Why the Struggle Against Coloniality is Paramount to Latin American Philosophy

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 "openness," especially in terms of how one thinks and lives
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 Gracia explains below (in so many words), I am perhaps only
 capable of painting a picture of Latin American philosophy
 as "philosophy born of [colonial] struggle," to slightly tweak
 the phrase coined by the African American philosopher
 Leonard Harris. This limitation is not a problem; I have
 no problem viewing Latin American philosophy as part of
 a larger philosophical practice committed to struggling
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 praxis that is missing in most of academic philosophy. In
 addition, I think there is an important difference between
 philosophizing from freedom and philosophizing for the
 sake of freedom. Philosophy looks different and often
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 traditional" purposes and problematics in political and
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 oppression, especially those resulting from coloniality.

 For the most part, philosophers residing in imperial,
developed countries are typically free (or at least free
 enough) to think without the constraints or burdens of their
 particular social, cultural, racial, and gendered existence.
 These individuals tend to think "universally" and their
 subjectivity or identity rarely enters the philosophical
 purview, except for discussions of identity writ large (in
 the sense that J. Locke talks about personal identity). This
 is especially true when the face of philosophy reflects
 the dominant racial, gender, class, and/or sexual norm,
or when one's status in country or place of residence is
 authorized by the state; that is, when one's subjectivity is
 legally, metaphysically, and socio-historically secure. To
 philosophize from this perspective does not mean that
 one is totally free of conflict or strife, for nobody lives a
 life free of turmoil of some kind. Nevertheless, there exist
 ways of practicing philosophy that begin from socially
 advantageous positions that subsequently delimit the
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 For those in colonial (and even "post-colonial") circumstances
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 As a Latino philosopher who teaches and specializes in
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 philosophy, the former often a report on easily recognizable
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 America (including Brazil), the Caribbean, and even
 amongst Latino/as in the United States. Although meant to
 be inclusive (perhaps too inclusive), the above descriptions
 are vague and mislead those unfamiliar with the field. They
 eclipse a "tradition," for lack of a better word, that takes the
 idea of Latin America and all the identity crises that come
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 This tradition places much importance on the goal of
 liberation, the idea of freedom (an idea realized in various
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16. I got the idea for this distinction in a conversation with Bernard Kobes, who pointed me to John Searle’s distinction between regulative rules and constitutive rules in Speech Acts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 33. The distinction is this: "regulative rules regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behaviour; for example, many rules of etiquette regulate inter-personal relationships which exist independently of the rules. But constitutive rules do not merely regulate, they create or define new forms of behaviour. The rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football or chess, but as it were they create the very possibility of playing such games."

17. Most philosophers, under the influence of liberal individualism perhaps, would reject this view on the grounds that there is not a proper way to be a Latino/a and also no proper way to be a Latino/a philosopher. After all, to claim that there are moral obligations in virtue of one’s (unchosen) race or ethnicity, they would say, is to essentialize the very same, which is descriptively mistaken insofar as races are not real, and it might be thought to be morally impermissible insofar as it denies the “priority of individual liberty,” or imposes unwanted obligations on individuals without their consent. I am of the mind that this line of argument is mistaken in regard to racialized and oppressed/marginalized groups. Someone wanting to make the case would want, however, to distinguish between the in-fact rules which our social reality collectively sustains, some of which may be pernicious (e.g., Jim Crow-era rules of conduct), and those that would be appropriate rules for people of color to adopt in order to combat oppression. In a future work, I would like to expand on this theme, but here I set this issue aside.

18. This, of course, is not to say that we cannot criticize our philosophical forbears. It is just to point to the social meaning attached to the disavowal and dismissal of LALo/a philosophy by other philosophers, and particularly by Latino/a philosophers.

