

**Anti-Imperial, but not Decolonial?
Vasconcelos on Race and Latin American Identity**

by

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The Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) is known for having produced one of the most famous formulations of mestizaje, which is perhaps the dominant strand in Latin American thinking about race. Along with Brazilian Gilberto Freyre's notion of racial democracy, Vasconcelos articulated the core tenets of what has been described as Latin America's distinctive approach to race.¹ The key premises of Latin American theories of mestizaje are: 1) that Latin American national and regional identity are defined by long-standing and widespread practices of (cultural and biological) racial mixing, 2) that the principal result of a process of mixing that began in the colonial era was a national population that is homogenous in its mixed-ness, to the point that the various groups that contributed to the mixing process (predominantly Spaniards and Indians, and to a less-acknowledged extent Africans) have disappeared as separate racial groups per se, and 3) that as a result of a racial system that blurs the boundaries between races and that did not include legally-encoded racial segregation, the region has avoided the problems with racial stratification and discrimination that have plagued other countries, especially the United States. All of these assumptions, which defined official state discourses and intellectual debates in the region for much of the twentieth century, have increasingly been contested and critiqued by self-identified black and indigenous movements in the region demanding recognition as such, and by scholars of racial politics in the region who have shown that Latin American racial systems were

¹ Diego von Vacano, for example, has argued that Vasconcelos' theory of racial mixing is emblematic of a "synthetic paradigm" of race that is both one of multiple strands of thinking about race in Latin American political thought, and one that is distinctive to this tradition (particularly when compared to European and American political thought, which instead respectively produced "domination" and "dualistic" paradigms of race). See Diego A. Von Vacano, *The Color of Citizenship: Race, Modernity and Latin American/Hispanic Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

characterized by extra-legal forms of racial discrimination that produced racially-hierarchical societies with differential access to citizenship, wealth, etc.² Despite these challenges, the narrative of Latin American racial harmony grounded in mestizaje propounded by Vasconcelos remains enormously influential, not only in Latin America, but also in the United States. Indeed, Vasconcelos has been described as serving as “an ideological standard-bearer for the Chicano movement that began in [the 1960s]...and for pan-Latino thinkers through the 1990s.”³

As I have noted elsewhere, however, Latino political theorists’ positive recuperations of Vasconcelos tend to gloss over the more unsavory elements of the theory of mestizaje developed in his most well-known work, *The Cosmic Race*, such as its reproduction of racist evaluations of non-whites as inferior and obscuring of Latin American anti-black and anti-indigenous racism.⁴ While engaging in selective reading in order to recuperate useful theoretical tools from a thinker whose ideas might in be problematic on certain fronts is certainly par for the course in political theory, I want to suggest that paying careful attention to space and time, and particularly to the concrete political context in which ideas emerge, is key to developing a nuanced understanding of their potential normative implications. In Vasconcelos’ case, the Latin American ideologies of mestizaje that emerged and were consolidated in many countries in the

² The literature on race in Latin America is vast, but a recent empirical project that sought to show how racial inequality operates in the region defined them as societies in which rights and opportunities are apportioned based on skin color. See Edward Telles and Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America, *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

³ See Ilan Stavans and José Vasconcelos, *José Vasconcelos: The Prophet of Race* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011), p. xiii.

⁴ See Juliet Hooker, "Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 2, no. 2 (2014).

region in the first half of the twentieth century need to be understood in light of transnational debates about race in the Americas at the time, particularly the rising threat of U.S. imperialism and Latin American intellectuals' embrace of a certain conception of regional identity in opposition to it. A key component of the discourse of "our America" within which Vasconcelos' work is situated is thus the fact that it was developed in direct conversation with U.S. racial politics through a consistent practice of comparison and juxtaposition. Like the Cuban nationalist José Martí, Vasconcelos was ideally positioned to comment on U.S. racial politics given that he lived in the country for extended periods of time at various points in his life.⁵

In this essay I thus read Vasconcelos as the inheritor of an anti-colonial strand within Latin American political thought inaugurated by the Argentinean Domingo Sarmiento that grappled with the question of Latin American identity in light of growing U.S. imperial policies toward the region. Like Sarmiento, whom he explicitly referenced as an intellectual forefather, Vasconcelos' ideas about race were shaped in key ways by the U.S., although unlike Sarmiento he did not seek to emulate them, but rather (like Martí) developed a stinging critique of U.S. racism. The hemispheric intellectual frame adopted here is thus particularly appropriate for understanding Vasconcelos' ideas about race, not only because of how he has been appropriated by contemporary Chicano and

⁵ Vasconcelos visited or lived in the U.S. at different periods in his life. As a child he lived in the U.S.-Mexico border region and attended elementary school in Texas. Later, as a young man he was in and out of exile and lived in New York, Washington, DC (where he served as an official representative of different Mexican governments), San Antonio, and California at various points between 1913-1920. In 1926-1927 he taught at the University of Chicago and lectured at other U.S. universities. After losing his bid for the presidency he again lived in the U.S. for short periods of time, principally in Texas in the 1930s. See "Biographical Sketch," in Gabriella De Beer, *José Vasconcelos and His World* (New York: Las Americas Pub. Co., 1966), p. 90-125.

