

Latin American Antiphilosophies

Written by Christina Soto van der Plas

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/04/07/latin-american-antiphilosophies/>

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This is a pre-print excerpt from *Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala*. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

When we, in Latin America, think of theory or philosophy, the thinkers that come to mind are almost always European, and particularly German, French or English. But when we try to think of Latin American philosophers, we must dig deeper and justify why a certain thinker could be considered a philosopher within the scheme of the Western understanding of what philosophy is deemed to be, as a corpus and self-referential system. However, most of the time, thinkers operating outside of the European philosophical pedigree – whether they write and think in the European languages they have inherited or in their mother tongues – are always first seen as subjects of ethnographic inquiries or anthropological fieldwork and investigation, and never quite as thinkers in their own right. ‘No Greek ever asked himself about the existence of a Greek philosophy and no Latin or medieval thinker – French, English or German – ever thought about the existence of their philosophy. They simply thought, created, ordered, established, defined. They philosophized.’ ‘Their heirs in Latin America’, Leopoldo Zea says ‘suffer from an inferiority complex. We say: This cannot be philosophy!’ (Zea 2010, 11) We hear the question: ‘Philosophy in Latin America?... and they question: Where are the systems? Do they have an equivalent to Kant or Hegel, etc.?’ (Zea 2010, 53) Hence, philosophy is the self-conscious and confident pretension that assumes that its particular thinking is *thought*. And this kind of thought is included within the limited history of occidental reason, also known as Universal History. That is, the history of the world that, by expanding itself, has made of the objects of its expansion part of its aggressive history.

In Latin America, there is a longstanding tradition of thinkers wondering if there is such a thing as philosophy in the Americas, and several responses have been offered from different traditions, countries, and genealogies. The debate can be traced back to the earlier colonial writings by Bartolomé de las Casas (2013) where the dispute was if the Indigenous population inhabiting the Americas should be considered as possible slaves or if they should instead be treated as sons of God, due to their religious conversion. Once most Latin American countries were independent, there was a fierce inner fight over whether our governments (and hence our scientific models and our ways of thinking) should follow the French model of development after the Enlightenment, or the nascent North American capitalist model. This also happened within philosophy and economics, and most thinkers adhered to one or another model.

In late 19th and beginning of the 20th century, however, many thinkers began questioning if we were original and systematic enough to be included within the philosophical catalogue of Western reason. Augusto Salazar Bondy famously wrote a book titled *¿Existe una filosofía de nuestra América?* (1968) following the philosophical critique first articulated by Samuel Ramos in Mexico where he affirms that in Latin America, we

think according to theoretical frames previously conformed to the models of Western thought, particularly the European ones, importing trends of ideas, schools, fully defined systems in their content and intention. To philosophize for Hispano-Americans is to adopt a foreign *ismo*, to subscribe to certain preexisting thesis... there is no philosophical system born in Hispanic America (Salazar Bondy 1988, 20).

Following this negative view of our capacity to articulate our philosophy, many thinkers began reflecting upon the

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'problem of America' and our identity as thinking subjects from a particular region of the world.

The question that I will address in this chapter then becomes: What is particular of the kind of questions we develop from our spaces of being in Latin America? What kind of philosophy can we formulate? Can we have a philosophy more akin to our chaotic Third World experience and not to that, say, of Kant's routine that every day at the same time after drinking tea walked around the bell tower of his hometown which he never left? I argue that it is about supplementing the possibility of *ser* with that of *estar*, and tracing the poetics of their relation, not of including our being in the philosophical (capitalized) Being. For tracing this discussion, I propose going back to questioning the idea of Latin American philosophy, but from the lens of a term capable of displacing the whole discussion: 'antiphilosophy'. This debate can be productive, as Hamid Dabashi would argue, albeit coming from a different geography, even if for European thinkers Philosophy is mental gymnastics performed with the received particulars of European philosophy in its postmodern or poststructuralist registers. But unless and until those defining moments are structurally linked, thematically moved and conceptually compromised, and thus epistemically violated, they will have very little or nothing to say about the world that is unfolding in front of us' (Dabashi 2015, 6). If 'we are no longer (if we ever were) knowable to that European knowing subject... We, therefore, come together at a new gathering of knowledge and power not to mourn but to dislodge the link' (Dabashi 2015, 23). Seeking to dislodge the link, I will trace the origins of what antiphilosophy means and how conceiving of it from Latin America can help us unsettle the mental gymnastics of philosophy, not necessarily by ignoring our European heritage, but rather by understanding how conceptually we can consider our form of thought as Western philosophy's necessary sophist, counterpart and interlocutor.

