

Radical Intelligible Alterity and the Limit of Philosophy in Latin America

Response APA 2017

by Alejandro A. Vallega

I.

I would like to thank Ernesto Velásquez for having had the idea of discussing this book, for bringing us together, as well as for his generosity in reading it, teaching it, and now commenting on it. I would also like to thank Linda Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, both beacons in my work for more than fifteen years: They are gifts to us Latino/as and Latin American philosophers.

The book *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* has become for me a call to think beyond my means, a challenge that I am working to take up in my present and future work. Just like painters know that a painting at a certain point takes flight on its own, so it has happened with this book. This delights me and also makes me another reader of that book, a well-informed reader that by virtue of the book's force must recognize all kinds of omissions, difficulties, and possible paths... the omissions are certainly mine, the difficulties and paths opened by the book are our challenge.

II.

I would like to now turn to the responses. Among the themes broached by them I find some common concerns that either directly or in resonance with the book call for a further questioning and discussion:

- A. The meaning of the second part of the book's title: "radical exteriority."
- B. The sense of the phrase "coloniality of time."
- C. The meaning of the phrase "aesthetics of liberation" or "decolonial aesthetics."
- D. The political sense or implications opened by these first three elements of thought, as developed in the book. This an imperative in our treacherous political times.

For the sake of brevity, I will focus mainly on the first two, always keeping in play the question of aesthetic thought and of the political in it.

A. *Radical Exteriority as Radical Intelligible Alterity*

Radical exteriority and the question of a partisan book, these two themes take me back by necessity to some of the deeper currents that inform my thought and the work in the book. The thought of radical exteriority has at least three distinct forces behind. The first, the rising to power and the following obliteration of the first socialist

government democratically elected in Latin America, the “unidad popular” led by Salvador Allende. I had the fortune of coming to my political consciousness as a child by living through and participating in the coming to power of Allende’s democratic government. I also had the terrifying and eye/mind opening experience of seeing a society suffer the violence of a *coup d’état*: and I must add, since we are so close to Philadelphia and Washington, a *coup d’état* financed by the US government through the CIA, whose director was George H. W. Bush. What seemed to be a time of failure, loss beyond salvation, exclusion, and irrational violence proved to me to also bear the gift of experiencing courage, dignity, friendship, and creativity/imagination. This was my first lesson in aesthetics of liberation. The second moment extends to date, as I have lived in exile since I left Chile with my family in 1974. Living in exile, living through exilic experience involves a distinct sensibility that since then has informed my thought; hence my focus on “exilic thought” in my first book, that is, on a thinking and sense of being that cannot be grounded on a single and autonomous origin (even when that single horizon is time, as is the case in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*). Ultimately exilic thought points to identity as a transformative time-space always already in departures as identity claims are made. Third is my first encounter with Dussel at the University of Oregon in 2004. I went to the University of Oregon in order to participate in a very small conference in which a few of us (Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Eduardo Mendieta the other two invited speakers) had the opportunity to present papers on Dussel’s work to Dussel, who was to respond then to them. Instead of responding to each paper Dussel gave a lengthy talk on the origins of Latin American philosophy of liberation. I had been working on Continental European/North American philosophy for fifteen years, always aware that my insights came for deep Latin American memorial experiences, my privileged education in Latin America, and many other sources from the south. Giving papers, and in spite of my moderate success, I always felt that I carried a southern suitcase filled with surplus baggage I could never share with most of the public. As I listened to Dussel I realized that the experiences and thought I carried with me were a gift that was the ground for my thought: Thus, listening to Dussel’s narrative about the ideas behind philosophy of liberation I felt as if my head and my feet finally met, and there was a sense of earth in my thought I could now recognize in each word I found. I imagine I was not the only one to receive such an insight from Enrique Dussel’s thought, and I think is not inappropriate to say that not only I but many others owe this kind of relational revelation to him. Philosophy became direct then for me and a praxis since I could articulate and put out front what before seemed to have no space or be barely of consequence to traditional philosophy and its academia. At this point I also realized that Latin America was not outside or inside the Westernized mind, but that it was constitutive and at the same time beyond Westernized rationalist calculative pragmatism, neoliberalism, and globalization. Thus, Latin American thought and experiences proved to be “partigiani” in the original sense of providing articulate forms of resistance beyond Westernized thought: It is in this sense of transformative resistance, and only in this sense, that I can see the word “partisan” related to the book. As for Levinas, his thought came as an echo with Dussel’s thought, also through the critical approach to it in the work of Charles Scott, and Robert Bernasconi’s immense creative appropriation of it. Frankly the book’s main figures from Western thought are

Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. But it is Dussel's reception of Levinas that serves as one of the main turning points in the book.

