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# “The Americas Seek Not Enlightenment but Liberation”: On the Philosophical Significance of Liberation for Philosophy in the Americas

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LIBERATION IS A NOTION EMPLOYED by many philosophers, theologians, political theorists, and social thinkers engaged in sociopolitical action or in academic and theoretical critiques of multiple forms of oppression, exclusion, and domination. Throughout numerous examples, "liberation" often refers to the long-awaited triumph over oppressive social, economic, and political structures or regimes. In such works, however, the idea of liberation is rarely (if ever) parsed for philosophical meaning. At the root of such hesitation is valid concern: outside of a particular historical or sociocultural context, the idea of liberation is rather vacuous and perhaps even meaningless. Worse, as I contend, liberation is often reduced to approximations such as liberty, freedom, and even "equality," all of which can (unfortunately) set the stage for disappointment and disillusionment when oppressive structures withstand change. Amidst such concerns, might philosophical reflection on the idea of liberation itself yield insights into the nature of oppression and the importance of liberatory struggle against such things as racism, sexism, economic exploitation, the intersection of these, and more? While focusing on the idea of America, anti-racist struggle, and even philosophical embodiment, I argue that it does.

Inspired by Latin American *liberation philosophy*, as well as philosophical and theoretical discourses and debates that can be considered part of a larger *liberatory tradition*,<sup>1</sup> this essay offers an account of the philosophical

significance of liberation and prescribes the special importance that ought to be attached to this notion in context of inter-American philosophical dialogue. Although the sense of "liberation" I employ owes much to Latin American philosophers such as Enrique Dussel, Ofelia Schutte, Leopoldo Zea, Horatio Cerutti-Guldberg (and more), I offer an ample depiction of liberation, one that is broader and more fundamental than even the Latin American tradition(s) of liberation philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

My depiction is "broader" on account of an explicit inter-American orientation (one that is justified not only in terms of content but also in terms of genealogy, as I explain below). I draw from decolonial theorists and philosophers in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as North American philosophers and social theorists challenging racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, domination, injustice, and/or marginalization. These struggles illuminate liberatory processes in multiple contexts and ground the idea of liberation in concrete circumstances. In particular, I situate my analysis of liberation in the contexts of multiple instances of anti-racist struggle since a commitment to combating racism, and not necessarily the overcoming of it (as strange as that sounds), exemplifies the process-orientation that "liberation" entails. Besides its pedagogical value, an overview of the meaning and significance of liberation *in the Americas* ought to include a variegated range of experience focused on such things as race, racialization, and other forms of objectification: socially stratifying conceptions of race (see [Quijano](#)), not to mention overly narrow and biologized conceptions of gender and sexual difference (see [Lugones](#)), serve as axes of domination through which control over labor, land, property rights, and sexual reproduction is (and was) exerted throughout all the Americas. Contemporary struggles against racism (and sexism for that matter), therefore, ought to be viewed as not only *thematically* part of a larger liberatory tradition but also *causally* connected to a conception of philosophy in which liberation is the central goal.

Because I think that a majority of philosophers situated throughout the Americas have yet to understand how liberation serves as a springboard for philosophical thought, I describe my understanding of liberation as more "fundamental," perhaps even philosophically orientating or foundational. By this, I do not mean that every philosopher ought to be wedded to one strand or another of Latin American liberation philosophy. Instead, for those philosophical systems or traditions purporting to be autochthonous to this hemisphere, the *idea* of America ought to (and indeed does for many) serve as a catalyst for liberatory thought. Put differently, at the heart of multiple American experiences, regardless of what adjective one places before the word "American," lays the challenge to confront the epistemic and ontological forms of dependency associated with America. Liberation harbors similar significance for the Americas as does the notion of "enlightenment" within the context of Western intellectual traditions. I am even willing to contend that *liberation is to the Americas what the Enlightenment is to Europe*. Liberation serves as a knowledge- or wisdom-guiding "end" as well as an intellectual movement. While both "liberation" and "enlightenment" are nouns, the former is indicative of an action or process and the latter of a state of being. Such a distinction makes possible two conceptions of the purpose of philosophical knowledge and the practice of philosophy: *philosophy for freedom* (liberation) and *philosophy from freedom* (enlightenment). This difference in starting points impacts the types of questions considered "philosophical"; the methodology and range of experience valid for philosophical inquiry; the institutional or greater social significance of philosophy; and even the overall purpose of philosophical knowledge, that is, whether it aspires toward orthopraxy or orthodoxy, practical or theoretical knowledge.

In what follows, I first explain why philosophical perspectives wishing to call themselves "American" ought to understand liberation as central to their philosophical practice. I then offer an account of the process-oriented dimensions of liberation, emphasizing the importance of "place" and lived experience. Last, drawing from multiple thinkers and texts, I provide a brief depiction of liberation as a philosophical heuristic (for lack of a better word) analogous to enlightenment. Overall, my goal is to explain the sense of liberation I have in mind and demonstrate the philosophical importance of liberatory discourses in the hopes of laying a foundation for an inter-American liberatory tradition.

