

Remembering Jorge J.E. Gracia

by Ernesto Rosen Velásquez

On this occasion, I want to do something a little different. Before this panel, I presented a piece on Jorge's philosophical contributions to Latinx philosophy at SUNY Buffalo before he passed away. In that paper, I tried to do a couple of things simultaneously. I tried to offer a chronology of Jorge's four decades of work in Latin American and Latinx philosophy dating back to 1975. This is in the footnotes.[1] Second, I pick some of his works and briefly highlight their philosophical significance. Third, in the process and sort of along the way I offer responses to some objections raised against certain aspects of Gracia's view that he develops overtime, recognizing that he often tried to offer rejoinders that I try not to repeat. Fourth, I trace the criticisms Gracia raises against one intellectual strand of the field—philosophy of liberation—and show how the objections he raises over the years either lack force or have rejoinders that diminish the force of his concerns.

Today I would like to sketch how our lives crossed paths. I want to engage in a process of remembering him. Philosophy because of its abstractness can sometimes make us forget our experiences or not jog our memory enough. As I was preparing what to say, I was going through some photos of us to help me remember our times together. I offer these personal reflections as a way of remembering Jorge.

While I was a graduate student pursuing my M.A. at the University of Hawaii Manoa studying Vedanta, Buddhism and Chinese philosophy with respectively Arindam Chakrabarti and Vrinda Dalmiya, the late David Kalupahana and Roger Ames, I saw the institutional existence, development of and support for these areas. I was in a place that had a PhD program in philosophy with specializations in these areas. They had language course offerings in Sanskrit, Pali, Vietnamese, Samoan, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and many other Indo-Pacific and East Asian languages. They had fellowships, comprehensive exams in these fields, guest speakers, the East-West Center, the journal of Chinese philosophy, the journal of Indian philosophy, yearly conferences on themes in Nyaya and Vendantic thought, graduate courses that were historical and/or topic focused or on individual philosophers such as Nagarjuna, Sankara, Confucius and Bartrahari. All of this was and still is alive and well. This was in 2000. As I was completing my studies, I remember upon experiencing this institutional support for Eastern philosophy asking myself again a Latino version of Tim Hector's question: Where is our philosophy?[2] The term "Latinx" was not used back then. My experience at the University of Hawaii Manoa showed me another learning environment is possible. I imagined a philosophy department with 15 black and Latinx faculty members each of which worked on different areas and/or periods or individual figures in these fields that were faint images or empty slots that needed filling in with content. Conferences, salsa music, hip hop, dancing, Latinx journals, fellowships, graduate seminars on philosophers X, Y, Z with Spanish sounding names that I did not know their names yet,

centers and everything that the University of Hawaii had and more. As this was stewing in me, black and Latinx folks were already working hard laying the groundwork to create fields and the institutional context for some of my ruminations to become a reality. Thanks to the internet, in 2000, when I was searching titles with the words Latino and philosophy in them, instead of nothing coming up, this time around Jorge Gracia's book *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective* popped up and my eyes lit up. It was from that point on through reading his book that I knew I wanted to work in that area with him after completing my M.A program and would need to apply to a PhD program to pursue my interests and do my dissertation on Latino philosophy.

