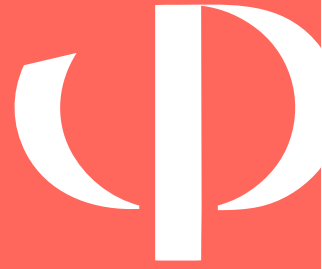


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CULTURE AND CANONS

It is hardly news to recognize that over the past few decades there has been widespread pressure towards something of a global monoculture. The nearly globally ubiquitous presence of McDonald's, Walmart, Hollywood movies, and American pop music, for example, is taken as one of the leveling effects of contemporary forms of capitalism. Somewhat concurrently, this has been accompanied by something of a collapse of a monoculture within the United States. Depending on where you live in the US, there may be no McDonald's and Walmarts—or there may be many. Pop albums don't have anything like the shared consumer base they once did. Instead, the algorithms of Spotify, Pandora, and Apple Music provide ever more customized tastes to individuals. Similarly, with notable exceptions, the era of movies providing a shared experience seems to have

collapsed. Where entire generations could be counted on to have seen *ET*, *Titanic*, or *Gone with the Wind*, modern movie audiences tend toward greater fragmentation.

That's how things can seem. The death of US monoculture may be a kind of myth, the sort of eviction from Eden that only seems possible because some corner of society felt culturally authoritative and licensed to disregard cultural endeavors that were not a part of those worlds. But fictions can have real power. In this case, there is at least some reason to believe that there is something right about this story. That is, an incomplete but wide swath of the English-speaking world shared a robust body of overlapping cultural experiences and touchstones, and this has given way to a more fragmented cultural landscape.

At the same time, it isn't as though this fragmentation took away expectations of knowledge required for various kinds of cultural authority. Canons, in some form, seem to be inevitable requirements of organizing knowledge. On one way of thinking about it, the canonical is just respectable information. More precisely, the canons are ideas, texts, et cetera that one can expect others in the same field to be under significant pressure to know in some more-than-trivial way.¹

If culture-wide canons collapsed with the monoculture, then an important successor has emerged in the form of *microcanons*. If you present yourself as a science fiction cinephile, you are revealed as a fraud if we discover you are unfamiliar with *Solaris*; *2001: A Space Odyssey*; *Star Wars*; and *Alien*. If you play platformers, you better know who Mario and Luigi are; if Indy Car racing is your corner of culture, then Mears, Unser, and Penske better mean something to you.² Broad cultural authority has given way to smaller, local forms of authority partitioned by discrete, frequently overlapping identities, interest groups, and communities.

Although the particulars are different, there is a parallel situation within universities. The gradual abandonment of a standardized general education curriculum, increased skepticism about canons composed solely of "dead white guys," and ongoing pressure to specialize have meant that many—perhaps most—undergraduates now leave college without having read Euripides, Augustine, Eliot, Kant, Tolstoy, and so on.

How this came about is surely a complicated matter, partly connected to the expansion of higher education to more than the leisured classes. Undergraduate educations are now more frequently shaped by comparatively local conceptions of what is valuable, conceptions that are reluctant to assert their authority for all learned peoples everywhere. If you take a course on Latin American writers for your literature requirement, you will surely read Borges, García-Marquez, Allende, and maybe Bolaño. If you take a nineteenth-century British poetry class, you'll still read Byron and Shelley. Microcanons, like all canons, proclaim that this and that ought to be studied. Unlike the older kind of canon, they add a further thought: . . . *but only if you are in to that kind of thing*. The loss of confident insistence that *all* learned people need to know this material just is the

loss of a single broad canon within higher education. What we have is the proliferation of more specialized micro-canons, smaller pockets of conversations within what once presented itself as a single, larger conversation.