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For the most part, philosophers residing in imperial, developed countries are typically free (or at least free enough) to think without the constraints or burdens of their particular social, cultural, racial, and gendered existence. These individuals tend to think “universally” and their subjectivity or identity rarely enters the philosophical purview, except for discussions of identity writ large (in the sense that J. Locke talks about personal identity). This is especially true when the face of philosophy reflects the dominant racial, gender, class, and/or sexual norm, or when one’s status in country or place of residence is authorized by the state; that is, when one’s subjectivity is legally, metaphysically, and socio-historically secure. To philosophize from this perspective does not mean that one is totally free of conflict or strife, for nobody lives a life free of turmoil of some kind. Nevertheless, there exist ways of practicing philosophy that begin from socially advantageous positions that subsequently delimit the philosophical practice.

For those in colonial (and even “post-colonial”) circumstances that find themselves on the side of underdevelopment, poverty, marginality, and domination, this luxury is not so apparent. For those that think for the sake of freedom the exigencies of their circumstances force a critical reflective stance that targets oppression, structural inequalities, pain, and suffering. Since “privileged” philosophers think from perspectives where their interests and problems are recognized and align with traditional or historical philosophical problematics, their status as philosophers is never in question. Those philosophers who begin from contested, dominated, and oppressed social locales are said to think about “non-philosophical” issues, their discourses remain unauthorized and non-canonical for reasons that reflect nothing other than bias, blatant disregard, and the force of history. These are the non-philosophers, the ones that use philosophy for instrumental reasons, and in so doing jeopardize their stance in academic and intellectual circles—this where I place Latin American philosophy.
While the above dichotomy admits of problems on multiple levels, it nonetheless presents opportunity to examine the difference offered by Latin American and other ways of doing philosophy. Whatever Latin American philosophy (LAP) may be, philosophy at the service of freedom plays a crucial role in the tradition I am concerned with, one that cannot be subsumed into a retelling of the history of Western thought as it has taken place south of the U.S. border. More than just the history of philosophy in the region, Latin American philosophy is an example of what philosophy looks like in the face of coloniality.

What follows contains a weak claim and a strong claim (perhaps a better way of describing these is to say descriptive and normative). The weaker claim is that one can interpret or describe the works of various Latin American philosophers as concerned with freedom, liberty, and the problem of colonization or coloniality, even when this is not the explicit goal of the author. More often than not, no interpretation is needed. Whether it is national liberation or questions of mestizaje; epistemic or political justice for indigenous peoples, freedom from political, racial, or gender oppression imposed by a patriarchal/colonial order; the importance of authenticity or originality in light of colonialism; or even anti-essentialist understandings of Latino/a identity, a majority of what constitutes Latin American philosophy revolves around, has been impacted by and concerned with, coloniality and liberation. This is not to suggest that every page of Latin American philosophy contains the words “colonial,” “coloniality,” “liberation,” or derivatives of these terms. Nevertheless, I believe that one is hard pressed to find “pure” philosophical content in Latin America that is not in some way engendered by or valued for its contribution to Latin American societies or cultures. This imbues Latin American philosophy with a tendency towards political thought, such that the term “Latin American political philosophy” is a pleonasm at best and a tautology at worst.

So as to take the more difficult route, I offer Gracia’s thoughts on why coloniality or colonization cannot be the basis for LAP as an example of an implicit instance where liberation-themes nonetheless abound. In his essay, “Ethnic Labels and Philosophy,” Gracia argues that what is distinctive about Latin American philosophy, or that which unifies Latin American thinkers under the umbrella of “Latin American philosophy,” cannot be “the experience of so-called coloniality, or even perhaps marginality.” Colonialization cannot serve as the basis for Latin American philosophy since not all experiences of colonialism are uniform nor is colonization unique to Latin American history. Coloniality as the basis for Latin American philosophy establishes conditions that are either too strict, such that it leaves out some of the region’s best thinkers who never wrote a word about colonization, or this criterion establishes conditions that are satisfied by many non-Latin Americans, e.g., Africans, Asians, and perhaps even North Americans. At best, Gracia continues, “even if one were to accept that coloniality is in fact something that characterizes Latin American philosophy, this would help to separate it only from philosophy which is a product of the First World, not from the philosophy of other parts of the world that have also suffered colonial exploitation.”

