

*EDUCACIÓN DE
CARNE Y HUESO,*
EDUCATION OF
FLESH AND BONE:
VARIATIONS ON A
FOLK MELODY

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Sube conmigo, amor americano.
(Pablo Neruda, "Alturas de Macchu Picchu")¹

QUESTIONS AND CLAIMS, SAYING

The organizing question—i.e., the question that organizes this symposium of talks and essays—is a serious and difficult one. *What is Latin American philosophy of education?*² This question, taken prima facie as a propositional claim, presupposes at least two wholes ('Latin America' and 'philosophy of education'), a series of parts ('Latin,' 'America,' 'philosophy,' and 'education'), and the possible relationships between them, all leading, eventually, to the meaning of the question. This rather tedious opening gesture should not be misunderstood. To consider the propositional linguistic content of the organizing question is meant to not only say what is most obvious. More importantly, it is also to *show* the

1 → Pablo Neruda, Nathaniel Tarn (trans), *The Heights of Macchu Picchu: A Bilingual Edition* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), 38.

2 → In some respects, this question and its resulting thoughts are mirrored in two articles by Claudia Ruitenberg: "Introduction: The Question of Method in Philosophy of Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, (3), 315-323 and "'Plays Well with Others': the engagement of philosophy of education with other educational research," *Theory and Research in Education* 2014, (12), 88-97.

linguistic and analytic limits of understanding the question in purely propositional, linguistic terms.

As an alternative to this analytical approach, I would like to pose a series of questions that themselves ask questions about the organizing question that might more rigorously reveal the sort of response (albeit a response that does not quite give an authoritative *answer*) that this question, on my reading, seems to be hoping for. This is to say that I do not read this question, against all possible claims to the contrary, as an “open question.” While the question is certainly not presumptuous (i.e., it doesn’t have a prefabricated answer) and while the possible responses are surely many and complex, I want to take the question not as being “open,” but instead as a question asked in “good faith,” with at least *aspirational* expectations. There is something cynical about the concept of an “open question” (and the liberal value of openness in general) if by ‘open’ we mean something like a tolerance for nihilism, an absence of hope for something to emerge instead of nothing. I would hope that the question is not so much open as it is asked as an offering: the act of donation that does not presuppose a gift. A *generous* question, but a real question all the same, with aspirations of a response. In this aspirational spirit, I would like to rehearse and rephrase the question, as a musician might prepare and perform a melody, with some possible variations and responses.

Consider the following variations: What are the conditions for the possibility under which a Latin American philosophy of education might emerge as possible or real in a serious way that is not trivial? Furthermore, we might begin by asking another preliminary question implicit in this question: Is there a distinction to be made between a Latin American *philosopher* of education and Latin American *philosophy* of education? (Which also asks whether there is a difference that makes a difference between *philosophers* and *philosophy*?) This, of course, further implies whether there is a serious difference between a Latina (the person) and Latin America (the continent)? Is the question of personal and communal ethnic identity coextensive to the reality of what Latin America is?

These questions are certainly not open, and may in fact be closed in the most literal and practical sense of the term: they are

strategically intended to operationalize the organizing question in such a way that certain claims might emerge and others be excluded by strict necessity. (These claims also orbit a more general concern I have about the field of philosophy of education, if there is such a thing, that I am importing into my own reading of this question about *Latin American Philosophy of Education*.)

Here are a few of these claims:

01

There *is* a distinction, albeit a difficult and messy one, between philosophy and philosophers, just as there is a distinction between a history of philosophy and a philosophy of history. The former is historical, the latter philosophical.

02

The “Latin American philosopher” presupposes a descriptive notion of what and who a Latin American is. This question seems to be addressed, primarily, in *Latino/a Philosophy*, a particular ethno-philosophy, which offers a particular reading of the philosophy of race. Jorge Gracia’s work here seems apropos (e.g., his “familial-historical view”).

03

Insofar as the terms ‘Latin American philosophy of education’ describe something that has an original offering to make, distinct (but perhaps not mutually exclusive) from the “Latin American philosopher of education”, then it seems intuitive to expect that the offering be, in some relevant sense, both necessary and sufficient—which is to say, distinct from descriptive concerns of the philosophy of race and *Latino/a Philosophy*. Otherwise, we might ask why entities are being multiplied without necessity and, more alarmingly, the issue risks becoming purely semantic.