In *Philosophy of Liberation* (1975-77) Dussel makes a beautiful differentiation between proximity and proxemia: to be human is to be not an entity among other entities (proxemic relation) but a being that is in its consciousness born in the most proximate strangeness (in proximity or approximation): from the mother's womb's on, one experiences the world and ultimately oneself first and foremost as the impossible proximity of that which one is not (this I would also call being-in-approximation).[1]

To be ethical is to take the risk to be/dwell in utmost proximity with that which is not even graspable for me. Before being rational we are dwellers in-the-world: Indeed, my identity is only possible by virtue of a pre-rational being-in-the-world which occurs as that proximate difference or being-in-approximation.[2] Ultimately, to meet anyone in justice is to approach them with this sense of strangeness, which bears the impossibility of controlling them, determining their identity, or, I would say, the impossibility of fully grasping them. Any one knowledgeable about Heidegger and Levinas can see their entanglement here. Now, the accent that I hear in Dussel and that I push further in the book is on *relational distinctness*, not on absolute otherness, on encounters in untranslatable distinctness in which identities configured as self-same and other. In other words, we are speaking about a thinking in and with distinctness, a thinking dynamic- in differenc-ing. This is a being-in-the-world or dwelling before identity, self, and its other and this logic are in place, operative. I should add that the book's (*Latin American Philosophy...*) lead is always relational and non-binary. As I see it, identity means being-in-approximation, not being autonomous, impermeable and complete, and it is this most proximate strangeness (which is not Levinasian "alterity") that I begin to introduce with the term "radical exteriority." I say not Levinasian because I do not separate totality and the other, nor does Dussel. And the fact that Dussel goes the way he does in developing his thought, a point with which I completely agree, does trace a path but he never abandons the sense of proximate relational distinctness that informs his insight concerning liberation in 1975-77.

Of course this is not the place to get into an interpretation of Dussel's thought. But I should add that my issue with Dussel's later work is that in 1975-77, with *Philosophy of Liberation*, he opens paths for a transformation of consciousness; not merely as another theory within philosophy but as an opening to rethink the very relational affective-rational grounds for thought (this is what is captivating for me about the radical proximity of alterity, as the ego cogito is exposed to a disseminating movement, of course these are my words and way of understanding alterity, not Dussel's.). However, then he must take a step back and develops a rationalist pragmatic approach to existence and in this sense he is pulled back well into Western/ized modalities of thought. I must underscore that I am speaking not of what Dussel says or his intention, but I am referring to the disposition or modalities of thought through which he engages the radical transformation he seeks. I have, for example, the turn of the *Ethics of Liberation* to analytical philosophy and second generation critical

theory. I also see that this turn towards rationalist critique and pragmatism is something necessary given Dussel's thought and position, as he himself has made clear interpolation in the discourse of the center is essential, and I concur as we run together and also in the sense that we collide. This is not an attack but I am underlining a limit in Dussel's thought for the sake of taking in another direction in liberatory thought: There is a pre-linguistic originary thinking that suffers the coloniality of power and bares potentials one cannot reach from Dussel's position (Dussel cannot get to what I call the aesthetic dimension of liberatory thought and the decolonial turn). In other words, there is a difference in sensibilities that is basic to my departure from Dussel; Heidegger calls it *Stimmung* (attunement) Ernesto Mays Vallenilla in *El Problema de America* calls it "temple." Here in terms of my work and Dussel's I must emphasize that I do not believe this is a question of who gets it right, or of Vallega vs. Dussel, as if one way should overcome all others. In my view, part of the walls of solitude of our time are sustained by the idea that at the end someone "tiene razon," one must have/posses and by given power by reason and hence holding meaning as power over all others. By contrast neither liberatory thought nor decoloniality may ever figure one ultimate way of thinking but they both are many-figured and distinct with each distinct circumstance (and I should open by virtue of their clear delimitation.)

The book takes up the term "radical exteriority" then because the term indicates a radical relationality beyond Being and other: There is a certain alterity already operative in the very claim to autonomous identity (for example, Western/ized racial identity), and yet this strangeness is at the same time ungraspable by the terms and delimitations that sustain the logic of the exclusive claim to an autonomous identity (the mestizo or border being are never a race).

