

Sentipensando Latina/o/x Theoethics

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Taking the work of decolonial scholar Arturo Escobar, this article explores the notion of *sentipensar* (lit. thinking feeling) and its possible intersections and implications for Latina/o/x theoethics. The concept of *sentipensar* signals a different type of rationality by which people are able to account for their immediate environment, history, and identity. Latina/o/x theoethics embodies its own kind of decolonial *sentipensar* beyond inherited Eurocentric intellectual frames. Latina/o/x scholars ground theoethics in their daily experience of *Lo cotidiano* (the everyday), by anchoring their construction of knowledge on *Lo cultural*, and by uncovering the violence of empire and colonization in their own ethno-bio-cultural mestizaje.

Sentipensar as Decolonial Category

As an expression of decolonial thinking, Arturo Escobar proposes the notion of *sentipensar*. According to him, *sentipensar con el territorio* implies thinking with the heart and with the mind, or *co-razonar*.¹ He adopts the term from Fals Borda, who in turned borrowed it from the communities that live near, and draw their sustenance from, the rivers in northern Colombia, who make up what is known as *la cultura riverena* or the culture of the peoples of the rivers. These communities, Borda explains, further enrich the notion of *sentipensante* pointing to how they reflect and think with their heart in intimate relation to and in balance with their immediate natural environment. These river people, Borda claims, follow the example of endurance and persistence of the *Icotea* turtle; they display the qualities of endurance in the midst of life's setbacks and have the

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knowledge to overcome them.² For his part, Escobar tells us that *sentipensar* points to the forms in which territorialized communities have learned the art of living. As he explains, it is a call – which I would describe as an ethical call – for people to *sentipensar* with the local cultures and knowledges of the peoples in their own geographic and territorial spaces instead of using external decontextualized knowledge that undergird the notions of “development,” “growth,” and even “economy.”

1 This is a play of words. In Spanish, the word for heart is *corazón* and the word for reasoning is *razonar*. In Spanish, when one becomes aware of things beyond the mental processes, what we would call intuitions, then the Spanish word *corazonada* is used. *Co-razonar* is thus reasoning intuitively with the heart and the emotions. See (Escobar 2014, 16).

2 See his interview: “Fals Borda, Sentipensante,” Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbJWqetRuMo> (accessed March 19, 2019).

Focusing primarily on Afro-Colombian contexts and secondarily on Indigenous communities and their concerns, Escobar discusses how these multiple communities weave life / *tejen la vida* as they interact with their immediate environment, always keeping in mind a sense of relationship with the land, the rivers, and the rest of nature. Their ways are radically different from the globalizing, neoliberal, capitalist calculi which turn everything into products of consumption and promote rapacious forms of development and economic growth. These calculi operate without factoring in the costs of environmental despoliation through extractivism, the destruction of entire ecosystems, and the erosion of the millenarian cultures and sense of community of the inhabitants of the region.

Re-defining *Sentipensar*

On one hand, I celebrate *sentipensar* as another crucial category of the larger decolonial lexicon. It harnesses the epistemological impetus from Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities in the Americas, though these impetuses are not exclusive to them. The term redraws the scope of intellectual and epistemological engagement away from inherited anthropocentric and instrumental reasoning-centred perspectives, to allow for other forms of knowledge and living life that take place with profound respect for and in close interaction with nature, animals, and other communities— what he calls, other ways of being or ontologies.

On the other hand, I understand the way in which Escobar highlights different ways of being / *formas de ser*; that is, the multiplicity of ways in which different peoples live life in close interaction and interdependence with their immediate environment as ontologies. However, it seems to me that there is still an operative Eurocentrism in his understanding of “being.” He, along with Nelson Maldonado-Torres’ in his proposal of “coloniality of being” (Maldonado-Torres 2007), depends too much on Heidegger’s *Dasein*. In other words, they understand being as the intellectual and existential activity and level of consciousness that takes place as individuals focus in on themselves, the meaning of their existence as individuals, and their relationship to the world (Heidegger 1962). Admittedly, Escobar attempts to go beyond ideas about individualist forms of being and towards *formas de ser* or ontologies which epitomize communality and interdepen-