## On the Significance of Liberation for the Americas

The origins of an explicit Latin American liberation philosophy can be found in the attempt to answer the question: "Is there a Latin American philosophy?" ([Mendieta § 1.1](#)). Such a question, asked by Zea in the 1940s and taken up by Augusto Salazar Bondy in the 1960s, represents the initial stages of an "American" awakening from a deep colonial slumber, a starting point for decolonial philosophical reflection. As Zea puts it (["Actual Function"](#)), "Is there a Latin American philosophy?" is a metaphilosophical inquiry into the importance of place or "culture" and its impact on the practice of philosophy. As such, "Is there a Latin American philosophy?" is not simply asking if it is the case that philosophy exists in Latin America. As a self-conscious and critical inquiry, this question goes beyond the mere recognition and development of hegemonic conceptions of philosophy as they occurred *in* Latin America or the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup> If not interpreted in this more robust manner, then "Is there a Latin American philosophy?" is a matter of historical contingency and accidental to philosophy itself. Which is why, at least on my read, the above question represents an inquiry into the philosophical relevance of America, an inquiry into the ways in which the *idea* of America or the experience of *being* American impact philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

While its colonial underpinnings might not be readily apparent in any given use, ruminating on the full meaning and origins of "America" reveals a concept "embedded in a European optic of the continent," as put by María Lugones and Joshua Price (lxx). It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to think about "America" and not acknowledge (or buy into) the European "discovery" and colonization of the region. The semantic context in which "America" makes sense requires a specific cartographic and geopolitical imaginary, one with Europe (and subsequently the United States) at the center of not only the globe but also serving as the main protagonist of world history. Stemming from this cartographic imaginary, appropriately dubbed "Eurocentrism" by Dussel (["Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism"](#)), are forms of asymmetrical historicity and the normalization of a particular geopolitical outlook. The supposed movement of world history from East to West, much like the movement of geopolitical power from Europe to the United States, reinforces the spatial normativity offered by the Eurocentric model (so, too, is the technological and cultural development of "First World" nations, with their supposed advancement or progress unfolding in a way that supports the ideology of this cartographic imaginary).

"America" is thus a concept *for* Europe and subsequently for the progeny of the Eurocentric outlook, that is, the United States. And while it, too, exists in a manner dependent upon the other continents (i.e., Africa, Asia, America), the idea of "Europe" does not immediately evoke this fact. The geospatial normativity offered by Eurocentrism provides a false sense of independence and erasure. Europe is thus capable of evading its intercontinental dependency in a way similar to how whiteness operates in the racial contexts of the United States, that is, as a self-enclosed, self-sustaining entity that exists independently of denigrated categories of non-whiteness.<sup>5</sup>

The notion of "Americanness" brings to the fore the epistemic dependence apparent within the idea of America. Coined by Quijano and Wallerstein in the early articulation of the host of issues that remain the focus of contemporary decolonial thought, "Americanness" offers a *carte blanche* and historical fissure that constitutes a precondition for the possibility of the modern capitalist world order (549).<sup>6</sup> For Quijano and Wallerstein, the resources acquired in the Americas, the quasi-legal strategies used in the justification of land appropriation, the variegated methods of labor control that subsequently articulated the parameters of race and ethnicity (and gender) as socially stratifying concepts, in addition to the (nation-)state model as the chief vehicle for "liberation" in the Americas (which solidified the social, political, and economic stratification of this region), all made possible the capitalist world order. These axes of domination were then exported throughout the globe and paved the way for the modern capitalist world system. "The creation of this geosocial entity, the Americas," Quijano and Wallerstein write, "was the constitutive act of the modern world-system. The Americas were not

incorporated into an already existing capitalist world economy. There could not have been a capitalist world-economy without the Americas" (549).

In addition to providing the material conditions that made possible the capitalist world economy, "Americanity" provided a historical break or rupture that makes possible the *modern* world (Quijano and Wallerstein 550–52). It is also the means through which "America" became a "discoverable entity," to use Edmundo O'Gorman's terminology. Embedded within "Americanity" is a sense of "newness" that simultaneously provides some with historical continuity, subjectivity, and depth while robbing others of any sense of historicity. Whereas peripheral *European* countries or regions were also marginalized by and subjugated to Western colonial metropolises, many European elites were capable of alleviating their domination by resisting the kind of exploitation and erasure suffered by the peoples of America. Historicity, or the continuation of a necessarily undeniable and authentic historical subjectivity, was the saving grace for those in the eastern and northern European peripheries, argue Quijano and Wallerstein (549)—I write "necessarily undeniable" since denying peripheral European countries their privileged status in light of the *linear* movement or unfolding of world history would undermine the West's claim to historical progress. The Americas, however, did not fare so well. As Quijano and Wallerstein explain, in the Americas,

the process of peripheralization involved less the reconstruction of economic and political institutions than their construction, virtually *ex nihilo* everywhere (except perhaps in the Mexican and Andean zones). Hence from the beginning, the mode of cultural resistance to oppressive conditions was less in claims of historicity than in the flight forward to "modernity."

(549)

Quintessential to the idea of Americanity is a sense of "newness" and the rush toward the present. The foremost indicator of this being the notion that America was *discovered*, something new, unseen, unknown until revealed by a particular (Eurocentric) point of view.