I should underline a major implication from this: If one acknowledges this radical relationality with respect to the "autonomous", and the fact that "modernity" arises with the colonization of the Americas and the Transatlantic trade, then "Modernity" is exposed to a movement within and yet beyond it: In its being constituted by the ways of being and knowledges, the living temporalities that are silenced, excluded, undone in the name of rationalist-calculative modernity, i.e., in terms of Western/ized practical rationalism. This is because excluded and oppressed knowledges are senses of being/thinking and ways of being that although constitutive of Western modernity cannot be grasped or subsumed by it. In the uncovering of modernity at large Latin American thought and experience prove discontinuous and unsettling to the exclusive myth of an original Western modernity and its sovereignty over all senses of beings and humanity. This happens as the indigenous peoples', African, Judeo-Islamic lineages, *mulato*, *mestizo*, *criollo*, traditions, languages, lives, ways of being, prove to populate the very formation of modern consciousness and hence appear fecund undercurrents overwhelming modern Western thought with its ideal and epistemic expectations and limits: As lives, bodies, thoughts, and cosmologies appear in discontinuity with Western/ized thought/consciousness delimiting and unsettle Western/ized thought's centrality and power.

In this sense of radical exteriority, alterity implodes “the center,” “Being,” and the purity of the rational and Western modernity, as dissemination plays out the claims of autonomous, original, impermeable identity... to the point of the undoing of the identity/difference between Western identity/existence and its “other” (here I mean “other” in the sense of the comfortably difficult sense of the West’s (genitive) “other.”). What is *radical* about this sense of exteriority is that it is neither inside nor outside the colonial/invented difference between Western existence/consciousness and its other: this sense of exteriority refers to being outside of the dialectical power differential and yet not nothing in relation to the dialectic of same-other, Western- non-Western, civilized-uncivilized, mythic-scientific... To say it in Levinasian terms, and I believe in clear departure from Levinas, exteriority is in Being and beyond Being at once. This is the point of speaking of “radical exteriority,” this is the thought in play. At this point thought has been moved from the binary inside outside, Western- Non-Western into the question of the very *differing* that makes such difference and their identities possible. One could say that we have moved from the center-periphery schema of World System Theory to the question of how to think the colonial difference in its temporalizing-spacing eventuation. Another way of saying this among the many in Latin America is to say that we have to think the colonial difference from the wound of an interruption, from and as a dynamic broken locus of enunciation.[5]

The book’s title indicates a path from a traditional thinking that seeks identity (in the various registers configured by Westernized modernity and its logic (including its appropriation of Ancient thought), to a thinking that remains with the concrete movement of *configuring* difference and its identities. The issue is not difference but *differenc-ing*, accent in the gerundive/dynamic sense. It is the temporalizing movement through which identities and differences arise and come to pass, it is this transformative movement that interests me. Thinking with the timing-spacing that is consciousness in resonance with the identities sustained in that movement, *pensar con el estar-siendo*, this is the task, the difficulty for thought as I engage thought in Latin America and I turn towards “philosophy” in light of it. I say in Latin America because in my experience such ways of being and thinking take concrete specific articulate living forms in Latin American experiences and thought (obviously this is not to say that this does not occur in many other positions and registers elsewhere, but in Latin America I see it explicitly.)

I think that the appearing of alterity within and yet beyond Western/ized modernity happens as a figure of “radical intelligibility,” or as Bret Davis suggested to me as “radical intelligible alterity.” This radical intelligibility is not a matter of another history or way of thinking parallel to Western/ized consciousness (this is not about comfortable-ghettoizing pluralism), but with this appearing the very question of intelligibility becomes a matter of other presents and configurations of consciousness/identities that with their living movement de-center, undo, and transform Western/ized consciousness. At the same time, these configurations bear their own voices, formations, listening, silences, affectivities, imaginaries, practices,[6] and temporal and oneiric projections (desire-time projections, and directionality). This opening movement

leads me to “the coloniality of time” and to the decolonial turn the book makes in terms of temporality and history.

