

“How do you create a new field? The Lasting Impact of Jorge Gracia”

by Linda Martín Alcoff

I am happy to have been invited to be a part of this homage to my friend and mentor Jorge Gracia. In these remarks I will begin with some personal reminiscences and then turn to an exploration of how Gracia’s experience as a Cuban immigrant informed and affected his work.

I knew Jorge Gracia since the beginning of my career in the 1980s. He was one of very few philosophers in North America who had a serious interest in Latin American philosophy, and who shared the bold and slightly crazy idea of promoting and developing dialogues among philosophers in this hemisphere. But Gracia also had a strong interest in thinking philosophically about issues relevant to Latinx people in general, that is, to those of us who found ourselves in ‘exile’ in the strange land of Anglo-America. The experience of dislocation raised acute issues of identity, ethnicity, race, nationality, and language, all of which had philosophical aspects that became paramount to explore for our own survival. But this project was important for the whole profession of philosophy as a way to reveal and reconsider some unexamined assumptions operating in regard to these topics.

Jorge and I disagreed, in person and in print, on some aspects of these issues (for example, I disliked the term he preferred, “Hispanic,” and we had a debate about this in print). But, because of his immense generosity of spirit as well as his quiet confidence and lack of insecurity, the fact that we sometimes disagreed in no way kept us from developing a wonderful relationship of mutual admiration and support. Jorge was an inspiration for many of us, as well as a professional role model, in the following way: he was very philosophically ambitious but never personally ambitious. His goal was to open up the profession to new interlocutors and new problematics, not to seek glory or power for himself. Jorge was just naturally intellectually curious, motivated to pursue the questions he was interested in for their own sake, and wanted to help other Latinos in the field of philosophy, no matter whether he agreed with them or shared their orientation, to be able to pursue Latin American philosophy, if that is what they wanted. He knew very well that not every Latino was interested in Latin American philosophy or Latinx issues, and he was fine with that, totally non-judgmental. But he wanted to make a space within the profession so that those of us with an interest in this area *could* write and teach about it. And he began this enormously difficult project at a time before there was any institutional recognition at all, and in fact, as he writes about, only hostility and indifference. In many ways it was Jorge Gracia who made the path that I together with so many others are now walking along. Hence the title of this talk---“How do you create a new field?”

At the time Jorge embarked on the project of opening up the field of Latin American philosophy for English speaking audiences in North America, his only compatriots were Ofelia Schutte, Oscar Marti, Risieri Frondizi, Maria Lugones, and perhaps just one or two others (such as my professor at Florida State, Donald Hodges). That was about it, and then Eduardo Mendieta, Gregory Pappas, Mario Saenz, myself and a few more. In the 1990s when the APA Committee on Hispanics was finally established and we began to do panels and some internal organizing, we could all meet for dinner around one table. Interestingly, in that first cohort, we were all immigrants, I believe; not one was a U.S. born Latino. Only now is this finally changing.

After Jorge chaired the APA committee, Ofelia Schutte was the next chair, and one evening she called me up and over the course of a long conversation talked me into doing it next, though I hardly felt qualified at the time. But there were so few of us; we all had to step up to contribute what we could. When I chaired the committee I basically followed the ambitious agenda that Ofelia and Jorge had set: to make a space for panels regularly at the APA, to promote publications by encouraging journals to find *knowledgeable* reviewers, to network among those interested in syllabus development, to encourage the international cooperation committee to look south instead of just east and west, and to end the discrimination against Spanish as a way to fulfill one’s language requirements in graduate philosophy programs. Ironically, just as we made some progress on that last demand, graduate departments decided they no longer needed language requirements. Jorge always had a sense of humor about the challenges we faced, and the recalcitrance in the profession. He had a wonderful ability to focus on achievable goals. As I worked my way through the APA committee structure, he readily shared confidential information with me about who I could trust and who I could not, who was ‘on the side of the angels’ as he would put it.