Antiphilosophical Principles

The term antiphilosophy first came into being as a monstrosity of the Age of Reason. It was originally a name under which a group of self-appointed antiphilosophers assembled in a reactionary response to the *Encyclopédie* and its rationalist and materialist project. The *Encyclopédie* edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert between 1751–72 in France had as its main goal to gather in a clear and accessible manner the accumulated knowledge of its time. But the project born out of the French Revolution was very controversial and had many adversaries, among them the self-appointed antiphilosophers. The Antiphilosophers were a group of conservative Catholics that defended faith and religious dogmas against the idea of universal reason. As we know, the ideas of the *philosophes*, the writers of the *Encyclopédie* won the debate and we remember their time as *the Age of Reason*, the beginning of modernity. And the intervention of the conservative antiphilosophers would have been lost in history if it were not for Jacques Lacan's unearthing of the term antiphilosophy.

The psychoanalyst rescued the obscure term of antiphilosophy but changed its meaning, for his own purposes. In *Perhaps at Vincennes* (1975), Lacan briefly suggests to the analysts of his School that antiphilosophy should be part of their curriculum for training, along with linguistics, logic, and topology. The role of antiphilosophy would be evidencing what he calls the indestructible root and eternal dream of the anthology of the stupidity that characterizes philosophy and the university discourse (Lacan 2001, 314). Against the commodification and fetishization of knowledge, a training in antiphilosophy would imply an *awakening* from the mere educational reproduction and transmission of ideas. After Lacan and his brief remarks, Alain Badiou, a self-proclaimed Platonist and philosopher, took up the task of defining what philosophy is *vis-à-vis* all of its enemies, rivals and against the contemporary version of the sophists (Bosteels 2008, 155). For Badiou, philosophy can only be defined if it reaffirms itself, survives and works through all the objections and violent strokes of the antiphilosopher, his rival and shadow, who is constantly seeking to dethrone philosophy's systematic ambitions. That is why Badiou spent many years of his seminar in Paris (between 1992 and 1996) inquiring about the formal criteria and the practices of antiphilosophy over and against the claims of philosophy itself. Bruno Bosteels even argues that 'today the dominant philosophical attitude is in fact thoroughly antiphilosophical in nature, even if the label is not always used or accepted' (Bosteels 2008, 161).

Alain Badiou explains three antiphilosophical operations which are at the core of how I will conceive of antiphilosophy in Latin America. As he says, first, the movement of all antiphilosophy is the destitution of the category of truth, the 'unraveling of the pretensions of philosophy to constitute itself as theory' (Badiou 2011, 75). For antiphilosophers, the

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question of being and the world are coextensive with the question of language. The limits of the world are the limits of language (words are not things, and truth is nothing more than linguistic effect, the outcome of culturally specific language games or tropes), 'nominalism is the untranscendable horizon of our time' (Bosteels 2008, 163). The second operation is that antiphilosophers often seek what lies beyond the realm of the sayable, beyond sense, and this *beyond* must be understood with its mystical consequences: 'Philosophy is an act, of which the fabrications about "truth" are the clothing, the propaganda, the lies' (Badiou 2011, 75). What matters for the antiphilosopher is an idea that transforms us in an existential or revolutionary way, not merely a passive theory as they deem philosophy to be. The third operation is that there is a radically new act – implying a subject – discrediting any systematic theoretical or conceptual elaboration: 'this act without precedent destroys the philosophical act, all the while clarifying its noxious character. It overcomes it affirmatively' (Badiou 2011, 76). As for their style, antiphilosophers usually do not write in a systematic fashion and their texts are often experimental and autobiographical. It is crucial to note that these three described operations debunk the core philosophical notions of being, truth, and the subject. Antiphilosophy situates itself as the extimacy (the internal exteriority), it moves between distance and proximity, admiration and blame, seduction and scorn (Bosteels 2008, 158) – challenging and questioning such presuppositions: truth is linguistic, beyond meaning, and a radical act is necessary to dynamite theory.