As Quijano and Wallerstein hold, the possibility for the modern world system required a temporal disjunction metaphorically captured by the idea of "newness." The modern world is where reason and not faith, dogma, or papal authority reigns supreme and serves as the foundation for knowledge. Under the guise of "modern," the capitalist world order is endowed with the necessarily vantage point that makes possible the superiority of some in contradistinction to the lack of modernity found in others, that is, the "premodern," savage, medieval, or ancient ways of being. The idea of modernity is therefore not merely a temporal reference indicating a moment in time, but signifies a stage in the unfolding and development of world history, a sign of progress.

Lest one continue in bad faith or revel in culpable forms of ignorance that often accompany First World privilege, those points of view that wish to emphasize their situatedness in the Americas should strive to "liberate" themselves from the yoke of "Americanity." Problem is, overcoming "Americanity," not to mention the various axes of domination that are part and parcel to it, is not so easily achieved. "Americanity" persists on account of various ideological mechanisms that are not easily done away with or overcome, and this is why I offer a robust account of "liberation" below. Some of these mechanisms, such as the continuation of the cartographic normativity in which "America" is afforded its meaning, articulate the preconditions for the settler-colonialism vital to the founding of the original colonies that became the United States of America. Others, such as the methods of labor control that differentiated social classes on the basis of race or gender in order to designate the type and range of labor connected to each grouping, set the stage for identity formation that persists today. To think that American societies will ultimately be freed from the unjust land appropriation that undergirds the United States of America, much like the notion that race will no longer serve as a "vortex for modern human social relations" across American societies, to quote Jeffery Stewart's description of the importance of race for Alain Locke (qtd. in [Locke xxvi](#)), is to misunderstand the nature of these oppressive structures and, therefore, is a misunderstanding of the philosophical significance of liberation.

On account of Americanness—and I offer examples connected to the workings of racism and processes of racialization below in order to relay this point—oppression, objectification, and coloniality<sup>2</sup> are woven into the fabric of almost every American experience (even those on the privileged end of human social relations are positively affected by the oppression of others). Thus, to seek "liberation" from racism, sexism, or even "Eurocentrism" is not easy to achieve and can possibly set one up for failure if one defines success as the overcoming or erasure of these oppressive social relations.

## The Idea of Liberation

"Liberation" is best understood as a process, or perhaps more appropriately an ongoing praxis, harboring both critical *and* creative potentialities. Liberation is best understood as a utopian goal ([Dussel, \*Philosophy of Liberation\* 186](#)). Liberation is not something easily completed or checked off a laundry list. It is not so impossible as to promote quietism, however. The idea of liberation is indicative of a process; it is an ongoing endeavor or a "striving for" rather than a single act or series of actions resulting in a definitive tangible end. This is not to say that a particular liberatory movement cannot have a concrete goal in mind. Say, for instance, ending apartheid. While such a specified objective is possible, "ending" something like apartheid requires systemic socioeconomic and political change as well as a commitment to forms of rectificatory justice that work toward undoing, dismantling, and supplying enough material and structural weight to outdo legacies of oppression caused by it. Liberation *from* apartheid (or racism and sexism for that matter)—this language is deceiving—suggests an orthopraxy, or as Dussel ([Philosophy of Liberation](#)) describes, a "liberative orthopraxis" (188); apartheid, much like racism, sexism, and even "colonialism" (in the sense of "coloniality"), does not just "end." The fight against them takes time and conscientious effort and constitutes a life commitment.

Philosophers working against racism realize this point. Ending racism, perhaps *combating* racism (I should say), is not limited to cognitive shifts or intellectual awakenings seeking to change the hearts and minds of racists, as Kenneth Stikkers reminds us (5–6). Instead, anti-racist struggle involves challenging racist ways of inhabiting the world, racist ways of being. It involves "performing the body's racialized interactions with the world differently," as George Yancy put it (843), even when those who *are* racist do not see themselves as performing racism. Such praxis calls for a rethinking of the divide between theory and practice ([Márquez, xi](#); [Villoro, "Ideological Currents" 185–87](#)) and also requires the possibility that the struggle against a particular instance of oppression might exceed one's lifetime and never really be "overcome." José-Antonio Orosco's description of Cesar Chavez's rejection of "crisis time" is useful here, specifically the Mexican *dicho* or saying, "Hay mas tiempo que vida (there is more *time* than *life*)" (106). The fact that a liberatory struggle might take more time to achieve than an individual's life span should not stop people from contributing their all to the cause. Such a notion also manifests in Derrick Bell's third tenet of racial realism: in light of the permanence of racism, anti-racist advocates should find fulfillment or "salvation" in the struggle itself; otherwise they may be disillusioned or deceived by the type of social, political, and legal setbacks that often, if not always, accompany racial "progress" ([Bell 98](#)).