Jorge taught us to be simply indefatigable in the determination to keep moving forward no matter the obstacles. The APA sessions on Latin American philosophy had the smallest attendance of any: we had fewer audience members than the sessions in philosophy of mathematics! But Jorge was dogged. He had begun his career as a medievalist, and I suspect this helped shape his perspective. A subfield in philosophy can be a small community but still strong and intellectually vibrant.

Besides his work within various institutional contexts, Jorge also made crucial contributions toward creating the field through editing anthologies so that those of us who wanted to develop courses could have readily available course material. He collected some of the most important essays from the 20th century and wrote useful introductions so that people new to the field could gain some idea about the various areas of philosophy that were covered and the different approaches sometimes taken. In some of his autobiographical essays and interviews he recounted how difficult it was to get these anthologies published. He had support from his department chair at the University of Buffalo to teach courses in this area, but getting publishers interested in producing the translated material so that the courses could be taught was another matter. In an interview with Ivan Jaksić Jorge revealed that when he first put together

the anthology on “Man and Values” he had “tremendous trouble trying to publish it in English. It was published in Spanish, ...But in English no publisher would touch it.” Only a small press in Buffalo, Prometheus Books, with a tradition of publishing out of the mainstream, would take it up.

I suspect this experience had an impact on Jorge’s political understanding of the country that had helped him escape Cuba, although by this time, as he also said in this interview, his “anti-Castro bile had passed, so now I could look at this in a rational way.” (227) The Fidelista in me enjoys the fact that Jorge does not credit his anti-Castro period as rational. But his point was that the presumptive dismissal he found among U.S. philosophers toward philosophical work in Latin America was clearly irrational, based on ignorance, and evidence not only of an absence of curiosity but of a more troubling issue in our field: dogmatism. Jorge opposed dogmatism no matter its source or its target. This was a cornerstone of his understanding of rationality.

I really appreciated this small catholic tendency in Jorge, an expansive orientation that assumed the necessity of collaboration across differences and disagreements. His leadership thus made it possible for us to create a collective community of all who were interested in Latin American philosophy across divisions in our methodologies, such as the continental/analytic/pragmatism divide as well as various political divides, and to maintain a sense of mutual respect and consideration. I well remember public debates he and I had at conferences and panels, and there are few times I have had such spirited debates with more senior men that did not leave me feeling abused and disrespected.

As a result of Jorge’s efforts, our community of Latin American and Latinx philosophers is today stronger than ever, full of wonderful young philosophers providing new leadership in new areas of work. I feel confident that, no matter how small our numbers at APA panels, the community will survive and thrive if we can maintain the spirit of collaboration and cooperation Jorge initiated. Jorge was not the only person leading the way: as I said, he worked alongside Ofelia, Frondizi, Oscar, and others. But Jorge made a major contribution both practically and intellectually to shape the field and make it habitable for others.

At one point Jorge considered becoming an architect, and I suspect that the courses he took in this field influenced him when he began to think about putting together the first anthologies of Latin American philosophy for North American audiences. He asked in one autobiographical essay, “What is it that an architect does? An architect surveys the terrain and then designs a structure with foundations...in an appealing fashion.” He certainly did such a survey in regard to the “terrain” of Anglo-American philosophy upon which he had to build a secure structure for Latin American philosophy. Although the metaphor of the architect connotes a position of status and power, we should remember that trying to create a hospitable domain for Latin American Philosophy was inglorious work. Jorge received gratitude from small groups of Latino philosophers in the U.S., but his efforts were largely ignored by others, and not given

any importance. His own sense was that most of his philosophical colleagues saw this area of his work as “weird” and “quirky”. He recounted that he once heard a philosopher suggest that maybe he had some “psychological problem” that drew him to work on Latin American philosophy. And yet, he persisted.