In Latin America and other peripheries there are antiphilosophical tendencies, but this is not surprising: the common attitude and rule nowadays is antiphilosophical. The exception would be finding someone claiming to be a true philosopher with a systematic project and declaring to uphold the notions of truth, subject and being (like Alain Badiou himself). But what I want to consider is how from these other geographies, the antiphilosophical offensive movement is linked to what I call an *estar* – an inhabiting of experience – and not merely to debates about theory and its place in our society. The sword and the pen are one in our countries, and political theory comes after the revolution not before. As José Revueltas explains, 'Instead of the "weapons of criticism" (that is, a systematic, coherent, organized and more or less total conscience of development) preceding its material deployment, objective development begins with the "criticism of weapons", with the armed revolutionary conflict itself' (Revueltas 2020, 320). The same goes for antiphilosophy: its active and revolutionary nature always begins with the criticism of the weapons of philosophy itself. This is precisely what Leopoldo Zea also affirms: 'In Western culture... philosophy comes before action, it is its foundation, it justifies it. In Latin America first there is the action, and then comes what justifies such an action' (Zea 2010, 34). Instead of having a metaphysics as the essential base of political praxis, in Latin America political praxis seeks to find a metaphysical doctrine – or at least a philosophy – to justify its actions. In this sense, we could say that our style of philosophizing is one committed with our realities, is a kind of thought seeking to solve the immediate problems of reality and not a preemptive model for developing action.

In what follows, I will take on Leopoldo Zea's plea for a Latin American philosophy *sin más* – universal and yet located and derived from a space and time – and I will propose that the kind of thought arising from the region's political and epistemological circumstances can be characterized as antiphilosophical in nature. As Zea proposes, we need to think about 'our strange way of philosophizing' (Zea 2010, 14). I will focus on key notions from two authors to demonstrate how these operations come into play in different circumstances and historical moments: the poetics of relation of Édouard Glissant, tracing a different geography for being, and Rodolfo Kusch's Indigenous thought that articulates a form of living.

Rodolfo Kusch's Dialectics of Ser and Estar

The Argentinian anthropologist Rodolfo Kusch (1922–1979) often traveled to the Indigenous villages of the Bolivian highlands. He wanted to rescue a popular and Indigenous form of thought – he researched particularly the Quichua and Aymara cultures – at the foundations of America (he calls it *América profunda* – and of course there are echoes here of populism and its quest for *authenticity* in the Indigenous roots). In his fascinating work one can find travel chronicles alongside profoundly critical reflections of, for example, the infinitesimal meta-mathematics disputed by the logic of negation of Aymara witchcraft. As Santiago Castro-Gómez characterizes the work of Kusch and others like Carlos Cullen, Enrique Dussel and Juan Carlos Scannone, they wanted to propose a 'hermeneutics of Latin American popular culture... to understand the structures of thought different from those of dominant culture, intellectual, and "wise" of Latin American *criollismo*' (Castro-Gómez 2011, 49). One of the pillars of Kusch's work is tracing the dialectics between *ser y estar* as experiences. For Kusch, in the depths of America there are two opposite

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cultures: one superficial and visible, product of the European civilization and another one unconscious, and deep, of popular and Amerindian character.

