

Sor Juana's Solitude: A Case Study in Existentialist Syncretism

by John Kaiser Ortiz

English Abstract

Octavio Paz's normative chronicle of the life and thought of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is acutely modeled, I argue, on Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's existentialist methodology, principally with regard to the latter's account of the relationship between selfhood and circumstances. Through his existentialist transfiguration of the principle of *sincretismo*, or the view that moral regeneration gets enacted by individual selves in order to transform and redeem their selfhood despite restrictive historical circumstances, Paz articulates a uniquely pan-American theory of the nature of the self. As a form of moral criticism, existentialist syncretism exemplifies how solitude and the search for communion bear particularly on the lives of modern women. It is therefore beneficial to think of Paz's engagement with Sor Juana as a syncretic existentialist critique of modern trans-Atlantic selfhood, one that has noteworthy implications for universal human identity.

Resumen en español

Mi argumento en este artículo es que la crónica normativa de la vida y el pensamiento de Sor Juan Inés de la Cruz escrita por Octavio Paz está basada en la metodología existencialista de José Ortega y Gasset, particularmente en la relación que este establece entre la identidad y las circunstancias. A través de su transfiguración existencialista del principio del *sincretismo*, la idea de que la regeneración moral es efectuada por individuos en busca de transformación y redención por encima de las restricciones impuestas por las circunstancias históricas, Paz articula una teoría sobre la naturaleza de la identidad (el sujeto) que es únicamente panamericana. Como crítica moral, el sincretismo existencialista es un ejemplo de cómo la soledad y la búsqueda de comunión impactan la vida de las mujeres modernas. Es por lo tanto importante pensar en el trabajo de Paz sobre Sor Juana como una crítica sincrética-existencialista de la identidad transatlántica moderna, con implicaciones importantes sobre la identidad humana universal.

Resumo em português

Meu argumento nesse artigo é de que a crônica normativa da vida e do pensamento de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz escrita por Octavio Paz é baseada na metodologia existencialista de José Ortega y Gasset, principalmente em sua relação com a visão do mesmo sobre a relação entre a identidade e as circunstâncias. Através de sua transfiguração existencialista do princípio do *sincretismo*, a idéia de que a regeneração moral é efetuada por indivíduos em busca da transformação e transformação de suas identidades a pesar das restrições de circunstâncias históricas, Paz articula uma teoria sobre a natureza da identidade (self?) que é unicamente panamericana. Como crítica

moral, o sincretismo existencialista é um exemplo de como a solidão e a busca por comunhão têm impacto na vida das mulheres modernas. Assim sendo, é importante pensar sobre a discussão do trabalho de Sor Juana por Paz como uma crítica sincrética-existencialista da identidade trans-atlântica moderna, com implicações importantes sobre a identidade humana universal.

The Conquest left great masses of Indians in spiritual orphanhood. This situation of total psychic dispossession made possible their conversion to Christianity; baptism was the path by which they could become part of the religious, juridical, and political order of New Spain...[it] opened the doors to the new society and at the same time was the return passage to the ancient sacred world. Indians became Christians; the Christians' god, virgins, and saints were Indianized. From the beginning Indian Christianity was an instinctive and popular form of syncretism. This syncretism profoundly influenced the beliefs of criollos and mestizos. (Paz 1998, 31)

Introduction

With *Sor Juana, or the Traps of Faith* (1982), Octavio Paz envisioned “a book that would be simultaneously a study of the age in which she lived and a consideration of her life and her works, a blend of history, biography, and literary criticism” (Paz 1988, vi). In the shadows of Paz's portrait of Sor Juana, however, can be found discernible traces of Spanish existentialist philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's ideas on the interplay between history and human agency. By providing a historical analysis of the seventeenth century Spanish viceregal court in New Spain with an eye towards the Inquisition in the Americas, Paz pursues a critique of modernity that embraces but also converts Ortega y Gasset's doctrine of selfhood and circumstances, a standpoint that falls under the umbrella of what the Spanish philosopher termed the method of generations, i.e., the view that generational attitudes towards concrete actualities are constitutive of selfhood but are dynamic and so change with each generation. One purpose of this essay, then, is to investigate Ortega y Gasset's existentialist methodology as Paz adopts it in order to illuminate the life of Sor Juana. Another purpose of this essay is to chart the trans-Atlantic pulse that pumps blood into the heart of Paz's critique of modernity, including the constraining but still redeeming circumstances within which Sor Juana's selfhood was positioned.

Paz's chronicle of the life and thought of Sor Juana is acutely modeled on Ortega y Gasset's existentialist methodology. As an existentialist critique of modern trans-Atlantic selfhood, Paz's engagement with Sor Juana has noteworthy implications for ideas about trans-Atlantic, pan-American, and universal human identity, or how human

beings find ethical footing even in situations that appear to hold adversative value to the growth and development of the self. Ortega y Gasset's influence on Paz's sense that historical circumstances are the constitution and chemistry of selfhood merits inspection given the historical relationship between Spain, New Spain, and Mexico—a relationship befouled by five hundred years of colonial domination and cultural/psychological abuse. Another reason why Paz's philosophical commitments in *Sor Juana* warrant closer study is because scholars of the first modern, pan-American female poet of the Americas seem to overlook her significance as a source for syncretic existentialist accounts of personal/national/global identity (trans)formation.

