The Phenomenology of Zozobra: Mexican and Latinx Philosophers on (Not) Being at Home in the World

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This chapter traces a line of thought that runs from the work of Mexican phenomenologists in the 1940s and 1950s to the work of contemporary Latinx phenomenologists in the US. The central topic is the phenomenon of *zozobra*, an anxious condition characterized by the inability to be at home in the world. According to the philosophers discussed in this chapter, zozobra has marked the Mexican and Latinx experience. This assessment raises a number of questions: Is zozobra a manifestation of internal tensions inherent to Mexican and Latinx multicultural identity, or do its origins lie elsewhere? What are the effects of zozobra on Mexican and Latinx communities, and what can and should be done to address it?

One possible approach to the topic of zozobra would focus on the *psychology* of identity. In the tradition of Latin American philosophy, it is sometimes said that because Latin America was born in the Conquest and colonization of the people indigenous to the western hemisphere, Latin Americans are prone to suffer from conflicting attachments to their indigenous and European roots.[1] These conflicting attachments are said to be embodied in the principal ethno-racial identity within

[1] For example, in her overview of the Latin American philosophical tradition, Ofelia Schutte (1987, 27) says: "Despite almost five hundred years of assimilation into Western European tradition, many Latin Americans still feel the conflict provoked by the conquistadores' subjugation and extermination of millions of Indians who dwelt in the region. The Indians have come to symbolize the ancient, exploited, maternal heritage of the Americans, in contradistinction to the technologically advanced, civilized, foreign conqueror. How to resolve this tension in an unalienated and authentic manner is one of the challenges of Latin American philosophy today." In this vein, Octavio Paz (1985 [1950], 26–27) offers a psychological account of the zozobra in Mexico along these lines: "The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction: he is a man. He becomes the son of Nothingness… That is why the feeling of orphanhood is the constant background of our political endeavors and our personal conflicts."

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Latin America—viz., *mestizo*, a term that means “mixed race” and usually refers to a person of indigenous and Spanish descent.[2] *Mestizos* may feel themselves to be too “white” to be indigenous, and too “brown” to be European. As a result, they may feel themselves to be excluded by, and/or distance themselves from, those with a less complicated relationship to their indigenous or European identity. Thus, between the inner conflict generated from opposing affinities with indigenous and European cultures, and the poignant sense of not belonging to either of those communities, *mestizaje* or “mixedness” can be fraught with psychological dissonances that undermine one’s sense of being at home in the world.

Nothing in what follows explicitly rejects this analysis. However, the thinkers discussed in this chapter seek to illuminate some of the deeper dynamics that may be underlying and even driving such contestations of identity. Thus, in place of a psychological account of zozobra, this chapter examines the *phenomenology* of zozobra, focused on how basic structures of sense-making are affected when one is unable to be at home in the world. From a phenomenological perspective, zozobra arises not from one’s thoughts and feelings *about* any given situation but, rather, from breakdowns in the “horizons of understanding” that make it possible to encounter well-defined situations in the first place. And when we examine these breakdowns of world from the perspective of *critical* phenomenology, we become attentive to the mutually reinforcing relationship between zozobra and the oppressive social structures affecting Mexican and Latinx communities, guided by the hope that a phenomenological understanding of zozobra might shed new light on ways for these communities to resist and overcome this oppression.[3]

Section One begins with a discussion of what it means to be at home in a world, drawing on the seminal account of “world” in Heidegger’s *Being and Time.* Next, Section Two examines the work of the Mexican phenomenologist, Jorge Portilla (1918–1963), who considers some questions that are urgently relevant to Portilla’s own circumstances: How should we understand the breakdown of a world? And what happens to a society’s capacities for sense-making when its members find themselves in a world that has become inhospitable? Portilla holds that zozobra arises from the disintegration of a community’s normative framework, which gives rise to the fragmentation of the various “subworlds” in a society and produces a number of personal and social pathologies.

Sections Three and Four examine an alternative approach to zozobra proposed first by the Mexican phenomenologist Emilio Uranga (1921–1988) and later echoed

[2] As Sánchez (2015, 67) puts it: “With the first mestizo comes the first internal duality, the first tension, and the first conflict of identity.”

[3] Critical phenomenology, as Lisa Guenther (2020, 12) describes it, combines classical phenomenological analyses of experience offered by figures such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger with an “equally rigorous account of how contingent historical and social structures also shape our experience.” For critical phenomenologists, “structures like patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity” are “not things to be seen but rather ways of seeing, and even ways of making the world that go unnoticed without a sustained practice of critical reflection” (12). Moreover, critical phenomenologists strive to understand how the world may be restructured so that “new and liberatory possibilities for meaningful experience and existence may come into being” (15).

and developed by the Latina philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004). Both Uranga and Anzaldúa argue that while zozobra may become more *apparent* when communities are subjected to social and political subordination, ultimately zozobra is an essential aspect of the human condition. As such, they argue that zozobra should be embraced and even cultivated as a source of authenticity and political empowerment. Indeed, both thinkers call for the construction of a new overarching normative framework that can unify their communities' horizons of understanding under the banner of "nepantla" or *in-betweenness*, thus conceiving of hybridity itself as the organizing principle of a new form of identity that can escape colonial paradigms of identity and agency. Section Five examines an alternative approach to these issues in the work of the contemporary Latina phenomenologist, Mariana Ortega. Instead of calling for a new and unifying normative framework, Ortega sees liberatory potential in what she calls "hometactics," the "micropractices" that enable marginalized individuals to move between subworlds in a less disorienting and destabilizing way.