For Kusch, the experience of *ser* is linked to the Europe of the sixteenth century and that of *estar* to pre-hispanic cultures. And he explains: 'the verb *estar* is very rich. We know that it comes from *stare*, in Latin, *estar en pie* (standing up), which implies discomfort... *Ser*, instead, comes from *sedere*, *estar sentado* (sitting down) and connotes a point of sustenance that leads us to the possibility to define' (Kusch 1975, 364). A definable world is a world without fear (comfortable) and a world subject to the swaying circumstances is a frightening world. Note that for Kusch *ser* is a matter of language, a verb. For him, *ser* requires a technique that dominates action and codifies it in the frame of the history of consciousness. In the Western ethos, we live in a constant race to *be someone* in life (*ser-alguien en la vida*), which is what happens in Latin American cities. While in the Andean setting, closer to nature *se está* or *está no más* (or even, one adopts the attitude of *dejarse-estar* in the world – to just let oneself be). It implies a territory, standing up in life, inhabiting the circumstance. The zero-point of Kusch's epistemology is *estar*. Based on these two distinctions, Kusch affirms that Latin America is constitutively divided between a modern rationality, imported from Europe, which is always theorizing in its sitting down (*ser*), and the inherent rationality of its earthly nature, which just *is*, standing up and facing life and experience directly (*estar*).

Kusch suggests that *el pensamiento americano* has two ways of dealing with philosophy, the one we learn at the university, which is based on European problems translated philosophically, and the implicit everyday thinking. In popular thinking the semantic is more important and you say *something*, while in the learned one the technique and the *how* matter more (Kusch 1975, 9). They are embedded in a dialectic, and we should not deny the technique of Western philosophy, but rather seek a language closer to our way of life. I would add that this is a kind of ontic situation crystalized in an ethical affirmation. European thought, like any other, is embedded in a way of life – just as the Latin American with *estar*. But, oftentimes, we are passive and not critical enough of the misplaced ideas that we acquire and come from elsewhere. As Roberto Schwarz argued elsewhere, there are a series of ideas out of joint or misplaced ideas, which is the mechanism of how Latin America imports European and North American ideas, but we must use and acquire those ideas with a critical distance, because they often do not fit our realities or material conditions, and they end up swiveling around falsely (Schwarz 1992, 23) in their foreign context.

Kusch claims that,

the real distance between an Indigenous way of thinking and a way of thinking consistent with traditional philosophy is the same as that between the Aymara term *utcatha* and the German term *Da-sein*. Heidegger takes up this word from ordinary German speech, first because *Sein* signifies *being* (*ser*)—which allowed him to take up again the themes of traditional ontology—and second because *Da*—which means *there*—signaled the *circumstance* into which being had fallen. Heidegger's problematic is centered on an awareness of a diminished being, a *thrown* being. His merit lies in having taken up in the twentieth century the theme of being (time and authenticity) with an exactitude that befitted the lives of German middle class that had always felt the fall of being as its own, with all the anguish that implies (Kusch 1962, 268).

Kusch proposes an equivalent of *Da-sein* in Aymara, the term *utcatha* that means *estar*. The term house is in *uta*, linked to *domo*, which means, essentially, being home. *Utcatha* also means *sitting down*, which leads us to *sedere*, *ser* in Spanish. It is a seat or chair, and it is also related to mother or womb. Its meaning reflects the concept of a mere being or *estar no más*, linked to shelter (Kusch 1962, 269). If *Da-sein* is a foreign category to Latin America, how can we accept the universality of Being? For Kusch, the answer can only come from our more essential *utcatha*, or *estar siendo*. The question is then: Do we join a branch of Western philosophy? Science, psychoanalysis? Do we open a franchise? Or do we create our own thought, our *pensamiento propio*?

In my view, Kusch's deduction establishes a fairly monstrous antiphilosophical category. A sort of teratology of reason. The gesture affirms the departing point of Latin American antiphilosophy which is the mere being *or puro estar*, a being here and now, in a circumstance and *in* language. In a truly antiphilosophical gesture Kusch says: 'I exist, then I think, and not the other way around. That is why mathematical truth is only an episode of the ontological truth. The false Western pretension, in this sense, is finding a universal science. Instead of science one can only

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speak of a methodic attitude. And, since existing is the most basic thing, the only possible universal is the existing itself' (Kusch 1962, 553). As Badiou recognizes, there is clearly a sophistic operation in reducing ontology to phenomenology, and in conceiving of truth as an effect of language, along with the 'biographical impulse, the taste for confession, and even in the end a highly recognizable infatuation that commands the "writerly" style of all antiphilosophers' (Badiou 2011, 88). Rodolfo Kusch's deduction of our *way of being* in the world is antiphilosophical in nature because he derives our experience from a linguistic specificity of the Spanish and Aymara languages and how they express the ways in which we inhabit our realities against the unmovable category of 'being' as *ser* that comes from a theoretical definition of Western philosophy – and from the rest of languages that can only articulate the notion of *ser*, and not that of *estar* or *ut catha*, which are specific to our realities.