Liberation amounts to an aspiration demanding a certain level of attentiveness to the exigencies of one's community, a principled commitment acknowledging the role of "place," and a point grounding any sense of utopianism in a reality calling for philosophical attention. Put differently, from *where* one thinks matters philosophically for liberatory thinkers.<sup>3</sup> This means at least two things. First, particular persons from concrete situations practice philosophy. When one philosophizes, she does so in way motivated by her individual consciousness and shaped by a unique set of circumstances that may or may not overlap, to a certain extent, with the predicament of others. In more phenomenological terms, both the subject of knowledge (the "thinking self" or the "thinking subject") and object of knowledge (the object of inquiry) are historically demarcated by the cultural, linguistic, and social/political contexts in which they arise.<sup>4</sup> As historically demarcated, there is an

indelible link between subject/object such that the division between the two is reconfigured: both are relevant, or equally significant, to philosophical inquiry. Any underlying metaphysical presuppositions inherited from modern philosophy—for instance, the belief that the object of knowledge is radically contingent whereas the subject is certain—is abandoned.

Second, liberatory philosophy takes reality to be the focus of philosophical investigation. This does not mean metaphysical investigations into the existence and workings of the "real world," but first and foremost, a commitment to contemplating and subsequently acting on (hence, "praxis") instances of non-freedom and oppression afflicting one's community or its surroundings. There is no need to cast metaphysical doubt on one's reality when the experience or sight of hunger or thirst makes such forms of skepticism difficult if not impossible to maintain. Furthermore, when one's circumstance requires immediate attention and action, the best solutions tend to be those that take sociohistorical particularities into consideration. Debates about the status of "organic" or "rooted" intellectuals arise in such a context-driven approach ([Sáenz 7–21](#)), as does the sense of philosophical practice as "commitment" or vocation ([Zea, "La filosofía como compromiso"](#)). Driving the emphasis on place therefore is a hallmark of liberatory philosophy: a principled approach concerned with suffering, oppression, and multiple forms of alienation or objectification, all of which take place in "real," lived, or embodied circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

Liberation as the ideal of philosophical practice implies the need to explore the ways in which the particularities of individual human existence (e.g., race, class, gender, nationality, ethnicity) impact the philosophical process, that is, the emplacement of philosophy. Construing philosophy in this manner cannot help but bring identity to the foreground, a topic of concern for many "American" philosophers and social theorists for whom their identity is a "problem," as expressed by W. E. B. DuBois (28). The problematic nature of identity includes the experience of racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender-based forms of oppression, just to name a few. It also includes philosophical reflection on the workings of unjust socioeconomic and political structures and the support they garner from socially stratifying concepts (e.g., race, gender, or class), exclusive categories group membership (e.g., citizen, denizen, or immigrant), and domineering ideologies. Following Schutte ([Cultural Identity](#)), then, the sense in which identity is relevant for liberatory philosophers is more aligned with "social" rather than "personal identity" (9–10), a prioritization that views social identity formation and practice as an inescapable determinant for many, a point I return to below. Liberatory thinkers thus focus on forms of subjective experience unfolding in the contexts of racial/sexual objectivity, colonial "totalization," and historical marginalization rather than decontextualized, "idealized," and abstract theories of the self.

While the idea of liberation emphasizes place, identity, and embodiment, the question of utopianism might remain an issue for some, namely, historical materialist who worry about a haunting idealism. Herbert Marcuse's thoughts in *An Essay on Liberation* might ease some worries. He writes that "what is denounced as 'utopian' is no longer that which has 'no place' and cannot have any place in the historical universe, but rather that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the established societies" (3–4). The idea that the dominant or prevailing social, economic, and political order denies or "blocks" certain realities from coming into existence, realities that, as Marcuse reminds, technological progress makes possible (e.g., ending resource scarcity or global hunger or eradicating an assortment of diseases), fits nicely with the thought of liberatory philosophers, especially the focus on victimization and suffering. Acknowledging the importance of historical contingency and individual agency plays an important role in this process, since imbalanced or asymmetrical power relations and structural injustices are the products of prior actions, such as enslavement, war, conquest, and colonization, or fetishized forms of political practice. Along these lines, Paulo Freire writes that liberation "cannot be achieved in idealistic terms." He continues: "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (34). Feasibility becomes an important theme of

liberation, one that Dussel also underscores in several places ([Twenty Theses \[Theses 8 and 20\]](#); [Ethics of Liberation, 158–204, 413–32](#)).

Amidst the emphasis on "freedom" or "liberty," liberation cannot be reduced to either of these, or, for that matter, to the achievement of political independence. Reducing liberation to any of these ignores the *complexity* of liberation. Due to its ameliorative ambitions, the idea of liberation holds much instrumental value. Nevertheless, the process-orientation of "liberation" suggests that its contribution is not merely a onetime event. It is not just a means to an end. Liberation reduced to liberty also fails to recognize why liberatory thinkers tend to maintain one foot in theories of decolonization predicated on coloniality. The history of the Americas is littered with instances of slavery, serfdom, and social stratification, and forms of passive citizenship accompany national liberation or political independence,<sup>11</sup> not to mention that national independence was often inspired by and worked in favor of colonial elites ([Villoro, "Mexican and North American Independence"](#)). Liberation reduced to freedom or liberty also results in the unnecessary (and unwelcomed!) ascription of many philosophers to the liberatory tradition (for instance, G. W. F. Hegel, who happened to write a great deal on freedom). Just because a philosopher writes on liberty does not mean that his concern is "liberation," a point that begs the question as to what is unique or significant about the sense of "liberation" at stake in the liberatory tradition: Is it merely the decolonial orientation that differentiates it from other philosophical endeavors concerned with freedom, or the dynamic between praxis and place?