dence. I propose, however, that his emphasis on *formas de ser* can be enriched by the understanding of being in Spanish: that of having two translations which do not exist in English, *ser* and *estar*. The expressions in Spanish: *ser* and *estar* are translated as *being* in English, but they convey different postures and intellectual orientations, which, I would argue, point us to different aspects of *sentipensar*. Grammatically, *ser* refers to something that is permanent and unchangeable. It assumes a finished product. Meanwhile, *estar* refers to a state of being or feeling, or occupying a space, a location or time, but which is not fixed, is bound to change. It is therefore more fluid and relational, with a deeper sense of becoming. The crucial contribution of *estar* is the celebration of interaction with the world and deeper levels of interdependence with nature through *active in-action*; that is, by waiting and learning to live with the landscape, the land and rivers, without wanting to aggressively change it, dominate it, or exploit it for profit. Here, the work of Rodolfo Kusch can prove helpful (Kusch 1970; Kusch 1975). He reminds us how Indigenous cosmologies preserve life in all its tensions. He draws attention to the connections between *ser* and *estar* as the two complementing sides of the ontological understanding of life that the indigenous communities teach, and which ought to be kept in tension to preserve an ontological equilibrium. *Estar*, he claims, antecedes *ser* because it is the space from which life emerges / *se da la vida*. He is critical of the potential fragmenting character of *ser* by focusing on the individual and which can dangerously become aggressive and utilitarian with the rest of nature. This impetus could be contrasted to the active and attentive waiting on nature in *estar*, which is manifest in agrarian cultures (Kusch 1975).

Along the same lines, and somewhat problematically, Escobar’s focus on different *formas de ser* as ontologies leads him to reject the notion of culture, even while he preserves the term *lo cultural* (the cultural). He rejects “culture” because of inherited Eurocentric universalizing claims which disallow other epistemologies. Unfortunately, instead of opening the category “culture,” Escobar seems to take for granted the European anthropocentric intellectual tradition and understanding of culture, prompting him to replace it with the much more abstract—and perhaps even more Eurocentric—category “ontology,” to speak about the concrete ways Afrocolombians live life in relation with their immediate environment and context.



I certainly agree with Escobar's evaluation of the term "culture" for its residual Eurocentric underpinnings which bolster the belief of a one world system (*unimundismo*) which encompasses all of reality.³ Yet, here Escobar seems to have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. The notion of "culture" (as an unqualified category and in the singular) is most definitely a technology of the modern colonizing project insofar as it contributed to asserting the "superiority" of Europeans over the rest of the world. But the present reconfiguration of the world by way of multiple cultural communities can hardly be understood in such terms. The plural *cultures*, specific adjectival modification such as Afro-Latina/o culture, Maya culture, etc., and the notion of *the cultural*, to speak about how different human collectives live life and interact with the environment and with each other socially, seem to most effectively communicate what Escobar is attempting to say by using the abstract notion of *ontologies*.⁴

Latina/o/x Theoethics as "Decolonial" *Sentipensar*

An emphasis on the cultural illuminates other discourses and debates in which people have also been wrestling with these issues articulating "decolonizing" paradigms for some time. In what follows, I explore some key points of intersection between Escobar's proposal of *sentipensar* and one such discourse,

–Latina/o/x⁵ theoethics.⁶ For the last 50 years, Latina/o/x scholars have insisted on reframing the theological, ethical, and pastoral tasks from the vantage point of the faith experiences and cultural traditions of Latina/o/xs. Among other categories, their articulation of the central role of *lo cotidiano*, the central role of the cultural dimension, and the notion of *mestizaje* epitomize their own forms of *sentipensar*

3 According to Escobar, there are different understandings of culture: one, culture as symbolic structure, which corresponds with the most accepted views among anthropologists and cultural studies. And two, culture as radical difference, which plays out in terms such as "civilization", "cosmovision", "epistemic difference", and "communitarian logic", which, for him, complexify ideas of culture as symbolic structure. See (Escobar 2014, 17).

4 For a fuller discussion of the cultural as a proper way to speak of the processes of culturalization see (Medina 2018, Chapter 1).

