Geographies of Selves: Haciendo una América Cósmica through Philosophy

ALEXANDER V. STEHN
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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IN HIS BEAUTIFUL AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING BOOK—*From American Empire to América Cósmica through Philosophy: Prospero's Reflection*—Terrance MacMullan (whom I call "Terry" in real life but "MacMullan" in print) has contributed successfully to the broader task of "bridging the rift separating the philosophical conversations of predominantly English-speaking North America and predominantly Spanish and South or Latin America" (MacMullan viii). MacMullan and I are each peculiarly situated to build these philosophical bridges, as white guys who grew up in Spanish-speaking places that our non-Hispanic families had just moved to—MacMullan in Puerto Rico, me in rural South Texas. Although geographically and culturally distinct, both are places where the US border crossed the majority population—Puerto Ricans in 1898 and Mexican Americans in 1848—making both MacMullan and I accidental colonialists. (Dewey said it well in 1927 after visiting Mexico: "Imperialism Is Easy"! [see Dewey].) In other words, MacMullan and I grew up in the very rifts that we now seek to understand and bridge from our *gringo Boricua* or *Anglo Tejano* subject positions that speak and read Spanish in dialogue with "the wisdom of philosophical voices from across all of the Americas" (MacMullan viii).

Since my word count is limited, I will not write about how much MacMullan's book taught me about the many philosophical voices that were already familiar to me, but I still want to name some of them alphabetically as North/South pairs to give a sense of the book's tremendous range: Addams and Alberdi, Anzaldúa and Bolívar, Du Bois and Frondizi, Emerson and Ingenieros, James and Martí, Peirce and Rodó, Royce and Vasconcelos. This list leaves out a lot, including all the living philosophers writing in both Spanish and English whose work MacMullan engages and cites throughout. Nevertheless, even this abbreviated naming exercise gestures toward MacMullan's

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success in fostering "a genuine, integrated inter-American philosophy capable of deconstructing the legacy of the United States' white supremacist empire in the Americas and to envision a greater America— . . . *una América Cósmica*—that achieves the promise of our ideals by being fully democratic, engaged, and pluralistic" (MacMullan xv). In short, MacMullan's book makes a tremendously important, wide-ranging, and painstakingly researched contribution to inter-American philosophy that should be on the reading list of anyone interested in the past, present, or future of philosophy across the Americas.

One philosophical voice was entirely new to me: Pedro Albizu Campos, whom MacMullan's ninth chapter calls "an American Socrates and the gadfly of the American empire" (147). As a specialist who regularly reads and teaches a wide range of both North American and Latin American philosophers, I felt somewhat embarrassed to learn that I had been ignorant of such an important public philosopher, but as MacMullan rightly points out: "Albizu Campos's voice was not just ignored: it was violently suppressed by US colonial authorities in Puerto Rico after he spent decades denouncing the cruelty and corruption of *yanqui* colonialism, proclaiming the sovereign rights of the people of Puerto Rico and above all refusing to acquiesce to the propaganda that Puerto Rico rightfully belonged to the United States" (MacMullan 143). Although he was a World War I veteran and the first Puerto Rican to graduate from Harvard Law School, Albizu Campos was an activist for Puerto Rican independence who spent twenty-six years of his life in prison (1936–1947 and 1950–1965). According to MacMullan, the speeches that he gave while he was out of prison from 1948 to 1950 "argued that the US occupation of Puerto Rico was the real crime and that it was no crime for the people of Puerto Rico to fight for their freedom against an imperial power, just as Washington did against the British. Like Socrates, his offence was one of speaking against injustice" (153).

Having lived most of my life in South Texas, and as a scholar of Mexican American philosophers like Gloria Anzaldúa, I've learned a lot about how the US government only selectively honors the citizenship of Mexican Americans—illegally deporting hundreds of thousands of US citizens of Mexican descent in two waves that chronologically coincide with the two periods that Albizu Campos spent in prison. And as a person who loves teaching Socrates in conjunction with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" or Leopoldo Zea's "La filosofía como compromiso," I was excited to order a used copy of *La palabra como delito: Los discursos por los que condenaron a Pedro Albizu Campos, 1948–1950*. Published in Puerto Rico in 1993, this

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book is out of print. It's not even listed on Amazon, much less available for purchase. Until MacMullan came along, Albizu Campos fell through the cracks of my inter-American philosophy. As a Puerto Rican American imprisoned for twenty-six years, he was apparently too "Latin American" to be American and too "American" to be Latin American. The public school education I received kept the Americans of Puerto Rico far away from me—even though they are my fellow citizens—just as it taught me virtually nothing about the Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants I grew up with. In a similar vein, when it came to languages other than English, my public school education only introduced me to Spanish in seventh grade, as something of a joke. I don't know a single person who actually learned Spanish from seventh to twelfth grade in my rural South Texas hometown unless they walked in already knowing it. By high school, I had learned that Puerto Ricans existed and spoke Spanish, but I didn't realize that they were US citizens until I took a Spanish class in college.