The erosion of a monoculture—or, at least, the erosion of the authority of a myth about a monoculture—has taken away the grounds for a certain kind of canonicity. There is little or no scholarly, literary, or artistic information that represents itself as the kind of thing that all learned people must know. One consequence of this is that in a *non-monocultural* world, wide-ranging expertise is hard to earn. Cross-canonical expertise isn't impossible, but it is difficult. Specialization has made the universal genius an anachronism, one that only occurs in fiction.³

Still, pluralism produces some of what the monocultural myth aspired to, albeit in a more modest form. We now readily recognize the possibility of cross-canonical texts. These are texts that matter to multiple communities of knowledge, oftentimes for diverse reasons. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, or Bourdieu's *Distinction*, or Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* are hardly confined to their original disciplinary homes. The possibility of cross-canonical texts is not a panacea. That a text might instructively speak to multiple bodies of inquiry does not guarantee that the relevant parties are even aware of it. Absent scholars with fingers in distinct scholarly networks, cross-canonical significance is difficult to achieve.

To think of canons as simply about identifying what work is good or not is to miss the varied motivations we have for regarding some texts as respectable background knowledge in a field. Fights about canons are often fights about, variously, which *techniques* we should favor for thinking; which *assumptions* we should take for granted; which *styles of exposition* we are prepared to countenance; which *conversations* we take to have a kind of authority over us; and even, sometimes, which *kinds of people* we are hoping to create. The decision to teach Rawls rather than Burke, Nietzsche rather than Shaftsbury, Beauvoir rather than Tertullian isn't just about what kinds of propositional knowledge and what patterns of reasoning are valuable. It is also partly about the kinds of people we hope education will produce, and, sometimes, what kinds of people will become philosophers.⁴

As one might expect with this smorgasbord of functions, canons can be shaped by diverse interests. Indeed, the emergence and persistence of some academic fields as *fields* has been plausibly shaped by the role such fields have played in class signaling⁵ and moral education.⁶ Canons may also shape their practitioners by selection effects, via style, form, and content. Faux-mathematical formulations of philosophical theses may be a mostly innocent feature to some, while repellent to others. Dialogue and poems may entice me, while only essays will do for you. Requirements that one learn a canon may play a role in pulling in some people and concerns and pushing out others. This is, of course, a contingent matter that turns on the fit between, on the one hand, the current style, form, and content of the canon, and, on the other hand, the dispositions of the day. If you find it hard to overlook the racism and sexism of, say,

Aristotle, Locke, Kant, and Hegel, then the cost of the buy-in to the discipline looks different than if you don't mind, don't notice, or can readily overlook those things with a dismissive wave of the hand.⁷

THE SITUATION OF PHILOSOPHY

Many of us have a sense of Anglophone philosophy being both late to the retreat from canonicity but at the same time particularly resistant to the possibility of completely relinquishing its traditional canon. This is, I think, because philosophy (at least as a discipline in the Anglophone world) has a somewhat atypical position with respect to canons.

For Anglophone disciplinary philosophy, the canon just is the thing in virtue of which it makes sense to think of it as a field or a discipline. That is, there is a shared tree trunk of information—the history of *Western* philosophy, as it is called—in virtue of which the field of philosophy has mostly held on to its image of being a field. That sense of unity is perhaps anchored in, or maybe expressed in, a tremendous convergence around the importance of that familiar range of historical figures. The branches from that trunk admit of different characterizations (e.g., analytic vs. everyone else—Continental, pluralist, phenomenological, pragmatist, etc.). There is a fairly widespread sense (whether accurate or not) of some kind of division that happens after Kant, at some point in the nineteenth century. So, even while contemporary subfields within philosophy take on the narrower shape of microcanons with no expectation that specialists outside those subfields will have read those texts, we remain certain that Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, and Kant remain figures we philosophers are all under some non-trivial pressure to know at some level of detail.