Jorge Gracia was many things; one of the things he was, was a Cuban. The experience of Cuban immigrants to the U.S. has been, and continues to be, distinct from any other Latin American experience because of the Cold War. Many came before the revolution for reasons similar to other immigrants, such as my professor Ernesto Sosa. But Cubans who came after the 1959 revolution, such as Jorge, often came at great risk, aggrieved at what felt like a politically coerced departure. Coming to the United States they have felt, as he described it, “displaced, scattered, and alienated.” (Gracia 2008: Preface, vii) No other immigrant group from Latin America so often uses the term ‘exile’ to explain their status in the United States.

Many Cubans, of course, have long hoped that their exile would end; even after 60 years have passed, this “dream of returning,” as Jorge put it, remains strong for some. As a result, their sojourn in the United States is taken to be temporary, making them less invested in becoming *estadounidenses*. Jorge suggests that this sensibility engendered a disinterest in making common cause with other Latin American or Caribbean immigrants, that their unique situation meant they did not identify with other Latin American immigrants. After my own migration from Panama, I grew up in Florida in the 1960s, and every one of my Latino friends in school were Cubans. It wasn’t until I went to college that I even met Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. The many Cuban friends I had in the 60s and 70s were a diverse lot: many were curious about the Cuban revolution as well as about post-revolutionary life on the island, and unwilling to accept their parents’ accounts entirely at face value. But for a variety of reasons, their experience as immigrants was still unique. The U.S. government provided some resources for the first wave of Cuban immigrants that were not available to others from Latin America because their very desire to leave Cuba could be used for anti-communist propaganda. But they also had distinct disadvantages. While I maintained ties with my family from Panama, and could visit, they could not.

Cuba figured quite differently in the political imaginary of the U.S., and as a result, travel and even communication remains difficult to this day. Because of the U.S. covert (and overt) operations against the Cuban government, and the role that some Cubans in Florida played in these operations, Cuban Americans have at times had a more difficult time traveling back to Cuba than others from the U.S. All of this tends to separate Cubans from other Latinos. The fact, then, that Jorge Gracia developed an interest in pan-Latino identity and culture in the U.S., to the extent of writing several books on the topic, and that he developed an interest in Latin America as a whole, is something quite interesting about him, and not to be taken for granted.

In the early 2000’s Jorge worked on a co-edited collection of writings and interviews with Cuban-American artists, writers, and philosophers that was entitled

Identity, Memory, and Diaspora and published in 2008. This volume provides a window on what is unique about Cuban American experiences, but also some elements they have in common with others, such as language difficulties, Anglo prejudices, the trauma of displacement, and the nostalgia that can become myth-making about the land left behind. In an interview with Iván Jaksic, Jorge discussed his own experience of immigration as well as his turn to philosophy and his eventual focus on Latin American philosophy.

This book disrupts quite effectively the assumption often imagined by outsiders that Cuban Americans form a politically and culturally homogeneous community. Although only four philosophers are included in this collection---Ofelia Schutte, Oscar Martí, Ernesto Sosa, and Jorge---it becomes clear that there is no homogeneity even in this small group. The other novelists, poets, and artists who wrote for the volume include some very well-known Cubans such as Ana Menendez, Gustavo Perez Firmat, Carlos Eire, Baruj Salinas, and showcases the breadth of expressive culture created by Cubans living in the diaspora. The similarities are as striking in this collection as the differences. Even when the images they paint are landscapes and seascapes, the intent can be to provide a poignant depiction of home. Some write about their experience with racism in the United States, about the trauma of dislocation and poverty, of cruel foster homes, but many also share the hopefulness engendered by new opportunities. A theme throughout the collection is the relationship between their creative work and their personal experience.

This is also a theme in Jorge’s interview. His departure from Cuba at the age of eighteen was traumatic; he had never before even left the island. The decision to leave was painful, even agonizing. It was a huge risk to come with only the permitted five dollars in his pocket. As the boat he was on started to leave Havana behind, and the only world he knew, he found himself, to his surprise, sobbing.

