

Dear Jorge: A Letter to My Mentor

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Through the form of a letter, I engage my mentor, Jorge J.E. Gracia, in his own biographical articulation of life. While the letter was not included in the volume for which it was originally written, it was read to Gracia before he passed, and I could not be more honored. In the end, that is all that really matters. In the words that follow I take a moment to reflect on Jorge's life and work as I process his passing.

Key words: mentorship; student-teacher relationship; Latin American philosophy; philosophical vocation

Prelude

The following piece was written as a response to an invitation to engage with Gracia's autobiography *With a Diamond in My Shoe* (2019) on the heels of the conference "A Collection of Individuals: The Philosophical Legacy of Jorge J.E. Gracia" held at SUNY Buffalo, October 18–19, 2019. Unfortunately, the piece was deemed not sufficiently academic for its original home, a fact that, to me, betrayed the spirit of Jorge's work. However, I wrote this piece with one specific audience member in mind: Jorge J.E. Gracia. I imagined him encountering it as he read through the pages of a book dedicated to engaging his ideas, and although the piece did not make it to the book, it did make it to Jorge before he passed. The letter was read to him surrounded by his family, and I could not be more honored. In the end, that is all that really matters. In the words that follow, I take a moment in this new publication venue to reflect on Jorge's life and work as I process his passing.

Jorge J.E. Gracia (July 18, 1942–July 13, 2021) was a Cuban-born philosopher who held the Samuel P. Capen Chair, SUNY Distinguished Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Department of Comparative Literature at SUNY Buffalo. Over the course of his life he authored or edited over 40 books. He was a prolific writer with many philosophical interests that ranged from metaphysics to Latin American philosophy. Jorge was a force, a beam of light, an echo of vivacious laughter. He was a mentor to many, not just those whose dissertations he directed. Jorge was a trailblazer, always concerned with history, and guided by a concern oriented around a conviction that to do philosophy you had to engage its history (Gracia 2019: 252)—a history which pointed toward glooming absences of people of color. For many of us, myself included, he served as a glimmer of hope that a career in academic philosophy with a focus on Latin America or the Caribbean was possible. He opened avenues that made writing a dissertation on Latin American philosophy as a primary focus real. In practice, this meant that you did not have to forsake your integrity to a discipline that constantly reminds you that you do not belong to it, insisting on the fact that ideas from anywhere outside of Europe or the United States are irrelevant to its beloved canons. Jorge's dedication to changing this fact spanned a good length of his career, and it was not without challenges that we all greatly benefit from today. He tells us in his *With a Diamond in My Shoe* (2019) about the painstaking blow of not being able to convince the US-American community of philosophy publishers to accept

an anthology on Latin American philosophy. Referring to the project as “exotic” or “there was nothing of it,” publishers continuously turned down Jorge down (Gracia 2019: 173). The very same anthology would many years later become the touchstone of the field’s primary text documents and would come to guide many of us to the possibilities of a different way of doing philosophy.

I am sure when we conjure Jorge in our memories we arrive at different stories. For me, it is a vivid memory of a cold winter snowy day in Buffalo, NY, sitting across from him in his office in Park Hall on the north campus of the university. Jorge looks at me and says, “We cannot afford to be pitted against each other,” as he shared his ideas about the trials of supporting and mentoring other Latin American scholars. In the end, even if he did not agree with others, there were broader social and ethical concerns guiding him. Philosophy was indeed a vocation for Jorge, and nowhere was this more felt than in his concern over mentoring and supporting Latin American scholars in changing the landscape of philosophy. Jorge will long live on in the praxis of the lives he touched, because, as he tells his readers: “Ideas are a way in which teachers may be said to achieve a kind of immortality” (Gracia 2019: 142). He is dearly missed.

Dear Jorge: A Letter to My Mentor

November 17, 2020

Dear Jorge,

I am not sure if you remember the day we met, but I certainly do. I came to scope out the SUNY Buffalo Philosophy Department before making final graduate school decisions. You missed our meeting. The departmental staff was really worried because you never missed meetings and you had (as I came to learn) recently suffered from a heart attack, which had left everyone in the department a bit shaken. Turns out you simply had urgent plumbing issues in your house. You laughed away the nervousness of the department with your vivacious cackle as we rescheduled for the following day. We met for coffee in the hotel lobby; you brought me a book of Cuban art and proceeded to eagerly answer all of my questions. I loved your energy as you even managed to laugh away a heart attack. You could laugh at anything, a trait I learned you characterized as a survival strategy and one I realized I might also carry. You made quite the dramatic entrance into my life. That day marked the beginning of a teacher-student intellectual journey; a journey which had some of the hardest but rewarding lessons of life.

As you reflect in *With a Diamond in My Shoe* (2019), the student-teacher relationship is one that “never really ends once it has started” (Gracia 2019: 142). Indeed, it does not even end after death, for it goes on in dialogue in which the memories of both parties are affected” (Gracia 2019: 142). The bond between teachers and students is one of the strongest that humans can experience and is grounded in vocations of dialogue so often described as central to our discipline. So, in the spirit of the immortal and in the name of dialogue, I wanted to write *to you* and *not about you*.

I was ecstatic when you told me you were finally writing a narrative about yourself! A personal, yet philosophical, piece on the story of Jorge. I eagerly waited for *With a Diamond in My Shoe*. As happens with many of our mentors, I sought to know you in your multi-dimensionality, knowing that we both were many people, and some iterations of ourselves never cross paths with other people. The relationships between teachers and students are unique precisely because they can take many forms. Nevertheless, they are the types of relationalities that persist, as the things we learn are always carried

with us even if that person no longer has an active role in our lives. Indeed, I wonder if I came to think about teacher-student relationships this way because of you. *With a Diamond in My Shoe* helped me appreciate you more fully and I thank you for your willingness to write a book of this sort.