If Paz amends Ortega y Gasset's doctrine of selfhood and circumstances to generate what I am calling a syncretic, existentialist, and feminist critique of the structure of women's experience, then this change involves a cross-cultural translation of the Spanish existentialist's principles that get filtered through Paz's re-formulation and transfiguration of Orteguian concepts in decidedly New-Spanish but also non-Spanish (and eventually Mexican) terms. In my view, Paz is more attentive, biographically speaking, than Ortega y Gasset to the transformative moral aptitude of individuals who are fundamentally at odds with their circumstances. Paz nevertheless echoes Ortega y Gasset in his articulation of the principle according to which selves may rise above yet still fall below the social mores, political freedoms, and forbidden/permitted utterances to which questions of identity and selfhood are indelibly tied. *Sincretismo is above all an instance of moral regeneration enacted by individual selves in order to transform and redeem their selfhood despite restrictive historical circumstances.* Because *sincretismo* assumes the comportment of moral criticism, it exemplifies the ways in which encounters with the problem of solitude and the search for communion bear particularly on the lives of women. Accordingly, the stamp of Ortega y Gasset's conceptual framework on Paz's biographical landscape offers insight into the scope of trans-Atlantic existentialism. One particularly important insight concerns how the reception of European ideas on gendered as well as generational identity get critically re-interpreted then re-drawn according to affectively witnessed ways in which humanity grows enabled/disabled by states, cultures, and societies across distinctive moments in place, space, and time.

This essay proceeds in two stages. The first section delineates the principle of *sincretismo* as a form of existentialist methodology. In the second section, I examine Paz's philosophical narrative in *Sor Juana* and use the principle of *sincretismo* to help account for her exceptionally solitary being.

***Sincretismo* and Paz's Critique of Modernity:**

Paz prefaces *Sor Juana* by stating that when he started writing around 1930 "her poetry was no longer a mere historical relic but had once again become a living text" (Paz 1988, v). He began to read her again while living in Paris in 1950 (Paz 1988, v), the same year he published *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*, hereafter *Laberinto*). While the themes of orphanhood and solitude dominating

Laberinto would get resurrected in *Sor Juana*, piecing together both works has not yet (at least to my knowledge) been adequately charted. (In future essays I hope to examine not only the critical relationship between *Laberinto* and *Sor Juana*, but also explore in greater detail Ortega y Gasset's influence on Paz's work.) Compatible with what Patrick Romanell claims is "the pivotal idea of [Ortega y Gasset's] whole philosophy" (Romanell 1967, 151), the Orteguian sensibility Paz evokes when he discusses Sor Juana in *Laberinto* was already couched in terms of Ortega y Gasset's eponymous claim in *Meditations on Quixote* that "I am myself plus my circumstances; if I do not save it, I do not save myself" (Ortega y Gasset 1961, 45). Ortega y Gasset explains that "Man reaches his full capacity when he acquires complete consciousness of his circumstances," for "Through them he communicates with the universe" (Ortega y Gasset 1961, 41). *Laberinto* routinely describes Sor Juana's solitude in terms of Ortega y Gasset's existentialist methodology: "All of her being responded to what the times could ask of a woman" (Paz 1985, 111); "Sor Juana affirmed her times, and her times affirmed themselves in her" (Paz 1985, 111). Paz's overview of Sor Juana in *Laberinto* consequently provides the stage but not the performance for her syncretistic rebirth and existentialist reawakening in *Sor Juana*.

Sor Juana, or The Traps of Faith can be summarized as an existentialist, syncretic, and feminist account of trans-Atlantic/pan-American identity (trans)formation that is as much the apotheosis of an elusive poet as it is a historical personification of her times. The syncretic tensions that shaped Sor Juana's life and thought were experienced as irreconcilable constraints on her sense of self: between her status as a woman and her proximity to the Spanish viceregal court; between her thirst for knowledge and her duties as a nun; between her stigma as an illegitimate child and her fame in society; between her intellectual ambition and the humility expected of her by ecclesiastical authorities; and between her status as a woman and the fact that she lived in a society that denied women roles as protagonists.[1] Paz's idiosyncratic contribution in *Sor Juana* rests, then, on the reification of *sincretismo* towards an integrative account of biographical selfhood.

Paz's unshakable commitment to criticism in all forms underscores the practical import of *sincretismo*; it answers the question about life's meaningfulness for selves in action. But since modernity has manifested a conspicuous reality wherein individuals get trapped in a cycle of solitude that quashes promises of communion, *sincretismo* becomes expedient for holding individuals as much as societies and institutions accountable for these conditions and realities. Paz is unequivocally critical of the moral bankruptcy of modernity precisely because it engenders an excess of solitude that contributes to a sense of life's meaninglessness. He writes, "this system does not answer the basic questions that people have posed themselves since they have been on earth. All can be summarized in the following: What is the sense of my life and where am I going?" (Paz 1999, 88). According to Paz, modernity has disrupted the balance human beings have always sought in terms of leading conscientious lives. In turn, communion gets emptied of its promise as modernity "has led us into the mazes of a

nightmare, in which the torture chambers are endlessly repeated in the mirrors of reason" (Paz 1985, 212).