Before we move any further I should note that a similar analysis could be done to philosophy of education, and the field itself, in my view, often seems to ignore the rigor of this line of thought when

it thinks about what, exactly, the terms ‘philosophy of education’ describe. Suffice it to say that if philosophy of education is merely an area of applied epistemology or psychology, or a theoretical/methodological wordbank for people doing social scientific research, for immediate schoolroom use, then we might as well just call it *that* and not pretend that philosophy of education has anything *philosophical* to do with education or that *education* is anything more than schooling and credentialing. This is, of course, to say that insofar as schooling is equated with education—or, to put it another way, insofar as philosophy of education would not be able to survive the death of school—then there was probably nothing there to begin with.

Returning to the question at hand, the distinction between a Latin American (philosopher) and Latin American (philosophy) reveals that we are left with a new question that is at least as important as the question of the philosophy of race, yet it emerges as a necessarily different question: What is Latin America? In other words, how can we proceed to imagine a Latin American philosophy of education if there is no descriptive notion of Latin America? What is required, it would seem, is not so much an ethno-philosophy as much as a new continental philosophy, a philosophy that reflects the continental reality of Latin America in the way Continental philosophy (or German Idealism, and other ready comparisons) captures something about the continent of Western Europe.

One objection and reformulation would be to reject the distinction between the Latino/a and Latin America—regardless of the distinction between philosophers and philosophy—and assert that Latin America is simply the sum of its Latin American parts. But this, I think, would be to miss the poetic heart of the matter. Latin America, I want to claim, is not merely a collection of Latin Americans, a demographic and geopolitical herd—*una bola de Latinoamericanos*—in the same way that philosophy of education is hopefully not merely a collection of philosophers who have things to say using the term ‘education.’ This unqualified, and vulgarly quantified, approach loses the mystery and enchantment of the continental question, “What is Latin America?”

My sense is that we do not know what Latin America is any

more than we know what a Latin American is, exactly—and, for that matter, we do not know what philosophy or education or philosophy of education are with sense of clarity or consensus—but we can proceed, with a healthy degree of reverence and caution, by relying upon a concept of Latin America that is grounded in its art. This anthropological approach is what I am calling “folk phenomenology” with the reduction being the “folkloric reversal.” This is a turn from aesthetics to art, from theory to practice, to enable the practice of theory. It is problematic in some ways, as all forms of phenomenology ultimately must be, but it does have some distinct advantages for clarifying the question “What is Latin American philosophy of education?” For one, it grounds the strategy of thought within a rigorous analysis of the things—*cosas*, *cositas* y *cosotas*—and refuses to accept a definition in the place of a description. Instead it is to favor a partial description, but one that can be judged in a very ordinary but fundamental way.

The remainder of this essay, then, will rehearse two pieces of art that seem to be significant not only in their descriptive value, but, also, in their ability to suggest a distinct notion of education that is Latin American in the continental sense. In other words, I am making the claim, through variations on the organizing question, that if a Latin American philosophy of education does not create a new sense of what education is and might be and become, then, we are probably wasting our time—or at the very least in violation of the maxim of Occam’s Razor—and might do more good to take up questions of the philosophy of race and Latino Philosophy instead. Latin American philosophy of education, within my reading of the artistic selections to follow, is no less than a notion of education that is anciently located in the known and unknown art of Latin America—and, perhaps most notably, the fact that such art still informs Latin America in a powerful way to this day—that offers a new poetic imaginary, especially when compared to the concept of education within the Anglo-European conversation, including the one that so often seems to inform discussions of education (e.g., as schooling pure and simple) in Latin America.

Again, after *saying* it is now time to *show*, to imagine a Latin American philosophy of education *en vivo*, an education of flesh

and bone. I will now attempt a performative investigation that is Latin American in less, and therefore more, than name only. *Latinoamericano* in the flesh need not become ideologically individualistic nor ignore the spirit. These are not racialized or ethnic discourses, but actual, embodied things from which follows (1) a tragic sense of nostalgia and (2) a notion of love that, together, anchor a preliminary picture of education that is quite different from, and entirely strange to, the predominant notions of education that come to us from Anglo-German-Greek [et al.], European liberal and neoliberal notions of education—from teleology of *paedia* to the formation of modernist *bildung* (and the folklore of the *bildungromans*) to the present-day econometrics of learning: *educación de carne y hueso*, education of flesh and bone.

ART, SHOWING

In what follows are two forms of art, a song and a stanza of poetry—(1) “Canción Mixteca,” written in 1912 by José López Álvarez, and (2) a stanza from “Para Que Tu Me Oigas” in *Veinte Poemas de Amor y Una Canción Desesperada* (1924), by Pablo Neruda—followed by some brief and preliminary meditations.³

01

*Canción Mixteca*⁴

¡Qué lejos estoy del suelo donde he nacido!

