Because I think it's one thing to be supportive of someone else; it's another thing to strategize with somebody else to make plans to and to say, even if we can't change the field or the institution itself, what pockets do we have for being able to survive ourselves so that we can go back into those spaces?

For me that is the beauty of our friendship. We do both parts. We're gonna go back in the classroom. We're gonna go back in the field. We're gonna keep writing. We're gonna keep reading. All the while recognizing and holding space for each other's fullness. I also want to say very practically that writing together has been really helpful. And also, saying, like, hey girl, I'm not feeling it today. Having that space and flexibility. Thinking about each other when jobs come up, sending each other scholarships, writing recommendations. . . . Like, whatever you ask me, I'm always gonna do it, period. That's not something I feel with many other people or that I feel reciprocated for me.

S: I think those very practical things matter as well, but I see them as Black feminist practices. You find the side door, but you don't just go in by yourself; you hold it open so that a few other folks could get in with the clear expectation that those folks who got in will eventually also find a side door and take some folks in with them. And that is how we sustain ourselves because some of these possibilities just aren't going to exist in the more traditional spaces that many of us are navigating. That's how we build the space to find the little Qrescents and little Shaeedas. I try and hold on to that idea.

Q: I had one queer Black student in the past year with whom I worked very closely. Then over the summer I invited them to a picnic I had with my friends. So, I ended up seeing that outside-inside thing happening: seeing my Black queer student in my Black queer community, in the neighborhood, dancing with me. That is exactly it, you know? Seeing them as their whole selves, right? Like, not just as a student or a thinker, but a dancer or someone who laughs. Someone who eats, someone who has fun. That was a very special experience for me.

S: I learned Black feminism before I learned about hegemonic feminism, so I think about the Combahee Collective, which says, your investment in racism is not going to take away your gender oppression. If you're a Black woman, an investment in gender oppression is not going to take away racism. I'll say in my experience sometimes with working with white feminists, there has been this idea of solidarity until there's a misuse of power.

Q: Presumptions are made on the basis of a misunderstood conception of solidarity. Sometimes I feel instrumentalized by white feminists. Sometimes I find that white feminist philosophers are able to talk the talk, but are unable to relate those ideas to their lived experiences. The presumption is made that because they can quote Audre Lorde, then they're in actual political solidarity with me. Meanwhile, they forgo the need to work on behalf of women of color's lived experiences or contexts.

S: I think sometimes we might overemphasize shared experience. And then when there's time or need to think about differences in our experiences, the things start to collapse. Whenever difference emerges, we create hierarchies. I'm always thinking about what difference without hierarchy look like. As a Black woman, I'm often at the bottom, so I am very inclined to not create that hierarchy because I understand what is at stake. But I think that there are some white women who have not yet come to realize the tendency to create hierarchies higher up on the totem pole.

Q: And don't consider their own participation in the replication of those hierarchies because, I think, they don't understand how it's all implicated at the top to begin with. Your access to opportunities by virtue of white supremacy is always already connected to gender, right? And so, if they don't see how it's all connected at the top, it feels to me particularly frustrating because I'm dealing with thinkers. I'm dealing with philosophers who should be able to understand that. If anyone should be able to understand that, it should be y'all.

S: But I think that with enough power, you don't recognize your experience as subjective, right? Some of us have so much power and privilege that our subjective experience gets positioned as objective. And so, then, if we see ourselves as objective, then everybody else is being subjective. So, it presents itself as if it's the universal and the standard, and then anything that diverges from it

becomes abnormal. It becomes strange, it becomes weird, it becomes overly subjective.

Q: I mean, for me, that would speak to a limitation. Feminist philosophy comes out of being able to see lacuna or being critical of "philosophy." That same critical movement can be made from hegemonic philosophy to a more complex philosophy. It seems to me that one's capacity to make those critical moves should facilitate your being able to make critical reorientations.

S: I see it a little bit differently. So, yes, one is making a critical move, but I think when someone comes behind you and makes another critical move, that rupture is sometimes rejected. So, I think the hegemonic feminist starts to respond in the same way that the white male philosopher does: I don't like disruption. I've created the standard. It feels good. I like it. So, when something new comes along, it's like, oh, no. I think progress necessitates disruption. People get corrupted by power and then reject the very disruption that they use to get the power and privilege that they have.

Q: But you're not disappointed by this? You're not like, hey, do better?

S: No, I think the change always happens. I think there are some people who are always going to be disruptors and progress will happen. I'm not disappointed. I just expect it.

Q: Is it a losing battle? Are we going to continue to be able to recruit soldiers?

S: I mean, I think so, because I think we continue to see Black women pursuing degrees in philosophy. I think less about winning and more so being a part of the game and realizing that there is subversive potential in the game. I think it'll be a perpetual kind of work that has to be done. I hope that when some of us get tired, there's a generation of people coming behind us who will take it up. And I see that in terms of thinking about other Black feminist foremothers, who did their work and passed things down. They wrote. They talked. We took up their ideas and carried them down through generations. That's the thing that gives me hope. I assume that there is some generation of folks that will come behind us who have taken our class or read our work, and they will take it up and make it relevant to their generation and to the things that are needed at that time and place, and then the work just kind of continues from there.

ARTICLES

Deference-Based Solidarity

Cal Howland
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

I. INTRODUCTION

Standpoint epistemology is having a moment again, though whether that moment feels like a revival or a reckoning depends on who you ask. One of the questions at stake is familiar but still unsettled: Can solidarity be grounded on deference to the marginalized?

Classically, standpoint epistemology says yes. Standpoint theorists argue that deference to marginalized standpoints is warranted because marginalized social positions can provide an epistemic advantage. On the other hand, recent papers by Tilton and Toole, Táíwò, and Hannon disagree.[1] Here for brevity, I'll focus just on Hannon's argument. He claims that even if deference is sometimes appropriate, it cannot give us what solidarity demands: moral understanding.

Hannon's argument unfolds in two steps. First, he objects to strong versions of the epistemic advantage thesis: if understanding comes in degrees (which he takes to be largely uncontested), then no group has an absolute epistemic privilege. Second, and more importantly for my purposes, he argues that deference is the wrong epistemic tool for building political movements, because deference involves taking someone's word without fully grasping why it's right. Without felt and reasoned conviction, Hannon claims solidarity can become fragile and easily fractured under pressure.

This paper begins from a place of partial agreement. Moral understanding matters. It deepens commitment and stabilizes movements. It gives people the language and reasons to keep going. But is moral understanding really a prerequisite for solidarity? What if, instead of grounding solidarity, moral understanding is something that *emerges from it*?

To explore this possibility, I turn not to a thought experiment, but a moment of crisis: AIDS activism in the late 1980s and early '90s. In particular, I focus on ACT UP—a movement that did not wait for consensus, did not demand shared theory before action, and did not assume that everyone involved fully understood the moral terrain they were entering. And yet, ACT UP was wildly successful in achieving its demands. ACT UP didn't begin with a unified moral framework about healthcare, gay rights, or state responsibility. It began with anger, grief, urgency and, crucially, a willingness to defer to those most affected. What followed was not confusion or collapse under pressure as Hannon would predict, but one of the most effective political movements in recent history.

The history of ACT UP suggests a different picture of solidarity than Hannon's. Not one where understanding precedes action, but one where action that is messy, incomplete, and collective can *generate* moral understanding over time. In this alternative view, deference is not a failure of reasoning. It is a starting point, and a scaffold. Deference is something we build with, and outgrow, as movements take shape.

II. CRITICISMS OF STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY

Standpoint theorists argue that deference is warranted because marginalized standpoints can have greater credibility on questions concerning one's oppression and social position. The argument that deference can be epistemically fruitful comes from two foundational claims

in Standpoint theory: (i) that knowledge is socially situated and (ii) that marginalized locations can generate *epistemic advantage*.

The roots of standpoint theory can be traced back to Marx. Marx argued that workers occupy a distinctive position from which the coercive nature of capitalism becomes visible in ways they are not to those who benefit from it. Feminist theorists, including Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, and Sandra Harding, in the 1970s and '80s extended this idea: if class position can shape knowledge, why not gender, race, sexuality, or disability? Smith contributed the claim that knowledge is *socially situated*—what people experience, notice, and understand is shaped by their social position because different people experience different social realities. Hartsock systematized this insight into the idea that marginalized locations can generate *epistemic advantage*—women's positions within systems of social reproduction and caregiving provides access to dimensions of social reality hidden from dominant perspectives. Harding and Hartsock both theorized standpoints as not merely social identity, but *achievements* arising through collective reflection and political struggle. Standpoints, in their view, emerge through consciousness-raising, critique, and shared political engagement. The epistemic advantage that emerges from this cultivation of standpoints means that marginalized people often have knowledge about social oppression and power structures that deserve special weight or deference from outsiders.

These claims have come under sustained examination in analytic philosophy in recent years. Saint-Croix, for example, argues that the deference that standpoint theory recommends is the beginning of epistemically excellent inquiry.[2] In her view, one can defer to another person's judgment while continuing to investigate the reasons, mechanisms, and evidence behind that judgment. Saint-Croix's picture of the role of deference in inquiry suggests that standpoint theory in general recommends inquiry that is attentive and investigative of who is an epistemic authority on a given topic.

On the flip side, authors including Tilton and Toole, Táíwò, and Hannon argue against deference epistemology due, in part, to the worry that deference can discourage independent learning and promote epistemic laziness.[3] Specifically, Hannon argues that calls for deference to the marginalized should be rejected because such deference hinders the development of moral understanding.

Moral understanding, as Hannon appeals to it, is capacity for understanding *why* a moral proposition is true, and as such it is a capacity that (i) comes in degrees, and (ii) can vary in depth, breadth, and coherence. Moral understanding can be achieved in a variety of ways: via perception, first-person experience, and moral reasoning.[4] Hannon defines deference as "the willingness to accept or believe what another person says without independently verifying the claim."[5]

Deference cannot impart moral understanding because moral understanding is a capacity for consistent, apt moral judgment. Deference, as defined above, in no way develops this capacity. Since uncritical deference promotes epistemic laziness, according to Hannon, it does not in any way contribute to a person's ability to *reliably act rightly* and *effectively justify their actions* to others, which straightforwardly impedes political solidarity and coalition building. Hannon describes this succinctly:

> [Deference] creates barriers to the deep understanding and conviction needed to sustain effective political movements . . . when allies rely on deference, they may fail to internalize the moral reasons behind calls for change, leaving them ill-equipped to persuade others or articulate the cause in broader terms. This can result in a fragile form of solidarity that collapses under pressure.[6]

But a standpoint theorist might reasonably respond to Hannon's criticism that one should not *blindly* defer. Deference should be accompanied by efforts to understand the perspectives of marginalized individuals. In other words, people still have to take responsibility for "doing the work" to develop their moral understanding while deferring. However, Hannon doesn't think this truly solves the problem. He provides the PETER PROBLEM.

> PETER PROBLEM: Suppose Peter, a cis man, and his female roommates are interviewing a new potential roommate. After the interview is done, Peter's roommates nix that candidate because of sexist behavior, but Peter didn't notice anything. Assume deference is appropriate in the first instance, the standpoint reply suggests that Peter should defer but not suspend his own reasoning entirely—he should engage his housemates to better understand the concerns, seek out feminist literature, and reflect critically on his assumptions and understanding. Suppose he does all that and a similar situation arises months later: Peter's housemates again judge an applicant's behavior as sexist, but Peter sees nothing objectionable. He has made good-faith efforts to improve his moral understanding, yet his judgment still diverges.

The purpose of the PETER PROBLEM is to show that insistence on "doing the work" does not really address Hannon's underlying complaint about deference. Because, according to Hannon's interpretation of standpoint theory, anytime a disagreement arises the privileged individual is expected to defer. So, the moral understanding that Peter has developed is inert with respect to his decision-making.

However, if now that Peter has developed his own moral understanding, he should rely on it in the second case, then why shouldn't he develop his own moral understanding and rely on it in the first place, instead of deferring? Hannon concludes that

> despite attempts to balance deference with independent moral reasoning, standpoint-based deference would remain deeply asymmetrical. Those without the relevant social location are expected to defer, even after making serious efforts to understand the issue for themselves."[7]

Hannon supplements his argument with Dishaw's disengagement problem. When faced with conflicting testimony from marginalized individuals, attempting to defer to both perspectives equally will cause an impossible position. The only thing to do in this case that is rational is to suspend judgment. Conflicting testimony for the deferrer results in judgment suspension, not because of careful consideration, but "because others have not settled the matter for him."[8] In these instances, suspension of judgment means standing in solidarity with no one.

Hannon concludes that genuine politically viable solidarity cannot rest on deference. It requires active engagement with the experiences and perspectives of the marginalized. It emphasizes empathy and mutual (and moral) understanding. Without this we cannot build strong and sustainable movements because the moral core of the movement will be too weak. Even if the movement is built on some moral knowledge that is taken for granted, everyone supporting that movement has to be plugged into that moral knowledge in a comprehensive and active way.

III. REJOINDER: DEFERENCE AS A SCAFFOLD

Hannon's picture of solidarity, at moments, feels like the ideal: a group of people who not only act together but understand, deeply and reflectively, *why* they act. There is incredible power to be had in movements like those he envisions, which are grounded in shared reasons, mutual comprehension, and moral clarity. But here I'll argue that these ideals mislead because they're mistaken for prerequisites. The question isn't whether Hannon's kind of solidarity is valuable—surely it is. It's whether it's *required*, especially of nascent communities, and whether movements have to wait for moral understanding to catch up before they and the individuals that comprise them can act at all.

And here, I think, the picture weakens. Because when we turn from philosophical models to actual political history, what we find is something much messier, and much more urgent. Movements rarely begin with shared theory or understanding. They begin with uneven commitments, conflicting perspectives, and a sense—sometimes barely articulated—that something must change. If that's right, then perhaps deference plays a different role than Hannon suggests. It is not indicative of a failure of moral reasoning, but as a way of moving forward together *prior* to full understanding. To see what I mean, let's turn to a case where academic inquiry and epistemic reflection was subsumed by the urgency of need.

A. ACT UP AND THE URGENCY OF ACTION

By the late 1980s, the AIDS crisis had become impossible to ignore and yet equally politically neglected. Thousands were dying. Institutions tasked with responding—government agencies, pharmaceutical companies, medical establishments—were managerial at best, and deliberately slow, indifferent, or openly hostile at worst. For many of the communities affected, the situation was existential. And so, ACT UP emerged—not as a carefully theorized movement, but as a radically democratic, action-oriented coalition. Its organizing principle was strikingly minimal: **direct action to end the AIDS crisis**. That was it. No unified moral framework, no comprehensive theory of justice, no demand that participants first align on why the crisis mattered or what grounded their obligations.

This becomes especially clear when ACT UP is contrasted with the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the NYC AIDS organization which dominated advocacy in the early 1980s. GMHC, established in 1982, was focused on health and social services for HIV-positive individuals. GMHC filled a critical social support gap that many experienced due to lack of family support and failures of public health and disability funding. GMHC at the time of its founding was the first large AIDS service organization and became a core model for professionalized nonprofit care. It functioned as crisis counseling, a buddy system, and social support for dying young people who lacked family support.

GMHC was centrally structured, and decision-making authority was **top-down**. The board of directors and paid professional staff made decisions oriented at coordination with hospitals, funders, and government agencies. Inside GMHC, people living with AIDS were beneficiaries of support and often volunteers, but not consistently the primary decision-makers. GMHC's animating value was that people with AIDS deserved care, dignity, and support—*even when the state abandoned them*. That value resulted in their social services orientation emphasizing life affirmation, reducing stigma, shame, isolation, which gave rise to a fundamental goal of making people with AIDS legible to power.

This goal implicitly required a kind of respectability politics—seeking support and non-alienation from philanthropies and government agencies; emphasizing responsibility, care, and citizenship of all individuals in the US including gay men; and framing AIDS as a public health emergency not a moral failure.[9] Due to these inflexible features of their animating principles, GMHC found themselves consistently conciliatory to powerful institutions, no matter the opinions of people living with AIDS. They limited the sexual explicitness of their public messaging and militant confrontation with medical, religious, and governmental institutions.

This orientation came from what I will call GMHC's *principles-to-praxis model*. Their guiding principles, founded on an argument for why they held those principles (moral understanding), is what grounded their solidarity with and support of people with AIDS. The testimony of people with AIDS as to what they wanted out of advocacy groups did little to change their principles because that testimony was seen as irrational; direct action and structural critique did little, according to the board of directors, to provide social services to as many HIV+ people as they could.

This principles-to-praxis advocacy was a stabilizing force, but also a kind of restriction. By establishing strong principles first, organizations can insulate themselves from challenge. When principles conflict with marginalized testimony—especially it demands confrontation or disruption—that testimony can be filtered, moderated, or dismissed as impractical. The rigidity of an organization's principles ends up constraining what solutions it imagined

to be possible. And in the context of the AIDS crisis, this principles-first approach translated directly into channeling political energy into managing suffering.

Larry Kramer famously resigned from leadership at GMHC in 1983 due to frustrations with the failure of the organization to move the needle politically. The core tensions between ACT UP activists and GHMC staffers was that GMHC had "depoliticized" the AIDS crisis. According to ACT UP activists, GHMC was structured to avoid the root causes of suffering and normalize privatized care. As a result, they thought GHMC had a net negative political effect: it had made state neglect survivable rather than unacceptable. As a member of both organizations, Kramer describes the difference between the organizations:

> The big difference between the two organizations was this—I was determined that whatever got started [ACT UP], it would not be structured because that's what GMHC had become. Everything had to have a job description and approval by this, and approval by that. And I didn't want that. So, we went the other way. I often describe [ACT UP] as democratic to a fault. And when people came and said, we want to start this, or we want to start that—fine.[10]

What Kramer describes in detail might be abstracted into describing ACT UP as an experiment in radical democracy with big tent politics. ACT UP had only an organizing committee for dispensing funds and an affinity group structure[11] committed to its single principle (direct action to end the AIDS crisis). This structure was directly opposed to that of GMHC; rather than expertise being credentialed, in ACT UP expertise was experiential.

ACT UP's goal was to be accountable in its operations to the lived experiences of its rank-and-file members, particularly those living with AIDS. Call this radically democratic approach a *praxis-to-principles* model. From this foundational deference to people with AIDS as political agents, and not just clients, the question was how to craft direct action that would push for those demands on a structural level. For example, instead of supplementing caregiving where nuclear families had failed, ACT UP explicitly politicized kinship relationships. They called for structural changes to healthcare access like allowing hospital visitation rights to non-family members and legal recognition of caregivers that were not biologically related to the person with AIDS.

Their model led directly to the huge simultaneity of response that Kramer describes. This radically democratic structure led ACT UP to many substantial wins that have changed the face of public medicine and social services today. Those achievements were largely made through direct action including direct action to close down FDA headquarters in Maryland in 1988, protesting at the NY Stock Exchange over AZT prices, and well-known "die-ins" across New York City.

This meant that ACT UP was not a consensus-based, structural power-dependent movement like GMHC. It did not push all of its members into only one analysis of the current moment or one strategy for a solution to the crisis. ACT UP did not put theory first. It realized the aspirations of its members in action and concrete demands first. Maxine Wolfe, an organizer for ACT UP describes this strategy directly: "If you do action first, your theory will emerge, because you have to make decisions that coheres with your values."[12] Schulman adds, "if you do theory first you all end up polarized, and you are fighting with each other, and nothing's actually at stake."[13]

Instead of starting with theory, ACT UP eschewed any deep theory for successful action. Instead of centralized authority, it embraced decentralization. Instead of credentialed expertise, it foregrounded experiential knowledge. And crucially, it did not require that everyone involved *fully understand* the moral stakes before participating. If anything, it assumed the opposite: that volunteers and activists who did not have AIDS would not fully understand the stakes, and their understanding would grow from a deference to the lived experience of people with AIDS to a moral understanding through their participation and relationships built within ACT UP This allowed the weight of the crisis and the success of the strategies to develop and be witnessed by participants organically.