But to my embarrassment at that time I was not aware of the people who worked in the field so for whatever reason—probably ignorance and not doing more research—the only other person that I was aware of who seemed to be working in the field was, the late Fred Sturm. I do not remember how I came across Fred Sturm's name. I was not aware of Ofelia Schutte's 1993 book *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* nor that she was teaching in a graduate program in philosophy at the University of Florida, Gainesville. I was not aware of Linda Alcoff's 1995 "Mestizo Identity" article nor that she was at that time teaching in a PhD program in philosophy at Syracuse. In 1998 as I was entering the M.A. program at the University of Hawaii Manoa, Elizabeth Millan was defending her thesis on Schlegel and German Romanticism, which Jorge was advising. She was finishing the PhD program and unbeknownst to her would eventually lead her to a position at DePaul after teaching at la Universidad Simon Bolivar in Caracas, Venezuela. I also did not know Eduardo Mendieta was teaching at the University of San Francisco at that time. I did not know that Goyo was teaching in a graduate program at Texas A&M. I did not know José Medina was starting to teach at Vanderbilt. I did not know Maria Lugones was teaching at SUNY Binghamton. I did not know Mariana Ortega was at John Carroll University. It was only until after I was admitted into the PhD program at SUNY Buffalo that Jorge introduced me to all or most of them and others not just in Latinx but also Africana philosophy through the yearly conferences Jorge organized. Jorge brought people together. His book *Hispanic/Latino Identity* also caused a splash and was the topic of several APA panels sponsored by the committee on Hispanics/Latinx especially during the early and mid/late-2000's.

Before I visited and eventually applied to SUNY at Buffalo, I also visited the University of New Mexico to see if I could pursue my interest in Latino/Latin American philosophy since Fred Sturm was there. It was in Albuquerque where I had the pleasure of meeting the first graduate student I came across working in Latin American philosophy: Carlos Alberto Sanchez. He showed me around the campus and around town. I remember his bright smile when I brought up Jorge Gracia's book. He showed me Jorge's 1986 edited collection *Latin American Philosophy in the Twenty First Century* and was excited by his work. When I asked him his opinion about pursuing my research interests there, he shook his head and said no. He said try to work with Jorge. Looking back this situation had some ironies given what we now know. I mention one. In 1972 Gracia was a finalist for the position in Latin American philosophy at the University

of New Mexico but the position was offered to Fred Sturm. As Gracia was told years later, they were not convinced that he

sufficiently appreciated Latin American philosophy. They particularly mentioned an exchange in which they asked me whether I thought Latin American philosophy existed, and my answer was I did not think it existed as American or European philosophy existed at the time.[3]

Jorge noted that Fred had an advantage over him in that he specialized in Brazilian philosophy but Fred lacked a strong publication record. Gracia notes that the University of New Mexico was not impressed by what he said about Latin American philosophy. According to Jorge, “they wanted a cheerleader for Latin American philosophy, a devotee that did not look at the field critically.”[4] So they “went ahead and offered the job to Fred Sturm who had a background that fit well with the area and the department.” [5] When they met on later occasions, their relations were cordial. When some members of the University of New Mexico invited him to give a talk they mentioned regretting not hiring him and while Gracia was pretty let down after not getting the job he noted that SUNY at Buffalo, in the end, was much better for him and his family.[6]

After visiting University of New Mexico, I already had set up an appointment to meet with Jorge at SUNY Buffalo so I visited the campus in early 2003 in the winter during the Spring semester. I discussed my background and expressed my interest in Latino philosophy and wanting to work with him. I mentioned that while I was excited to be able to work with him in this area I would not be able to if I did not have a full scholarship. I simply could not afford it. He told me to apply and he said he would see what he could do. I applied. I was admitted on a full scholarship. In my ignorance, I mentioned to him I visited University of New Mexico and asked him about Fred Sturm’s status in the field. He too shook his head and said, “he did not make substantial contributions to the field.” Jorge went on to note that with his SUNY Capen chair he was in a position to offer me more support for travel, conferences, etc. In my embarrassing ignorance and naiveté now looking back, I asked Jorge, “Who is the top person in the field?” He smiled and exploded with his classic boisterous unique Gracia laugh, “you are looking at him.”

It was a pleasure to work with Jorge. We laughed a lot. He gave me space to try to develop. I remember Jorge was worried about me when I was not dating anyone during graduate school. He told me he thought I was living a monkish life. Then when I was dating my now wife Liz, he was worried I would get too distracted and not finish my dissertation. He genuinely cared and was an excellent advisor who was professional.