How far I am from the ground upon which I was born!

inmensa nostalgia invade mi pensamiento;

immense nostalgia invades my thoughts;

y al verme tan solo y triste cual hoja al viento,

and upon seeing myself alone and sad, like a leaf in the wind,

- 3 → One might be led to believe that this is an interpretive or hermeneutic exercise. This would be a mistake. I will not attempt to present an expository reading of the selections, but, instead, allow them to inspire thoughts from themselves as things. As I will say again: Let the arts—and art itself—speak for themselves.
- 4 → I am quoting this song from memory, as all folk songs are quoted. The translation is my own.

quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento.

I'd wish to cry, I'd wish to die of sentiment.

¡Oh Tierra del Sol! Suspiro por verte

Oh land of the Sun! I breathe to see you

ahora que lejos yo vivo sin luz, sin amor;

now that far I live without light, without love;

y al verme tan solo y triste cual hoja al viento,

and upon seeing myself alone and sad, like a leaf in the wind,

quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento.

I'd wish to cry, I'd wish to die of sentiment.

Inmensa nostalgia (immense nostalgia): nostalgia for nostalgia.

It is one thing to long for home, that Odyssean longing of the West, but it is quite another thing to long for the ability to long for home in the first, and last, place. This is perhaps difficult to understand for anyone who has a home or has had one, but so many people in Latin America (and, in a more radical sense, Latin America itself) lack the essentialist colonial or indigenous consolation of home. A mestizo—or any such some-such—might long for something at least once removed from nostalgia: the nostalgia for nostalgia, the longing for the longing for home. The desire remains, but the erotic force is, paradoxically, made stronger in absentia. As the desire for home is put at a distance, it becomes more intimate and shows an excess foreign to Odysseus' journey back to Ithaca. Here, within the erotic structure of nostalgia for nostalgia, and all desire for desire, the journey cannot go backwards. Nostalgia for nostalgia cannot long for the past; it is to long for the future. Nostalgia for the future begins, perhaps, with nostalgia for nostalgia.

This “nostalgia for nostalgia” is radically different than the two forms of nostalgia that occupy the present educational imagination. For instance, to show the nostalgic uniformity among those with strong political commitments, isn't the distinction between the Right and Left in the West simply a matter of degree and dating of an identical nostalgia? The Right longs for the 1950's (or whatever fantasy they find convenient) while the Left longs for '68. Reproductions of this sterile nostalgia can be understood, I think, as a principle logic of the colonial motivation to create a “new world” in the exact image of the old.

In many ways the naturalistic Homeric motif of nostalgia was disrupted when the Hellenic idea of temporality met the radical messianic futurism of Judeo-Christianity. Liberation in Latin America is, of course, deeply informed by this soteriological and eschatological nuance, where those who are homeless and disenfranchised find themselves closest to God because of their distance from a material home. This is why the preferential option for the poor in Catholic social teaching, so influential to Liberation Theology, has been so poorly misunderstood by the nostalgic secular Left (and, of course, it goes without saying, the religious Right) and their postmodern cousins who are privileged enough to leave nostalgia behind altogether. But, to reclaim the erotic force of nostalgia for nostalgia, we need look no further than a song of longing, a song that, in the United States, we might call the blues, itself at a doubled distance from its future.

And the blues of nostalgia for nostalgia is rooted in the hopeful despair of tragic love.

02

*Para Que Tu Me Oigas (excerpt)*⁵

Llanto de viejas bocas, sangre de viejas súplicas.

Lament of old mouths, blood of old supplications.

Ámame, compañera. No me abandones. Sígueme.

Love me, companion. Do not abandon me. Follow me.

Sígueme, compañera, en esa ola de angustia.

Follow me, companion, on that wave of anguish.

A weak, tragic, love. Love on waves of anguish. The Western colonial idea of love, going back to the Homeric epic, is one of conquest. *Conquista*. Love conquers all. Here however we find a lover who loves the beloved beyond victory or defeat, through companionship on waves of anguish. This is an *epimethian* lover,

5 → Pablo Neruda, *Veinte Poemas de Amor y Una Canción Desesperada y Cien Sonetos de Amor* (Barcelona: Vintage Español, 2010), 7, translation is my own.

recalling Ivan Illich's final chapter of *Deschooling Society*, where he recalls matriarchal Greece (before the Homeric epic).⁶ In this (Latin American?) version of the myth, Epimethius, against the advice of his brother, Prometheus, marries Pandora, unleashing suffering but also giving birth to hope.