There is much to appreciate in Gracia’s comments, particularly his anti-essentialism and turn to a familial-historical model for understanding group identities (Gracia’s modus operandi). Both are worthwhile contributions to philosophy of race and ethnicity, and, as I will suggest, epitomize a Latin American philosophical concern with freedom from totalizing concepts, the type of which are typified by colonial impositions. Gracia assumes that like ethnic groups themselves, it is wrong to think of “ethnic philosophies” in essentialized ways that rely upon necessary and sufficient conditions. There is no one definitive characteristic or trait that defines the members of an ethnic group. Instead, ethnic groups are cluster concepts, groupings united on their relation to a variety of traits to characteristics, none of which are necessary and often context-specific. Ethnic philosophies supervene on ethnic groups, and the fact that members of an ethnic group do not share in a single feature entails that a philosophy arising from this group cannot harbor universal characteristics. Gracia holds that “ethnic philosophies are historical realities enmeshed in webs of complicated relations.” He continues, “a proper understanding of them must reflect this reality [. . .] the conditions of membership vary, as history itself does, allowing for different groupings and ways of looking at them.”

There are two dimensions of Gracia’s views that are worth focusing on. One pertains to the idea of history itself; the other to how history is interpreted. There are various ways of explaining what history is: (1) facts or events that have taken place; (2) interpretation or accounts of facts as performed by historians; and (3) “history” as a discipline, which entails an assortment of meta-historical and methodological principles and commitments. This variegated understanding of history results in no exclusive way of looking at the past or even agreement upon what constitutes “history.” One’s interests, goals, proximity, or distance to the subject in question condition how they view the past. To impose a single monolithic interpretation of the past frustrates other ways of viewing history and, more importantly, preempts the formulation of novel perspectives. For ethnic philosophies like Latin American philosophy, such imperial approaches to its history limit the range of possible interpretations (and manifestations) in the present and future. As I take it, Gracia’s views are not just about the multiplicity that is the past, but also about the dynamic and creative nature of the present determined by that “past” and the possibility for an open future. To say that all members of an ethnic philosophy necessarily share in one common feature is to totalize or master the practice and boundaries of that philosophy. This means the concepts that arise from this group will be limited by the conditions that are imposed by an over-determined historical view. This would be the colonization of a particular ethnic philosophy.

My “liberationist” reading of Gracia’s work is supported by his views on ethnic groupings. While discussing the problems that arise when one expects all Latino/as to speak Spanish or eat beans and rice or dance salsa, namely, the problems with stereotypes, he writes:
These examples illustrate the fact that to be Latino does not entail much that is generally associated with the stereotype. But why should this lumping and homogenization generate fear in the Latino population? Why do we find strident voices complaining and warning about this phenomenon? Because we worry that by being lumped together into one stereotyped group, the reality which we are will be misunderstood—we will be taken as what we are not and this can affect our lives in significant ways, some very nefarious to our well being. Homogenization becomes particularly dangerous in political contexts because the government often formulates and implements social policy based on stereotypes.14

Again, the problem with stereotypes is that they impose an image of what it means to be from a particular group before individuals have a chance to define themselves. Stereotypes limit how our reality will be understood. While Gracia may fall back on the claim that there is no normative dimension to his argument for the familial-historical view, meaning that he is simply painting a more accurate picture of reality, the moral dimensions of his train of thought are visible in the above passage (i.e., “nefarious to our well being”).

Gracia’s comments are reminiscent of what the philosopher of liberation, Enrique Dussel, writes while speaking about the victim of colonization:

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 ones who a have clear mind for pondering reality.15

“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, i.e., an aperture or distance 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 perspective.