So I am especially grateful to MacMullan for introducing me to Albizu, who "implored his audience to not be bamboozled by the *yanqui* propaganda that Puerto Rico is poor because it lacks resources, or suffers from a primitive culture. They were poor because of colonialism. They had resources: they didn't have *access* to their resources because of U.S. colonialism that was exporting them. They were poor because they are being robbed by the very people who claimed to be civilized, who claimed to be there to help" (160). I can't wait to teach Albizu's texts to my students alongside Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Change "Puerto Rico" to "Deep South Texas" and "Puerto Ricans" to "Mexicans," and the narrative almost perfectly parallels Anzaldúa's description of how her family went from owning their own land in South Texas as far back as when it was Mexico to working as sharecroppers and migrant farm workers.

I owe a great personal and philosophical debt to Gloria Anzaldúa, so I want to focus the remainder of my remarks on the third part of MacMullan's book: "Inter-American Philosophy as a Legitimate Aspiration." MacMullan weaves Anzaldúa's philosophy through his last three chapters, urging *gringos* or *yanquis* to "confront our *Gringo* Doppelganger," to practice what Anzaldúa called "spiritual activism," and to create a genuinely inter-American path "toward a loving community of the Americas or *una América Cósmica*" (MacMullan 169). On MacMullan's interpretation, Anzaldúa "calls us to attend to the fact that white Americans who are deathly afraid of what people of color will do to them when white folks become the demographic minority will continue to be dangerously unhinged until we accept the shadow beast

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of what we've done and continued to do" (MacMullan 196). The case of my home state of Texas is instructive here. Non-Hispanic whites officially became a numerical minority in 2022, and our state government has become increasingly unhinged. In 2023, our state legislature passed Senate Bill 17 banning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs at public universities. And over the last three months, Texas's Governor and Attorney General have squared off with the Biden administration and the Supreme Court over Texas Senate Bill 4, which allows local and state police officers to arrest and deport people who they believe entered the country illegally. This isn't far from what leaders of the American Redoubt movement—which MacMullan analyzes in chapter 12—would do if they went from being a fringe movement in the American Northwest to being the majority party in the Texas Legislature.

MacMullan presents Anzaldúa's spiritual and emotional path of *conocimiento* (knowledge) as the alternative that accepts ambiguity, acknowledges and corrects the harms of oppression, and tries to help us all heal and find community together. In Anzaldúa's words, "[t]he answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts" (qtd. in MacMullan 211). Early in the book, where MacMullan also names Anzaldúa's personal and philosophical genre of *autohistoria-teoria* as a model, he identifies the split that originated in him during his childhood: "My life experiences in Puerto Rico and the states led me to wonder from an early age about what America is, who Americans are, and how all the different peoples of the America relate" (xiii). As a fellow gringo/yanqui/Anglo Tejano who has tried and is still trying to do similar personal and philosophical work, I agree with MacMullan that not many white people seem interested in this project, especially if it involves us learning other people's languages, histories, cultures, and philosophies. But just like Anzaldua's writings, MacMullan's book "invites reflection and introspection at least as much as it does analysis" (MacMullan 212).

I could easily go on praising MacMullan's book, but the one disappointment I'll share here as my third and final point is that I wish MacMullan would have put more of himself and his story directly into the book. The reflection is there, and so is the analysis, but the introspection remains mostly implicit. MacMullan gives us minimal access to his inner life. I would hypothesize that this form of self-effacement is rooted in MacMullan's intellectual humility and working assumption that readers might not be interested in too many autobiographical details about his life (and perhaps I've already bored readers with what I've shared about my own). After all, neither MacMullan

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nor I are Gloria Anzaldúa, and very few of us can achieve Anzaldúa's shocking level of self-disclosure, not even to ourselves. Consider the interviews from the early 1980s where she discusses incestuous sexual feelings toward her father and other family members, fantasies about having sex with animals, lots of drug use, and other dimensions of her "shadow side." AnaLouise Keating, who edited *Interviews/Entrevistas*, the collection of interviews with Anzaldúa published in 2000, calls this Anzaldúan move "Risking the Personal" (Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas* 2). Keating also writes about how the prospect of printing these things worried her so much that she asked Anzaldúa to consider holding them back, since "people might react negatively and surely they'll have to rethink their conceptions of 'Gloria Anzaldúa'" (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 6). Keating paraphrases Anzaldúa's reply like this: "If I've exposed it to myself, I can expose it in the writing. Self-exposure is the hard part" (Interviews/Entrevistas 7). Or, as Anzaldúa says in one of the interviews: "My mother says I'm shameless because to me, nothing is private. Maybe that's why I became a writer. My sexual life, my fantasy life, my spiritual life are unveiled, divulged. If there's a veil, it's for myself, but once I realize something, then the whole world can know it" (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 80).

I don't mean to imply that MacMullan has something to hide, or even that he's trying to hide it. I just wish that MacMullan had risked speaking in the first-person *singular* more often. The first-person *plural* runs throughout the book, which is full of insights about many kinds of Americans, including *gringos* and *yanquis*, although the America Cósmica that MacMullan is working toward is obviously much larger than any one race, ethnicity, language, sexuality, polity, or geography. MacMullan's insights are hard-won, achieved through much careful study and undoubtedly a great deal of personal reflection, but he rarely writes about himself. As a result, MacMullan's own personal doppelganger or shadow beast remains in the margins and spaces of his text.