Sincretismo represents Orteguian existentialist methodology in action. As such, *sincretismo* stands for the lived/felt harmonization of extremes, fusion of differences, and reconciliation of opposites that find their form in and content through the shape and substance of particular individuals (e.g., Sor Juana). What makes Paz's development of the principle of *sincretismo* significant—and what distinguishes Paz's existentialist syncretism from established anthropological and ecclesiastical uses of the term (where syncretism simply indicates the merging of Christian/European religious belief and practice with native American/African/non-European traditions)—is the normative synchronization he seeks to strike between selfhood and circumstances. Indeed, Paz's development of *sincretismo* introduces existentialist, biographical, and feminist elements into the standard equation, and this renders his account more expansive than common usage. *Sincretismo* thus symbolizes an implied process of growth for individual selves in action that lays the foundation for what I am calling Paz's critique of trans-Atlantic existentialist selfhood, one that gestures toward universal human identity. Paz's account of universal human identity is rooted in what he claims is the fundamental human need for a sense of connectedness or belonging in the world, one that should (ideally) give us the feeling that we are leading consequential lives.

As a principle of moral criticism, *sincretismo* draws on epistemological and metaphysical practice. *Sincretismo* doubly signifies 1) the process of knowledge for selves in action and 2) an account of the structure and meaning of lived/felt experience. As an existentialist principle that encourages growth and transformation through criticism, *sincretismo* can be viewed as the union of disparities (tenets, dispositions, histories, values) underlying the lived/felt experience (acts, occurrences, iterations, recollections) of selves in action, and this occurs at the same time that *sincretismo* materializes the social process of history in general. *Sincretismo*, in other words, stands for the harmonizing of the extremes of lived experience towards self-realization. This includes one's own sense of personal identity as it stands above social/political undercurrents that are witnessed from a given historical context and geographical setting. Sor Juana's existential solitude forms the first part of Paz's account of selfhood; the second part is to be found through the ways in which Sor Juana's solitude gets spacialized, that is, both engendered and encumbered by the historical circumstances of her place and time.

Sincretismo bears on a theory of self in two ways. First, *sincretismo* anticipates the process of growth experienced by selves in action toward identity (trans)formation. *Sincretismo* in this sense stands for an understanding of lived/felt experience that leads to a coherent balance between the extremes of solitude and communion as these are known and experienced at the individual or personal level. Second, *sincretismo* clarifies historical changes in the structure of our society and our day-to-day relations so that these may be re-written (or translated) and experienced anew across different cultures, religions, and worldviews from one generation, culture, or place to the next. *Sincretismo*

pertains to both the individual experience of history and the universal process of history, and it expressly concerns the moral transformations that generations and cultures embody (and idealize) over time. I mean to distinguish the process of individual or personal growth from the wider process of social/historical growth as a way of demarcating the two main routes of growth postulated by *sincretismo*.

Paz's critique of modernity vouchsafes the practical moral import of *sincretismo* as a principle that accounts for these twinned processes of growth. The process of growth Paz corroborates, discusses, and exemplifies in *Sor Juana* conveys what he calls criticism, especially moral criticism. By moral criticism I mean the practical need individuals as well as societies share for attuning moral evaluation of themselves and others toward a viewpoint that is sympathetic rather than hostile to the ways in which circumstances help yet hinder our wishes for autonomy or personal freedom. Of course we make choices. And I agree absolutely with Ortega y Gasset that we choose our destinies, that each of us is ultimately responsible for the direction our lives take. I likewise agree with his claim that, regardless of how we got there, our salvation, in the final analysis, depends on our ability to redeem our selves plus our circumstances; you cannot save one without the other; the two are inseparable. But the objective realities that cushion and condition our election clearly bend or pull us in directions that are not always (at least not entirely) of our own choosing. Being responsible for our selves—existentially, morally responsible—implies that we question the arrangement, time after time. Formally speaking, moral criticism represents the applied existentialist methodology that Ortega y Gasset furnishes (and Paz adopts) through his claim that we are our selves plus our circumstances. It follows from this that moral criticism lays the groundwork for determining the extent to which our lives promise redemption.

Whereas Paz claims that how individuals answer the question of life's meaningfulness involves a cyclically repeated encounter between the opposite extremes characterizing human as well as historical experience (e.g., solitude and communion), *sincretismo* designates the universal, historical process whereby we grow as individuals (and as communities, societies, nations, members of the same species) at the same time that we grow as members of a certain generation. This is a key point. To the extent that the account of *sincretismo* I have delivered up to now is drawn from Paz's biography of Sor Juana (which I turn to in the next section), I want to stress that my configuration of existentialist syncretism attempts to fill-in-the-gaps left by scholars who have written on either or both Mexican poets (e.g., Sor Juana and Octavio Paz). Surprisingly, not all *sorjuanistas* find Paz's biography deserving of comment. Stephanie Kirk, for example, who has written cogently on Sor Juana, makes no mention of Paz's biography even though her characterization of Sor Juana's solitude clearly parrots the existentialist syncretism of Paz and Ortega y Gasset.[2] Kirk writes, "Sor Juana, although singular in her genius and desire to promote women's capacity for knowledge, was a product of her time" (Kirk 2008, 40). Importantly, Kirk examines how Sor Juana "delves into an exploration of an unequivocally female body and its relationship to pain" (Kirk 2008, 51) as another means with which to infiltrate what Stephanie Merrim (whom Kirk cites) describes as the "city of knowledge," or the metaphorical space in

colonial Mexico that excluded women (Kirk 2008, 37; See also Merrim 1999, 194). From this perspective, the contribution I hope this essay makes to the secondary literature on Sor Juana and Octavio Paz is to draw out the presupposition of existentialist syncretism as an unconcealed method of analysis and interpretation.

