PLAN DE SAN MIGUEL

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The development of Mexican philosophy, both in the United States and in Mexico, reflects a broader interest in the promise of global philosophy, and we believe that Mexican philosophy provides a model for how global philosophy will and ought to develop. Specifically, Mexican philosophy teaches us how to appreciate the value of *particularizing* a tradition. It teaches, in other words, to value the characteristics, history, and local color that distinguish one tradition from another. More than the specific concepts and lessons unique to it, we believe that this will be the lasting contribution of Mexican philosophy—its “gift to the world,” to paraphrase one of its great representatives, Emilio Uranga.

To particularize a tradition means, in part, distinguishing it from larger traditions that may have encompassed it at some point. For instance, in the United States, much of what counts as Mexican philosophy today fell under the larger banner of “Latin American philosophy” less than two decades ago. This made sense: “Latin American philosophy” unified the scant resources that were available in English, as well as the very small group of philosophers who were interested in them. These resources pointed to a common history representing familiar themes. “We are neither indigenous nor European, but a species midway between,” Bolívar proclaimed in Venezuela, and we all felt that some version of that sentiment captured the problem of identity in our philosophy. In Cuba, José Martí spoke of *nuestra América*, and we were thankful for the contrast. However, with the rapid growth of Mexican philosophy, we find that it no longer makes sense to speak of a “Latin American philosophy.” While it has undoubtedly served as a useful guide, the emergence of Mexican philosophy teaches us, by contrast, that the themes and figures that constitute the Latin American philosophical tradition are overly general, which is unhelpful in defining a robust philosophical tradition. So, just as Latin American philosophy taught us that it doesn’t help to think of a philosophical tradition as hemispheric (viz., Latin American philosophy as opposed to Western philosophy, or Eastern as opposed to Western), so too are we beginning to appreciate the fact that neither is it helpful to think of it as continental. In short, in its specificity, “Mexican Philosophy” is helping us to learn what constitutes a philosophical tradition.
We thus believe it is imperative to continue building on the momentum gained in the last decade by Mexican philosophy, both in the United States and in Mexico.

In the preface to the Spanish translation of Patrick Romanell’s *The Making of the Mexican Mind*, published in 1954, José Vasconcelos quipped that “It is clear that you have much money in the North, since they have given you the mission of writing about nothing, for Mexican philosophy or a philosophy that could be called that does not exist.” It is unclear whether Vasconcelos was being ironic or falsely modest because, while he did not believe that there was no such thing as Mexican philosophy, especially not in 1954, he had every reason to believe that Mexican philosophy would not *continue to exist*. Again, looking at the United States, despite early efforts to introduce and promote Mexican philosophy by O. A. Kubitz in 1940s, Romanell in the 1950s, John Haddox in the 1970s, Amy Oliver in the 1980s, and so on, Mexican philosophy simply did not take root. So, when we look back on the explosion of work dedicated to Mexican philosophy in the last decade, it is imperative that we find a way to disprove Vasconcelos, once and for all. Mexican philosophy is not nothing.

If we are to establish Mexican philosophy as a permanent fixture of global philosophy, however, we must start by acknowledging that it is not an accident that Mexican philosophy has so far failed to take root and that every genuine effort to promote global philosophy is still met with opposition and will continue to be. After all, global philosophy represents change, and the effort to particularize philosophy constitutes a major blow to any tradition that arrogantly pretends to be *the* tradition. In this sense, particularization is a strategy of resistance and reclamation against hegemonic forces in the history of philosophy that through insistent claims to universality have justified their pretentions.

The opposition to particularization, however, is subtle and insidious. It has evolved from straightforward rejection to now quietly hiding behind a culture that promotes diversity and inclusion. The profession encourages us now to diversify our syllabi, but so far that has amounted to asking us to look for someone in the history of another tradition who has something to say about epistemology, or aesthetics, or the problem of free will. We might thus include an excerpt by Sor Juana, for example, so that we can make a point about standpoint epistemology. But herein lies the danger. *How* we introduce her into our syllabi allows us to diversify philosophy without knowing anything about Sor Juana or the tradition that she belongs to. In other words, there is a way of excluding by including, a way of diversifying philosophy that does not take seriously the project of particularizing philosophy, even as a possibility. There
is a way of silencing a tradition precisely by shining a tiny light on an excerpt of it.

To meet this opposition, then, we cannot think of Mexican philosophy, or any other tradition in global of philosophy, merely as a resource. Its power lies in its difference, and its difference is that of a tradition.

Subtle and insidious though it is, opposition to Mexican and global philosophy is also concrete and practical. It is still very unlikely that someone will get into a top Ph.D. program, or get a job, or get tenure as someone who works on Mexican philosophy. Professionally, we might be encouraged to explore marginalized figures or traditions—it doesn’t hurt—but we also tell prospective students and job candidates that they need to put something else on their CV as their primary area of specialization. In other words, one thing hasn’t changed in the last ten years: despite the growing recognition of Mexican philosophy as a viable subfield of philosophy, anyone who wants to dedicate their intellectual effort solely to the tradition, as one might choose to work on early modern philosophy or the metaphysics of fundamentality, still has to choose between their commitment to Mexican philosophy and their career. In our own case, we wagered our careers on Mexican philosophy—something we say non-hyperbolically—but even though we have enjoyed a modicum of success, we can’t in good conscience advise our students to follow our path because we know that chances are that they won’t survive, just as chances were that we wouldn’t.

So, if global philosophy is the future and Mexican philosophy offers direction and lessons on how to achieve that future, we must continue to build on the momentum Mexican philosophy has gained in the last ten years and we must articulate, so as to call out, the challenges to that momentum.

By way of closing, here are a few lessons we have learned this last decade, and steps that we still plan to take.

1. There is no single definition of Mexican philosophy to date and there won’t be for a long time to come, and that shouldn’t deter us. Our most urgent task is not to define the tradition, let alone insist on a single definition, but to clear a path to its full emergence. If there is one lesson that we keep having to learn over and over, it is that the historiography of Mexican philosophy, and the making of Mexican philosophy, is in its early stages, and that it would be irresponsible to define it now. Instead, we should adopt practices that make Mexican philosophy as inclusive as possible and that allow for revision. This includes, among other things, continuing to identify and translate contributions that might not fall under traditional definitions of philosophy or Mexican philosophy, particularly those of women, indigenous communities, Mexicans of
African descent, and political dissidents. To this end, our goal is publish a second anthology of Mexican philosophy in the near future—one that tells a richer, more inclusive, and more comprehensive story.

2. There is not yet enough institutional support producing advanced research in Mexican or global philosophy. To this end, the Journal of Mexican philosophy is establishing a mentorship program that we call the familia model of peer review. The goal is not just to publish and promote the work of junior scholars, but to help them develop their work for publication and to develop professionally. As for senior scholars who already well-established, it will give them the opportunity to leverage their institutional authority to meet the opposition described above. The way this will work is that we will create a unique link for junior scholars seeking mentorship to submit their work. We will then choose one article per volume and pair the author of that article with a senior scholar on our editorial board who will help them develop their work until it is ready for publication.

3. As Mexican philosophy develops, so too will the temptation to take ownership of it. Mexican-American philosophy is a continuation of Mexican philosophy and is produced in multiple languages, as it always been. If Mexican philosophy is to provide a model for global philosophy, it must resist hierarchies in and outside of Mexico, it must recognize and celebrate its internal diversity, and it must continue to present itself as a collaborative project. In this way, Vasconcelos may have been sincere, and his lesson may have been, that if Mexican philosophy is to continue to exist and thrive, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans can’t do it without each other.¹

¹ This plan was written in San Miguel, California, in the shadow of the Mission San Miguel Arcángel. Inside the Mission are remnants of 17th century Spanish culture—religion, music, philosophy. As we considered our task—that of putting together Volume 2 of JMXP—the Mission reminded us that traditions travel and settle far from home, and that they take root and flourish only when they adapt to their surroundings and are particularized. After visiting the Mission, we felt a duty to prepare this call for action, this Plan, in the tradition of other Plans before.
FILOSOFÍA MEXICANA: UN LUGAR DE OBSERVACIÓN

AURELIA VALERO PIE

RESUMEN: Con el propósito de responder a la pregunta sobre la existencia de una filosofía mexicana, en este ensayo exploro cómo se desarrolla y asigna un significado a una tradición filosófica. A partir de cierto número de ejemplos, sugiero que hay dos ideas de tradición, basadas en supuestos muy distintos y con consecuencias igualmente divergentes. La primera se funda en la noción de rescate y descubrimiento; la segunda en una conjunción de prácticas y relatos, que puede identificarse con el término invención. Propongo que adoptar esta última idea de tradición permite trascender la visión acumulativa de la historia, abrir al cambio y hacernos responsables del sentido y orientación de la filosofía mexicana.

Palabras clave: filosofía mexicana; filosofía en México; descubrimiento; invención; relatos historiográficos sobre la filosofía.

ABSTRACT: In this paper I recommend a new answer to an old question, namely, whether there is something that can be properly called 'Mexican philosophy', understood as a philosophical tradition that revolves around a set of authors, works, and problems that provides a certain continuity over time. I argue that the key to this question is the meaning we assign to the term ‘tradition’. When one claims that there is a need to rescue a tradition, whether it has been underrepresented or simply forgotten, the underlying assumption is that a tradition is something to be discovered. On the other hand, when one claims that no tradition exists objectively, but is forged through an active endeavor to make associations and engage in story-telling, then a tradition is something to be constructed or invented. Based on several examples, I demonstrate, not only that the latter conception is closer to the actual development of Mexican philosophy, but that for several reasons it’s also more fruitful.

Keywords: Mexican Philosophy; philosophy in Mexico; discovery; invention; historiographical narratives of philosophy.

En lo inmediato, así como en lo simbólico, en el sentido físico y también intelectual, somos en todo

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momento quienes separamos lo conectado o conectamos lo separado.

Georg Simmel, “Puente y puerta”

En un ensayo publicado hace ya casi tres lustros, Guillermo Hurtado inquiría si existe la filosofía mexicana, entendida no como el trabajo de individuos dedicados a estudiar, enseñar y escribir filosofía en el territorio hoy conocido como México, sino como “propuestas filosóficas originalmente mexicanas, escuelas o estilos filosóficos nativos, comunidades de discusión que giren en torno a ideas planteadas por filósofos de nuestro país” (2007: 41). A conciencia, su pregunta replicaba aquellas otras que, de manera análoga, habían orientado y en ocasiones incluso capturado los debates en nuestra región desde hacía alrededor de un siglo, ya sea que se ponderara la existencia de una filosofía Hispanoamericana, la existencia de una filosofía Iberoamericana, la existencia de una filosofía Latinoamericana o la existencia de una filosofía circunscrita a algún espacio nacional. Al cabo de tantas décadas, sin embargo, la respuesta seguía—y sigue—sin parecer evidente y es que tanto el sintagma ‘filosofía mexicana’ como los términos que lo componen resultan problemáticos en más de un sentido. Con sus matices y gradaciones, las opiniones todavía se distribuyen entre principalmente dos posiciones encontradas, divididas entre quienes se han esforzado por argumentar que es posible descubrir a través de un conjunto de rasgos, temas y preocupaciones recurrentes a lo largo del tiempo, y quienes consideran ambos términos—‘filosofía’ y ‘mexicana’—como mutuamente excluyentes.

De la respuesta de Hurtado hay un pasaje que me gustaría retomar para insistir, a mi vez, en una dimensión central para determinar la existencia o posibilidad de una filosofía mexicana. Al formular las condiciones para establecerla, afirmó: “No basta con la creación de filosofía original para que exista una filosofía mexicana. Se requiere, además, del funcionamiento de prácticas e instituciones que generen y sustenten diálogos críticos y rigurosos, y, sobre todo, que preserven la memoria y fomenten la renovación de dichos diálogos a lo largo del tiempo en la forma de tradiciones filosóficas propias” (2007: 45). El reto consiste, por consiguiente, en hacerse cargo de la temporalidad, para anudar los hilos entre el pasado y el presente, y, a la vez, preparar una trama abierta al futuro. Ahora bien, ¿en qué consiste una tradición o una corriente intelectual? ¿Cómo se identifica? ¿Qué le presta unidad, continuidad y coherencia al filo de los años, décadas e incluso siglos, de ser verdad que podemos hacerla remontar hasta las antiguas civilizaciones mesoamericanas? Ninguna de estas interrogantes es menor para quienes intentan demostrar la existencia de una filosofía mexicana, dado que ésta remite al problema en torno a cómo identificar una o varias tradiciones del pensamiento
distintivas y características, originales o auténticas, transmitidas en el curso de las generaciones.

1. Dos Ideas de Tradición Filosófica

Pese a que no siempre se define de manera explícita, es posible identificar por lo menos dos maneras de concebir una tradición entre quienes se han interesado por la filosofía mexicana. Una de ellas corresponde a quienes colocan el peso de la prueba en los resultados de un proyecto de rescate, de tal modo que surjan a la luz aquellas obras y autores insertos, en su opinión, dentro de estas coordenadas. Como indica el mismo término ‘rescate’, dichos esfuerzos se fundan en una idea de tradición como algo que existe independientemente de la labor misma del historiador e intérprete de la filosofía, como algo que se encuentra y que constituye, por ende, un hallazgo o un descubrimiento. Aducir, por ejemplo, que dudar de la existencia de una filosofía mexicana es producto de la ignorancia o la indiferencia, como lo afirmó en su momento José Gaos (1996, 2008), tendría como supuesto la noción de un pasado a la espera de ser encontrado, descubierto, recuperado, devuelto a la visibilidad. A contracorriente de ese conjunto de nociones y supuestos puede postularse, sin embargo, una idea distinta de tradición filosófica, aquella que la considera como un efecto de las prácticas mismas y del lugar de observación.

Con el propósito de ilustrar esta segunda idea de tradición y apuntar algunos de sus principales aspectos, refiero a continuación una cita de José Vasconcelos, extraída de su prólogo a El neo-naturalismo norteamericano de Patrick Romanell, publicado en 1956. En ese fragmento Vasconcelos recordaba el contexto en que conoció al autor, es decir, cuando éste preparaba una obra previa, The Making of the Mexican Mind, aparecida en 1952 y traducida un par de años después como La formación de la mentalidad mexicana. Afirmó entonces Vasconcelos:

México debe especial gratitud a Patrick Romanell por su libro sobre el pensamiento filosófico mexicano [...]. Cuando a mí se me presentó [hace ya más de diez años], indicándome el motivo de su presencia en México—el encargo de escribir un libro sobre filosofía mexicana—respondí sin vacilar: “Pues se conoce que tienen ustedes mucho dinero allá en el Norte, ya que le han dado la misión de escribir sobre la nada, puesto que no existe una filosofia mexicana o una filosofía que pudiera llamarse tal.” Sin embargo, después de un año de paciente esfuerzo que siempre estuvo iluminado de simpatía, Romanell hizo el milagro de examinar esa nada y extraer de ella un volumen que a todos nos dejó sorprendidos, por su exactitud, por su penetración, por su imparcialidad
y, en suma, por el sentimiento cordial que lo anima. (1956: 7-8; las cursivas son mías)

A riesgo de contribuir a un mayor desencantamiento del mundo, me interesa analizar en qué consistió concretamente el “milagro” operado por Romanell. Tras una estancia de doce meses en México, en que se sumergió en la lectura de textos filosóficos y conoció a varios de los mayores filósofos que trabajaban entonces en el país, el autor se dio a la tarea de trazar, a lo largo de seis capítulos, un panorama de la filosofía en México, desde sus orígenes modernos y hasta la edad contemporánea. Tras proponer, en el primero de ellos, un contraste sistemático entre lo que Romanell designó como “las dos Américas,” el segundo capítulo describe los antecedentes del pensamiento filosófico nacional, en particular a raíz de la lucha contra el positivismo y el esfuerzo por establecer coordenadas intelectuales forjadas en nuestro propio tiempo y espacio. Sendas secciones consagradas a Antonio Caso y a José Vasconcelos dan cuenta de sus respectivas ideas y magisterios, entendidos como el punto de arranque de una disciplina que por aquellas fechas comenzaba a profesionalizarse. El quinto capítulo, por su parte, examina los desarrollos filosóficos en los años inmediatos a la escritura del libro, desarrollos multiplicados y fortalecidos gracias a la llegada de muy destacados pensadores españoles. El conjunto se cierra con una sección de referencias, concebida para invitar a explorar, con mayor detalle y a profundidad, las rutas abiertas en la filosofía mexicana.

Entre la “nada” y el repentino surgimiento de una filosofía mexicana se encuentra, por lo tanto, la escritura de una narrativa que, además de identificar referentes textuales, actores y sucesos, articulaba cada uno en una secuencia dotada de sentido. Autores sin clara asociación previa, fuera ésta intelectual, temporal o geográfica, aparecían ligados por vínculos de influencia y lazos genealógicos, esto es, según un sistema de clasificación que distingue entre precursores y continuadores, pioneros y epígonos, maestros y discípulos. Asociaciones antes insospechadas quedaron igualmente al descubierto, como al poner en paralelo a William James y a José Ortega y Gasset, con lo cual Romanell, además de hacer inteligible el relato al público estadounidense, colocaba a la filosofía mexicana en una escala continental.

A partir de ese conjunto de filiaciones y selecciones, que naturalmente lo mismo incluían que excluían, el profesor dividió la historia intelectual del siglo XX en dos grandes etapas: la que se extendía de 1900 a 1925 y se ubicaba en la estela del pensamiento francés, y aquella otra que abarcaba el período posterior, con la asimilación de las ideas de origen alemán irradiadas desde España (1952: 146; 1954: 165). De este modo, aliados y rivales, propios y extraños, se fueron hermanando, consciente o inconscientemente, en la gesta de la filosofía
mexicana, cuya continuidad se daba por supuesto gracias a un encadenamiento de tipo temporal e intergeneracional. Unidad, coherencia y permanencia aparecieron como el final expediente.

2. Filosofía en México

Las conclusiones de *The Making of the Mexican Mind* fueron a todas luces del gusto de Vasconcelos, cuya filosofía encontró un lugar protagónico en el entramado histórico que había urdido Patrick Romanell. No obstante, al atribuirle el milagro de presentar por vez primera una filosofía mexicana, sus palabras desconocían y, por ende, desacreditaban otros esfuerzos análogos emprendidos en el pasado, en particular los de Emeterio Valverde Téllez y Samuel Ramos. Del primero son conocidas sus *Apuntaciones históricas sobre la filosofía en México* (1896), así como su *Crítica filosófica, o estudios bibliográfico y crítico* (1904). En unas y otra se dio a la tarea de “buscar y estudiar las obras de los pensadores mexicanos, para ver qué hallamos en ellas de original, o para seguir al menos la marcha de las ideas filosóficas en nuestra patria” (1904: i).

Con este propósito en mente, el canónigo y erudito pasó lista a las instituciones de enseñanza, bibliotecas, periódicos, revistas, libros y protagonistas de la filosofía en el país, partiendo del período prehispánico y hasta sus días. Sin embargo, ese ejercicio de recopilación y ordenamiento, más que conducirlo a identificar un conjunto de rasgos, si no privativos, al menos distintivos de las ideas surgidas en el espacio nacional, tenían por finalidad el refutar las “falsas filosofías,” esto es, aquellas que no armonizaban o se encontraban en abierta oposición con el pensamiento católico. Cualquier otra corriente intelectual predominante durante el siglo XIX, llámesele liberalismo, positivismo o racionalismo, quedaba desacreditada como expresión de un auténtico saber, mientras que, gracias al recurso a la lógica y a un método racional, se revelaba la Providencia como eje rector de la Historia.

Con todo, si Emeterio Valverde logró conquistar un lugar en la memoria, ello se debió a su *Bibliografía filosófica mexicana*, cuya primera edición apareció en 1907; ampliada y revisada, la segunda se publicó entre 1913 y 1914. Ambas versiones se componen de un gran número de fichas, en que se ofrece un recuento biográfico del autor en turno y se enumeran sus obras, cada una de las cuales cuenta con una breve descripción. Uno a uno pasó revista a cerca de 1500 filósofos, entre quienes se cuentan abogados, médicos, profesores, ingenieros y, sobre todo, miembros del clero secular. Gracias a los puntuales registros que ahí aparecen, también es posible conocer informaciones sobre las imprentas, bibliotecas, instituciones culturales, periódicos, revistas y traducciones que operaron o se desarrollaron en el país entre 1554 y 1914. A ese cúmulo de noticias—en algunos casos único vestigio que ha llegado hasta nosotros—
responde que se considere la Bibilografía filosófica mexicana como un instrumento indispensable y punto de partida de la historiografía en esta materia y período.

Cabría, no obstante, formular diversas preguntas: ¿cumplió el padre Valverde con el objetivo, tal como se había propuesto, de mostrar la originalidad de las obras reseñadas, al igual que la marcha de las ideas en esta parte del planeta? ¿Es posible identificar, a partir de dicho repertorio, una tradición o una filosofía distintivamente mexicanas? ¿Qué ofrece ese compendio al lector que recorre sus páginas? Ordenadas en estricto orden cronológico, las sucesivas entradas de la Bibliografía se presentan como valiosos trozos de información, sin indicaciones acerca de los potenciales vínculos que unen unos con otros, como no sea el que se infiere de su inscripción entre las portadas del libro. Y pese a haberse subrayado como una de sus mayores cualidades en tanto muestra de ecuanimidad y honestidad intelectual, tampoco resulta fácil reconocer un principio de selección, en vista de que con igual detalle registró tanto a los exponentes del neotomismo como a sus adversarios (Matute 1990). Se vislumbran, desde luego, ciertas preferencias, visibles en el espacio que prestó a ciertos autores como el filósofo católico español Jaume Balmes, cuyas ediciones en México se describen con particular profusión, pero es poco lo que permitiría apuntar hacia una tradición de sello mexicano.

Impulsado por la noción de un rescate—el rescate frente al olvido—Valverde Téllez pasó sus días en archivos y bibliotecas, y con frecuencia se le veía “en puestos y librerías de viejo, hurgando entre el polvo y la polilla, con riesgo a veces de equilibrio personal para atrapar el peregrino volumen y el folleto curioso” (Alfonso Junco, citado en Pérez Martínez, 1989: lxxii). Esa tan valiosa como paciente labor, que por cierto tanto agradecimiento logró granjearle, se basaba en una visión acumulativa de la historia, cuyos ideales regulatorios, no por ello asequibles, son la coherencia y la exhaustividad. Ello significa que la tarea de salvamento consistía en completar el gran cuadro de la filosofía a partir de aquellas piezas sueltas que se fueran encontrando: a mayor número, más cercanos nos hallaremos de alcanzar la totalidad. Más aún, que a cada uno de esos fragmentos le corresponde un lugar único dado de antemano se desprende de una creencia en particular, a saber, que el pasado filosófico es una entidad fija e inmutable. El ingenio y la creatividad intervienen, por lo tanto, únicamente en las estrategias de busca, mas no en los resultados. Conjurados así los peligros de la poiesis, quien emprende las tareas de rescate puede encontrar solaz y confianza en la idea de que su actividad equivale a un descubrimiento, el cual, con suerte, puede incluso adquirir los rasgos de una revelación.

Para hacer justicia a la labor de Emeterio Valverde Téllez es necesario afirmar, junto con Aimer Granados, que “más que historiador, fue un
bibliógrafo” (2001: 170). A ese título, el principal mérito de su trabajo consistió en consignar cientos de autores y miles de obras, con lo cual demostró con creces que el país había sido prolífico en filosofía o, dicho de otra forma, que, tanto en el pasado como en el presente, había abundante filosofía en México. No obstante, que estos registros constituyeran una filosofía mexicana quedó faltó de comprobación, debido, precisamente, a que el espacio geográfico sirvió como único referente, sin proponerse una articulación de tipo cualitativo y temporal. No es, pues, casual que sus escritos, carentes de vínculos y principios seleccionadores, se hayan considerado como umbral de la historia, a su vez punto de partida de cualquier tradición. “En las obras de Valverde—sostuvo, por ejemplo, Oswaldo Robles, filósofo de orientación neoescolástica, muy activo en los años cuarenta del siglo XX—están ordenadas todas las fuentes para el estudio de nuestro movimiento filosófico: ningún investigador serio, que emprendiera la redacción de la historia de la filosofía en México, podría prescindir de ellas” (1946:16). Tenía razón, en la medida que los primeros intentos por demostrar, en forma de relato, la existencia de una filosofía mexicana, extrajeron de estas bibliografías numerosas informaciones, con lo cual se instituyeron como uno de sus principales sustentos.

3. Filosofía Mexicana

“Las Apuntaciones históricas sobre la filosofía en México y la Bibliografía filosófica mexicana de Emeterio Valverde Téllez, son las únicas obras sobre la materia que existen en nuestro país, y cualquier investigación tiene que partir de esta base,” escribió Samuel Ramos en su Historia de la filosofía en México, publicada en 1943 (1985: 200). Según este autor, el prelado había logrado documentar con particular fortuna las ideas y los textos pertenecientes al período colonial, si bien las secciones relativas al siglo XIX resultaban deficientes. Sin embargo, más que el propósito apologético que había guiado la escritura, su mayor insuficiencia se encontraba en el orden del discurso.

Falta el esfuerzo—señaló Ramos en su crítica a Valverde—por desentrañar en todas [esas doctrinas] la unidad de su desarrollo histórico, si es que la hay. Los filósofos son presentados con referencia de sus datos biográficos y sus obras, pero falta situarlos en su ambiente histórico. […] La filosofía escolástica es una filosofía que pretende sustraerse de la historia y colocarse en el plano de la perennidad, de lo eterno. […] No hay valoración objetiva de las doctrinas ni desde el punto de vista filosófico ni desde el punto de vista histórico y circunstancial de México. Le falta al autor para ello la perspectiva de toda la historia de la filosofía. (1985: 201; las cursivas son mías)
Es de suponer que superar ese conjunto de limitaciones constituía uno de los retos que Ramos se propuso al momento de emprender su propio relato. Mostrar la unidad a través del tiempo y adoptar una perspectiva histórica aparecían como dos condiciones insoslayables, en vista de que las informaciones sueltas eran incapaces de dar cuenta, por sí mismas y sin importar su número, de un recorrido a la vez colectivo, significativo y duradero. Así se entiende que en el prólogo de Historia de la filosofía en México describiera su tarea como la búsqueda de un objeto en particular, a saber, el de “una tradición que pudiera fijar un sentido nacional al movimiento filosófico de los últimos años” (1985: 99).