The unity of that trunk, and the convergence around the history of the subject (at least in our pedagogical requirements), tends to be the fig leaf that hides the absence of any interesting uniformity to the diverse kinds of things that have counted as philosophy. Transformation and loss of our current canonical structure would be costly to the field and its practitioners in at least three further ways. First, if philosophy has more than one trunk—a hedge-like-structure, perhaps—it becomes harder to ensure the transmission of specific conversations and particular kinds of knowledge.⁸ Second, the scope of one's expertise is made smaller if the canon or field becomes larger. My expertise at Kant is comparatively less significant the more pillars we add to our temple. Third, and more inchoately, I suspect that some in the field think that the more widely we spread our attention, the less well suited we are to appreciate the really great work in the field. Our current mighty dead are particularly mighty. If one sees the power of that work, the world-historical influence it has had, this seems to set a pretty high bar for work that aspires to a place in that pantheon, and too-easy expansion of what is central to philosophy devalues that and threatens to shrink our own ability to appreciate the lofty heights achieved by our intellectual ancestors.⁹

Perhaps the costs described above should be paid, but we do well to acknowledge that these challenges lurk and to

recognize that they are important barriers to both radical transformation of the canon, as well as abandonment of a canon.

SOME CHALLENGES FOR THE INCEPTION OF A CANON OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICAN PHILOSOPHY

The recent publication of Sánchez and Sanchez's *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century*¹⁰ provides an extraordinary opportunity for reflecting on the limits and promise of canon-formation. The volume is a rare case of an actual, genuine *event* for a field. That's not hyperbole. Within the United States academy, it constitutes an important creation moment for the field of Mexican philosophy, and it does so in part by making possible the teaching of a range of courses in Mexican philosophy.

Acknowledging the importance of this volume does not denigrate the essential and important work in Mexican philosophy that came before it, in both Spanish and in English. However, before the publication of *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century*, the US wing of this field was the work of mostly lone specialists fortunate to find *any* interlocutors in the Anglophone philosophical world. With the publication of this volume, a nascent community of scholars on this side of the border has a collection of texts from which to draw, to train new students, and to which we can direct interested colleagues. The anthology provides a critical mass of interrelated texts, many of them historically important and philosophically rich, most of which are now available in English for the first time.

In light of the foregoing, it is difficult to see the book as anything other than the nascent formation of a microcanon for Mexican philosophy within the Anglophone philosophical world. This last bit matters in an important way: a microcanon in the heart of the academic empire, as it were, is a microcanon at the heart of a global system of knowledge production and credentialing.

This can be ethically complex in a number of ways. First, as Pascale Casanova¹¹ and others have noted, one way for scholars in the global periphery of academe to achieve status in the periphery is to achieve it in the center. Fifty years ago, that might have meant seeking fame in France; today, that is more likely to mean that the United States is where the main stage is to be found. Whatever the right account of what propels the center's uptake of work at the global periphery of academe, the result is the incentivization of certain kinds of work in the periphery, and, relatedly, the creation of distinctive roles for such figures—for example, the Latin American philosopher as a representative of a community or tradition who gains her relevance speaking on behalf of that community or its intellectual traditions.^{12, 13}

Second, canon-formation and the consequent attention by scholars based in the US is likely to have an outsized impact on what is regarded as canonical outside the United States. So the power to influence what is canonical Mexican philosophy is disproportionately in the hands of people outside of Mexico. It is easy to exaggerate the conversation-shaping powers of scholars in the United States. Still, it is

not implausible to think that the US academy's canon of Mexican philosophy will exercise considerable influence on any wider understanding of Mexican philosophy, perhaps even in Mexico. Thus, one might have reason to worry that the narrative of Mexican philosophy may get away from Mexican philosophers, and that this would be true even if the history of Mexican philosophy were a more central preoccupation in Mexico than it currently is.¹⁴

It is not obvious what the alternatives are. Ongoing failure to engage with and study Mexican philosophy within the US hardly seems appealing. For that matter, one might object that the best hope for the history of Mexican philosophy is for it to be cared for by a wider community of scholars. The history of German philosophy has done well in large part precisely because it is not exclusively in the hands of German philosophers. The aspiration to have the legacy of one's labors limited by something as arbitrary as a national border is, I suspect, not easy to defend.