For Gracia, the lack of necessary and sufficient conditions does not rob ethnic philosophies or ethnic groups of an identity. Like proper names or dates of birth, there is a sense in which ethnic philosophies have specific points of origin or arise from a set of circumstances that is unique to that grouping (this uniqueness does not entail that the traits in question will not be shared by others). However, one cannot think of that identity as anything other than contingent and contextual. Although Latin American philosophy may have a starting point, say the “discovery” of America, as Gracia does, and a range of topics that tend to be discussed by various thinkers that fall within this area of study, these are historically contingent and always contextualized. Thus, what is called “Latin American philosophy” is not meaningless, as this title signifies a set of questions that are clumped together for a variety of reasons, none of which should reign supreme. Thus, to say that Latin American philosophy maintains an inherent tendency towards liberatory thought is simply to highlight a contingent history that makes sense in light of a desire to differentiate Latin American philosophy from those descriptions of this field posed at the onset of this essay (for the reasons offered above in addition to those that come below).

I ask, if the burden of differentiating Latin American philosophy from Anglophonic interpretations of the philosophical canon falls upon the texts and ideas that do not just retell the history of Western philosophy south of the U.S. border but represent a particular way of doing philosophy that is unique to “Latin America” and other parts of the world, why continue with such descriptions of LAP as those provided at the onset of this paper? How might those other texts, the ones that are often emphasized when explaining what LAP is or why this area makes worthwhile contributions to academic philosophy in the United States, be the real difference makers, so to speak? How does this point to that which distinguishes LAP from “mainstream” understandings of philosophy?

To say that colonialism ought to be a starting point for Latin American philosophy is where controversy starts. It is problematic, I admit, to think of colonization as an indispensable basis for Latin American philosophy (and note that I am aware of the totalizing nature of my claim). First off, as Gracia explained above, not all Latin Americans have suffered colonialism equally. Here, however, I think there is a tendency to think about the experience of colonization strictly from the perspective of the victim. I offer as example the way whiteness has been understood in the context of the United States for support.

It is often the case that white people report that the experience of race does not play a central role in their life. Being part of the dominant racial group, race is not an issue for whites the way it is for Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, or Asians. Nonetheless, is this to say that white identity is race-less? Is this to assume that whiteness has not been impacted by the existence of race? Of course not; the white experience of race—for the most part, since white people always want to remind of the fact that nonwhites can be racist to whites as well—is best understood as constituting the oppressive side of race relations. Self-effacing white people who claim to be “white-trash” sound as ridiculous as me claiming to be “male-trash”; regardless of how much I hate it, others will assign to me the privileges that come with masculinity. Nevertheless, even if whites do not “feel” race, there is a way in which white identity is predicated on the existence of nonwhites. Given that whiteness has often been associated with rights, privileges, and benefits denied to others, whiteness operates more in antagonistic ways. While we may not be able to positively identify what whiteness is, we can, and historians often do,
identify the way in which whiteness is a social, political, and legal construct that was used to exclude Asians, African Americans, and now Hispanics.¹⁶

In short, one’s experience of race, or colonization for that matter, does not have to begin as victim. This is pertinent to my goals in this essay since it sets up the stronger claim: Latin American philosophers ought to think of themselves as concerned with “philosophers for freedom.”¹⁷ I hold this view to such an extent that the absence of colonialism or liberation-themes from their work can be interpreted as a stance on colonization, especially when injustices and inequality is ubiquitous in their immediate surroundings (the culpability and definitiveness of silence). We can take the absence of explicit engagement with the idea of coloniality as the basis for one’s opinion on this topic: they do not really care about it or represent such a privileged approach to philosophy such that they cannot really be considered part of the Latin American tradition.¹⁸

This stronger claim is partially supported by Ignacio Ellacuría’s (the Jesuit philosopher murdered during the Salvadoran civil war) views on the liberating aspects of philosophy and his normative suggestion that philosophers ought to concern themselves with the socio-historical contexts they inhabit.¹⁹ Crucial to Ellacuría’s views on philosophy are both a critical and creative components.²⁰