A juzgar por el volumen mismo, enmarcar el periodo reciente suponía retrotraer la mirada hasta alcanzar los orígenes de la nación mexicana. De ahí que el recuento dé inicio con la pregunta sobre la presencia de algún tipo de filosofía entre los antiguos pobladores del territorio. Y si bien su respuesta es negativa, debido a que a lo sumo pudo hallar concepciones religiosas con una función espiritual equivalente, el examen le permitió ir descubriendo los relámpagos de iluminación filosófica en el transcurso de casi quinientos años. Dividida en dos partes, la obra pasa entonces revista a los principales desarrollos de la disciplina en México, primero en su relación con España y después durante la edad independiente.

Con base en ese ordenamiento, mientras que Alonso de la Veracruz, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, y Benito Díaz de Gamarra aparecen como las figuras tutelares en el período colonial, Gabino Barreda, Justo Sierra y Antonio Caso tomaron a continuación la estafeta. Gracias a ellos y a muchos otros más, la filosofía en México experimentaba, al momento en que Ramos cerraba sus líneas, una época de renacimiento: a la par de haber alcanzado la “normalidad filosófica,” esto es, el haber logrado trascender los estrechos confines de aulas y bibliotecas para llegar a un público más amplio, el interés por la materia se había también generalizado. Poco o nada se ignoraba de lo producido en Europa, por lo que por fin había llegado el día de desasirse de su tutela y formular una filosofía propia.

Pese a reconocer que la filosofía mexicana era un proyecto a futuro y no tanto una herencia, Historia de la filosofía en México de Samuel Ramos consiguió revertir la tendencia a desestimar el estudio de las ideas producidas en nuestro propio tiempo y espacio. En virtud de un trabajo, no sólo de rescate y recuperación, sino de articulación en un entramado cargado de sentido, sus páginas debilitaron, por decir lo menos, el escepticismo que en un inicio entorpeció sus esfuerzos, en vista de que la mayoría “no creía en la existencia de un abundante pasado filosófico en nuestro país que mereciera figurar en una historia especial” (1985: 99).
Contra esas nociones preconcebidas, Ramos desplegó un amplio repertorio que, además de incluir escritos rubricados por filósofos de formación, abriría un espacio a las ideas filosóficas dispersas en múltiples ámbitos y disciplinas. Ni unos ni otras se exponían, por cierto, de manera aislada o en alguna suerte de limbo intelectual; por el contrario, cada uno aparecía en un diálogo con sus pares, pasados y contemporáneos, al igual que en el contexto histórico específico en que se inscribieron. Se asentaban así las condiciones para dar forma a una tradición de pensamiento.

Desde su publicación y en virtud de su lugar pionero, Historia de la filosofía en México ha adquirido un carácter modélico para quienes han emprendido con posterioridad esfuerzos similares. Aumentado más que corregido, su inventario de autores y cortes temporales suelen retomarse en los panoramas históricos sobre la materia, así como el llamado a no ceñirse al estrecho campo de la filosofía profesional. Modélico también lo ha sido en el sentido de ofrecer un método de análisis, si bien es de resaltar que en su obra aparece enunciado, más que empleado en la práctica. Este consiste en abstraer, de entre o por encima de las diferencias, aquellas notas o rasgos en común, en tanto garantes de la unidad y signo de la especificidad de esa tradición.

Aunque concebido en términos más amplios, dado que intentaba abarcar la filosofía hispanoamericana en su conjunto, dicho método aparece, por ejemplo, en la célebre caracterización histórica y formal de José Gaos, ideada en paralelo a la propuesta de Ramos. A partir de un examen que incluía los escritos de los pensadores más reconocidos a lo largo y ancho del continente, el filósofo transterrado identificó cinco rasgos dominantes, tal como apuntó en un largo artículo aparecido en tres secciones entre 1942 y 1943: el sentido estético, el privilegio de la palabra oral sobre la escrita, el gusto por el ensayo, la impronta literaria y la vocación política. Del carácter a la vez singular y compartido de esa suma de factores resultaba que había “una filosofía española por la lengua y el pensamiento” (1990: 51), afirmó Gaos en una tesis de profundas implicaciones para la comprensión de nuestra identidad colectiva.

Al comparar las respectivas propuestas de Samuel Ramos y José Gaos, Aureliano Ortega Esquivel observó con perspicacia que “lo que para el primero conserva todavía un fuerte tono de búsqueda, en el segundo aparece eventualmente como hallazgo” (2018: 57). ¿La filosofía mexicana se encuentra, pues, en el futuro o en el pasado? ¿Es una tradición por hacerse o una por perseverarse? Cualquiera que sean las respuestas, las interrogantes mismas ponen en evidencia que el conocimiento de obras, autores y contextos no basta para encontrar líneas de continuidad, dado que estas en gran medida dependen de las distinciones que operen en cada momento. Qué estamos buscando y cómo clasificamos determinará, no sólo qué se incluye y cómo se ordena, sino el
sentido mismo de los objetos relacionados. Una tradición constituye, desde esta perspectiva, el resultado de un relato, pero también de una práctica y de una serie de actos: lejos de descubrir agrupaciones preexistentes, se trata de un proceso artificial por el que se introducen distinciones, conceptos y significados.

Con plena conciencia del papel activo que desempeña quien intenta concebir, no ya una filosofía en México, sino una filosofía mexicana, el propio Aureliano Ortega ofreció unos apuntes críticos, destinados a desmantelar ciertos prejuicios y a explorar diferentes vías de reflexión. La cabalidad de su planteamiento aparece en la invitación a repensar el concepto mismo de ‘filosofía’ y desligarlo de sus asociaciones con el pensamiento sistemático, del apego a un pretendido canon y del estilo distintivo del filósofo profesional. Desde este punto de vista, lo estrictamente filosófico se encontraría, no tanto en la correspondencia entre cierto escrito o expresión y las producciones avaladas por la academia, cuanto en la formulación de diversas preguntas que, para el caso mexicano, Ortega Esquivel ejemplifica con tres: la pregunta por la novedad que acompañó los primeros encuentros entre americanos y europeos; la pregunta por la identidad, ya sea del país o de sus pobladores; y la pregunta por el destino, sobre todo ahí donde se experimentó la urgencia de alcanzar libertad, autenticidad y autonomía (2018: 35-37).

Como último ejemplo, voy a detenerme en Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century, no sólo porque representa la primera antología de textos en esta materia publicada en inglés, sino porque los editores, Carlos Alberto Sánchez y Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr., tomaron una postura explícita en cuanto al significado de una tradición de pensamiento. A ese respecto lo primero que llama la atención es el reconocimiento de que la labor de selección y ordenamiento, lejos de reducirse a una tarea descriptiva por la que se registra, con mayor o menor fidelidad, un panorama filosófico establecido de antemano, es de carácter normativo. Ello significa que incluir y excluir, nombrar y clasificar, además de constituir operaciones que imprimen un significado y una orientación, también construyen su objeto, en este caso, la filosofía mexicana. A lo cual hace falta de inmediato añadir que sería un error considerar este gesto creador como un acto soberano, debido a que ninguna tradición está sujeta a una autoridad única e indivisible, ajena a las exigencias del tiempo. Por el contrario, entre los elementos condicionantes es preciso por lo menos incluir los relatos que hasta entonces la habían configurado, así como la recepción efectiva por parte de la comunidad a la que están dirigidos. Por todo ello, uno de los retos a los que nos enfrenta hoy la pregunta por la existencia de una filosofía mexicana consiste en la necesidad de dialogar con ese pasado y negociar el cambio, sin por ello reproducir las estructuras de exclusión y marginalización que las historias sobre
esta corriente, en su gran mayoría, también han contribuido a alimentar y a sostener durante muy largo tiempo (2017: xxiv; Río 2022: 54-73).

4. A Modo de Cierre: Inventando la Filosofía Mexicana
A cuarenta años de haber dado a la imprenta su más célebre obra, Edmundo O’Gorman se hallaba todavía menesteroso de esclarecer el sentido que había prestado al término ‘invención’ de América, por oposición a la común idea de un descubrimiento. Tal como lo había asentado desde 1958, fecha de la primera edición, su propuesta interpretativa no negaba la existencia de un trozo de tierra adonde en 1492 desembarcó Cristóbal Colón; su trabajo rastreaba, en cambio, el proceso histórico por el que ‘América’ fue adquiriendo significado o, en el vocabulario de O’Gorman, su ser.

Los entes históricos—explicó décadas más tarde—cualquiera que sean, no son lo que son en virtud de una supuesta esencia o sustancia que haría que sean lo son. Con otras palabras, su ser no les es inherente, no es sino el sentido que les concede el historiador en una circunstancia dada o más claramente dicho, en el contexto del sistema de ideas y creencias en que vive. (2009 [1992]: 953)

Tal es igualmente la acepción que aquí se quisiera invocar al aludir a la invención de una filosofía mexicana: no se trata de negar la existencia de manifestaciones filosóficas en el país, expresadas oralmente, por escrito o incluso en formatos visuales y sonoros, sino de señalar que ninguna de ellas posee, en sí misma, sus propias claves interpretativas ni, mucho menos, un lugar invariable dentro de alguna unidad o proceso de índole histórica. En este sentido, sólo la filosofía en México, en su calidad de objeto fijo e inerte, es susceptible de descubrirse o rescatarse; en cambio, una tradición, en tanto ente histórico, únicamente puede inventarse a partir de un trabajo de articulación constante entre el presente y el pasado.

Samuel Ramos fue consciente del tipo de operaciones involucradas al momento de escribir su Historia de la filosofía en México. Así se advierte en el prólogo de su obra, al afirmar que “la contribución personal que el autor reclama para sí, no es la presentación de las ideas filosóficas, aun muy deficiente, sino la construcción de un ordenamiento histórico, dentro del cual muchas ideas adquieren un sentido que aisladamente no tienen” (1985: 101). La acotación resulta de primer orden, porque de este modo Ramos nos recuerda que ordenar y clasificar implica no sólo incluir y excluir, sino dotar de sentido y estructura. Ambas acciones suponen elegir un marco de análisis, en el cual intervienen ciertas distinciones que funcionan, a su vez, como claves interpretativas.
Referirse a una tradición filosófica mexicana es, desde esta perspectiva, una forma de mirar y de evaluar, es un hacer y no un descubrir.

Aunque puede considerarse un matiz, las consecuencias no son menores, dado que comprender la tradición como un relato y los actos que lo acompañan, como un proceso que no se limita a nombrar algo ya existente, sino que crea y organiza, nos permite ir más allá de una concepción acumulativa de la historia, en donde la fidelidad es susceptible de cuantificarse en el número de autores y de obras “rescatadas”; constituye una invitación a observar cómo operan las distinciones, discutirlas y contribuir a seguirlas renovando y transformando en función de las preguntas y necesidades del presente. Significa, por consiguiente, hacernos responsables, y no únicamente asumirnos como herederos, de una tradición. “Tampoco sólo cada uno de los sucesivos presentes de la historia es obra del respectivo pasado [...] sino que el pasado es obra de cada uno de los sucesivos presentes en vista de los respectivos futuros,” escribió José Gaos en En torno a la filosofía mexicana (1996: 329).

Así, pues, a la pregunta sobre la filosofía mexicana se podría responder que esta no existe, si por ello se entiende una realidad histórica independiente del observador y del trabajo continuo de interpretación. Se inventa, sin embargo, a cada instante que emprendemos la tarea de vincular el presente con el pasado.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Una versión preliminar de este ensayo se presentó en el XX Congreso Internacional de Filosofía, organizado por la Asociación Filosófica de México, en donde conté con los valiosos comentarios de Laura Soto, Fanny del Río, Raúl Trejo, Xóchitl López, Aureliano Ortega y Guillermo Hurtado. A este último debo, en particular, la idea de contrastar las historias de la filosofía, en su forma de relato, con el tipo de trabajo bibliográfico que realizó Emeterio Valverde Téllez, con lo cual aparece de manera más nítida la distinción entre filosofía mexicana y filosofía en México.
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DECOLONIALIZATION DEGREE ZERO: ON EDMUNDO O’GORMAN, PHILOSOPHICAL ADJACENCY AND THE GENEALOGIES OF MEXICAN THOUGHT

IGNACIO M. SÁNCHEZ PRADO

ABSTRACT: This essay discusses the work of Edmundo O’Gorman in connection to the idea of “philosophical adjacency,” that is, the work of a historian who engages philosophers and philosophical questions in the effort of thinking the historical being of Mexico and Latin America. The essay speaks of a “decolonization degree zero” in O’Gorman, claiming that his work provided a philosophical opening to challenge the epistemology and ontology of coloniality in a way that would foreground and render possible a genealogy of work in this line. The essay engages these matters moving through the formation of the disciplines of history and philosophy in Mexico and navigating the influence of figures like Martin Heidegger and Arnold Toynbee in Mexican thought.

Keywords: Edmundo O’Gorman, philosophical adjacency, decolonization degree zero, Mexican philosophy, historiology, Invention of America, existentialism.

Resumen: Este ensayo discute el trabajo de Edmundo O’Gorman en conexión con la idea de “adyacencia filosófica”, es decir, el trabajo de un historiador que se confronta con filósofos y cuestiones filosóficas en el esfuerzo de pensar el ser histórico de México y América Latina. El ensayo habla de una “descolonización grado cero” en O’Gorman, argumentando que su obra proveyó una apertura filosófica para desafiar la epistemología y ontología de la colonialidad de una manera que daría pie y posibilidad a una genealogía de trabajo en este sentido. El ensayo discute estas cuestiones moviéndose a través de la formación de las disciplinas de la historia y la filosofía en México y navegando la influencia de Arnold Toynbee y Martin Heidegger en el pensamiento mexicano.

Palabras clave: Edmundo O’Gorman, adyacencia filosófica, descolonización grado cero, filosofía mexicana, historioglogía, Invention of America, Existentialism.

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The act of writing a paradigmatic book carries a curse: turning the complexity of thinking into a slogan that becomes uncritical repetition. Such slogans often grow unrooted from all the elements that turned them into a concept: their history, their becoming, their nature as “the point of coincidence, condensation, or accumulation of its own components,” to use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s characterization (1994: 18-20). Thusly, the resplendent acumen of La invención de América (2002 [1958]), and the title concept’s resonance as a departing point to understand the presence of the past in our continent, has overshadowed Edmundo O’Gorman’s vast oeuvre. It is so established that most commentators omit the mention of a book published a few years earlier, La idea del descubrimiento de América, which lays a lot of the philosophical ground of La invención de América—and in fact was published by the Centro de Estudios Filosóficos. To my knowledge, a monograph that would seek to make sense of the totality of O’Gorman’s work, building upon the plethora of tributes, essays and references, remains the task of a future critic, and an exhaustive endeavor that far exceeds the possibilities of an essay. Due to this collective debt towards O’Gorman, the “invention of America” is oftentimes invoked as a stale snippet of commonsense, burdened with self-evidence that occludes the deep intellectual histories that shaped it, and the profound consequences of its decades of conceptual becoming.

I do not seek here an exhaustive account of O’Gorman’s work, much less another revisitation of his famous but inescapable concept. Instead, this essay explores specific issues surrounding O’Gorman’s historiography, building upon ideas I have developed in other essays. I have previously claimed that La invención de América constitutes an arriving point for a tradition of writings that gradually performed an epistemological visibilization and critique of the idea of “América” as constructed in European thought. In this essay, I claim O’Gorman as a philosophy-adjacent historian who brings the paradigms of mid-century Mexican philosophy to re-envision the discipline of history as a tool for consciousness and not merely a positivistic study of historical documents. To exhaustively cite the vast body of scholarship available on O’Gorman’s method and thought would be materially impossible, and most of it focuses on La invención de América anyways. Thusly, this essay will engage selectively with thinkers that have sparked the ideas behind it, while recognizing that much further reading must be pursued in order to have an in-depth discussion of the matters I raise.
I have provocatively entitled this essay “Decolonization Degree Zero” to describe the stakes of O’Gorman’s philosophy. I am aware that in contemporary critical discourse, the term “decolonial” is often identified with the thinkers advocating for the decolonial option, like Walter Mignolo. I am equally aware that the term “decolonization” in today’s US academy broadly describes the dismantling of logics of coloniality widely understood, particularly in relation to the epistemic and ontological underpinnings surrounding disciplines of knowledge and the institutions that sustain them. To describe O’Gorman’s writing, I propose a deliberately problematic definition of philosophical decolonization through an extrapolation from Roland Barthes’ idea of “writing degree zero.” A few years before O’Gorman’s seminal book, Barthes challenged the idea of literature by noting that it can only exist tied to the forms of history, which is why existing literary categories could not afford writers the ability to think anew. Insofar as literature “carries at the same time the alienation of History and the dream of History,” its “Freedom,” it must arrive at “the consciousness of this division and the very effort which seeks to surmount it (2012: 87-88). Barthes notes that this allows for the imagination of an unalienated language in which “the proliferation of modes of writing brings a new Literature into being in so far as the latter invents its language in order to be a project” (88).

*Mutatis mutandis*, I believe O’Gorman, like many of his Latin American contemporaries, confronted an idea of human science in which “the alienation of History,” in the guise of Eurocentrism and coloniality needed to be distinguished from “the dream of History,” the ability to account for the being of Mexico and the continent. The language for such a pursuit, in O’Gorman’s time, was yet to come, and in fact remains a utopian horizon of various forms of liberationist and decolonial philosophies. But O’Gorman’s time is the moment in which the freedom described by Barthes appears analogously in the context of Mexican thought. In other words, I claim—following in part some readings of O’Gorman by decolonial thinkers—that his historiographical method sets the stage for a process of decolonization of philosophy, and of thought more broadly, by way of an approach to history via philosophical adjacency.

In my view, O’Gorman belonged to a paradigm of Mexican thinking that gradually opened the conditions of possibility for decolonizing Mexican ontology (concerned with the Mexican self and the idea of *Mexicanidad*) and epistemology (concerned with the ideas, instruments, and perceptions through which we can understand Mexico on
its own terms). Of course, I am not claiming that O’Gorman is a decolonial thinker in the proper sense, something that would be deeply inaccurate. Instead, I suggest that within his career at the center of the discipline of history in Mexico, his writing glimpsed ways to think about the decolonization of thinking, oftentimes against the grain of both his methods and the hegemonic position his work would come to occupy from the 1960s onward. O’Gorman’s trajectory from his first published writing, the short story “El caballo blanco” (O’Gorman 1932),¹ to his passing in 1995 charts the transition between Mexican history as a broad intellectual pursuit of the lettered classes to a well-established and institutionalized discipline, of which he was a central figure. O’Gorman was a lawyer by training, a profession he practiced for a decade or so (Matute 1997: 2), something that was far from uncommon. Founding figures of the disciplines of history, like Silvio Zavala, literary studies, like Alfonso Reyes, and philosophy, like Antonio Caso, held degrees in law and jurisprudence, a common experience central to O’Gorman’s pursuit. I will discuss this below. For the time being, it is worth noting that O’Gorman’s position within the history of philosophy is ultimately a factor of his belonging to a field of humanism in which the professional boundaries of disciplines was a work in progress.

II

There is wide consensus describing O’Gorman as a paradigm-shifting figure in various lines of Latin American philosophy, and as an author whose work sets the stage for liberation and decolonial philosophies forward. One could briefly recall Enrique Dussel’s idea of “el encubrimiento del otro” (1994), which pushes O’Gorman’s account of the “descubrimiento” to the posing the erasure of the other as a condition of possibility for the totalizing conception of European modernity. It is worth noting, though, that O’Gorman himself uses the term “encubrimiento” in his book La idea del descubrimiento de América to speak of the way in which the concept of discovery occludes the self of the continent, an idea not too far from Dussel’s (O’Gorman 1951: 5). Similarly, Walter Mignolo recognizes in O’Gorman’s work “a turning point” which “reveals that the advances of modernity outside Europe rely on a colonial matrix of power that includes the renaming of the lands appropriated and of the people inhabiting them” (2005: 5-6). All of this is grounded on what Susana Nuccetelli calls

¹ I thank Edgardo Bermejo Mora for providing me with a copy of this first writing.
“O’Gorman’s anti-realism,” that is, a “metaphysical challenge” to the naturalized idea of America and its discovery, posing that America never existed as such until the arrival of the Europeans, or the emergence of the very idea of “continent” (2020: 16-18).

One can find in O’Gorman’s *oeuvre* many of the same preoccupations underlying what Jairo I. Fúnez-Flores calls the “decolonial and ontological challenges” to the social sciences stemming from Latin American theory’s “efforts to destabilize modernity’s ontological assumptions and epistemological commitments” (2022: 21-22). O’Gorman in particular, and Mexican existentialism in general, played a substantive role in creating thinking conditions able to dislodge the self-evident authority of European thinking, a given in Latin America’s intellectual world well into the 20th century. As José Rabasa observes, O’Gorman did not take the idea of invention to its ultimate consequences, but allowed the conception of a “horizon open to the intervention of multiple actors. Interventions that in some instances appeal to a new name for the continent, for example, Abya Yala, which means in cuna language ‘land in plein maturity,’” assumed by various indigenous organizations since the eighties” (2012, web. My translation).

This epistemological opening not only has ramifications in terms of understanding both Mexico and Latin America as historical and philosophical constructs. It creates mechanisms to rethink historical narratives grounded on the idea of discovery, as well as a variety of ontological questions surrounding contemporary communities borne out of colonized peoples. Rabasa, for example, develops the concept of “invention” beyond O’Gorman’s definition, tracing it back to its usage in Spanish historiography and linking it to the work of later thinkers, such as Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau (1993: 3-4). Rabasa’s work (like Dussel’s) is an example of the way in which O’Gorman foregrounded deep discussions on the material constitution of Eurocentrism in 16th-century Spanish historiography, a topic central to critical decolonial moves. Similarly, O’Gorman’s reflections become a condition of possibility for the further exploration of the various forms of naming the region and the politics of underlying such nomenclature, from the exploration of the rise of the term “Latin America” in the 19th century (Ardao 2019 [1980]) to identifying the succession names as the consciousness of the continent evolved over time (Rojas Mix 1991) to the continuous interest in distinguishing our America from North America (Altamirano 2021). In addition, there is no doubt regarding the persistence of the epistemological move behind the concept of invention, as demonstrated in Jesse
Alemán’s essay “The Invention of Mexican America,” where he invites his readers to consider the “multiple reinventions of America” and to understand hemispheric studies as a tool affording “Mexicans living in the United States a transnational context for imagining themselves against the colonial logic of discovery” (2012: 81-82).

Although these arguments all derive from the broad circulation of La invención de América, there is nevertheless the need to recognize that O’Gorman’s legacy exceeds the idea at the center of his masterpiece. His legacy, in my view, resides fundamentally in the crystallization of an epistemological stance from which one could glimpse the smooth space of the peoples and territories of the continent away from the striations deployed by colonial technologies and apparatuses of capture. A degree zero of decolonization as a matter of thought, no less.

To make sense of the idea of degree zero as I present it here, one can depart from the problem of philosophical adjacency. In a very simple way, I use this term to describe the fact that even when we identify well-delineated and autonomous disciplines of knowledge, their praxis frequently involves exchanges with bordering disciplines. This is particularly the case of humanistic and qualitative disciplines such as philosophy, history or literary criticism, whose objects and methods seek to encompass the totality of the human condition and its social materiality, as well as the phenomena and potentialities that underlie them. I consider adjacency to be the enduring quality of thinking in resistance to the process of “disciplinarization,” which John Guillory defines as “the strategy of locating the production and reproduction of [scientific] expertise in the university” (2023: 26). Latin American philosophy requires us to think beyond what Guillory also calls “the mediating function of the disciplinary form” and the university as the “monopolistic agency for the institution of the professions” (2023: 26), insofar as such process not only came to Latin America

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2 I am using here, for shorthand, the well-known terminology developed by Deleuze and Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus (1984).

3 There is nothing new under the sun, and I thusly acknowledge that when I was thinking philosophical adjacency, a Google search yielded an article with the title “Philosophical Adjacency. Beckett’s Prose Fragments via Jürgen Habermas” by Phillip Tew (2002). The piece is itself a good example of what I am discussing here, in this case the adjacency of Beckett’s writing to Habermas. However, Tew’s notion of adjacency is grounded on the desire to speak of “provisionality” and “fragile causality” while I am using the term to speak about points of encounter and in-between-ness withing the emerging cartography of fields yielded by disciplinarization.
belatedly—mostly as a result of the modernizing processes of the first half of the 20th century.

Of course, philosophy in Mexico is a longstanding field with substantive development through centuries prior to the foundation of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, borne out the Escuela Nacional de Altos Estudios in 1924 (González González 2008). Still, many of the authors central to the pursuit of philosophical thinking in the colonial period and the 19th century existed in the realm of what Ángel Rama calls “The Lettered City,” namely, the gathering of institutions and discursive practices that bind the practice of writing and its epistemes to the social organization of structures of power (Rama 1996). The various practices that we identify with the liberal arts today (from philosophy and theology to history and even some forms of science) were practiced by individuals—letrados—who were also essential in the organization of the signifying and political orders of the region in the colonial period and in the 19th century.

Yet, this horizon of organization does not contradict the transcultural nature of philosophy and other disciplines of thought. Today, it is commonly accepted that indigenous cosmologies and philosophies are a well-established part of the continent’s philosophical tradition (see, for example, Nuccetelli 2002). In O’Gorman’s historical horizon this was clear thanks to the publication, a couple of years before La invención de América, of Miguel León-Portilla’s influential La filosofía Náhuatl. Estudiada en sus fuentes (1956). As Mabel Moraña observes, “In a multicultural and multilingual space like the Americas, philosophical reflection can only manifest as a hybrid (fluid, impure) practice related to the profound and undeniable cultural heterogeneity that constitutes it” (2020: 8). Furthermore, Moraña continues, “the essay as a hybrid and open genre” was the medium that capture such fluidity (2020: 8). O’Gorman’s career runs parallel to the long durée process of disciplinarization of humanistic knowledge in Mexico, but even if today the constitution of disciplinary silos is a matter of fact, the hybrid and impure nature of philosophical thinking has never ceased to be in tension with it.

