

## “I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”

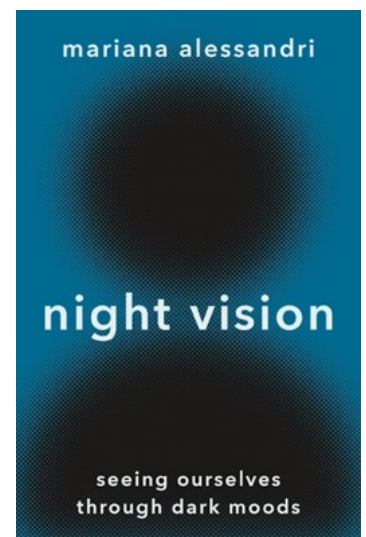
—An Interview Series with John Capps—



MARIANA ALESSANDRI is Professor of Philosophy, Director of Religious Studies, and Faculty Affiliate in both Mexican-American Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley. She is the author of *Night Vision: Seeing Ourselves through Dark Moods* (Princeton University Press, 2023) which was named an NPR “Book We Love” for 2023. In addition to her other research (spanning existentialism, Latin-American philosophy, and religious studies), and pieces written for popular audiences, she has also been a Fulbright Scholar, been awarded the APA’s prize for public philosophy, and won SAAP’s Jane Addams and Inter-American Philosophy awards.

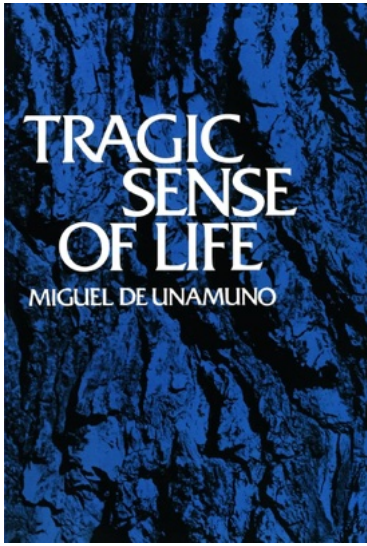
### What does American philosophy mean to you?

I used to think American philosophy meant American pragmatism, specifically. Although I enjoy reading William James and Henry David Thoreau, and my pragmatist husband and I even named one of our children after Ralph Waldo Emerson, I do not consider myself an American pragmatist. But American philosopher, yes. It means for my thoughts to grow in this soil—the soil of South Texas for the past 15 years, and in Mexico City whenever I get the chance to think there. I teach at Gloria Anzaldúa’s alma mater and have written articles about how I read her as a US-American, Mexican American, and Mexican philosopher. To be an American philosopher is to be keenly aware of one’s location in America, to be devoted to a local community, and to agree to think from that place.



### How did you become an American philosopher?

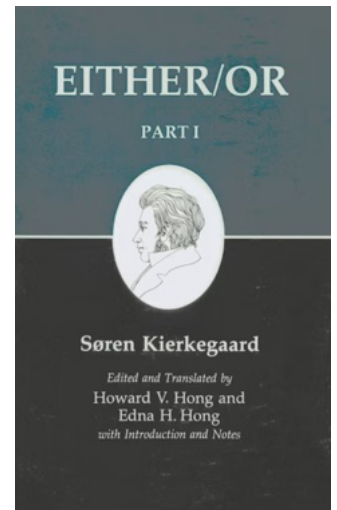
I have always identified as an Existentialist, but not as a French one or a German one, or even an American one, just as a person who yearns to cut through the small talk of life.



When it came time to write my dissertation, I made a choice to follow my “happy passions”: I wrote about the quixotic religious thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Miguel de Unamuno instead of the persistent inequities and tragedies that Latina Feminists are so good at drawing our attention to. But before I earned tenure, I learned that it wasn’t only Unamuno who considered himself to have been Kierkegaard in a past life. Gloria Anzaldúa says she found in Kierkegaard a melancholy matching her own. I knew then that I wouldn’t have to choose anymore: I could be an American philosopher rooted in my Mexican American place, and I could bring Denmark, France, and Spain with me. Thinking about dark moods from South Texas with thinkers like Audre Lorde and Maria Lugones and bell hooks, in addition to my old steadies, has been a blending of worlds that I always craved but didn’t know was possible.

### How would you describe your current research?

I tend to scratch what itches me and doesn’t stop. In 2014 I was bothered by toxic positivity before it was even a term, so I wrote a love letter to complainers for the *New York Times*. Since then, I have more or less devoted myself to writing publicly accessible philosophy in defense of the picked-on emotions and moods: anxiety, sadness, grief, anger, and depression. *Night Vision* was my first book and it has gotten a lot of love from the community and college students in particular. Now I am trying to figure out how to write about shame in a way that helps people scratch a similar itch to the one I have been feeling for about five years, that is, why do we keep talking about shame as a personal problem and not a social one?



### What do you do when you’re not doing American philosophy?

My favorite thing to do when I am not reading or writing formally is think about out how to raise my kids well. This includes trying to make vegetables more appetizing, devising ways to bring more Spanish into our home, and reading about how to opt out of technology as much as we can get away with in today’s world. I stub my toe while parenting more than I wish to, but I feel that it’s the most worthwhile endeavor I could put my imagination and creativity into.

What's your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?

We should all be reading chapter 5 of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/la frontera*. It is a sharp criticism of American shame culture writ large, and it shows how both deep shame and great pride can be taken in speaking a non-dominant, even marginalized tongue. We should be reading it because, in the case of Spanglish at least, it's an American phenomenon. Language shame is not to be taken lightly or dismissed as someone else's problem.

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