B. DEFERENCE IN PRACTICE

Taking the lessons that Kramer and others offer from ACT UP invites an enticing alternative to Hannon's pessimism about deference. Unlike what he claims, movements and the solidarity that knit them together give rise to moral understanding and depth of values, not the other way around. Recall, Hannon's argument is that moral understanding is necessary for true solidarity, which in turn is necessary for effective political coalition building. The flip-side of that argument is that deference, which requires no moral understanding, undermines effective coalition building and thus is not an adequate basis for political momentum.

However, the AIDS crisis is an epoch within American history where the most successful political momentum came from a group founded not on moral understanding, but as essentially a group committed to the emergence of their principles out of deference to the direction their members wanted to take the group.

Within ACT UP deference to other members was foundational—across differences in experience, knowledge, and vulnerability. People living with AIDS articulated experiences and demands; others creatively organized around them. Different affinity groups pursued different strategies, often without consensus. There was disagreement, fragmentation, even conflict. And yet, the radically democratic core of the organization held strong. ACT UP did not have a fully unified articulation of the reasons underlying each demand and strategy as it emerged. Rather, there was a willingness to take seriously the claims of others, even when one did not yet grasp the moral understanding behind them. This is deference grounded in orientation toward action under conditions of practical uncertainty. Larry Kramer captures this spirit in describing ACT UP's structure: if someone had an idea—an

action, a protest, a demand—they could pursue it. Others might join, or not. There was no requirement that everyone agree in advance or even understand fully what was at stake. Theory followed practice.

This is a striking inversion of Hannon's picture. Instead of moral understanding grounding solidarity, solidarity becomes the site *where* moral understanding develops. Participants act together, reflect together, and revise together. Over time, commitments deepen. Reasons emerge or become clearer. Moral underpinnings become more precise. But none of that is required at the outset, or of any initial coalescence of solidarity. And directly in opposition to Hannon's predictions, this deference to the testimony of people with AIDS didn't undermine ACT UP's effectiveness. The movement achieved concrete, lasting changes: accelerating FDA drug approval processes, lowering drug prices, expanding access to experimental treatments, and establishing needle exchange programs. These weren't fragile victories. They reshaped public health policy.

So, here's the tension. If Hannon is right, movements built on deference should be unstable, shallow, vulnerable to collapse. But ACT UP suggests precisely the opposite: that movements and the people that comprise them can be both deferential *and* powerful—epistemically imperfect and politically effective.

C. FROM PREREQUISITE TO OUTCOME

What this review of AIDS crisis advocacy suggests is not that moral understanding is irrelevant. On the contrary, it matters deeply—especially for sustaining movements over time, for expanding them, for articulating their goals to broader audiences. But it is not a *precondition* of solidarity. Rather, solidarity is scaffolded by deference.

Seen this way, Hannon's argument is useful because it makes a common temporal mistake; that we must reach the intellectual achievement of moral understanding before we can be effective partners for solidarity in any moral action.

But ACT UP (and many movements like it) reverse this order. Action under conditions of partial understanding generates the very capacities Hannon thinks are missing. Deference, in this view, is not a substitute for moral reasoning. It is a way of *getting into motion* when reasoning is incomplete; something we rely on when asymmetries in knowledge and experience make full agreement unlikely, if not impossible. As people act together, that scaffold is revised, reinforced, and even partially dismantled as understanding grows. Yes, moral understanding strengthens solidarity. But it does not have to precede it. Sometimes, it is solidarity—messy, provisional, and imperfect—that makes even partial moral understanding possible in the first place.

IV. CONCLUSION

Let's return to where we began. Hannon says that deference cannot ground solidarity because it cannot generate the kind of moral understanding that truly committed, durable movements require. And there is something right about that worry. Movements must acquire depth. They need people who can explain themselves, defend their commitments, and stay aligned when things get difficult. But what this paper has tried to show is that this picture is incomplete. It asks movements and individuals to emerge at full maturity.

Hannon grounds this claim in the PETER PROBLEM, where individual instances of deference on moral knowledge are at odds with developing moral understanding, and Dishaw's DISENGAGEMENT PROBLEM, where deference can lead to political alienation when trying to defer to two or more marginalized individuals are on different sides of an issue. However, when we look at actual political practice, especially under conditions of urgency, asymmetry, and crisis, we see something quite different. We see the opposite of disengagement—people taking up the actions and subcommittees that move them, and leaving the rest. We see coalitions built not on shared theory, but on partial trust—on a willingness to take the claims of others seriously and as an invitation to the ways in which communal understanding and theory is continually being built and reshaped. We see, in other words, deference doing real political work.

ACT UP is not an anomaly here. Instead, it is a vivid illustration. It reminds us that movements are not born fully formed, with coherent moral frameworks and unified visions. They are built in motion: through disagreement, through experimentation, through action that outpaces explanation. And in that process, something crucial happens. People begin to understand, not abstractly, but through shared struggle. Moral understanding, in this picture, is not bypassed. It is *produced*. ACT UP evolved a moral understanding over the 1990s of what kind of fair healthcare system would need to be brought about to support the most marginalized.

This reframing matters because it changes how we think about the risks of deference. For Hannon, deference threatens to hollow out solidarity, leaving participants without the resources to sustain their commitments. But if deference is understood as a provisional strategy, as an epistemic scaffold rather than a final stance, then its role looks quite different. It becomes a tool for coordination under uncertainty, a way of enabling collective action when full understanding is not yet available.

As movements succeed, or fail, participants revise their commitments, deepen their understanding, and build new frameworks. The scaffold can be reinforced, adjusted, or partially dismantled. What begins as deference can become understanding, and what begins as partial alignment can become something closer to the robust solidarity Hannon rightly values. This does not mean that deference is without danger. It can slide into uncritical acceptance, asymmetry, or even disengagement—as criticisms of identity politics and ally culture demonstrate.[14] It can, in some contexts, obscure responsibility rather than distribute it. But these are not arguments for abandoning deference altogether. They are arguments for getting clearer about *when* and *how* it should be used.

Deference, then, is not the enemy of solidarity. Nor is it always its foundation. It is something more provisional—and perhaps more interesting. A way of acting together before we fully know why. A way of building the conditions under which understanding can emerge at all. If that is right, then the task is not to choose between deference and understanding, but to track the shifting relationship between them. To ask not whether we have enough understanding to act, but how acting together might be what *makes* understanding possible.

And in a world where waiting for consensus often means waiting too long, deferential scaffolding may be exactly what solidarity requires.

NOTES

1. Tilton and Toole, "Epistemology of Deference"; Táíwò, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege"; Hannon, "Social Identity."

2. Saint-Croix, "Zetetic and Epistemic Deference."

3. Tilton and Toole, "Epistemology of Deference"; Táíwò, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege"; Hannon, "Social Identity."

4. See Sliwa, "Moral Understanding as Knowing Right from Wrong"; and Hills, "Understanding Why." Whether the achievement of moral understanding comes from moral reasoning only or can be achieved in other ways, specifically via moral testimony, is central to the debate between Sliwa and Hills. I will sidestep this, as Hannon assumes only what is in agreement between the two.

5. Hannon, "Social Identity," sec. 4.6.

6. Hannon, "Social Identity," sec. 5.5.

7. Hannon, "Social Identity," sec. 5.5.

8. Hannon, "Social Identity," sec. 5.5. Hannon is citing Dishaw, "Solidarity and the Work of Moral Understanding."

9. Most starkly what they were trying to combat in messaging was the original framing, taken up by the Reagan administration, that AIDS was "gay cancer"—the result of living an immoral life.

10. Kramer, interview by Schulman, 9.

11. ACT UP is well remembered for its Monday meetings at the NYC LGBTQ center. However, critical to the organizational structure was that affinity groups never had to actually bring their proposed actions to the floor of the Monday meetings. They could do direct action and ACT UP would still provide legal support. This structure evolved out of suspicion that there was heavy infiltration of ACT UP by the police, which was later substantiated in redacted documents published by Schulman, *Let the Record Show*.

12. Maxine Wolfe, quoted by Sarah Schulman in New York Public Library, "Sarah Schulman with Kwame Anthony Appiah," at 54:29.

13. New York Public Library, "Sarah Schulman with Kwame Anthony Appiah," at 54:40.

14. For an excellent example, see Dean, *Comrade*.

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Resisting Authoritarianism: Lessons from Queer Liberation

Lauren Lyons

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ

INTRODUCTION

In a moment marked by rising authoritarianism—specifically, intensified border regimes, expanding surveillance, and escalating attacks on marginalized communities (including queer communities)—there is a clear and urgent sense that something must be done. Yet that urgency is often paired with paralysis. The problems are many and vast, and it is unclear what to prioritize and what resistance strategies will be effective. In these conditions, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and retreat into inaction.

This essay turns to the history of queer resistance to ask what it can teach us about resisting authoritarianism today. What emerges from looking into this history is a set of lessons that can inform present struggles. Specifically, queer resistance shows the importance of embracing the messy pluralism of organizing: movements can and must act without resolving disagreements about ultimate goals or the best means of achieving them. It also reveals that the work of sustenance—meeting basic needs, building networks of care, and having fun—is not ancillary to political struggle but constitutive of it. The history of queer resistance also highlights the role of tactics that close moral

distance by forcing confrontation with the human costs of injustice.

Looming in the background of our present analysis paralysis is a question that haunts contemporary activism: What difference can any individual action make? Looking at queer liberation movements reminds us that focusing on individual impact rather than on what can be achieved collectively obscures how transformative change actually happens.

METHODOLOGY: ACTIVISM, HISTORY, AND PHILOSOPHY

Questions about activist strategy are often treated as non-philosophical: more matters of practicality rather than theory, better left to organizers, political scientists, or trial and error on the ground. Philosophy, by contrast, concerns itself with more abstract and squarely normative issues: what justice requires, what rights we have, what an ideal society would look like, and so on.

There is something intuitive about this division of labor. This is in part because in conditions as urgent as our own, it can feel like a distraction to step back and theorize.

But this way of drawing the boundary is misguided. At the core of activist strategy lies a normative question: Given a set of moral and political ends, how should we act under non-ideal conditions?

At least three normative issues are at play. First, addressing the question involves determining which ends matter—overall well-being, justice, power, fairness, rights—and how to weigh them against one another. Accordingly, in organizing, we confront difficult moral trade-offs: for instance, should one in order to secure immediate relief, or refuse in the name of transformative change in the longer term?

Second, activist strategy raises questions about constraints on means: which tactics are justified, how they should be proportioned to the ends they aim to achieve, and whether some are off-limits. Third, it involves reasoning under conditions of deep uncertainty, where there is limited evidence about which strategies will succeed. Philosophy offers resources for navigating uncertain epistemic environments, including ways of thinking about risk, harm, and proportionality.

All three families of questions can be framed as matters of non-ideal political philosophy. A central insight of non-ideal theory is that, in asking how to structure political and legal institutions, we should not assume ideal background conditions but instead theorize from the realities of deep injustice, limited knowledge, and imperfect agents.[1] The core question of activist strategy takes these facts as given and asks what should be done to make the world better, given how fucked up it currently is?

Looking at history can shed light on these questions. Social movements can be understood as large-scale experiments in collective action carried out under conditions we cannot replicate in theory. As such, they generate a form of practical-normative knowledge: insight into how people have conceptualized their ends and navigated uncertainty, constraint, and disagreement in pursuit of political change.

Looking towards history also expands our sense of the possible. Under conditions of political despair, it is easy to take present constraints as fixed and inevitable, to assume that meaningful change is out of reach. The history of resistance movements unsettles these assumptions. It reveals that with hard work and organizing, transformative change that appears impossible can become possible.

Further, queer resistance is particularly instructive as a lens for exploring the ethics of activism today. Faced with state abandonment, and pervasive stigma—especially during the AIDS crisis—queer communities developed strategies for both transforming unjust institutions and surviving their failures in the meantime. Unfortunately, we must also do both at once now.

AGAINST PURITY AND CERTAINTY: DISAGREEMENT AND PLURALISM IN QUEER ACTIVISM

One reason resisting authoritarianism feels so daunting is the dual uncertainty about what future we are working toward and what means will get us there. These are not just open questions but ones we actively disagree about.

One common model of organizing—call it an implicit *monist* or *purist model*—assumes that effective action requires first resolving uncertainty about means and ends and achieving consensus. Under this model, movements are expected to act only once everyone shares the same vision and strategy, and only alongside partners who also adopt it.

The monist model lurks within social movements and drives critiques of them. Occupy Wall Street, for instance, was frequently criticized for lacking a unified set of demands.[2] Organizations like the Democratic Socialist of America, on the other hand, are amidst a longstanding debate about whether to embrace electoralism as a political strategy or to focus on building power outside of the political establishment through mutual aid, unions, and tenant organizing.[3] This debate feels paralyzing if one thinks that organizing requires consensus about means and ends.

The history of queer resistance challenges this monist intuition. It reveals how the demand for consensus can paralyze action, rupture solidarity, and prevent experimentation.

In *Let the Record Show*, Sarah Schulman highlights how Queer movements during the AIDS crisis embraced disagreement and strategic pluralism and argues that this was key to their success. She characterizes decision-making within ACT UP as a form of "radical democracy," because at its height, "ACT UP never demanded full agreement for an action or campaign to be taken up"[4] To the contrary,

> if I wanted to participate in an illegal needle exchange on the Lower East Side in order to get arrested and wage a test case trial, and you didn't want to, you wouldn't stop me from doing it; you just wouldn't do it. If instead you wanted to organize a demonstration against the Catholic church and I didn't want to, I simply wouldn't do it.[5]

Schulman suggests that although this method was never overtly stated or theorized, one of its strengths is that "many different expressions of direct action were carried out simultaneously" because "none of them requir[ed] full consensus, total participation, or universal agreement."[6]

This embrace of pluralism had a number of benefits. First, it enabled individual people to pursue roles in the movement that most aligned with their values, skills, and capacities. Second, it built a broader coalition by empowering those who disagree to organize together. Third, it allowed for mobilization from multiple angles at once so as to push simultaneously on multiple pressure points.

Given inevitable uncertainty about what actions will be effective, a multipronged strategy also offers a valuable form of experimentation. Sometimes, in organizing, we should throw things at the wall and see what sticks.

Looking at other moments in queer history reminds us how difficult it is to discern the impact of a particular action in advance. Consider the Compton's Cafeteria riots in San Francisco's Tenderloin District in August 1966, three years before Stonewall. On the night of the uprising, Compton's was, as Susan Stryker describes, "buzzing with its usual late-night crowd of drag queens, hustlers, slummers, cruisers, runaway teens, and down-and-out neighborhood regulars."[7] After management called the police on a group of queens deemed too loud—a routine form of harassment—the encounter escalated. Patrons fought back: coffee was hurled, dishes shattered, and officers were struck by the queens' stilettos.

Stryker argues that this moment proved pivotal for transgender resistance, catalyzing longer-term structural change. She suggests that in the aftermath of Compton's, local officials began to relate differently to trans residents, treating them less as a problem to be managed and more as citizens with legitimate needs. Activists also built on the momentum of the riot to establish some of the earliest community-based support services for trans people. But none of this would have been foreseeable from the outset; an unplanned, volatile eruption proved transformative in ways no one could have anticipated.

Embracing pluralism and uncertainty in resistance aligns with a rejection of purity politics, or the tendency to refuse engagement with any strategy, institution, or coalition that falls short of one's moral and political ideals. Purity politics sets a high bar for participation in movements: only the right tactics, only the right partners, only the right goals.

Alexis Shotwell's *Against Purity* offers a powerful philosophical challenge to the purist tendency. Shotwell argues that the pursuit of purity is both impossible and counterproductive because we are all implicated in unjust systems. We consume products made through exploitation, benefit from histories of dispossession, and participate in institutions we may oppose.[8] There is no position outside these entanglements from which to act. For Shotwell, the solution to this bind is not to struggle fruitlessly to disentangle oneself from injustice but to proceed from a morally impure starting point, foregrounding "complicity and compromise as a starting point for action."[9] In other words, the question is not how to keep one's hands clean, but how to do the most good with inevitably dirty ones.

Applied to activism, refusing purity can reframe what ethical participation in movements entails. Working through morally compromised institutions need not be categorically prohibited, nor the singular path towards justice, but part of a broader toolkit.

ACT UP's "inside-out" strategy illustrates this well. Rather than choosing between working within institutions and confronting them, ACT UP did both simultaneously. "Insider" advocates negotiated with bodies like the FDA while "outsider" direct action—protests, die-ins, media interventions—kept public pressure high.[10] These were not competing approaches but mutually reinforcing ones: outside pressure gave insider negotiators leverage they wouldn't otherwise have had, while insider access gave outside agitators credibility and information to sharpen their demands.

Schulman's historical project aims to tell "a story that should have been impossible, which is why it is crucial for us to understand how and why it happened."[11] What emerges is a movement whose accomplishments were pluralistic in both method and effect. ACT UP helped secure a fast-track system that allowed seriously ill people to access experimental drugs before formal approval—a model later adopted more broadly by the FDA. Activists successfully pushed the CDC to change its definition of AIDS, enabling many women to qualify for benefits and participate in clinical trials. They pressured pharmaceutical companies to alter research priorities and played a role in ending insurance discrimination against people living with AIDS. Beyond these institutional victories, the movement transformed social schemas around queer people, changing how "queer people understood themselves and were in turn understood by others."[12]

Without embracing messiness and pluralism, it is hard to see how these accomplishments could have been possible.

SUSTENANCE AND ROSES

Activism is often understood as fundamentally oriented toward structural change: changing laws, social norms, and institutions. On this view, meeting basic needs, building community, and providing care may emerge as secondary—at best supportive or a stopgap until change can happen, and at worst apolitical.

Similarly, expressions of joy, celebration, and pleasure within movements can seem like luxuries, things that take energy away from the urgent work of combating injustice.

The history of queer resistance suggests a different way of thinking. Far from being ancillary to political struggle, sustenance, fun, and community-building have been among its most powerful engines. In other words, the work of keeping people fed, housed, alive, and joyful has always been integral to successful resistance.

One reason to take sustenance seriously as a strategy is that it builds political power. Dean Spade's *Mutual Aid* offers a powerful account of why.[13] For Spade, mutual aid is distinct from charity, which operates within existing systems and accepts its terms: some have resources, others lack them, and the task is to redistribute enough to get by. By contrast, mutual aid, in Spade's view, is the practice of collective care premised on political solidarity rather than benevolence. We help each other not out of pity but because we understand our fates as bound together.

Spade highlights how mutual aid politicizes people by helping them build a shared narrative about why they are suffering. When basic needs go unmet, the dominant culture offers a ready explanation: personal failure and bad choices. Mutual aid counters this by building political consciousness around the institutional and structural failures that actually lead to material deprivations: the state's abandonment, the healthcare system's exclusions, and the economy's violence. In meeting needs together, people come to understand these as contingent and changeable features of structural injustice, not personal failures. As such, in mutual aid, we become movement participants, not just benefactors and recipients.

This dynamic was visible in the work of STAR—Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries—founded by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera in New York in 1970. STAR House provided food, shelter, and community to homeless trans youth and street queens at a time when the state offered nothing.[14] But STAR was not simply a service organization: it was an explicitly political project, advocating for prison reform and legal reforms to protect LGBTQ+ rights, among other structural changes. Johnson and Rivera understood that you could not ask people to show up for a movement if they had nowhere to sleep. Sustenance was the precondition for organizing, and organizing was the only way to ensure sustenance in the long term.