III

In my prior work, I have engaged O’Gorman’s intellectual context in particular, and the scene leading to Mexican existentialism in general. To avoid repeating myself, I will just weave the basic argument of prior pieces into this essay. In my book Naciones
intelectuales (Sánchez Prado 2009), I study the formation of an autonomous literary field in Mexico, tied to figures like Alfonso Reyes and the creation of institutions such as El Colegio de México. In this scene, the field of philosophy also acquires autonomy.\(^4\)

A fundamental factor is the arrival of José Gaos, who introduces Heidegger and leads to the creation of an autonomous philosophical field, which in turn is fueled by the generation of Gaos’s disciples, collectively known as Grupo Hiperión, and by Mexican existentialism in general. O’Gorman was adjacent to this formation, not only attending Gaos’s seminar but also engaging directly with the work of Martin Heidegger. This was in part afforded, as I discuss extensively in a forthcoming piece (Sánchez Prado 2023b), by a translation scene which allowed key works of philosophy and philology (not only Heidegger’s, but also key writings by Hegel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Werner Jaeger and Erich Auerbach) to see the light of day in Mexico, particularly at the Fondo de Cultura Económica.

The core of Mexican existentialism was not only its contribution to the development of Mexican philosophy as an autonomous academic field but also its achievement in terms of a philosophy of the Mexican self, a broadly discussed topic in intellectual history (see, for example, Sánchez 2016 and Santos Ruiz 2015).\(^5\) Yet, the impact of existentialism (not only in its dominant Heideggerian branch but also in its Sartrean manifestations) was much broader. In both the influential chronicle of the existentialist movement penned by Oswaldo Díaz Ruanova (1981) and the forthcoming book by Stephanie Merrim (2023), there is an argument that existentialism affected literary writers such as Rosario Castellanos, Octavio Paz, Xavier Villaurrutia and Juan Rulfo, among many others. O’Gorman, in turn, had a very

\(^4\) I use the terms “field” and “autonomy” as developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. See Bourdieu 1996.

\(^5\) It is worth pointing out that there is a broader thinking about the history of Mexican philosophy that does not center the Hiperión this much, but rather claim a foundational moment in the prior generation. Abelardo Villegas, in his classic El pensamiento mexicano en el siglo XX, calls this period “El nacionalismo filosófico” (1993:145-63), which is, in my view, both accurate and reductive, as it misses the dimensions of universalism and cosmopolitanism in the period. Meaningfully, this chapter ends with O’Gorman. More recently, Guillermo Hurtado places Hiperión at a more central place, giving particular centrality to the work of Luis Villoro (2007, 9-134). A much distinct view is that of Carlos Pereda (2013) who subsumes Mexican existentialism to a larger landscape of the reception of German philosophy in Mexico. In Pereda’s account, rather than a discussion of Hiperión as a group, Zea and Villoro are considered as part of a larger constellation of contemporaries, alongside figures such as Alejandro Rossi and Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez.
significant connection to literature that has yet to be studied in-depth, as we can gather from Gonzalo Celorio’s essay on his literary readings (2009: 151-60). O’Gorman’s theorization of history must be understood as part of this irradiation. His philosophical adjacency has come to be recognized in many ways. A quick example is his inclusion in the two major anthologies of Mexican philosophy in English, Roberto Caponigri’s *Major Trends in Mexican Philosophy* (1966) and Carlos Alberto Sánchez and Robert Eli Sánchez Jr.’s *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century* (2017).

At the core of O’Gorman’s philosophical adjacency lies both the longstanding history of making sense of Mexico and Latin America through historicity and historical teleology, as well as the limits of the historical sciences of the early 20th century in Mexico—embodied for O’Gorman in the figure of Silvio Zavala. In his extensive reflection on O’Gorman’s connection between philosophy and history, Alfonso Mendiola observes that Heidegger allows O’Gorman to break away with the notion of a reality in the past that can be objectively studied and logically inferred. That is, that while the historian studies history as such, the practice of history itself is premised on an ahistorical premise: the belief that there is a reality independent from the mentalities of the past (2005: 84). Mendiola bases this claim in two assertions by O’Gorman. The first one, coming from *La invención de América*, challenges the idea “that things have always carried, for any subject and in any place, a fixed being, predetermined and unchangeable” (O’Gorman 2002: 83. My translation). The second, from *Destierro de sombras*, asserts the “constitutive paradox of the historical being of the man of New Spain” to respond to the “exigencies of the vital order” raised by the tension between the “inevitable transfiguration of the Indian image into the Spanish image” (of the Virgin of Guadalupe) and “affirming its alterity as a New Spanish [novohispana] image” (O’Gorman 1991: 37. My translation).

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6 At the time of this writing Merrim’s book was forthcoming, but her essays on existentialism foreshadowing it give a good sense of her connecting Hiperión to literary writers. See particularly Merrim 2014.
7 I do not delve here on Zavala’s theory of history, tied to scientifism, but a good account of his ideas and his role in the formation of the field, see Mora Muro 2018. There is also a great study by Andrés Kozel (2012: 133-237) that departs from the polemic with Zavala to develop a brilliant account of O’Gorman’s historicism. Although I do not engage Kozel’s analysis here, it is mandatory reading for scholars interested in O’Gorman.
8 I do not engage with it directly, but Cherif Wolosky 2012 provides another good study of the development of O’Gorman’s method between history and philosophy.
Mendiola concludes, correctly in my view, that accounting for contingency is the essential contribution of the consciousness of historicity, ultimately locating history in a paradox: “the historicity of an event is to construct a poetic of the unsayable, which is why historicity is a form of reality (lived experience [vivencia], hermeneutics of facticity, etc.) that is never reached” (2005: 102). Without elaborating too much, it may be important to mention that Heideggerian thinking was, in practice, the mechanism by which O’Gorman arrived at this conclusion, but in the general map of the period, there is a larger array of ideas at play in the arch running from Husserlian phenomenology to Gadamerian hermeneutics. In any case, the adjacency to philosophy in O’Gorman’s practice of history is the consequence of participating in the creation of human knowledge at that precise moment in time in which the lettered city began the process of disciplinarization.

History has been at the core of Mexican thinking since at least the positivist era. A key text of 19th century Mexican liberalism, Gabino Barreda’s Oración Cívica (1993 [1867]), narrated the arrival to the juncture of the 1860s, after the French Invasion and the triumph of the Liberal Party, as a historical teleology that, in the words of Charles Hale, represented the former as “the conflict between ‘American civilization’ and ‘European retrogression’” (1989: 8). The text was clearly at the forefront of the history of Mexican philosophy as understood in the time of O’Gorman, and the Hiperión group. José Gaos included it in his 1945 Antología del pensamiento en lengua española and the text was clearly engaged in Leopoldo Zea’s Positivism in Mexico (1974 [1943]). It is not a coincidence that the historicist approach behind Ortega y Gasset’s circumstancialism and Gaos’s historicism, as well as the Heideggerian philosophy that so influenced these Iberian precursors, takes hold in Mexico. Santiago Castro Gómez reads the line that goes from Ortega to Gaos to Zea and to the Argentine philosopher Arturo Andrés Roig to construct a metahistorical logic to describe consciousness in terms analogous to what post-Foucauldian philosophy would call epistemes (2021: 79-105). Mendiola, Castro Gómez and Hale’s accounts must be put together to make sense of both O’Gorman and Mexican historicism in general.

The philosophy of history and existentialism both led to the constitution of a philosophy-adjacent metahistory (or a history-adjacent philosophy depending on which thinker is approached) that allowed for the problematization of the ahistorical

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9 A parallel discussion concerns O’Gorman’s continued concern with authenticity. See López 2017.
stance of the historian. This we know from Mendiola. Such a perspective was clear even in the earlier approaches to O’Gorman’s work. Patrick Romanell, for instance, argues that O’Gorman’s main contribution was to understand that “the European was able through the Cartesian cogito to rationalize the existence of America as follows: I think of America, therefore she exists” (1952: 177-78). Consequently, there was also the possibility of understanding that historical constructs such as “America” or “Mexico” are not given, but the result of a historical process of coming into Being, which allows the process to be a subject of philosophy and not of historiography. In fact, the clash between positivist and historicist approaches to the discipline of history from which the work of O’Gorman emerged in the 1930s (Moctezuma Franco) results from the inability of positivist history to account for existence. As O’Gorman puts it in his passionate manifesto Crisis y porvenir de la ciencia histórica, “historiography is, from the point of view of that which is true, the elaboration of the intelligibility of being that history performs, for the quotidian mode of being of existence” (1947: 257. My translation). Nevertheless, as Hale has argued, the liberal leanings post 1910 survived radical and popular challenges, as well as the metaphysical work of philosophers like the Hiperión group (1989: 259). The historicism of the 20th century, including O’Gorman’s, was methodologically a break with positivism, but intellectually sought the same concern: the search of the soul of the nation in its historical becoming.

This is not to say that O’Gorman’s methods did not imply a deep paradigm change in the idea and practice of history in Mexico. Castro Gómez forcefully argues that O’Gorman did not repeat the platitude, present in Barreda as well as in Alfonso Reyes and other intellectuals or prior generations, of the spiritual superiority of America over Europe. Rather, his work put forward the idea that America was in itself a construction of Europe, which turn means that the “ontological program” of Latin American thinkers would have to face a dilemma: either adapt the New World to European standards or “take this model as a starting point for creatively transforming it” (2021, 206. Emphasis in the original; O’Gorman 2002: 135-36). Decolonization degree zero is the name I have for this specific moment. Rather than seeking to join what Reyes called “the banquet of civilization” (1950: 41), that is, a Latin American universality to be recognized within the grounds of an idea of culture defined by Europe, O’Gorman essentially set the ground for the region to think itself beyond such grounds.

I depart from Castro Gómez’s account of the genealogy of O’Gorman’s thought, and of Mexican historicism in general, to recover an argument that I have made
elsewhere. In a prior piece, I describe an aggregate of metahistorical texts that lead O’Gorman to a “postcolonialism avant la lettre,” by which I mean a gradual development of a critique of colonial reason by taking possession of the epistemological perspective of the colonizer through writing, decades before such operation became canonical in Edward W. Said’s Orientalism (Sánchez Prado 2013; Said 1978). The substantive body of historical essays written by Alfonso Reyes, from his canonical Visión de Anáhuac 1915 to the various essays compiled in his 1942 collection Ultima Tule, take the idea of “América” (meaning Latin America) as a given, and claims the sense of futurity that both the European tradition of utopian essays and Hegel’s philosophy of history granted to the continent.10 Reyes achieved this by taking over, as an essayist, the point of view of the colonizer, from the gaze of the conquistadors in Visión to the historicization of the utopian mind in Europe, in order to make sense of how this mind projected into the continent after 1492. Reyes was profoundly influential in existentialist circles. O’Gorman dedicates his essay “Historia y vida,” a programmatic text claiming that historical science should become a “saber de la vida,” to Reyes, who would have wholeheartedly endorsed such call as someone who advocated for the need of the humanities to be at the core of the Polis. O’Gorman’s existentialist idea of consciousness certainly went beyond Reyes’s historicism, but the roots of the epistemological operation that renders the idea of “invention of America” possible was already at work in Don Alfonso’s writing.

Similarly, O’Gorman is not the only thinker to challenge the historical consistency of Europe’s supposed epistemological domain in the Americas. Luis Villoro, for example, developed a dialectical account of mestizo consciousness in Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México (1995 [1950]). Villoro laid out in historicist terms the distinction between the “ser del indio” as an ontological category and “indigenismo” as an epistemological operation by the rising mestizo consciousness. In doing so, Villoro did something analogous to O’Gorman, namely, challenge the self-evident idea of the “indigena” and “indigeneidad” and rendering it as a historical construct, foreshadowing what Said would do with his category of Orientalism.

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10 Reyes’s work is haphazardly available in English. A good sampling of the relevant works can be found in Reyes 1950 and Reyes 2009: 101-93. I have written very extensively about these questions in the essays collected in Sánchez Prado 2019 so I will not revisit Reyes here. Regarding the utopian tradition of the Latin American essay, see also Sánchez Prado 2023a.
It is not surprising that Villoro would follow his Hiperión period with a long trajectory in epistemology and philosophy to later become an advocate of indigenous autonomy and interculturalidad, tied to his work on the Ejército Zapatista. Without further elaborating on Villoro, something for a different essay, I simply want to note that his writings are another instance of decolonization degree zero, and the political thought it rendered possible was essential to think political claims regarding indigenous peoples and the problems of race and ethnicity from the 1990s forward.

This detour into Reyes and Villoro seeks to demonstrate that to productively read O’Gorman we must move away from thinking *The Invention of America* and its main ideas as unique, and to recognize that Mexican thinking at large (not only philosophy, but also philosophically adjacent disciplines such as history and philology) was in the decades that followed the Mexican Revolution a site of ontological and epistemological decolonization distinct but parallel to other forms of such thinking around the world. One could recall here that O’Gorman’s explorations of the philosophy of history in the 1950s run parallel to the arch in which Frantz Fanon wrote *White Skins, Black Masks* (2008 [1952]) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963 [1961]). Mexico was not undergoing a process of political decolonization, as it was happening in Africa or the West Indies, but the long arch of Revolutionary culture and cultural nationalism pushed philosophy into raising questions regarding the epistemology and ontology of consciousness. There is a line in the criticism surrounding O’Gorman that challenges the originality of his theses. Horst Pietschmann (1997), for instance, notes that some of the ideas developed by O’Gorman could also be found in the work of Italian historians such as Antonello Gerbi, whose work was equally available in the Fondo de Cultura, or in the work of Pierre and Huguette Chaunu on Sevilla and the Atlantic.

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11 A really excellent account of Villoro’s Indigenism in relation to the history of Mexican philosophy can be found in Hurtado 2007: 115-34. I unfortunately became aware of Hurtado’s exceptional book after writing my essays addressing Villoro. It takes a different route than me (after all I am a cultural studies scholar), but I think his reading and mine complement each other in significant ways.

12 Villoro, sadly, remains the major Hiperión philosopher without due recognition in English, now that Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla have joined Zea and O’Gorman in the map of Mexican philosophy as studied in the US. I think that translations of his work and more studies are overdue. For the time being, I would invite Hispanophone readers to revisit his work on Indigenism from the mid-century and the end of the comparative fashion. A good place to do so is the anthology prepared by Ambrosio Velasco Gómez (Villoro 2017).
The point to me is not whether O’Gorman is original or not; he was in some ways, and not in others. Rather, *La invención de América* is a book that captures the spirit of the very reconceptualization of the world that was emerging at the time.

IV

Why does it matter that O’Gorman was a historian and not a philosopher like Villoro or a philologist like Reyes? Historical science was undergoing substantive revisions of its own premises in the years in which O’Gorman developed his early work. To close this essay, I want to point towards a few of the aspects in O’Gorman’s horizon as a historian that afforded his philosophical adjacency. The arch between O’Gorman’s early work and the writing of *The Invention of America* runs parallel to major interventions of the very idea of history, which was also moving away from positivist paradigms in other latitude. Alvaro Matute (1997, 4) notes in passing that O’Gorman refers to Raymond Aron’s *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1961 [1938]). Subtitled “An essay on the limits of historical objectivity,” Aron’s book justifies the need of a philosophy of history as a field. His philosophical system puts forward a complex epistemological reflection on the knowledge of the self and the other, which in turn allows him to reflect on the limits of historical objectivity and causality, and on the possibilities of experience and historicity.13

Anecdotally, most authoritative works on O’Gorman and Heidegger (for instance Gilardi 2015) consider O’Gorman’s recourse to historicity to derive from Gaos and Ortega. In some cases (like Hernández López 2006), critics begin with O’Gorman’s engagement with historiography in 1940, omitting his formational period in the 1930s. I have not encountered any reference to Aron as a source for O’Gorman’s idea of historicity beyond Matute’s quick reference. In fact, Aron is not mentioned once in *Crisis y porvenir de la ciencia histórica*, even though O’Gorman concludes the book with an extended reflection on the idea of historical truth, just like the French historian did in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Matute is correct to point to the many coincidences between both (1997: 4). In any case, there is no question that the coincidences would merit an in-depth inquiry regarding the extent to which Aron may have been a source for O’Gorman’s historicism. Kozel does point out that O’Gorman likely read Aron in Ortega y Gasset’s *Revista de Occidente* but draws in this reading a

13 On Aron’s many adjacencies and relations to existentialism, Sarah Bakewell’s engaging chronicle *At the Existentialist Café* (2016) gives an informal but informative account.
connection to Max Weber instead of Heidegger (2012: 3, 20). For my purposes, I merely want to state that when Heidegger is developing his core philosophical work in the late 1920s, and as Aron writes his essay in 1938, the need to discuss the problems of historical consciousness and truth in ways that would anticipate O’Gorman’s interventions from the 1940s onward, which is to say that in O’Gorman’s formative period such a question was already part of the problems of historiography in the West at large.

The turn towards Aron and Heidegger in O’Gorman’s early years can be read as an intersection between his own understanding of the constructed nature of social structures over history and his desire to theorize consciousness and experience. Even before his debate with Silvio Zavala, O’Gorman was well-aware of the limitations in the study of Mexico and a whole line of his work, which would require a separate essay from this one, embarked on a major revision not only of the narratives underlying national history but also of the very idea of national history as such.14 In his works prior to his properly Heideggerian thinking, it is already clear that he understands institutions and events to shape consciousness. His 1937 work *Historia de las divisiones territoriales de México* (2007), still in print, is a painstaking history of the ways in which changes in law and jurisprudence (based on his training as a lawyer) related to territory and land not only are essential to the transition independence, but also constitute a process of determination of regional identity. The book is understudied in major works regarding the idea of cartography and territory in Mexico.15 But it is evident upon reading its highly technical arguments that O’Gorman traces a line between the technicalities underlying legal regimes and how they affect historical events. This were not necessarily a causal relationship in a 19th-century sense (no laws of history are claimed here) but accidental, a list of effects that were real but unintended and not systematic or deliberate.

This is the reason why O’Gorman gravitated not only to existentialism and circumstancialism but also to broader philosophical frameworks that challenged the narrow sense of truth and fact in historical practice. Mauricio Tenorio Trillo notes that O’Gorman “in his *ars historica*, relocated history’s DNA in poetry” (2019: 26). Tenorio

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14 I believe an excellent essay on this subject is Hale 2000, although a more recent perspective is perhaps necessary.

15 See for example Craib 2004, which cites the book in passing but could clearly has broader connections to O’Gorman’s claims.
states this in reference to the 1991 text “Fantasmas en la narrativa historiográfica,” in which O’Gorman summarizes his craft at the end of his life by calling for “imprevisibles historias,” unpredictable histories (Meyer: 957-85).16 Throughout his career, O’Gorman was steadfast in identifying causality as a problem in historiography, and the need to have a method that was both self-aware of its epistemological limits, and able to strive to the best representation of the human condition as possible. This is the reason why philosophy is all over his work. David Brading (1996), for instance, reminds us that O’Gorman was the translator of David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hume 2010 [1779, 1942]), a book published by Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1942 and which continues to be a canonical edition of this thinker. Brading affirms that Hume is a source of at least two key ideas in O’Gorman’s praxis: the criticism against “entes históricos” (such as “America”) and the critique to causality (1996: 700-701). While Brading recognizes that the thesis of the “Invention of Américala” was only possible after reading Heidegger, he also appears to suggest that O’Gorman’s engagement with Hume (and I would add with Raymond Aron) on causality was crucial for Heidegger to have such an impact on his thought.

O’Gorman’s “historiology” was, from the basis of these concerns and the intellectual scene I have described so far, an intervention that addressed the significant concerns of a historian working from Mexico in relation to a historical science in turmoil. As previously mentioned, O’Gorman took issue with the recently professionalized discipline of history by taking on Zavala, who was a staunch defender of the traditional model of Leopold von Ranke. As Guillermo Zermeño Padilla notes, this in itself was controversial, given that Rankean history was being challenged by figures like Marc Bloch or Lucien Febvre, but Ranke’s “scientificism” was ultimately compatible with the legacies of positivism, and a good adversary for the historicist approach that O’Gorman was defending (2011: 455-56).17 To be fair (and Zermeño is very nuanced in his account), the Rankean model offered a pathway in terms of pedagogy and methodology that fit the desire to create a professional history field, whereas historicism was, paradoxically, more compatible with the *letrado* spirit of

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16 Tenorio-Trillo makes reference to the text in Meyer 1993, a compilation of writings by historians on their relation to history, which included texts by O’Gorman, Villoro, Paz and Zavala among others.

17 A good side-by-side comparison of scientificism and historicism in these debates can be found in Hernández López 2006: 50.
encompassing knowledge across and array of humanistic fields. Ainhoa Suárez Gómez usefully defines “historiology” as the desire to “translate to the historiographic terrain the philosophical principle that affirms that the fundamental characteristic of human existence is its constitution as a temporal being” (2020: 232. My translation). The promise of Rankean history to Zavala and other figures aching to create a historical discipline in Mexico was precisely the objectivization of history, while the unpredictable, radically contingent history proposed by O’Gorman, in which grand narratives and causalities were against the model, was likely to make professionalization more challenging.

Suárez Gómez usefully traces the notion of historiology to Ortega y Gasset, concretely to an essay written as a preface to the Spanish edition of Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of History in José Gaos’s translation (2011: 233; Hegel 1928). It is important that, unlike the English editions, the Spanish version uses “historia universal” to translate Weltgeschichte in the title, because this aligned the book to yet another preoccupation to understand O’Gorman’s wagers. Even if O’Gorman takes the term from Ortega, there is no question that his work breaks from Hegelianism. Even an unsympathetic reader of O’Gorman like Neil Larsen notes that ascribing to O’Gorman a Hegelian genealogy is incorrect (1995: 111). Larsen admits being relatively new to O’Gorman, and attributes a more strongly Husserlian inclination to his work, considering the Heideggerian influence “super-imposed on this more orthodox phenomenological language (1995:112). Larsen, a Marxist, is clearly turned off by O’Gorman’s ontological claim, since O’Gorman’s rejection of Hegel does carry an implicit rejection of Marxist historical sciences. Indeed, O’Gorman considered Marxist historiography a continuation of Rankean ideology and it is scientificist fallacies (1947: 96-99). Although Larsen suggests through an overstretched interpretation the idea that O’Gorman was, if not explicitly denouncing the threat of communism, at least articulating ideas compatible with it (1995: 116), I think it is more correct to argue that, as the idea of universal history put forward by Hegel had grown into a major term in the discipline, Marxist inclinations towards historical totalization (not unlike Rankean ones) were suspect for a historian reticent to embrace universal laws of history.

The idea of universal history is another interlocutor of O’Gorman’s historiology, in part because the redefinitions of the term in the early 20th century clearly had bearings on any attempt to dislodge Eurocentrism and totalization in history. As early
as 1923, Antonio Caso published a book entitled *El concepto de la historia universal*, which already rejected, as Guillermo Hurtado discusses, both the idea of historical laws and the idea of progress as the constant improvement of humanity, that is the two central tenets of positivism (Caso 1923; Hurtado 2016: 271-72). Without delving too much into Caso, I think it is significant that Mexico’s major philosopher of the period engaged in such a question, which means that the ties between philosophy and history had clear precedent among Mexican philosophers before O’Gorman. But the idea of universal history went much further than its postulation in philosophical terms. As Susan Buck-Morss concisely summarizes, “universal history as traditionally understood emerged out of the semi-secularization of Biblical history that followed Hegel’s attempt to think the whole of religion, philosophy, and history as a cosmological system of modernity” (2020: 28). Buck-Morss continues by observing that “in the twentieth century, universal history became an attempt to include all so-called civilizations within an academic canon” (2020: 28).

Just to provide one of many possible examples, one can recall here the figure of Arnold Toynbee. Toynbee was an English historian with roots in the fields of Greek and Byzantine history, who would become one of the most widely read historians of the century. This was thanks to his monumental work *The Study of History*, published in twelve volumes from 1934 and 1961, and widely admired as an attempt to encompass a history of all civilizations. Toynbee had many Mexican readers and admirers, including Alfonso Reyes, who in 1948 found many coincidences between his understanding of history and that of his British counterpart (Reyes 2000: 235-42). It is not surprising that Reyes would find Toynbee so compelling. As a fellow Hellenist, he would have been attracted to Toynbee’s early work, and Toynbee’s idea of civilizations, outdated as it may sound today, nevertheless provided a broad recognition of historical importance to societies far beyond Europe. In this, Toynbee clearly was in the same page as Latin American thinkers anxious to align the region’s history to universality.

More to the point of this essay, Toynbee was also a major influence on Leopoldo Zea, who in the 1950s begins to model some of his work, notably *El occidente y la conciencia de México* (1953), on Toynbee’s idea of the West. As Guillermo Hernández Flores notes, Toynbee allows Zea to account for the relation between empire and

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18 For a full account of Toynbee’s work, see Lang 2011.
colonized nations and make sense of Mexico vis-à-vis the West (2004: 87-90). Presumably, O’Gorman would have at least noticed such influence, given that in this time his work was running parallel to Zea’s. Toynbee visits Mexico in 1953 with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation at the outset of his new status as a “world figure,” as one of his biographer’s terms it (McNeill 1989: 235). The month-long visit was a major event, which included Toynbee’s conversation with the president. The visit inspired a book entitled México y el Occidente (Toynbee 1956), which included two lectures by Toynbee on Mexico—part of the work he was conducting for A Study of History, whose final volumes motivated his trips through Latin America and Asia—and Zea’s chronicle of the visit. As Nayelli Castro documents, Emilio Uranga was very critical of Toynbee and skeptical that his work would have an impact in Mexico, but Zea’s enthusiasm and Toynbee’s characterization of the Mexican revolution as a “vanguard decolonization movement” validated a “philosophy of history in which universality was constructed, in good measure, through the sum of identity reflections” (2018: 73-74). Similarly, Toynbee’s belief in Mexico as a model for “racial reconciliation” (1969: 343) likely warmed him up to a generation of scholars concerned with mestizaje as part of a larger conversation on Mexicanness.