Continuing with this line of reasoning, Canadian political scientist Yvon Grenier wrote an astute monograph over a decade ago on Paz's contributions to the critical discourse on modernity, politics, and the arts. But Grenier too does not travel as far as I am attempting to go with the existentialist methodology I think Paz's work summons. Indeed, I am claiming that what Grenier and others who write primarily for North American and European audiences seem to miss in Paz's work in general and in *Sor Juana* in particular are the nuanced applications of Orteguian existentialist methodology.

Grenier touches on the significance of Paz's notion of *sincretismo* when he promises to develop "a new synthesis of Paz's political thought, one that attempts to capture its syncretism and its tensions" (Grenier 2002, xi). Grenier adds that through an analysis of Paz's syncretism, "one begins to see how a recognition of the fundamental ambivalence of life, captured in art in general and literature in particular, is useful for thinking conceptually about politics." Importantly, Grenier avows, "Paz offers a constructive and original criticism of both modernity and liberalism from what could be called the poet's perspective" (Grenier 2002, xii). But although Grenier mentions the term syncretism on several occasions (Grenier 2001, xi, xii [twice]; as 'syncretic conjugation' on 10; 126), he never provides a working definition of syncretism, thereby leaving readers to assume what can only be standard textbook (and non-existentialist) usage of the term. Moreover, while Grenier briefly alludes to Ortega y Gasset's influence on Paz in a footnote, which was suggested to him by a colleague (Grenier 2001, 69), he only remarks that Paz was sometimes critical of Ortega y Gasset, both of whom Grenier believes represent "the two most important and universal thinkers of the Spanish-speaking world in the twentieth century" (Grenier 2001, 69).

Grenier's project is philosophically valuable because his work is a broadly written text that seeks above all to initiate discussions on the relevance of Paz's political thought to our own (Grenier 2002, ix). Grenier clearly seeks to tie the political problems of our age to what Paz felt was the unique promise of harmonizing the extremes dominating modernity. Multiple reasons exist for imagining that *sincretismo* opens new corridors for theorizing the political. Grenier gives two reasons why Paz's work "offers a truly valuable contribution to the understanding of contemporary politics" (Grenier 2002, 125-127). Grenier's first reason obliquely raises the question of universal human identity. He writes, "We often forget that political ideologies are not exclusively made of political ingredients" (Grenier 2002, 126). Grenier explains that "much of today's antipathy toward globalization, for instance, stems from a romantic anxiety before the standardized and planetary triumph of the impersonal over the personal" (Grenier 2002, 126). Globalization becomes, therefore, a constructive notion to measure Paz's worldview against because it underscores the importance of linking *sincretismo* to universal human identity. Grenier's second reason is that "Paz teaches us not to be

afraid of paradoxes" (Grenier 2002, 127). Hence, "Modernity is at the center of what constitutes Paz's reflections on his time, and only part of it has direct political resonance" (Grenier 2002, 78). Elaborating on what Paz sees as conditions for the possibilities of salvation through *sincretismo* requires that we turn to a closer examination Sor Juana's selfhood and circumstances.

The attributes Paz assigns to modernity anthropomorphize the same qualities characteristic of individuals who are both in search of themselves and their life's meaning. "Modernity is a word in search of its meaning," Paz affirms in his Nobel Prize lecture (1990), a claim that broadens the scope of Mexican national identity to include universal human identity. But while "modernity has been a universal passion" (Paz 1995, 259), this passion has been neither rescued nor ransomed, for Mexican and modern Europeans alike, and this was a longstanding concern for Paz's treatment of the problem of solitude. This lack of redemption has led to a sense of incompleteness or insolvency that raises the specter of solitude. Earlier, in *Children of the Mire* (1974, hereafter *Children*), a text based on his 1972 Charles Eliot Norton lectures and published midway between *Laberinto* and *Sor Juana*, Paz fleshed out the modern origins of the problem of solitude:

The modern age is a separation....each generation repeats the act by which we were founded, and in its repetition we deny and renew ourselves. Separation unites us with the original movement of our society, and severance throws us back on ourselves...we search for ourselves in otherness, find ourselves there, and as soon as we become one with this other whom we invent and who is our only reflection, we cut ourselves off from this phantom being, and run again in search of ourselves, chasing our own shadow. (Paz 1974, 27-28)

Paz is overtly critical of modernity precisely because its "unending movement forward," that which we call progress, frustrates the realization of our potentiality as human beings and becomes instead the arrested development of our selves and the stagnation of the societies to which we severally belong (Paz 1999, 88). Hence, modernity "is a polemical tradition which displaces the tradition of the moment, whatever it happens to be, but an instant later yields its place to still another tradition which in turn is a momentary manifestation of modernity" (Paz 1974, 1).

Paz's critique of modernity depicts modern selfhood as one whose silhouette is communion but whose shadow is solitude. This means that in mirroring Sor Juana's seventeenth century self as an archetypal reflection of modern, universal human identity, Paz switches his footing from one that balances individual experience to the other now bearing the weight of historical experience. The fact that all human beings face extremes of solitude and communion only explains one half of the problematic condition for Paz. The other half resides in the fact that certain societies and peoples of the world arrogate superiority and thereby the right to dominance over the rest of the world's population. In *Children*, Paz claims that "Every time the Europeans and their North American descendants have encountered other cultures and civilizations, they have called them *backward*. This is not the first time a race or a civilization has imposed

its forms on others, but it is certainly the first time one has set up as a universal ideal, not a changeless principle, but change itself" (Paz 1974, 20). In other words, the value Paz ascribes to this principle of change is one that accounts for the origins of the problem of solitude.