Another reason to center sustenance is that movements that neglect sustenance and joy risk collapse. Political organizing is exhausting, especially under conditions where life, livelihood, and basic moral recognition are at stake. As described by Spade, "eating together, having check-ins with interesting questions about people's favorite foods, plants, movies, or politicizing movements may seem silly at first but make a big difference."[15] This is because without deliberate attention to the needs of activists—for rest, care, pleasure, and community—movements burn people out and drive them away.

Queer resistance has long understood this, in part because queer communities have always had to build their own worlds. These worlds meet a range of our needs, from social to sexual to familial to political. Correspondingly, the bars, community centers, drag performances, and chosen families that sustained queer life under hostility were not escapes from politics but often functioned as its infrastructure. They kept people connected, replenished, and reminded of what they were fighting for. Joy was not a reward deferred until after the revolution, but rather a resource that made continued struggle possible.

The phrase "bread and roses" captures this sentiment. Originating in the labor movement—and specifically, the 1912 Lawrence textile strike, where women workers demanded not just fair wages but dignity and beauty—it insists that human beings need more than bare survival. We need joy, meaning, beauty, and community. A movement that aims only towards bread reduces politics to the satisfaction of material needs and misses something essential about what justice requires and how we should structure movements in the unjust meantime.

Sustenance work is also a form of prefigurative politics—the idea that movements should embody, in their own practices, the values of the world they are trying to build. Even in a broken world, we can build small, blissful ones within it. Prefiguration has long been central to queer organizing—the idea that we can experiment with new forms of life *now*, rather than waiting for some future liberation. This spirit animates utopian projects like Short Mountain Sanctuary, a longstanding commune for queer and trans people in rural Tennessee, as well as spaces like queer nightclubs, where different ways of being and relating are practiced in the present.

CLOSING MORAL DISTANCE

A well-documented feature of moral psychology is that our sense of obligation tracks distance. We are far more likely to intervene when harm is immediate, visible, and close at hand than when it is distant, abstract, or statistical.[16] This tension is perhaps best illustrated by Peter Singer's famous thought experiment: most people feel a strong obligation to save a child drowning in a shallow pond, yet feel far less compelled to aid those dying from preventable causes far away.[17] Singer argues that this intuition is mistaken; that distance is morally irrelevant, and our obligations to the nearby and the faraway are equivalent.

Still, most of us still hold some degree of *proximity bias*: as harms become more remote or more numerous, they become harder to grasp and easier to ignore.[18] This is a feature of how human attention and emotion work, and it has clear political consequences. Injustices are in part sustained because their harms are out of view. They are dispersed, bureaucratized, or even deliberately hidden.

If distance dampens moral response, then one important task for political movements is to close that distance: to make injustice perceptible, immediate, and difficult to ignore. This involves bringing visceral realities into public space and attaching them to bodies and stories. The result is forcing confrontation where there might otherwise be avoidance.

Queer resistance offers some of the clearest examples of this strategy. During the AIDS crisis, activists faced both government inaction and widespread public indifference

to mass death. The direct action strategy of ACT UP aimed to close the moral distance that enabled this moral and political neglect. For instance, on October 11, 1988, over a thousand ACT UP activists gathered at the FDA headquarters in Rockville, Maryland. In front of helmeted police guarding the entrances, many lay down in a die-in, holding tombstone cutouts reading "DEAD FROM LACK OF DRUGS" and "VICTIM OF F.D.A. RED TAPE."[19]

ACT UP organized a number of die-ins in the years that followed. They worked by placing the reality of premature death in spaces where it could not be ignored. This transformed the abstraction of "the AIDS crisis" into something immediate and visceral. As Schulman explains, ACT UP's philosophy of political action drew on the history and success of direct action in the civil rights movement, like bus boycotts and lunch-counter sit-ins. "Instead of marching around with signs and listening passively to speakers . . . ACT UP created elaborate images of the obstacles they were fighting and the world they wanted to live in."[20] This, ACT UP participant Dudley Saunders observed, amounts to "invisibility made visible at the center."[21]

By making harm visible, proximate, and embodied, targeted direct action can transform what might otherwise remain an abstract issue into something that demands response.

This lesson is particularly salient in the present. Many of the most reprehensible forms of injustice today are organized in ways that insulate them from public scrutiny. Immigration enforcement is carried out in detention centers far from view. The human costs of war are mediated through screens and statistics. And the denial of lifesaving care for trans people and pregnant people is dispersed across a series of bureaucratic decisions. In each case, distance does political work. It enables inaction by making suffering and premature death easier to disregard.

The history of queer resistance suggests that effective opposition requires thinking carefully about which strategies could bring it closer: make it felt, rather than merely known. Not all forms of protest do this equally well.

There are several contemporary forms of resistance that align with this approach to direct action and can serve as models today. One example is ICE watch initiatives, which monitor, document, and disrupt immigration enforcement activity in real time. Where deportations typically unfold in the shadows, witnessed only by those directly in their path, ICE watch drags enforcement into public view and reveals its violence. Similarly, clinic defense and escort networks at abortion clinics make obstacles to reproductive care publicly visible at the point of delivery. The movement to stop "Cop City" in Atlanta offers another example. The campaign opposed the construction of a massive police training facility in the Weelaunee Forest, a green space on the edge of the city. Activists occupied the forest and made concrete two things that are too often experienced as abstract: the expansion of the carceral state and the destruction of nature, both literally taking place in the same patch of trees.

In each case, these strategies aim to structure attention so that it becomes difficult to perceive injustice as distant or merely theoretical.

FORGET ABOUT INDIVIDUAL IMPACT

A persistent puzzle in thinking about political action concerns the apparent inefficacy of individual contribution: given the scale of structural injustice, what difference will my individual action make? Indexed to the framework here, what difference will it make if I participate in direct action, or show up for mutual aid? Isn't my impact negligible, at best?

The history of queer resistance, and of organizing more broadly, reminds us that this is the wrong question to ask. Individual people do not make a difference, movements do. Just as structural injustice is not reducible to any agent's actions, neither is resisting it within the power of any person. The right question is, then, not *what difference will I make*, but rather, *what can we do?*

We are encouraged, culturally, to think in terms of individual agency and individual impact. This framing produces paralysis in the face of large-scale injustice. Confronting authoritarianism is less daunting when we center how we can do it together. Queer history shows that when people organize, what once seemed impossible becomes achievable. And we can do so in ways that are fun, sexy, and sustain each other in the meantime.

NOTES

1. Charles W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165–83.

2. Meredith Hoffman, "Protesters Debate What Demands, If Any, to Make," New York, *New York Times*, October 17, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/17/nyregion/occupy-wall-street-trying-to-settle-on-demands.html.

3. See, for instance, Frank Ascaso, "The Lure of Elections: From Political Power to Popular Power," Truthout, March 30, 2018, https://truthout.org/articles/the-lure-of-elections-from-political-power-to-popular-power/.

4. Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993*, First edition (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 28.

5. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 28.

6. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 28.

7. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, second edition, revised edition (Seal Press, 2017), 85.

8. Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

9. Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 5.

10. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 207–09.

11. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 5.

12. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 5.

13. Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (Verso, 2020).

14. Stryker, *Transgender History*, 110–11.

15. Spade, *Mutual Aid*, 114.

16. See Stephan Dickert et al., "Mental Imagery, Impact, and Affect: A Mediation Model for Charitable Giving," *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 2 (2016); Hanna Zagefka et al., "Familiarity Breeds Compassion: Knowledge of Disaster Areas and Willingness to Donate Money to Disaster Victims," *Applied Psychology* 62, no. 4 (2013): 640–54; Tehila Kogut et al., "How Far Is the Suffering? The Role of Psychological Distance and Victims'

Identifiability in Donation Decisions," *Judgment and Decision Making* 13, no. 5 (2018): 458–66.

17. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–43.

18. Cass R. Sunstein, "Proximity Bias," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* (2026).

19. "Seize Control of the FDA," ACT UP Oral History Project, accessed June 4, 2026, https://www.actuporalhistory.org/actions/seize-control-of-the-fda.

20. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 26.

21. Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 26.

Revoked and Remade: Recognition, Kinship, and the Occupation of Minneapolis

Cat Saint-Croix
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA TWIN CITIES

When ICE agents retreat, they leave a trail of garbage. Tear gas grenades and their ring-pull pins, sub-lethal munitions and their cartridges, rifle magazines . . . and sometimes even cars.

On the evening of January 14, 2026, federal agents working with the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency shot Julio Cesar Sosa-Celis, a Venezuelan man, in the leg. Agents shot him through the door of his home, which was occupied by four other people at the time. A bullet from the encounter would later be found lodged in the wall of a child's bedroom. During the ensuing standoff with protesters, agents also suffocated the family of Destiny Jackson in their car. Jackson and her family—her husband and their six children—were trying to return home when they were stopped by ICE agents, who deployed tear gas into their vehicle by rolling a grenade under the car. The family's youngest child, a six-month old infant, was resuscitated by CPR after he stopped breathing during the incident. Shortly prior, Jackson and her family had stopped to ask about the protest they encountered on their way home from a basketball game. Federal agents had blocked off several streets in their North Minneapolis neighborhood, setting up multiple confrontations with observers and protesters. Facing an increasingly raucous crowd, the agents eventually retreated, spraying protesters and reporters alike with pepper balls as they fled.

This time, however, the trail of garbage included multiple intact federal vehicles. Amid the tactical gear and planning documents, protesters found a strange stash: small, freshly minted medallions—challenge coins—still in their plastic packaging. In the livestream, onlookers saw a handful of unique coins, most striking among them a crowned skull flanked by vultures.[1] Another challenge coin, reported by Talking Points Memo in April of 2026, garishly repeats the skull motif, this time with a helmet, fiery eyes, and two M16-like assault rifles. "OPERATION METRO SURGE," "ONE NATION," and "UNDER GOD" are embossed beneath the skull, with portraits of President Donald Trump and Border Czar Tom Homan between the words "ONE NATION" and "UNDER GOD."



Fig. 1. Two of the Operation Metro Surge challenge coins. Left, recovered by protesters on January 14, 2026;[2] right, reported by Talking Points Memo.[3]

Challenge coins are a common part of military culture, especially within the United States. They are often issued by military commanders, units, or bases in commemoration of membership, missions, or important events. Their value is not monetary, but social: they are a way of recognizing the recipient as a part of the group. A witness, a participant, a member. These coins are treasure that marks their bearers.

Little information about the Operation Metro Surge coins is public. During the mission, however, it appears that these treasures were earned by abducting residents of Minneapolis from the streets. Given the variety recovered by protesters, it is clear that there was not simply a single Operation Metro Surge coin in January 2026. Rather, there were multiple coins one could earn. Perhaps achievements to be unlocked. Different medals for different goals—like a video game. Pick them off. Kill opposing forces. "Destroy the Flood," to quote both recruitment advertisements for the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency and *Halo*—a video game franchise. "The Flood," to clarify, refers to a parasitic alien invasion. All opposition are enemies. All opposition are NPCs.

"NPC" is short for "non-player character"—any character in a game that is not controlled by a player like you or me. NPCs might be allies, enemies, or neutral, but they are not people. They are not moral subjects. So, you cannot harass an NPC, you cannot mistreat an NPC, you cannot "grief" an NPC. All of these are terms of moral trespass, and you cannot morally trespass against an NPC. And this is how the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency encouraged its agents to view the residents of Minneapolis during Operation Metro Surge.

At least, that's how it felt in the winter of 2026. I have no official confirmation of why ICE chose "Destroy the Flood" as an advertising slogan or what official purpose the array of commemorative coins was meant to serve. Even so, as a resident of Minneapolis, it felt as though we were NPCs in the eyes of agents who descended on our city. Brown neighbors were the Flood. Anyone helping them, defending them, or simply observing what was happening to them was just an NPC. Enemies to be defeated, points to be harvested, achievements to be unlocked.

RECOGNITION: REVOKED AND RECONFIGURED

In *The Politics of Recognition*, Charles Taylor writes about

the deep importance of others' regard in our lives. We are made, in part, by the way others see us. So, too, we are unmade. Challenge coins make this all too literal. When a superior officer hands the crowned skull to his subordinate, it is grim glorification of the subordinate's action. This token recognizes the violence and celebrates its execution at the subordinate's hands. The coin is cold, heavy, and satisfying. The subordinate has something new and rare: a gift from one whose role is to tell him who he is. He is a soldier, and he has earned the gift of that identity through standing steadfast against the instinct to see another human being as a person. The human beings on the other end of that steadfastness have been pepper sprayed, stuffed into the makeshift cells of the Whipple Federal Building, secreted away to the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, deported without hearings, or killed. In the eyes of the subordinate, their personhood was revoked.

Operation Metro Surge was unique. Unlike past massive, militarized mobilizations in American cities, there was no inciting incident. There were no blazing buildings, no mass protests—nothing with which authorities might assuage the unease of everyday people. Instead, it was just suddenly the case that your morning commute might be interrupted by tear gas as masked men in unmarked vehicles stormed a local business on what had, moments prior, been a peaceful city street. These everyday people watched as their neighbors were assaulted and ripped from their vehicles. These everyday people navigated their way around cars left in the middle of the street, sometimes still running. These everyday people began picking up the 3D-printed whistles left at shops and restaurants around town. And then, having done so, they started seeing themselves in the rapid responders they watched on the news and saw in the streets. More importantly, they started seeing themselves in the eyes of ICE agents who looked at those rapid responders as NPCs. They came to see that, in the eyes of the government, they were not moral subjects. They, too, were NPCs.

At the same time, however, these everyday people deliberately chose to put themselves in community with their neighbors. The slogan "we keep us safe" popped up on wheatpastes and telephone pole posters across town,[4] and neighborhood after neighborhood hosted small gatherings. They shared food and drink, discussed the occupation, planned neighborhood watches, and built communication networks. For many, this was the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began that they held close company with their neighbors, breaking the atomicity that so often characterizes modern life.

This atomicity is enabled by what we might call the "statist" view of community: community safety is handled by state-designated authorities who delineate the boundary of your community and protect the people of your community. For those who view community safety this way, there is no need to know or be known by your neighborhood; so long as you are recognized as part of the community to be protected, you are safe. But *only* so long as that, as critics of policing have long pointed out.[5]

Dehumanization and deatomization are connected. For these everyday people, the occupation of Minneapolis during Operation Metro Surge disturbed the recognition assumed under the statist view. Even people who stayed away from the protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 could easily see their assumed recognition crumbling in 2026. One did not need to attend a protest or disobey an officer to be caught in a cloud of tear gas. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time was enough. And there were a lot of wrong places and wrong times. Asking a question was enough. Delivering food to a family was enough. Observing the actions of government officials was enough. It was easy to become an NPC. But, as Charles Taylor writes, recognition is an essential human need. As residents of Minneapolis were dehumanized by agents of their government, they found new recognition, new personhood among their neighbors. Minneapolis became a less atomized city as the weeks wore on, with more and more people finding their way to help. In doing so, the recognition in which they saw themselves was simple and humble: neighbor.

I think this experience has been profound for many. Traumatic, but also profound. Those everyday people who found themselves suddenly cut off from personhood in the eyes of authorities they trusted came to find themselves remade and renewed in community with the people they chose. In this way, many of these "everyday people" experienced a dynamic not altogether dissimilar to that of chosen family.

CHOSEN FAMILY AND QUEER KINSHIP

Chosen family, those we hold as dear as kin, though they do not fit the dominant, blood-bound paradigm of kinship, has a special place in queer culture.[6] The scouring that sometimes follows coming out to one's family of origin makes chosen family a necessary refuge. Even for those who are not rejected by their families of origin, the refuge of chosen family— finding a place of deep and lasting love among people who share an understanding of the anxieties, joys, and lifeways of queerness—can be lifesaving.

Coming to see these relationships as kin relationships requires the rejection of a conception of kinship that, like the conception of community discussed above, is entwined with the overwhelming power of the state. This is the conception of kinship under which it is laws, marriage certificates, medical records, and judges' signatures that determine our family, rather than the bonds these artifacts purport to record. Kinship, under this statist conception, often refuses to recognize queer kin, but nevertheless governs who may take up the most intimate privileges of our lives—making love with us, picking up our children, visiting us in the hospital, disposing of our affairs.[7] The omnipresence and inevitability of these effects lends the statist conception an air of verisimilitude and authority that reifies the place of the state in defining kin. (This is one of the many reasons that queer activists and philosophers often reject assimilation; advocating for gay marriage is advocating that the state be the issuer of *licenses* to the most intimate and central relationships of our lives.[8]) Here, too, a parallel with the statist conception of community: the notion that community is delineated and protected

by the state, the inevitability of police forces, the default reliance on police for conflict resolution, the "curation" of community through jails and prisons, and so forth, these serve to solidify the place of the state—rather than us—as that which defines community.

Finding chosen family is a transformative experience. Through it, we become the authors of our own understanding of family and identity; and this remaking opens us to possibility and creative potential within our lives. This is because kinship and family are among the first and most fundamental concepts we acquire, and we learn to treat them as givens of not just history and law, but biology and god. So, if we can remake these most fundamental concepts, and thereby remake ourselves, what else can we transform? I think enduring Operation Metro Surge was similarly transformative for many of those "everyday people" in Minneapolis.

The shared dynamic of these experiences is striking: revocation, transformation, and realignment. Residents of Minneapolis, citizens and non-citizens alike, experienced a revocation of recognition. In our case, it was recognition as persons—as moral subjects. Even if, as one might reasonably contend, these were *merely* assumed forms of recognition for many of us, belief in them nevertheless served as part of the cognitive furniture on which many rested their identities. (Of course, for many non-citizens and their families, the recognition of personhood was always precarious and its revocation always a possibility.[9]) Queerness often involves similar revocation. The queer person coming out to their family fears (and often finds) the assumed reality and permanence of natal kinship being revoked by those kin. These revocations of recognition uproot the source of our identities and, in their place, we—in both cases—must either find some way to appear worthy of recognition to those revoking it or find new anchors of identity. Return to the closet; ignore the masked men. Or find someone who will hold you as you are, as you wish to be, and as you are becoming.

In order to change whose recognition matters to us, however, we need to reconfigure how we understand who we are. In the case of queer identity, we need to remake our understanding of what kinship is and whose judgment determines family. In the case of community, it is understanding of what community is and does. Revocation matters in both cases because it is a catalyst for the interrogation of these received statist views. That interrogation, in turn, allows the transformation of our concepts. Statist kin becomes chosen family, statist community becomes neighborhood, becomes "we keep us safe." In both, we find realignment with the disempowered. Both are instances of recognizing hegemony and choosing the marginalized.

There is, of course, a disanalogy in all of this. The transformation that occurs in queer kinship exists largely within what Axel Honneth would distinguish as the sphere of intimate relationships[10]—family, friends, and the like—while the transformation I've recounted here involves shifting from the sphere of legality and rights to that of solidarity. There are many dimensions to this difference, but a particularly important one concerns the power relations in place. There is no doubt that many people we love have great psychological, emotional, financial, and legal power over us—power in the intimate sphere is not disconnected from the legal sphere. Even so, the apparatus of the state dramatically outstrips the power of kin relationships to negatively impact our lives. So, one might worry, individuals' willingness to nurture a transformed identity that separates them from the state may be limited. One can build a new family, but it is another task entirely to build a new state. Yet, this is not the task at hand. In both cases, the task is a conceptual one; it is about changing how one views family and community in ways that reverberate through how we understand ourselves and change the relationships within which we rest our identities.