I have not found any direct reference to O’Gorman being influenced by Toynbee (I would not discard its existence, though), but there is no question in my mind that his work was at the very least aware of this new turn towards universal history and towards the presentation of specific civilizations like that of Mexico as part of a new decentered account of the history of the world. In any case, the fact that Mexico was both on the map of mid-century historians around the world as a significant reference meant that O’Gorman was able to build his method in relation to this new standing of universal history. O’Gorman was decidedly opposed to the consequences of the Hegelian notion of universal history. In 1939 O’Gorman mounted a critique of Hegel’s impact in the formation of Panamericanism, particularly in response to Herbert Bolton’s text “The Epic of Greater America” (O’Gorman 1939, Bolton 1933). The text had an enduring influence, and was partially reprinted in Lewis Hanke’s Do the Americas Have a Common History? (1964), which also included Silvio Zavala’s defense of international collaboration between US and Latin American historians. O’Gorman is particularly troubled by Bolton’s mention of natural resources as a reason to be concerned about Latin America, and sees in this assertion a reflection of Hegel’s idea of America as a continent without history (1939: 15). O’Gorman would have surely
been aware of the emergence of Latin Americanism in the US as an imperial-adjacent project. One can recall here that the discipline of Latin Americanist literary studies in the 20th century finds its first exponent in Alfred Coester, who openly says that his writing of a history of Latin American literature in 1916 is animated in part by the opening of the Panama Canal (Coester 1916; Degiovanni 2018: 42-61). Although Degiovanni does not directly mention Bolton, it is clear the Boltonian thesis was connected to this impetus.\(^{19}\)

O’Gorman’s philosophical adjacency then can be reasserted as a project of decolonization in the guise of these developments. As Latin America became more integrated in the imagination of a world history, the assertion of the region’s epistemological autonomy carried the resistance of the reterritorialization to Eurocentric history. A history concerned not with method but with ontology was also necessary to ensure that the disciplinarization of history did not entail an erasure of the struggles of the continent. Finally, O’Gorman was a constant antagonist of historians of Spain and early Americas, challenging influential historians on their accounts of America. This was the case with Hanke himself, who O’Gorman challenged in relation to Bartolomé de las Casas (Hernández López 2006: 110-117). His polemic with the French Hispanist Marcel Bataillon—who called him “el historiador filósofo” with a degree of derision—was extensive enough to merit a joint book (Bataillon and O’Gorman 1955). But the reality is that, as Walter Mignolo discusses, this characterization in fact describes O’Gorman’s lucidity, including the possibility of studying the genre of histories of the Indies as something other than historical documents (1984: 197).\(^{20}\) It was philosophical adjacency which allowed O’Gorman to be such a transformational historian. It is what empowered him to raise in history ethical questions related to human realization as Conrado Hernández López, one of O’Gorman’s most careful readers, argues (2006: 151-54). Philosophical adjacency, the refusal embedded in letting history become a discipline that abdicates

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\(^{19}\) Another aspect I am sidestepping but is worth noting is that O’Gorman was committed to the advancement of universal history as a practice even if his work not always addressed it. It is worth recalling that Porrúa’s mass editions of Herodotus and Thucydides carried introductions by O’Gorman (Meyer 2009: 689-710 & 754-806). O’Gorman also translated into Spanish David Thomson’s influential 1969 book *World History 1914-1968* (1970).

\(^{20}\) Mignolo discusses in this text O’Gorman in comparison to Hans-Georg Gadamer, a discussion that certainly adds to his connections to Heidegger.
from the fundamental questions of the human, was the reason why he reached decolonization degree zero. O’Gorman, thanks to this insight, continues to be a required reading for all Latin Americans, and an essential point of reference for Mexican history, philosophy and culture at large.
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WHEN WE DIE, WE BECOME MUERTOS: CHILDREN’S PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH IN TIANGUISTENGO, HIDALGO

AMY REED-SANDOVAL

ABSTRACT: In this essay, I explore the philosophies of death and dying presented by preschool and kindergarten-aged children in a pre-college philosophy class in Tianguistengo, Hidalgo before, during and after the Xantolo celebrations in the region. I describe, and then analyze philosophically, how some Tianguistengan children described death as “convertirse en un muerto,” or “becoming, transforming and converting into a muerto.” While muertos transcend the boundaries of the realm of the living, they are nevertheless concrete, material beings that living humans perceive in various ways. I argue that Tianguistengan children’s philosophies of death also emphasize the silliness of death, as well as the significance of non-human animal deaths. Their philosophical views inspire, I contend, fresh ideas about death that people of all ages should consider carefully.

Keywords: Death, pre-college philosophy, philosophy for children (P4C), Aztec philosophies, animal ethics, standpoint epistemology, childhoods

RESUMEN: En este ensayo, exploro las ideas filosóficas de la muerte, y del proceso de morir, presentadas por niñas y niños de la edad preescolar en una clase de filosofía infantil que fue llevada a cabo en Tianguistengo, Hidalgo antes, durante, y después de las celebraciones de Xantolo de la región. Describo, y después analizo filosóficamente, como algunas niñas y algunos niños de Tianguistengo describieron la muerte como “convertirse en un muerto.” Aunque estos “muertos” transcendien las fronteras del plano de los vivos, siguen siendo seres concretos y materiales que las y los humanos percibimos de maneras diferentes. Argumento que las filosofías infantiles tianguistenguenses de la muerte también enfatizan los aspectos cómicos de la muerte, y también la importancia de las muertes de las y los animales- no-humanos. Argumento, finalmente, que sus perspectivas filosóficas inspiran ideas frescas sobre la muerte que las personas de todas las edades deberíamos considerar cuidadosamente.

Palabras Clave: Muerte, filosofía infantil, filosofía para niñ@s, filosofías aztecas, ética de los animales, epistemología del punto de vista, infancias

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I. Introduction

My daughter’s preschool teacher in Tianguistengo, Hidalgo asked me to devote next week’s pre-college philosophy session in her classroom to the philosophical topic of death. As she made the request, I was helping her move the classroom chairs back to their desks from the “philosophy circle” in which I had positioned them for today’s discussion of some complexities of language. The group of three, four, and five-year-old children and I had just read and analyzed a Spanish translation of Mo Willems’ picture book *Knuffle Bunny*, a story in which a toddler struggles to communicate to her dad that he accidentally left her beloved stuffed rabbit in a laundromat washing machine. I glanced out the window, a new habit of mine. Outside grey clouds cloaked the sky and heaved water onto the village below. It was the tail end of the rainiest season of the year in Hidalgo’s Sierra Alta region, however, and people seemed to barely notice that everything was drenched. My four-year-old daughter, who was still getting used to her mother’s status as a philosophy teacher in her classroom, tugged at my sleeve, eager to walk home with me despite the unrelenting downpour.

“The children should understand why we do the things that we do,” the teacher said, in Spanish, picking some errant paper scraps off the floor. “They shouldn’t just do them *porque sí***.”

I stopped shifting chairs for a moment. Not only was I thrilled that the teacher was open to exploring with her young students the challenging philosophical topic of death, I also considered it a personal victory that she had joined my cause of encouraging the children to avoid saying “*porque sí***”—or “just because” (a not-so-distant cousin of the English-language appeal to authority *because I said so*)—in response to the philosophical challenges with which they were presented. Additionally, I was eager to explore death in the festive classroom setting she had created for the holiday season. It was November, the season of Day of the Dead, or, as it is often called in Mexico’s Huasteca region and surrounding areas (including Tianguistengo), *Xantolo*. “Xantolo” is a Nahuatl term in which “xan” is a derivative of the Spanish word “santo,” or saint, and “olo” means “abundance.” Xantolo, then, is the season of saints, and of the dead, and of their relations with the living. I felt honored by the request to explore death philosophically with local children during these Tianguistengan celebrations, even though I had only arrived in the village three months ago.

In this essay, I explore the philosophies of death and dying presented by children in one of my pre-college philosophy classes held in Tianguistengo, Hidalgo before, during and after the Xantolo celebrations in the region.
Specifically, I describe, and then analyze philosophically, how some Tianguistengan children described death as “convertirse en un muerto,” or “becoming, transforming, or converting into a muerto.” While muertos transcend the boundaries of the realm of the living, they are nevertheless concrete, material beings that living humans perceive in various ways. As we shall see, Tianguistengan children’s philosophies of death also emphasize the silliness of death, and the significance of non-human animal deaths. Their philosophical views inspire fresh ideas about death that people of all ages would do well to consider carefully.

In Section II, I further describe the sociocultural context in which my class was situated, including the Nahuatl and Indigenous histories of the region. I acknowledge, in brief, my own positionality as a pre-college philosophy instructor and “cultural outsider” in Tianguistengo. My goals for Section III are two-fold. First, I narrate, both from memory and my pedagogical notes, the philosophical dialogue in which this understanding of death was articulated. Second, I contextualize this view of death-as-becoming-muerto by exploring possible relationships between this view of death and Nahuatl/Aztec philosophies of death that existed before, and persisted despite, Spanish colonization.

It would be an adult-centric disservice to the young philosophers in question, however, to simply present this philosophical view as a childish extension of adult ideas and rituals. As decades of Philosophy for Children scholarship and practice has shown, children are talented, natural philosophers who frequently offer unique philosophical views that may contrast those of adults (including in their own communities). Thus, in Section IV I employ Gareth Matthews’s notion of “children’s philosophy” to analyze Tianguistengan children’s views on death on their own terms. What are the virtues of considering death in terms of becoming a muerto/a/x? How might adopting such a view change one’s position on life itself? Finally, how can we transform our pre-college philosophy pedagogy through an analysis of children’s philosophy?

Prior to beginning, some clarificatory notes are in order. First, I wish to position this piece in terms of Mexican philosophy and Aztec/Nahua philosophies. I aim to contribute to these bodies of scholarship by foregrounding the voices and philosophical perspectives of Mexican (and, particularly, Tianguistengan) children. I also wish to stipulate that I am not attempting to represent the perspectives of all children of Tianguistengo—just as those working in Mexican or Nahuatl philosophy (for example) do not claim to represent the perspectives of all

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1 I am grateful to James Maffie for helpful discussion of this point.
Mexican and Nahuatl people. Furthermore, I recognize that any attempt to describe the philosophical views of “others” falls into a problem of representation, or of “speaking for others” as argued by Linda Martín Alcoff (Alcoff 1991-1992; see also Elicor 2020). This ethical challenge is especially difficult when writing about children, given their comparative lack of sociopolitical power. In response, I want to make clear that this article is not the “final word” on Tianguistengan children’s philosophy: it is, instead, an attempt to demonstrate that these young people have a philosophy that adults ought to learn from, and ought to consider seriously (ideally by giving their voices an influential public platform). I also position this piece within the Philosophy for Children (P4C) tradition, which often analyses the pedagogical practice of pre-college philosophy. In this vein, I will explore the pedagogical practice and context from which Tianguistengan children’s philosophical claims emerged, engaging P4C scholarship in the process.

Finally, some clarifications about language and identity. In this paper I will use terminology that reflects both my preferred terms and those that are more recognizable for readers. Specifically, I will use the terms “pre-college philosophy” and “Philosophy for Children” to describe my pedagogical approach to philosophizing with children. I will also use the terms “Nahuatl/Nahua” and “Aztec” to refer to the Indigenous philosophical traditions within which I contextualize some of the children’s philosophical claims. Note that not all the children in the classroom self-identified as Indigenous, and that for various reasons I did not inquire about the children’s ethnoracial identities. I refer here, instead, to the importance of Nahua/Aztec philosophies and traditions in Tianguistengo, where the children live and philosophize.

II. The Road to Pre-College Philosophy in Tianguistengo

To get to Tianguistengo’s cabecera municipal, or municipal headquarters, where I taught pre-college philosophy classes, one must drive along a narrow, winding road known as the Zacualtipán-Tianguistengo highway. Driving down this road, one is struck by the spectacular vegetation of Tianguistengo’s Sierra Alta region, which the German Baron Alexander von Humbolt once deemed The Mexican Andes (Mercado Escudero 1993: 25). One loops through tough bundles of pine and oak trees—once home to monkeys and mountain lions until deforestation became a serious local problem—that on clear days break away to astounding views of emerald mountains, bright grazing pastures, and mossy hillocks surrounding the many small villages of which greater Tianguistengo is comprised. On overcast days, which are far more common, one drives along the road with mild
trepidation, for the endless fog conceals not only the jaw-dropping views, but also, the other cars winding down the road. Situated 667 meters above sea level, Tianguistengo is a basin for fog, as its cool, salt-laden airs are outspread by the steady winds hailing from the Gulf of Mexico.

The name “Tianguistengo” is Nahuatl, and it can be roughly translated as “next to the market”: “tianguis” means “market,” and “tengo” means “next to,” or “on the bank of.” Since 1860, the Tianguistengo’s cabecera municipal has designated its Thursdays as market or “tianguis” days, with vendors from across the region setting up shop in the parking lot in front of the local church to sell fragrant foods and various household items. Tianguistengo was once part of the Señorío de Mejztitlán, which in 1380 was consolidated by Techotlala, the King of Texcoco and grandfather of legendary Aztec philosopher Netzahualcoyotl. In 1486, the ”serranos aliados a Metztitlán” were invited to the inauguration of the famous Templo Mayor, or Teocalli, upon its dedication to the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli.

In 1530, the Señorio Independiente of Metztitlán was taken by the Spaniards, and Tianguistengo came under the control of the Spanish crown. Augustine evangelists arrived that same year a part of Spain’s colonizing mission, and they began constructing the Santa Ana de Tianguistengo church in 1540. Soon after, settlers from Extremadura, Spain began to arrive in the region, and evidence of this colonial history is to be found in the Extremaduran architecture characteristic of the cabecera municipal, featuring “techos a dos aguas,” or gabled roofs, the sloping sides of which are helpful in regions with significant rainfall.

While there is no published work (at least to my knowledge) that chronicles the colonial violence inflicted upon Tianguistengo in particular, the region undoubtably experienced, and continues to experience, the full battery of colonial harms outlined by Aníbal Quijano and other decolonial philosophers (Quijano and Ennis 2000). A town elder once told me in casual conversation that during his youth, mestiza/o Tianguistegans were called “gente de razón,” or reasonable people, while Indigenous Tianguistengans were called “gente sin razón,” or unreasonable people. Still, Indigenous residents of Tianguistengo have resisted colonial forces through the preservation of their language and customs, many which have been skilfully (albeit forcefully) adapted to Spanish and mestizo sociopolitical domination in the region. As of 2020, in the broader municipality of Tianguistengo, the population was 14,340, of which about 6,000 speak an Indigenous language (primarily Nahuatl) (Data Mexico 2022). Indigenous customs with pre-colonial histories are still proudly practiced, such as Xantolo, la Danza del Palo Volador—which is practiced in many Nahuatl communities
through Mexico and is emblematic of Nahuatl metaphysics—and the dance of the Tirilrosde Oxlanta.

Still, enduring coloniality and other structural injustices have plagued Indigenous and non-Indigenous Tianguistengans, though Indigenous peoples are at heightened risk. As recently as 1996, only 70 percent of homes in the municipality had running water, and a mere 35 percent of households had electricity (Escudero 1993: 21-29). In 2020, 28.8 percent of the population lived in “severe poverty,” and 52.8 percent of the population lived in “moderate poverty.” Only four percent of the population has internet connectivity at home; however, about 65 percent of the population has a cell phone, and many Tianguistengans get some internet access on their phones. The majority of adults do not finish grade school, and approximately 21 percent of the population is illiterate, with women constituting about 57 percent of that group.

I came to Tianguistengo with the goal of helping a local Escuela Normal, or Normal School, develop a pre-college philosophy program for the region. During the remote learning period of the COVID-19 pandemic, they had invited me to give an online keynote presentation about pre-college philosophy pedagogy for their annual conference, and I was inspired to learn of their interest in bringing opportunities for philosophical dialogue to the young people they serve. Thus, in collaboration with the school, I developed a plan to establish pre-college philosophy opportunities in Tianguistengo. As it usually happens, however, my philosophical outreach with children provided me with new perspectives on philosophical questions: once again, I was more learner than teacher. Thus, the ensuing analysis does not focus on my planned program development, but rather, on the exciting philosophical ideas produced by Tianguistengan children in a philosophy class facilitated by an enthusiastic—yet very “new”—cultural outsider.

III. On Becoming a Muerto

A. Philosophy for Children in Tianguistengo

I entered the pre-school classroom prepared to talk to the children about death. I found them sitting at their desks making pan de muerto: a doughy, citrusy Mexican pastry topped with bread-based skull and crossbones representing the bones of the dead (though there are considerable regional differences in how the bread is adorned). Once prepared, pan de muerto is placed upon the altars constructed for los muertos, serving as a delicious treat to guide them home, or elsewhere on their journeys. The children in the class, including my daughter, seemed absolutely delighted by the messy activity. Still, when the teacher announced that the
philosophy class was about to begin, they finished sculpting their bread buns and went outside to wash their hands in a tall bucket of cold water. As I waited for them to return, I surveyed the classroom, which was decorated with numerous paper *Catrina* skeletons that were both serenading and being serenaded in glistening mariachi uniforms. I moved the chairs into a “philosophy circle.”

My lesson plan involved starting with a traditional Community of Inquiry (CoI): a term of art in Philosophy for Children that refers to a pedagogical practice in which children sit in a circle and listen to their facilitator read them a philosophically suggestive story (for further discussion on CoI, see Lipman 2003: 36). Upon finishing the story, children are asked to quietly reflect on philosophical questions the story inspires for them. Then, the facilitator asks them to share their questions with the group. The questions are written down by the facilitator, who then reads the list aloud. Subsequently, the group of children is asked to vote for the question that they find most interesting, and the rest of the COI is devoted to collective exploration of and response to the selected philosophical question. In such pedagogical practice, the philosophical questions, and, indeed, the philosophy itself, should come from the children. The (adult) facilitator should avoid, as much as possible, directing the philosophical discussion with their preconceived philosophical views.

My plan was to follow the guidelines for a CoI as much as I could, at least at the very beginning. I had selected the story book *Death, Duck and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch (translated to Spanish as *El Pato y La Muerte*)—a favorite of pre-college philosophy practitioners who want to explore death. Erlbruch tells the story of Duck, who finds that Death—personified as a kind of feminine skeleton wearing a long tweed coat over a checkered dress and carrying a solitary tulip—is suddenly always around him. He voices concern about this, but comes to form emotional attachment to Death, who is by his side as he begins to die. Death does not answer Duck’s philosophical questions about the nature of death, but shows him considerable kindness as the story develops. At the end of the story, Death floats Duck’s corpse on a river and pushes the body away. Death is sad, and misses Duck, but observes that death is a part of life.²

² I should note that I had considered using some of the wonderful story books about death that were recently published by Mexican authors, having just picked up several such books at Mexico City’s annual book fair. For instance, *Un Huipil Para La Muerte* (A Huipil—or hand-embroidered Indigenous Blouse—for Death), by Claudia Esmeralda Ríos Rodríguez, depicts Death as Catrina-like skeleton who is saddened by the fact that everyone is frightened of her appearance. She enlists the help of a Tzotzil girl, who does not fear her, and the girl weaves a beautiful huipil for her, and thus changes the relationship between the dead and the dead and the living. The message, of course, is that we ought not fear death—instead, we should view as life’s counterpart, and thus a part of life.
My first step, then, was to read this book in accordance with the recommended steps of a CoI. Then, I would ask the children to raise the philosophical questions that the book inspired for them. However, I also expected to diverge from a CoI, as I was working with very young children who are still developing the self-confidence necessary to audibly formulate questions in front of an audience of listeners. They had made significant progress in this vein since the start of the school year, but, in my view, it would have been pedagogically foolhardy to depend solely on their questions for the entirety of the philosophical dialogue. As explored by Karen Emmerman, pre-college philosophy practitioners often experience tensions when trying to simultaneously “democratize the classroom” (by allowing children to articulate and select their own questions) and build philosophical skills (by delving deeply into questions that inspire robust philosophical discussion and debate—questions that children themselves do not always ask) (Emmerman 2021; see also Mohr Lone 2014). Darren Chetty has also warned against depending on children of color to raise questions about racism in pre-college philosophy classes (Chetty 2014) While today’s intended topic was not racism per se, I believe that Chetty’s argument should inspire caution in terms of relying exclusively on a CoI and children’s questions in philosophy classes on any sensitive topic.

Thus, I would open the floor to children’s questions after reading the book, and then spend some time answering them as a group. I would then break students into small groups, each one with its own adult facilitator (I was joined in the classroom by the main teacher, a student teacher, and my husband, who was helping me that day as a volunteer in our daughter’s classroom). In those groups, we would ask the children the following questions: what is death? What happens when we die? Should we be afraid of death? And finally: why do we celebrate Xantolo? This was what Karen Emmerman has called a “middle ground approach,” in which children are encouraged to select their own questions in an effort to democratize the classroom, but are also presented with philosophical challenges pre-prepared by the instructor.

I opted for *Death, Duck and the Tulip* for this particular class because, as a pre-college philosophy facilitator, I wanted a book that did not present readers with such a clear ethical vision of death (though I do believe that *Un Huipil para La Muerte* would be an excellent Spanish-language book to use in a philosophy class focused on the question of whether we ought to fear death, among others). In response to the teacher’s challenge—that I encourage children to encourage why they participated in Xantolo traditions, and not just participate porque sí—I wanted to momentarily “step away” from traditional Mexican and Xantolo depictions of death as a Catrina to create space for a broader philosophical dialogue. Finally, *Un Huipil para La Muerte* is likely more suited for older children given its style and length.
As the children filed back into the classroom, hands washed, they sat in the philosophy circle and we read *Death, Duck, and the Tulip*. They listened with apparent interest. I then asked them to reflect quietly on a philosophical question about the book. Following a brief silence, one child asked: *why did the duck die?* As several the other children indicated immediate interest in the question both verbally and through body language, I decided to let the conversation flow in that direction. In response, the children began to respond in what might be regarded as scientific terms, which does not mean that the conversation was not philosophical (after all, the question of *why* someone dies cannot solely be addressed in empirical terms, though scientific “answers” are often important pieces of the puzzle). One child pointed out that the duck was very cold. Another suggested that the duck had not been eating his vegetables. Finally, a child replied that the duck’s feathers must have fallen off, and that is what caused his death.

After the children had finished answering this question to their satisfaction, they seemed eager for a change, so I divided them into small groups. The other teachers and volunteers in the classroom were, at this point, familiar with the goals of pre-college philosophy pedagogy, and they were prepared to ask the children the aforementioned philosophical questions while granting them space in which to speak. The classroom became a bit loud—the children had a great deal to say on this topic—but we were nevertheless able to hear and learn from one another.

In my small group of four children, I first raised the question of what happens to us after we die. Immediately, a four-year-old girl issued the reply that is the subject of this paper: *when we die, we become muertos.* The other children in my group nodded in agreement. Fascinated, I began to explore what a *muerto* is—and in so doing, I abandoned my “lesson plan” for this stage of the class in order to explore the philosophical response to the question the girl, and the group, had generated. This supports, I submit, Emmerman’s argument for a “middle ground approach” to Philosophy for Children, especially when working with young children: I was able to work toward the goal of democratizing the classroom even after I asked the children my own philosophical question, as my question encouraged a child to articulate her unique philosophical position that then became our collective point of focus. I told the children in my group to talk to each other about what it means to be a *muerto* and went to check in on how the other groups were fairing in the exercise.

First, I walked over to the group for which the main classroom teacher was now acting as philosophy facilitator. I found them engrossed in a lively conversation involving lots of physical movement. After listening for a few minutes, I learned
that they, too, were talking about muertos and describing them as material beings. Specifically, they were talking about muertos coming out of their graves and singing and dancing. *Vienen bailando*—“they come dancing”—the children were saying, and they, themselves, started dancing like muertos. Their specific claim that the muertos “come dancing” was likely inspired by the song and dance they were practicing in school for an upcoming Xantolo celebration in the town square. The song—which I now know well, as my daughter took part in this activity and sang the song regularly at home—is called “Calaverita de Azucar,” and one of the verses is as follows:

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\begin{align*}
Vengo bailando desde el otro mundo (I come dancing from the other word) \\
Y es que mi casa está más allá (and my house is far away/ “In the great beyond”)
Busco un alma que me de un dulce nombre (I look for a soul that will give me a sweet name) \\
¡No quiero espantar, solo quiero bailar! (I don’t want to frighten anyone, I just want to dance!)
\end{align*}
\]

A bit later, children in the two neighboring group also began to talk about the muertos that “come dancing” and exit their graves. One group started debating whether this was scary. Feeling convinced that the other groups did not need my pedagogical support, I returned to my own group to ask them more about what it means to become a muerto. I found the children engrossed in debate over whether people eat our bodies when we die, which may or may not have been inspired by the fact that they were making edible pan de muerto with skulls and crossbones right before class. Two of the children believed that our bodies are eaten by the living after we die, and two believed that they are not. The group then pivoted to discussion of whether death is a person. As explored previously, in reference to the Catrinas the teacher has set up in the classroom, death is often portrayed as a skeleton-woman in Mexican culture: she is sometimes called La Flaca and La Huesuda (The Skinny One, and The Bony One). Half of the children said yes, death is a person, and half said no—which shows that while the children’s views are, indeed, shaped by the cultural context in which they are positioned, they nevertheless approach their social milieu and associated philosophical ideas with a critical gaze.