Surprisingly, it is rare for Mexican and Latinx philosophers to be considered together as participants in a shared discourse, as this chapter aims to do. Scholarship on the intersections between these philosophical traditions has centered almost exclusively on the work of Anzaldúa (Pitts, 2014, Stehn & Alessandri, 2020, Alessandri & Stehn, 2020) but has not highlighted the relationship between her work and that of Uranga or other Mexican (or Latin American) *phenomenologists*.[4] This chapter thus aims to provide new insight into the common concerns motivating prominent phenomenologists in each tradition and to illuminate the intimate interplay of the perspectives they offer. The dialectic I trace in this chapter can contribute to important discussions within what is sometimes called "critical phenomenology" on the ways that oppression influences, and is influenced by, our sense-making practices. The various positions staked out by Portilla, Uranga, Anzaldúa, and Ortega, represent three distinct directions that these discussions might be taken. As we will see, Portilla is in some ways a *social conservative* who believes that our ability to pursue meaningful lives depends on the existence of stable and widely shared social norms. Uranga and Anzaldúa are *visionaries* who call for the radical reconstitution of identity on the basis of our shared homelessness. Ortega is a *pragmatist* who celebrates the small victories that allow marginalized groups to survive and adapt in worlds that are hostile to their existence. Future discussions of the phenomenology of home would do well to learn from all these perspectives, and to recognize that home is several things simultaneously: an essential foundation for human existence, an illusory ideal whose pursuit leads us to exclude vulnerable others and vulnerable parts of ourselves, and a site for the negotiation of the circumstances in which one finds oneself, in the tragic and beautiful hope of creating a life to call one's own.

[4] For a phenomenology of the Latinx experience informed by Mexican phenomenology, see Sánchez (2015, ch. 5). For a discussion of the relationship between the Latinx feminisms of Anzaldúa and Ortega and feminist work in Latin America more generally, see Rivera-Berruz (2020).

1 Heidegger on Being-in-the-World

It will be helpful to begin this examination of zozobra with a brief and partial review of Heidegger's seminal discussion of "being-in-the-world" in *Being and Time.* In this text, Heidegger famously argues that for Dasein (the kind of entity that human beings are), all our sense-making activity takes place within—i.e., is made possible by, presupposes, refers to, and is inextricable from—a richly meaningful "world." Heidegger describes a *world*, in this sense, as a "referential totality" (1927 [1962], 105). Just as the meaning of a word necessarily refers to the meaning of other words, so that no particular arrangement of symbols or phonemes is meaningful in isolation, Heidegger argues that the meaning of each thing we experience depends on its relationship to the wider meaningful context in which it is embedded. For example, the significance of a nail in a carpenter's workshop cannot be understood in isolation from its relationship to hammers, wood, construction projects, the skills and traditions of carpentry, customers, the human need for shelter and furniture, and so on. In this way, the nail implicitly "refers to" the hammer and, ultimately, to the world of the carpenter as a whole. According to Heidegger, then, all meaning is holistic and embedded in a world: "a horizon of understanding, a space of possibilities, on the background of which we understand" ourselves and everything we are or could be involved with (Blattner, 2006, 63).

If a world is a "space of possibilities," it is important to clarify that the kind of "possibility" at issue here is roughly equivalent to what William James called a "live option."[5] A live option is an action or attitude that is not merely *physically* or *theoretically* possible, but one that *makes sense* for a person to perform or adopt, based on the way that their identity and concerns align with the significance of the action or attitude in question. For example, if you are deeply devoted to the craft of carpentry and able to make a good living from it, you would not agree to significantly lower the quality of your work simply for additional profit. While doing so may be physically or theoretically possible, it will not show up to you as a live option, because the action would violate the commitments that are central to your self-understanding and so make no sense for you to perform. As James (1979 [1896], 199) puts it, "the notion makes no electric connection with your nature—it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all." By the same token, an action that would otherwise "scintillate" in this way, but which has become physically impossible, will no longer be a live option. With this in mind, we can think of a world—for example, the world of carpentry, or the world of a small farming village in nineteenth century Germany—in terms of a network of live options, a setting for meaningful possibilities to unfold, defined both by a *normative framework* within which certain actions and attitudes are understood to be credible and important, and a corresponding *practical infrastructure* that enables people to pursue and maintain those actions and attitudes.

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[5] A reference that is more proximal to Heidegger would be Husserl's notion of "motivated" possibilities. For discussion, read Walsh (2013).

From Heidegger's perspective, we know and inhabit worlds primarily through our practical familiarity and committed participation in them, rather than through intellectual or cognitive reasoning. The notion of *being at home in a world*, in the sense that is relevant here, derives its meaning from the ordinary experience of having a home, a particular built environment that provides shelter and serves as the setting for one's domestic life. "Home" is thus conceived here as a place of *intimacy*, a place where one is comfortable performing mundane and routine activities of personal hygiene and other "backstage" (Goffman, 1978) operations that are usually concealed from public scrutiny. Home is also intimate in the sense that it is a primary place to pursue certain projects that are deeply important to our identities, such as those related to family and the activities one chooses when not at work.[6] With this in mind, we can say that "being at home in a world" combines two elements: (a) *familiarity*, a relatively well-developed practical know-how for maneuvering in a given space of possibilities, attuning oneself to what matters in various situations, and discerning the relevant saliences and affordances in order to pursue what counts as a live option in that space, and (b) *identification*, an implicit endorsement of or harmonization with that world, especially with regard to the way that world makes it possible for one to pursue the projects that are central to one's self-understanding. Both familiarity and identification are a matter of degree, and as such, one can be more or less at home in a world. Moreover, these notions refer to conditions that are an ambiguous mix of "objective" and "subjective" states, insofar as *being* familiar can be distinguished from *feeling* familiar, and the fact that one's identity is inextricable from a given world does not necessarily imply that one experiences a felt sense of "mineness" in relation to it.