Existentialist syncretism emphasizes that, from beginning to end, we come to know ourselves, the world, and others through local circumstances. But since modern experience gets defined by extremes of lived/felt contradiction, our potential for self-realization gets undermined, for example, by warfare and other forms of ideological conflict. Paz's insight here underscores that Europeans and North Americans habitually view other nations and peoples as *backward*, thereby assuming a colonialist standpoint, one that exposes these claims of universal human identity as severely limited by the internal social/political exclusions that shape the global environment:

The contradiction that corrodes universalist ideologies and inevitably ends by destroying them is that they do not, in fact, transcend the specific social entities we call nations, classes, peoples, and ethnic and cultural groups. New Spain is a good example of this commonplace: from within the bosom of a vast philosophical, political, and religious universalism—imperial Spain—emerged the *criollo* sense of a distinct identity that evolved into Mexican nationalism. (Paz 1988, 30)

While this passage authenticates the principle of *sincretismo* as the commingling of historical and philosophical factors pertaining to the nature of selfhood, when framed in terms he uses at the beginning of *Children*, Paz affirms that as a polemical tradition "Modernity is never itself; it is always the *other*" (Paz 1974, 1).

Paz's idea of moral criticism and his broader critique of modernity appear to be tied to his understanding of the interplay between both forms of *sincretismo*. He writes, "History is a theater in which a single person, humanity, becomes many: servants, masters, bourgeois, mandarins, clergymen, peasants, workers...History is a discourse" (Paz 1990, 129). For Paz, it takes people with genuine experience to hew meaningful interactions between themselves, the world, and others. The moral process of growth cannot be fabricated through the empty principles of formulaic philosophical systems. Speaking of the twentieth century, Paz claims that, "Our age is distinguished from other epochs and other societies by the image we have made of time. For us time is the substance of history, time unfolds in history" (Paz 1974, 9). He adds, "The meaning of 'the modern tradition' emerges more clearly: it is an expression of our historic consciousness. It is a criticism of the past...an attempt, repeated several times throughout the last two centuries, to found a tradition on the only principle immune to criticism, because it is the condition and the consequence of criticism: change, history" (Paz 1974, 9). Modernity thus presents everyone with inimitably normative possibilities for redemption.

The Redemptive Extremes of Sor Juana's Solitude

Born out of wedlock on the volcanic foothills of the Valley of Mexico in either 1651 or 1648, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was given the name Juana Ramirez de Asbaje by her mother, Doña Isabel Ramirez de Santillana, and father, Pedro Manuel de Asbaje y Vargas Machuca (Paz 1988, 65). On 24 February 1669, after passing her youth in the service of the viceregal court and “not yet twenty-one,” “she took the veil in the convent of San Jeronimo” (Paz 1988, 99). While no one factor explains her choice to become a nun, Paz lists “her bastardy, her poverty, and the absence of her father” (Paz 1988, 107)—her orphanhood—as among the reasons triggering her decision. In over twenty years of life in the convent, she wrote poems, plays, essays, and spirited religious pamphlets, and enjoyed the distinction of her beauty, wit, and talents. But as hers was an age of Inquisition, Sor Juana faced censorship from prelates and other ecclesiastical authorities, which precipitated her renunciation of all literary endeavors before her ultimate death. She died on 17 April 1695 at the age of forty-six after having valiantly attended to her sisters during an unknown epidemic in which “nine nuns died out of every ten who fell ill” (Paz 1988, 2, 464). The absence of an environment of human flourishing seems, in Sor Juana's case, to have fueled a rare flame of industrious passion.

Sor Juana's solitude suggests a negative process of growth that nonetheless had affirmative consequences for her identity. That solitude might be misinterpreted as a fluke across her many public and private lives shows, on the contrary, how the circumstances from which Sor Juan fashioned her self-identity are consistent with the sequestered struggle to preserve herself. A metonym, at times, for self-imposed solitary confinement, day-to-day life in the convent supplied the existentialist syncretic circumstances of solitude that braced the moral backbone of Sor Juana's middle-aged existence. Seen along these lines, redemption requires a transcendence of the physical as well as spiritual limits of the historical circumstances in which one lives. If Sor Juana's orphanhood led her to idealize different states or scenarios of belonging that might have assured her redemption, then her solitude echoed her private but also universal human longing for love and communion.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the existentialist syncretism Paz substantiates in *Sor Juana* has been widely assumed by scholars to be the hagiographical standard for Sor Juana studies. As I mentioned earlier, Paz has not always received credit (and still does not) for articulating the terms of existentialist syncretism in colonial and contemporary Mexico. However, on this point there is an abundance of evidence for the parallel claim that Texan scholar Dorothy Schons, whom Georgina Sabat-Rivers describes as “la erudita y primera sorjuanista de Estados Unidos” (Sabat-Rivers 1985, 928), also deserves at least partial credit, which Paz readily grants, for being a pioneering *sorjuanista*. In the Appendix to *Sor Juana* (See Paz 1988, 503-504), Paz laments, “Unfortunately, Dorothy Schons did not gather her observations, scattered in several articles, into a book” (Paz 1998, 504). However, Paz clearly tips his hat to Schons, crediting her for having initiated critical studies of Sor