The personal experiences Jorge recounts in this interview do not remain centered on a singular moment of migration, however, but encompass the difficult effort to integrate his life in a foreign country in which his own identity was constantly misinterpreted by non-Latinos with no interest in him as an individual. Among Anglos, Latin culture was agglomerated into a homogeneous mush. He found that he was expected to eat red beans when he was in California, mofongo when he was in NY, but for a Cuban, these foods were as foreign as hot dogs.

As Jorge began to travel around the U.S., he found himself befriending a diversity of Latin Americans who had similar experiences in the world of the Anglos. Although the food was often distinct, as well as other cultural elements, there was in fact a shared pan-Latino identity in the diaspora that was not simply a misperception. Cubans who stayed in Miami, he found, often remained primarily self-identified only as Cubans. The only binary that counted for them concerned Cubans and non-Cubans. For Jorge, by contrast, there was a larger cultural divide between Anglos and Latinos, despite the fact that both were quite internally diverse. But his interest in exploring this

divide was not shared with many Cubans he knew. “This was something that they did not want to talk about, that they dismissed, that they were not interested in. They thought I was weird...” (Gracia 2008, 226)

After mastering English Jorge went to college and found himself with a wide variety of friends that included Anglos and other Latin Americans besides Cubans. He began to notice the broad differences of family life, social orientation and religion between Anglos and Latins, and started to think of himself as pan-Latin, or as Latin American. He knew he had to learn to navigate these differences, and he was also simply curious about his new surroundings, but for a long time he did not connect any of these interests with his philosophical interests. He thought of philosophy as a discipline seeking universal truths, not particular ones.

It wasn't until Jorge was hired by the University of Buffalo philosophy department as an Assistant Professor that he had the opportunity to delve into philosophy in Latin America and in Spanish. Prior to this point, however, I would suggest there was more to the story. Jorge was drawn early on to medieval philosophy, which meant mostly an engagement with Catholicism and many works originally written in Spanish. He began to argue for the view that medieval philosophy was an underappreciated area of the Western tradition, that it was critical to modern European thought, that the concepts we still use today, such as essence, nature, quality, and relation, were formed in the Middle Ages just as the modern languages we speak today were being formed. (2008, 225) So his interest in medieval philosophy was not merely *about* the medieval period, but about the way in which it served as the intellectual foundation of the modern period. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see this choice of focus as also linked to Jorge's Cuban identity: he published a translation into English, with commentary, of the influential 16th century Spanish philosopher Francisco Suarez, a Jesuit priest. Suarez's influence is only now being acknowledged but for a long time, the links between the Iberian Peninsula and the Western European Enlightenment were generally ignored. Jorge, in part because of his bilingual abilities, was able to help us begin to reconnect the dots and give a more accurate history of modern European philosophy than one that imagined Descartes thought it all up. (As is now more widely known, Descartes studied with the Jesuits, was encouraged to do philosophy by a Bishop when he visited the Vatican, and adapted without much revision Jesuit ideas about the importance of doubt for establishing belief).

So, I would suggest that Jorge's moves in medieval philosophy presaged his later philosophical interest in Hispanic identity and cultures. But in the interview with Jakšić, he describes the move to Latin American philosophy in the following way. He found himself at the University of Buffalo in the 1980s with a department chair, Bill Parry, who thought it important to expand the domain of course offerings beyond the usual Anglo- and Eurocentric focus and who suggested to Jorge that he might “look into” Latin American philosophy and see whether he could develop a course on it. Interestingly, Parry had had his tenure taken away from him during the 1950s because he was a Marxist. Jorge recounts that at this stage of his life, he was past his “anti-Castro bile”

and immediately developed a close friendship and collaborative relationship with Parry, the Marxist. And so, he began to “look into” Latin American philosophy by first reaching out to the Argentinian philosopher Risieri Frondizi, who was teaching at University of Southern Illinois-Carbondale at the time, to discuss the possible readings for such a course.