In the final ten minutes of our session (with pre-schoolers, my sessions tend to last for 30-40 minutes), I posed the question of what (else) happens to us after we
die. I was responding to their interest in the debate of whether dead bodies are eaten by the living after death; I wanted to expand upon that question. Interestingly, a four-year-old boy then replied that when we die, people drink hot chocolate (a beverage traditionally consumed during Xantolo). The children then began discussing the last time that they had consumed delicious hot chocolate. I found it interesting that when asked what happens to us (i.e. dead people) when we die, they decided to focus on what the living do in response to “our” deaths. In their view (I infer), what the living do to mourn, celebrate, and connect with us after we die—and also, what they fail or neglect to do—are vital parts of what happens to us when we die.

Finally, the children chose to move beyond a human-centered response to the questions under exploration by discussing animals that had died (note that Xantolo, and Día de Muertos, involves specific rituals and times for honoring dead animals). One boy said, with apparent sadness, that he saw one of his family’s cows die. The girl who had originally stated that when we die, we become muertos said that a neighbor had poisoned her aunt’s cat, and that the cat had died. She began to cry when she told the story, and the other kids and I tried to console her. At this point, the class session was over: parents we coming to the door to take their children home under giant umbrellas. So, while I would have loved exploring the children’s questions statements about animal deaths, I reluctantly ended that day’s session.

B. Nahua Philosophies of Death

Why did a four-year-old girl in my classroom say that when we die, we become muertos? Why was the image of muertos dancing out of their graves such an important part of literally all the philosophical discussions the groups of children were having? As I explore in the next and final section of this paper, when we study children’s philosophy, we generally cannot look to published books and articles to answer our questions. Due to the structural position of children in our social world, it can also be difficult to comfortably ask kids direct follow-up questions. One way to flesh out (so to speak) the idea that death is becoming-a-muerto is through appealing to Nahua/Aztec conceptions of death that have long influenced the Tianguistengan social world in which the children are situated. Thus, in this section, I explore possible connections between this conception of death, and Nahua understandings of death and the afterlife.

To begin with, note that many Aztec/Nahuatl conceptions of death emphasize, at least in part, what I shall call the material components of death—that is, not
simply the idea of an imperceptible soul, but also, the material bodies and bodily activities it entails, including travel to concrete places that are described in rich detail. When I say that Aztec/Nahua conceptions of death were/are “material,” I also mean to say that they refer to real bodies and things, like skeletons animated by the yolita—or personal identity-granting life-force—located in the yoyotl, or the heart(s) of the living. On this view, with death, the yolita may leave the human body, travel to the underworld, and occupy the body of a dead relative, or it may come back to the realm of the living to occupy the body of a newborn or other individual (McKeever First 1995) Note that in other Aztec/Nahua conceptions of death, dead human souls—especially those of children—are believed to reincarnate as (real) colorful birds and butterflies. Furthermore, though the muerto is dissimilar to the human body that its yolita once inhabited, it nevertheless eats, dances, and does “body-like things.” Thus, though muertos are, as Miguel León-Portillamaintains, “fleshless,” they are also, in many other respects, material. However, as León-Portillacautions, this does not mean that Nahuatl (or Aztec) beliefs about death and the afterlife do not involve souls. Still, these philosophies of death often involve material components that are strikingly different from, for instance, Christian philosophies of death in which the soul is to imagined as fundamentally disconnected from, and utterly dissimilar to, human and animal bodies.

Nahua philosophies of death are, then, both bodily/material and immaterial— involving both bodies, physicality, and souls. Upon death, a significant part of our total life-force, or life-energy, persists, despite the fact that the soul leaves the body and becomes, as León-Portilla maintains, fleshless. It is this sacred life energy that enables the muerto to achieve certain forms of embodiment, and engage in physical activities (León-Portilla 1990) In Aztec philosophy, death is life’s counterpart—just one example of what James Maffie has called “agonistic inamic unity” in Aztec metaphysics, in which two things that are opposite from one another are paired and “both interdependent and mutually competitive or agonistic” (2014: 137) Maffie explains that these pairs or “unities” are, in fact, energetic processes that are partially constitutive of Teotl, a “continually dynamic, vivifying, self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy” (2014: 21-22). Maffie further explains that in all such dualities, neither component “is morally or metaphysically superior to the other” (137). Maffie also describes Teotl as an artist, and the cosmos as Teotl’s energetic performance. Perhaps muertos themselves are also artists engaged in the energetic performance of Teotl.

The agonistic inamic unity of the life-death duality is beautifully exemplified in the Aztec origin story of people. León-Portilla tells the story of Quetzalcoatl’s
Reed-Sandoval, When We Die, We Become Muertos

descent to Mictlán, which brought about the existence of human beings. At this
time, the Fifth Age—in which we are now—had been established, and the sun had
been created. The Aztec gods gathered in Teotihuacan, and decided that
Quetzalcoatl—the “feathered serpent” and a primary Aztec god—should descend
to Mictlán, the underworld (soon to be described in greater detail) to get human
bones to form people that would rehabit the Earth (León-Portilla 1990: 107-
109). Quetzalcoatl is forced to undergo a series of trials in Mictlán—he even dies
and comes back to life—but is ultimately successful, and he ascends from the
underworld with the bones that are then used to form the first man and the first
woman. Here, we see that life itself comes from death: both the material bones of
the dead, and Quetzalcoatl’s own death in Mictlán.

The materiality of death—that is, the ways in which muertos take on varied
physical forms and engage in physical activities, like dancing, traveling to concrete
places, avoiding danger, and consuming foodstuffs on Xantolo—is also present in
Aztec/Nahuatl understandings of what happens to humans after we die. After
dying, the yolía of humans may go to one of four “dwelling-places”: where one goes
depends not on one’s conduct during the entirety of one’s life, as we find in
Christianity and some other religions, but in terms of the nature of one’s death.
What León-Portilla describes as the “first region of the dead” is aforementioned
Mictlán, which Quetzalcoatl visited as part of his mission to create the first human
beings of the Fifth Age. Mictlán is the dwelling place of people who die of most
illnesses, and of old age—for this reason, it is the dwelling place of most of the dead.
More than just a “dwelling place,” however, it a challenging site in which the dead
must overcome a series of obstacles during a period of four years. With the help of
a guide dog, believed to be the soul of a god in dog-form, the dead are required to
journey through the nine levels of Mictlán before arriving at Chiconamatlan, the
final resting place and region of the dead.

Whether Chiconamatlan is an agreeable or “neutral” resting place, or more
akin to a miserable hell described in many variations of Christianity, is a subject of
some scholarly dispute. While León-Portilla describes Mictlán as cold and dark, he
seems to present 16th century Aztecs as generally at peace with the afterlife that
likely awaited them, regarding it as “asunto de los dioses” (a “matter of the gods”).
Alberto Ruz Lhuillier, meanwhile, argues that the Aztecs’ discriminatory
conception of death—in which the majority went to a terrible Mictlán, and a
minority went to paradise (described below)—caused existential and psychological
unrest among the Aztecs (Luz Ruhillier 1963: 253)
A second “dwelling place” in Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death is Tlalocan: an “earthly paradise” (León-Portilla 1990: 125). Those who are sent to Tlalocan were chosen by Tlaloc, the Nahuatl god of rain. These individuals died in ways that were associated with water, such as drowning in floods and other bodies of water. Tlalocan is described as featuring fresh air, a beautiful landscape, and limitless fresh foods. The dead who go to Tlalocan need not undergo trials, like those sent to Mictlán, by some scholars suggest that children sent to Tlalocan also underwent a four-year period of transition that might remind Christians of the notion of purgatory.

The third dwelling-place is for breast-feeding children who die “before the age of reason.” It is called Chichihuacauhco, or a “wet nurse tree” (or “tree of our flesh”). Drops of milk from the leaves of this tree nourished the young children, who one can also envision as being warmed and nurtured by the “flesh” of her bark. Finally, warriors who died in battle, and women/pregnant people who died during childbirth, were sent to the dwelling place of the sun, located in the West, called Tonatiuhiluícac. This dwelling place was considered to be the most glorious of all, as its male inhabitants would accompany the sun from dawn until noon, while its female inhabitants would accompany from noon until dusk. After this period of four years, the inhabitants of this dwelling place were turned into birds—various “plumed creatures” of different, beautiful colors who would nourish themselves from earthly and heavenly flowers.

We have seen that Aztec/Nahuatl understandings of death emphasize the materiality of death: concrete places, bodies, and things alongside immaterial souls. One’s final resting place depends upon the metaphysical fact of how one died: whether one drowned, died in childbirth, died of illness, etc. The various dwelling places are described in rich detail: the West of the sun, Tonatiuhiluícac, a tree that gives milk to breast-feeding children, an earthly paradise filled with good food and fresh air, and a dark, cold underworld consisting of nine distinct layers. Furthermore, we find considerable exploration of the dead—the muertos—who are creatures who cannot be understood simply in terms of souls, or of beings who are no longer alive (this particular point is perhaps similar to Western understandings of ghosts). In Mictlán, it is the muerto who, as soul with a particular embodiment, must undergo a difficult, four-year journey through nine layers of underworld only before they reach their final resting place. Those muertos who die as warriors who go proudly to the sun act for four years before they attain their final forms as plumed creatures. Additionally, those muertos who are young children maintain, in many respects, their earthly forms—we are to think of them as children in need
of milk, warmth, and maternal love. Note that many of these muertos become things: voyagers, birds, orphans, extensions of the sun.

Such a conception of death—which emphasizes being and becoming-a-muerto and the material aspects of death—stands in contrast to ideas of death that either depict the dead as disembodied souls, or assume that one’s entire existence ends upon one’s demise. One such articulation of death can be found in Plato’s *The Apology*, in which Socrates, who is on trial and facing execution, famously tells the jurors who will eventually condemn him that he is not afraid to die. Socrates argues that death can entail one of two things: “either the dead man wholly ceases to be, and loses all sensation; or, according to the common belief, it is a change or a migration of the soul to another place” (Plato in Church, etc., 2020: 76). Notably, both of these after-life “possibilities” identified by Socrates differ from Nahuatl understandings, which give comparatively vivid depictions of what the dead look like (i.e., like human warriors, birds, breast-feeding children, or “fleshless” creatures accompanied by guide dogs) and where they may be found (i.e., to the West of the sun, in a dark, cold underworld, by a tree dripping nourishing milk, or in an earthly paradise where food is harvested).

This distinctive vision of death is also evinced in Xantolo and Día de Muertos celebrations in Hidalgo and throughout Mexico. When families construct altars filled with pictures of the dead and their favorite foods, it is to guide the dead—los muertos—either on their journeys to their final resting places, if the loved one recently died, or to the homes in which the altar is placed for a visit, if they have been deceased for years. In the context of such celebrations, the dead seem to assume a somewhat distinctive metaphysical status: they are neither living, fleshy human beings nor “mere souls” utterly disconnected from their previously inhabited bodily forms. During Xantolo, these muertos are driven by what Westerners sometimes call “bodily urges”—the smells and tastes of their favorite foods, the pleasure of their favorite books, and, for children, the joy of a preferred toy. The muertos are the living dead who consume the essence of the foodstuffs left by the living who remember and love them.

It is in this context in which a child in Tianguistengo, Hidalgo told me that when we die, we become muertos. Moreover, Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death and associated cultural practices can help us both to unravel and ponder this

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3 Prior to Spanish colonization, the exclusive goal of the Día de Muertos altars was to guide the dead on their journeys to their final dwelling places. The believe that the altars can guide our loved ones back to us for a visit was developed under Spanish and Catholic influences.

4 To think of these urges merely as “bodily” would, however, support a mind-body dualism that the Mexica denied. My point, however, is that these are not disembodied processes for muertos.
philosophical claim, for we can draw out the following connections between Tianguistengan children’s philosophies of death and their Aztec/Nahuatl counterparts.

First, recall that in Aztec/Nahuatl metaphysics, death is life’s counterpart in what Maffie calls an “agonistic inamic unity.” We saw that Tianguistengan children, in their discussion of death, acknowledged its necessary connection to life by referencing the ways in which death depend on the living in the form of foodstuffs, song and dance. Second, the children said that when we die, we become *muertos*—the embodied, living dead. As explored previously, in Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death (and life) the figure of a *muerto*, also understood in terms of a “becoming,” figures prominently. Third, recall that the children talked about how the *muertos* we dancing—*vienen bailando*—as they emerged from their graves, and that the children physically danced as they described this. This seems to echo Maffie’s claim that Teotl is an artist, and the cosmos an energy-infused, artistic creation. What better way to acknowledge the cosmos-as-art than through dance and song?

In sum, in this section I have explored the following. First, I surveyed how Tianguistengan children in a Philosophy for Children classroom posited an understanding of death as *becoming-a-muerto*. Second, in an effort to flesh out this claim, I identified several possible connections between this theory of death, and Aztec/Nahuatl philosophical ideals that have long influenced many aspects of social life in Tianguistengo. This is not to say, however, that the children were simply parroting philosophical ideas of the adult world. In the next section, I argue that we should approach their philosophical claims as Tianguistengan *children’s philosophy*, and adjust our philosophical pedagogy accordingly.

IV. Tianguistengan Children’s Philosophy of Death

As mentioned in the introduction, a great deal of scholarship in the field of Philosophy for Children has focused on the question of whether children are capable of doing philosophy in the face of widespread societal beliefs that they cannot. The philosopher Gareth Matthews has compellingly argued that they can, stating that:

...Many young children naturally raise questions, make comments, and even engage in reasoning that professional philosophers can recognize as philosophical. Not only do they do philosophy naturally, they do it with a freshness of perspective and a sensitivity to puzzlement and conceptual
mismatch that are hard for adults to achieve. The adult must cultivate the
naiveté that is required for doing philosophy well; for the child such
naiveté is entirely natural (Matthews 1992: 122)

Though I am in full agreement with Matthews—if not, I would not be a
practitioner of pre-college philosophy—I want to take the notion of children-as-
philosophers a bit further. Rather than arguing that children are capable of doing
philosophy (which they are), I shall argue, based upon the preceding reflections,
that both children and adults should explore children’s philosophical
contributions in pre-college philosophy classrooms as “children’s philosophy.” I
make this argument by listing several unique features of Tianguistengan children’s
philosophy of death, which serves as an example of a children’s philosophy that
ought to be given series consideration as a set of philosophical ideas, and not merely
as evidence of children’s philosophical precociousness.

Interestingly, though Matthews briefly addresses the question of whether
“children’s philosophy” may exist as part of a broader project on the philosophy of
childhood, he more rigorously pursues the questions of what “children’s art” is and
how we should appreciate it. Still, I believe that his reflections on children’s art can
help us to engage Tianguistengan children’s remarks on death as children’s
philosophy. In his discussion, Matthews narrates a failed attempt to convince a
Boston art museum curator to host an exhibit on children’s art. The curator was
amused by the idea but said that he would only feature “first-rate” art in his
museum. The implication, of course, was that children’s art cannot be first-rate art,
and it therefore cannot be featured in a serious art museum.

Mathews admits that it would be hard for a curator to characterize children’s
art in terms of a particular stylistic “period,” which is often how curators organize
their exhibits. Furthermore, he recognizes that children’s art is perhaps more
stylistically immature. However, he suggests that Andy Warhol’s collection of soup
cans hardly counts as “mature” art, and yet it has been featured in “first-rate
museums,” raising questions about whether artistic “maturity” should be an
operative principle in making decisions about what art to feature in museums.

Contra the Boston curator’s skepticism, Matthews argues that there should,
indeed, be a place for children’s art in museums. He says that children’s art should
be appreciated for the same reasons that we appreciate children’s philosophy—for
in both cases, such children’s work “exhibits a freshness, an urgency, and a
naturalness ... that asks to be celebrated for itself.” While he explicitly proposes
that children’s art be featured in museums, he does not provide such specific
recommendations for how we ought to appreciate children’s philosophy. Though it is beyond the burden of this paper to provide a complete account of how children’s philosophy ought to be appreciated, I will now outline below several unique features of Tianguistengan children’s philosophies of death that emerged in a Philosophy of Children class. I aim to show two things: (1) that Tianguistengan children have a philosophy of death; and (2) that children’s philosophy can be appreciated, at least in part, through serious analysis of the philosophical claims that children make in pre-college philosophy class.

Note, first, that instead of regarding these philosophical ideas as “immature” because they were not presented in the same way that adults present their philosophical ideas—i.e., in papers and books, during seminars, and during fancy dinners following departmental colloquia—we should regard them as both different in their presentation and deeply philosophical. Children, particularly very young children like those with whom I worked in Tianguistengo, are unlikely to write lengthy academic articles to be sent out for peer review or give invited presentations at colloquia. Furthermore, their participation in pre-college philosophy classes is very different from that of philosophy students in graduate seminars. Philosophy for Children classes are often extremely energetic, and feature young people jumping, dancing, running around, crying, hiding their faces under their sweaters to avoid getting called on, and, all the while, philosophizing.

To avoid adult-centric biases, we should take seriously all of their verbal and physical contributions to their philosophy classes, rather than dismiss them simply because they do not resemble those of adults.

With this in mind, let us now consider several important features of Tianguistengan children’s philosophy of death, which I previously contextualized in terms of Aztec/Nahuatl philosophical ideas. *First,* I have explored the children’s emphasis, in our philosophical discussion, on “becoming a muerto.” I’ve attempted to explain this emphasis in terms of Aztec/Nahuatl understandings of death, which involve not only people becoming muertos, but muertos becoming different kinds of beings on their journeys to, and within, various dwelling-places. While contextualizing the children’s claims about “becoming a muerto” can enable us to understand and appreciate them better, I submit that there is something especially fascinating and child-like about emphasizing what we become when we die. While leading accounts of Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death emphasize where the dead go and why, Tianguistengan children emphasized personal growth and physical transition as part of this process.
This makes sense, as children are themselves in a state of near-constant growth, change, and physical transition. Children tend to eagerly anticipate their birthdays and the rights, responsibilities and capabilities that come with each passing year. They are aware that they are on their way to becoming semi-distinct beings called adults, whose bodies, brains, and lives are different from those of kids. Thus, from the perspective of Tianguistengan children philosophizing about death during the season of Xantolo, it is understandable that becoming a muerto would emerge as the salient, frightening, and exciting feature for philosophical analysis. We saw, furthermore, that in our conversation the children were not primarily interested in where muertos eventually rest. They were curious about the bodies of the muertos, and what they can do, and how they exist in relations to others. In Matthews’s words, seems to exemplify a freshness of perspective that is often hard for adults to achieve, even if the children’s claims developed within an adult-dominant philosophical context.

In approaching and assessing Tianguistengan children’s philosophies of death, adults would do well do carefully consider death as a kind of becoming. What if we viewed death not in terms of the end of something—or in terms of the final destination of a disembodied soul—but rather, as an act of becoming a metaphysically distinct kind of being? This would inspire additional questions such as: what being would that be? What would our bodies look like, and what would our powers be? How would others treat us in our new state? I propose that to think productively with Tianguistengan children on this point, adults should try to remember what it is like to be a child looking forward to their next birthday, or to their adolescence or adulthood. From such a perspective, is becoming a muerto more or less exciting and frightening than becoming an adult? And what can this teach us about both death and life?

A second notable feature of Tianguistengan children’s philosophy of death is that is significantly less speciesist than many other, human-centered accounts. Recall that that when asked whether they knew someone who died, the children immediately discussed, at length, the deaths of animals that were dear to them, and did so prior to discussing human deaths. Indeed, most of our conversation on this topic focused on one child’s aunt’s poisoned cat, and another child’s family’s deceased cow. This appears to coincide with empirical evidence demonstrating that children are generally less speciesist than adults (See Wilks et al 2021 and McGuire et al 2022). It is also understandable in the context of Xantolo/Día de los Muertos, in which a special day—usually October 27th—is reserved for constructed an altar for one’s deceased pets. In Catholicism, October 4th is devoted to the
blessing of pets as part of the Feast of St. Francis de Assisi, the patron saint of animals. Furthermore, we have seen that in Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death, a dog accompanies the dead on their journeys through Mictlán.

Thinking with Tianguistengan children’s philosophy, then, we might take inspiration from their emphasis on, and concern for, the deaths of non-human animals. What if we considered the existential and moral challenges of death, first and foremost, in relation to the deaths of non-human animals? From an ethical perspective, there are good reasons to shift our emphasis in this way—after all, humans make up a mere 0.1 percent of all life on Earth (but have “destroyed” 83 percent of all wild mammals) (Carrington 2018). Perhaps, then, a philosophical focus on non-human deaths, exemplified by Tianguistengan children, would better enable us to connect our existential qualms about death to major ethical and political challenges articulated within the fields of environmental and animal ethics.

I submit that is also opens the door to philosophical reflection on death that does not automatically “center” the notion of a human soul whose afterlife journey depends on whether one was “good” or “bad” during one’s life—and in so doing, it generates space for non-Western perspectives on death. What does a non-human animal soul look like, and sound like? (See also Chao et al 2022). Can a non-human animal become a (material) muerto? How should humans and non-humans mourn the lost animals? And, finally, what can this teach us about human deaths?

A third and final element of Tianguistengan children’s philosophies of death that I shall highlight here is their tacit acknowledgement of the silliness of death. Recall that in the very same conversations in which we explored sad elements of death—a child literally cried about her aunt’s poisoned cat, and a boy mourned his family’s deceased cow—the children danced, sang, laughed, and jumped about muertos dancing their way out of their graves (vienen bailando). It is scary, and also rather fun, to imagine muertos emerging from their graves—not because they want to frighten us, as the aforementioned song goes, but because they want to dance. We might describe this as a form of philosophical play, in which death, and becoming a muerto, is pondered through the unstructured performance of roles that was supported by Tianguistengan teachers preparing for the annual Xantolo school performance in the town center (for further discussion on children’s philosophical play, see Stanley and Lyle 2016)

This can also be contextualized in terms of Day of the Dead celebrations throughout Mexico, in which Mexicans are known to “laugh at death,” and “play with death” (certain Halloween traditions—which are often eschewed by
Tianguistengan adults despite, and because of, their growing popularity in Mexico—also involve a sort of playing with death. Tianguistengan children perhaps take this one step further, by literally dancing and singing about death in the context of a philosophical conversation that also involved tears and mourning. Their philosophical approach to death is just as silly as it is profound, and for the children in question, there is not contradiction here.

Thinking with Tianguistengan children about death, we might pursue some taboo questions. Is there anything funny, and/or fun, about the idea of death? How might the living play at being muertos? What is more serious, life or death? Should we fear muertos, or, as the song goes, should we acknowledge that they really just want to dance? It also raises questions about whether ancient philosophical traditions may have had humoristic understandings of death that may be lost on contemporary readers. Thus, with humor and silliness in mind, we might revisit philosophies of death with which we feel familiar to see what we might learn (Did Socrates think death was funny? Did Nezahuacóyotl?).

I hope to have shown, in this section and throughout this paper, that Tianguistengan children have a unique philosophy of death from which both adults and children can learn a great deal if they consider it with care. Not only are the children in question capable of doing philosophy, as Philosophy for Children practitioners have long maintained, but they have a philosophy for others to analyze and study. Tianguistengan children’s philosophies of death stipulate that when we die, we become muertos—a frightening, exciting metaphysical transition that may even be a type of personal growth. Such death is also silly, and funny, and it is not limited to humans. Tianguistengan children’s philosophy can be helpfully contextualized by considering possible connections to Aztec/Nahuatl philosophies of death that are influential in the region, but the children do more than simply parrot the philosophical views of adults. Children, qua children, have a unique philosophical perspective that can be at least partially grasped by adults through Philosophy for Children pedagogy—though problems of interpretation stemming from social hierarchies and other epistemic difficulties will also render adult interpretations (such as this one) contested and incomplete.

I also hope to have contributed, in this paper, to Mexican philosophy by analyzing and foregrounding Tianguistengan children’s unique philosophical views on death, thus adding to collective understanding of Mexican philosophical approaches to life’s most important questions. Furthermore, I hope to contribute to Philosophy for Children scholarship by arguing that children not only do, but also have, philosophy. On a pedagogical level, we can adjust our pre-college
philosophy “teaching” by recognizing that a children’s philosophy may emerge in the Philosophy for Children classroom, and anticipating and celebrating this in our lesson plans. Following Emmerman’s aforementioned call for a “middle ground” approach to pre-college philosophical pedagogy, I believe that we can study children’s philosophy not only by allowing children to select philosophical questions, but also, by carefully attending to the way in which they answer—or choose not to answer—the philosophical questions that adults pose.

Most importantly, while I certainly cannot claim to successfully represent the views of all Tianguistengan children—or even those in my class—I hope to have shown that children’s perspectives on life’s most important questions ought to be taken far more seriously. Children are not simply capable of showing off their philosophical skills to grownups; they actually have important things to teach us, and they can help us transform our world for the better. As I have explored in this paper, Tianguistengan children’s views on death are potentially transformative on existential, aesthetic and political levels, and if adults ignore them, it is also our loss.5

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TWO MODELS OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC MULTICULTURALISM: BENHABIB AND VILLORO

SERGIO GALLEGOS ORDORICA

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I contrast two different models of deliberative democratic multiculturalism: one defended by Seyla Benhabib in *The Claims of Culture* (2002) and one proposed by Luis Villoro in *Estado Plural, Pluralidad de Culturas* (1998) and *Los Retos de la Sociedad por venir* (2007). Specifically, I contend that, despite the presence of similarities, both models exhibit important differences since Benhabib views the relations that obtain between different agents in a democratic multicultural society through an adversarial lens while Villoro views these relations through an educative and collaborative lens. I show that this difference can be traced back to different understandings that Benhabib and Villoro have of the notions of culture, identity and deliberation. Finally, I argue that Villoro’s model is better than Benhabib’s because Benhabib’s model entails a progressive erosion of the trust required for the very institutions that mediate democratic deliberation in multicultural societies.