5 The search for appropriate labels to speak about these diverse communities has become an intellectual minefield. For some time, many scholars have appropriated LatinX in an attempt to include members of the LGBTQAI+ communities. While I agree that the function of any label must be as inclusive as possible, here I agree with Nicole Trujillo-Pagán who demonstrates that the use of LatinX undermines the inherent diversity of Latina communities. More specifically for women, she claims that LatinX neutralizes claims of sexism by giving the appearance of gender neutrality. See (Trujillo-Pagán 2018). It is for this reason that I adopt the variation Latina/o/x because it preserves the internal diversity of these communities even while attempting to include and account for members of the LGBTQAI+ who have ancestral connections with Latin America or who are Latina/o/x. I am adopting this variation as Jeremy Cruz, Neomi DeAnda and I articulated it in "Respondiendo a las demandas históricas: Analyses of the Transformative Legacy of Samuel Ruiz García of Chiapas," (Medina, DeAnda and Cruz 2013). For further details of this variation see also (De Anda 2015, 169).

6 I use the term theoethics to highlight the interrelationship between ethics and theology as expressed by Latina/o/x scholars. By contrast to traditional approaches that seek to preserve the disciplinary boundaries between theology and ethics, Latinas/os/xs do not write theology and ethics separately. Speaking of Latina/o/x theology and ethics does not do justice to the work of Latina/o/x scholars. Implicit in Latina/o/x "theological" perspectives are ethical implications and principles. Similarly, implicit in Latina/o/x "ethics" are theological insights, affirmations, and principles. Theology and ethics are not understood as being separate. In fact, they are viewed as corresponding and mutually informing. Hence my use of theoethics. Moreover, I speak of theoethics because Latina/o/x communities do not live life in academic silos. Rather, their deep-seated religious devotions, practices, and beliefs (theology) carry with them the necessary material by which their morality is defined and into which their actions for justice are rooted. Finally, I use theoethics as an intentional decolonial move away from traditional hard-and-fast disciplinary boundaries. If ethics corresponds with the ways in which different communities reflect upon questions of morality and human activity, then theology corresponds with the content with which those notions of morality and human activity are informed, inspired, and provoked.

and as part of doing theoethics in a decolonial key. Their proposal points to how Latinas/os/xs incarnate other forms of living life/ of being, and in so doing they weave and articulate other forms of knowledge, other epistemologies. In what follows, I briefly discuss some of the intersecting aspects between these categories and decolonial thinking.

A. Lo Cotidiano.

Lo cotidiano, or the everyday, became one of the central categories of Latina/o/x theoethics for its potentially transformative power to change social structures of oppression and marginalization. According to Latinas/os/xs, *lo cotidiano* is the juncture at which people confront and struggle against the social, political, and economic forces that prevent Latina/o/x communities from thriving.⁷ *Lo cotidiano*, claims Ada María Isasi-Díaz, describes the spaces where people live and experience life, where they choose survival and contribute to struggles for survival (Isasi-Díaz 1993). Meanwhile, Gilberto Cavazos-González tells us that *lo cotidiano* and *cotidianeidad* describe the commonplace, the daily routine where the mundane takes place but also where people are surprised by the wonderful gift of life breaking through, even as they struggle with the reality of sorrow and the difficulties of life (Cavazos-González 2010, 2). It is for this reason that María Pilar Aquino insists that in *lo cotidiano* people (her focus is on women) experience sin and grace, hope and despair, resistance and oppression, loneliness, and solidarity (Aquino 2000, 102–108). Thus, *lo cotidiano* constitutes a unique hermeneutics that permits people both to interpret reality as simultaneously one of oppression and resistance, while providing them with the ethical tools to counter all that threatens life (Aquino 2000, 13, 29). *Lo cotidiano*, that is, life as it is actually lived also constitutes the dimension at which people experience the divine, express their faith in God, and imagine the possible futures for subsequent generations.

Crucial for our decolonial purposes, *lo cotidiano* constitutes a different epistemology and theological source which draws on community and the individual in relation to others as the *locus* for the creation of a liberative ethics, irreducible to the sphere of the “domestic,” the “private,” or the “individual.” (Espín 2006, 5) Consistent with the Latin American libera-

tion theological understanding of praxis as preceding theological reflection, Latina/o/x scholars argue that *lo cotidiano* describes the frontlines of theological knowledge and guides ethical action. It is both the temporal juncture at which people actively resist their condition of marginalization as well as the ethical frame from which to act, imagine, envision, and struggle for a different society. The crucial insight is that God is revealed in *lo cotidiano*. Also, the everyday is the space in which people come to make sense of and express their faith in God. Professional theological knowledge is but a second or even a third movement because it draws its knowledge and insights from this concrete historical context where people live life and express their faith (Riebe-Estrella 1999, 210–213).