Juana and, more specifically, for having published work “which was the first reasoned inquiry into the three principal mysteries in Sor Juana’s life: Why did she take the veil? What was her real name, Juana Ramírez or Juana de Asbaje? Why, at the height of her fame and intellectual maturity, did she renounce literature?” (Paz 1988, 503-504; See also Schons 1925). Intriguingly, Sabat-Rivers takes issue with Paz’s claim that Schons did not complete said manuscript, claiming that the unpublished work, entitled “Sor Juana: A Chronicle of Old Mexico,” was bequeathed to a Texas library (Sabat-Rivers 1985, 928). Sabat-Rivers cites a passage from Schons’s extant foreword where the latter claims that Sor Juana “was undoubtedly one of the earliest of American Feminists...She was not only a feminist but a writer of great charm and distinction, and one of the outstanding women of learning in the colonial world” (Sabat-Rivers 1985, 929). Others agree. According to Stephanie Kirk, “Sor Juana wants to write herself into the system of knowledge of the period, but does so...through a subtle inversion of the system’s own models” (Kirk 2008, 40). Similarly, José Quiroga proposes that “Paz sees Sor Juana as a victim of the closed and hermetic universe of colonial times—a writer who is a product of her context, and who at the same time was crushed by it” (Quiroga 1999, 81). For Paz, “the life and work of Juana Inés can be summed up in a single sentence: knowledge is a transgression committed by a solitary hero who is then punished” (Paz 1988, 85).

“There was an insoluble contradiction,” Paz confesses, “between Sor Juana and her world” (Paz 1988, 476). “On the one hand,” he writes, “the society in which Sor Juana lived—her culture, her ethic, her social hierarchies—help us to understand her; on the other, it conceals her from us” (Paz 1988, 226). Paz concludes that “understanding the work of Sor Juana demands an understanding of her life and her world;” correspondingly, “An understanding of Sor Juana’s work must include an understanding of the prohibitions her work confronts;” for that reason, Paz surmises that “almost always in spite of themselves, writers violate that code and say what cannot be said, what they and they alone *must* say” (Paz 1988, 6-7). In this sense, Sor Juana’s life evokes what Leo Strauss called the sociology of knowledge, a phrase meant to draw attention to writers, especially philosophers and theologians like Maimonides, who realize the threat of persecution whenever the contrast between their critical thoughts and the prevailing mores of their age stand face-to-face. In Strauss’s words, “persecution...gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines” (Strauss 1980, 25). Julie A. Bokser contends, in the same way, that Sor Juana “was a prolific writer of poetry, drama, and prose...she was necessarily adept at political rhetoric” (Bokser 2006, 5). Perhaps with these considerations in mind, Amy Oliver speaks fluently on behalf of *sorjuanista* sentiment in the early twenty-first century: Sor Juana “had a first-rate philosophical mind and has become a powerful symbol for independent and social exploratory thought in the Americas” (Oliver 2014, 65).

Paz’s biography goes a considerable distance in defending his claim that social/political and specifically religious institutions generated pressures that cemented the moral endowment of Sor Juana’s solitude. “A theater of social and cultural activities no

less than of intrigues and political decisions," Paz informs us, "the viceregal court was a radial center of morality, literature, and aesthetics; it profoundly influenced both social life and individual destinies" (Paz 1988, 24). Recall that *sincretismo* occurs at the level of human experience and material circumstance, both of which serve as determinants of individual destinies. Seen in terms of *sincretismo*, Sor Juana grew to become a target of ideological exclusions and oppressions transplanted from the Old World in a manner that clearly ranked European institutions and individuals over mixed-race identities in the Americas. This prioritization happened at the moral expense—we might also say the sacrifice—of scores of human beings, especially women. Although she was criolla, which meant she enjoyed a slightly higher social status than mestizos and native peoples, Sor Juana died a narrowly mourned victim of the politico-religious institutions and personalities of her time. Yet, both her written and unwritten record set forth models of resistance that were later carried on by poets and other intellectuals in the twentieth century. In consequence, Sor Juana's life becomes a troubling reminder that forceful personalities are sometimes driven to extremes most of us do not know how to talk about; much less would we be able to keep our sense of self intact left facing such torturous circumstances alone.

Paz's notion of *sincretismo* gives voice to the idea that we have a moral obligation to change the way we think and live. "History is conflict and every society is torn by social, political, and religious contradictions," he writes; "Societies live and die because of them" (Paz 1974, 23). And yet, "modernity is [also] a sort of creative self-destruction" (Paz 1974, 3). Historical circumstances, in other words, have always presented individuals with their own mirrored self-reflection. The spitting images of our selves in others and in history are masqueraded one moment, unmasked the next. But it is nonetheless up to us as individuals, as the (un)announced heralds and (un)elected representatives of institutions and ideologies, to redeem ourselves and each other, to sustain a salubrious life for our selves and our society, to contribute in creative ways to the betterment of life for all human beings. It goes without saying that some of these endeavors are (and have always been) more pleasing to our sensibility and taste than others.