Heidegger did not explain as clearly as we might have wished whether he believed there is just *one* world that we all share, or, if there are multiple worlds, how they are distinguished from and related to one another. Heidegger's interpreters, however, often describe worlds as *nested* and *interwoven* domains of human life, in the sense that the world of a carpenter's apprentice would be contained within the world of carpentry, which in turn might be partially overlap with other "subworlds" within the wider world of nineteenth century Germany.[7] Although there may not be any bright lines demarcating the upper or lower limits of this nesting pattern or the boundaries between worlds, the very notion of "a world" calls to mind the image of a sphere and seems to imply a domain that is relatively *bounded*, *internally coherent*, and *stable*. At any rate, *Being and Time* certainly seems to

[6] For critical analysis of the notion of home in the context of oppression and resistance, see Lugones (2003, ch. 9), and hooks (1990, ch. 5), both important sources for Ortega's analysis of home discussed below, as well as Gallegos de Castillo (2016).

[7] For example, Mark Wrathall describes a world as "a particular style of organizing our activities and relations with the things and people around us…. Whole books are devoted to helping us get a feel for foreign worlds—The World of the Reformation or The World of Texas Politics, or The World of the Maya or The World of the Suicide Bomber. Despite the fact that the very same physical and chemical laws apply to both Texas politicians and suicide bombers, there is a very real sense in which they inhabit different worlds" (2005, 20).

assume that worlds have these qualities, insofar as the text does not raise questions about how worlds may become destabilized or disintegrated. Indeed, Heidegger's central concern in this text is not the possibility that worlds might break down but, to the contrary, the question of how individuals might resist the intense pressure to conform to social norms and achieve personal authenticity—a concern that would seem to gain its urgency in a context in which the worlds in question are especially secure and tightly connected. However, as we will see, when Mexican phenomenologists consider these issues from the vantage point of Mexico City in the 1940s and 1950s, different concerns come to the fore.

2 Jorge Portilla on the Disintegration of Community

Portilla's phenomenology of "world" is marked by his view that mid-century Mexico was in the process of disintegrating. In the decades following the tumultuous revolution of 1910, Mexico had engaged in an intense nation-building effort, seeking to construct a unified national identity that could bind together the various social groups in the nation; however, by mid-century this project was severely strained, and the promise of a national rebirth had faded.[8] There was a widespread sense, discussed incessantly among Mexico's intellectuals, that everyday life in Mexico had become deeply permeated by "zozobra," a Spanish term often translated as "distress" or "anxiety," and which connotes instability, ungroundedness, and the wobbling that precedes the capsizing of a ship. But while some prominent Mexican intellectuals such as Samuel Ramos (1972 [1934]) and Octavio Paz (1985 [1950]) offered *psychological* accounts of zozobra, focused on an examination of "the Mexican mind," Portilla and his fellow phenomenologists rejected these psychological interpretations as degrading and misguided, and in their place, they offered *phenomenological* accounts of zozobra, focused on an examination of what happens when worlds come apart.

In his 1949 essay, "Community, Greatness, and Misery in Mexican Life," Portilla offers a phenomenological account of zozobra that begins by affirming Heidegger's description of a world as a "horizon of understanding" in which all meaning is embedded. Portilla emphasizes the role of other people in one's community in constituting this horizon. "Our action," Portilla (2017 [1949], 187) says,

> is not carried out in the middle of the desert, but in community. We cannot project any action whatsoever without counting on others…. Our action is inconceivable to ourselves if a somewhat precise halo is not attached to it, one of approval or reproach, of incentive or of obstacle, whose source is the community, those "others."

[8] See Santos Ruiz (2015) for a critical discussion of the relationship between Mexican phenomenology and Mexico's nation-building project. For the history of Mexico during this period, see López (2010).

When things are going well, we often take this interpretive horizon for granted, only noticing its importance when things go wrong. When we travel to a foreign country, for example, we may discover that the normative frameworks and practical infrastructures we encounter there are quite different from those we are accustomed to, so that we find it difficult to properly make a joke, give a compliment, demonstrate practical competence, and do things that express our character. Such experiences illustrate that "horizons [of understanding] have critical importance for human action. One of their primary functions is that of serving as walls against which bounce the echoes that carry the meaning of our actions"—a fact that becomes painfully obvious to us when the "echo" that bounces back "makes it evident that our [action] did not have the exact meaning that we were giving to it" (184).

Portilla notes that at any given moment, we may simultaneously occupy many nested and interwoven worlds and subworlds. As he puts it,

> we always live in a multiplicity of communal horizons that mix and weave with each other and that remain always potential or actual, depending on whether our action reveals or conceals them. We live always simultaneously immersed in a national community that can take various forms, from the political to the aesthetic: in a professional community; in a guild; in a class; in a family…. (183–84)

As this passage suggests, Portilla is especially interested in the ways that *nations* can constitute a world. Indeed, throughout Portilla's work, we find a consistent argument for a view that we might call "phenomenological nationalism," the view that individuals' sense-making capacities are mediated and structured by their belonging to a nation.[9] Portilla emphasizes, however, that all nations do not influence individuals' sense-making activity in the same way. One important way that nations differ, in his view, is the extent to which subworlds (such as those related to family or profession) are "integrated" within a larger horizon of understanding that binds together the national society as a whole. Portilla thus imagines a spectrum between a "sub-integrated" nation and a "super-integrated" nation. He suggests that Germany, for example, may be an instance of a "super-integrated" nation, in which the various social roles a person may occupy—worker, father, music-lover, and so on—all fit together in a tight, cohesive package, so that all of a person's activities work together to express the national way of life (187–88).