B. The Cultural.

For Latinas/os/xs, *lo cotidiano* is intimately interwoven with the cultural dimension, since inherited cultural traditions define, shape, and condition how people understand the world, interact with each other, and respond to the divine (Espín 2007; Espín 2006). There is a resonance here with Escobar’s notion of ontologies. Latina/o/x theoethicists understand *lo cultural* not only as a set of interpersonal protocols or social interaction. Rather, the cultural refers much more broadly to the way in which Latinas/os/xs understand life, interact with the environment and with each other, and respond to the divine. In other words, Latina/o/x communities confront reality and live daily life as Latinas/os/xs: they feel joy, love, hope, and despair as well as celebrate their faith, wrestle with moral decisions, approach God, and think theology in the manner in which their Latina/o/x cultural traditions allow them. In this manner, Latinas/os/xs’ way of living through the cultural is a rejection of inherited Eurocentric ideas of a universal human, notions of a universal culture, or the pretense of universally applicable theoethical principles. Resonating with Escobar’s category here, Latinas/os/xs reject the notion of *unimundismo*. They insist instead that *lo cultural* is a central feature, vantage point of enunciation, and source of theological knowledge. The affirmation of the cultural is not simply the way by which Latina/o/x scholars attempt to be contextual. It is rather an affirmation that all ethnoracial communities are also conditioned by their own cultural traditions. Inherited Eurocentric theoethical affirmations are also the result of specific cultural traditions, episte-

7 See (Aquino 2000; Isasi-Díaz 1993).



mologies, and contexts; they are also specific responses to contextual questions and challenges. A crucial point is that each cultural tradition epitomizes its own global view of the world and a unique epistemology, ethics, and theology (Fornet-Betancourt 2002).

It must also be said that the endorsement of the cultural as a site of theological knowledge is not a romantic wholesale acceptance of Latina/o/x cultural traditions. At various moments, Latina/o/x scholars have been strongly critical of intra-Latina/o/x cultural attitudes and practices such as androcentric male chauvinism (*machismo*) (Aquino, 2001; Aquino, 1992), racism (De La Torre 2006), and attitudes of discrimination against members of the LGBTQAI+ communities (Espín 2000), all of which denigrate the humanity of members of their own communities. At the same time, the celebration of Latina/o/x cultural traditions by Latina/o/x scholars involves an introspective look to reclaim their ancestral forms of knowledge (indigenous and African). These forms of knowledge have often been suppressed because of the operative Eurocentric forces of assimilation and the social structures of discrimination established by the dominant culture, which many Latinas/os/xs have internalized.

For instance, on one hand, as a Latino Canadian, I celebrate the centrality of the cultural which allows for an openness to cultural multiplicity. On the other hand, the cultural can also serve as a critical lens for white liberal proposals which fail to deliver as it is the case with the Canadian affirmation of multiculturalism. It did nothing to challenge the expectations and dominance of linguistic and cultural English or French performativity in the public sphere, while consigning the languages of other cultural traditions to the private sphere (Medina 2013; Fleras 2014).

C. Mestizaje.

Mestizaje is the third aspect of Latina/o/x theoethics that I wish to highlight for its decolonizing impetus. In many ways, *mestizaje* brings *lo cotidiano* and the cultural together by emphasizing the complex processes of biological, cultural, and religious intermixture, which resulted from double colonization (by Spanish and Portuguese first and the USA second) (Elizondo 1983). In responding to the social, political, racialized, and cultural experiences of discrimination, Latina/o/x scholars insist that Latina/o/x theoethics cannot be done without revisiting

and interrogating the history of violent colonization (Elizondo 1978). Building on class analysis as done by Latin American liberation scholars and interrogating their history of colonization through the engagement of *mestizaje*, Latina/o/xs uncovered the crossings of multiple forms of social oppression and exclusion (ethnoracial, cultural, social, economic, gender, sexual orientation). Colonization in the Americas was not the simple act of imposition of empire over other peoples and territories alone. Rather, it impacted and shaped all aspects of the lives of Indigenous and African peoples and their descendants through the reality of intermixture with Europeans: it redefined their world, their religious traditions, their cultures, and their forms of knowledge.