Keywords: Deliberation, Democracy, Multiculturalism, Seyla Benhabib, Luis Villoro

RESUMEN: En este artículo presento y contrasto dos modelos distintos de multiculturalismo democrático deliberativo: uno que es articulado y defendido por Seyla Benhabib en *Las Reivindicaciones de la Cultura* (2002) y el otro que es propuesto por Luis Villoro en *Estado Plural, Pluralidad de Culturas* (1998) y *Los Retos de la Sociedad por venir* (2007). De manera específica, arguyo que, a pesar de algunas semejanzas, ambos modelos exhiben diferencias importantes puesto que Benhabib percibe las relaciones que hay entre los distintos agentes en una sociedad multicultural democrática a través de un lente antagonista mientras que Villoro percibe estas relaciones a través de un lente educativo y colaborativo. Muestro que esta diferencia puede ser rastreada a las distintas maneras que Benhabib y Villoro tienen de entender las nociones de cultura, identidad y deliberación. Finalmente, sostengo que el modelo de Villoro es mejor que el de Benhabib en tanto que los supuestos mismos sobre los que descansa el modelo de Benhabib implican una erosión progresiva de la confianza requerida en las instituciones que, según la propia Benhabib, median la deliberación democrática en las sociedades multiculturales.

Palabras clave: Deliberación, Democracia, Multiculturalismo, Seyla Behabib, Luis Villoro

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1. Introduction

Since the publication of Charles Taylor’s “The Politics of Recognition” (1992), philosophers have debated how contemporary democratic societies should proceed to accommodate the existence of minority groups that struggle to be recognized. While various philosophers in the 1990s and onward have subscribed to the idea that democratic societies should embrace multiculturalism, which can be understood broadly in terms of “an ideal in which members of minority groups can maintain their distinctive collective identities and practices” (Song 2020), there have been disagreements on how this ideal can be realized. For instance, while some theorists such as Chandran Kukathas (1992) have argued for the need to tolerate the existence of distinctive minority identities and the cultural practices associated to them in democratic societies, others such as William Kymlicka (1995) have claimed that mere toleration is insufficient and that, for minority groups to be able to thrive on an equal footing along with the dominant majority instead of merely surviving, it is important to offer them “group-differentiated rights” or positive accommodations.

In addition to engaging in discussions regarding how to implement the ideal of respect to cultural differences, political philosophers have also debated which specific models of deliberation democratic societies should implement to achieve the abovementioned aspiration of multiculturalism. Specifically, while some such as Seyla Benhabib (2002) have put forth a “dual-track” model of democratic deliberation (inspired by Habermas), others like Villoro (2007, 2012) have adopted a different model of deliberation (inspired by Aristotle) that emphasizes the importance of group consensus and of understanding the positions of others. In light of the existence of these models of democratic multiculturalism, a few questions arise. For instance, what are the shared assumptions that Benhabib and Villoro accept about the notions of culture, identity, and deliberation that are employed in their models, and what are the differences between them? What are the main features that distinguish Benhabib’s model from Villoro’s? What are the reasons that account for the differences between both models? Are both models equally good for creating and maintaining multicultural democratic societies and, if that is not the case, which model is better and why?

My goal in this paper is to tackle these questions and to provide some tentative answers. I proceed in the following way. In section 2, I provide a brief account of Benhabib’s and Villoro’s notions of culture, identity, and deliberation. Specifically, I show that, while Benhabib and Villoro agree in general about these three notions, they have also slightly different views regarding them, which are reflected on the structure of the models of democratic multiculturalism that they respectively present. In section 3, after distinguishing in some detail the two models proposed by Benhabib and Villoro, I argue that one of the central differences between them is
that, while Benhabib’s model is far more agonistic in virtue of her conception of deliberation, Villoro’s model is, in contrast, centered on the importance of consensus building through the active understanding of other people’s positions. Having distinguished these two models, I move in section 4 to offer a tentative account of why both models differ in these respects and I argue that the main reason is that Benhabib conceives democratic deliberation in a multicultural setting as a process that is primarily mediated by certain political and social institutions such as legislatures, courts and political parties whereas Villoro’s model of democratic deliberation in multicultural setting rejects these institutions -in particular, political parties- and emphasizes the ideal of a direct communitarian democracy. Subsequently, in section 5, I contend that Villoro’s model is better than Benhabib’s model given that Benhabib’s model involves, because of the assumptions that she makes, a progressive erosion of the trust required by the very social and political institutions that mediate democratic deliberation, while Villoro’s model allows a better handling of the internal tensions that exist in multicultural democratic societies. Finally, in section 6, I conclude by some offering certain remarks that point to a couple of lines for future inquiry.

2. Culture, identity and deliberation for Benhabib and Villoro
To understand the models of democratic multiculturalism proposed by Benhabib and Villoro, it is important to be clear about how they view certain central notions, especially culture, identity and deliberation. Though Benhabib (2002: 189n4) remarks that the notion of culture is notoriously difficult to define, she offers a rough approximation when she writes that “what we call ‘culture’ is the horizon formed by these evaluative stances, through which the infinite chain of space-time sequences is demarcated into ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘holy’ and ‘profane’ and ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ Cultures are formed through binaries because human beings live in an evaluative universe” (2002: 7). Villoro, in partial contrast to Benhabib, offers the following characterization of the notion of culture: “a culture is continuity: the weight of past events in the present, tradition. But it is also a project: the choice of ends and values that give sense to collective action. This involves the adhesion to shared collective ends” (2012: 15). As we can appreciate, there are various common elements in the two characterizations of culture: both emphasize the key importance of certain values (or evaluative stances) which ground cultures and shape what Benhabib refers to as an “horizon” and Villoro dubs a “project” and both stress as well that cultures are continuous through time given that Benhabib talks about them in terms of “infinite chain(s) of space-time sequences” and Villoro in terms of “continuity.” But one difference that emerges between those characterizations is that, while Benhabib highlights the role of binaries in the creation of the evaluative stances that form cultures (binaries that are very often deployed in exclusionary ways to create
boundaries between insiders and outsiders), Villoro underscores the unifying character of shared collective ends in the creation and maintenance of cultures.

With respect to identity, Benhabib notices that it has often been taken a synonym for culture given that it functions primarily as a “marker and differentiator” (1992: 1). Thus, for Benhabib, identity appears to be the characteristic or the set of characteristics that marks an individual (or a group, in the case of group identity) as different from other individuals (or from other groups). For Benhabib, human identities are typically constituted through webs of interlocution, which is a view that she adopts from Charles Taylor (1989). Because of this, she embraces a conception of group identity where the focus is “less on what the group is but more on what the political leaders of such groups demand in the political sphere” (2002: 18). For Villoro, the concept of identity is polysemous, so he distinguishes different meanings of it. In one sense, as he puts it, “the ‘identity’ of an object is constituted by the features that singularize it from other objects and that remain in it as long as it is the same object” (2012: 73). In a second sense, which applies to individual human beings and groups, for Villoro “identity’ refers to a representation that the subject has. It means, for now, that which the subject self-identifies with” (2012: 74). When this second meaning is applied to groups, Villoro points out that the identity of a group consists in “an inter-subjective representation, shared by a majority of the members of a same people, that would constitute a collective ‘self’” (2012: 76). And he further adds that “it is constituted by a system of beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that are communicated to every member of the group through its membership in it” (ibid.). As we can see, just as in the case of the notion of culture, there are shared elements in how Benhabib and Villoro view the notion of identity. For both, identity (and, more specifically, the identity of a group) works as a feature (or set of features) that differentiates a group from others, and it is constituted in relation to other people via webs of interlocution or communication. What sets their views slightly apart is that, while Benhabib emphasizes the fact that identity is constituted via the demands of a group in the political sphere, Villoro stresses instead that identity is constituted by “a representation where every member of this [people] can recognize himself and which integrates the multiplicity of contraposed images” (2012: 77). Consequently, while Benhabib underscores the role of identity as a tool of revindication, Villoro highlights the role of identity as a tool for integration.

Finally, consider the notion of deliberation. In an article prior to *The Claims of Culture*, Benhabib characterizes deliberation as a “procedure to be informed” (1996: 71) and maintains further that, within the deliberative model of democracy, deliberation “proceeds not only from a conflict of values but also from a conflict of

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1 On this issue, Benhabib (2002: 7) notes: “To possess the culture means to be an insider. Not to be acculturated in the appropriate way is to be an outsider.”
interests in social life” (1996: 73). In contrast, Villoro characterizes deliberation somewhat differently. For him, deliberation is tantamount to argumentation to the extent that he writes: “after ‘arguing’ (or ‘deliberating’ as Aristotle said) to justify the value of an action or of a final state of affairs, the desire to realize it arises” (2007: 34-35). Subsequently, he further characterizes deliberation as the source or the origin of moral behavior to the extent that he maintains that “moral behavior implies the deliberation between opposed reasons” (2007: 214). In virtue of this, we can realize that there are certain similarities between Benhabib and Villoro’s views on deliberation. Indeed, both seem to agree on the fact that deliberation is a communicative process where different reasons are presented and weighed, either in conversation with ourselves or with other people. However, there is a significant difference: while Benhabib characterizes the communicative process of deliberation as occurring within a context that is driven by a “conflict of interests in social life,” Villoro characterizes this communicative process as based merely upon “the contraposition of reasons adduced by different subjects, within a given communication context” (2007: 218). This contraposition of reasons is presented in Villoro’s model not in adversarial terms, but as an edifying process that, in Villoro’s words, “would open for each one the possibility to see oneself and society through the eyes of others and to identify partially one’s position with that of others” (2007: 184).

Considering this evidence, we can ascertain that, while Benhabib views the notions of culture, identity and deliberation in adversarial terms, since they are characterized by appealing to certain evaluative stances structured by binaries or to a conflict of interests in social life, Villoro view these notions in more conciliatory terms to the extent that they are characterized in terms of adhesion to collective ends or to a mere contraposition of reasons. Because of this, these three notions yield, in the case of Benhabib, a model that is more centered around the role of disputes or clashes. In contrast, in the case of Villoro, the notions produce a model that is more centered around the role of adhesion or integration. To appreciate this difference, let me consider in more detail the models in the next section.

3. Distinguishing Benhabib’s Model of Multiculturalism from Villoro’s
My goal in this section is to present in some detail the two models of democratic multiculturalism of Benhabib and Villoro to highlight their similarities, but also their differences. In terms of their similarities, both Benhabib and Villoro articulate models that make certain assumptions about the necessary conditions to engage in dialogue. In the case of Benhabib, the core assumption, which derives from the discourse ethics articulated by Habermas (1990), consists in the fact that “moral and political dialogues begin with the presumption of respect, equality and reciprocity between the participants” (2002: 11). For Villoro, the core assumption is that there
are certain minimal values or conditions that must be presupposed to be able to engage in dialogue, which “include the respect to the life, the autonomy of agents and to their equality in relation to their negotiation position” (2012: 178).

Based on these assumptions, both Benhabib and Villoro articulate models in which the relationships between the different elements of a multicultural society are shaped through discourses via the articulation and the negotiation of norms of action and interaction. On this subject, Benhabib is explicit since she openly subscribes to “the view of discourses as deliberative practices that center not only on norms of action and interaction, but also on negotiating situationally shared understandings across multicultural divides” (2002: 16). Villoro maintains a similar position, holding that it is through discourses that we can establish some basic conditions which enable us, within every culture, “to measure whether its beliefs are adequate to fulfill its functions. They accordingly provide a common basis to debate between different cultures” (2012: 171). But one important difference is that, while Benhabib considers the process of discourse through an adversarial lens where the participants are viewed as antagonists or disputants, Villoro views the process of discourse through an integrationist lens in which the participants are viewed as conversational partners.

As a result, the models that Benhabib and Villoro propose are distinct in the sense that they propose rather different internal dynamics performing distinct regulative roles within democratic multicultural societies. To be specific, Benhabib’s model, which she characterizes as a “dual-track” model, is characterized in my view by having an intrinsic agonistic dimension where the participants are considered as clashing with each other as the following passage reveals:

The deliberative democratic model is a two-track one: it accepts both legal regulation and intervention through direct and indirect methods in multicultural disputes, and it views normative dialogue and contestation in the civil public sphere as essential for a multicultural democratic polity. There is no presumption that moral and political dialogues will produce a normative consensus, yet it is assumed that even when they fail to do so and we must resort to law to redraw the boundaries of coexistence, societies in which such multicultural dialogues take place in the public sphere will articulate a civic point of view and a civic perspective of ‘enlarged mentality’. (Benhabib, 2002: 115. My emphasis)

As we can see, the agonistic dynamic is, for Benhabib, a key component not only in the characterization of the differences that arise in multicultural settings, which she describes in terms of disputes, but also in the characterization of the ways to assuage these differences given that she holds that dialogue and contestation are key
for a multicultural democratic polity. Moreover, the agonistic facet of her “dual-track” model is further highlighted by the fact that she clearly acknowledges that, within the model, there is no presumption that moral and political dialogues will produce a normative consensus. Thus, though social consensus remains a possibility for Benhabib, its eventual achievement does not eliminate contestation, which, as much as dialogue itself, is a central element of a multicultural democratic society.

Now, in clear contrast to Benhabib’s position, the model of democratic multiculturalism propounded by Villoro underscores the importance of concurrence or consensus as the central discursive process of a multicultural democratic society, rather than dispute or contestation, by focusing on the decision-making practices of Indigenous communities in Mexico:

The organization of autonomy [in a multicultural democratic polity] would acknowledge the political rights of peoples, limited to the communal or regional territory of their corresponding autonomy. In many Indigenous communities, decisions are taken by consensus. (2012: 125)

It is important to stress what Villoro says here does not entail that agonistic or conflictual circumstances do not occur within democratic multicultural societies. He does acknowledge the real possibility of conflict cases and, to address them, he advocates for the existence of a legal regime that establishes when conflicts exist and appoints judicial authorities that solve them when he writes: “However, regardless of how circumscribed distinct jurisdictions might be, there may always be cases of conflict. There must be, then, a law for disputes, with judicial authorities that determine when conflicts exist and how to settle them” (2012: 125). But, in clear contrast with the emphasis on dispute or contestation that we find in Benhabib’s model, Villoro stresses that the core element of a democratic multicultural society should be equity, which he characterizes in terms of “equality of opportunities and consensus between all the communities and all the individuals that compose the nation” (2012: 184). Because of this, we can clearly see that the model of democratic multiculturalism that Villoro presents is more consensus-oriented than the one articulated by Benhabib. Having presented the main difference between the two models, I turn in the next section to examine the source of their difference.

4. The Differences between both Models of Democratic Multiculturalism
As I argued in the previous section, the main difference between Benhabib’s “dual-track” model of Benhabib and the one presented by Villoro is that, while Benhabib’s model appears to have a very prominent agonistic dimension where participants are characterized as being antagonists, Villoro’s model is much more consensus-oriented, with participants being viewed as partners. Given this key difference, a
question that naturally arises is the following: why are the models distinct in this regard? In this section, I want to provide a tentative answer to this question based on the previous sections. To be specific, my contention is that Benhabib’s “dual-track” model has this agonistic dimension because of how Benhabib views culture, identity, and deliberation. Indeed, given that Benhabib views group identity in terms of the demands made by the leaders of distinct groups within the public sphere and deliberation as a discursive process that is driven by a conflict of values and interests in social life, it is unsurprising that she views discourses as being mediated primarily (though not exclusively) by certain formal political and social actors and institutions such as political parties, unions, legislatures, and courts. To see the importance that these formal institutions have in Benhabib’s “dual-track” model to generate the agonistic dimension that she underscores, consider the following passage:

Very often, it is social movements that, through their oppositional activities on behalf of women and gay people, the disabled and the abused, expand the meaning of equal rights and render what seemed merely private concerns matters of collective concern. The deliberative democratic approach focuses on this vital interaction between the formal institutions of liberal democracies like the legislatures, the courts and the bureaucracy, and the unofficial processes of civil society as articulated through the media and social movements and associations. (Benhabib 2002: 121. My emphasis)

It is clear that the agonistic dimension of the multicultural democratic model that Benhabib proposes is based on the interaction between the formal institutions (i.e., political parties, unions, courts, legislatures, etc.) and the informal movements or processes in society. In contrast, the model of deliberative democratic multiculturalism that Villoro proposes, which is centered around convergence of opinions and consensus-building, rejects the involvement of these formal institutions given that they are perceived as hindrances or obstacles to the functioning of a multicultural democratic society. Specifically, considering that identity is a representation where every member of a group can recognize himself and that deliberation is a communicative process through which one intends not merely to articulate and weigh one’s own reasons but also to understand and assess the reasons of others according to Villoro, any institutions that are perceived as distorting that representation or as blocking or altering one’s access to the reasons of others are rejected. This is why, as Villoro remarks, indigenous communities “consider that the involvement of political parties breaks the unity of the group and prevents agreement” (1998: 125). Moreover, the rejection of political parties and of other formal institutions such as unions, courts and legislatures in Villoro’s model is also due to the fact he subscribes to the ideal of a direct communal democracy, as
opposed to indirect or representative democracies, which are prone to devolve into factionalism or partisan politics.²

The impulse to sideline these formal institutions within the model Villoro proposes also arises from his study and engagement with Mexican politics. Indeed, throughout the history of Mexican politics in the 20th century, membership into state-controlled agrarian leagues or unions (e.g., the Confederación Nacional Campesina or the Confederación de Trabajadores de México) was often used as an instrument to co-opt Indigenous votes and maintain political control in exchange for state patronage. Because of this, the model of democratic multiculturalism that Villoro proposes differs from Benhabib’s in virtue of the fact that it eschews the various formal institutions such as political parties, courts, unions, and legislatures that Benhabib emphasizes. And it precisely eschews these various formal institutions because Villoro understands the notions of culture, identity and deliberation in a way that is quite different from Benhabib’s. Indeed, considering that Villoro views culture as a project that integrates various individuals who share some collective ends and that he considers deliberation as a process that aims to open the possibility to identify our positions partially with those of others by inviting us to see through their eyes, it is clear that the presence of the abovementioned formal institutions in his model could potentially interfere with or distort the goals of culture and deliberation in a democratic multicultural society by introducing an adversarial or antagonistic framework. After offering an account of how and why the two models of democratic multiculturalism differ in this section, I turn in the following section to argue that Villoro’s model is better than Benhabib’s to the extent that the assumptions that Benhabib makes entail the progressive erosion of the formal institutions that her model relies upon.

5. The Superiority of Villoro’s Model of Democratic Multiculturalism

I have argued in the prior sections that the models of democratic multiculturalism articulated by Benhabib and Villoro are not only different in some of their key features (specifically, Benhabib views the relations holding between the many components of the society through an adversarial lens whereas Villoro views them through a collaborative lens), but also that this difference can be explained by the fact that Benhabib and Villoro have different understandings of the notions of culture, identity and deliberation. Because of this, Benhabib’s model appeals to formal institutions such as political parties, legislatures, courts, and unions, in contrast to Villoro’s. What I wish to argue now is that, because of this, Villoro’s model is better than Benhabib’s since the assumptions upon which Benhabib’s

² Villoro (2012: 125-126): “Aunque estas prácticas estén a menudo corrompidas por intereses particulares y den lugar a cacicazgos, se mantiene el ideal de una democracia comunitaria directa.”
model rests entail a progressive erosion of the trust needed to maintain the very institutions that, according to her, mediate democratic deliberation in multicultural societies.

To appreciate this, it is first important to observe that, given Benhabib’s view according to which deliberation is driven by a conflict of values and interests between different actors, it is not surprising that she views multicultural societies as being structured by internal conflict and tensions. In fact, when she examines the nation-building process that shaped modern European states, she points out that these European nation-states were historically developed with an internal tension or struggle at their core:

There is a constitutive dilemma in the attempt of modern nation-states to justify the legitimacy through recourse to universality moral principles of human rights, which then get particularistically circumscribed. The tension between the universalistic scope of the principles that legitimize the social contract of the modern nation and the claim of this nation to define itself as a closed community plays out itself in the history of reforms and revolutions of the last two centuries. (Benhabib, 2002: 176)

Because of this internal tension or struggle, European nation-states have created liberal democracies that attempt to resolve this struggle by proclaiming the central role of individual liberty and moral equality vis-à-vis the law as universal principles while also promoting the creation of the formal institutions mentioned by Benhabib (i.e., political parties, legislatures, courts and unions) as vehicles for individuals to organize into groups and to make demands in the public sphere. This is because, as Benhabib herself acknowledges, “these very proclamations, articulated in the name of universal truth of nature, reason, or God, also define and delimit boundaries, create exclusions within the sovereign people as well as without” (2002: 175). Thus, part of the role of these formal institutions is to allow the contestation of boundaries and the rectification of exclusions.

But, given the adversarial lens that that Benhabib deploys in the elaboration of her model of democratic multiculturalism, the interplay between these different formal institutions very often leads to a progressive erosion of trust within a multicultural society of individuals vis-à-vis each other and of individuals vis-à-vis these formal institutions. Indeed, as several authors have pointed out, when other people around you are perceived as enemies or adversaries, trust in them tends to erode over time.\(^3\) And, as it also has been argued, trust in other people is paramount

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\(^3\) For an excellent discussion of how within contemporary democratic assemblies the perception of others as adversaries or enemies erodes trust in them, see Mansbridge (1980).
for a democracy to function.\(^4\) Thus, in a model where others are perceived as adversaries or antagonists rather than as conversational partners, maintaining the levels of trust necessary for democracy to work over long periods of time is quite difficult, which is why Benhabib’s model is more problematic.

In contrast, Villoro’s model of democratic multiculturalism is based upon a consensus-building dynamic, seeking to understand and partially identify with other people. Thus, his model is not marked by the struggle that Benhabib stresses at the core of modern European nation-states, but rather by the efforts of communities (in Latin America and Africa) to maintain and preserve their communal structures. This explains, according to Villoro, why attempts to create liberal democracies that are based on European nation states in Africa or Latin America have usually foundered:

> Liberal democracy [in Africa or Latin America] has not been able to function, not only by the lack of interest of the population, but also because it establishes the competition and division wherein traditionally unity and collaboration in communal life have prevailed. (Villoro 2007: 120)

Thus, we can conclude that the “dual-track” model of democratic multiculturalism that Benhabib proposes is more problematic than that of Villoro given that her model involves, given the assumptions that she makes regarding about the adversarial relations between people and various formal institutions, a progressive erosion of the trust that is required for democracy to work.

6. Conclusion
I have argued that the models of democratic multiculturalism developed by Benhabib and Villoro are different in terms of their core characteristics, and I have offered an account of their differences in terms of how Benhabib and Villoro view culture, identity, and deliberation. I have also argued that Villoro’s model is superior to Benhabib’s to the extent that the assumptions she makes ultimately undermine the trust required by democracy to work. If what I have argued is correct, at least two lines of inquiry emerge: (i) should we dispense Benhabib’s model given its shortcomings, or are there elements of it that we can integrate into Villoro’s model and (ii) are the current challenges to traditional nation-states (e.g., Spain, Canada and the UK) by separatist movements in Catalonia, Scotland and Quebec further evidence that Villoro’s model is better? I intend to address these questions in future work.\(^5\)

\(^4\) For a discussion of this point, see Inglehart (1999) and Warren (1999).

\(^5\) A version of this paper was presented in November 2022 at the conference celebrating the 100\(^{th}\) anniversary of the birth of Luis Villoro at the Insituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas in Mexico City.
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ROSARIO CASTELLANOS AT PHILOSOPHY’S DOORSTEP

FANNY DEL RÍO

ABSTRACT: Rosario Castellanos is known as a literary author (not a philosopher), even though she studied philosophy and worked closely with el grupo Hiperión (the Hyperion Group), an important school of philosophy in mid-twentieth-century Mexico. In this essay I claim that her work—as often happens with female philosophers—has unjustly been kept out of the philosophical canon, largely because of gender bias. I argue further that we ought to approach her literary contributions as valuable albeit untraditional sources of philosophical thought. To make my case, I offer a reading of Castellanos’s autobiographical novel Rito de Iniciación.

Keywords: Gender bias, el grupo Hiperión, canonical philosophy.

RESUMEN: Conocida como una autora literaria (no filosófica), Rosario Castellanos estudió filosofía y trabajó en cercanía al grupo Hiperión, una importante corriente del pensamiento filosófico de mediados del siglo XX en México. En este ensayo sostengo que la obra de Castellanos, como la de muchas mujeres en la filosofía, ha sido injustamente dejada al margen del canon filosófico, en gran medida por un sesgo de género. Sostengo que debemos aproximarnos a su obra literaria como una fuente valiosa pero no tradicional de pensamiento filosófico, lo que ejemplifico con mi lectura de su novela autobiográfica Rito de iniciación.

Palabras clave: Sesgo de género, el grupo hiperión, filosófica canónica.

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Despite her many books and essays that examine the role of women in Mexican society and the unjust appropriation of men in all fields of culture, Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974) was left out of the academic philosophical canon and the philosophical conversation of her time, even by her close male friends, something she referred to as feeling en el umbral (“at the doorstep”) of philosophy, of culture, of life. Not much has changed since. In this essay, I contend that Castellanos is a significant figure in Mexican philosophy, and that her contribution was not given due consideration during her time—not even by the philosophical movement that became known as la
filosofía de lo mexicano (“Philosophy of Mexicanness”)—mainly because of the gender prejudice that she and the women of her generation were subjected to, and because of an equally biased notion that what counted as “real” philosophy was academic, white, and male.

What I defend in this essay is that Rosario Castellanos was unjustly excluded from professional philosophy, and particularly from the Hyperion Group (el Grupo Hiperión), even though she was philosophizing about many of the same themes. I will examine the ideas and philosophical climate in which Castellanos wrote her novel Rito de iniciación (Rite of Passage 1964), which I claim ought to be considered a portrait of el Grupo Hiperión, a source of philosophical thought, and an example of her rich and original contributions to la filosofía de lo mexicano. Finally, I will show that, because Castellanos, like other women in history, was ignored by histories of philosophy, journals, and academic curricula, we must question their reliability as an objective source of canonical works. More strongly, we need a broader conception of philosophy, one that allows us to look at other sources (for example, literature), something that challenges us to review our acceptance of the canon, and of the scope and the method of philosophy.