Whereas all philosophy might be imbued with a liberating function ([Ellacuría 94](#)), in professional academic philosophy today, greater weight seems to be placed upon *philosophizing from freedom* and not *philosophizing for the sake of freedom*. With the former, in the words of the Caribbean philosopher, Paget Henry, philosophy is "an affirmation of the autonomy of a thinking subject." He continues: "As the primary instrument of this absolute subject ... philosophy shares in its autonomy and therefore is a discipline that rises above the determinations of history and everyday life" (9). Such a decontextualized, "liberated" understanding of philosophy is unduly burdened by philosophical practices within which liberatory discourses are at home. In this setting, the affirmation of the autonomy of a thinking subject is not as important as the liberation of the *subject-in-struggle*, a struggle for freedom. This sense of "freedom," I must remind, is not idealized; for liberation philosophers, "freedom" is concretized by an emphasis on place and embodiment. With philosophy for freedom, the questions come from reality, from life, rather than emerging from the skepticism or unbridled curiosity of a thinking subject.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres demonstrated this when comparing René Descartes's *Discourse on Method* to Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*:

Both [texts] focus on impediments to the search for truth. But they highlight different forms of deception. Descartes focuses on the deception of the senses, tradition, and assumed certainties, while Césaire focuses on the deception of those who, after apparently following Descartes' method, believe not to be deceived but deceive themselves nonetheless in regard to what is most fundamental: themselves and their relation with others.

[\("Césaire's Gift" 127\)](#)

There is no need to conceive of an evil deceiver who might have just fabricated one's customs, language, memories, and history, such that one cannot find truth or certainty in these when the European colonizers and their distorting representation of the colonized victim will serve such purposes. The imposition of imperial culture, language, and even history all reveal that there is not much "certainty" to be found in these sites of colonial domination when coercive force does most of the work. Thus, skepticism is not an impediment to truth as much as the perverse social arrangement imbedded in colonial domination. Liberatory philosophical practice therefore does not occur in a vacuum or hyperbolic chamber but begins from the lived circumstance of thinking subjects, "subjects" that have in many ways been objectified—yet another reason why a particularly American

approach to liberatory thought must include anti-racist, anti-sexist, and other related forms of critical philosophical reflection.

## Liberation as Philosophical Heuristic

A commitment to liberation is not easily compartmentalized or made a *part* of philosophy. For this reason, Mendieta views liberatory philosophy as metaphilosophy:

The philosophy of liberation's philosophical orbit is defined by the axes of critique, commitment, engagement and liberation. As a critique of all forms of philosophical dependency and inauthenticity, it is consciously and avowedly a metaphilosophy. The philosophy of liberation is thus, among other things, a view about what counts as philosophy and how it should be pursued.

(§ 1.1)

I appreciate Mendieta's depiction of liberatory philosophy. The most forceful or significant metaphilosophical contribution from the philosophy of liberation points to legacies of colonialism (coloniality) impacting academic philosophy, points I tried to convey above. Nonetheless, the significance of "liberation" is often downplayed, sold short, when reduced to one of its axes, that is, through criticism of those forms of philosophical practice that promote dependency and inauthenticity. As forceful as it may be, such criticism might remain committed to a hegemonic conception of philosophy. For this reason, I suggest the idea of liberation as a philosophically orienting ideal, a heuristic in the sense of providing a sense of purpose or direction for philosophical inquiry, not just a critique of hegemonic philosophical practice.

While *philosophers* of liberation might conceptually draw from hegemonic philosophical concepts and ideas, liberation philosophy does not take Eurocentric modernity or the Enlightenment as its starting point. Arising from "the underside of modernity" ([Dussel, \*Invention of the Americas\*](#)), this tradition's points of departure are the experience of colonization and the *realization* of the importance of *striving-for-liberty*. It does not seek "enlightenment" or wish to become "modern"; both would amount to a false start anyway since modernity's underside, that is, the experience of colonization, is already a constitutive facet of modernity itself, as a plethora of voices have stated before ([Dussel, \*Invention of the Americas\*](#); [Quijano and Wallerstein](#); [Zea, \*Role of the Americas\*](#); [Quijano, "Coloniality of Power"](#); [Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being"](#)). Instead, one should think of liberation as itself being analogous to the idea of enlightenment.

Liberation occupies similar conceptual space as the idea of enlightenment in the history of European thought. As a philosophical-intellectual movement (i.e., *the Enlightenment*) or even a goal, "enlightenment" constitutes the kind of background knowledge that undergirds much European or "Western" thought. It infiltrates everything from literature, art, philosophy, and science to political revolutions, legal systems, human and political rights, and systems of governance. Throughout modern European intellectual history, the idea of enlightenment is periodically "activated" by a philosopher or political institution reflecting upon its meaning and significance or its failures and/or absence. The same is true about the idea of liberation in the Americas; it, too, is the explicit topic of inquiry (say, in liberation or decolonial philosophy), an ideal or goal motivating independence and revolutionary movements, and also serves as a kind of implicit or background knowledge.