In a super-integrated nation, Portilla argues, individuals gain what we can call *agential freedom*, the freedom to take meaningful action. High levels of integration in the horizons of understanding enable individuals to anticipate the meaning of their action, and so they can simply set their minds to acting as they are willing and able to act. Portilla says that in such a nation, the "atmosphere seems to be a space

[9] For discussion of Portilla's phenomenological nationalism, see Sánchez & Gallegos (2020, Ch. 2.) *Phenomenological* nationalism—the view that our sense-making activity is shaped at a deep, existential level by our nationality— does not involve the use of phenomenology for nationalistic purposes, and so it should be sharply distinguished from *political* nationalism. Indeed, Portilla abhorred political nationalism and consistently argued (e.g., in his examination of Mexico, the United States, and Germany) that the influence of nationality on people's sense-making capacities was *detrimental* to their flourishing as sense-makers.

of incredibly open opportunities for individual action, something like a paradise for the industrious man"—adding, on a more ominous note, "a paradise that frequently transforms itself into the dominion of the predator" (189). By the same token, however, individuals in a super-integrated nation suffer from a lack of what we might call *normative freedom*, the freedom to alter the normative framework that helps to establish the meaning of their actions. Individuals in super-integrated nations may *violate* social norms, of course, but this is not equivalent to inhabiting a world in which the normative framework is more inchoate and open to *innovation*. In this vein, Portilla quotes Karl Vossler, a German academic who, after visiting South America, wrote: "Central Europeans of today, who are at the point of smothering our healthy members with a system of well-intentioned bandages and of making ourselves immobile by force of organization, can take example in the free spirit of independence of the Latin American" (quoted in Portilla, 2017 [1949], 189).

Nevertheless, too much normative freedom is no freedom at all. According to Portilla, Mexico is a "sub-integrated" society, located on the far opposite end of the spectrum of worldly integration. In Mexico, he says, "everything happens as if these structures of transcendence that we have named horizons of community suffered…from a lack or in-articulation" (189). Although Mexicans are not "smothered" by rigid social norms, Portilla says that the horizons of understanding in Mexico are so unclear, incoherent, and unstable that the basic conditions for the possibility of meaningful action are undermined, together with the possibility of agential freedom. For this reason, Portilla describes the state of sub-integration as "a species of social malnutrition that forms a thin yet suffocating spiritual atmosphere for whomever must form their personality within it" (131).

According to Portilla, then, zozobra arises when the discontinuities and dissonances between the subworlds one inhabits become so pervasive and persistent that it becomes largely impossible to enjoy the experience of familiarity and identification with the kind of situations one encounters on a daily basis. Imagine, for example, that actions which are highly valued in your family life are repudiated in your professional world, and vice versa, or that you would like to be an idealistic patriot but find that the practical infrastructure for serving your nation is undeveloped or operates in a dysfunctional manner, while the infrastructure for participating in corruption is well-developed and operates efficiently. As Manuel Vargas (2020, 2) notes,

> A precise characterization of these misalignments can be elusive. In relatively mild cases, the misalignment is localized to features of a job, or a group, or some particular practice. More encompassing cases of misalignment leave one feeling more radically at unease with wider or more comprehensive swaths of one's milieu. In these more extreme instances, we might characterize the situation as producing a sense that one is 'ungrounded', perhaps normatively unmoored, in that it is unclear how one is to proceed, what the significance of one's choices will be…

In the absence of a larger, shared world that can hold together the subworlds we inhabit, a person will find themselves constantly toggling between normative frames and unable to proceed wholeheartedly on the paths available to them. This is the condition of zozobra.

Some common psychological effects of zozobra, according to Portilla, include self-doubt and quietism, cynicism, nostalgia, and apocalyptic thinking. These effects that become distinctive social pathologies in sub-integrated nations. The primary and most direct effect of zozobra is quietism, a hesitation to take action of any sort. As Portilla puts it:

> In effect, if the community's reception or response in regard to our action cannot be determined with a certain amount of clarity, it is likely that we will indefinitely postpone the demanded action until the horizon clears up and, if this does not happen, we will carry it out only when the circumstances themselves turn it into a demand that cannot be postponed, and then it will probably carry within itself the mark of improvisation. Nothing slows down the impetus toward action more than uncertainty in regard to the manner in which the work to be done will be received. (187)

Together with this sort of quietism comes a tendency toward cynicism that is also characteristic of zozobra.

> Thus, in a disarticulated community such as ours, the man of action, and even the intellectual, will find himself affected by a certain cynicism which is nothing more than a defensive maneuver or a movement of self-affirmation, which can be described with the analogy of whistling or humming in the dark so as to forget one's fears….
>
> It is clear that a failed, unnatural, or badly interpreted action will turn us into introverts, melancholic and hopeless. Action becomes imaginary: everyday conversation in Mexico is filled with stories about men who attempted a noble act, who tried to realize a useful or noble endeavor, an act that was ultimately crushed by the harshness of the external world, or invalidated by collaborators who were inept or of bad faith. (188)

Portilla thus sees the tendency toward introversion, sentimentality, and nostalgia—a desire to escape into fantasy or into memories of a bygone era when life made sense—as an expression of the cynicism that grows from zozobra (188).

Finally, Portilla argues that zozobra often gives rise to an apocalyptic imagination and a profound sense of the fragility and contingency of life. He compares what it is like to live without a clear and stable communal horizon of understanding to the situation of an "explorer or sailor working with a malfunctioning compass. Her horizon, in this case a geographical horizon, has become confusing and more than likely threatening" (184). In a similar way, he says, a person navigating everyday life in a disintegrated society will experience themselves as vulnerable in a deep and primordial way.

> The individual, prevented from securely founding his being on the web of human relations, finds himself painfully exposed to the cosmic vastness. We live always simultaneously entrenched in a human world and in a natural world, and if the human world denies us its accommodations to any extent, the natural world emerges with a force equal to the level of insecurity that textures our human connections. (189)

In other words, our sense of security is largely a function of our sense of community, and so a fragmentation of a widely shared horizon of understanding will leave us feeling incapable of coping with the disasters that seem to be impending at every turn.