1. En El Umbral

Rosario Castellanos once said, “I have grown accustomed to standing at doorsteps” (Castellanos 2007: 376-379), a surprising statement for someone who wrote so many books, received so many prizes, enjoyed countless readers, and who was a teacher, a journalist, a diplomat, a woman who seemed never to have stopped at the doorstep of anything. But the truth is that her philosophical work has been underappreciated, when not simply ignored, for years. However, she should be read, analyzed, studied, and discussed widely, especially by philosophers interested in feminist philosophy, Mexican philosophy, or Latin American philosophy, not to mention philosophers interested in la filosofía de lo mexicano or “Mexicanness,” a movement best represented by the members of the Hyperion Group. In this section, I examine some of the ways in which Castellanos was excluded from this philosophical movement, and thus from la filosofía de lo mexicano, despite the fact that its members, los hiperiones, were all very close to her.

When Rosario Castellanos moved to Mexico City to study at the university after spending her childhood years in a small city of Chiapas, she quickly became friends with the extraordinary group of brilliant young men who became the intellectual elite of Mexican philosophy in the late 1940s and beginning of the 50s. They were the members of el Grupo Hiperión: Jorge Portilla, Luis Villoro, Emilio Uranga, Joaquín Sánchez McGregor, Salvador Reyes Nevárez, Fausto Vega, and Ricardo Guerra. Most were students of the Spanish refugee and philosopher José Gaos and influenced by the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, and the
The historicism of José Ortega y Gasset, but their primary philosophical aim was to combine those European schools with Mexican philosophy (mainly represented by the works of Antonio Caso, José Vasconcelos, and Samuel Ramos) to provide an ontological account of “Mexican being” in order to analyze Mexican reality and transform it. They are often referred to as the “Mexican existentialists.”

Rosario Castellanos should have been a member of the Hiperión group, which would have given her work exposure in academia, would have placed her works in the middle of the philosophical discussion, and, perhaps, would have made the histories of Mexican philosophy in the past 70 years more inclusive. Also, it would have relieved her from the experience of being left at the doorstep, en el umbral, and, perhaps, from depression and the feeling of unworthiness, self-doubt, and anxiety. More importantly, the members of Hiperión got all the credit for the same things that she was also working on: the object of her investigation, her sense of social justice, her work on the self, the question concerning the phenomenology of being a Mexican woman. Even her thinking, her elegant writing, her sense of humor and irony, all tie her in a profound way to the Hiperión group. That there are so many parallels shouldn’t be surprising: she belonged to their generation, and was a friend and fellow student to most of them. She even married one of them, Ricardo Guerra. She dedicated one of her most influential feminist texts, Mujer que sabe latín, to Luis Villoro.¹ But—as can be seen from the list of members—the Hiperión was an association for men only, and neither them nor their teachers—all men, including Leopoldo Zea, Antonio Caso, and José Gaos—dared to suggest that they include any women in the group. Why? Not because women were not accomplished.

Their female colleagues were impressive in their own right, and there were many: Victoria Junco, Monelisa Pérez-Marchand, Olga Victoria Quiroz-Martínez, Vera Yamuni, Carmen Rovira, Rosa Krauze, Celia Garduño, Elena Orozco, Lina Pérez, Jacqueline Pivert, and Ana Mass de Serrano, to name a few.² A bit older than the rest but very much present, Paula Gómez Alonzo³ wrote the first philosophy graduate

¹ The Woman Who Knows Latin (1973) is a nod to the well-known adage in Spanish: mujer que sabe latín, ni encuentra marido ni tiene buen fin, which literally means “a woman that knows Latin will not find a husband nor have a good ending.” Perhaps it can be better understood in the light of these two sayings: “good women are rarely clever, and clever women are rarely good,” and “nobody loves a clever woman.”

² Other women philosophers sometimes associated with el Hiperión, like Juliana González (b. 1936), Olbeth Hansberg (b. 1943), and Margarita Valdés (b. 1942) were much younger, and, in some cases, they were students (sometimes becoming wives) of some of the members of the group. Although Graciela Hierro (b. 1928) was just one year younger than Ricardo Guerra (b. 1927), she entered academic philosophy later (1966), when Hiperión had already dissolved.

³ Paula Gómez Alonzo (b. 1896) was born around the same time as Antonio Caso (b. 1883-6), and four years before José Gaos (b. 1900). In 1952, she traveled with Leopoldo Zea to the Popular Republic of China.
dissertation in 1933, titled *La cultura femenina* (1933). Rosario Castellanos’s own master’s thesis, *Sobre cultura femenina* (1950), was a nod to Gómez Alonzo’s text. Also absent from the Hiperión was Zoraida Pineda Campusano who, as Castellanos once remarked, “was the first and only woman attending the courses of Philosophy at [the old building known as] Mascarones” (Castellanos 1973: 29).

The members of the Hiperión group, or los hiperiones, were surrounded by female intellectuals, but, despite their many achievements, no women were invited to join. Castellanos was no exception. By excluding them from the Hiperión, the paradigmatic example of the philosophical “elite,” women philosophers were kept “at the doorstep” both of the group and, in fact, of philosophy itself. In his memoir *Vida y trama filosófica en la U.N.A.M. (1940-1960)* (1989), Eusebio Castro estimates that women were about ninety percent of the total student population in the Department of Philosophy. However apparently unmoved by this fact, in his book he provides the following “colorful” anecdote of what life was like at Mascarones back then for “the girls.” He says:

In that literary and philosophical atmosphere (...) we celebrated student elections, concerts, dances, and the crowning of the School Queen (...) The Department of Philosophy stood out (...) due to the attraction (...) posed by the great many beautiful young women there—about ninety percent of all the students enrolled (...) It was not surprising, then, that (...) such an environment, with an abundance of beautiful girls, was the perfect venue from which to choose the School Queen. (Castro 1989: 32-33)

Castro considered the by-no-means-meager female population an “aesthetic element of feminine charm or feminine intelligence that dulcified the atmosphere” (ibid.). But what exactly did Castro mean by “feminine intelligence”? Castro speaks only in passing of the overwhelming majority of women in the Department of Philosophy (ninety percent of the entire student population!), and singles out only three women. The first is Paula Gómez Alonzo. He makes no reference to her many books, or her dissertation (the very first philosophy dissertation!), and instead emphasizes that she is a “faithful follower (...) student and disciple of Antonio Caso” (136-137). He also mentions Rosa Krauze, whom he describes as “a young and lovely student of philosophy who, some years later, would write [the book] *La filosofía*

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4 Pineda Campusano (b. 1906) was also the author of the interesting volume *Memorias de una Estudiante de Filosofía* (“A Memoir of a Woman Student of Philosophy”) (1963).
5 The building known as ‘Mascarones,’ often spoken about in books, letters, and memoirs, was the site of the first Department of Philosophy, where los hiperiones and Rosario Castellanos studied. It also housed literature, theater, and other academic majors. The old school was replaced in the 50s when the university moved to the current “Ciudad Universitaria.”
de Antonio Caso (1961)” (30). The third woman Castro highlights is Vera Yamuni, whom he calls his “colleague and friend” (116), and says that she was a “student, disciple and close associate of [José] Gaos and of his philosophical work until his very last days, [as well as] an example of feminine intelligence” (110; added emphasis).

We begin to see a pattern emerge.

Castro singled out (only) these three women because they dedicated themselves to studying the works of their male teachers. That is exactly what Castro means by “feminine intelligence”: women dedicating their intellectual talent to study the work of men as the subject of their philosophical investigation, while ‘masculine’ intelligence, or simply intelligence (as it obviously doesn’t need to be gendered) like the one displayed by los hiperiones, is not linked to any one subject in particular. Of course, Gómez Alonzo, Krauze, and Yamuni went beyond the study of male philosophers (i.e., that which earned them Castro’s “praise”), and they published remarkable and original works and essays, given that their actual “feminine intelligence” was certainly not circumscribed to analyses of their male counterparts.6 However, Castro’s decision to silence those other achievements is useful in explaining why, in the founding of the famous “Round Table of Philosophy” in 1945, as soon as the bylaws were established, “the issue” was raised: Would women be allowed to participate? Castro recounts:

The Zapotec philosopher López was the first to speak. (...) Women? No way!...

Others remembered Husserl’s words: women are not made for philosophy...

Someone else quoted Nietzsche: “short ideas and long hair”...

[Schopenhauer:] woman is the deadliest animal of all creation... a bait of Nature to force us into perpetuating the species. (1989:151)

Another example of exclusion can be found in Oswaldo Díaz Ruanova’s book Los existencialistas mexicanos (1982), in which he writes that, after class ended, “The ‘hiperiones’ would continue the discussion of the ‘a priori’ in La Rambla, a Porfrian cantina that was famous for its snacks” (Díaz Ruanova 1982: 202).

Let’s pause here to underline that in Mexico women were legally banned from cantinas until 1981, which usually posted a sign on the door that read: No dogs, women, indigents, men in uniforms, and minors allowed.7 So, members of the Hiperión could

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7 Even now, in 2022, there are cities as allegedly ‘cosmopolitan’ as Monterrey that have men-only admission to cantinas, despite the Constitutional law that prohibits (and penalizes) the banning of any...
discuss the “a priori” to their heart’s content, but they invariably did it in the absence of the “lovely” señoritas.

In 1950, Rosario Castellanos graduated with a dissertation that she would publish that same year with the title Sobre cultura femenina, which is reminiscent of the influential work The Second Sex (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir, as it also surveys what male philosophers have written about women throughout history. Castellanos’s dissertation is written with her characteristic sarcasm, and although reportedly throughout the examination laughter was heard coming out from the room where she defended her thesis, Ricardo Guerra would eventually disclose that the members of the jury in her exam were “furious because they said women did not need to think, and much less speak openly.” In any case, and despite all the laughing that her sharp wit easily provoked, Castellanos, just like De Beauvoir, was always quite serious about how women had been viewed in history by male philosophers. And yet, after graduating, Castellanos began to drift away from academic philosophy which, as was becoming clearer every day, did not welcome female philosophers. In Mujer que sabe latín, she recalls: “the philosophical language was inaccessible to me (...) and the only concepts that I could grasp were those disguised as metaphors” (Castellanos 1973: 205). Yet, with a different philosophical language, perhaps more akin to the “literary” kind, she would produce several magnificent essays, like those she wrote about De Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Simone Weil, Juana Inés de la Cruz, Jean Paul Sartre, among many others. It is no surprise that she even went on to say in her article “Poetas filósofos”: “The boundaries between philosophy and poetry are so intimately intertwined that it is difficult to determine the limits and the extents of each discipline” (Castellanos 2004: 40).

But it is easy to see why the kind of philosophy that dominated the old school of Mascarones at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 50s would have seemed “inaccessible” to Castellanos: language itself, particularly the language of philosophy, was spoken in the masculine. But let’s say with more precision, it still speaks in the masculine. In Sobre cultura femenina, Castellanos would courageously call out an enclosing horizon:

person on the basis of sex, gender or sexual preference from commercial establishments. For an example of this, see: https://www.opinion51.com/p/romandiamujerescantina

8 In her Introduction to Sobre cultura femenina, Gabriela Cano reports that the session “was inundated by laughter (...) The members of the committee—professors Eusebio Castro, Paula Gómez Alonso (sic), Eduardo Nicol, Leopoldo Zea and Bernabé Navarro—could not refrain from bursting into laughter (...) The audience also laughed loudly,” (FCE, Mexico 2005:31) whereas Ricardo Guerra had a different recollection of that day. In an interview, he said: “cuando ella presentó su tesis (...) [r]ecuerdo que el jurado estaba furioso porque decía que la mujer no tenía por qué pensar, y mucho menos hablar libremente” (https://www.cronica.com.mx/notas-ricardo_guerra_cuenta_su_amor_y_vida_con_rosario_castellanos-1094812-2018.html).
[t]he world that remains tightly closed to me has a name: it is called Culture. Its inhabitants are all male. They call themselves Men, and Humanity is the name they have given to their ability of residing in the world of culture and to accommodate themselves in it. (Castellanos 2018:82-83)

It is that world that emanates from the written works of los hiperiones. They, who were so interested in studying el ser del mexicano (“Mexican being”), who wrote books and essays analyzing Mexican intellectuals, philosophers, indigenous people, or the meaning of “relajo,” all wrote in the masculine, and from a male point of view. They turned the masculine into the “universal,” and they received praise and recognition in return.

2. Rito de Iniciación
In Spanish, unlike in English, gender is written into the ending of words. Someone might point out that the Royal Spanish Academy, which largely prescribes our use of Spanish in Mexico, has determined that using the two plural formulas, as in “todos [male form] y todas” [female form], instead of the single male form “todos” [universal form] goes “against the principle of economy of language and is based on extra-linguistic motives,” so that referring to a group as “todas,” even if the group is composed of, say, one million five hundred women and only one man, is “incorrect.”

But the Royal Spanish Academy fails to acknowledge that accepting the male plural as the universal plural, and the use of the word “man” to refer to “humankind” is what Castellanos—and every woman around her—found in the writings of los hiperiones. And, even if we grant that they were only obeying the semantic rules and tradition of the time, and did not subscribe to gender bias, what explains why they failed to cite any of the many books written by the women whom they knew personally, or any other women, for that matter?

If language was not a faithful reflection of the misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy that dominates every linguistic and extra-linguistic order of life, real life, perhaps not only would los hiperiones have included women among its members, but maybe their writings and language would have reflected gender plurality. However, the essays of Rosario Castellanos, whose themes, such as auto-gnosis, self-knowledge, and

9 Jorge Portilla, another of the hiperiones, wrote La fenomenología del relajo (“The Phenomenology of Relajo”). Relajo is a word that describes disorderly conduct, rebellious and jesting, which, for Portilla, was a Mexican state of being.
10 https://www.rae.es/espanol-al-dia/los-ciudadanos-y-las-ciudadanas-los-ninos-y-las-ninas
transformation—all wrought with irony, humor, deepness, a critical eye, social sensitivity, etc.—substantially overlapped with those written by los hiperiones and which were known to them, were never cited by her “close” male friends, who seemed to prefer to keep them at a safe distance, just as the male-dominated history of philosophy had done with Sor Juana’s amazing philosophical works, which were relegated to a literary category, “women’s writing,” which has the ring of “women’s work.” Rosario Castellanos saw clearly that, for a woman:

(...) from the moment that she is born (...) education starts to work on the given material to mold it into its destiny and transform it into a morally acceptable being, that is, a socially useful being. Thus, she is stripped off her spontaneity to act, she is prohibited from the initiative of making decisions; she is taught to obey the commandments of an ethic that is completely foreign to her, with no justification and rationale but that of serving the interests, purposes, and ends of others. (Castellanos 1973: 14)

The way of “adapting” the given material—i.e., the woman—Castellanos goes on to say, is to expel her from the “religious congregation, the political agora, the university classroom” (9). That is why someone like her will have to search, almost painfully, for “another way of being (...) human and free” (Castellanos 2014:213).11

Castellanos was kept “at the doorway” of philosophy because the academy did not welcome women, did not acknowledge the contributions of women, and did nothing to highlight the accomplishment of women in the histories of philosophical thought or in the classroom, like teaching about women philosophers present or past. Nevertheless, she must have believed that a decade after, in the 60s, perhaps Mexico had changed enough for her to give philosophy a second chance because she began to write Rito de iniciación, a kind of memoir of her years as a student of philosophy with many of los hiperiones as her classmates. During a conference in 1964, she announced that she had finished the novel; but later, in 1969, she told a journalist that she had decided to destroy the manuscript. When, finally, the book was published (posthumously) in 1997, the publisher Eduardo Mejía explained that, at the time when she was writing the novel, Castellanos held a job at UNAM, and that she had read some passages to her fellow workers. But “one unfavorable, devastating opinion (...) made her afraid of the response of her colleagues [to the book, so she] collected the copies from her friends and the publishing house, and destroyed them” (Introduction to Rito de iniciación, Alfaguara 1997: 371). Mejía explains that only the original manuscript that she had kept survived, which was how the novel was finally preserved.

11 Otra forma de ser is a verse from the poem Meditación en el umbral (“Meditation At the Doorstep,” included in the book Poesía no eres tú, 2014: 172).
Castellanos was usually a courageous writer, so one can only speculate that a deeply-ingrained fear of the censure of the (predominantly male) opinion and the (predominantly male) philosophical academy dissuaded her from publishing a finished book that delved too intimately, and too critically, into the philosophical environment at the UNAM, which, incidentally, has barely changed. Perhaps, apart from the censure, she also feared for her job, on which she depended financially.

The experience of being a man or a woman in Mexico is very different. Central concepts of Hiperión member Emilio Uranga such as accidentality, corazonada (“intimation”), zozobra and nepantla were used by him to reflect philosophically on the (male) Mexican being. But for us Mexican women (and I shall return later to some of these concepts in the context of Castellano’s novel), “accidentality” is substance; corazonada is what we are accused of having, instead of logical reasoning; and zozobra is not the ontological achievement as los hiperiones conceived it, but the condition of our being in a country in which we seem to be fully, and simply, nepantla, “in-between.” This is a social fact. Just ask Sor Juana. Or ask Rosario Castellanos—something we can’t do by exploring her archives, because they do not exist. So our only option is to examine her literary writings, keeping in mind that literature was perhaps the only way in which she found the liberty to express her philosophical thoughts. As Polish-born author Samuel Gordon—who was a student of Castellanos in Jerusalem—said:

We must remember (...) that Rosario Castellanos graduated as a student of philosophy, not literature. Maybe that is why the program she submitted for the second year [at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem]—1972-1973—belonged more to the universe of Mexican philosophy than to that of Mexican

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12 This, at least, is what the group Mujeres Organizadas de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras argued when they occupied the Department of Philosophy in 2019. The list of their petitions can be seen at: https://archivodemujeres.omeka.net/exhibits/show/tomaffyl
14 Although ‘nepantla’ is a philosophical concept used by Uranga, meaning the ontological state of “being in-between” or “in the middle,” which points to what Castellanos meant by being “en el umbral,” interestingly, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was born in the actual town called [San Miguel de] Nepantla, which can be interpreted in a way that the “in-between-ness,” or being ‘nepantla,’ is, in fact, the ontological fate of women philosophers in Mexico. Apropos of the term ‘Nepantla,’ José Emilio Pacheco quoted another famous writer, Carlos Monsiváis, when he said that with “Rosario Castellanos began the literature of Mexican women; she made possible that the walls of Nepantla—the middle land, no-one’s land—that had been since Sor Juana’s times both the home and the prison cell of our women writers, started to crumble down. It is thanks to Rosario Castellanos that Mexican women found their voices.” (Castellanos 1974: 7)
15 Unlike the archives of many male philosophers that are guarded jealously in public universities and libraries.
literature (...) Rosario Castellanos (...) chose to teach a remarkable course about the essence of Mexicanness, that began with Samuel Ramos’ *El perfil del hombre y la cultura* [Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico] and ended with Jorge Portilla’s *Fenomenología del relajo*. (Gordon, 2013)

Other women in philosophy, notably Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt, also rejected seeing their writing as philosophical. De Beauvoir said of herself: “... Sartre is a philosopher, and I am not, and I never really wanted to be a philosopher. I like philosophy very much, but I have not created a philosophical opus. My field is literature. I am interested in novels, memoirs, essays, such as *The Second Sex*. However, none of these is philosophy” (Beauvoir 1979: 338). And Arendt protested against being considered a philosopher when she said in an interview: “I don’t belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher nor do I believe I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers.”¹⁶ Rosario Castellanos was in good company.

As remarkable—and significant—as it was that Castellanos used philosophical books in her course of Mexican literature in Jerusalem, the fact that she included many women writers with the men was just as unusual, remarkable, and significant. She examined the works of Elena Poniatowska, Elena Garro, and Josefina Vicens (who wrote under a male pseudonym), alongside the male household names: Octavio Paz, Juan Rulfo, and of course Luis Villoro, and Emilio Uranga, among others.

In the next section, I will examine *Rito de iniciación*, which is in a way a memoir of her student years and a reflection on the phenomenon of identity, ‘otherness,’ the transformation of the sense of ‘self’ in the woman protagonist,¹⁷ and a call to expand the canon of philosophy and see women’s literature as a form of philosophy.¹⁸ Furthermore, I believe that the book is also a declaration of principles against the way in which it had come to be accepted to silence, make invisible, delegitimize, and subordinate women to men in the world of academic philosophy: the protagonist’s journey through the night is a symbolic transformation (or ‘rite of passage’) to stop ‘revolving’ around what other people choose to think, or do, and instead making herself her own nucleus or center.

3. **Otras Fuentes**

Because Castellanos, like most women during her time, was virtually banned from philosophizing professionally, we should not expect to find in her works the regular structure of, say, a philosophy treatise, or even a ‘paper.’ As I have argued elsewhere

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¹⁷ For example, see Patricia Zúñiga’s “Rito de iniciación. Un caleidoscopio de realidades” (2003: 6-9).

¹⁸ Here I quote Carlisle (2022).
Del Río, Castellanos at Philosophy’s Doorstep

(Del Río 2022: 82-83), in order to access the philosophical writings that have been excluded from the canon, it is useful to remember the lesson of Miguel León-Portilla’s 1956 foundational book La filosofía náhuatl: estudiada en sus fuentes (or “Nahuatl Philosophy, Studied in Its Sources”). León-Portilla wrote against the common allegation that pre-Hispanic thought was not philosophy, but rather poetry with literary but no epistemic value. León-Portilla knew that if he was to demonstrate the philosophical content of Nahuatl thought, he would have to turn to non-traditional sources. When we explore the philosophical contributions of women, we must do the same, because their voices have been silenced, invisibilized, by excluding them, first, from the philosophical discussion in groups, like the Hiperión group, and then from the histories of philosophy and the curricula in academic philosophy. So, we need to look elsewhere, in other sources—such as newspapers articles, letters, testimonies, interviews, literature, etc. That is what I propose we do with the novel by Castellanos.

Rito de iniciación can be described as an example of the Hiperión movement, which, although it was labeled as “Mexican existentialism,” had some major differences with the rest. It was a movement characterized by a hopeful quest for (A) self-discovery, and (B) cultural emancipation, and, in that sense, it was a contrast with the pessimistic ‘mood’ of European existentialism and its accompanying anxiety, nothingness, and sense of the absurd. That same hopeful quest was very much present in Castellanos’s novel, especially when, in the ending, the long journey of the protagonist through the night, ends with her discovering herself as a “new being.” However, Hiperión was blind to the predominant culture of sexism, which was, and still is, particularly serious in Mexico, and that is where Castellanos brought in her own voice, which could have enriched the movement. For that, I will add it as the element (C) of Mexican existentialism that she brought to the table of philosophy: her novel is unique in that the main character is a woman whose individual quest for liberation speaks to that blind spot of the Hiperión. In Castellanos, Mexican existentialism metamorphoses into feminism, and that is one of her great contributions to Mexican and universal philosophy. Another woman writer, Elena Poniatowska rightly said that, with her dissertation (1950), Castellanos established the intellectual point of departure for the liberation of the Mexican woman” (Castellanos 1974: 7). Indeed, Castellanos went on to reflect on feminism in most of her books and articles, and in Rito de iniciación she seems to return to that which was her first published philosophical text, where, almost fifteen years before, she wrote:

Abstract thinking, objectivity, the ability to project beyond oneself, to identify with others through the art of literature, seems a gift that has been denied to the woman that writes […] Perhaps after a deliberate effort, after a long

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19 See also Lamas (2017).
discipline, the gift of objectivity will be conquered [and then, we can only hope it will be aimed towards] her inner self [...] once that bottom core (that tradition ignores or distorts, that the usual concepts do not reveal) has been reached, she will be able to bring it to the conscious surface in order to liberate it through expression. (Castellanos 2018: 213-214. My emphasis.)

Since her untimely death in 1974 (she was 48 years old), there seems to be a slow but growing consensus to finally consider Castellanos as a philosopher in her own right. A recent example of this can be found in a recent presentation by Manuel Vargas where he talked about her affinity with the Hiperión group. However, by way of caution, Vargas warns us against another form of epistemic injustice, perhaps that which Linda Martin Alcoff has identified as the problem “of speaking for others” (Alcoff 1991-1992):

Although it is undoubtedly true that Castellanos is interested in gender in the Mexico of her time, it is unclear how much Castellanos viewed herself as responding to or critiquing the project of her friends and teachers, and indeed, how much the existentialist and phenomenological concerns of the Hyperion Group were her concerns. (Vargas 2021)

More importantly, Vargas believes that, despite the striking parallels with the concerns of both Mexican and French existentialists, we “might worry that in reading her as essentially engaged in a project of philosophy de la mexicana,” we risk projecting “alien, self-serving concerns on to her, making her compliance with our interests and values a condition of the visibility and relevance of her work.” Caution is in order, he says, because her first (and main) philosophical text, Sobre cultura femenina, “has no citation of Heidegger, Sartre, or Beauvoir.”

Although I consider Vargas’s (and Alcoff’s) reservations important, I believe there is no risk of projecting “alien, self-serving concerns” (Vargas) onto Castellanos, therefore affecting the “meaning and truth” (Alcoff) of her work, provided that we keep two things in mind. The first is that rather than a lack of interest or identification with De Beauvoir, Heidegger, or Sartre, the absence of quotes responds to the time factor: The Second Sex was not available in Mexico in 1949, and the existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre was introduced to the Mexican philosophical discussion by the Hiperión group, which was barely being formed in 1948, so she could not have incorporated citations of their texts in her dissertation. Other than that, she did subscribe with the objectives of doing a philosophy “de la mexicana,” which brings us to the second thing to keep in mind: as I have argued, Castellanos was very much invested in the same philosophical concerns as los hiperiones, with one big exception: the gender issue, which—as she points out in the quote above—“tradition ignores or
distorts, (and) the usual concepts do not reveal.” But that is precisely the originality of her contribution to the movement of “Mexicanness,” for which she never got credit.

What happens when we use other concepts (instead of the “usual” ones), and a different canon (one that questions and dismantles the tradition that “ignores or distorts” the gender issue), is that it becomes possible, just as Castellanos hoped in 1950, for the bottom core to emerge to the “conscious surface” to be “liberated through expression,” an expression not confined to the ‘literary’ kind, but that reaches into philosophy.