With the idea of liberation as its "guiding light" (and I recognize the irony in that phrasing), the pursuit of knowledge does not begin from a subjectivity already endowed with freedom. The great philosopher from Königsberg, Immanuel Kant, assumes such a starting point in his response to the question "What is Enlightenment?" As he explains, "[n]othing is required for this enlightenment, however, except *freedom*; and the freedom in question is the least harmful of all, namely the freedom to use reason *publicly* in all matters" (42). Kant encourages his audience to think for themselves and endorses a conception of freedom connected to

intellectual liberty and freedom of conscience (of course, with self-imposed restraints that have the betterment of society and other people's autonomy in mind). Freedom or liberty is already part of the picture for Kant's audience. He begins from a subjectivity that seeks mental emancipation from the fetters of laziness, dogma, epistemic hubris, or misuses of reason.

Liberatory philosophy begins with a "subject" wherein external obstacles—serfdom, slavery, domesticity, exclusion, domination, poverty, hunger, and more—hinder individual autonomy or social emancipation. It begins from a subject that contemplates the need to remove, critique, or bring awareness to those obstacles that render subjectivity or agency difficult if not impossible. Dussel (*Ethics of Liberation*) describes this sense of subjectivity as that which "in order to become a subject, it is necessary to make a self-conscious critique of the system that causes victimization" (387). The struggle is not against a self-imposed form of heteronomy but against forms of intellectual nonage imposed by the alienating and objectifying nature of conquest, colonialism, and coloniality, that is to say, "other-" imposed forms of intellectual immaturity. These are perhaps more aptly described as ascriptive forms inferiority and the kind of intellectual nonage that is not a product of laziness but a product of being overworked in plantations, fields, mines, or *encomiendas*, for instance.

While both "liberation" and "enlightenment" are emancipatory projects, both cognitive realizations, they represent distinct kinds of "emancipation," one an "inner" or "introspective" sense of autonomy and the other, freedom from oppressive social arrangements. Certainly, the liberatory standpoint also underscores the importance of thinking from one's own perspective, thereby promoting a sense of philosophy as internally valuable. This sense of internal value, however, is not easily reducible to Kantian understandings of autonomy. How does the realization that one's language or mode of thought is the product of colonial imposition or domineering ideology and not just an initial stage of heteronomy conveying the facticity or "thrownness" of one's historical situatedness, necessitate that philosophy take shape in decolonial liberatory contexts? How can one know the self when alienated from the language of thought itself, when philosophical reason is an instrument of the objectifying and dehumanizing processes? How does the practice and meaning of philosophy change when it serves the emancipation of body and mind not just from the shackles of laziness, myth, or superstition, but freedom from slavery, conquest, and oppressive social, economic, or political structures?

For those aiming for liberation, their identity or sense of self is the site of much oppression. These are identities born of struggle, to borrow Leonard Harris's terminology, forced to confront the hegemonic and domineering assumptions of dominant perspectives. These identities lack the ability, the privilege, to disregard the opinion of others or presume uncontested notions of freedom. In his interactions with white women who view him as suspect or threatening prior to even knowing him, Yancy describes his body as a battleground (844), the site of conflict between his sense of self and the projection of black criminality imposed upon him on account of his black skin. Similarly, in "Throwing Like a Girl," Iris Marion Young explains:

Women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections. To be sure, there are actual women in contemporary society to whom all or part of the above descriptions do not apply. Where these modalities are not manifest in or determinative of the existence of a particular woman, however, they are definitive in a negative mode—as that which she has escaped, through accident or good fortune, or, more often, as that which she has had to overcome.

(42–43)

Within the above thoughts, I find a new argument in support of Glaucon's challenge to Socrates in Plato's *Republic*, namely, that it is better to appear to be good than actually be good. Racialized and/or gendered

persons cannot so easily dismiss what other people think about them or how they appear. To do so has life or death consequences. Along these lines, the thoughts of Yancy and Young are akin to those of Dussel: "Distant thinkers, those who had a perspective of the center from the periphery, *those who had to define themselves in the presence of an already established image of the human person* and in the presence of uncivilized fellow humans, the newcomers, the ones who hope because they are always outside, these are the one who have clear mind for pondering reality" (*Philosophy of Liberation 4; emphasis added*). "Distant thinkers" are those residing on "the outside" of hegemonic circles and totalizing systems, those in colonial peripheries in relation to a center that is Europe; those for whom their status as a rational subject implies spatial connotations, that is, an aperture or distance (hence, "place") from the imposing views of the center; those who had images of humanity's past cast upon them in terms of being considered barbarian, pre-modern, savage, inferior. "Newcomers," or those for whom *creative* interpretive practices are possible, are best suited to ponder reality since, as Dussel continues, they do not seek to defend any privileges or ideological perspectives.

Paulo Freire echoes something similar in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. "Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one," he penned. "The man who emerges is a new man, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all men. Or to put it another way, the solution of this contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this *new man*: no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but man in the process of achieving freedom" (33–34; emphasis added). Note that the solution to the oppressor-oppressed relation emerges in "the labor," the struggle. Along these lines, compare Kant's thoughts above to what Angela Y. Davis writes when examining Frederick Douglass's understanding of the liberatory process:

The slave could thus become conscious of the fact that freedom is not a static quality, a given, but rather is the goal of an active process, something to be fought for, something to be gained in and through the process of struggle. The slave-master, on the other hand, experienced what he defined as his freedom as an inalienable fact: he could hardly become aware that he, too, had been enslaved by the system over which he appeared to rule.