Widespread corruption is both a sign of zozobra as well as a practice that exacerbates it, according to Portilla. Because the nation does not function effectively as a horizon of intelligibility that shapes individuals' sense-making practices, actions that would involve sacrificing one's self-interest for the sake of the national community simply do not show up as making sense to people in a compelling way. As Portilla puts it,

> the functionary does not act as a representative of that communal transcendence that we call the State, but rather as a representative of his own personal interests. Here we have a failure of that sentiment of solidarity that should have integrated this functionary to the total person of the State… . His community-State horizon disappears and the only thing that remains is the sufficient means for his particular relations to easily turn into personal relationships in which only personal interests are at play. (185)

In this way, Portilla insists that corruption—"that specter that carries with it all the fault of our national misfortunes"—is not merely an issue of "individual morality" but, rather, "an alteration or weakness of the moral foundation which is the community" (185).

Thus, Portilla views zozobra as something that arises when a nation disintegrates, and when this occurs, zozobra gives rise to profound personal distress and social dysfunction. Let us turn now to Portilla's philosophical collaborator, Emilio Uranga, who challenges this view by arguing that zozobra reflects the human condition and so is unavoidable, and that, in fact, communities that have been oppressed can and should *embrace* zozobra as a vehicle for their existential and political empowerment.

3 Emilio Uranga on Authenticity and Colonial Ideology

In his 1952 text, *Analysis of Mexican Being*, Uranga argues that the zozobra that marks Mexican life has been inflamed by the social and political subordination of Mexico and Mexicans by European powers. This socio-political dynamic has robbed Mexico of material resources for constructing the practical infrastructure that could support a more integrated horizon of understanding, while simultaneously imposing a normative framework that prevents many Mexicans from being at home in their world. In the normative framework that enjoys global hegemony, the European is centered and seen as necessary, admirable, and fully human, while the Mexican is marginalized and seen as expendable, deficient, and less than fully human.

> The European does not ask himself the question regarding his own being because he immediately identifies the human and the European. He does not justify himself before humanity because, for him, his own being is the measure of the human. We, on the other hand, have to justify ourselves. It is a historical fact that endures, one registered on the historical record, that humanity has been denied to us, being men has been denied to us; but it is from this original situation that we must elevate our thinking. (Uranga, 2021 [1952], 138)

Thus, according to Uranga, in the background of Mexican life there is a persistent, felt need to justify one's very existence in the face of dehumanizing subordination.

When a group of people is treated with contempt by those who are in positions of social and cultural dominance in this way, Uranga says, there arises an unsettling doubling of perspective. Members of marginalized and subjugated social groups must constantly monitor themselves through the internalized perspective of those with privilege and power and so do not have the luxury to simply *be*, but instead find themselves always questioning the *meaning* of how they are being.[10] This "oscillation" between normative frameworks is characteristic of zozobra.

> Zozobra refers to a mode of being that incessantly oscillates between two possibilities, between two affects, without knowing on which one of those to depend on, which justifies it, indiscriminately dismissing one extreme in favor of the other. In this to-and-fro the soul suffers, it feels torn and wounded. The pain of zozobra is not obviously identifiable with fear or anxiety, it takes from both in an emotionally ambiguous manner. (180)

To illustrate his analysis, Uranga compares Mexico to Spain, saying that among the Spanish there is little evidence of the normative uncertainty or zozobra that characterizes the Mexican way of being.

> Amongst themselves, Spaniards shout and speak loudly, the interjections and insults fly without injury; however, amongst us, we [Mexicans] know ourselves as overly "fragmented" and avoid the least provocation, even the most gentle and inoffensive ones, and we avoid also the raising of our voice or the harsh word. A nature which is substantial also manifests itself in the predictable, clear, and somewhat mechanical way with which the Spanish takes a position before certain limit situations of human life: love, death, kinship, friendship. In all of these situations the Spaniard reacts in an always expected way (he knows what to count on), while the Mexican always hesitates and has to extract the appropriate attitude out of his zozobra. The Mexican does not know how to explain his conduct and feelings, he does not objectify himself, but rather lives in indeterminateness and vagueness, and is often depressed. On the other hand, the Spaniard brutally objectifies himself, calls bread "bread," wine "wine"; he grabs hold of himself with certainty and confidence, while we unravel amongst our indeterminations. (157–58)

According to Uranga, then, the Spanish way of being is characterized by an absence of zozobra, enjoying instead a sense of stability, familiarity, and identification with regard to the normative order of everyday life, and this gives the Spanish confidence and a capacity for self-assertion that are comparatively absent in Mexico.

However, rather than searching for some way to escape the insecurity of zozobra, Uranga argues that zozobra should be proudly accepted as the price that must be paid for being authentic and in touch with most vital aspects of the human condition. Uranga draws a distinction between two possible ways of being, which he calls "substantiality" and "accidentality." This distinction is loosely derived from Aristotle's well-known distinction between substances and accidents, according to which an accident is an attribute that may belong to a substance, but which does not affect the substance's essence. For example, a dog is a substance, while the color of its fur is an accident—whether the fur is white or black is irrelevant to its being a dog. Using this Aristotelian distinction as a rough analogy, Uranga uses the terms

[10] It would be fruitful to compare Uranga's analysis here to DuBois' (1897) discussion of "double consciousness," as well to related ideas in Fanon (1967/1952), Alcoff (1999), and others.

"substantiality" and "accidentality" to describe two basic ways that a person might experience the things they encounter. While substantiality would be characterized by "plenitude or fullness of being, an entity without fissures or edges" (104), Uranga says that the accidental form of experience

> finds itself…at a distance, alienated, detached…fragile and fractured…both in being and not in being. There lies its essential vulnerability or affectivity, the 'encountering itself'…but, at the same time, the not knowing what to depend on, the not adhering in a definite sense, hesitation, or *zozobra.* (118–19)

With this distinction in place, Uranga then argues that, at bottom, *all* human beings are accidental, and that substantiality is ultimately impossible for creatures like us. Drawing on Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Uranga argues that human beings are essentially self-questioning and self-defining entities, and therefore the meaning of our existence will always be uncertain and open to doubt (152ff). Unlike a rock, which is defined by objective properties, or a table, which is defined by its assigned functions, as a human being I am defined by my self-understanding, which is always subject to suspensions and revisions. From Heidegger's and Uranga's perspective, there is no "true self" inside of us to provide certainty about who and how I should be. Instead, as Heidegger puts it in a passage quoted by Uranga, "I decide for my existence through a radical possibility that is my proper constitution."[11] For this reason, the being of human beings is essentially uncanny, incomplete, uncertain, and vulnerable to the experience of zozobra (Withy, 2015).