The adoption of *mestizaje*, that is, the experience and condition of being mixed (Indigenous, African, and European), is then a critical reminder of this violent history. At the same time, by reclaiming *mestizaje* Latinas/os/xs offer a counter-narrative which accounts for and at the same time challenges the violence of colonization as well as ideologies of ethnoracial and cultural purity. Similarly, by adopting *mestizaje* Latinas/os/xs challenge pervasive notions of identity as self-contained, airtight, finished products. Instead, they demonstrate that identities are porous and the result of complex processes of intermixture (Segovia 1996, 203). The adoption of *mestizaje* is decolonizing in content and impetus. It encourages Latinas/os/xs to move away from inherited colonizing ideas of human existence, ethnoracial and cultural identity, and to seek out other forms of knowledge that until now have remained absent in mainstream debates. In a decolonial vein, *mestizaje* is reclaimed as a crucial site and source of theoethical knowledge.⁸

Latina/o/x Theoethics and Decoloniality: (Dis)Connections

Despite the positive decolonial thrust of Latina/o/x theoethics, presently it is undergoing self-critical internal reconfigurations. To this end, the way in which *mestizaje* is seen as promoting Eurocentric ideas and cultural and ethnoracial whitening is being interrogated by younger scholars (Medina 2009; Aquino 2015; González 2006). In the emerging dis-

8 For a fuller discussion on *mestizaje* see (Medina 2009).

courses, Latina/o/x theoethics could be enriched by Nelson Maldonado-Torres' notion of coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres 2007). By the same token, the idea of "coloniality of being" which focuses on the way in which present capitalist structures shape how people live and behave, could be enriched by a Latina/o/x exploration of how *mestizaje*, with its long history and ideological baggage, has also been an expression of colonizing structures of being.

As a different episteme which stems from peoples' lived experiences and multiple histories, the notion of *mestizaje* serves as a cipher anticipating the divine dismantling of racialized, cultural, and religious structures of power (Medina 2020). It also epitomizes an ethical praxis and ethos, as well as pastoral approaches, unwilling to succumb to easy recipes of "inclusion," "unity," and "hospitality." Instead, *Mestizaje* allows for an envisioning of the spaces necessary for the creation of an intercultural, interreligious, interethnic, and multilingual society, a society where there is room for many worlds, many histories, many ancestral lines, and many epistemologies. In so doing, it invites a subversion of false notions of purity, homogeneity, unity, and whiteness.

Latina/o/x theoethics are articulated by drawing on people's experiences. Scholars reclaim and affirm their cultural traditions, historical experience of *mestizaje*, and the space of *lo cotidiano* as forms of knowledge which go beyond abstract categories alone. Through these experience-based categories, Latina/o/x scholars identify the intersection of forms of oppression: gender, ethnoracial, cultural, and economic, as constitutive aspects of the colonial apparatus especially in today's globalizing neoliberal capitalist networks which promote the commodification of life itself. In this way, Latinas/os/xs anticipated the concept of intersectionality. Latinas are also part of the longer history of intersectional feminist discourses along with Gloria Anzaldúa and Chela Sandoval, among others. By interrogating their own history of colonization and its accompanying destructive social, cultural, political, and economic effects, Latina/o/x scholars resonate with Anibal Quijano's notion of coloniality of power (Quijano 2000). Their insistence on reclaiming their own cultural traditions created the conditions for a distancing from inherited Eurocentric forms of knowledge even before decolonial thinking was articulated in the social sciences (Mignolo 2007; Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007). In these and other ways, Latinas/os/xs already include attempts to

"decolonize" ethics and theology by emphasizing the concrete lived experiences of colonization, oppression, marginalization, and poverty as points of departure. Moreover, decolonization is a feature in Latina/o/x ethical and theological discourses through the identification of colonization, along with its history and present expressions, as an important factor that must be accounted for in theoethical considerations. Stated differently, Latina/o/x theoethics is a form of *sentipensar con el pueblo y por la vida del pueblo*/with the people and for the lives of the people. In this way they embody what Adolfo Albán Achinte calls disruptive epistemes (Albán Achinte 2012).

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