

***With a Diamond in My Shoe. A Philosopher's Search for Identity in America* by Jorge J. E. Gracia, Albany, SUNY Press, 2019. 282 pp. ISBN 978-1-4384-7728-2, paperback, \$29.95**

By Laura Arcilla Villa

In this intellectual autobiography and memoir, renowned Latinx scholar and medievalist philosopher Jorge J. E. Gracia reflects upon his life and career in the North American continent since his departure from Havana by ferry to escape the Castro regime in 1961. The book is suggestively entitled, for the diamond remains a powerful symbol of endurance, purity, and beauty that repeatedly emerges in the narrative to give Gracia strength and hope in his new life and search for identity. The rich symbolism of the diamond returns again in the books' epilogue, where Gracia muses how thinking about a diamond and its properties has given impetus to the search for identity that has informed his life as a philosopher and as an immigrant.

That the book is dedicated to the countries that gave its author "refuge in a moment of need," and to the country where he was "born and raised," brings into prominence the unifying thread of the narrative. That thread is Jorge J. E. Gracia's search to understand and forge his identity, not only as the professional philosopher and scholar that he eventually became, but as the uprooted individual undergoing the personal, political, and cultural transformations imposed by his status as a refugee, legal resident, and naturalized citizen in the United States and Canada.

The book's eloquent prologue announces to the reader that the book is "the story of the American Dream becoming a reality," and states what is perhaps its most important idea: that the story about to unfold is really about identity: a story "about a Cuban who, without forgetting his roots, became Canadian, American, Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx in order to survive and thrive"(xi). The book is indeed the story of a philosopher's search for identity in the United States and Canada. The story emphasizes professional life and accomplishments, although the reader gets a glimpse of Gracia's family life and ancestry in the Old World of Spain and France.

The book has twenty-three numbered chapters, a prologue, and an epilogue, and is organized chronologically into vignettes offering the reader a reconstruction of the highlights of Gracia's life and career, and a retrospective assessment about the unity of his academic life and about his place in the discipline. The initial vignettes cover his "Farewell to Cuba (1961)," his arrival to West Palm Beach disguised as a seminarian, and his eventual settlement in Miami. These chapters stress survival and are full of dramatic detail. They give the reader a clear sense of the strife, resourcefulness, and determination needed to succeed in a new, and often hostile, environment. They also reveal the importance of the hospitality and support extended by fellow Cubans to the newly arrived refugee. All these values characterize the experiences of immigrants in

the United States and, for Gracia, help fuel “the kind of energy that helped make this country a land of immigrants” (31).

The memoir takes a radical turn in the fourth chapter, “A Gate to the Real America (1962),” where Gracia discusses his first real encounter with the new culture. This encounter could not have happened before his decision to move away from an *ethos* at once familiar and limiting, in order to continue forward on the ambitious path he had set for himself: “I began to understand why Miami was full of Cubans who had ventured outside this bubble and had returned, and others who had never tried. They feared the unknown, and what was foreign to them” (33). The dynamic between embracing the new culture and moving away from the familiar *ethos* is a recurrent theme, and a struggle that is constitutive of his new identity.

The encounter with “real America” takes center-stage in the next two chapters, where Gracia discusses his student years at Wheaton College; the prejudice he encountered there; his perplexity at his peers’ ignorance about Iberian and Latin American geography, history, literature, and culture; his struggles with the English language; and his first efforts to work out a new identity. His concern at the time was how to integrate the appreciation for his own culture and for the new one, while rejecting the “unacceptable” elements present in both (54). This struggle, then eminently personal but not yet philosophical, was heightened by Gracia’s encounter with the Christianity practiced at Wheaton and by the institution’s theological commitments, which he discusses in relation to his upbringing in a Catholic culture he never completely embraced.

Gracia’s discussion of his vocation and career begins with the decision to pursue the study of philosophy professionally, discussed from the seventh chapter onwards. “Knowing Myself (1962-1965)” marks the second dramatic point in the narrative, where the personal memoir about the Cuban refugee is transformed into the intellectual autobiography of the professional philosopher, historian, and scholar. This chapter is followed by vignettes about Gracia’s journey from the University of Chicago to the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto, where he pursued a “complete immersion” program in medieval studies and became a specialist in the history and philosophy of the Middle Ages. There is plenty of detail in these chapters for readers interested in Gracia’s new family life and immigration history, or in the institutional culture at Chicago and Toronto’s Pontifical Institute. Readers can also delve into the details of Gracia’s scholarly journey through the libraries of Europe to work with original manuscripts for his doctoral dissertation and to deepen his acquaintance with his Western cultural roots.

Gracia’s development as a philosopher and the departmental politics surrounding that process can be followed by reading chapters 11 to 22. There is interesting anecdotic detail about the process of becoming hired at the University of Buffalo, and about the struggles of building a career in the “partisan and sectarian context” of the department (128).