Beyond Rodolfo Kusch's attempt to find in the depth of America our *pensamiento propio*, what I want to hold onto from his antiphilosophical gesture is the potential of *estar* as a way of unsettling the philosophical core of Being. This is clearly a first step in the direction of dislodging philosophy and questioning its ferrous grip in our territories when we have our own language and categories that are extremely rich and fertile in how they can articulate a different debate, one that is more in tune with our political praxis and our contradictory reality.

Glissant's Poetics of Relation

After this brief exposition of how Rodolfo Kusch conceives of *estar* as the core of being-existing (within the dialectic of *ser* and *estar*), derived from language, and how I read in it a fundamentally antiphilosophical gesture, I insert here the poetics of relation, a geography devoted to reimagining itself in this *existing*. The second antiphilosopher I want to briefly address is Édouard Glissant (1928–2011). Glissant is from the Caribbean, and he was born in Martinique, partaking in the tradition of the French Caribbean thinkers of postcolonialism including Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. His work is halfway between poetry, antiphilosophical reflections, and contributions to a politics that upholds *métissage* and creolization against French essentialism. However, unlike the thinkers that defend *négritude* and a Pan-African sense of belonging, Glissant puts forward his idea of *antillanité*, which decenters the ideas of origins and proposes instead nomadism and the relation as a model. He conceives of the Caribbean inserted in a world of chaos – which he calls the *chaos-monde*.

Against the totalitarian, unique, and monolingual root that feeds itself of its surroundings, Glissant proposes the rhizome (beyond Gilles Deleuze, although his work is very much Deleuzian in nature), an enmeshed root system, a spreading network with no predatory ambition. The form to which Glissant clearly adheres to, like a true antiphilosopher, is the poetic form: The highest point of knowledge, he says, is always a poetics (Glissant 1997, 140). We should understand poetics as *poiesis*, creation, dynamic, energy. A poetics of relation does not imply cultural relativism where everything is the same as or is relative, which is another form of essentialism. Instead, it maintains the specificity of every space and at the same time articulates a chaotic, fluid, and relational network. In his seminal work, *Poetics of Relation* (1990) – the third volume of his *Poétique* project – Glissant thus articulates a form of thought departing not from identity or a structure, but from the relation itself, the knowledge of how the Other is within us and affects how we evolve historically and as beings, as well as how we are *projected toward* in an arrowlike nomadism.

The basis of Western thought, for Glissant, is transparency, which is not unlike what Kusch proposed in the vein of *ser*: a being we can identify from the comfort of our seats. The West says: 'In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and perhaps judgements. I have to reduce to make you intelligible' (Glissant 1997, 190). Indeed, the West can only understand the 'different' by relating it to its norm. And, in order for them to admit that others exist, they should be measurable or classifiable within their system. To which Glissant, the antiphilosopher, replies in a radical maneuver: 'we need to bring an end to the notion of scale and displace all reduction' (Glissant 1997, 190). The right to difference is the right to opacity (against the transparency and clarity of Western scientific thought) where 'opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures' (Glissant 1997, 190). This means that instead of looking for the ultimate cause of things, the origin or root cause of movements and ideas, Glissant privileges the weaving, that is, the relation between

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opaque beings in no particular order.

