

Ambidextrous and Exophonic Polyglot: On Jorge J. E. Gracia

by Eduardo Mendieta

I want to share a couple of reminiscences; from the many I have of Jorge. Let me begin by noting that Jorge was neither my teacher, nor a colleague in any of the departments where I taught. Yet, I always thought of him as a mentor. I always looked forward to seeing him every December at the APA until some years ago, when he retired, and stopped coming to the APA. I also thought of him as an ally, a partner in the larger project, which was to advance Latinx philosophers and the work that Latin American philosopher do in Latin America, and the Americas at large. I knew about Jorge since the early nineties, though Elizabeth Millan, whom I met in the early nineties in Freiburg while we were studying German. Elizabeth and I had a German reading group of two, and we would read Kant in German. In October of 1997, my friend and colleague Pedro Lange-Churión and I organized a major conference titled: *Hispanics: Cultural Location-Hispanos: Localidades Culturales*. We gathered a stellar group of scholars: Norma Alarcón, Linda Martín Alcoff, Fernando Coronil, Enrique Dussel, Roberto Goizueta, S.J. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Jorge Gracia, Elizabeth Martinez, Walter Mignolo, Alejandro Portes, Iris M. Zavala. It was at this conference that I met Jorge in person. The poster from this conference hangs in my living room, and I have seen it all over the place. But it was Linda Martín Alcoff who brought us into friendship contact when she organized a workshop in Syracuse to plan the work of the APA Committee on Hispanics, which must have been 1998 or 1999. She had become the chair of the APA Committee, after Jorge and Ofelia had founded the committee in the early nineties. At the Syracuse meeting we decided we needed to implement several things to promote the work of Latin American and Latinx philosophers: *first*, we needed a newsletter; *second*, we needed to promote the work on younger and established philosophers who devoted themselves to the study of Latinx and Latin American philosophy. In order to do so, we came up with the idea of an APA Prize for the Best Essay on a theme related to Latin American/Latinx philosophy, and then an APA Book Prize for the best book on the same topics. I became the founding editor of the APA Newsletter on Hispanics, which today continues to do important work on Latin American and Latinx philosophy. Collectively, Jorge, Linda, Ofelia, and myself we raised the money to establish the endowment for the essay prize. We decided to wait for the book prize because back in the mid and late nineties, there were not enough books on Latin American philosophy and Latina/o philosophy to consider ---Jorge himself had not yet published some of his books on "Hispanics." Ofelia Schutte's impactful book had just recently being published, or was about to be published. To this day, when you renew you membership to the APA you can add additional money to go towards a specific committee. I continue to add money to the APA Prize for the best essay on "Latin American" thought, which today I think the committee construes more broadly now.

I can't underscore enough how important Jorge, Ofelia, and Linda's leadership was in making the APA a place within which Latin Americans and Latinx philosophers could do work that would be acknowledged, celebrated, and studied. We also made the APA acknowledge Spanish as a philosophical language, and added "Latin American" and "Hispanic" philosophy to the list of recognized AOS and AOC on its website. Eventually, the leadership of the committee has gone on to students of Jorge, Linda, or myself. In addition to his work within the APA, Jorge leveraged his Capen Chair at Buffalo to organize workshops and seminars, many of which I was invited and contribute to. Some of my earliest published works were written for those events.

When I first met Jorge, he had yet to write his works on Hispanic Identity. However, as soon as he began to put together his distinct take on "Hispanics" in the US, I became the go to referee on his books. This is why I think most, if not all, of his books on Hispanics have a blurb from me. As the books came out, Linda and I would organize sessions within the APA that we then would turn into special issues within journals like *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. Together, over a decade and more, we organized sessions on the works of Gracia, Angelo Corlett, Maria Lugones, Jorge Valadez, and others as well.

Jorge also taught me something very important and that was that if Latinx, Hispanic, Latin American philosophy was to get a place within the US academy, we had to train and mentor colleagues who also had to have a foot firmly planted in an orthodox, more established, discipline or tradition. Jorge exemplified this superlatively. He was by training a medievalist. He was also a philosopher of the history of philosophy to which he contributed a book that I still appreciate. He was interested in questions of ontology and individuation. He also was interested in the relationship between philosophy and literature. Thus, he was ambidextrous and had he had more tentacles, he would have been polydactyl. In fact, out of one of the seminars he organized with the funds provided by the Capen Chair, he edited a volume on "philosophical writers" that brought together three of my favorite authors: Borges, Calvino, and Eco. I reviewed that book for the editorial. Later, he organized a conference on philosophical painters. I remember visiting his home in Buffalo and seeing his collection of Cuban painters and artists. This also turned into a beautiful book. Jorge had what some called a "Cuban" comic-tragic sensibility. When we got together, we would shift back and forth between Spanish, Spanglish, Cubanish, Colombianish, and Jorge's inimitable puns and Cubanismos. We all spoke with accents. We were Quixotic exophonic polyglots. Looking back over the more than two decades that we collaborated, it is astonishing to see not only the quantity but also the breath of his philosophical interests: history, ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, literature, and of course Latin American and Latinx philosophy.

Periodically, however, at one of our get together at the APA, Jorge would say: "You must publish your book on Latinos. You must publish your next book." I always returned home feeling chastised, but also energized to continue my work knowing that someone wanted to see me succeed and do the kind of work that we thought was

important. I have no doubts that Jorge was one of the senior scholars who write letters for my tenure and eventually for my promotion to full professor, as I have no doubts that Linda was one of them as well. Jorge was always jovial, energetic, full of charm, and generosity. I remember him in his unchanging uniform: a blazer and his mock turtlenecks, and his athletic and agile physicality. Later I learned that he was an avid golf player, and I remember saying to him: “you play that bourgeois, white man’s so-called sport.” He laughed, and said: “It keeps me fit.” While he had no patience for Enrique Dussel’s work –as he told me on many occasions—he nonetheless was neither dogmatic nor dismissive. He was ecumenical and always affirming of one’s interests. As I look back at nearly three decades of collaboration and interaction with Jorge, I can say without exaggeration that without his work Latinx philosophy would not be what it is today, and Latin American philosophy in general would not be a viable and legitimate area of specialization and/or concentration for young Latina/o philosopher. Muchas gracias, querido Jorge.

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