*Rito de iniciación* is edgy, at times cynical and ironical, and always intelligent, analytical, dazzling, and—to top it all—beautifully written. Above all, it is the personal testimony of a young girl from the provinces who arrives in the big city with her heavy luggage full of prejudices, ghosts, and fears, and transforms into una mujer de palabras, “a woman of words,” as Castellanos described herself in the poem *Pasaporte* (Castellanos 2014: 221). But how does she achieve this? First, by shifting her “center of gravity” from the others onto herself (A=self-discovery); then by shifting the foreign cultural models (for example, her literary heroines) to an identification with Mexico, represented by the “City” (B=cultural emancipation); third, by liberating herself from sexism (C=gender emancipation). So, the novel achieves the two big goals shared with el grupo Hiperion, A and B, and even surpasses them by adding C. Los hiperiones, and by extension, the world of philosophy in general, were blind to this, or at least they never acknowledged it in their works.

*Rito de iniciación* is also a wonderful fresco of the period, in which Castellanos portrays the students, who prefer to “waste time talking in the corridors or the cafeteria” rather than reading in the library (Castellanos 2016: 96); the old professor, who opens his house to the students and lets himself be worshipped, reclining, with studied naturalness, in the cushions of a chaise longue and talking without pause while his sister—who could also very well be his wife, his secretary, his servant, his slave, or his nurse—goes around serving refreshments in silence; the elderly female writers, united by a history of loneliness, envy, and frustration; and Susana, whose only aspiration is to find a husband. Cecilia, the protagonist, asks Susana a rhetorical question aimed really at herself: “Do you think it’s worth to write a book?” to which Susana replies: “I don’t. There are so many books already” (Castellanos 2016: 268). But Susana does what women were expected to do: look for a husband, and settle.

Instead, Cecilia could be seen as Rosario Castellanos’s alter ego. Like her, Cecilia cannot adapt to the family, the place or time in which she was born. Castellanos described her own infancy in these words: “I was a child who lived in Comitán, Chiapas, in the middle of the sixteenth century.” (2007: 267. My emphasis.)

To the triple disgrace of being born a woman, in Mexico, in the “middle of the sixteenth century,” Rosario/Cecilia must add the tragedy (and guilt) of the death of a brother who, being male, was of course deemed irreplaceable. Rosario/Cecilia will seek
shelter from a harsh reality in the parallel universe of literature, “because the world (...) gave me vertigo” (2016: 186-187). But what was able to alleviate that vertigo? Las vocales (“The vowels,” 2016: 192). In the novel, literature is not so much an escape as it is freedom from a world in which Cecilia simply does not fit. Yet, in order to become a writer, Rosario/Cecilia will have to face, and defeat, a prejudice that is present in the novel, even if the concept had not yet been coined: the “impostor syndrome.”

Once in college at Mexico City, Cecilia meets Sergio, who becomes a close friend because both feel a bit like “outsiders”: he is a closeted homosexual in machista Mexico of the 1950s, and she is socially awkward and far removed from the idealized heroines that she idolized in her youth: “There was no escaping that limbo through a heroic destiny (...) Her own personal tragedies would never amount to much more than a run in her stockings, a bad date, a missed opportunity to use a good pun” (2016: 80).

At the University, Cecilia/Rosario discovers the frivolous intellectual atmosphere that lies under the insecure, yet patronizing eyes of her male teachers and colleagues. Years after writing the book, Castellanos would point out that “(...) as a girl, one had to play the fool in order to be accepted by the male students. They could not stand even the slightest competition [and they had] a medieval idea of what a woman ought to be like” (Poniatowska 2004).

In her desperate quest for a better fate than being in the “in-between-ness” of nepantla, Cecilia/Rosario will initiate a relationship with Ramón Mariscal/Ricardo Guerra, which is interrupted when he accepts a scholarship to study in Europe. She then expressed something she had not felt before:

Cecilia wished she could be him in order to leave, to go far away, anywhere in the world, never to return. But Cecilia was not him, she was only herself, and she never would be anyone but herself, and this certitude produced in her a sadness that she was unable to conceal [...] what had saddened her, even terrified her, was, perhaps, to have discovered [that he was] her gravitational center. (2016: 268)

After they break up, Cecilia falls into zozobra, which (exactly as Uranga wanted) she will eventually transform into something else, a present open to possibilities: Now that Ramón is leaving, the prison cell crumbles, and I am set free. Yes, nothing and no one can force me into obeying a rule, or follow a concept. I can forget myself, who I am, what I want (...) I can dissolve, evaporate. I can die. (278)

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20 The notion “impostor phenomenon” was introduced by Clance and Imes (1978).
21 Zoraida Pineda Campusano also portrays that same environment in her memoir (cited above).
But slowly Cecilia begins to realize that this means to ‘die’ to the cultural demands of learning “the art of being agreeable” (200). By this death, she will find (B) the coveted “cultural emancipation” (reivindicated by the Hiperión group) symbolized in the procurement of a new “identity card” (279), to “live on her own” (282). She will then be able to (A) find herself, take the pen “like a bullfighter takes killing instruments,” (283) but first she needs closure, to say goodbye to all who have travelled with her along her pilgrimage. To Sergio, who with his “siren call” had asked her to agree to a marriage of convenience; to Ramón and his invitation to spend one last night together; and to Susana and Alberto, with their “perfect couple” farce.

Cecilia says goodbye to Ramón, and refuses to let him accompany her. She tells him, “If I am to become accustomed to loneliness, I better start now” (307), and heads down the empty street that leads to a public square where “the urban dimensions, seemingly huge in the light of day [now, at night] had diminished to the perceptual scope of the senses, and the synthetic exercise of intelligence” (ibid.). It is then that Cecilia can turn inward: “This is my circumference, and it ends here, where my fingers touch, where my footsteps stop, where my eyes reach” (307).

Cecilia then makes a decision: “This city and I will be friends,” and just like that she engages in the search for the “real face” of a Mexico that exists beyond the “Babylonian figures underneath which it hides to preserve the privacy of its core, its secret” (308), and, along with her development into an “autonomous entity,” in that same measure she becomes able to “contemplate, face to face, the gorgeous, naked, unarmed, linear creature” that no longer hides under its “arbitrariness, unpredictable, inevitable inconstancy,” but instead strips itself of artifices in order to reveal that, behind the appearance of a hostile chaos, “there is an underlying order, and law” (308). Cecilia realizes that the City has become a teacher:

From her I will imitate the art of infinite metamorphoses and ultimate immutability, which is not a contradiction or even a conciliatory pact, but two ways of having access to the same object: the way of those that do not transcend the spinning of vertigo and keep going round and round, and the way of those that find themselves in the beyond, in the now, in stillness. (308)

The City opens its arms to Cecilia, as if to a long-lost child returning home after many years. Immersed in the City, Cecilia can now sing a song of freedom: “Joy, joy of being myself”:

This is how this miracle, the perfect synchronicity between us two, takes place: Do you see how I manage to mirror that which surrounds me? From my own identity, I respect limits, admire, and identify with the rest (...) I am strict, and
concrete, but, just like the atmosphere, I am newly born to enrich the universe by placing in its reality a being that was not there before. (309)

In that materialization of her “new” being, in the celebration of her discovery of the City, and of herself, Cecilia begins the final, most radical of returns:

(...) resting an elbow on the handrail of acceptance, I look back to find that nothing of what I have had and nothing of what I have not had, nothing of what I have been given and nothing of what has been taken from me was ever unnecessary. (ibid.)

And it is this moment that leads to the revelation: the “epiphany of language” (315) that will open the consecutive doors of the kingdom:

... one after another (...) so that I may be the marvelled, thankful, joyous guest (...) and so there is no more of this you and me that presently constraints and divides us. For the moment to consumate is not yet here, that moment when—just like when the reins of the horses that stamp the floor with impatience are released—the final obstacles are overcome, the moment of reconciliation, the unique moment toward which the entire universe is readying itself and flowing into. (316)

Cecilia prepares to turn her sacred, symbolic ship in the direction of that reconciliation when, without warning, she is interrupted by the hissing voice that every single Mexican woman has been startled by at least once during their life: “Where are you going all alone, mamacita? Someone might kidnap you” (ibid.).

The joyous hymn of life is stopped abruptly. Perhaps the City has turned its back on Cecilia by allowing those repulsive, sibilating words to be uttered. These are words that have arisen from that male-dominated culture from which she seeks to be liberated: mamacita is used by many Mexican men as one of the most abject of sexual “compliments.” By reproducing it, Castellanos also introduces a national characteristic in a larger concept, “sexual harassment” (a term that had not yet been coined), and in doing so she points to another concept that would only be developed much later by feminist philosophy, which is the idea of “situatedness” (Harding 1992). The whole sentence, Where are you going all alone, mamacita? Someone might kidnap you, has a multiplicity of philosophical connotations. Of course, as just words they might seem ridiculous in a public place in the light of day, but to a woman alone in the middle of the night in a deserted square, in a country where seven in every ten females over the

22 The term was introduced in 1975.
age of 15 has been a victim of gender violence, and an average of ten women are murdered every day; they are something different: a warning that her life is actually in grave danger. Unlike to the man who speaks them, for whom they are a prelude to a “testimony of virility, an advertising of his aptitudes as a seducer, a springboard for more audacious enterprises to come, of greater shine, of more advantage” (285).

Cecilia, however, manages to get a grip on her fear. She refuses to let herself be intimidated. Instead, she accelerates her pace and goes inside a dark, abandoned tunnel, thereby untying “the ropes that yoked me to shore” (318). That is how she recovers from the initial shock:

I close the ears to his shouts and calls, I shut my eyes, I stand alone. In my spine still reverberates the shudder that seized me in the face of danger (...) and I ignore if I am now closer or farther from danger, if I was able to ward it off or instead I triggered it further and this will culminate in a cataclysm. [But perhaps I could] go back, even if I have come so far? Not anymore. (318)

No, there is no going back. Not anymore. The “birth tunnel” is:

the true one, that which was not the result of a fortuitous combination of coincidences, the blind clash of instincts (...) or the response to someone else’s appetite, but the one which is my own, for which I am accountable, responsible, and obligated to comply. (ibid.)

On the other side of the tunnel, Cecilia can see the dawning of the new day. She has defeated the night, fear, and fatigue:

Occupying almost the entire length of the street, the huge sweeper machine advanced slowly, and noisily. Next to it, the fast, silent bicycles zigzagged snubbing the straight line and taking joy in their undulating movements with a boast of balance and skill. Behind them came the milk truck. And then other trucks that transported perplexed bricklayers and early-rising office workers. From her spot, Cecilia watched the movement like behind a cloud of mist, behind a veil of tears. She felt distant, overwhelmed, and utterly happy. (322)

The metamorphosis is complete; the cocoon has transformed into a butterfly, and the young, provincial, awkward girl has become “a woman of words.”

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24 https://www.observatoriofeminicidiomexico.org/_files/ugd/ba8440_9a5cdf1db02f497e9e6b62c007163d3b.pdf
4. Conclusion

*Rito de iniciación* is only one example of a mature text with a feminist message, as illustrated by the fragments here quoted. But it is also a profound reflection that brings philosophy down from the ivory tower where it has so often resided to remind us that, in its ancient Greek origins, philosophy was actually born as poetry, their boundaries so “intimately intertwined” that it proves difficult to know where one ends and the other begins. By confining a poet like Rosario Castellanos to the (peripheral) world of ‘literature’ (or even worst: of women’s literature) and excluding her from the philosophical canon, philosophy cancels itself, forgets itself, and strips itself from the opportunity “to enrich the universe by placing in its reality a being that was not there before.” And wasn’t the goal of the “Mexican existentialists” the construction of a new Mexican being and a new Mexican identity, in order to achieve decolonized cultural emancipation? Yet they too ignored the struggle, the fight of women for equality, even when it was in the voice of Rosario Castellanos, someone they appreciated and cared for as their colleague and friend.

One of los hiperiones, Luis Villoro, once wrote that the goal of a philosophical reflection should not be to formulate answers, but to formulate new questions.25 If that is the case, this novel and most of Rosario Castellanos’s writings are indeed *philosophical* reflections regarding identity, otherness, self-discovery, cultural emancipation, colonialism and sexism, and the only explanation as to why she is not counted among Mexico’s most influential philosophical minds of the twentieth century is that, as I have shown, then as much as now, our categories of what counts as philosophy, and of what matters in philosophy, are still gender-biased, exclusionary, prejudiced, sterile, and inoperative. The works of Rosario Castellanos, and in particular her personal testimony in *Rito de iniciación*, guide us in the right direction to question the canon and the scope of what we call philosophy. It is, indeed, time to reexamine our philosophical assumptions, and to discard all that does not lead to an accurate and fair reflection of women’s (as well as other discriminated groups) real contributions to the history of human thought, even if that means we have to dig them up from sources other than the ones we are familiar with and which have been mainstream until now.26

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25"For a philosophical reflection does not stop when it finds an answer but when it’s capable of formulating a new question" (Pues una reflexión filosófica no concluye cuando formula una respuesta sino cuando es capaz de plantear un nuevo interrogante) (Villoro, 1960: 40).

26 An earlier version of this essay was read in the *II Coloquio Internacional sobre Emilio Uranga y el Grupo Hiperión*, organized by Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in August 27, 2021.
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A DECLARATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ARTURO GÓMEZ MARTÍNEZ

10/11/99

On behalf of the Nahuas of Ixcacuatitla, Chicontepec, Veracruz.
Ixcacuatitla, Chicontepec, Veracruz

Let all hear!

These our sacred words, beliefs, and practices (tomasehualteotlatol) are very beautiful, and although we have combined with them some aspects of those of the Catholic

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1 The original declaration is untitled. It appeared originally in Spanish and Nahuatl in The Nahua Newsletter No. 30 (2000): 2-5. I’d like to thank both Arturo Gómez Martínez and Alan R. Sandstrom, the editor of the Nahua Newsletter, for their permission to publish this translation of Gómez Martínez’s declaration.


3 Tomasehualteotlatol is a component of tlaneltokilli which occurs throughout this piece. The word “tlaneltokilli” derives from the verb “neltoca,” which means “to believe something.” According to Gómez Martínez, tlaneltokilli refers to “a system of beliefs, faith, devotion and worship that is directed towards deities by means of rituals and offerings” (Arturo Gómez Martínez, Tlaneltokilli: La espiritualidad de los nahuas chocontepecanos. México: Ediciones del programa de Desarrollo cultural de la huasteca, 2002, p. 11.) However, native Nahuatl-speaker and ethnographer Abelardo de la Cruz writes, although some authors translate tlaneltoquilli as “religion,” it is in fact quite “distant from its western counterpart.
Church, they are nevertheless our ancestral heritage. We have our own ways of devotion, giving thanks, and paying respect (totlaneltokil), and these are rooted fundamentally in maize and its cultivation. Yet we also perform devotions to water, wind, fire, and earth. We regard all of these – maize, water, wind, fire and earth – as sacred manifestations and expressions of s/he who give us life and sustenance. And it is for this reason that we conduct rituals with them in mind, that we pray to them, and that we offer them our foods and the lives of birds. We know that our deities (totiotzitzih) are powerful, invisible and intangible. We know that they inhabit

Rather than see their beliefs as part of a religion the Nahua conceptualize it as ancestral belief, linked to both tangible and intangible objects” (Abelardo de la Cruz, “The Value of El Costumbre and Christianity in the Discourse of Nahua Catechists from the Huasteca Region in Veracruz, Mexico, 1970s-2010s” in David Tavárez (ed), Words and Worlds Turned Around: Indigenous Christianities in Colonial Latin America, University Press Colorado, 2017: 267-288, 272). He adds, “El costumbre includes a search for balance among the elements in nature, gratefulness for agricultural produce, and petitions on behalf of the collective good” (Cruz, op. cit., 272). Therefore, despite nelote’s being translated as “to believe,” I would caution against an intellectualist interpretation of tlaneltokilli that stresses belief and faith and urge instead that we understand it in praxiological terms, i.e., as first and foremost as set of ceremonial and ritual practices or ways of acting in the world.

In order to preserve and recognize this difference, Huastecan Nahua refer to their religious beliefs, rituals, and lifeways in Spanish as “el costumbre” or “los costumbres,” i.e., as “the custom” or “the customs.” By replacing the conventional Spanish article “la” in “la costumbre” with their own article “el,” they appropriate the word as their own and distinguish their religious lifeways from those of Catholics and evangelicals. In sum, tlaneltokilli refers not to belief alone but also a system of practical ceremonies or rituals such as speaking to deities, singing, dancing, burning copal incense, gifting food and other comestibles to deities, offering the blood of live fowls, building elaborate altars (called “mesas” in Spanish) and cutting colorful paper figures of deities. For additional discussion of tlaneltokilli, see Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain. Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2023.

Tomasehualteotlatol contains the word “masehual” meaning “common” or “indigenous.” Contemporary Nahuas refer to all indigenous peoples of Mexico as “masehualmeh” (plural, masehualli, singl). In pre-Conquest Nahuatl, it referred to commoners as opposed to noble persons. See https://nahuatl.uoregon.edu/content/macehualli.

Gómez Martínez here acknowledges the syncretic nature of contemporary Nahua religious lifeways, which have incorporated aspects of Catholicism yet still retain a pre-Conquest, indigenous core. The Nahua’s pragmatic approach undercuts any orthodoxy. Cruz adds, perhaps paradoxically for western readers, that many Nahua accept Christianity while at the same time also “practicing costumbre. El Costumbre is a religion that tends to be sympathetic of other religions – unlike Christianity. So they do not see them as mutually exclusive” (Cruz, op. cit., 268).

Gómez Martínez here refers to the practice of gifting the life-energy contained with foodstuffs (such as tamales) and live chickens to deities and to “s/he who gives us life.”
different parts of the cosmos, and we know that they go about observing our behavior and our works, and that they punish us when we behave badly or when we do not offer them ceremonies. These deities created us, and they created the world and all that exists in it. And in return, they require that we reciprocate with them by gifting them a small portion of what we produce as well as a little music, copal incense, foodstuffs, and dancing. These are the reasons that we, the indigenous peoples of Mexico, celebrate rituals. So that the deities are not angered, so that they do not send punishments; we respect them and we believe in them. And we do so despite the fact that the Catholic priests, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religions criticize, rebuke, and quarrel with us. However, our deities are the ones who help us most. Afterall, they are the ones who send the rains so that the earth will be fertile and so that the plants will grow and provide us with healthy fruits and vegetables, thus keeping us from suffering hardship and hunger. It is therefore important that we respect our ancient traditions devoted to the deities so that we do not provoke the ire of the deities and so that the deities continue helping us. It is critical that those who care for Chicomexochtli (7 Flower) do not abandon him; that they offer him rituals, foodstuffs, music, flowers, and dancing. There are people who persecute us for our religious customs and

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6 Nahua deities are aspects of a single life-force called totiotzin (literally, “our honored deity”), the impersonal, all-encompassing pantheistic life-force comprising and energizing the universe and all its inhabitants. Although invisible and intangible, Nahua deities do not occupy a distinct ontological “supernatural” world distinct from the natural world. There being no nature vs. supernature distinction, the deities are all around us in maize plants, springs, caves, hills, fire, wind, etc. Their being intangible and invisible marks their epistemological, not their ontological status. As Gómez Martínez makes clear below, Chicontepec Nahua access these deities via cut-paper figures (teixiptlahuan) that embody and make deities directly present to humans. For further discussion of Nahua pantheism, see Gómez Martínez (2002) and Sandstrom and Sandstrom (2023).

7 Dancing, music (singing and instrumental), copal incense, and foodstuffs (such soft drinks, aguardiente, cookies, and tamales) contain life-energy which Nahuas reciprocally gift to deities to give thanks for and give in exchange for their having been created as well as for such benefits as rain and crop fertility. In doing so, they also help guarantee the circulation of life-energy and future agricultural fertility.

8 Protestant evangelicals are also guilty of abuse. Nahuas (and other indigenous peoples) who follow traditional indigenous religious ways (los costumbres) are persecuted by those who do not follow them, be they indigenous or not.

9 Chicomexochtli (7 Flower) is the male aspect of the maize deity, while Macuilxochitl (5 Flower) is the female aspect. Both are said to be “the owners (dueños) of maize.” They consist of the life-force – chicahualiztli – which is contained within maize and which is transferred to humans upon eating maize, and which humans in return gift back to the deities so that maize may be reborn as the next maize crop. Just as the deities feed humans so likewise humans feed the deities. Humans and deities exist in a symbiotic relationship.
practices (*totlaneltokil*), but we should ignore them, because we, too, have the right to practice and express our faith. They criticize our customs, arguing that our gods (*totiotzitzah*) do not really consume the foods we offer them.\(^{10}\) However, these critics are not paying attention, they are ill-informed. Our god (*toteco*) wants reciprocity from us. We should not only ask from him but we must also offer him a little of what we receive in return. You fellow indigenous peoples know that if the deities receive our gifts and if we communicate with them by means of copal incense smoke, music, and prayers – that is if we perform our devotions properly – then the deities will bring rain when we ask for rain and will protect our harvest.

Our traditions, customs, and practices (*totlaneltokilli*) are beautiful. The most obvious evidence of this is our colorful, cut-paper figures of deities and other nonhuman spirit beings (*espíritus*) who are helpers of the principal deities.\(^{11}\) It is also imperative that we respect our sacred places. The hills, springs, caves and ancient (archaeological) ruins are sensitive places.\(^{12}\) We have to reinvigorate our ceremonies (*tlaneltokil*) by conveying the knowledge of how to conduct them, because in this way we will preserve them as much as possible in their original form (albeit with modifications). We must ourselves begin to respect and value our beliefs and lifeways. That is the only thing that we have left as indigenous people. If we do not do it, then non-indigenous persons will not do so, either.

These our traditional medicine and the entire indigenous system of treating disease (*masehualpahtli*) are very important, very good, since we indigenous people (*masehualmeh*) have our own culture and methods of curing. It is always good that we consult our indigenous curers, since they can cure us of spiritual illnesses.\(^{13}\) Being

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\(^{10}\) Such critics point out that the foods offered remain wholly present and intact after allegedly being consumed by deities. The Nahua respond that the deities consume the “spiritual” or life-energy essence contained within foodstuffs, say tamales, while leaving behind the tamales’ material form. Being consumed by deities renders the remaining tamales tasteless and odorless.

\(^{11}\) For extensive discussion of the sacrality of paper (*amatl*) and the ritual use of colored, cut-paper figures by contemporary Huastecan Nahua and their Otomí (Ñähñu) and Tepehua (Hamasipiní) neighbors, see Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, *Traditional Papermaking and Paper Cult Figures of Mexico*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. The cut-paper figures are *teixiptlahuan* that embody and make present the corresponding deities, and in so doing make them immediately available for human-deity communication and reciprocal gifting. Cruz contends “the cult of paper” is “an essential component of Nahua theogony” (*Cruz, op. cit.*, 272). See also Gómez Martínez (2002).

\(^{12}\) They are “sensitive” because as living beings they communicate and interact with humans, and also experience love, care, neglect, anger, harm, respect and disrespect.

\(^{13}\) Such spiritual illnesses include a *susto* (“soul fright” or “soul loss”) which occurs as a consequence of a person’s tonalli life-force abandoning their body due commonly to some traumatic experience. The
based upon different beliefs and thus not knowing anything about these types of illnesses, allopathic (non-indigenous) medicine cannot cure them.

We indigenous people (timasehualmeh) should combine the medicines of the Western medical professional with those of the indigenous curer (masehualtepahtiketl, curandero) in order to obtain the best results and return to health quickly. When we feel ill, we should consult those persons who are able to divine the cause of illnesses by casting maize kernels. They are qualified to tell us how we ought to proceed, if it be an indigenous curing ceremony or visiting a (Western) medical clinic.

We must respect and carry on the rituals that we celebrate so that they are not lost, for they are part of our identity. In addition, they greatly help us in certain ways such as bringing together our ways of thinking and our ways of mutual respect. By means of traditional wedding ceremonies, a priest or respected elder (huehuetlacatl) weaves together and unites the family in marriage. Elotlamanitzli, the ceremony of the young ear of maize (elotl), is very beautiful and with it we give thanks for the young ears of maize to the deities but principally to earth and to water. The ritual that aims at requesting rain called atlatlacualiztli must also be celebrated, since without rain there will be no crops and the sun will kill us.

To these, the deities whom we configure with ceremonial cut-paper figures, we must respect and render devotion. As for those who criticize us, let’s not pay attention to them. Finally, even though some of these critics are indigenous, they do not understand what we are doing. They profess religions which are not their own and which they do not understand. What’s more, they are indeed poorer than we are, for they do not realize that these alien religions are using and exploiting them.

These, the deities configured using colorful cut-paper, we must care for, respect, incense, and offer foodstuffs and music. As for those of who have a “xochicalli or

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patient consequently suffers from extreme loss of appetite, depression, restless sleep, and lethargy. Susto is cured by a ritual cleansing of the patient and by the curandero’s beckoning the patient’s tonalli to return to the patient’s body.

As this passage suggests, Huastecan Nahua embrace a pragmatic attitude towards such matters. They go with what works, be it indigenous or not. Cruz comments that Nahua el costumbre is generally open to admitting new deities even if the deities originate in non-indigenous religions. The Nahuatl word for ceremony is “campeca.” Cruz speculates that it may derive from the expression, “ica nopeca” (“in case it works”). This expression is used while carrying out a ritual (Cruz, op. cit., p. 270).

The Nahuatl word for western medicine is “coyotepahtiketl” which combines the words “coyotl” (“coyote”) and pahtihketl (“medicine”). Nahuatl speakers commonly refer to any people non-indigenous peoples and indigenous as “coyomeh” or coyotes since they behave like coyotes who steal, lie, cheat and do not participate in reciprocal relationships.

See note #11. Spoken words, singing, music, copal incense smoke, aguardiente, soft drinks, cookies, tobacco, and tamales all serve as life-energy-containing foodstuffs which humans offer to deities, deities
house of costumbre” (“flower house or house of ceremonies”), care for it, cleanse it, and decorate it; and as for those who do not have one, build one, regardless of whether it be constructed of wood or concrete.

consume, and which nourish deities. This is an essential part of the reciprocal exchange of life-energies between humans and deities that keeps the cosmos alive and processing.