For this reason, Uranga holds that the accidentality that defines the Mexican way of being is more "authentic" than the Spanish way of being.

> If the human being is constitutionally accidental, then it becomes understandable why the Mexican has to be described as authentically human, given that he exists in immediate proximity to the accident. This is another way to say that the Mexican is authentic because life is lived as originarily ontological, or in proximity to his own being. (109)

Authenticity, in this sense, is a quasi-ethical ideal of human flourishing, one that involves humbly and honestly facing up to one's self-questioning and self-defining nature, and then taking responsibility for creating one's own life in the face of the fragility and uncertainty of the meaning of our existence. "Inauthenticity," in contrast, "would be to flee the condition of accidentality and to substantialize oneself" (105). The Spanish are inauthentic in this sense, from Uranga's perspective, because they take for granted the meaning of the things around them and of their own lives, as though such things were immutable facts, thus denying their responsibility for participating in the creation of those meanings. Although accidentality is an "originary" human condition, nevertheless, "what passes itself off as human being in general, namely, generalized European humanity, does not appear to us to define itself as accidental, but precisely as arrogant substantiality" (107). Thus, given the nature of human beings, to take one's normative order as stable and certain, as Uranga says is characteristic of the European outlook, or to remain immersed in one's projects without disorienting periods of self-alienation, can only be a result of bad faith,

[11] Heidegger (1929 [1995], 43), cited in Uranga (2021 [1952], 153).

self-deception, and a refusal to acknowledge or admit to what is, in fact, a universal human vulnerability—a dishonest state that will ultimately require both inward and outward violence to maintain.

Uranga thus calls upon Mexicans to "accidentalize" themselves—that is, to relate to their accidentality not merely as a "given," but instead to take it up as "a project to be realized," and even to affirm to themselves, "*it must be realized*" (105). To make his case for the intentional pursuit of accidentality, Uranga brings together a socio-political critique of coloniality, on the one hand, with an existentialist view of the human condition, on the other, as we see in the following passage:

> America, Hegel said, is an accident of Europe. *This proposition must be taken literally*. To be accidental should not involve, for us, an inferior value before the substantiality of Europe, but it should highlight precisely the notion that that which is authentic or genuinely human is nothing consistent and persistent, but something fragile and fractured. This ontological condition is more originary, more primitive than that of man as substantial, which represents a derivative state, one that at bottom represents a deviation from the demands posited by the human condition at its very core. (155)

Uranga thus suggests that substantiality is a distinctively European value. In European philosophy, he argues, there has been a tendency to assume that what gives value and dignity to humankind, what makes us most human, is some quality that we possess, such as rationality, autonomy, identity, will, agency, a strong commitment to well-defined values and projects, etc.—while opposite qualities such as fragility, lack, uncertainty, and incoherence are denigrated and disdained.[12] But this set of values reflects the "arrogant" perspective of those who enjoy social and political dominance, whose privilege protects them from many of the circumstances that provoke a sense of self-alienation, fragility, lack, uncertainty, and incoherence for those who are marginalized, while at the same time facilitating the imposition of the strong over the weak and the callous disregard of those in need.

In this way, Uranga challenges the assumption that confidence and self-assertion is always better than uncertainty, hesitation, and gentleness, suggesting instead that the exclusive valorization of substantiality is a manifestation of an oppressive coloniality and colonial ideology. If this is correct, then by intentionally cultivating the accidentality and zozobra that has been imposed on them, Mexicans can undermine this colonial ideology and transform their accidentality into something that supports rather than undermines their flourishing. This strategy is similar to the way some oppressed groups have appropriated slurs used to denigrate them, in the hope of finding a kind of invulnerability in the act of taking on for themselves that which others sought to impose (Brontsema, 2004, Herbert, 2015). But in the case of appropriating zozobra, what is appropriated is the very *form of consciousness* that arises

[12] Discussing this point, Vargas (2020, 15–16) says, "Philosophers have tended to valorize cross-situationally stable, normatively unified agents, and the Kantian and Aristotelian traditions have tended to defend this sort of view in different ways." Vargas cites Korsgaard as an example of a philosopher explicitly arguing for this view. For this reason, when Uranga argues that accidentality "constitutes the being of all human beings," he views this as a philosophical position that has the potential "to overturn the teachings of the Western tradition" (Uranga, 2021 [1952], 111).

when one is subordinated—and this would be the ultimate invulnerability. Uranga thus calls for a generational movement that embraces and celebrates zozobra in order to undermine the normative hegemony of those who pretend to embody substantiality.

Noting that the notion of accidentality is drawn from European philosophy, Uranga suggests that the generational movement to celebrate zozobra might instead organize itself under the heading of "nepantla," a term taken from Nahuatl, the language of indigenous communities in southern Mexico and Central America.

> We pointed out that the mode of being of the Mexican is oscillatory and pendular, moving from one extreme to the other, making simultaneous two instances while never sacrificing one for the sake of the other. The Mexican character does not install itself over—for lack of a better term—two agencies, but between them. The Nahuatl term "nepantla" captures this phenomenon perfectly; it means "in between," in the middle, in the center. We thus have before us, in all its purity, the central category of our ontology, autochthonous, one that does not borrow from the Western tradition, satisfying our desire to be originalists. The content within which our being oscillates is, suddenly, indifferent with regard to its matter; there is, for its part, nothing that would invalidate the form that binds it together. (166–67)

By elevating nepantla as the organizing principle of a new communal identity, Uranga hopes to undermine the colonial logic of identity, in which identity is inextricable from exclusion and the imposition of an artificial coherence. "The people of nepantla" would include everyone who can find no stable home in the world and who do not fit neatly into the identity categories offered by the dominant normative framework. Ultimately, this would include everyone, since all human beings have only a tenuous hold on their identity and place in the world—a vision of humanity in which the paradigm is not the European, but the Mexican.