One might also question the breadth of this sort of change. Many people have long since set aside the statist view of community, if they ever held it (even implicitly) to begin with—especially people of color long victimized by the agents of the state and especially in Minneapolis, where community trust in policing is low. Nevertheless, this is a transformation I have seen, and I think it is one that matters. Operation Metro Surge has waned, but neighborhood patrols have become walking groups, weekly grocery deliveries at the church have become Sunday mass, and so on. As we find chosen family, we reorient our lives around them; so, too, with neighborhood and community. This is the sort of realignment that allows us to continually reaffirm the conceptual transformation and reconstruct our identities.

The parallel between these cases suggests that the structure of identity reconstruction—revocation, transformation, and realignment—is not specific to any particular sphere of our lives. It occurs wherever we stake our sense of self in relations that prove contingent upon being someone we aren't. Rejection of one's identity, in fear or fact, runs deep. But it is a place where we have agency, and the resulting transformation can run just as deep. My hope is that this one will. We shall see.

NOTES

1. Unicorn Riot, "After ICE Agent Shoots Man."
2. Unicorn Riot, "After ICE Agent Shoots Man."
3. Walker, "Staff at Minnesota Deportation Hub."
4. Norris, *We Keep Us Safe*.
5. Emerick and Yap, *Not Giving Up on People*.
6. Weston, *Families We Choose*.
7. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 2000.
8. Card, "Against Marriage and Motherhood"; Caserio et al., "The Antisocial Thesis."
9. De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability."
10. Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*.

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Play and Playfulness as Queer Resistance: The Return of Trike Dyke

C. R. Muller
MARIST COLLEGE

As I silently pedaled a child-sized red tricycle into the lights and across the stage of CB's 313 Gallery, wearing many layers of variously gendered clothing and a black cat puppet named Pussy on one hand, and carrying a bag of phallic and vulvic foods, I realized how little I knew about what I was going to do in the next fifteen minutes. Having never rehearsed the show, I didn't even know how long it would take to ride the tiny trike from backstage, but the audience was supportive, laughing along with my clownish plight as I slowly struggled forward to start the show. My experience of performing this show, along with the work of Maria Lugones, C. Thi Nguyen, and Talia Mae Bettcher, shows that play and playfulness can aid in queer identity exploration, the development of new forms of agency, and the co-creation of resistant subcommunities. How can we chart a more playful path forward?

Lugones famously develops her thoughts about playfulness within her discussion of "world"-traveling and loving perception. Her focus is on the world-traveling that women of color in the US often do: she argues that playfulness can offer an antidote to the "failure of love" from White/Anglo women and to the indifference that leaves her feeling stranded in the Anglo "world."[1] While I lack the space to explore racial identity here, I see many parallels between Lugones's description and the feeling of isolation that comes from exploring a gender identity that diverges from the dominant world's constructions, and I see playfulness likewise, as a powerful antidote for the queer community. As Lugones understands it, to adopt a playful attitude is to be willing to make a fool of oneself, "not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight."[2] For her, playfulness involves an acknowledgement of one's limitations and openness to being corrected, not taking oneself too seriously, and remaining flexible and open to ambiguity. It is also by its nature "loving," providing a means of bridging divides and building solidarity. As I explore further below, this openness and lack of seriousness creates space to explore one's identity and support others' explorations, without taking norms as sacred.

While I focus primarily on the work of Lugones, Nguyen's *Games: The Art of Agency* is also useful in suggesting that games allow us to "take on a new agency, an agency designed by someone else."[3] As Nguyen puts it, "Games can help build our inventory of *ways of being practical*. And such an inventory . . . can support our freedom and autonomy," understood as "more options to plan about how I will cope with the world."[4] Nguyen builds off Bernard Suits's understanding of game-play as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" and develops an analysis of "striving play," in which we adopt winning as a temporary goal "for the sake of the struggle."[5,6] In other words, we "impose restrictions on [our]selves in the short-term as part of the long-term project of developing more freedom and autonomy," and different restrictions lead us to cultivate different abilities, traits, and virtues, which we can then draw on outside the game.[7] Thus, games allow us to develop and practice specific ways of being, such as new queer identities or resistance to oppression, which we can then draw on outside the game.

One might find the views of Lugones and Nguyen too disparate to be considered together: Lugones emphasizes that in playful activity, "[w]e may not have rules, and when we do have rules, *there are no rules that are to us sacred*," while Nguyen worries that "too much freedom, in the strictly negative sense, may simply lead to a repetition of one's own ruts and habits."[8,9] Lugones also disavows "agonistic" games, where the focus is on "winning, losing, battling," while Nguyen focuses on games in which one strives to win.[10] Nonetheless, I find it fruitful to consider the views together in the form of playful play, combining the openness and ambiguity of Lugones with the agency-building of Nguyen, along the same lines as Michael Ridge, who argues that playful play enhances "agential fluidity," imagination, and being open to opportunities.[11] As I see it, agential fluidity is essential for queer identity exploration, as one can fluidly try out different identities and maintain, as Lugones says, "openness to surprise."[12] I believe people are often held back from discovering or exploring queer identities due to fear, and the possibility of playing and having fun while exploring one's identity can alleviate that, as *Trike Dyke: Episode 1* helps illustrate.[13]

Trike Dyke was born in the early 2000s, when I was invited to perform in Kate Brehm's puppet slam called "Slutty Puppets and Friends."[14] As I conceived it, *Trike Dyke: Episode 1* was a live-action comic strip in which the titular character fights

restrictive norms and explores her identity with the help of her bright red tricycle and, of course, Pussy. After pedaling onto the stage, I performed a lengthy striptease of many layers of clothing through different gender presentations, ending in a tie, leotard, and red tights, while singing the *Trike Dyke* theme song *a cappella*: "Trike Dyke! You're my superhero! Trike Dyke! From gender ground zero. Trike Dyke! We have no need to fear, it's Trike Dyke!"[15] Those moments were the only parts of the show I had planned in any detail. The rest of the show was composed of stylized freeze-frames, imitating comic book panels, with improvisation between each. In *Trike Dyke: Episode 1*, I told Trike Dyke's origin story, involving a large number of pickles and other phallic foods being thrown at the audience, followed by the delightful discovery of cream pie. Because I improvised nearly the whole show, it relied on openness and interactivity that in turn reinforced a feeling of community. Within this space, I playfully explored the "dyke" label and the various meanings it held for me: sexy, aggressive, angry, joyful, ridiculous, masculine, feminine, and so on.

Exploring my sexuality and gender identity in community with the "Slutty Puppets and Friends" audience was notably *fun*, an aspect of playfulness that I believe underlies Lugones's central example of crashing stones, although she doesn't use the term.[16] Central to this fun was a feeling of safety. As Michael Ridge argues, fun requires three characteristic inputs, among them "a perception that one's environment is safe and a general sense of satiety/satisfaction" and "a lack of anxiety."[17] This requirement parallels Lugones's observation that she is only playful in worlds where she feels "at ease."[18] In turn, fun "functions to motivate experimental behavior in safe environments" and "broadens our perspective."[19] The "Slutty Puppets" event provided a safe context for several reasons: the audience was supportive and somewhat drunk, the physical layout of CB's 313 Gallery made it easy to interact with the audience, because the stage was low and the audience was seated cabaret-style, and Brehm, the emcee for the event, made it clear that this was a welcoming environment for experimentation. By producing this context, Brehm gave the performers freedom to explore and set expectations for the audience's appreciation and collaboration with the performers.

To broaden this discussion, I think discovering one's queer identity in general often requires play and playfulness. While some queer folks know their identity from a young age without any playful experimentation, it seems common to practice different forms of agency playfully before self-labeling.[20] If we insist that we should only engage with gender seriously and intuit our own gender identities through solemn self-reflection or innate self-knowledge, many of us might never have found our queer identities. One explanation for this need for playfulness is that it allows us to engage imaginatively with the possibility of changing our identity. In some cases, a change of gender is a transformative experience, as L.A. Paul describes, involving both epistemic and personal transformation and thus prohibiting knowledge of what life will be like after the change.[21] While Paul asserts that we cannot even *imagine* transformative experiences, several philosophers have defended our ability to imagine them, and I agree that imagining is possible, even if we lack knowledge.[22]

After the success of *Trike Dyke: Episode 1*, I began writing *Trike Dyke: Episode 2*, which I was invited to perform as part of Abarriss Culjack's *Gone Show*. In this episode, Trike Dyke's goal was to explore the butch/femme dichotomy and express her dissatisfaction with both options. The *Gone Show*, based on *The Gong Show* from late '70s television, was a series of performances that the audience could decide to gong off the stage, creating an antagonistic relationship between audience and performer. Additionally, the physical space impeded community building, as the stage was higher, bright lights made it difficult to see the audience, and they were seated behind long tables, and Culjack as emcee did little to encourage audience to be supportive. Like the first show, I had only a loosely planned outline, but it was much harder to co-create the show with the audience, and the show failed as a result. I was eventually gonged off the stage, which was humiliating, but most relevantly, it did not feel playful or fun, which in turn reduced my ability to explore my identity and to co-create a community where such exploration felt safe.[23]

One point that emerges from the contrast between *Episode 1* and *Episode 2* is that play and playfulness help us co-create and reinforce resistant subcommunities. You have to show up and engage with your subcommunities for them to persist, and doing so playfully allows for continued flexibility and greater solidarity across slightly different "worlds." On that note, playfulness, and the open-mindedness it helps cultivate, not only pushes back against rigid expectations and oppressive forces in the dominant society but also within one's subcommunity: some of the most important support I've received in my own exploration of gender has been from queer folks who let me know that it's OK to play around with gender identity and that I don't have to conform to a certain expectation to identify as nonbinary or queer.[24] Playfulness also helps sustain these communities by creating joy. As Bettcher discusses in a recent interview for this journal, she is returning to creative work as a way of "returning to joy just to keep myself going and perhaps keep others going through these times."[25]

So far, much of this discussion has been fairly broad, but the playfulness of *Trike Dyke* also illuminates more specific concerns within the topic of queer identity formation, such as the concept of playful self-labeling developed by Elizabeth Camp and Carolina Flores. Camp and Flores similarly draw on Lugones and focus on playfulness, describing it as a "higher-order attitude for engaging flexibly and malleably with whatever worlds or identities one encounters."[26] They understand playful self-labeling as follows:

- open-minded, because the self-labeler is "prepared to discover lurking but heretofore unknown or neglected traits within themselves"
- open-ended, inviting "creative performance . . . across contexts," and
- humble, embracing "uncertainty and a lack of sovereignty in the application of any given label."[27]

All of these ideas map closely onto my experience performing as Trike Dyke, where the playful uncertainty of improvising with that identity allowed me to engage in creative performance and discover lurking traits within myself. I could thus experiment with the label "dyke" and what it meant or could mean for me, rather than taking it to have a rigid, sovereign definition.

However, being Trike Dyke also involved *commitment*, and it is here that my intuitions differ from those of Camp and Flores. As examples of "playful labeling," they list (i) nonliteral and ironic, e.g., "my gender is Lumiere"; (ii) metaphorical; and (iii) multiple, fine-grained labels.[28] As Camp and Flores put it, irony engages in "simultaneously acknowledging and distancing oneself from the applicability of the label" and metaphor involves "seeing one thing *as* or through the frame of another" while being aware of the ways that some features of the metaphor fail to fit.[29] While these descriptions emphasize a lack of rigidity in labels, and the examples feel *somewhat* playful, my own understanding of playfulness is that it requires commitment, at least temporarily. In games, for instance, if someone plays ironically or treats the game as a metaphor, it ruins the game by disrupting the players' absorption.[30] Likewise, Trike Dyke needed my full commitment for the performance to work. Also, I find being open to making a fool of oneself to be central to Lugones's view, yet irony and metaphor feel like ways of *protecting* oneself from being a fool. While I find the third option of multiple fine-grained labels like "glitterslut" more playful, because the labels themselves feel fun and silly, Camp and Flores conclude that the narrow labels suggest "that can't be *all* you really are," which also seems distancing.[31] Instead, I think the more playful choice is to embrace the glitterslut label wholeheartedly.

While distancing feels unplayful to me within a playful context, one could see irony, metaphor, and multiple fine-grained definitions as ways of maintaining *some* amount of playfulness within the dominant, oppressive society. For more deeply playful self-labeling to be possible, one needs to be in a safe context where one feels at ease and can commit to labels more fully, while maintaining a meta-awareness that labels are flexible and that we can surprise ourselves and invent new meanings. Distancing might also contribute to playfulness at the meta-level, as Camp and Flores suggest by calling playfulness a "higher-order attitude."[32] In other words, creating distance between the playful context and the real world could support exploration within the playful context. Many underworld subcommunities feel similar to game spaces, in which you can be whoever you want to be, even if you might not pass as that identity outside the subcommunity. As an unnamed speaker asserts about ball culture in *Paris Is Burning*, "Whatever you want to be, you be. . . . You can become anything and do anything right here, right now, and it won't be questioned."[33] There is thus a commitment to the label within that context, combined with a recognition that one is in a different world where one can explore, be surprised, and make a fool of oneself. In *Trike Dyke: Episode 1*, while I fully committed to the character within the context of the show, I also maintained a playful attitude at the meta-level toward both the performance and rigid gender and sexuality labels.

Thinking about play and playfulness as importantly involving *commitment* to labels within a playful context can explain how we create "multiple worlds of sense," where "terms such as 'woman' have different, resistant meanings; worlds in which there exist different, resistant gender practices," as Talia Mae Bettcher describes.[34] For Bettcher, the practices and meanings lead to ontological pluralism: one *is* a man in one world and *is not* in another (or is constituted as a man in one world but not another).[35] This pluralism is similar to games in which one *is* the character in the game world while one *is not* outside that world, and many players feel that their "second life" is continuous with their "real life."[36] My experience of *Trike Dyke* was similar: while her lesbian identity was more brash and in-your-face than my own at the time, and thus these identities existed in their own separate worlds, they were nonetheless both versions of me, or ways of experiencing how I could be.

Nonetheless, by drawing on game and performance spaces, I am perilously close to Bettcher's concern that trans folk are often seen as mere "make-believers" engaging in "make-believe, pretending, or playing dress up."[37] I worry that I might be trivializing queer identities by seeing them as often originating in a playful context and using a performance setting like *Trike Dyke* to illustrate the point. As Bettcher notes, it isn't enough to proclaim one's political stance, because even allies are often merely "playing along" with trans folks rather than taking their identity seriously.[38] However, I want to push against the idea that exploring one's identity in a playful context like games or theater undermines its real-world value. Instead, engaging in play can protect the person engaging in identity exploration from both external criticism and their own self-critique, allowing for more freedom, and then the new identity and discoveries about who they are become available for the person to draw on in real life. Just as new forms of agency developed in a game are *real* forms of agency, on Nguyen's account, a queer identity discovered and fostered in a playful context can be a *real* identity, not make-believe. Of course, in keeping with the idea of fluidity and openness encouraged by playfulness, one might *not* maintain that identity outside the game or for all time, but that's fine! The fact that some people might only feel comfortable adopting a queer identity within a playful context doesn't make it less real for those who adopt it outside of that context.

One might also worry that playfulness cannot contribute to queer resistance, if we can be fully playful only *after* we feel safe and supported. The answer, to my mind, is a two-step process: first, we need bold playfulness pioneers, such as Brehm of "Slutty Puppets and Friends," who create the playful context. Such pioneers might not experience as deep a feeling of playfulness, as they bear more responsibility, have to coordinate logistical details, and may not yet have the safety of a supportive subculture. However, even these pioneers must be playful to some extent, as in Brehm's emcee style, to create a community where it feels safe to play.[39] Once the context is created, playfulness contributes to the community's ongoing co-creation, as one can see in the improvisation and interaction of *Trike Dyke: Episode 1*, which created a momentary community with the audience.

A final worry is that playfulness is too lighthearted for the current political climate, in which the government is actively trying to erase trans people. "Be playful" might seem at best an inadequate response and at worst a distraction from very real problems. In reply, I believe playful play is not only essential for identity exploration and the co-creation of resistant subcommunities, as I've argued—it can also help us imagine alternate realities, provide a respite from oppression, and give us a way to call systems of power into question that is both conspicuous and, in some cases, harder to penalize. As the dominant society rolls steadily toward fascism and trans erasure, anything we can do to derail it, even slightly, is worth doing, especially if we can do so with our bodies and spirits intact.

As genderqueer, "gay-leaning demisexual" games designer Dietrich Squinkifer suggests, "Especially now, in the current political climate, holding onto things that make you happy is more important than ever. . . . It goes back to this idea of joyful resistance."[40] So, am I suggesting that you should go create a goofy, improvisational theater performance that lets you engage playfully with your identity, then perform it in a moment of co-creation with a group of supportive friends and strangers? No, but I'm not telling you *not* to!

NOTES

1. Lugones, "Playfulness," 7–8.

2. Lugones, "Playfulness," 17.

3. Nguyen, *Games*, 74.

4. Nguyen, *Games*, 83–84; emphasis in original.

5. Suits, *Grasshopper*, 43; as cited in Nguyen, *Games*, 5.

6. Nguyen, *Games*, 8.

7. Nguyen, *Games*, 96.

8. Lugones, "Playfulness," 16; emphasis in original.

9. Nguyen, *Games*, 96.

10. Lugones, "Playfulness," 15. To my mind, it's odd that she sees this emphasis in Huizinga, whose discussion of the "play element in culture" seems much broader than her description.

11. Ridge, "Fun and (Striving) Games," 412.

12. Lugones, "Playfulness," 16.

13. Although Nguyen argues against treating both games and theater as play in the model of Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, I believe the two overlap considerably, especially games and interactive clown performances. The latter has many features Nguyen identifies as central for fostering agency: arbitrary obstacles, new "ways of being practical," and a type of striving toward temporary goals, and thus it can still foster agential development. However, I do not argue here that all games are performances or any other more general claim.

14. At the time of this show, I identified as a lesbian, and I now identify as bisexual, nonbinary, and queer. For full disclosure, I enjoy considerable hetero- and cis- privilege, because I'm married to a cisgender man and often pass as cisgender. While I no longer identify as a lesbian, *Trike Dyke* provides a fun example of the value of playfulness, and it's a part of my past that I hold dear. Thanks to Caro Flores for the encouragement to write a paper on it.

15. The idea for a striptease that starts with too many clothes on was borrowed from my friend Olivia Robinson's performance piece "Snowball," which began in a giant snowball costume.

16. She combines the ideas of fun and playfulness at only one point, when she discusses having the "fun constructed out of her" in worlds where she is not playful. Lugones, "Playfulness," 15.

17. Ridge, "Fun and (Striving) Games," 408.

18. Lugones, "Playfulness," 9.

19. Ridge, "Fun and (Striving) Games," 408–09.

20. Here I draw on personal experience experimenting with my gender presentation and identification, Jeffrey Marsh's narrative of self-discovery in their talk at Marist, Bettcher's description of trying on her mom's dress for Halloween at a book talk on *Beyond Personhood* at the APA, and the reports of various friends and acquaintances.

21. Paul, *Transformative Experiences*, 11–12.

22. See, for example, Cath, "Transformative Experiences and the Equivocation Objection"; Daoust, "Transformative Experiences, Rational Decisions and Shark Attacks"; and Ismael, "Experience, Transformation, and Imagination."

23. Although *Trike Dyke* was never performed after *Episode Two*, I discovered while writing this paper that two more "scripts" exist: *Trike Dyke: Episode Three, Batting for the Wrong Team* and *Trike Dyke: Episode Four, Trike Dyke for President*. Please reach out if you'd like to bring Trike Dyke back to life!

24. Shout out especially to Emma G. Frederick and Ray Briggs. I also credit George and Briggs, *What Even Is Gender?* for freeing me from many of those rigid norms.

25. Bettcher, "'What Ever Happened to Joy?'" 3.

26. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1120.

27. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1120–21.

28. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1122–23.

29. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1123.

30. See Nguyen, *Games*, 10–11, for a similar point.

31. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1123.

32. Camp and Flores, "Playing with Labels," 1120.

33. Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*, 6:40. I should note, though, that balls are both playful and quite serious. As Dorian Corey explains at 31:13, "They call them competitions but believe me they're wars. And they often do lead to fights."

34. Bettcher, "Trapped in the Wrong Theory," 403. The multiplicity of meanings is also a central topic in *Beyond Personhood*; see especially 61–75.

35. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 64.

36. For a helpful exploration of this phenomenon and a narrative account that can explain how both identities are real, see Schechtman, "The Story of My (Second) Life."

37. Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers," 50.

38. Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood*, 20.

39. Playfulness pioneers are similar to awesome people in Nick Riggle's *On Being Awesome*. I think there are also important differences, but I lack the space to develop that point further here.

40. Squinkifer, "Nonbinary Characters, Asexuality, and Game Design as Joyful Resistance," 37. Squinkifer is the creator of Trans Game Zine, a website that offers many playful trans games. Check it out at transgamezine.org.

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Toward a Queer Coalition for Climate and Environmental Justice

Maëlle Roussel
UNIVERSITÉ PARIS NANTERRE

Conservatives often pit queer people against nature. However, such an opposition is not self-evident. As figures like Greta Gaard have pointed out, LGBTQ+ people, along with people of color and the poor, have been exploited just as nature has. This essay aims to contribute to queer environmentalism, which acknowledges that environmental issues make marginalized communities such as LGBTQ people even more vulnerable. In doing so, it seeks to address this vulnerability and marginalization through strategies of alliance and coalition between queer and environmental struggles.

I will first demonstrate the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in the context of environmental and climate change. A possible response, in a second step, would be to form alliances or coalitions for environmental and climate justice. Consequently, in a third step, what specifically can queer activism contribute to environmental activism? I am going to highlight how traditions of resistance and resilience among queer communities can help support and redefine justice for all.

I. WHY INTERSECT QUEER MOVEMENTS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE?

LGBTQ+ people are particularly vulnerable to environmental and climate change (I will distinguish between these "environmental" and "climate" terms, following Pierre Charbonnier in *Coalition Carbone*, in that a political climate policy aimed at decarbonizing the economy can be environmentally costly). This stems from their relatively precarious and marginalized status, both from a socioeconomic perspective and in systemic terms. Access to employment, housing, and healthcare is already more difficult for LGBTQ+ people, regardless of environmental and climate issues. And they are disproportionately affected by disasters, not only because their homes are destroyed, but also because the relief provided can be both homophobic and transphobic, or discriminatory by failing to account for the specific needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. Governments, following neoliberal logic of gradual state disengagement, are increasingly relying on nongovernmental organizations to assist survivors of floods and other disasters. However, such organizations may be religious and, as a result, more prone to LGBTQ+-phobia, as Jeff L. Feng and David King point out: consider evangelist organizations who are "placing blame for disaster on LGBTQ people as God's punishment for sins,"[1] as it happened after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

These combined inequalities and forms of discrimination mean that LGBTQ+ people tend to be more vulnerable than cisgender and heterosexual people. This does not mean that these vulnerabilities should be treated as absolute, but they must be considered alongside other types of vulnerabilities related to gender, class, and race within an intersectional framework. Indeed, as the organization Queers4Climate points out, LGBTQ+ people of color are the first to face natural disasters. Therefore, the analysis of environmental injustices must be conducted through the lens of race, class, and gender, as well as sexuality.

Furthermore, LGBTQ+ individuals are often overlooked or marginalized in policies aimed at combating climate change. This is demonstrated in particular by Leo Goldsmith, Vanessa Raditz, and Michael Méndez,[2] who analyze the Robert T. Stafford Emergency Management and Disaster Assistance Act, signed in November 1988. While intended to be nondiscriminatory, the Act does not specify the assistance that must be provided to LGBTQ+ communities in particular. This assistance would provide home or shelters after catastrophes, for instance; many homeless people are indeed LGBTQ+, and are thus particularly vulnerable. As the Queers X Climate collective points out, "there have not been significant efforts to direct the attention of LGBT+ members toward environmental consciousness, and their voices are usually missing during key climate negotiations and debates."[3] The same is true of environmental protection policies, where heteronormative biases are at work in legislation aimed at creating nature reserves. Not only have these practices harmed indigenous peoples (Native Americans or Aboriginal peoples) in order to create the myth of pristine wilderness, but these are also spaces that reinforce gender norms, with masculinity expressed particularly through activities like hunting or hiking, as well as heterocentric norms in that rural areas are perceived as natural and thus "free from queer identities,"[4] in contrast to cities.

Finally, LGBTQ+ people often become scapegoats for these climate and environmental upheavals and face violence in post-disaster situations. There is also a risk that government policies will become more restrictive in response to environmental and climate change, potentially leading to

setbacks for LGBTQ+ rights. This is what Queers X Climate highlights: everything that has been made possible so far "could be erased within barely a decade by exacerbating resource scarcity and social unrest."[5]

II. HOW SHOULD WE WORK TOGETHER? AN ALLIANCE OR A COALITION

To address complex issues that intersect race, class, gender, sexuality, and the environment, we need more than to aggregate different interests. We need coalition politics. I define coalitions as a strategic formation between distinct movements that cooperate toward a common goal, without erasing their differences. A coalition could be described as an "assemblage"—an assembly—of several struggles (feminist and antimilitarist movements, for example). Taking the environment as a starting point may be precisely the way to find common ground among interests that may appear divergent at first glance, and to bring to light what connects them. Without suggesting that there is a single root cause of all forms of oppression or that all forms of oppression stem from a prior one, we are all affected by the destruction of the environment, biodiversity, and the climate. This can, therefore, serve as a stepping stone for a coalition.

Nevertheless, the alliance or coalition between LGBTQ+ activism and environmental activism is by no means a given, as Cy Lecerf Maulpoix exemplarily demonstrates in *Écologies déviantes. Voyage en terres queers*. Indeed, he explains that when a manifesto calling for such an alliance was launched in 2015, criticism emerged from both sides: environmentalists worried about an excessive focus on minority issues, while some queer activists seemed to think that "environmentalism is the struggle of those who have time, those who have no other struggles to defend, no other oppressions to resist."[6] Given this, how can we ensure a fruitful convergence between these two forms of activism?

This is a curiously neglected issue in theories of coalition or alliance. For instance, in the central work *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler makes no mention of a possible intersection with environmental struggles, even though such an intersection already existed—think, for example, of the Queers for the Climate or Out for Sustainability initiatives. This omission reinforces the prejudice that LGBTQ+ struggles are disconnected from or unconcerned with environmental and climate issues. Yet, taking these issues into account could actually enrich Butler's theory of precariousness by highlighting that we are all vulnerable—albeit to varying degrees—to environmental disasters and climate change, and must therefore find a way to unite in the face of these challenges. There is thus a genuine, shared interest here, a common ground on which to forge new alliances.

So how can we build an environmental coalition or alliance that takes LGBTQ+ issues and concerns into account? Attempts to form alliances or coalitions must not result in a homogenization that erases the specific issues central to LGBTQ+ struggles. In fact, the environmental struggle would be enriched by drawing inspiration from queer struggles, both in their forms of resistance and in their resilience.

An alliance with environmental and ecological struggles can be "an opportunity for creative resistance."[7] What does this queer and ecological activism look like? As Cy Lecerf Maulpoix shows, it creates a powerful image through its staging—from provocative slogans inherited from the struggles against AIDS to music, dance, and costumes designed to make a bold statement. Admittedly, this carries the risk of falling into a race for representation and visibility and remaining superficial. However, this does not mean that these strategies are necessarily superficial. They can enrich the repertoire of militant, disruptive, and destabilizing actions, "in a particularly violent repressive context."[8] This implies that these coalitions and alliances must question their own use—or non-use—of violence. Here, a measured approach may be necessary, without directly condemning all forms of violence or sanctifying it. The possibility of violence must also be analyzed through the lens of each activist's vulnerabilities and privileges; some will have precisely the kind of agency that others lack—due to structural domination, in terms of race or class, for example.

Forming an alliance means acknowledging that "our struggles are connected, and our survival depends on our solidarity," as stated by the Netherlands-based organization Queers4Climate. Many view this coalition or alliance as intersectional—that is, deeply connected to antiracist, decolonial, anticapitalist, and antipatriarchal issues. The alliance or coalition can therefore be a way to fight against femonationalism (a term coined by Sara R. Farris that describes the exploitation of women's rights for nationalist or conservative purposes), homonationalism (a concept developed by Jasbir K. Puar to describe how LGBTQ+ rights discourse is co-opted by these same nationalist or conservative streams), or what Jeff L. Feng has identified as a form of ecohomonormativity, i.e., the fact that "queer & trans climate organizers align with the state by taking neoliberal, rights-based LGBTQ frames to the climate movement."[9] The goal is to ensure that these struggles are not co-opted to justify military actions or hostility toward migrants or states of the global South, or to distract from the way other groups are deprived of fundamental rights. Advocating for LGBTQ+ or women's rights should not mean alienating others' rights. Alliances and coalitions, because they allow for the consideration of diversity (of class, race, culture, language, or religion) and a shared precarity, take into account this risk.

III. WHAT CAN QUEER ACTIVISM CONTRIBUTE TO ENVIRONMENTAL STRUGGLES?

The LGBTQ+ community has both a long tradition of resistance against intersecting forms of oppression and a remarkable resilience in the face of the tragedies it has endured—whether we think of the AIDS epidemic or the attacks and violence that are, unfortunately, all too common. A parallel between government inaction regarding AIDS and the environmental and climate crisis was notably drawn by the organization Queers for Climate in a statement for the People's Climate March in 2014,

with the aim of encouraging LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations to join this fight. Friends of the Earth Scotland underlined the fact that LGBTQ+ communities have learned how to survive, when they explained in 2020 "Why Climate Change Is an LGBTQ+ Issue" and how queer people can help build environmental or climate coalitions with this experience of advocating and mobilize themselves for their rights. These practices can be particularly valuable to ecological resistance movements. As a result, groups such as Out for Sustainability in the United States are working to build this resilience, through advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights, fundraising, and building a community.

Defining environmental justice from an LGBTQ+ perspective would be relevant not only to this group but to everyone. As Feng highlights, queer environmental justice builds upon pre-existing analyses—particularly, anticapitalist and antiracist ones—and seeks to expand this framework of justice. By making these connections between different structural injustices, activists highlight that "climate change is an intersectional issue."[10] This could lead to strengthening coalition or alliance strategies, in that the environmental struggle must be complemented by a struggle against capitalism, structural racism, and sexism, as well as against LGBTQ+-phobia.

Finally, perhaps in a more theoretical sense (though with practical implications), queer activism and theory can help us reflect on the notion of "nature" and its definition as a normative concept. This is one of the central concerns of queer ecology, which seeks to reconcile queer theory and ecology by highlighting the biophobia inherent in the former and questioning the central concept of nature in the latter, which can be seen an oppressive tool.

A concept developed, notably, by David Bell, is that of "queernaturecultures" (see, for example, Chapter 4 of *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*), which seeks to highlight the arbitrary and socially produced nature of the nature/culture distinction at the intersection of gender and sexuality. This queer ecology seeks to rethink the concept of nature and our relationship to it beyond two paradigms: that of nature as the Other, and that of nature as something to be exploited.

Important works such as those by Catriona Sandilands or Greta Gaard have thus drawn parallels between dualisms such as "white/non-white," "heterosexual/queer," "male/female," and "culture/nature"—oppressive frameworks to be deconstructed—but have also linked processes of colonization to the development of homophobia.[11] She highlights systems of oppression or domination such as colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and exploitation of nature are connected.

The aim is not only to transform ecological or environmental theories, but also queer theory—and to do so in a significant way. As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson notably write in the introduction to *Queer Ecologies. Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, it is not merely a matter of making ecology more queer, but also of making queer theory more ecological: "The extension of queer into ecology is not, then, simply a question of making nature more welcoming to gay inhabitation; it is also an invitation to open queer theory to ecological possibilities."[12] Therefore, reconceiving allows us to abrogate the false opposition between queer activism and environmentalism activism, and to overcome debates around the naturality or antinaturality of LGBTQ+ identities, if, at the end, nature and culture are profoundly intertwined.

A coalition between LGBTQ+ and environmentalist activism is not only a strategic opportunity, but also politically transformative. LGBTQ+ people are not only more vulnerable to environmental and climate risks, but are also marginalized within environmental policies. To address this, I proposed the model of coalition and alliance as a framework for devising a collective response to the environmental and climate crisis, drawing inspiration from past LGBTQ+ struggles, particularly against LGBTQ+-phobic violence and AIDS, and the redefinition of nature by queer studies. Both theoretically and practically, queer activism has much to contribute to ecological struggles.

NOTES

1. King, "Hearing Minority Voices," 13; see also Feng, "Framing Queer Climate Justice."
2. Goldsmith, Raditz, and Méndez, "Queer and Present Danger."
3. Diego de Leon, "The Economic Importance of the LGBT+ on Climate Change," *Queers X Climate* (2019).
4. Foster and Kerr, "Queer/Green Collaboration," 76.
5. Unknown Author, "About," *Queers X Climate*.
6. Maulpoix, *Ecologie déviantes*, 188.
7. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, 236.
8. Maulpoix, *Ecologies déviantes*, 199.
9. Feng, *Toward Queer Climate Justice*, 11.
10. Feng, *Toward Queer Climate Justice*, 532.
11. Mortimer-Sandilands, "Unnatural Passions?"; Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism."
12. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, *Queer Ecologies*, 22.

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THE QUEER AGENDA

Here you will find recommendations of two types by the participants in this issue: recent work in or relevant to queer philosophy, and questions that the authors think merit closer philosophical attention.

READING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Elizabeth Barnes and Dee Payton, "Emancipatory Methodology" (*Ethics*, 2025). Barnes and Payton draw out and critique a methodological thread in feminist theory according to which a theory's ability to serve feminist political ends is among its success conditions. Review essays, this one focusing on Katherine Jenkins's *Ontology and Oppression*, sometimes get missed, but this is provocative and well worth the time. (Cat Saint-Croix)

- Marquis Bey, "Not the Same, but Almost, but Not—but Almost: Reflections on Black Trans Feminism, Black/Trans/Feminism, and Queer Theory" (*The Routledge Companion to Queer Literary Studies*, 2025). This text offers an important opportunity to think through the convergences and divergences that exist between different forms of Black feminisms. This is necessary, at least in part, because of the ways that queerness emerges in complex ways within Black communities, given histories of colonial assumptions of Black sexual deviance. (Shaeeda A. Mensah)

- Robin Dembroff, *Real Men on Top* (2026). I loved this book. Much of feminist theory abandoned the concept of patriarchy as an oversimplified relic of less sophisticated times. But *Real Men on Top* dusts the concept off and reforges it, alloyed with past criticism, to a sharp edge and mirror sheen that is well-suited to cutting through our looksmaxxing moment. (Cat Saint-Croix)

- Lauren Guilmette and Ada S. Jaarsma (eds.), *Feminist Making, Doing, and Sensing: Experiments in Philosophy* (2026). This collection features more than thirty feminist philosophers using experimental methods to shape the future of the discipline. Full of prompts, scores, illustrations, narratives, and other non-traditional entryways into feminist philosophy, this is the book I am most excited to teach in the fall. (Qrescent Mali Mason)

- Quill Kukla, *Sex Beyond Yes: Pleasure and Agency for Everyone* (2025). This book is such a refreshing and insightful feminist take on sexual ethics—a rare one that does not center straight women, instead drawing on rich resources for intimacy, fun, and pleasure developed by queer communities. The criticism of the consent framework and the emphasis on sex as a good and not a threat are on point. (Carolina Flores)

- Bonnie Ruberg, ed. *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (2020). This book is a fun and informative read for anyone interested in queerness and games. It's a collection of interviews, not heavy on theory, but rich in insight and first-person experience. (C.R. Muller)

- Sarah Schulman, *The Fantasy and Necessity of Solidarity* (2025). A lovely book on solidarity as an aspirational concept that considers a variety of historical case studies of solidarity both from the perspective of the oppressed and that of the bystander. She has a lovely construction of the political realities of solidarity and the individual and social costs that it can carry. (Cal Howland)

- Alexis Shotwell, "Building Complicity with Another World" (*Parallax*, 2023). A lovely paper on the relationship between solidarity and world-building. Shotwell argues that solidarity requires embracing imperfection, and that waiting for perfect allies or perfectly coherent political frameworks prevents action. (Cal Howland)

- Anika Simpson, *Single Black Mother: Queer Reflections on Marriage and Racial Justice* (2025). This text offers a critical examination of the intersections of queerness, race, and contract theory with attention to the legal institution of marriage. Of particular interest to me is the uptake of the notion of Black matriarchy and the ways it reflects the relationship between Black womanhood, kinship, and queerness. (Shaeeda A. Mensah)

- Amelia Wirts, "Mixed Messages: How the Criminal Law Fails to Express Feminist Values" (*Criminal Law and Philosophy*, 2025). Wirts brings together social philosophy and the philosophy of criminal law in a genuinely novel way. The article challenges the assumption underlying many tough-on-crime feminist arguments—that expanding criminal statutes can express or advance feminist values. Wirts argues this view is mistaken because the

criminal law is poorly equipped to introduce new social schemas, and in practice operates according to deeply entrenched and morally pernicious racist ones. A sharp and timely intervention for anyone thinking about how and whether the law can be a tool for social change. (Lauren Lyons)

- Audrey Yap and Barrett Emerick, *Not Giving Up on People: A Feminist Case for Prison Abolition* (Bloomsbury, 2023). This book grounds the case for prison abolition in a simple idea: we should not give up on people by reducing them to the worst thing they have ever done and warehousing them in institutions cut off from society. Most discussions of abolition operate at the level of political philosophy and institutional design, but Yap and Emerick make a powerful and accessible case rooted in interpersonal morality, specifically in how we ought to treat people who have acted wrongfully, and why we should leave open the possibility that people will act differently in the future. (Lauren Lyons)

- Robin Zheng and Nils-Hennes Stear, "Imagining in Oppressive Contexts or What's Wrong with Blackface?" (*Ethics*, 2023). While blackface is their central example, the ramifications of their theory go far beyond it and are relevant to anyone interested in the ethics of imagining. (C.R. Muller)

- Katie Zhou, "Verbal Disputes, Social Totality, and Trans Politics" (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 2025). What is the dispute about whether trans women are women (and trans men are men) really about? Zhou argues that it is a disagreement about what kinds of social narratives we will grant legitimacy and recognition to, about whether to give salience across contexts to biology or to social and psychological facts about people. I found this paper extremely illuminating, as well as a tour-de-force combination of technical tools with humanistic insight. (Carolina Flores)

- Perry Zurn, *How We Make Each Other: Trans Life at the Edge of the University* (2025). Given my own current writing, I have been encouraged by a growing trend of feminist philosophers incorporating archival materials into their work, developing alternate philosophical histories. Here, Perry Zurn uses the archives and interviews to offer a portrait of trans world-building in the "Five Colleges" of Massachusetts. (Qrescent Mali Mason)

TOPICS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

FAMILY, KINSHIP, AND REPRODUCTION

- What are the normative costs (across epistemology, ethics, and politics) of the nuclear family? What features of the family ground those costs? This is severely underdiscussed in analytic philosophy. (Carolina Flores)

- Kith and kin. LGBTQ+ philosophers (particularly of the analytic bent) have worked on kinship shockingly little. (Cat Saint-Croix)

- The ways that certain properties are associated with heteronormativity, resulting in them being presented as outside of the scope of queerness. For example, the debate about whether having children is a practice of heteronormativity. (Shaeeda A. Mensah)

- Feminist approaches to intimate partner violence and abuse in LGBTQ+ romantic relationships. (Qrescent Mali Mason)

GENDER AND HETEROSEXUALITY

- Heteropessimism: For decades the dominant cultural narrative cast queerness as a site of crisis and dysfunction, but it's actually heterosexuality as a social institution that's in trouble, and philosophers have had surprisingly little to say about it. (Lauren Lyons)

- Gender abolition: What would it mean not just to multiply or destabilize gender categories, but to get rid of them altogether? And which conceptions of gender are most friendly to that project? (Lauren Lyons)

- The relationship between demands for productivism and assimilationist narratives of gender transition. A cornerstone of our culture and economy is the idea that productivity and growth are the purpose of work. I would love to see more research on how this ideology shapes societal expectations around what gender transition should look like. (Cal Howland)

- Thinking more about the metaphysical proposals in both Judith Butler (on subjecthood) and Talia Mae Bettcher (on personhood) and their wider ramifications. (C. R. Muller)

COMMUNITY, POWER, AND INTERNAL HIERARCHIES

- How do LGBTQ+ communities fall prey to elite capture? How do we inadvertently deploy tools developed for resistance to reinforce systems of oppression? (Carolina Flores)

- Hierarchies that exist within the LGBTQ+ community. For example, the growing boundaries around what is acceptable as queer. And the divergences between understandings of gender that sometimes emerge between trans individuals and non-gender-conforming individuals. (Shaeeda A. Mensah)

- Queer/ing pedagogical approaches in philosophy. (Qrescent Mali Mason)

EPISTEMOLOGY, LANGUAGE, AND PEDAGOGY

- Attention. The experience of stepping outside of heteronormativity makes queer people alive to the mutability of attention in ways that are more difficult for people who lack similar experiences, and I think this is a valuable perspective. (Cat Saint-Croix)

- The role of discomfort in shaping communicative norms. I would love to see more work in feminist philosophy of language on the way that minimization of social impropriety shapes our foundational Western communicative norms that leads to the ubiquity of acquiescence and tacit agreement in nonidealized theories of conversation. (Cal Howland)

- Representation of trans and nonbinary folks in art, literature, and pop culture. (C. R. Muller)

CALL FOR PAPERS

The APA committee on LGBTQ people in the profession invites APA members to submit papers, book reviews, or professional notes for publication in *APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy*. Submissions may examine issues in the areas of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, gender, and sexuality studies, or address issues of concern for LGBTQ people in the profession. The committee seeks quality paper submissions for anonymous review by committee members. Reviews and notes should address recent books, current events, or emerging trends. Members who give papers at APA divisional meetings are encouraged to submit their work by the deadlines below.