Since it plays a role in supporting political and socio-economic institutions, one of the natural targets of philosophical critique has always been ideology. Being the means through which humans sustain themselves, socio-economic and political institutions are literally shaping human reality by structuring and determining the lives and communities of those they serve. Even though it may be inherently neutral, ideology, an outgrowth of existing institutions, affixes itself to the prevailing understanding of reality and reinforces the status quo. In doing so, ideology assists in the stifling of growth, thereby denying the community the possibility of life. If human communities are composed of living beings, their interests and concerns cannot be captured by a single economic or political structure backed by an ideological outlook that justifies itself. That would be to say that all human problems, concerns, and creative outputs have reached their zenith, something obviously untrue if we are speaking about living beings. Philosophy and philosophers fail to represent the dynamic entity that is the community when they are not sufficiently critical of ideology. Philosophers are those individuals that ought to concern themselves with this stagnation of life else they deny the conditions that engender ensuing philosophical thought. For Ellacuría, the fact that Latin American cultures lack a philosophy of their own reflects part of the reason why the region remains in the grips of inequality and violence.

Yet, never is this criticizing done for no other sake besides questioning the status quo; an implicit goal of philosophy has always been to bring about change, to improve the situation at hand, or at the very least assist in making alternatives to the status quo imaginable (and thus possible). Philosophy does this by making clear the foundations, or lack thereof, of ideology. For Ellacuría, without sufficient critique, there cannot be creativity, an aesthetical, epistemological, existential, and even political category (remember what José Martí says in Nuestra América: “Gobernante, en un pueblo nuevo, quiere decir creador”).

Philosophy has always been “creative,” i.e., connected to freedom from oppression and striving for a kind of openness or responsiveness to life. As Ellacuría wrote in “The Liberating Function of Philosophy,”

We can say that philosophy has always had to do with freedom, though in different ways. It has been assumed that philosophy is that task of free individuals and free peoples, free at least of the basic needs that can suppress the kind of thinking we call philosophy. We also acknowledge that it has a liberating function for those who philosophize and that as the supreme exercise of reason, it has liberated people from obscurantism, ignorance, and falsehood. Throughout the centuries, from the pre-Socratics to the Enlightenment, through all methods of critical thinking, we have ascribed a great superiority to reason, and to philosophical reason in particular, as a result of its liberating function.

[...]

This matter of philosophy and freedom gets to the fundamental purpose of philosophical knowledge, which even if it is understood as a search for truth, cannot be reduced to being a search for truth for its own sake.²¹

In almost a prophetic sense, to think of Latin American philosophy as “philosophy born of colonial struggle” returns philosophy to its original purpose. Whether it is from ignorance, misuses of reason, political force, or popular dogma, a liberatory dimension has always been part of philosophy.

For Ellacuría, the beauty that is philosophical thought renders this liberatory tendency explicit when it serves as the mouthpiece for a community’s concerns, interests, and means of critical and creative self-understanding. Critical and creative thought necessitates engaging the full range of humanity, not just the elite. Philosophers may be the voice of the community, but they are not a revolutionary vanguard. Part of the philosopher’s epistemological tool kit is the greater portions of society (in Latin America), the poor, dominated, and oppressed. Philosophers fail to formulate complete conceptions of truth, beauty, meaning, and value when the oppressed, poor, and marginalized are ignored as sources for knowledge.

That being said, for one to grow up amidst colonial oppression, experience it, or perhaps even benefit by it, and yet not think philosophically about it takes a tremendous amount of effort. To not write about it means that one is an “ideologue,” which implies a denier life. It is difficult, if not impossible, to think philosophically as a Latin American and not be concerned with colonization or a derivative subtopic in some way. To not do so requires
conscious effort and willful ignorance, the type of which ought to be morally culpable. For those that worry that this normative standard leaves out many of Latin America’s best thinkers, I think there is a way in which we can keep those who do not write on colonialism in the LAP canon: We should interpret their silence on this topic as indicative of their stance on this issue. Namely, it is an issue not worth their attention. Their lack of concern or attention renders them complicit with the ideology that supports the status quo, which on the one hand stagnates the dynamism that is the human community. In the context of Latin America, to leave ideology intact is to turn one’s head to social and political institutions responsible for the deaths of the poor, oppressed, nonwhite (or insufficiently mestizo/a and mulatto/a) masses.