B. The Coloniality of Time and Asymmetrical Overlapping Temporalities: A Decolonial Turn with Respect to Temporality

Briefly, the coloniality of time underlies the colonial difference. The colonial difference is the modern version of the non-rational violent power differential established by the conquering of the Americas: A power differential in the form of the hierarchical relation between conqueror and conquered. In modernity this takes the naturalized racial form of Western superior identity/consciousness and its color inferior other. The Westernized mind imagines itself as the apogee of human existence. This establishes a self-absorbed narcissist consciousness. And under that narcissist gaze existence finds a new sense of linear historical time with three positions: A present that belongs to the most advanced consciousness (determined as our “now” and its goals for the further perpetuation of that almost hyper-human consciousness and way of being). A past that leaves behind all other senses of existence, ways of being, forms of being-in-the-world and their distinct access and configurations to/of senses of being: What is not of the now and its potential progress and goals becomes useless, practically meaningless (cultures, lineages, memorial experiences, oral traditions, cosmologies, imaginaries...). As for what is to come, the future can only be the burden of the Western/ized consciousness: White man’s, the Westernized mind’s burden. This linear sense of temporality is the coloniality of time: subtending and organizing, giving direction to the coloniality of power and knowledge (this is not a question of one form of coloniality before the other). Thus far I have followed Quijano’s account of coloniality of power and knowledge, and moving a step further, I have underlined temporality in order to make explicit and open for analysis “the coloniality of time.”[7]

The implications are many but one critical for us is that it would seem that because this sense of temporality is understood as reality, this lineal temporality is understood as the way “time is” (historical time, and transcendental time which sustains the first, and between the two exclude any other possibility). This single temporal line becomes the form of human consciousness through which experience becomes possible. The critical implication is that for as long as this sense of time determines consciousness, and its direction and goals for that matter, all “revolutionary” ideas, normative transformations, and forms of critique and resistance under it will remain wedded to the racist power differential, and eventually result in the same pattern of exclusion. Here is where we (Mendieta and I) get claustrophobic (with Quijano’s account), and in fact, even worse, many may find this story completely believable: an insurmountable nihilist abyss, at best the dream of “the end of history.” I should add that I believe that such an abyss underlies the present political situation in the United States: a politics of accumulation without change. But this is only one part of the point of exposing the coloniality of time.[7]

As in all decolonial thought, exposing a nexus of power not only leaves open its undoing, but in the interruption, erupts the unexpected, the unthought, the commonly unimaginable...

As Quijano points out, going back to Mariategui's work in 1927 (the same year of the publication of *Being and Time*), what is taken to be the past in the Western/ized imaginary and its temporality, what is supposed to have been left behind, and to now be useless, meaningless, in Latin America still forms part of consciousness and reality. [8] Latin American reality and consciousness work not only horizontally, in terms of present, past and future, but also vertically. That is, that which is thought past and meaningless according to Western/ized consciousness, history, and its logic, actively constitutes present consciousness and reality. For example, in Latin American economy bartering, slavery, feudalism, agriculture, industry, neoliberalism, all work together to form senses of value. Analogously this occurs with subjectivity, intersubjectivity, community, culture... Just to offer a couple examples: the city of Cuzco in Peru, where the ancient ordering of the *tawantinsuyu*, with the lines (*ceques*) that divided and oriented all activities of Inca life in sequence with cosmological movement overlap with the order imposed by colonial churches and houses, and with the contemporary disseminating movement of the contemporary city. One may also consider Ticio Escobar's exposure of Güarani masks as indigenous works of art that in their transformation are more dynamic than the so called contemporary art in Museums; and, last and most dramatically, Gloria Anzaldúa's transformative temporalizing relationship with existence through her body.[9]

The uncovering of the coloniality of time ultimately exposes an opening to senses of temporality that cannot be fitted into Westernized conceptions of linear history. In terms of history and time, and the implications for philosophy, I think that the chapter titled "Yucatán" is clear, and in fact central to the thought being developed in the book.

C. Towards a Decolonial Liberatory Aesthetic Thought

One implication is that thinking becomes a task that seeks to remain with the overlapping, encroaching, cancelations, doublings of distinct ways of being and senses of life as *lived*. And lives do not only occur through the agency of individual subjects and their rationality, but in the discrete specificity of pluriversal encounters, in relational movements through which meanings, subjectivities, communities, and intersubjectivities are negotiated, lost, and re-founded in tensions and encroachments that go well before and after the consciousness of the Western/ized now.