This is the love that cannot be given or taken; it is weaker (and therefore beyond) the logic of exchange, transaction, or even revelation; it cannot be a gift to the beloved before it shows itself as an offering. To *offer*, then, begins with companionship, which does not abandon the beloved in the face of suffering, danger, or the tempest of an offering that never gives. Rather than a triumphant, immune love, that gives rise to the Promethean ethos of colonialism and modernity, tragic love is fragile and prone to sickness, at times defenseless. (This is at least kin to the religious "porous self" that Charles Taylor distinguishes from the "buffered self" in *A Secular Age*.⁷)

There may exist a fragile solidarity in existential sensibility between the student who cannot study, the teacher who cannot teach, the professor who can no longer profess and the postmodern and postcolonial geopolitical and cultural state of Latin America. Whereas "education" is presented by altruists, philanthropists, and bureaucrats as a nostalgic redemption, a force that conquers all through the love of the gift that ignores its ontogenetic offering, the truth of nostalgia for nostalgia and tragic love recovers what has been lost in pedagogy through the mystagogy of revolution. Part of that mystery is itself revolutionary (as opposed to being purely reactionary): the wounds of Christ remain after resurrection and glory. Grace bleeds and laments dance.

EDUCATION OF FLESH AND BONE, *OFFERING*

The *Popul Vuh*, a Mayan creation myth, traces the human person to primordial corn. On Ash Wednesdays, Roman Catholics receive a dab of ashes on their foreheads, accompanied by a

6 → Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 2000).

7 → Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

reminder of death, an elemental sign that traces them to the dirt of the Genesis creation stories, made real in the grave. There is, of course, an obvious physiological relationship between the human person and the earth, visible after death. Our bodies decompose. Flesh and bone burn.

While the elemental relationship between peoples and their planet is obvious in physiological, gastronomic, and ecological ways—although not obvious enough, seeing how viciously blind we are to it as we pollute and consume it into oblivion—it seems to be less apparent today in terms of our origins.

In the extreme, everything has failed. The problem with ancient mythopoesis—i.e., religious myths and stories—is that they are too culturally selective and ultimately untrue when taken literally and unimaginatively. The problem with modern scientific and logical claims is that they are often even narrower, taking things literally and unimaginatively. The problem with ideology is that it is parasitic, derivative of the previous two, living in the absence of either. We are in a devastating predicament, caught between sentimentalists, rigorists, and nihilists. There is either too little to hold on to, too much, or nothing at all.

The language of crisis has lost its urgency and this may be where the question “What is Latin American philosophy of education?” reemerges in a question asked by a small group of students looking for a home, seeking a place that, in its aspirations and dreams, is more than a racially sensitive support group. Surely, this is not a politically therapeutic query. All the same, I am a Latino—a *Tejano*—with a limited understanding of Latin America, clinging to a Spanish language and some childhood years of borderland living, as I write and publish in English, under an Anglicized name, while expatriating to Canada. There is no doubt that I came to this question for mixed and conflicted reasons.

Philosophy as a consolation, that Boethian preparation for death, has perhaps reached me, too, at a personal and confessional level, even as the facile tendency to Latinize the question strikes me as being more Roman than Latin American. And even as these more intimate realities pierce and tear at the assumptions of the earlier distinctions, the question of what Latin American philosophy

of education is rests on the hope that a continental philosophy of the Americas, rooted in a broad and original content and form, might reclaim an education, both ancient and new, that exists as the offering of the incarnate body, the physical, the mystical, the community of believers, the flesh and bones and wounds and signs and silences that we find in the iconic presence of art when it is allowed to show itself.

Everything that shows itself, offers.

POSTLUDE

*Antigua América, novia sumergida,
también tus dedos,
al salir de la selva hacia el alto vacío de los dioses,
bajo los estandartes nupciales de la luz y el decoro,
mezclándose al trueno de los tambores y las lanzas,
también, también tus dedos,
los que la rosa abstracta y la línea del frío, los
que el pecho sangriento del nuevo cereal trasladaron
hasta la tela de material radiante, hasta las duras cavidades,
también, también, América enterrada, guardaste en lo mas bajo,
en el amargo intestino, como un águila, el hambre?*

- Pablo Neruda, "Alturas de Macchu Picchu."⁸ ■

8 → Neruda, *Heights of Macchu Picchu*, 58.

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