Paz does not believe that Sor Juana succumbed to what Simone de Beauvoir called the force of circumstance. But he does believe that Sor Juana offers a paradigmatic instance of existentialist solitude. Paz elsewhere looks to the Conquest of the Americas, two centuries before Sor Juana's lifetime, for the beginnings of solitude. With an eye peeled on twentieth century theorizations of *Mexicanidad*, he maintains that the Conquest originated the condition of solitude, a problem no less menacing for Sor Juana at the end of the seventeenth century than it was for Mexicans at the beginning of the twentieth. (The epigraph at the start of this essay speaks to this moral and historical anguish.) As a result, the *pachuco* of 1940s Los Angeles would endure a similar fate to that of Sor Juana. Of course, Paz was himself no foreigner to psychological and political estrangement from the world of others, even in his native Mexico. Along a similar vein, Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla suggests that centuries of cultural conflict in Mexico helped to bring about a "schizophrenic

posture" (Bonfil-Batalla 1996, 65). Bonfil-Batalla later calls the cultural and psychological anguish besetting Mexican national character a "schizophrenic situation" (Bonfil-Batalla 1996, 175). Bonfil-Batalla further claims that "so-called syncretism may be understood not as an indiscriminate amalgam of elements from different backgrounds, a sort of devotional collage, but, rather, as the product of a complex process of appropriation" (Bonfil-Batalla 1996, 136). I accept Bonfil-Batalla's insight into syncretism. *Sor Juana*, therefore, shows us that historical practices instituted by the Spanish empire in colonial Mexico set in motion cultural practices of oppression and self-effacement that, *mutatis mutandis*, affected how personal/national/universal human identity would be structured and so experienced for centuries to follow.

Sincretismo encompasses the practical lesson that one cannot predict whether or how given historical circumstance will lead to solitude or communion. What Paz's narrative allows us to conclude, then, is that regardless of the form our experience takes, history is a testament to the fact that creative, willful persons use negative situations towards positive ends. No single aspect of either one's self or one's circumstances determines personal identity. Based on this claim, however, it becomes evident that the twin processes of *sincretismo* depend on personal and impersonal encounters between different peoples and cultures, including their conflicting histories and conflicted identities. Hence, "Without the court we cannot understand Sor Juana," he writes; "not only did she live in it as a young woman, but her life itself can be seen as the history of her relationship—intimate but also fragile and unstable—with the viceregal palace" (Paz 1988, 24).

Sor Juana's solitude was exacerbated by the fact that she was an exalted exception to the racialized, gendered, and class-based exclusions of her time. Each of these forms of marginalization and oppression contribute harmfully to the felt experience of the problem of solitude:.

If the criollo, born of Spanish blood, was the victim of ambiguity, the mestizo, born of mixed blood, was doubly so: he was neither criollo nor Indian. Rejected by both groups, the mestizo had no place either in the social structure or in the moral order. In the light of traditional moral systems...the mestizo was the living image of illegitimacy. From this feeling of illegitimacy grew his insecurity, his perpetual instability, his tendency to swing between extremes.... (Paz 1988, 32)

Sor Juana was born criolla, but she was an orphan, as well. She was also, in spite of her rise and fall within the eyes of the church, an enigmatic, cunning poet who sought the only realistic refuge she could thrive in given the noxious enclosure of the baroque Spanish world. Sor Juana felt herself to be this living image of illegitimacy, the feeling of which was magnified by her being shut in by the autocratic ethic governing her universe. For similar reasons, I think, Paz claims that "the criollo breathed naturally in a world of strangeness because he was, and knew himself to be, a strange being" (Paz 1988, 59).

That Sor Juana converted uninviting circumstances into overtures of self-expansion has been the dominant interpretation I have given to *sincretismo* up to this point. Indeed, *sincretismo* attests to Sor Juana's brilliance as she was able to overturn the moral contradictions of her age in a way that became her historical advantage. In the end, however, Sor Juana faced a universal problem more deeply associated with *sincretismo* than her individual solitude—that of living in a society that placed greater value on the authority of its imprimatur, on its seals and nods of approval, than on the quality of its occasions for personal growth and human/social flourishing. Paz believes she must have faced enormous hostility from her sisters given the monotony of life inside the walls: "What is extraordinary is not that some nuns abandoned themselves to pious or cruel eccentricities but that they did not all go mad," adding, "For certain less-than-stable personalities, the tedium and the long hours of idleness encouraged delirious fantasies and...disgust and horror toward their sisters and themselves" (Paz 1998, 126). Schons provides a counterbalance to this when she describes what society was actually like outside the walls of the church. "A most licentious age," she writes (Schons 1926, 143); "The male element of the population was under no restraint (even the priesthood was no exception) and roamed at will, preying on society. Not only immorality, but depravity and bestiality reigned" (Schons 1926, 144). Along these lines, Paz explains that "[Sor Juana's] satire of men and her defense of women...are a moral, even visceral, reaction to lived experiences" (Paz 1988, 68).

Sor Juana exposes the nature of those lived/felt experiences that obtain between the self, the world, and others in such a way that Paz can develop solitude as a ceremonious, if not necessary, quality of modern life, one tied to the promise or ideal of love and communion. While this represents an inversion of communion taken as an idealized experience for all human beings, Paz sees a connection between "Sor Juana's personal situation and the obstacles we Mexicans have experienced during the process of modernization" (Paz 1988, 476). But he does so by developing her capacity to exist from without and within the walls of social, political, and moral confinement in seventeenth century New Spain. Sor Juana's fate as a "Daughter of the Church," as she was euphemistically called, flaunts her orphanhood, the source of her illegitimacy as a human being within the eyes of her society (Paz 1988, 65). Sor Juana's sense of solitude, then, which is manifested by her writing "I, the least worthy of all" frequently in the margins of her books, attests to the recurring, lifelong nature of her encounters with solitude (Paz 1988, 448). This is not at all surprising to readers familiar with Sor Juana's life (or Paz's biography, for that matter). Paz faithfully describes the inner life of Sor Juana as one wherein, early in her youth, "she must have completed the psychological process of withdrawing into herself," surmising, "she must often have felt lonely" (Paz 1988, 87). In addition: "Throughout her life...she went through periods of inexplicable sadness and ill-defined anxieties. Something gnawed at her thoughts and consumed her hours, an invisible visitor that appeared at night to prevent her from sleeping or thinking" (Paz 1988, 448).