As I turned the pages of your story, it struck me that honest biographies are courageous undertakings, with such philosophical complexities: Can we ever tell a true story about ourselves? Or are we sentenced to be the Pierre Menards of our own narratives? A funny thought all the same, given that the only reason I know about Pierre Menard is because of you. My first semester of graduate school you taught a course titled “Interpreting Borges,” during which you had us analyze and interpret the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges alongside artworks commissioned to do the same. This was my first graduate course with you, and it was unlike anything else the department had to offer. It was a beautiful introduction to what philosophy could look like: an interdisciplinary bridge that could creatively and critically assemble ideas. Like all conditions of experience, there is always an underside, the material conditions by which our experiences are possible. I learned through your memoir that the Borges course and culminating text, *Painting Borges: Philosophy, Interpreting Art, Interpreting Literature* (Gracia 2012), was really a success of integration of personal interests in art with philosophical reflections on identity, which I did not know, but suspected (Gracia 2019: 233). In other words, the Borges project was many years in the making. It was never a simple creative philosophical engagement but rather the strategic outcome of many years of well-planned moves that would position you to take up the project.

Art, I have come to learn, held a very special place in your heart. It links you with Cuba specifically and Latinx identity writ large (Gracia 2019: 233). It’s peculiar how aesthetics can produce such strong affective material bond, the kind that navigates traumas of immigration, displacement, and disenfranchisement. *With a Diamond in My Shoe* helped me appreciate that about you and led me to contemplate why I took up dance, music, and sound with such ardent interest since my time as your student. I think there is something profoundly important about aesthetics that many philosophers dismiss, and my appreciation for the world of aesthetics as a vehicle for the human condition is rooted in a classroom on the 7th floor of Clemens Hall where you taught Interpreting Borges.

That same classroom on the 7th floor of Clemens Hall would greet me again years later when you invited me to return to SUNY Buffalo as a guest speaker, a status I certainly did not think myself worthy of at the time. Yet you always ardently reminded me that I was destined for great things. You told me my first job was just that, my *first* job. In fact, your dedication in *With a Diamond in My Shoe* reads: “For Stephanie, from her teacher who expects great things from her.” You bestowed me with greatness long before I could recognize it was there, and for that I am eternally grateful. My time as a student at SUNY Buffalo was grim when it seemed like greatness was really a status reserved for an elite few whose qualities I seemed to lack. Yet it was precisely this emptying absence of people of color in my graduate training that drove my interest in philosophical historiography that would come to shape the arc of my career well beyond my time at Buffalo. As I turned the pages of *With a Diamond in My Shoe*, I came to realize that your love of history spreads across all your interests. The importance of history in philosophical analysis emerges in much of your work but, to no surprise, I learned it is also linked to a young man who left Cuba dressed as a priest with a diamond in his shoe and a voracious appetite for knowledge with a deep love for reading.

It seems that your voracious appetite for knowledge only grew over the years. As I read the lines of your story, I was struck by the way philosophy emerged as a vocation; that is, as a way of life. Almost like the imperative of your life’s work could not be anything else. You note in one of the closing chapters that “historical work is detective work and detective work is always fascinating in that it satisfies our curiosity. Our past, whether philosophical or not, is a mystery that requires hard work

to be uncovered, and once undertaken, that work can become an addiction. The challenge of solving mysteries is a perennial enticement to humans” (Gracia 2019: 245). I think one of the biggest lessons *With a Diamond in My Shoe* leaves readers with is just this: How can philosophy be a way of life? Much like the Caribbean anarchists of the turn of the twentieth century who understood their ideals through their praxis, you lived philosophy as more than just a professional career. No rock was ever left unturned from the beam of curiosity. Your ancestors must be so proud.

We stand on the shoulders of giants. No life is ever singular. We are made possible through the relationalities we form over the course of our lives. Nowhere is this most felt in your narrative than by the story you tell about your mother, Leonila Gracia, her strength, her tenacity. A woman whom I never physically encountered but without her there is no you. So, maybe in our own way we have met and in this imaginary landscape we shared a *cafecito* and talked about you.

Jorge, you taught me more lessons than I can count. You reminded me that there are many ways to skin a cat as I struggled to narrow research projects. You reminded me that ideology could be dangerous. You emphatically held that Latinx peoples in philosophy cannot afford to be divided; we simply would lose ourselves if we did. And as I write this amidst my final year before being eligible for tenure, I am reminded of your sage words after I successfully defended my dissertation: “no sleep until tenure.” But most importantly, during our meetings you always told me to laugh often because life is short. So, as I also begin to turn the page on some monumental moments with the close of 2020, a year no one will ever forget, I constantly remind myself to laugh and laugh often. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for all you have done and all you will continue to do through the work of every student whose life you touched.

Contigo Siempre,
Stephanie

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Dr. Stephanie Rivera Berruz is an associate professor at Marquette University. She received her PhD in Philosophy from SUNY Buffalo in 2014. She is the recipient of the Woodrow Wilson Career Enhancement Fellowship (2017–2018) and The Way Klinger Young Scholar Award (2021) for her work on Latinx feminisms, Caribbean, and Latin American Philosophy. Her research is inherently interdisciplinary and explores historiography, social identity, current political issues. She published a co-edited anthology: *Comparative Studies in Asian and Latin American Philosophies* (2018), and her work has been featured in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *Genealogy*, *Hypatia*, *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*, and *Essays on Philosophy*.