“The Vocation and Profession of Philosophy (1975)” comes close to presenting Gracia’s philosophy of education. Students come to the university to learn from their teachers “the facts, methods, and history” of their fields but also to “learn by themselves and expand the field in which they are cooperating with their teachers” (139). This mutual collaboration provides impetus to the emergence of schools or traditions in philosophy, and Gracia is to be commended for appreciating and promoting it from the early stages of his career. His reflections on his journey to full professorship, and on what is needed for “success in the philosophical profession as a whole” (143), are sociologically interesting and can be read as advice to young philosophers aiming to walk the standard path towards becoming professional philosophers in academia.

Gracia’s work in Latin American philosophy takes the stage in chapter sixteen, “Latin American Philosophy in the US (1939-1985). His early interest in this area is anecdotally connected to the request William Parry made to the newly hired professor at Buffalo in 1971: “You’re Cuban. I am sure that there’s Cuban philosophy, and there’s Latin American philosophy certainly. Why don’t you look into it and see whether you can teach a course on Latin American Philosophy?” (154) In retrospect, Gracia credits Parry for what would be the life-changing decision to pursue Latin American philosophy, rather than devoting himself exclusively to metaphysics. Gracia reasoned that his training as a historian would help him “to establish the parameters in the field and open it up to others” (155). The fruits of his work in this area became visible in 1986 with the publication of the anthology that he and Argentinian philosopher Risieri Frondizi had put together.

This chapter includes Gracia’s reflections about the development of the field from the 1940’s to the 1970’s, when Latin American philosophy remained “for the most part a branch of European philosophy, except for the religious cosmologies of pre-Columbian cultures” (173). Gracia decries the reluctance of publishers to “open the American philosophical market to Latin American philosophy” (175), and discusses why the field continues to be marginalized in the United States today. Reasons include: traditional disciplinary boundaries; the concentration of practitioners in Florida, Texas, New Mexico, California, away from more traditional centers of philosophical activity; lack of interest and coordination between Latin American philosophers and Anglo-American practitioners; negative attitudes among Latin American philosophy practitioners towards the work of their peers; and lack of “leaders who can serve as examples and mentors to younger generations” (177). Gracia is cautious about the future of the field but sees reasons for hope due to demographic changes discussed in chapter eighteen. These include increased numbers of professionally trained philosophers of Hispanic or Latino ancestry interested in contributing to the field (208); availability of English translations; original work produced by well-established philosophers in North America; and larger numbers of Hispanics, Latinos/as or Latinx students in the United States and in the profession. These demographics create “a sense of obligation” to respond to the needs of an ethnic group (philosophy practitioners included) interested in learning something about their intellectual roots (209).

Chapter eighteen discusses Gracia's research program and his work in Medieval and Latin American philosophy. The preceding chapter, on his ascendancy to the position of department chair, helps understand this development. Readers interested in Latin American philosophy will notice Gracia's candid appraisal of "liberationist" philosophers and theologians. The former scholars adhere to the theoretical and methodological commitments of Liberation theology and philosophy, especially in the versions articulated by Enrique Dussel. Gracia contrasts them with all other "mainstream" philosophers, whether "analytic, continental, or historians" (206), and decries the conflicts between the two groups. He thinks this most partisan and ideological conflict has halted the development of Latin American philosophy: "on the one hand, liberationists only think about promoting Dussel's thought, and on the other, non-liberationists will not give him any space" (207).

In chapter nineteen, Gracia discusses nationality and ethnicity and his work towards developing a theory of Hispanic/Latino identity. This theory emphasizes the "historical ties" between the peoples from the Iberian Peninsula, Latin America, and the Hispanics/Latinos in the United States (218, 219). The theme of identity returns after a short hiatus where Gracia's discusses his long-standing interest in literature and the arts, and in collecting and promoting Cuban (and Cuban-American) art.

Chapter twenty-two, "Return to Philosophy through its History (1990-2000)" is a meditation on the recurring theme of Gracia's philosophical career and professional identity. His love for the history of philosophy has remained vital but his self-concept emphasizes philosophy rather than the history of it. The history of philosophy is never absent in his work in Medieval or Latin American philosophy (246) but the foundation of his thought is to be found elsewhere. Gracia sees himself "doing philosophy historically" (248) but thinks that contemporary philosophers lack appreciation for "the relation of philosophy to its history" (250). While admitting that we can engage in philosophy "without engaging in its history," or "without prior knowledge" of anyone else having researched the same problem (252), he thinks that "most philosophy is done as a result of a preceding history, for that history functions as a motive and testing ground for philosophical reflection" (252).

The book's last chapter pays homage to the author's mother and her courageous life and struggles in Cuba.

In this memoir, Gracia emerges as a systematic thinker with a keen interest in reconstructing the trajectory of his professional life: "Each of my books is the result of trying to develop and answer questions and explore ideas in a chapter of a previous book that needs expansion and development" (247).