As we turn now to discussions of zozobra in contemporary Latinx philosophy, we find a striking degree of continuity in the line of thought initiated by Portilla and Uranga.

4 Anzaldúa on the New Mestiza

The *phenomenon* of zozobra is a central concern of contemporary Latinx philosophy, even if the *term* "zozobra" is rarely used when discussing it. As many Latinx philosophers have pointed out, while Latin American identity is complex, Latinx identity is often even more so, insofar as Latinx identity is a mixture of mixtures, bringing together what is often already a *mestizo* identity of Latin America with one or more of the various, complex, and conflicted identities found in the US. For this reason, in addition to navigating the inter- and intra-personal tensions associated with being both "too white" and "too brown" for inclusion in indigenous or Anglo-European communities, many Latinx individuals must also navigate the tensions associated with being "too Latin American" to feel fully at home in US culture, and "too American" to feel fully at home in the Latin American culture of their heritage. "*Ni de aquí ni de allá,*" from neither here nor there: this common refrain among the

children of Latin American immigrants to the US expresses a sentiment that can persist within Latinx communities for generations.

One specific way this pattern can play out is a felt need to be or act "whiter" in professional spaces, or even to enact a more general self-distancing from one's *latinidad* or "Latinness" to maintain or improve one's social status. Discussing this topic, Maria Lugones (1987) describes the disorienting experience of suddenly losing access to certain of her character traits and capacities that she deeply cherished, such as her "playfulness" and sense of humor, whenever she entered professional spaces in the US. This dynamic can give rise to "impostor syndrome," in which Latinx individuals doubt their talents and accomplishments and experience a persistent anxiety about being exposed as a fraud—a condition that Carlos Sánchez (2011) describes as "post-immigrant fear," in which the descendants of non-white immigrants remain vigilant of the threat of being asked to show one's "papers" (i.e., demonstrate one's credentials or proof of belonging) on pain of being "deported" from certain social spaces. As Jennifer Morton (2019) points out in her discussion of the "costs of upward mobility," such fears often reflect the reality of a society in which many Latinx communities are oppressed, and so those Latinx individuals who gain wealth or education risk becoming increasingly isolated from their friends and families.

One of the most well-known discussions of Latinx zozobra is found in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, who writes eloquently about her own experience of not fitting into simple identity categories.

> Being a mestiza queer person, una de las otras is having and living in a lot of worlds, some of which overlap…. Moving at the blink of an eye, from one space, one world, to another, each world with its own peculiar and distinct inhabitants, not comfortable in any one of them, none of them "home," yet none of them "not home" either. (Anzaldúa, 2009, 141)

Despite the challenges associated with this zozobra, Anzaldúa offers a perspective that is strikingly similar to Uranga's, calling on us to embrace zozobra as a source of personal and collective liberation. Like Uranga, Anzaldúa begins by arguing that fragmentation is the human condition, insofar as all people experience some amount of the self-splitting that is so pronounced in the Latinx experience.

> We all have many different selves or subpersonalities, little "I's": This self may be very good at running the house, taking care of the writing as a business, making a living from the writing, and figuring out expenses. This other self is very emotional and this other self is the public figure who goes out, does speeches and teaches. Whatever subpersonalities you have (and some are antagonistic to others)—they all make up *el árbol*, which is the total self. (Anzaldúa, 2000, 242)

Anzaldúa thus holds that the multiplicity of the self is not inherently problematic or something to be avoided or corrected; to the contrary, it is full of creative potential.

Indeed, Anzaldúa argues that the dysfunctions associated with multiplicity are in fact caused by the imposition of hegemonic normative frameworks that demand people to be coherent, orderly, and stable—demands that may now be beginning to be subjected to skeptical critique.

> Now people are integrating that desire not to compartmentalize into their lives, into everyday activities. But compartmentalization has been a way of life for so long—to be different people and even aware of it: life forcing us to be one person at the job, another at school, and yet another with our lesbian friends—that it feels really ambiguous to bring all those other identities with you and to activate them all. (141)

Again echoing Uranga, Anzaldúa calls for Latinx individuals to refuse to check parts of themselves at the office or classroom door, and to insist that the world begin to accommodate their complexity. She thus envisions a movement of people who embrace a new conception of *mestizaje* that is not tied to any ethnic or racial origins but only to mixture and hybridity itself.

> The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa, 1987, 79)

Thus, calling for us to take up the mantle of "*nepantleras*" (i.e., or people who take up nepantla as a project to be realized), Anzaldúa aims to construct an alternative normative framework that can bring a unified meaning to the fragmentation experienced by the Latinx community, without reproducing the violence inherent to colonial conceptions of identity.

However, it is not clear whether an identity that is so inclusive can function as an identity category at all, not to mention provide the kind of normative framework that would enable a community to avoid the negative effects of disintegration described by Portilla and others. With this in mind, let us now conclude our examination of zozobra with a less ambitious but perhaps more practical approach to coping with zozobra.

5 Ortega on Hometactics

In her 2016 text, *In-Between: Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, Mariana Ortega offers a treatment of zozobra that is framed as a response to Anzaldúa's description of the multiplicity of the self. Ortega begins by arguing that multiplicity and the zozobra that accompanies it are both a matter of degree, and that while "all selves may experience not being-at-ease occasionally," some individuals "experience it continuously" (Ortega, 2016, 60). In particular, Ortega says, the condition of multiplicity becomes intensified and more burdensome for those who are members of oppressed and marginalized social groups.