Paz believed that Sor Juana's crushing experiences of solitude reflected New Spain's political corruption and moral decay. He writes, "An understanding of the person

Sor Juana may have been depends on our—also relative and approximate—understanding of history” (Paz 1988, 197). In Paz’s eyes, Sor Juana was a woman who, along with Emily Dickinson and other female poets, was “vitaly conscious of [her] singularity” (Paz 1988, 1). Her encounters with solitude reveal the peculiar desperation of New Spain’s colonial history. He adds, “solitude again presents itself as her natural element, her native state: Juana Inés is a plant that grows in an arid land” (Paz 1988, 87). Sor Juana’s alleged turpitude was doubtless based, then, as much on her own experiences of solitude as it was on the moral limitations of colonial society. Sor Juana’s life is proof, in sum, that we endure the pangs of solitude at the same time as we long for communion.

The tensions within *sincretismo* prove to be an enduring feature of contemporary thought and experience. Although Sor Juana led a life wherein the social limitations and moral shortcomings of her place and time seem, paradoxically, to have contributed to her own growth as an artist, those of us thinking about such relationships today would hardly call the Inquisition a culture of human flourishing. And so, even if Sor Juana’s life embodies the harrowing psychological and philosophical realities tied to solitude, her accomplishments also reveal a model for how to see circumstances in a way that leads to individual and social redemption. Our stories are distinctively our own at the very same time that they are universal and, hence, also everyone’s story. As human beings, we exist inside of space and time; we grow with each other as members of the same generation, not excluding those from another community, society, or nation. This means that *sincretismo* teaches us to seek out and gain knowledge of ourselves through individualized and de-individualized experience. This balance assures us that we will grow as much through conflict as in harmony with those entities, institutions, and ideas that collectively add up to form our self and circumstances.

Sincretismo redirects our attention away from feeling torn between the extremes of human experience towards a worldview concerned with growth in its seasonal manifestations. Sor Juana’s life bequeaths metaphysical testimony to the lifelong process of initiation into, escape from, and return to the problem of human solitude. And yet, her encounters with solitude represent an ineffable, inexhaustible plenty that set her apart from the disquieting experiences of history’s gifted and talented. If the problem of human solitude incriminates social/political institutions and ideologies prevalent during certain eras, then, as Sor Juana’s life demonstrates, it is only because the power of circumstances over her self and writings also attest to the regenerative value and peculiar ideal of communion/redemption in a manner relatable to emergent Mexican selfhood as it simultaneously connects to and disconnects from modernity’s embryonic universal human identity.

From Orphanhood to Redemption

The question of universal human identity figures centrally in Paz’s poetic and philosophic works. Paz repeatedly urges that what is universal to human identity is the problem of human solitude: each of us feels a profound separation from our selves, the

world, and others. Solitude is a triangulated problem to which Paz would later admit that the only suitably moral response is the idealization and subjection to love. In an early 1990s interview, we see most clearly why I am claiming that Paz's biography of Sor Juana provides a case study in existentialist syncretism that leads to an account of universal human identity.

There are two situations for every human being. The first is the solitude we feel when we are born. Our first situation is that of orphanhood, and it is only later that we discover the opposite, filial attachment. The second is that because we are thrown, as Heidegger says, into this world, we feel we must find what the Buddhists call 'the other share.' This is the thirst for community. (Paz in Plimpton 2003, 92)

If all human beings desire community, then this thirst can be seen as a universal characteristic of all human beings. Community thus figures in Paz's worldview as type and token of universal human identity.

Lovers, of course, "constitute the greatest image of communion. But even between lovers solitude is never completely abolished. Conversely, solitude is never absolute. We are always with someone, even if it is only our shadow. We are never one—we are always 'we.' These extremes are the poles of human life" (Paz in Plimpton 2003, 92). Once we grant that Paz conceives of moral growth as a cyclical, back and forth movement between extremes of solitude and communion towards intensifying self-knowledge, we are then in a position to reframe the processes of *sincretismo* as meaning too that the experiences circumscribing selfhood point a finger toward the role that space, place, and time have in shaping the person we come to know as our self. The formation of selfhood, in other words, is drawn from inferences within but also outside of the spatial, geographical, and temporal confines wherein selves in action question themselves.

Framing *sincretismo* as a principle of moral criticism implies its regenerative value. This is because the process of growth implied by *sincretismo* obliges us to face difficult questions about ourselves under conditions and in moments not of our choosing. That we get stuck in the here and now does not, of course, do away with the need to accept responsibility for the ultimate meaning of our individual as well as collective lives—regardless of circumstances. But the specter of solitude reappears so routinely that it can leave us thinking that the promise of getting unstuck or sustaining a sense of belonging is pure fiction. Sor Juana symbolizes the kind of person who exists worlds beyond that of someone down on their luck or simply struggling to maintain courage in the face of adversity. Sor Juana is a loyal, die-hard muse for those who care to see in her metamorphosing solitude a standard for how to face our own ghosts and demons in the academy and world today.

John Kaiser Ortiz
Department of Philosophy
Millersville University
Millersville, PA 17551
john.kaiserortiz@millersville.edu

Notes

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[2] Kirk appears, at the time of publication, to have published a monograph on Sor Juana that contains numerous indexical references to Paz's work.

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