Still, this does not mean that there aren't risks to which we ought to be attentive, especially at moments of canon-inception. Responsible scholarship, as always, is the order of the day. And to the credit of Sánchez and Sanchez, this is not a volume that was constructed *ex nihilo*, and without consultation of scholars in Mexico who work on Mexican philosophy. There is a fairly standard set of canonical twentieth-century figures in Mexican philosophy, formed by scholars in Mexico and histories of philosophy in Mexico. Figures like Sierra, Caso, Ramos, Vasconcelos, Zea, and Villoro have already been variably present in English language accounts of philosophy in Mexico. It is also a strength of this volume that it involves the intentional rehabilitation of figures that have been mostly abandoned by contemporary Mexican philosophy (a handful of important scholarly exceptions like Guillermo Hurtado's crucial work duly noted). Sánchez and Sanchez include figures like Portilla and Uranga, who tend not to be studied in contemporary Mexican philosophy's understanding of what is valuable in its own history. The inclusion of these figures is not haphazard, but an intentional effort to incorporate philosophers who were important in their own time period, and for whom there is reason for us now to read.

What's missing? What else might we want to include? These questions have some urgency at the moment of canon-formation precisely because changing an established canon is oftentimes harder than creating it from the get-go. But as noted above, these questions also get some of their urgency from what texts *do*. Tacit norms and values are often all the more powerful for our pretending that they are not there. To teach Sor Juana and Uranga, like teaching Beauvoir and Nozick, is often a matter of what knowledge we transmit and which arguments we find worthwhile. And, again, it is *also* about what kind of philosophers we are trying to make in the next generation. The burden is on us to pick who gets resurrected when we try "to open our veins and inject some blood into the empty veins of the dead."¹⁵

In light of these concerns, one might think there is a natural list of ways we might hope to supplement this volume.

Our canon might include a larger selection of women—especially, but not exclusively, feminist—philosophers, more philosophers outside the ambit of Mexico City, and, potentially, more people from outside traditional academic circles. As easy as it is to point to these as ways to build on what Sánchez and Sanchez have already given us, none of these would have been uncomplicated additions to the present volume.

First, consider the status of women in the volume. It is easy to charge that women philosophers are underrepresented (there is one selection by a woman author among the nineteen readings in the volume). Even so, volumes like this are inevitably circumscribed by access to permissions, by a concern to faithfully represent literatures and traditions that were often created under conditions not adequately hospitable to women authors and their work. If one thinks that mere inclusion for the sake of inclusion is often no favor at all, then expansion on this front may not be a straightforward matter. Still, from the standpoint of what kind of canon we might have reason to want, it might be appealing to endeavor to seek to form this microcanon in a more expansive way.

Second, on looking beyond figures who have notable connections to Mexico City, this too is a difficult matter. What makes further expansion difficult is that, of course, the greatest concentration of educational resources and cultural influence has historically been located in the capital. Trying to tell a story about, for example, the history of philosophy in the United States before World War II would, for similar reasons, be heavily weighted to figures with ties to a geographically small region of the North Atlantic seaboard.

Third, on the matter of the inclusion of non-traditional, potentially non-disciplinary philosophers, matters are especially fraught. There are some in this volume: O'Gorman and Reyes, for example. However, effectively presenting the value of Mexican philosophy to a new audience is partly a matter of the values and interests of that audience. If your audience for a volume like this is the modal Anglophone teacher of philosophy, then the inclusion of non-academically trained philosophers in a volume on Mexican philosophy runs the risk of confirming (too common, often-frustrating) background expectations that there is not academically serious philosophy in Latin America. There is a battery of concerns here for the specialist in Mexican philosophy, ranging from stereotypes that what work there is, is mostly literary to the idea that the only material of interest is from "wisdom traditions" and not anything like a recognizable disciplinary system of knowledge (which is, itself, a complicated and unobvious assumption). Thus, to incorporate elements of "not immediately academically recognizable philosophy" is to run the risk of a double marginalization—making a marginal field more marginal by emphasizing its exoticism.¹⁶