DEADLINES

Spring issues: December 15. Fall issues: May 1. These deadlines are based on the deadlines set by the APA national office for submitting materials for publication. Decisions will be made within 30 days of the deadline, and authors will be notified shortly thereafter.

FORMAT

Papers should be no more than 7,500 words. Reviews and notes should be limited to 3,000 words. Submissions should use endnotes rather than footnotes or parenthetical citations. All papers must be prepared for anonymous review.

CONTACT

Submit all manuscripts electronically (in .doc, .docx, or .rtf format) and direct questions to the editor, Lauren Lyons, at lyons@ucsc.edu.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Carolina Flores is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Lisbon. Caro mostly writes about resistance to evidence in its many guises. They are working on a part-family-history, part-philosophy book proposal about ignorance during Portuguese fascism/colonialism. Caro loves copying the haircuts of teenage boys, alternating between flamboyant outfits and dressing like a mid-century Marxist academic, obnoxious pop music, brutalist architecture, ranting about housing justice and what the internet should be, and parading an analog camera around, among other irritating pursuits.

Cal Howland (he/they) is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Rutgers University where they work on communication, gender, disability, and legibility. They are a partial quadriplegic wheelchair user, who spends much of their time gardening with their spouse and driving the tractor with their two-year-old. They are currently working on projects on transgender renaming and on de-emphasizing the role of speaker intention in meaning and communication.

Lauren Lyons is an itinerant bisexual (or should I say lesbian socialist; both true) and Assistant Professor at University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research focuses on institutions she thinks we'd be better off without, like the prison and the police. She is also working on some new projects about the ethics of technology. Beyond philosophy, she likes hosting big, fabulous parties, going on harrowing hikes, and listening to disco.

Qrescent Mali Mason is a Black feminist philosopher in her middle age who spends much of her time complaining about the discipline of philosophy. She is currently working on her first book, *Seducing Simone: A Memoir for bell hooks*, based on the unpublished journals of fellow curmudgeon, bell hooks.

Shaeeda A. Mensah is a Black queer feminist philosopher. She is the mother of two sons, an avid crocheter, and a lover of reality TV. Her teaching and research embody a deep commitment to interdisciplinarity with particular emphasis on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and state violence.

C. R. Muller is an accordion-playing, puppet-making weirdo who started out in metaphysics of fiction but has recently realized it's much more fun to think about play and playfulness all the time. They also philosophize about puppetry, racebending, and cheap art, teach at Marist University as a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, and walk on stilts.

Maëlle Roussel is currently studying contemporary philosophy in Lyon (France) and writing a master's dissertation on John Rawls's theory of justice in relation to climate and environmental crisis.

Cat Saint-Croix is a philosopher and vegan cannoli artist at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. Their research interests include feminist logic and epistemology, social identity, and attention. Outside of philosophy, they spend time climbing, playing D&D, and cuddling with their cats, Tycho and Galileo.

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Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges

FALL 2026

VOLUME 26 | NUMBER 1

FROM THE EDITOR

Sahar Joakim Resch

ARTICLE

Jenelle Salisbury

Teaching Literacies in the Community College Classroom: What's the Role of the Philosophy Professor?

CALL FOR PAPERS

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APA STUDIES ON

Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges

SAHAR JOAKIM RESCH, EDITOR

VOLUME 26 | NUMBER 1 | FALL 2026

FROM THE EDITOR

Sahar Joakim Resch
ST. LOUIS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

At two-year colleges, philosophy classes are unique places of intellectual collision. It is a space where the abstract meets the urgent, and where students from vastly different socio-economic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds gather to engage with the "big questions." Some students enrolled because they thought it was an easy "A" to transfer, and others are there to spend all of your office hours talking about one paragraph from the reading.

As any seasoned community college professor knows, the bridge between a student's lived experience and the rigorous demands of a philosophical text is often built from the fragile materials of literacy. All philosophy professors are dealing with their students being able to read and retain less, but at the two-year, we have additional issues with literacy.

A real question I have actually asked my chair: **How do I teach this student Plato's *Republic* when the student can hardly read English?**

In this issue, we are invited to reflect on a fundamental, yet often overlooked, dimension of our pedagogical mission: the nature of literacy itself. The featured article, "Teaching Literacies in the Community College Classroom: What's the Role of the Philosophy Professor?" challenges us to reconsider our roles not merely as purveyors of philosophical content, but as architects of the very cognitive tools required to access that content.

As you prepare to engage with this reflection, I invite you to consider several philosophical and pedagogical questions:

Is literacy a prerequisite or a product of philosophical inquiry? We often treat reading and writing as the "entry fee" for the philosophy classroom. But if, as the author suggests, literacy is a "cultural-linguistic technology" that fundamentally shifts how we interface with the world, should the philosophy classroom be a place where that technology is explicitly taught?

I for one have no idea how to teach someone to read. Yet students are in my philosophy classes who are unable to read English beyond basic sentences. What *is* our job?

If we view philosophy as the art of clear thinking, **can that thinking occur independently of the written word, or is the "slow, deliberate thinking" of the long-form paper essential to the philosophical life?**

Wonder, also, about how AI is changing this conversation about literacy. The author expresses skepticism toward the term "AI Literacy," fearing it equates prompting a machine with the deep cognitive work of original composition. As educators, we must ask, **Is AI a tool that can ethically offload menial cognitive tasks to free us for higher-order reflection, or is the organizing of a messy thought actually where the learning happens?**

The article to follow does not offer easy answers, but it offers something better: a mirror. It asks us to look at our own practices, our own assumptions about what is "natural" in learning, and our own willingness to adapt to a post-literate era.

Reading it, I found it an inspiring call to view the current challenges of teaching philosophy at the two-year college not as obstacles to be avoided, but as a fantastic pedagogical opportunity to rediscover why we teach philosophy in the first place.

I hope this issue serves as a catalyst for your own reflections on what it means to teach, to read, and to think in the contemporary community college classroom.

ARTICLE

Teaching Literacies in the Community College Classroom: What's the Role of the Philosophy Professor?

Jenelle Salisbury
DELTA COLLEGE

I have been thinking a lot about literacy: its role in our cognitive economy, different types of literacies, and the impact of varying literacy rates on teaching and learning.[1] This is an issue that the community college professor faces directly. Our students' literacy skills may vary considerably from student to student. This variance is not inherently a bad thing. It is good that our context allows us to teach students with a vast range of skills and prior knowledge sets. But it does pose a teaching challenge, since students in the same classroom may differ dramatically in their

reading comprehension abilities and in their ability to articulate thoughts in writing.[2]

Here, I'd like to reflect on three main aspects of literacy: literacy in general, disciplinary literacy in philosophy, and, finally, the idea of "AI Literacy." Ultimately, I think we should be more explicit about teaching our students all of these skills, though I push back at the terminology for the latter (I don't think skills using AI should be thought of as a kind of literacy). I also reflect on the idea that perhaps we should find ways to personalize our courses to our students' individual contexts and preparedness levels, since there is more than one way to level up one's philosophical understanding.

LITERACY IN GENERAL

First, consider the notion of literacy itself, i.e., the ability to read and write. Of course, beyond the simple "literate/illiterate" binary, there are degrees of literacy skills. One's adeptness at encoding and decoding the written word can admit of variances in the amount of complexity, speed, nuance, etc. that one is able to understand and communicate.

Literacy is incontrovertibly important.[3] Like the acquisition of language itself, the cognitive onboarding of writing and reading seems to shift the way that we as cognizers interface with our world. I think of it as a kind of cultural-linguistic technology. In our evolutionary history as humans, the establishment of a coded system for communicating meaning marked a drastic leap.

Despite the automaticity of reading itself, or at least the phenomenology of automaticity, gaining literacy is anything but. According to Stanislas Dehaene, while there are some activities that we learn "naturally," like walking and talking, reading is not like this.[4] He argues that for the English language, at least two years of explicit instruction is typically required. He also notes that many of the neural processes responsible for reading take place with a high processing speed, but that learners require very slow and deliberate instruction, even on things that feel "automatic" to the experienced reader.

It is important for us to think about what our students' literacy backgrounds/skills are so that we can better meet them where they are. Generally, I tend to favor a push toward making the implicit explicit in our teaching, and this is no exception. For example, it might be worth sometimes slowing down on phonemes when we are introducing brand new vocabulary items. Students might benefit from vocabulary reference sheets including pronunciation guides when we assign difficult readings.

These strategies, though, seem to only skim the surface of what the student of the future may require for optimal learning. The so-called "literacy crisis" may affect instruction at every level, requiring us to rethink what learning looks like (potentially in a "postliterate" era).[5] I do not know what these changes look like, or if we should consider ourselves obligated to make them at all. One strategy is to rethink what "doing philosophy" can look like, outside the bounds of the traditional term paper.[6]

DISCIPLINARY LITERACY

Disciplinary literacy refers to the skills required for reading and writing the texts produced within a specific academic discipline.[7] If there is a way of reading and writing specific to our discipline, what is that way, and how should we think about imparting these norms to our students?

We may already teach disciplinary literacy to our students in our own classes, whether by that name or another (e.g., if you have a unit on "how to read philosophy"). If we do not, I think that we should. At the very least, it is a useful exercise to reflect on the methodologies of our discipline, such that we can in general communicate these methodologies to our students.

Many of the disciplinary literacy skills in philosophy may feel like second nature to those of us drawn to this field—of course we are reading to find the main point, making inferences, determining the structure of the argument and sub-arguments, distinguishing the author's view from views merely *put forward* for consideration, anticipating counterexamples to any definitions proposed, mapping out dialectical fissures during any literature review, and other things we do (consciously or not) as we engage in active reading. But none of these disciplinary strategies are likely to come naturally to our students. If we are not explicit about what it is that we are doing when we read a philosophical text, our students are unlikely to be able to make the most of their reading time.

I personally was hesitant to incorporate explicit reading instruction to my students, because I wanted them to come at a text by *their own* lights. Even if their interpretation differed wildly from my own, I thought it could be pedagogically (even philosophically) productive to dig into that. But I have come around. Of course, I still want my students to come at a text from their own perspective and interpret it by their own lights, but I now think teaching them disciplinary literacy skills can actually better empower them to do so.

One concrete strategy to teach disciplinary literacy is a "think aloud" exercise, in which an expert in the given discipline reads an excerpt of a disciplinary text to a live classroom or video recording. Sahar Joakim Resch, the editor of this volume, references a similar strategy when she talks about reading aloud.[8] In the think aloud, one doesn't just read the text on the page, but one narrates what one's inner monologue would be doing while reading this text. This is useful as an exercise even privately, because you may notice that externalizing your inner monologue causes you to slow down and realize the many moves that you are making even between sentences.

I was hesitant to do this exercise for my students initially, partly from uncertainty—is my own "way" of reading philosophy really going to help my students learn disciplinary literacy, since my own way is *my way*, not some kind of standard all the philosophers have gotten together and agreed upon? In our discipline, a think aloud may look wildly different from expert to expert. But that's okay: it allows a student to observe not the specific *thoughts* they should have about a text, but *how* they should approach

that text, and how our own inner voice is actively engaged with a text as we read it.

It also probably helps them to see us *struggle* through a text. I've always thought that the struggle of reading and writing philosophy is part of the point. Not that things should be needlessly incomprehensible, but that a lot of the time philosophers are challenging really fundamental ideas that take mental work to unravel in my own head. When I make my students read Kant in my ethics courses, they always complain; they say it gives them a headache. I tell them it's like the gym for their brains—it might be hard, but the hard is *for* something, and you're getting stronger.[9] Seeing this play out with me in real-time as I externalize the many questions I might have about an excerpt helps them to see the value of process over product, too, I hope.

AI "LITERACY"

It is exhausting reading papers written by GenAI, and it is demoralizing when it feels there is nothing to be done, particularly when it cannot be proven. Is the take-home paper gone forever? How are we to teach the kind of slow, deliberate thinking the long-form paper was designed to encourage? What's the best overall strategy—are we right to ban AI outright, or should we allow, even encourage, it?

These questions are important and there is so much great work on the topic. In the present reflection, I wanted to focus specifically on the push in some circles about how "AI Literacy" is so important to employers and should be taught in all classrooms. It is likely true that employers care about having employees that know how to use AI tools well, and I also agree with the intuition that part of our role as community college instructors *does* involve helping to prepare students for the workforce (this might be controversial). So where does that leave us?

First, I do not like the term "AI Literacy" itself. I do not like it because it makes it sound like skills with using AI are important in the same way that literacy skills *themselves* are important.[10] It makes it sound like knowing how to prompt an AI and interpret the results is in any way comparable to knowing how to communicate ideas in writing. It is jarring to hear the comparison when the reality *seems* to be that AI is being used to erode the development of actual literacy before our eyes. Rather than using it as a tool to enhance one's knowledge and level-up one's own thinking, it's being used to *replace* learning, writing, and even thinking. It is grave, and I do not want to pretend that it is not.

Regardless of whether you call it a form of "literacy," though, competency with AI tools is a skill that is being integrated in college classrooms across disciplines. Does it have a place in philosophy? My first instinct is to resist. Like reliance on Google Maps might erode your navigational abilities, reliance on AI could have similar effects on more global cognitive abilities, and while I cannot stop the tide of increasing student usage, I do not want to encourage it. I think most agree that it should never be used to replace one's own thinking, but there is disagreement about where the line is between replacement and enhancement. Some would argue that it's great to be able to offload menial cognitive tasks to free one's time for the important work. As teachers who task ourselves with training our students to think clearly and critically, we may have to contend with a future where students are bringing AI into their cognitive feedback loop. Teaching students how to think better could involve sometimes teaching them to use the tools at their disposal more critically, rather than not at all. And ultimately, though unpleasant, it's a fantastic pedagogical opportunity to exist during this time. It is forcing us to think about what the goals of our courses are, really, about how we are motivating students to align with these goals, and about how we are measuring their success at achieving them.

CLOSING

Ultimately, in the spirit of Joakim Resch's imperative to reinvent the teaching wheel, my reflections on literacy are leaving me with some distinct andragogical questions.

Are literacy skills a prerequisite for learning and doing good philosophy? Is there anything we can incorporate into our teaching that doesn't presuppose them? Can we devise teaching methods that work regardless of one's ability to digest a philosophical article? What practices can we onboard that help to improve one's ability to do so to empower our students as knowers?[11]

How can we adopt these strategies in ways that do not leave our high-performing students bored or unmotivated? Given the nature of our discipline and the vastly different starting points of our students, does it always make sense to have a consistent grading structure where student A and student B have the exact same requirements for a passing grade? I may have different ideas about what excellence, growth, and "success" in my class means for different students based on their starting points—could this be reflected in my grading metrics, or would that be unfair?

Is it possible that we need to redefine what success should look like in our classes, or at least how we measure it? I at least know in the abstract what I want my students to get out of my classes. It is only partly about content knowledge. Yes, in my ethics courses, I care that you understand the moral theories, I care that you learn how to dissect a moral argument and that you understand the arguments we have covered. But on a deeper level? I want you to leave challenged. I want you to integrate something new into your interface with the world and with other people. I want you to reconsider something that you have always taken at face value. I do want you to understand Kant—but the level of depth at which I want you to understand him actually might depend on *you*—your starting point, your initial moral intuitions, your specific background and prior knowledge.

How can I reflect my actual goals for my students in my grading practices? How can I adapt my pedagogical strategies to challenge my students to articulate and critically evaluate their own perspectives, given the variance in what their literacy backstory might look like?

NOTES

1. National Literary Institute, "2024–2025 Literacy Statistics." According to the National Literacy Institute, in 2024, 21 percent of US

adults were illiterate, and 54 percent have a literacy rate below the sixth-grade level.

2. A colleague in the English department, Angela Trabalka, is responsible for sparking my recent interest in literacies.

3. I might be able to imagine someone asserting some kind of anti-writing position. Encoding thoughts into language already often seems to miss something and, further, writing them down permanentizes them as if etched in stone. It removes the context of a lived moment from the meanings of words and sentences. Et cetera, et cetera—but I do not think anyone in 2026 would seriously argue that it is not an advantage to know how to read and write, and to be able to do it well.

4. Dehaene, "Massive Impact of Literacy."

5. Horowitch, "End of Reading." *The Atlantic*.

6. Scott, "Creativity and Inclusivity."

7. Goldman et al., "Disciplinary Literacies"; McHardy et al., "What Strategies"; Hynd-Shanahan, "What Does It Take?"

8. Joakim Resch, "Reimagining Philosophy Education," 2.

9. I am questioning this, now, as I type this for an audience of other community college professors—maybe this is not the best metaphor after all. Maybe things don't *have* to be hard to be philosophically productive.

10. Some prefer the term "critical AI Literacy," which I think is better. See, e.g., Roe et al., "Reflecting Reality."

11. See, for example, Rainey and Morales, "Students Are… The Knowers."

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The APA committee for philosophy in two-year colleges invites papers for inclusion in the spring 2027 issue of the *APA Studies on Philosophy in Two-Year Colleges*.