I was speaking to my colleague in the English department at the University of Dayton. She works on Latinx literature/theory. I remember us reminiscing about our times in graduate school and I was talking about my education as a philosopher, constructing and critically evaluating arguments as a usual practice. I asked her how her view was different from her advisor’s perspective. Her eyebrows furled as if I asked a

strange question. I also mentioned how I disagreed with certain aspects of my advisor's view and that this is not just ok but expected. I thought other disciplines did this. Her face crinkled and she said with a surprised bizarre look on her face, "why would you, or anyone else for that matter, want to do that, work with someone and have as your advisor someone you disagree with?" I said how are we going to learn about ourselves without someone challenging us, raising complexities, pointing out limits in our view and critically evaluating the perspectives we develop? How are we going to grow, restate our view, see ourselves in all our flaws without someone caring enough to show us when we are wrong, inaccurate, oversimplifying or overlooking something?

I enjoyed working with Gracia because from what I saw he handled differences well. He was always cordial. Even if he disagreed with you on paper, he always kept the unity. When I was a graduate student, the first article I published was as a critique of Jorge's familial-historical view in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. While I am not proud of that piece and disagree with some parts of it and I say to myself, "Why did I say that" after it came out Jorge said, "while I disagree with the argument you make it is a very well written laid out piece." We laughed, ate, drank wine and talked about philosophy together at his warm comfortable cozy home. My brother-in-law is a jazz musician. When he was playing salsa with a live band at our wedding Jorge, Norma, my wife and I were dancing all night long together in my wife's backyard in Buffalo. Thank you so much for being my *maestro* and ultimately a colleague, who showed me that I have to work to try to develop my own distinct voice, think for myself, make judgements, come to my own conclusions and act in the world. All of these activities are not simply radically individual but also deeply communal processes. Thank you for also being a friend who would help whenever I would call.

The last time I was with him was October 18th and 19th 2019 at SUNY Buffalo. It was a conference revolving around Gracia's work. It was titled, "A Collection of Individuals" that was organized by two of his former students. The first was William Irwin, a professor at King's College Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania who works in aesthetics and hermeneutics and who is the founder of the philosophy and popular culture series with Open Court Press. The second was Jonathan Sanford, a medievalist who is president and professor in philosophy at the University of Dallas. This occasion was particularly special for me because not only was I able to reunite with Jorge in person because it was just before Covid-19 hit but I also was able to be in the company of four generations of Gracia's students who worked in Latinx and Latin American philosophy: Ivan Jaksic, Elizabeth Millan, myself and Stephanie Rivera Berruz. I remember meeting Stephanie for the first time around 2009 with her youthful zest, energy and sharpness when she was applying to the MA program upon Ofelia Schutte's suggestion, to work with Jorge on Latinx/Latin American philosophy. As I was finishing at SUNY at Buffalo Stephanie was just beginning her upward trajectory. Thank you Jorge for playing a role in creating the conditions for me to meet all of these bright people. At the conference on Gracia's philosophical legacy as we talked over appetizers and drinks Jorge said, "Ernesto I have lived a great life, I was able to read, write and travel and do the things I

wanted to do. I lived a life with no regrets. If I die I will die happy.” I miss him and his boisterous laugh.

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Notes

[1] This paper titled, “Jorge J.E. Gracia’s Contributions to Latina/X/o Philosophy and His Engagement With Philosophy of Liberation” is published in the book that resulted from the conference titled *The Philosophical Legacy of Jorge J.E. Gracia* ed. Robert Delfino, William Irwin and J.J. Sanford (Rowman Littlefield, 2022): 21-36.

[2] Paget Henry, *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (Routledge, 2002).

[3] Jorge J.E. Gracia, *With a Diamond in My Shoe: A Philosopher’s Search for Identity in America* (SUNY Press, 2019): 189.

[4] *Ibid.*, 189.

[5] *Ibid.*, 189.

[6] *Ibid.*, 190.