(132)

While the above is meant to convey the sense in which liberation constitutes a process wherein subjectivity is born of struggle, it also makes possible the sense in which liberatory philosophy results in a transformation, hence, the emphases on creativity and newness. Along these lines, Fanon explains that decolonial processes ideally constitute a complete overhaul of societies shaped by colonization. "Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon," he writes. "[It] is quite simply the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men. Without any period of transition, there is a total complete, and absolute substitution" (1). Fanon summarizes this as the "veritable creation of new men":

Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History. It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to supernatural power: The "thing" colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation.

(2)

One captures a glimpse at the extent of the totalizing nature of colonialism in Fanon's depiction of what is necessary to overcome it: decolonization would have an ontological impact (it "alters being"); it projects the colonized to world-historic proportions; it results in new rhythms and language, that is, novel means of

articulation and expression that reflect new ways of being human, thereby calling into question the "humanism," if we can call it that, implicit to colonization. I call attention to the link between creativity, the novelty required for decolonization to take place, and the process of liberation in Fanon's work.<sup>12</sup>

The liberatory endorsement of creativity and newness will no doubt inspire many to think of the need for a "liberatory aesthetic." This use of "creativity" is not necessarily the sense employed in liberatory theory; creativity should not be limited to its aesthetic sense but should be understood as an existential modality connected to "openness" and the rejection of closed or fixed social and historical totalities. Creativity is therefore connected to freedom, dynamism, and movement. Also relevant are conceptions of human identity devoid of essentialized, normative, or socially stratifying content. Because social identity is a site where culture plays a big role, the range of human possibility and potentiality (human creativity and freedom) dwindle within various attempts to totalize, historicize, or "cover over" cultural difference. Dynamic conceptions of human life therefore undergird many liberatory works.

Rather than concentrate on theoretical debates or philosophical problems emanating from the minds of professional thinkers, "liberation" commandeers philosophical thought, rendering it an instrument to the realization of life, as grandiose as this might sound. A philosophy of liberation therefore critiques, calls into question, and challenges those forms of social, economic, and political organization—not to mention ideologies, theories of knowledge, and/or philosophical approaches—that result in domination, "totalization," oppression, marginalization, and alienation, as well as pain and death. *This* pursuit of knowledge or love of wisdom does not end in a static collection of facts, with "certainty," or a contribution to a technical debate, but in the *continued* application of philosophical faculties and ideas that call into question unjust social structures and hegemonic practices. The understanding of philosophy must shift from an erudite "love of wisdom," a benchmark on the register of Western civility, to a process in which "the *telos* of thinking, if there is any, is the struggle against dehumanization, understood as the affirmation of sociality and the negation of its negation [coloniality]" ([Maldonado-Torres, "Thinking at the Limits of Philosophy" 261](#)).

I emphasize "continued," since in the above quotes, the thoughts of Fanon, Freire, Davis, and Dussel refer to a process. This is also the sense of "process" I used above to describe the idea of liberation. Because of the dynamic nature of coloniality, one should not think that we live in a time where freedom or liberation has already been achieved, an idea suggested by such notions as "post-racial," "post-colonial," and perhaps even "post-Enlightenment." Instead, as Kant suggests, "we may not live in an enlightened age but an age of enlightenment" (44), yet another reason why one cannot reduce "liberation" to liberty. Dussel ([Twenty Theses](#)) put it best when he wrote that "[i]t is true that the bourgeois Revolution spoke of *liberty*, but what is necessary now is to subsume that liberty and speak instead of *liberation* (as in North American pragmatism, one does not speak of *truth* but *verification*). So now we do not refer to liberty but instead to liberation as a process, as the negation of a point of departure, and as a tension pressing towards a point of arrival" (137).<sup>13</sup>

For purposes of an Inter-American dialogue, if the *idea* of "America" is indispensable to the production of knowledge, or, if it is case that the experience of *being* American constitutes a crucial philosophical point of departure, two variants of a methodology that challenges the prevailing subjectivity implicit to academic philosophy today, then a liberatory hue ought to color the backdrop of all Inter-American *philosophical* thought arising from this region. For a philosopher to explicitly begin from the standpoint of the Americas and yet be unbothered by his status as an "American" suggests a false start. A philosopher cannot rest settled within his "American" context; it must be complicated ([Lysaker](#)). For the above reasons, several liberatory theorists and indigenous thinkers have either distanced themselves from the idea of "America" ([Mignolo, \*Idea of Latin America\*](#)) or have attempted to reclaim the term in a more pluralistic way ([Martí, "Our America"](#)). The challenge for philosophers of the Americas therefore is to think through their colonial dependencies (as "Americans")

using their colonial inheritance (philosophy), an act done in good faith if one is willing to rethink the nature and purpose of philosophical inquiry.