To justify this as an immanent critique rather than an *ad hominem* attack, let's follow MacMullan's careful reading of Anzaldúa's own description of the Coyolxauhqui imperative as

> a struggle to reconstruct oneself and heal the sustos resulting from woundings, traumas, racism, and other acts of violation que hechan pedazos nuestras almas. . . . Grappling with (des)conocimientos, with what I don't want to know . . . sometimes results in discovering the positive shadow: hidden aspects of myself and the world. *Each irritant is a grain of sand in the oyster of the imagination. Sometimes what accretes around an irritant or wound may produce a pearl of great insight, a theory.* (qtd. in MacMullan 213; emphasis added)

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Anzaldúa is describing her own philosophical methodology here, and there's no question that her confrontations with irritants and *desconocimientos* (ignorance) produced many insights, many pearls. MacMullan's book is also full of pearls, and he does not shy away from social irritants like white supremacy. But he does not show us the wounds, at least not the personal ones, *que hechan pedazos de su propia alma* [that tear his own soul to pieces].

Readers may think me a doubting Thomas: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20.25). And MacMullan could perhaps channel his early experience as a *monaguillo*, or altar boy, for eight masses a week in Santurce and quote Jesus: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20.29). So let me clarify. I believe MacMullan, but I was convinced of what he had to say before he said it. I've learned a lot, and I've become more intimate with myself as well as with many of the inter-American philosophical traditions that I have been studying for twenty years, but I want to better understand how MacMullan's insights emerge from his own wounds. What are some of the other relevant experiences that haunt MacMullan? Where and when did they happen? MacMullan has not hidden from the skeletons in America's closet, and I think he is right that "the only way to deal with these fears is to face them *together*" (MacMullan 214). I am further suggesting that if MacMullan had brought his *personal* fears into plainer view, it might have inspired more courage in his readers to know and face their own fears with him. I believe it would have also given MacMullan's readers even more insight into the existential sources of his careful and thought-provoking scholarship.

In any case, I agree with MacMullan when he writes that "[t]he only humane *América* is one where we accept the complexities of our identities, geographies, histories, and the borders between them" (215). With the autobiographical material about his early life in Puerto Rico, MacMullan reveals the initial irritant, the initial split, the first move: "I moved so many times in my life that if I am 'from' anywhere, it is Miramar, a small neighborhood in Santurce not far from Old San Juan or the Condado district, the first part of Puerto Rico that was transmogrified to accommodate tourists from the States" (2). In MacMullan's introduction, there is also open grappling with the *I* and not just the *we*: "I fear I've warranted José Vasconcelos's harsh statement that as a gringo I never fully belonged, and was just another 'migrating bird' ('*ave de paso*') that almost never stays on the island" (xi). This seems to me a real and credible fear, but it's announced rather than analyzed in the text. I want to know more about the complexity of MacMullan's identities, geographies, histories, and the borders between them, not just in his childhood and adolescence but in graduate school, in his life as a parent, in his

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struggles as department chair. In turn, I would like to further explore with MacMullan how the individual, interpersonal, and collective tasks of "Reimagining Identity"—in this case, una América Cósmica—relate to Anzaldúa's ideas about "Geographies of Selves" as they appear in the fourth chapter of *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*.

I suppose that I am asking from MacMullan what Thoreau both demanded of himself and gave to his readers: "a simple and sincere account of his own life" (Thoreau 6), but I also want the inter-American, Anzaldúan twist. How did MacMullan's mestizo consciousness develop? Who is this *gringo Boricua* or "white U.S. citizen raised in a Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican city within a Catholic, Irish-American/Italian-American family"? (MacMullan xii). As in the beginning, MacMullan speaks more directly for himself at the end: "I struggled throughout this book with words like 'us' and 'our' and 'American'" (216). These are hard words for anyone, and they have been much debated at SAAP since its founding, just as they have been debated across the Americas for centuries. MacMullan's own inter-American philosophy constitutes a powerful critique of the narrow white supremacist epistemologies of ignorance that haunt *yanqui* America in order to "make room for a *larger us* like the one Anzaldúa uses . . . an 'us' that includes everyone" (216). So please tell us, MacMullan: What selves does your "I" include? *¿Y qué amasijo te queda?* Or put more simply: How did the philosophers you've written about so beautifully in *From American Empire to América Cósmica through Philosophy* help you understand, finger, and perhaps even heal your own wounds?

To bring my comments to a close, I would like to make it clear that I am asking MacMullan these questions as his brother, *como un Anglo Tejano*, who is still trying to understand and heal my own splits, to navigate the borders of US American and Latin American philosophies, *y criar a mis propios hijos en una América Cósmica*, in Anzaldúa's Rio Grande Valley where we speak English, Spanish, and Tex-Mex. Let us be the healing of the wound!

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