At some points in his *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant also appears to embrace the philosophical language and structure, albeit in a series of aphorisms – which is a common antiphilosophical maneuver against systematic treatises. There are, for example, a series of statements where he condenses what he means with his idea of ‘relation’. He advances his thinking, deceivingly, from the logic of negation, even though they can be perceived as affirmative propositions – not unlike the ones we can find in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Glissant affirms: “‘Being is Relation’”: but relation is safe from the idea of Being’ (Glissant 185). Let me add two more of his propositions to confirm the antiphilosophical core of his thought. The first one: ‘That which would preexist (Relation) is the vacuity of Being-as-Being’ and ‘Being-as-Being is not opaque but self-important’ (Glissant 1997, 185). In asserting a kind of being, the antiphilosopher cannot but add that we are in fact dealing with being-as-being, which is a movement close to the *estar* and *utchatha* defended by Kusch and his *pensamiento propio*.

For Glissant, the relation – which is never to say the relationship, which is dialogical – is what preexists the emptiness of the Being-as-Being, and it contaminates, sweetens, as a principle, or as flower dust. The second proposition I want to consider is the following: ‘Beings remain, as long as Being dissipates’ (Glissant 1997, 186). This means that the multiplicity of beings, the beings of the poetics of relation can only exist if Being, as a notion and unifying principle, dissipates, and as long as it asserts the subject. If we wanted to translate this into Kusch’s vocabulary, then the following would be true: *estar* remains when *ser* dissipates. That is, Relation is knowledge in the movement of *estar*, which risks the being of the world, ‘or being-earth’ (Glissant 1997, 187), *ser del mundo*. Once again, we find the idea of a kind of thought and existence that is universal and yet located and derived from a space and time, which is precisely the link and material base that Western philosophy often erases in favor of its pretended neutrality and universal ambition. Instead, antiphilosophers in Latin America recognize that they are theorizing *in* a space, *in* a language and within a certain space that determines the material conditions of their way of thinking. Recognizing this should not in any way diminish or obfuscate their relevance and theoretical power nor should it relegate them to being second class philosophers for their origin denomination, as if Glissant had to be first Martinican and then a philosopher, and not the other way around, to be understood.

Glissant is a thinker with an incredible potential to think the matter of relation, the operation of *poiesis* as a creative force and as the foundation of *chaos-monde* (there we find his mystic undertone, what for him goes beyond the limits of language). I believe this is a step forward from the dialectics of *ser* and *estar* and towards tracing the constellation between *ser*, *estar*, *da-sein*, *utchatha*, *être*, *étant*. It is not about the ‘West and the rest’ of civilization, where we are incapable of producing our own thought (*pensamiento propio*) but of a reading that privileges the affirmation of a fluid cartography of energy that brings together heterogeneous elements of reality without stripping them from their specificity. The zero-point of Glissant’s epistemology, in my view, is the following: relation is knowledge in motion of the being of the universe, and it risks being in being-there (*se arriesga el ser en el estar*). Like in Kusch, there is the need of a radical act of facing the unknown of our geography and of searching our space not in that universality we pretend to yield to no end.

Conclusion

With the antiphilosophical core of these authors, I seek to begin redefining the *unthought* of Western philosophical systems via the engaged and active nature of the Latin American style of thought. The antiphilosophical operations of Kusch and Glissant give the *ser* and *estar* a genealogy (a filiation and not an affiliation) and remind us that truths, even if they are not relative or circumstantial, do exist in a site. Truths exist in a space and time and not in the vacuum that Europe pretends it to be – in order to philosophize, to preserve the character of universal history, philosophical truths, and the scientific method beyond any bias or uncertainty that history or society might infringe upon their epistemology. Such is the site of the event or a besieged state, a regime of exception. The seat of being gives consistency to the specificity and the reality of a theoretical form and how it is configured in a region. But standing up, uncomfortable, in an *estar*, we relate to a creative poetic. Our antiphilosophy needs to traverse these other knowledges in order to be-something. It also needs to doubt its zero-point, the *chaos-monde* from where it is writing, *el asiento del ser que es el estar*. Beyond dialectics of *ser* and *estar*, or of privileging one over the other, what we seek is a poetic that can be the platform for the dance of thought, its swaying critique. When we philosophize from

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Latin America, I hope it will be not only legible in terms of curiosity or ethnophilosophy. The historical conditions are the basis of ideas and changes are ideas that are not yet articulated: *ser y estar, ahí*.

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