Perhaps these pragmatic considerations can and should be outweighed by other aspirations—e.g., aspirations to change what it means to do philosophy, to be a philosopher, and where we should look for philosophy. I take no stand on these things. My point is only that limited disciplinary

attention is not allotted in a vacuum, and that no choice about these things is without cost to uptake and audience-formation.

I applaud Sánchez and Sanchez for the broad-mindedness they have shown. I also want to continue to encourage those of us working in this field to ask ourselves what we've overlooked, what we can incorporate into our now-coalescing microcanon of Mexican philosophy. If we answer these questions partly in light of not just what *has* mattered, but also in light of what sorts of philosophical sensibilities we hope to produce, my suspicion is that the resulting canon will be one that we are happy to live with for a longer period of time.

WHAT WOULD SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

What would institutional success in the US look like for the history of Mexican philosophy? One answer: were particular texts of Mexican philosophy to achieve new cross-canonical significance, this would clearly be a kind of institutional achievement.

Perhaps the most likely promising future is one where particular figures inside Mexican philosophy, but outside the traditional historical canon, come to play a role in one or more disciplinary microcanons, and, eventually, in the kinds of things we expect philosophy majors to know. How might this happen? The most likely path involves convincing specialists in some or another sub-field that a particular figure or work in Mexican philosophy has insights that matter for work in that other specialist field. The standing challenge to overcome is a familiar one: there is a potentially unbounded set of things that could be relevant to our projects and no one has time to read everything, so we all rely on heuristics to sort works, figures, and the like into things we pay attention to and endeavor to respond to. In circumstances like these, one has to show that if reading Villoro can help us better understand what communitarians care about, then Anglophone political philosophers have reason to pay attention. If "Essay on the Ontology of the Mexican" can sustain new and interesting work for specialists in moral psychology, then it has a shot at cross-canonical significance in that way. And so on.

If the foregoing is right, one takeaway from all of this is that *if* we want cross-canonical standing, it means that we can't all stay in the silo of Mexican philosophy. We could reject that aspiration, but that too has costs. And none of this is to deny that the field benefits from some scholars who specialize and exclusively pursue research within the history of Mexican philosophy. By itself, however, that is not a promising path to cross-canonical viability.

The corollary to this is that the disciplinary status of cross-canonical works will hinge on both the apparent value of the work *and* the significance of the other canons in which the work features. Not all cross-canonical significances are equal. Gabriel García Márquez's role in world literature matters in a way that Moenia's significance to electronic music does not. Without passing judgment on the intrinsic virtues of either work or the genres in which their work figures, the canons in which they figure have very different standings within the wider artistic community, and this

difference in standing of the fields has consequences for the distribution of intellectual and academic attention on those works.

At least some of us now face a challenge: Can we take this gift, this book, and find ways to make it meaningful and valuable to both our students and colleagues? I'd like to think the answer is yes, and that in so doing we can make manifest the promise of Mexican philosophy. Achieving this goal requires more work—work that, thanks to Sánchez and Sanchez, as well as their collaborators in translation and publishing, we now have the opportunity to pursue. We are all in their debt.¹⁷