Latino thinkers in the U.S., but also because his theorization of Latin American mestizaje was self-consciously formulated in light of domestic racial politics in the U.S. and the challenge of confronting global white supremacy.

Vasconcelos extensive oeuvre is broad, thematically varied, disjointed, and often contradictory, but his arguments about race and Latin American identity are fairly consistent. As Ilan Stavans has noted, Vasconcelos is one of those thinkers who is often invoked, but is not closely read, or to be more precise, most understandings of his political thought focus only on the opening essay, “Mestizaje,” of his most well known text, *La Raza Cosmica* or *The Cosmic Race* (which was first published in 1925 and reissued in 1948).⁶ In this essay I focus on two of Vasconcelos’ later lesser-known works, *Indología* (1927), which along with *The Cosmic Race* contains his most sustained thinking about race, and *Bolivarismo y Monroismo* (1934), which constitutes his clearest analysis of how Latin Americans needed to respond to the threat of U.S. imperialism. Together, then, *Indología* and *Bolivarismo y Monroismo* expand the arguments alluded to in “Mestizaje,” and allow us to situate Vasconcelos’ work within an anti-colonial strain of Latin American political thought that explicitly resorted to comparison with U.S. racial politics in order to assert Latin American superiority. Vasconcelos’ project was thus anti-racist insofar as it refuted negative assessments of the region because of its large multiracial population rooted in racist condemnations of racial mixing as leading to degeneration, a key tenet of the scientific racism that dominated intellectual circles in Europe and the U.S. (and which was also quite influential in Latin America) in the late-

⁶ See Stavans and Vasconcelos, *José Vasconcelos: The Prophet of Race*, p. 4-5.

nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.⁷ There are important limits to Vasconcelos' conception of mestizaje, however, as it falls short of full-blown racial egalitarianism and obscures racism within Latin America. I end the essay by juxtaposing Vasconcelos' ideas to contemporary Latin American thinkers' articulation of a "de-colonial option" that shares his concern with the connections between race and coloniality at the same time as it seeks to formulate an alternative epistemology drawn from Latin America's racial 'others.'

I. Sarmiento, Vasconcelos, and "Our America"

As is true of many other Latin American thinkers, Vasconcelos undoubtedly drew upon and was influenced by European ideas,⁸ but I want to suggest that his arguments about mestizaje are best understood by placing him within a hemispheric intellectual lineage in which comparison between the U.S. and Latin America is a key methodological and rhetorical feature of debates about race. Sarmiento, who was one of the most influential Latin American thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century, inaugurated a discourse about whether a horizontal relationship could be established between "Ambas Americas" or both Americas (the U.S. and Latin America). Sarmiento's successors, such as Marti and Vasconcelos, would take his concerns in a more radical anti-imperialist direction. Like him they argued that the region needed to unite politically in order to counter U.S. hegemony, but they also rejected the U.S. as a model and focused entirely on the cultural/ethno-racial unity of "Our America" (meaning Latin America).

⁷ Von Vacano, for example, has (rightly) traced how approaches to aesthetics and notions of synthesis derived from Nietzsche informed Vasconcelos' understanding of mestizaje.

⁸ See Aline Helg, "Race in Argentina and Cuba, 1880-1930: Theory, Policies, and Popular Reaction," in Richard Graham et al., *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 37-69.

Vasconcelos theorized mestizaje more explicitly than Martí, but his arguments about race cannot be understood apart from the anti-colonial impulse to challenge U.S. imperialism and the notion of global white supremacy underpinning it. The two are inextricably linked because the self-proclaimed aim of his arguments about mestizaje was to vindicate Latin America and contest white supremacy ideologically.