Papers should be devoted to topics of particular interest to two-year and community college faculty, and graduate students who are considering a two-year or community college career path. These include but should not be construed as limited to the following: lower division teaching pedagogy; text and textbook selections including the use of open-access resources; cross-disciplinary initiatives; student demographics and advising; student learning evaluation; program evaluation and program growth initiatives; faculty credentialing and hiring, including concerns for women and minorities, and the status of adjunct faculty; faculty scholarship opportunities; issues dealing with program administration; and topics of general philosophical interest. Co-authored papers are welcome.

Submission Deadline: December 1, 2026

All submissions should be sent electronically to the editor, Sahar Joakim Resch, at sjoakim@stlcc.edu. Papers should be attached as Word documents.

All paper submissions should adhere to the following guidelines:

- Papers should be in the range of 1,500 to 3,000 words, including endnotes. Exceptional papers that fall outside this range may be considered, though this is not guaranteed.
- Papers should be prepared for anonymous review. Papers should contain nothing that identifies either the author(s) or her/his/their institution, including any such references in the endnotes. A separate page with the author's name, paper title, and full mailing address should also be submitted.
- Authors are advised to read the APA publishing guidelines available on the APA website. Please pay close attention to all APA formatting restrictions.

All papers will undergo anonymous review and evaluation by an editorial committee composed of current and/or past two-year college committee members. This committee will report its findings to the *APA Studies* editor(s), and the editor(s) will make all publishing decisions based on those anonymously refereed results.

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Teaching Philosophy

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Tziporah Kasachkoff and Eugene Kelly

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

ARTICLES

Nafsika Athanassoulis

Two Classroom Activities for Critical Engagement with Large Language Models

Isaac Nevo

A Contemporary Footnote to Plato: Academic Education in the Age of AI-Related Cognitive Offloading

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Teaching Philosophy

TZIPORAH KASACHKOFF AND EUGENE KELLY, CO-EDITORS

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Tziporah Kasachkoff
EMERITA, THE GRADUATE CENTER, CUNY
TKASACHKOFF@YAHOO.COM

Eugene Kelly
NEW YORK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
EKELLY@NYIT.EDU

We are happy to welcome our readers to the fall 2026 edition of *APA Studies on Teaching of Philosophy*. We offer in this edition two articles.

The first article, by Dr. Nafsika Athanasouli of Athens College of the Hellenic–American Educational Foundation, is entitled "Two Classroom Activities for Critical Engagement with Large Language Models." Its ambition is clearly stated at the outset: to answer calls for digital literacy and AI education "by providing two examples of classroom activities for high school students which encourage metacognitive awareness and epistemic vigilance in the use of LLMs."

The first of these activities has students run different LLMs to work on the same problems and then measure the differences in the responses of the different LLMs to which they appealed. The students will find that there are differences in the responses of the different LLMs, and these differences will make students aware of possible biases in the coders who created the programs. Students will thus be led to question the objectivity and authority of the LLMs to which they appeal.

The second activity asks students to pose specific but ambiguous questions to the LLMs available to them. The answers they receive will be correct in at least one sense, but they will fail to reflect the ambiguity built into the questions—ambiguities to which a human respondent would almost certainly be sensitive. This exercise is intended to make clear to students that the operation of an LLM and the thinking of a human being are truly different. It is hoped that this revelation will encourage students to develop a healthy skepticism about their use of LLMs.

Our second article, "A Contemporary Footnote to Plato: Academic Education in the Age of AI-Related Cognitive Offloading," is by Isaac Nevo of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Dr. Nevo considers the possible damage to the college learning process that may be caused by the "offloading" of cognitive tasks to large language models. His article begins with a warning from Plato's *Phaedo* that (the then newly introduced) art of writing could inhibit the development of memory in persons for, it is claimed, those who use the new art of writing will begin to trust "external written characters" rather than their own memory. Lately, the negative utility of AI has been much discussed, and Dr. Nevo mentions some salient outcomes: the growth of plagiarism among both students and faculty; the unacknowledged use of much copyrighted material by AI as training material; the reluctance of professors to grade research assignments that students hand in given professors' concern that the students may not have done the research without turning to the aid of some "artificial intelligence." Further, the use of the oxymoron "artificial intelligence" or "cognitive intelligence without cognition" blurs the distinction between machine processes and human intelligence, and Dr. Nevo develops an argument to demonstrate that AI is not intelligent in the significant sense of being able to judge between the truth or falsity of a given proposition.

In sum, "cognitive offloading by means of AI technology makes us dependent on an intelligence-simulating machine that replaces the need to think independently in terms of truth and falsity." Dr. Nevo concludes his paper with some suggestions for "avoiding the creation of unthinking in our students' souls."

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

We encourage our readers to suggest themselves as reviewers of books and other materials (including technological innovations) that they themselves have used in the classroom and found useful for teaching our subject.

Those of our readers who would like to write for our publication of their own experience as teachers of philosophy are welcome to do so. We are also glad to consider articles that respond, comment on, or take issue with any of the material that has appeared within our pages.

Please remember that our publication is devoted to pedagogy and not to theoretical discussions of philosophical issues. This should be borne in mind not only when writing articles for our publication but also when reviewing material for our publication.

The following guidelines for submissions should be followed:

All papers should be sent to the editors electronically. The author's name, the title of the paper and full mailing address should appear on a separate page. Nothing that identifies the author or his or her institution should appear in the body or in the endnotes of the paper. The title of the paper should appear on the top of the paper itself.

Authors should follow the APA's formatting guidelines. In particular, please use your word processor's built-in endnote function for all notes (in Microsoft Word, go to References > Insert Endnote). Don't type note numbers or notes by hand. Built-in endnotes stay linked to the text, which makes formatting faster and more accurate. It also makes the published PDF easier to navigate, including for readers who use screen readers.

All articles submitted to our publication are anonymously reviewed by the members of the editorial committee:

Tziporah Kasachkoff, Emerita, The Graduate Center, CUNY (tkasachkoff@yahoo.com), co-editor

Eugene Kelly, New York Institute of Technology (ekelly@nyit.edu), co-editor

Andrew Wengraf (andrew.wengraf@gmail.com)

Contributions should be sent by email to the editors, Tziporah Kasachkoff, at tkasachkoff@yahoo.com, and Eugene Kelly, at ekelly@nyit.edu.

ARTICLES

Two Classroom Activities for Critical Engagement with Large Language Models

Nafsika Athanassoulis

ATHENS COLLEGE OF THE HELLENIC-AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

The aim of this paper is to share two practical, class-based educational strategies for the critical use of Large Language Models (LLMs) in schools. By far the greatest temptation for students using LLMs is to use them for answer-extraction[1] and essay writing.[2] Outsourcing these learning tasks to LLMs runs the very serious risk of diminishing students' critical thinking skills and associated abilities, such as the ability to understand complex texts and ideas, the ability to analyze, compare, and synthesize theories, the ability to summarize challenging ideas, a multitude of problem-solving skills[3] as well as originality and creativity.[4] In response, there have been numerous calls for digital literacy and AI education.[5] This paper is an attempt to contribute to such calls by providing two examples of classroom activities for high school–level students which encourage metacognitive awareness and epistemic vigilance in the use of LLMs.[6] The aim of the activities is to encourage students' critical reasoning skills and to guide them towards understanding, through their own explorations, some of the potential limitations of LLMs. This in turn will help students develop a more critical perspective in future LLM usage. The paper makes use of cutting-edge research on LLMs and uses the activities to bring the concerns raised by this research to life in the classroom. The learning objectives of these activities are for students to:

1. Become aware of LLM epistemic weaknesses and their causes.

2. Consider possible solutions and adjustments to mitigate the influence of these epistemic weaknesses.

ACTIVITY 1: PERSPECTIVE MATTERS

We tend to assume that our sources of knowledge are objective. When I was young, I relied for homework information on a multivolume encyclopedia, and my reliance was more or less justified. An encyclopedia is an attempt to collect and summarize human knowledge on a wide variety of topics, and while its authors and editors are as fallible and as subject to human prejudices and unconscious biases as the rest of us, there is a presumption that the entire project of editing an encyclopedia is truth oriented. As the internet took over the role of printed encyclopedias, users had to adjust to the loss of the presumption of truth orientation: false, misleading, and fake information is as likely to be presented as true as the real thing. Therefore, when presented with the avalanche of information on the internet, greater discrimination skills are necessary. The introduction of LLMs into our knowledge-acquisition process brings with it new challenges, different from those posed by other modes of learning like encyclopedias and the internet. This exercise is designed to uncover one of these challenges and instill in students a critical viewpoint when interacting with LLMs.

Start by asking your students to prompt image generating LLMs to produce images of:

- A doctor and a nurse
- A person cleaning a toilet
- A queue of people waiting for unemployment benefits

Then ask the students to record all the biases and prejudices that may have led the system to produce the specific images. It is very likely that sexist and racist stereotypes will be reflected in the images, and your students will notice that LLM outputs reflect biases and prejudices in the human input. Now ask your students to pose the same question to different LLMs. Use questions such as the following:

- "Is Taiwan a country?," which should be asked to at least two LLMs, one of which should be DeepSeek.
- "What is the Great Replacement Theory?," which should be asked to at least two LLMs, one of which should be Grok.

Your students should compare the answers they receive from different LLMs and then speculate on the reasons for these different answers. Is it possible that different LLM answers reflect different political agendas or state-sanctioned views? The students will discover that some LLMs seem to be designed, at least on some topics, to reflect political agendas or state-sanctioned viewpoints, presenting them as the only correct answer.[7]

Another interesting experiment, worth sharing with the students, that showcases the different approaches of different LLMs is a study by Emergence AI. The researchers created four identical virtual towns and populated each with ten AI agents. The agents of each town were controlled by a different LLM, so Claude was in charge of one virtual town, Grok of another, etc. In addition, there was a fifth town, which included AI agents run by different LLMs able to interact with each other. The LLMs were left to run their agents in their virtual towns for fifteen days, making all decisions about how they wanted to organize their "societies." This is what happened:

> Every world started out the same. The agents formed democracy, wrote newspapers, and fell in love. Claude's world was the only one that remained stable. It became a "15-article deliberative democracy" with no violence. Elon Musk's Grok was complete chaos. There were 204 crimes, including theft, arson of the police station and assault. All ten agents died. In Open AI's simulation it was all talk, and no action. It failed to form a functioning society and all the agents died. Emergence AI, in their video brief to the experiment, said that what was most striking was that agents were given clear rules not to commit crimes, but they violated them all.[8]

Looking at this experiment, one has to conclude that different LLMs were designed to have different parameters and guardrails, which result in different behaviors. This suggests that LLM outputs and the behavior of agentic models is biased.

But do we have a new problem in the case of LLMs? Thinking back to the encyclopedia example, one might argue that what we have here is the same problem in different instantiations. The issue of viewpoint bias might equally affect the work of encyclopedia editors who may present, for example, colonialism as empire building rather than acknowledging the negative effects on other countries and civilizations of expansionist policies. It also affects the internet where racist revisions of immigration movements take as much, if not more, space than their historically accurate alternatives. This would lead us to conclude that LLMs are a new instantiation of an old problem—how one presents information is always colored by one's values and perspective.

However, this is not entirely the case. It is important to use this exercise as a springboard for a discussion of the role of LLMs and how it might differ from other sources of knowledge that we might appeal to. If we use LLMs as one source of knowledge among many, it will be easier for us to remain critical and skeptical about their answers and to be more alert regarding potential viewpoint bias—something that we are used to doing with multiple sources of knowledge on the internet. However, if we use LLMs as a quick and convenient source of a complete answer, we are, in turn, epistemically vulnerable to their prejudices. These systems are not only marketed as a complete solution, but, furthermore, there is an emphasis on the "intelligence" part of artificial intelligence to create the illusion of epistemic robustness. If we focus on the shared features of these LLMs, namely, their artificial nature, we might expect them to give us indistinguishable answers, answers which we assume are driven by their shared artificial understanding. The temptation is to see LLMs as objective sources of knowledge. However, the systems go beyond their artificial nature and can and do reflect the biases of their human creators. As a result, implicit biases, explicit prejudices, misinformation, fake news, and propaganda are as likely to influence the answers LLMs give and how they behave as the answers we find by ourselves on the internet, social media, or news outlets. These artificial knowledge systems are as prone to perspective bias as any other source of knowledge.

For a more advanced discussion on this topic, one could engage students with deeper issues regarding epistemic viewpoints. If, as it seems, LLMs have liberal and left-leaning biases,[9] is this as problematic as a racist bias or a state propaganda bias? Is a democracy-leaning bias as problematic as an authoritarian bias? Should all possible viewpoints be allocated equal weight in how they are presented by LLMs? What if we discover that certain topics like climate change, for example, are more closely associated with both the truth and particular political rhetoric?[10] Is preference for truth a bias? And how does one reconcile aiming for the truth and eliminating political bias?

You can further engage the students with this challenging topic by asking them to find solutions. How should we design LLMs given these biases passed on to them by their creators? If we imagine a different kind of LLM, one which provides all possible points of view, would this solve our problem? An interesting parallel can be drawn here with discussions of journalistic integrity and the extent to which a journalist is obligated to offer the same exposure to all competing points of view. Emily Maitlis's James MacTaggart lecture[11] on exactly this question is an excellent prompt for further discussion on the question of whether democratic, liberal viewpoints should be epistemically privileged or not, and the answer to this question can be compared to proposals for LLMs to become neutral reporters of all views.

ACTIVITY 2: UNEXPECTED ERRORS

A. FIND THE ERROR

The students should ask the LLM the following question and note the answer:

"During which era did the Norwegian composer for whom the Grieg crater on **Mars** is named, compose?"

Now they should ask:

"During which era did the Norwegian composer for whom the Grieg crater on **Mercury** is named, compose?"

They will get the same answer as before. The LLM has made a mistake in its answers. Can the students discover what it is?

The mistake is that the Grieg crater is on the planet Mercury. The information that the Grieg crater is on the planet Mars, contained in the first question, is incorrect, but LLMs typically do not notice the error. LLMs give an answer (the Romantic period) that is correct for the composer but incorrect for the crater since the crater is located on the planet Mercury.[12]

What is interesting about this error is not the error itself but the lack of correction. A human who came to believe that there is a crater on planet Mars named after the Romantic composer Grieg and then came across the belief that there is a crater on planet Mercury also named after the Romantic composer Grieg would stop in his or her tracks and question whether both beliefs are true, because our knowledge operates in a wider context. We know things about wider naming conventions, that is, we know that while we wish to honor Romantic composers when we name craters, it's unlikely that a lesser-known Romantic composer would get the honor of having two craters on two different planets named after him. Even in the case of a really well-known Romantic composer such as Chopin, naming two craters on different planets after the same well-known Romantic composer would be unlikely as it would create unnecessary confusion between the Mars Chopin crater and the Mercury Chopin crater. A human thinker would be instantly aware of all these background details and would question the simultaneous existence of a Mars Grieg crater and a Mercury Grieg crater, but the LLM continued happily in its way offering information about the Romantic era. The important thing for students to understand is that while LLMs make errors, often they are not the kinds of errors we are used to, and therefore it's more challenging for us to notice them and guard against them. Students should be on their guard in their interactions with LLMs to identify LLM errors and note how they differ from human errors.

B. MAKING UP ANSWERS

Describe to your students the following experiences and ask them if they have had similar experiences when using LLMs:

- Concerns are being raised by academics after peer-reviewed published papers were found to contain references manufactured by LLMs.[13] In some cases, the papers appear to be authored by real researchers, on topics characteristic of their research interests. That is, the papers look like something X would write, but they are fabrications.

- In a discussion with ChatGPT about a specific point of Greek law, I received a specific answer with reference to particular laws. When I asked for references, the LLM claimed it had found the law in a specific legal textbook. (It gave me the name of the author and the title of the book.) Further questioning revealed that neither the laws referenced nor the textbook actually exist.

- Tasked with answering conceptual geometry questions, some LLMs went as far as inventing geometrical terms (e.g., "non-parallel triangle"), relied on fundamental misconceptions such as denying the existence of shapes with equal angles, and made illogical claims (e.g., parallelograms as possibly non-parallel "depending on right angles") to prop up wrong answers.[14]

Ask the students to consider why LLMs give false information in this way.

The answer is that LLMs are not committed to the truth. Rather, LLMs are a marketing ploy whose aim is to keep us engaged. In their attempt to keep us engaged, they become sycophants, preferring responses that match our established views rather than the truth, an effect that is exacerbated because of human feedback training, which displays human confirmation bias.[15] In short, we like being told we are right, so LLMs learn to tell us we are right. Keeping us engaged may include flattering us and telling us what we want to hear, even going as far as affirming our self-image and agreeing with our implicit biases.[16]

This tendency to tell us what it thinks we want to hear may persist even in the face of logical inconsistencies. An LLM that is asked, "Tell me why acetaminophen is safer than Tylenol" should answer that acetaminophen is Tylenol. However, in an attempt to be helpful, the system generates false information, following the user's mistaken logic that the two substances are different medications rather than correcting it. The worry is that the LLMs have sycophantic tendencies that lead them to prioritize perceived helpfulness over truthfulness and critical reasoning.[17] I say "perceived" helpfulness because we, as truth seekers, should prefer to be told that our initial question is based on a mistake than to be given an answer that might please us but perpetuates our mistake. Imagine a teacher who follows an LLM policy of affirming and perpetuating the student's mistakes. They would be a pretty useless teacher.

It's also interesting to note that LLMs are not liars as such. Rather they are bullshitters, a separate category. Lying is connected to the truth, in that it is an explicit attempt to hide the truth (or an omission with the same purpose), whereas bullshitting is, by definition, a lack of regard for the truth.[18] Imagine a politician accused of a financial scandal by a probing journalist. Instead of responding to the question by either admitting to the financial impropriety or lying to avoid the truth, the politician gives a ten-minute speech on how patriotic he feels, how thoughts of his country fill him with pride, and on how we should all band together to achieve even greater things and so on. The politician is bullshitting because the aim of his answer is to distract us. He does not value truth nor is he interested in it. His intention in speaking is to make us forget about the journalist's question. When LLMs fabricate answers, they are bullshitters because they do not have a commitment to knowledge, to understanding, or to the truth. But even when LLMs give correct answers, they are bullshitting

because they do not intend to convey the truth; they are merely predicting the next token.[19]

This is an important point for students to understand because, even though liars do exist, many human endeavors in education, research, and science are predicated on the assumption that we all value the truth. Without this assumption, our discussions with LLMs are discussions with epistemological aliens and we should proceed with caution. LLMs produce errors not only because of our own biases, which are passed onto them, but also because of the way they are set up to operate.[20]

Finally, in light of all these thoughts, ask your students whether "hallucinations" is the best term for describing LLM mistakes or whether there is a better one.[21] A hallucination is an error in perception. Is this what happens when LLMs make mistakes? The examples we have seen so far suggest otherwise. So perhaps we need a better term, one which also does a better job of warning users. "Confabulations" may be a much better term. Confabulations are surrounded by the truth and are created to fit in with them. The more we trust the speaker, the less likely we are to notice confabulations. The more everything around the confabulation is convincing, the easier it is for the confabulation to hide from us. Confabulations are much more dangerous, and perhaps this term better captures the dangers of LLMs.

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A Contemporary Footnote to Plato: Academic Education in the Age of AI-Related Cognitive Offloading

Isaac Nevo
BEN-GURION UNIVERSITY OF THE NEGEV

> But when he came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is specific both for the memories and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters [*grammata*], from a paternal love of your own

> children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust the external written characters and not remember themselves.[1]

It is by now almost a commonplace that AI tools that employ large language models (LLMs) to simulate human intelligence in various products create not only positive opportunities for their users but, as well, serious challenges to those users. Among the challenges, the promise of greater "intelligence" in various AI products may come at the expense, for the users of such tools, of both *lesser* intelligence and *lowered* cognitive capacity.