NOTES

1. It may be tempting to put this in terms of the idea that something is canonical *if it matters*. That's too simple, as a work can matter without being canonical. A work may close off certain possibilities without that work or idea being held in special regard within a field. Suppose Copernicus's work put an end to a particular theological metaphysics. It doesn't follow that we think of Copernicus's *On the Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres* as a canonical work in theological metaphysics. Or a work might shape a field in the wrong way, for example, by being so terrible as to make others avoid the topic, view, or figure. Even so, the mark of the canonical within a field is, roughly, being "the kind of thing one is under significant pressure to know" is surely an imperfect characterization, but good enough for present purposes.
2. In comparison to canons, microcanons have narrower, non-universalizing expectations about the value of their contents and the scope of those to whom those attendant expectations apply. If one has a notion of the canonical that is compatible with this sort of thing, then it may make sense to think of microcanons as a species of canon with a narrower-than-typically-recognized authority. For my purposes, the chief advantage of "microcanon" is to highlight the comparatively narrow band of authority and expectation imposed by this knowledge, compared to more traditional conceptions of the canonical.
3. Tony Stark evidently has competences ranging from rocketry to robotics to high energy physics to artificial intelligence. Bruce Banner allegedly has seven PhDs. No wonder he's so angry: that's a lot of committee members he had to please.
4. If teaching Rawls or Hume or Kant or Aristotle can help us make the right kinds of people—and it would be strange if we didn't hope that teaching philosophy didn't help form the dispositions that make us kinds of people (good citizens, committed communitarians, principled individualists, moral skeptics, and so on)—then choosing who we teach says something about who we want to create, who we want to speak to, and which conversations we want to have. Competing aspirations about this are, of course, par for the course. The other side of this is that we also have concerns to *not* cultivate other ways of thinking, convictions, values, and kinds of people. We sometimes teach and read to avoid producing certain types of persons.
5. See T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
6. See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
7. Rickless contends that "students at all levels are more intellectually engaged when they can identify, at least in some way, with the authors of the texts they are reading. And this is particularly true, I think for undergraduates." See, S. C. Rickless, "Brief for an Inclusive Anti-Canon," *Metaphilosophy* 49 (2018) 167–81.
That seems right, although I'd add that the importance of the degree of identification may vary in complicated ways across the involved social identities, class, subject matter, and so on, and that there is a want of good empirical data about the particulars.
8. Rickless notes this as well, although he is inclined to think that this is a cost that is worth paying for other reasons, some of which overlap with the concerns I've raised about the price of admission to the discipline.

9. Of course, there's also something of a self-fulfilling prophecy about this fact, both as a matter of influence and as a matter of appreciating its intellectual heights: it is hard for work to have influence and be properly appreciated if it is never taught. In contrast, when something is frequently taught it is much easier for that work or figure to have real influence, and for us to know what is great about that work or figure.
 10. Carlos Alberto Sánchez and Robert Eli S., *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century: Essential Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
 11. P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
 12. Ofelia Schutte, "Cultural Alterity: Cross-Cultural Communication and Feminist Theory," *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 53–72.
 13. As Casanova warns, such scholars are under pressure to remain within the neat confines of her intellectual role as a bridge between those communities.
 14. For similar concerns see A. Barceló, "Against Latin American Philosophy Going Mainstream," *Philosophical Percolations* (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.philpercs.com/2016/05/against-latin-american-philosophy-going-mainstream-.html>.
 15. José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, 1st American ed. (New York: Norton, 1961).
 16. This is a point that is distinct but not unrelated from the familiar problem in various "marginal" (to mainstream Anglophone philosophy) fields of the "double bind" of being too exotic to be philosophy or insufficiently exotic to be worth sustained philosophical attention of scholars at the center. For the particular case of Latin American philosophy, see Mignolo (2003), who draws from Bernasconi's (1997) discussion of the challenge of African philosophy for Continental philosophy. Walter Mignolo, "Philosophy and the Colonial Difference," *Philosophy Today* 43 (1999): 36–41; Robert Bernasconi, "African Philosophy's Challenge to Continental Philosophy," in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. E. C. Eze (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell, 1997), 183–96.
 17. My gratitude to Joshua Landy for an especially fruitful discussion about microcanons, and to participants and audience members at the 2018 Pacific APA session on *Mexican Philosophy in the 20th Century*.
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