## NOTES

1. By *liberation philosophy*, I refer to the Latin American tradition of liberation philosophy. By *liberatory tradition*, I mean the larger understanding of liberatory philosophy that I seek to justify in this essay, one that includes anti-racist, anti-sexist, and other forms of philosophical struggle against oppression.
2. Secondary literature on liberation philosophy ([Schutte, "Origins and Tendencies"](#); [Mendieta](#)) differentiates between a strict or narrow usage of "philosophy of liberation," referring to a specific intellectual movement that occurred in Argentina in the 1970s, and an inclusive use of "philosophy of liberation" that houses a variety of Latin Americans working on liberatory themes (not all from Argentina). For reasons offered in this essay, my attempt to "broaden" or make possible a larger *liberatory tradition* exceeds even those Latin Americans who are *thematically* linked to liberation philosophy.
3. See the comments made by Manuel Vargas in "Multicultural Philosophy Panel 2: Comparative Philosophy" ([vimeo.com/58932466](https://vimeo.com/58932466)). For a brief discussion of the difference between a characteristic (or autochthonous) Latin American philosophy and the history of hegemonic conceptions of philosophy in Latin America (one that also explains how they are compatible and not antagonistic), see [Nuccetelli et al. 1–2](#).
4. I am drawing from Carlos Astrada's description of two ways of formulating the philosophical significance of Latin America, that is, as either a metaphysical question pertaining to Latin American existence (understood in a Heideggerian sense) or in terms of the inseparability of the subject-object of consciousness (the more Husserlian route). See [Dussel, "Philosophy in Latin America" 16](#).
5. This suggests the need to further explore the similarities between "Eurocentrism" (as understood in the sense described above) and white racial normativity, an endeavor that would bring out the "centrality" of white racial normativity as well as the normativity of geopolitics with Europe (and now the North Atlantic) as the center. For more on whiteness as self-contained entity, see [Yancy](#).
6. Quijano and Wallerstein argue that Americanness unfolds in four interrelated ways: coloniality, ethnicity, racism, and the concept of newness itself (550).
7. "Coloniality" is the term used to describe the power dynamic implicit to colonialism yet capable of surviving decolonial processes. Coloniality is not necessarily the rule of a particular imperial regime, like that of Spain in what became Mexico or Peru, but the power dynamic implicit to colonialism leading to stratified social hierarchies divided in terms of class, land rights, race, gender, political power, or education, and even in terms of "knower" or "object-known." Although national liberation may take place, and thus a society may be "post-colonial," there is a sense in which the power dynamics implicit to colonization (i.e., coloniality) may still be operational. For more on coloniality, see [Quijano and Wallerstein](#); [Quijano \("Coloniality of Power"\)](#); and [Maldonado-Torres \("On the Coloniality of Being"\)](#). See also [Lugones \("Heterosexualism"\)](#) for a critique of Quijano revealing how coloniality, especially in terms of narrow and overly biologized accounts of gender and sexual difference, remains persistent within the work of someone like himself.
8. In the *Philosophy of Liberation*, Dussel states:  
I am trying, then, to take space, geopolitical space, seriously. To be born at the North Pole or in Chiapas is not the same thing as to be born in New York City. ... Philosophy, when it is really philosophy and not sophistry or ideology, does not ponder philosophy. It does not ponder philosophical text, except as a pedagogical propaedeutic to provide itself with interpretive categories. Philosophy ponders the nonphilosophical; the reality. But because it involves reflection on its own reality, it's set out from what already is, from its own world, its own system, its own space.

9. See [Sánchez \(Contingency and Commitment\)](#) for an account of the significance of place in regard to his reading of Mexican existentialists, especially the introduction, "From Prejudice to Violence," which I take to be a kind of apology. See also [Ellacuría 107–12](#).

10. The liberatory-philosophical focus on suffering is shared with, if not inspired by, the work of liberation theologians. "Liberation theology," explains Christopher Rowland,  
is a theology which is explored not just in tutorial or seminar but engages the whole person in the midst of a life of struggle and deprivation. It is theology which, above all, often starts from the insights of those men and women who have found themselves caught up in the midst of that struggle, rather than being evolved and handed down to them by ecclesiastical or theological experts.

(2)

Liberation theology begins from the experience of those suffering at the hands of economic exploitation and neoliberal imperialism, not to mention those experiences and circumstances afforded by histories of colonialism. Its point of departure is not "detached reflection on Scripture and tradition but the present life of the shanty towns and land struggles, the lack of basic amenities, the carelessness about the welfare of human persons, the death squads and the shattered lives of refugees," to quote Rowland once again (2). [Schutte \(Cultural Identity 173–73; "Origins and Tendencies" 270–71\)](#) offers a brief explanation for why a philosophy of liberation and theology of liberation ought to be viewed as two separate types of projects.

11. From a Latin American perspective, Simón Bolívar's "Address to the Angostura Congress" is a great example of the specious nature of national independence.

12. Along these lines, one should think about the importance of the Harlem Renaissance to Alain Locke; I think Fanon's thoughts point to how one should interpret the "New" of the "New Negro."

13. Dussel offers a more expansive account of the parallel between verification and liberation in his *Ethics of Liberation*, 165 [§ 3.1 "Pragmatism of Charles S. Pierce"].

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