What is the nature of philosophy for those who are existentially compelled to philosophize? Philosophy, for those in this predicament, is not a choice. It is a vocation; the pursuit of freedom imposed by the non-freedom one lives; a duty brought on by a reality that denies the humanity of people. This is what Latin American philosophy as a philosophy born of colonial struggle means, and that is how I think about Latin American philosophy as a tradition that exceeds the history of philosophy south of the U.S. border.

NOTES


3. When Latin American philosophy is understood as simply the history of philosophy in Latin America or “philosophy south of the U.S. border,” any philosopher in Latin America or with a Hispanic surname becomes a Latin American philosopher. I worry about this when it comes to job prospects for those who work in this area. I think this subfield requires more specialization rather than just inclusion for the sake of adding numbers. I thank Kim Gilz for reminding me of Tommy Curry’s comments in this regard. Perhaps all this paper calls for is more specialization.

4. See Leonard Harris (ed.), Philosophy Born of Struggle (Dubuque, IO: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1983). Only the historical specificity of the struggle against coloniality as it has taken place in Latin America can differentiate Latin American philosophy from say African, Asian, and more. I am aware that colonization does not happen in any uniform or monolithic way; hence, my desire to talk about “philosophy born of colonial struggle” in a general sense.

5. The qualifier that runs throughout this sentence implicitly acknowledges that not all who come from colonial circumstances represent an oppressed or victimized perspective. Thus, there are many from Latin American metropolises that represent elite points of view and philosophize from freedom. As I explore below, especially in my discussion of Ignacio Ellacuría’s views on the nature of philosophy, all academic or professional philosophers think from freedom. Some philosophers, however, are more interested in living an understanding of philosophy that places it at the service of various social, political, and economic pursuits.

6. Along these lines, see the contributions by Ofelia Schutte and Jorge J. E. Gracia to George Yancy’s Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012).

7. Coloniality is not necessarily the rule of a particular colonial order or regime, like that of Spain in Mexico or Peru, but is the power dynamic implicit to colonial systems resulting in stratified social hierarchies divided in terms of class, land rights, race, gender, political power, education, and even knowledge-proprietor or that known. There are thus ontological, historical, and epistemological dimensions to coloniality. 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. Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America,” Nepantla: Views from the South 1, no. 3 (2000).


9. Ibid.


12. Ibid.

13. Compare Gracia’s thoughts on history of those of Enrique Dussel in his recent political philosophy and ethics. Dussel begins his three-volume work on political philosophy with the first volume a rethinking of the history of political thought. Rather than start with the Greeks, Dussel ventures back farther to reveal the sources for the Greek terms for “justice,” “demos,” “equality,” and “destiny.” See Enrique Dussel, Politics of Liberation: A Critical World History, trans. Thia Cooper (London: SCM Press: 2011 [2007]), 15-16. His ethics does the same. The point of comparison with Gracia is that where multiple ways of viewing the past lead to a variety of ways of thinking about the present and future. Novel justice claims or ethical ideas do not come from nowhere; they have a history.


15. Ibid., 4. Emphasis added.


17. At this point, some may worry that I am creating a scenario where I undermine the dynamic nature of Latin American philosophy. Risieri Frondizi articulated such a concern in his famous essay “Is There an Ibero-American Philosophy?” Phenomenology and Philosophical Research Vol. IX, no. 3 (1949). As Frondizi explains, philosophers who attempt to think from the perspective of a Latin American “corrupt” (my word) the philosophical process. By trying to be Latin American or think as a Latin American, one runs the risk of self-consciously limiting the creative process and perhaps even obviates the possibility for an authentic LAP (351-53). The conscious attempt to think in Latin American ways, whatever that may be, is a self-imposed handicap that might result in the abandonment or dismissal of many ideas that fit the Latin American script. Much like being “cool,” one just is, trying to be “cool” is not cool. I do not see this as much of a problem as I do further proof of the importance of unbridled creativity (or freedom) in LAP.


21. Ibid., 93–119.