At this point one may turn to thinking with the temporalizing movement in the arising of consciousness, with imaginaries, desires, shifting archetypes, involuntary memory, emotions, with the unfolding of affectivities and bodies through which meanings and histories come to pass in beautiful-impossible-necessary namings. Thinking with these registers of living-dying,[10] of coming to be in passing in concrete distinctness, this is what I would call aesthetic thought: What Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui calls a thought that is *senti-pensante*. [11] Coloniality works on our consciousness body-

heart-minds at these levels. And it is here along these registers and dynamics that one finds decolonizing liberatory aesthetic thought necessary and also possible. A task at the edge of philosophy and identity, a task sought in our *estar-siendo*, sought with and in the modalities of inhabiting (*estar*) in which the senses of time/history/space arise, a task of a thinking *senti-pensante* from and in which perhaps one may begin to understand such impossible words as “Latin America” and “philosophy.”[13]

Una vez más, muchísimas gracias.

Notes

[1] Dussel, Enrique. *Filosofía de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2011; chapter Two; 44-5.

[2] This is the moment when, granted the major difference between the two European thinkers, Dussel, Heidegger, and Levinas cross paths.

[3] “Western/ized” simultaneously indicates Western traditional rationalism as well as its forms in the colonial context of colonized and westernized minds and their vision of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and nature.

[4] Which incidentally I believe is what Heidegger is trying to think in his own way and from his own concrete situation in his later thought, both in *Contributions to Philosophy* as well as his work on poetry and thought.

[5] I take this nomenclature from Walter Mignolo. Vallega, Alejandro *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009-2010; 176-77.

[6] I understand practice or praxis, as the approximation to proximity/strangeness. “*La praxis es esto y nada más: un aproximarse a la proximidad.*” Dussel, Enrique. *Filosofía de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2011; 46.

[7] Quijano, Aníbal. “Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina,” *La Colonialidad del Saber, Eurocentrismo y Ciencias Sociales*. Ed. Edgardo Lander. Buenos Aires: Consejo Americano de Ciencias Sociales, 2000; 201-46. In English: “Coloniality of Power, Ethnocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla*, vol.1, number 3, 2000; 533-80. See also: “Colonialidad y Modernidad/Racionalidad,” *Perú Indígena*, vol. 13, número 29, Lima, 1992.

[8] Quijano, Aníbal. *Modernidad, Identidad y Utopía en América Latina*. Quito, Ecuador: Editorial El Conejo, 1990. In English: “Modernity, Identity and Utopia in Latin America,” *Boundary 2* 20:3, 1993.

[9] Escobar, Ticio. *El mito del arte y el mito del pueblo*. Santiago, Chile: Editorial Metales Pesados, 2008. Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Duke University Press, 2015.

[10] I take this term from the work of Charles Scott, and I understand it to engage the concrete temporalizing movement that occurs with and beyond the human concerns and rational consciousness.

[11] See, Rivera Cusicanqui, Silvia. *Hambre de Huelga: Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa y otros textos*. Querétalo, México: La mirada Salvaje, 2014; 88-9.

As I have indicated in my response during the SPEP session on the book: "This is a task that leaves such separation as body and soul, civilized-uncivilized, scientific-superstitious/ritualistic behind, as body and mind must be brought to be thought in concrete movements of existence beyond the subjective rational subject, cognitive fact, and rationality as a calculative rational tool. Already in *Sense and Finitude* (Vallega, 2010) I worked on exposing philosophy to aesthetic experience, but in the Latin American book thought, lives, and ways of being occur in configurations that require attentiveness, listening, sense they are given beyond the binomial system of reason or the teleological affective psychology that undergirds westernized rationalism." "Towards a Situated Liberatory Aesthetic Thought, a Response" *Comparative and Continental Philosophy Review*, special issues: *Dislodging Eurocentrism and Racism from Philosophy*, forthcoming, Spring 2017.

[12] On the Aesthetic turn see: Vallega, Alejandro. "Exordio/Exordium: for an Aesthetics of Liberation out of Latin America Experience," *Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, Vol.18, number 1, Spring 2014, 125-40.

Ernesto Velásquez makes every good point about the "this is not America" sign at Time Square, amid the clutter and Boise of neoliberal capitalism the sign cannot decenter the totality; however, the image does make an impression that is dissonant and displacing. But the "image this is not America" is only an introduction to the displacement that occurs when Jaar presents the Rwanda Project in his installation at Overdam space in Milan, Italy. (See: Vallega, Alejandro *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009-2010; 214-16.).

[13] Here "estar" refers to the work of Rodolfo Kusch. See: Kusch, Rodolfo. *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América*. Tr. María Lugones. Ann Arbor: Duke University Press, 2010.