> While the account of multiplicitous selfhood offered here is to be understood as a general account of self—that is, all of us are multiplicitous selves—…[for] those multiplicitous selves whose experience is marked by oppression and marginalization due to their social identities…multiplicity is sharper, sometimes piercing, thus leading to a sense of alienation and *Unheimlichkeit*, or uncanniness, that makes their lives more vulnerable to injustice. (51)

Oppression intensifies and exacerbates zozobra, in Ortega's view, because (1) members of oppressed social groups are frequently forced to enter into subworlds dominated by privileged social groups, for work, education, and other social and practical goods, and (2) members of oppressed social groups tend to experience a strong sense of unfamiliarity when they are in subworlds dominated by privileged social groups. Presumably, members of privileged social groups would also tend to experience a strong sense of unfamiliarity if and when they visit subworlds dominated by oppressed social groups, or any social groups to which they do not belong. However, those who are privileged often enjoy the ability to remain inside relatively segregated social bubbles and so can work, study, and take care of other concerns without having to venture out of familiar social spaces.

In this way, members of oppressed social groups tend to be the ones who must bear the cost of the disunity and fragmentation of a society's subworlds.

> Since there is overlapping between worlds, some of these worlds will share norms, meanings, and points of view, while in other cases there will be minimal overlapping. Power relations at work in these various worlds are established differently and construct the multiplicitous self in various ways… there will be cases in which there will be incommensurability, and some elements will be lost in cross-cultural communication…. Complete translation is not possible, and the multiplicitous self-will in some sense always be an outsider. (67)

On this basis, Ortega criticizes Heidegger's assumption that the domain of "everydayness" is a domain in which we feel at home and can rely on unselfconscious, skillful coping. For many Latinas, Ortega argues, the demands of daily life take them into social spaces in which they feel forced to suppress or abandon practical identities and ways of being that are central to their own self-understanding. "The selves described by Latina feminists continually experience not being-at-ease or tears in the fabric of everyday experience while performing practices that for the dominant group are, for the most part, nonreflective, customary, and readily available" (61–62).

According to Ortega's analysis, then, the worst effects of zozobra arise when members of oppressed social groups are alienated from subworlds that they must frequently inhabit but are dominated by privileged social groups. It follows from this analysis that one way to cope with the worst effects of zozobra would be to diminish this alienation and strengthen the sense of familiarity and identification with the relevant subworlds. This task might be accomplished through *assimilation*, adopting the practical identities, attitudes, and ways of being of the dominant group. However, moving in the direction of assimilation often gives rise to "sense of confusion, ambiguity, or even contradiction" (81) about one's own personality and values. In this way, a Latina is more likely to find herself experiencing an "existential crisis based on the anxiety that arises when she faces extremely difficult choices given her multiple personalities" (54). The painful intensity of this zozobra itself constitutes a significant harm, and it also makes a person more vulnerable to various kinds of oppression by weakening their ability and willingness to resist injustice.

With this in mind, Ortega commends the use of what she calls "hometactics" as an alternative to assimilation. Hometactics are practices that support a person's

“sense of familiarity, ease, or…belonging in a space or location, even though the space is a new or foreign one” (205). Examples of hometactics include “painting the walls of your apartment with bright colors, such as the ones that remind you of a childhood home or your country origin” and “making and sharing foods you used to eat in your past by improvising with ingredients that are available” (206). Another example of hometactics is “rethinking, refeeling the meaning of family by developing new relationships with a neighbor, getting so close that he becomes family, too”; “finding ways of relating to members of other groups with whom one was not associated before”; or “switching languages in different contexts or integrating words from familiar languages to feel more at ease” (207). Each of these practices functions to increase the amount of “overlap” between subworlds in which one enjoys familiarity and identification and subworlds that are less unfamiliar and alienating, thus making it easier to move between these subworlds without becoming disoriented or estranged from important dimensions oneself.

Hometactics are typically improvised, small in scale, and temporary. As such, it is unclear the extent to which they will help to alleviate the zozobra experienced by the oppressed or constitute a serious challenge to the oppressive social structures themselves. Indeed, as Ortega admits:

> [There are important] questions as to the extent to which such hometactics might be found to be too opportunistic within dominant schemas, might be representative of not just making do but of “selling out,” might be too passive, might be too complicit in dominant schemes, or might or might not preclude the possibility of more sustained political projects need to be examined. (206)

However, by way of conclusion, let us note that there is no deep incompatibility between the approaches to zozobra commended by Ortega, Anzaldúa, and Uranga. One could employ hometactics to “alleviate the stress, pain and anxiety that arises from a life of in-betweenness” (207) while at the same time pursuing “grander and more sustained political projects” (206), including the construction of a new paradigm of identity under the banner of nepantla. After all, hometactics do not aim to eradicate zozobra entirely by instituting a stable normative regime to one’s liking, but only to alleviate the most painful aspects of zozobra, which may then give one more access to the creative and liberatory potential that is inherent to liminality.

I hope to have shown that the topic of zozobra is a point of shared concern that connects the traditions of Mexican and Latinx phenomenology and, what is more, that the voices and perspectives we find within these traditions can be helpfully understood as participating in a shared dialectic. This dialectic offers a phenomenological approach to understanding some of the tensions that mark Latin American and Latinx identity, which have typically approach by scholars from a psychological point of view. As we have seen, the approach taken by Mexican and Latinx phenomenologists does not focus merely on the thoughts and feelings of the individuals who are questioning, asserting, or reinventing their identities but rather, examines the ways that the experience of identity is already shaped by *conditions of possibility* that are *external* to the individual. These conditions of the possibility of identity include the horizons of understanding that constitute the world within

which individuals and groups construct and contest particular identities, or—when those horizons disintegrate—constitute a setting within which individuals will struggle to form any stable or coherent identity at all. In turn, this line of thought illuminates several perennial issues in the domain of classic phenomenology, such as the nature of worlds and what it means to be at home in the world, by examining these notions in light of distinctive sorts of breakdowns that occur in the Mexican and Latinx context.

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