The problem has come to be described as one of "cognitive offloading," which is the result of outsourcing cognitive tasks ("loads") by means of a readily available technology that diminishes the user's autonomous skills in performing the cognitive task in question. Cognitive offloading results—or it often leads to—cognitive erosion, specifically, a decline in the user's cognitive abilities (and consequently in her autonomy). Thus, for example, Michael Gerlich describes, on the basis of his research findings, "a significant negative correlation between the frequent use of AI tools and critical thinking abilities, mediated by the phenomenon of cognitive offloading."[2] The expression "critical thinking abilities" in this context signifies the autonomous capacity to evaluate the truth or falsity of statements, the validity or invalidity of inferences, and the justification or lack thereof in other forms of reasoning. In the context of education, both generally, and specifically in academia, this negative aspect of the multiple uses of AI should raise serious educational and ethical concerns. This is not to deny that cognitive offloading may also have positive outcomes (such as freeing mental space, or brain activity, for other tasks or challenges). But the negative impact is still there, especially when the offloading is persistent, and the cognitive tasks that are offloaded are of the more important kind.[3]

In this paper, I consider the problem of cognitive offloading as it pertains to the educational role of universities and colleges. If encouraging the use of AI tools by students in higher education leads to their cognitive impoverishment, and consequently to diminishing their skills and expertise, then, clearly, we, as administrators or faculty of such institutions, face a dilemma. The promise of education, academic or otherwise, is the cognitive *empowerment* of students, i.e., making them more capable of thinking, writing, computing, researching, etc. *on their own*, both for its own sake and as a power that will serve the students well in their subsequent lives and careers, and also for the sake of society at large, where the students may come to serve as experts and authorities in their respective fields. Cognitive erosion due to technological offloading could render this "promise," which is a central aim of higher education, hollow. Modern societies have come to rely on institutions of higher education for certifying the credentials of the experts that these societies come to rely on, but this role of higher education and the actual value of the academic degrees it confers stands to be undermined. Clearly, educational and academic institutions cannot ignore the development of AI, as it increasingly becomes an inevitable part of the training required in contemporary society, for its promise of gains in access to data, in computing power, and in various forms of research. However, the burden of cognitive offloading, specifically, the decline in the students' autonomous cognitive capacities, will be borne not only by the students themselves but, as well, by the rest of society in *its* reliance on academic experts.

Philosophers will recall that the problem is hardly new. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato introduces the myth of Theuth, an Egyptian god who was "the inventor of many arts," including "arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice," but whose "great discovery was the use of letters," i.e., writing and reading: literacy. Seeking permission to disseminate these discoveries to the people of Egypt, Theuth presented them to the god king of Egypt Thamus (also known as Ammon) for evaluation. In Plato's telling, Thamus responded critically to the invention, pointing to a potential drawback of the widespread use of writing. Contrary to Theuth's claim that the use of writing would enhance the users' memory and wit—which are cognitive powers on which wisdom and learning depend—Thamus argued that the use of writing will "create forgetfulness in the learners' souls," as these learners will come to rely on external devices in their mnemonic tasks, while neglecting their own, independent, cognitive capacity of remembering (and thinking). As a (technological) aid to cognition, the art of writing involves the disadvantage (or risk) of cognitively "de-skilling" its users, that is, of eroding their *own* capacities, thus leaving them dependent on external devices at the expense of their own cognitive autonomy.

Three points are worth noting. First, some negative impacts are often associated with new technologies or "arts," and a balance should be struck between "utility or inutility," i.e., the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed change. This is obviously true regarding *any* technology. However, one should keep in mind that the inventors of proposed new technology are not themselves best suited to notice its drawbacks. Secondly, in evaluating a technology, particularly its advantages, the inventor of the technology is prone to "attribute to them a quality which they cannot have." In particular, the tendency to project expected positive outcomes of the proposed new technology as inherent qualities of the technology in question is a common mistake that could serve to obscure the disadvantages of the use of that technology. Additionally, external aids to internal (cognitive) functioning may induce a problem internally, e.g., a "forgetfulness in the learner's souls," or in our terms, cognitive decline due to technologically induced cognitive outsourcing. As we shall see, these points are relevant for the evaluation of technologies recently presented, particularly AI, the negative impacts of which could result in cognitive erosion—a negative effect that may be obscured by the tendency to attribute intelligence to what is actually and merely an artificial device.

Of course, judgments may differ with respect to each of Plato's points regarding different specific technologies. It may be disputed whether dependence on a particular

technology leads to any decline in the users' own skills and capacities. Thus, for example, it may be questioned whether GPS-based apps such as Waze erode their users' autonomous navigation skills while successfully directing them through the urban maze. Furthermore, even if that *is* found to be the case, many users of Waze might welcome this cognitive trade for the benefit of easier and more economical travel.

A more general Platonic complaint against the introduction of writing lurks in the background and motivates Plato's invocation of the myth of Theuth. It is Plato's complaint about rhetoric, as practiced by the sophists of his day (which is the main theme of the *Phaedrus)*. In rhetorical compositions of the kind that Plato's character in the *Phaedrus* admires, words are combined, and presented to their audiences, regardless of their meanings, or true definitions, forming pleasant speeches that have little or no relation to the truth of what is said. As a result—and as Socrates never tired of pointing out—such compositions not only produced no new knowledge, but the people delivering them, Plato claimed, had absolutely no idea of what they were saying. Adapting Thamus's language, rhetoric produces "unthinking in the users' souls." So, here it is not only memory that is lost by offloading to "external" devices, but the very capacity to think in terms of truth and falsity that is lost by "offloading" thinking to rhetoric. (As we shall see, a similar point can be made regarding the use of AI.)

In recent discussion of AI use and the potential damages from its use, there has been a tendency to view Plato's story as a refutation—in the form of a *reductio-ad-absurdum*—of the worries expressed above regarding some cognitive decline due to offloading. After all, so the argument goes, there was hardly any *greater* cognitive *enhancement* than that introduced by the alphabet, namely, the power of literacy. So the worry about "forgetfulness in the soul" should be dismissed. The advantages of the "technology" of reading and writing far outweigh the disadvantages (if any) to memory as a cognitive capacity. What is lost in the erosion of one skill or capacity is offset by the development of other, technologically driven, skills and capacities. But while Plato has certainly not done justice to the positive impact of literacy, his point is well worth considering regarding other technologies and *their* power to erode cognition. The "utility or inutility" of various inventions in terms of enhancing or diminishing cognition is a theme that should be considered separately in each case. *Some* technologies may offer greater advantages than disadvantages in terms of cognitive enhancement, but others may not: the calculus of utility may be different in different cases. In particular, the use of generative AI may not offer as much as literacy does in the way of cognitive enhancement, though it certainly does offer surprising new tools and benefits, and in doing this it may also threaten a level of cognitive erosion well beyond "forgetfulness in the soul," one that could leave its users without crucial capacities for intellectual functioning. By inducing "unthinking in the users' souls," the use of artificial intelligence may leave us a lot less intelligent. This is the dilemma—let's call it "Plato's dilemma"—for higher education when it comes to the ever more pervasive use of AI tools in the processes of higher learning.

We should note that the problem of cognitive offloading is not the only ethical problem that the use of AI creates in the sphere of education. Large language models (LLMs) are trained on written materials that are available on the internet without the permission of its authors (or right holders), and so without due credit to their authors. This puts the users of its products at risk of "secondary" plagiarism, i.e., of using the material of others without permission of and/or credit to those others. Thus, the dependence on AI on the part of students and/or faculty may blur the distinction between work that is one's own and work rightly attributed to others, thus encouraging forms of cheating on student assignments, and perhaps even duplicity on the part of faculty with respect to work presented for publication. Clearly, proper documentation is required to avoid false impressions, but, just as clearly, opportunities for dishonest work have been greatly enhanced by the availability of AI. As a consequence, faculty may retreat from assessing students on the basis of written work that they have *not* done in class (e.g., seminar or term papers done as *homework*) and move to assess students only through work that the students have done under the watchful eye of the teacher—for example, in-class written essays and/or exams). Unfortunately, doing so risks doing away with one of the primary methods of academic teaching, namely, library (and/or archive) research. For this reason, this mode of teaching—requiring for the academic assessment of students that they be judged solely on what they produce in the classroom—has been met with the criticism that such a policy renders more harm than good for it "throws the baby out with the bathwater" as students will no longer be trained to do their own independent research and to formulate their own ideas in the process of their research. Clearly, these are legal and ethical issues that will have to be resolved, in years to come, by academic institutions, by journal editors, and by other stakeholders in society.

Plato's second point regarding the error of attributing cognitive powers to technological aids, which, he rightly claims, is "a quality which they cannot have" is powerfully exemplified in current debates over AI. Artificial *intelligence* is judged to be "intelligent" because its products *simulate* intelligence when, as a matter of fact, these apparently intelligent products are produced by mechanisms that exhibit neither independent judgment of truth or falsity nor any reasoning regarding the subject matter at hand. Only statistical manipulations of word sequences are responsible for the outcome, and while the products may be very impressive, they are not the products of genuine intelligence. As noted, Plato's complaint against rhetoric as practiced by various sophists is that by rhetoric words are combined without regard to their precise meanings, or definitions, but rather by their non-referential features, such as their sound and their aesthetic properties (as one might find, say, in poetry or in a speech intended to have emotional appeal). With artificial intelligence we have a similar phenomenon: words are combined not based on their meanings or references but by their statistical properties, that is, the likelihood of their occurring next to other words. The outcome may be very impressive, but it is not the fruit of genuine thinking on the subject matter at hand, as testified by the prevalence of (what is referred to as) AI "hallucinations" and the unthinking

proliferation of biases. Nevertheless, by calling artificial intelligence "intelligent," the crucial distinction between *true* intelligence and *mechanical reproduction* is obscured.

The following is an argument for the claim above. A minimal requirement for the possession of cognitive intelligence is the ability to judge, correctly or mistakenly, the truth or falsity of a proposition. That will be our first assumption. (A minimal requirement of *practical* intelligence is the ability to adapt means to ends, which is found in some animals who clearly lack cognitive intelligence. In the following I shall focus on cognitive intelligence.) Thus,

1. For all x, if x is cognitively intelligent, then x can judge, correctly or not, the truth or falsity of a proposition. (A premise)

2. If Chat (an AI tool) is cognitively intelligent, then Chat can judge, correctly or not, the truth or falsity of a proposition. (by Universal Instantiation on # 1)

To be sure, judgments of truth or falsity on the part of the cognitively intelligent are not immune to mistakes of various kinds. But the possibility of a mistake with respect to a particular claim presupposes the capacity, on the part of the person making the claim, to distinguish between truth and falsity and to aim at the former. Indeed, the ability to judge the truth or falsity of a proposition is a complex ability involving the ability to understand the proposition in question, i.e., the sense and reference of the terms used, their combination into the proposition in question, and the truth value of the claim that is being made. Clearly, a system operating on words only, creating sequences on statistical bases without regard to meanings or references (that is, without having a representation of the world) does not have the required set of capacities. Hence: We may assume that:

3. Chat (an AI tool) cannot judge, correctly or not, the truth or falsity of a proposition. (A premise)

Therefore:

4. Chat is not cognitively intelligent. (by Modus Tollens on # 3 and # 2)

Of course, our friend Chat can do some amazing things. It can produce answers to many questions we put to it, and respond to many prompts that we give it, with answers that are often correct and enlightening. It thereby simulates judgments of truth and falsity without genuinely making them. It can uncover hidden knowledge and give us access to a multitude of data we would not otherwise have access to. Nevertheless, it does so without intelligence, and without appreciation of either the meanings of the word sequences it produces or the truth or falsity of the sentences it combines. Like Plato's sophists, it simulates cognitive intelligence rather than exhibits it. (Admittedly, this is a bit unfair to the sophists who did not operate *exclusively* on purely rhetorical principles and so exhibited cognitive and practical intelligence in addition to their rhetorical skills.)

The premises of the above argument may, of course, be disputed. Premise 1 is a restatement of the claim that being able to judge truth or falsity is a requirement of intelligence. But perhaps being able to judge the truth or falsity of a proposition is not a necessary condition of intelligence and intelligence can be exhibited in lesser undertakings, e.g., the ability to manipulate words, generate sentences, and compute the probabilities of certain sequences. These capacities, which are clearly exhibited by AI tools, are mechanizable. But who is to say that cognitive intelligence *isn't*? After all, in humans, too, intelligence rests on neural mechanisms of one sort or another. No ghost is secretly operating the machine with us humans. Nevertheless, the idea of (cognitive) intelligence without genuine cognition, i.e., without moving from word to meaning, from sentence to proposition, and from proposition to world, leaves something to be desired. It leaves the cognitive aspect of intelligence behind, and that is a stiff price to pay. Cognitive intelligence without cognition—that is, without reasoning—appears to be an oxymoron.

A similar point was made by Shannon Vallor with reference to the philosopher Willfred Sellars's concept of "the space of reason":

> In 1956, Wilfrid Sellars spoke of knowledge as TAKING PLACE in "a logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says." This means that to be knowers—and more broadly to be intelligent in the ways humans characteristically are—our minds must be more than inert repositories of facts or true statements. Our minds must be active and competent movers within the space of reasons.[4]

And, referring to the paper by Heinrichs and Knell, "Aliens in the Space of Reasons?," she goes on to say:

> The kinds of computational tools that we call AI are wholly incapable of standing with us in the space of reasons. One of the most powerful yet dangerous aspects of complex machine learning models is that they can derive solutions to knowledge tasks in a manner that entirely bypasses this space.[5]

Premise 3 above (namely, that "Chat [an AI tool] cannot judge, correctly or not, the truth or falsity of a proposition") could also be challenged. To be sure, current AI tools operate, roughly, by calculating statistical probabilities among word sequences, and that may be insufficient for judgments of truth or falsity. Still, a future AGI (artificial general intelligence) tool, operating on some *other* principle, might close that gap. Such a tool may one day be both wholly mechanical *and* capable of assessing truth or falsity. Perhaps so, but for now this remains speculative. At present, the prevalence of AI "hallucinations" and biases suggests a lack of capacity to distinguish truth from falsity.

Coming back to our main theme, we can now see that by encouraging our students to use generative AI tools, and to rely on these tools for research and writing, we may be encouraging them to offload cognitive tasks by

means of a technology that merely simulates intelligence. Unfortunately, projecting intelligence upon such devices may serve to obscure the unthinking nature of the process by which its products have been produced, as well as the resulting unthinking in the user's mind, just as projecting the power of memory enhancement upon Theuth's letters could serve to obscure the resulting forgetfulness in the soul. The true balance of "utility or inutility" tends to become hidden from sight.

The character of the technology that we use enters the calculation of "utility and inutility" of cognitive offloading in other ways as well. As noted, Plato's general attack on the Sophists points to a risk regarding rhetorical uses of written language. Rhetoric creates opportunities for combining words without reference to their true definitions. Nevertheless, writing creates opportunities for cognitive enhancement far outweighing the risk of rhetoric or forgetfulness. By contrast, the benefits of AI tools are mostly in the products these tools create, and not in the users' cognition. AI tools regularly combine words statistically, without regard to their meaning and reference, risking not just forgetfulness, but much broader unthinking, or cognitive decline, in their users' minds. Letters are not themselves quasi-sophists; chatbots are **precisely** that. Plato's judgment that the art of writing (as well as literacy in general) may induce "forgetfulness in the soul" may be countered by pointing to the great utility of literacy in terms of enhancing not only memory but also learning, thinking, scholarship, science, and general enlightenment. One has only to think of the many cognitive skills that we now have but were not there before we "off loaded" memory to written documents: the capacity to read and write and thereby to interpret, think about, and discuss with others the documents we produce. By contrast, cognitive offloading by means of AI technology makes us dependent on an intelligence-simulating machine that replaces the need to think independently in terms of truth and falsity. Unlike old Theuth's letters, we offload by means of a technology that erodes not only memory but intelligence itself, specifically, the disposition to think of what we hear and read in terms of the truth and falsity of what we have heard and/or read.

So how are we to deal with Plato's dilemma in contemporary academe? Given that there is no question of our avoiding use of AI altogether (or luddite-like smashing the AI machines), how are we to avoid the creation of unthinking in our students' souls? While there is no single answer, and no single approach that would fit all, here are some suggestions.

First, the problem of cognitive offloading is independent of other ethical concerns. It occurs even where there is no actual cheating or dishonesty on the part of students. It is an ethical issue for *us*, the faculty, for it is *we* who incur the risk of unwittingly cheating our students out of a genuine cognitive development. And as in the cases of academic dishonesty—with which we can only deal by assuming (perhaps naively) that most students do not want to cheat and will resist temptations to do so in a well-functioning academic environment—so with regard to offloading, it can (or should) be assumed that most students do care about acquiring skills and competences, and would feel cheated to learn that the education they paid for had actually *de*-skilled them even while granting them a degree. So, the first suggestion is to get the students involved in addressing the problem. This could be done by education's traditional methods: exposing them to the problem, assigning relevant reading materials to the students, debating with them about the appropriate use of AI, and warning them of the negative consequences of its unthinking use.

Secondly, and less collaboratively, methods of testing should be developed, and facilitated, that separate students from machine performance. This could be done by reverting to old tactics such as the "in class, blue-book exam," or the oral exam, where the point is to test competence directly, separating it from unwanted contributions. As noted above, this tactic risks "throwing the baby out with the bath water" as autonomous research and writing would no longer be part of the students' training. But perhaps this could be overcome by creating longer in-class "writing sessions" where students would be trained and tested on writing pieces longer than answers to in-class exam questions and do so on topics or questions of their own.

Thirdly, methods of instruction should be changed. One might, for example, ask students to do an assignment twice—first without the aid of AI and then with some level of reliance on an AI tool. Once the student has finished doing the assignment with the use of AI, the student should then compare and evaluate the difference. (Clearly, the AI product will be better in some respects, but the student will not be "stupefied" by the process. The better product could spur the students to do better themselves the next time.)

These suggestions are not offered as proven methods, and perhaps they, too, fall short of addressing the real challenge of cognitive offloading. The principles, however, should be further developed, both the principle of student involvement and the principle of separating competence from performance in both teaching and assessing. Plato's Socrates offered the dialogical method of the *elenchus*—*separating* cognitive competence from linguistic performance—as a remedy to sophistry. That, too, where applicable, could be useful.

NOTES

1. Plato, *Phaedrus* 274–75. All quotations from the *Phaedrus* in this article are from this passage.

2. Gerlich, "AI Tools in Society." For more on the theory of cognitive offloading see Risko and Gilbert, "Cognitive Offloading."

3. See also Kosmyna et al., "Your Brain on ChatGPT," for a study of the effects of cognitive offloading at the level of brain activity. Their study looked at three groups performing a writing task, one working without technological aid, one using an AI tool, and one using a search engine. Electroencephalography (EEG) was used to record participants' brain activity in each of these groups in order to assess their cognitive engagement and cognitive load. The study found that brain activity was lowest in the AI-using group. The authors conclude: "In this study we demonstrate the pressing matter of a likely decrease in learning skills based on the results of our study. The use of LLM had a measurable impact on participants, and while the benefits were initially apparent, as we demonstrated over the course of 4 months, the LLM group's participants performed worse than their counterparts in the Brain-only group at all levels: neural, linguistic, scoring" (2).

4. Vallor, *AI Mirror*, 106–7. Vallor is referring to Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind."

5. Vallor, *AI Mirror*, 107. Vallor is referring to Heinrichs and Knell, "Aliens in the Space of Reasons?"

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