Eventually Jorge came to believe that an anthology of such readings was in order, to provide translations and a context so that a course of study could be devised with some coherence and so that those wanting to teach such a course would not have to invent it anew each time. He thus embarked on the effort to find a publisher willing to support a collection of readings by Latin American philosophers translated into English. Despite the fact that there was no such anthology at the time, and thus no competition, Jorge could find no one who was interested in publishing it. The only publisher he eventually found was an anti-establishment type, as Jorge called him: Paul Kurtz who worked for Prometheus Press, mentioned earlier.

Up until this point Jorge had worked exclusively in medieval philosophy, a minoritized field to be sure but one that was recognized as a legitimate area that deserved its place in the profession. Now he found himself embarking on rough uncharted seas, with only a few allies. But even more importantly to his own growth as a philosopher, Jorge was finding a connection with the margins in new ways. He describes this period as one in which the many philosophical friends and colleagues he had developed in the mainstream world in his capacity as a medievalist tended to view his new areas of interest with puzzlement. They thought it was “weird”, he related, a “quirky thing that Gracia does,” and some even hypothesized that maybe he had some “psychological problem” pushing him in this direction. (2008, 229) Given all these challenges, the only reason Jorge believed that he was able to continue pursuing Latin American philosophy was because the demographics of the profession were slowly changing, there were a few more Latinos around, and, also, because there was growing interest in Black philosophy and in issues of racial and ethnic identity. These changes, he says “opened some space also for Latin Americans and Latin American philosophy.” (229) Thus, his intellectual community began to shift.

The field of Latin American philosophy as Jorge always envisioned it from the beginning grew out of his experiences as a young adult, trying to navigate the Anglo-Latino divide. He did not imagine the field as organized around national histories and national experiences, as some Latino ethnic groups still do today. For most of his life, Jorge did not experience his Cuban identity as the most important aspect of his experience in the diaspora. He felt like a Latin American in a land of Anglos. This was not a consistently hostile relationship by any means, but there was a difference nonetheless in historical, cultural and political formations. Thus, when Jorge worked to create the field of Latin American philosophy, he imagined an intellectual debate in which the Argentinian Sarmiento and the Uruguayan Rodo were in conversation with the Cuban Marti and the Peruvian Mariategui, in which the ideas and arguments of Mexicans such as Ramos and Zea could be set alongside the ideas of arguments such

as De la Torre and Salazar Bondy. It was a pan-Latin Americanism, united by the Iberian influence, the quest to overcome intellectual and cultural colonialism, and the need to address the specific mix of people and experiences in the South. This was not universal philosophy, and yet it was no less philosophical for that.

So let me end by returning to the metaphor of the architect. Jorge explained as you'll recall that the architect tries to create a structure that will be appealing. When I first read that line, I was a bit apprehensive: to whom was this structure meant to appeal? To the Anglo mainstream? But this was not at all Jorge's intention. He says, “the work is geared toward creating a structure that *will serve me to live and function in it...*in which I can function comfortably.” He worries there is a certain narcissism here, since the drive was “to make sense of the landscape of my experience.” (2008, 231) But in his description of how the architect must perform his work, Jorge provides a glimpse into an expansive meta-philosophy that is grounded in the materiality of particular experiences: “All philosophy begins with experience---here and now. I look at my terrain, and my terrain is what? My experience: what I have perceived, what I have seen, what I have felt.” He goes on to ask, is there a swamp that needs to be drained? Do I have needs the terrain cannot provide for? This personal, experiential set of criteria is then used to formulate a way to judge the adequacy of what is built, its function, its comfort, its aesthetic value. As Ofelia Schutte will no doubt remind us, this was a very Nietzschean point of view about philosophy. And in combining the architectural and the philosophical sensibility, Jorge is very clear: the structure is never complete “there is always remodeling to be done...a window that needs to be opened, one that has to be closed...it is a constant flow.”

Let us long remember the windows Jorge opened for all of us.

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