Vasconcelos' project was anti-colonial and anti-racist in this (limited) sense, even as it fell short of full-blown racial egalitarianism, particularly in a domestic Latin American context.⁹ It is precisely because of this underlying anti-colonial impulse that racial homogeneity is such a fundamental element of Vasconcelos' conception of mestizaje. Unlike the conception of hybrid subjectivity developed by Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, for instance, Vasconcelos' conception of mestizo identity is decidedly not fluid, fractured, or multiple.¹⁰ It is instead a seamless fusion or synthesis of various original elements. Vasconcelos' aim was not to deconstruct race, as we shall see, but rather to encourage Latin Americans to embrace a conception of their racial identity that he believed would allow them to unite politically in order to contest U.S. imperialism. In his conviction that the region's racial politics was crucial to Latin America's potential to assert itself as the United States' political equal and withstand its dominance in the hemisphere, Vasconcelos was indeed Sarmiento's heir even as he embraced a thoroughly inverted conception of which region's racial system was more advantageous and who should serve as the political model where race was concerned.

There are numerous reasons to situate Vasconcelos' theorization of mestizaje

⁹ This important distinction was sharpened over the course of conversations with Emiko Saldivar (UC-Santa Barbara) about Vasconcelos and Mexican nationalism.

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).

within a Latin American intellectual lineage inaugurated by Sarmiento that was deeply concerned with hemispheric power relations and U.S. imperialism. Vasconcelos viewed Sarmiento as a kind of model. His admiration is evident in the numerous occasions in which he referenced Sarmiento by name in his various works. Gabriella De Beer, one of Vasconcelos' biographers, suggests that he identified with him because: "In Sarmiento, Vasconcelos saw what he would have liked others to see in him...Sarmiento symbolized the educated leader diametrically opposed to...the military chieftain."¹¹ Indeed, Vasconcelos himself described Sarmiento as "a type of victorious Quetzalcoalt" whose political and intellectual activities were directed at the dual aims of eradicating *caudillismo* and the diffusion of public education.¹² Vasconcelos shared Sarmiento's critique of *caudillismo*. He condemned "those barbarous dictatorships that...do nothing more than continue the tradition of facundismo in a continent that generally lags in civilization."¹³ He argued that if Latin America were able to "cast off the yoke of those barbarous caudillajes that are the reproach of some of our countries we will have eliminated at least half of the causes that threaten our destinies."¹⁴ According to Vasconcelos, "America's glory days were not presided over by any absolute leader, they were the presidencies of Sarmiento...in Argentina...and Lincoln's administration in the

¹¹ De Beer, *José Vasconcelos and His World*, p. 253.

¹² The reference to Quetzalcoalt alludes to an Aztec myth about the struggle for primacy between two gods, one warlike and the other intellectual and dedicated to science and the arts, which according to Vasconcelos showed that the effort to bring education to Latin America was of long standing. Vasconcelos and Sarmiento were both educational reformer who are credited with building the foundations of the public education system in their respective countries.

¹³ José Vasconcelos, *Indología: Una Interpretación de la Cultura Ibero-Americana* (Paris: Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1927), p. 147-48.

¹⁴ *Bolivarismo y Monroísmo: Temas Iberoamericanos* (México, D.F.: Editorial Trillas, 2011), p. 76.

United States.”¹⁵ Twentieth-century dictatorships, whether animated by right- or left-wing ideologies, were the modern legacy of caudillismo, according to Vasconcelos, and in the case of Mexico resulted in the loss of half of its national territory. He further connected the dangerous localism of caudillismo with the kind of shortsighted nationalism that prevented the regional unity needed to oppose U.S. imperial encroachment. Vasconcelos sought to add weight to his call for Latin Americans to overcome nationalism (which he viewed as a European import) by arguing that it was a position shared by Sarmiento: to “overcome European nationalism...is to proclaim with Sarmiento that the borders of Hispanic nations are not subject to the hazards of armed conflict.”¹⁶

At the same time as he portrayed his arguments in favor of Latin American unity as a continuation of Sarmiento’s views, Vasconcelos completely disagreed with his critique of Spain’s legacy in the Americas. Vasconcelos’ views on the impact of the Spanish conquest and Catholicism were diametrically opposed to Sarmiento’s; he valorized them whereas Sarmiento rejected them. Vasconcelos vehemently disputed the view that the Spanish legacy was to blame for Latin American underdevelopment. He argued that U.S. imperial ambitions toward Latin America were legitimized by “the cultural doctrine propagated throughout the continent of the uselessness of whatever is Spanish. Not even our best have escaped this anti-Spanish phobia. Sarmiento falls prey to it, even though he does not want to be taken for an Indian either.”¹⁷ For Vasconcelos the nineteenth-century critique of the Spanish legacy opened the doors to U.S. domination in

¹⁵ *Indología: Una Interpretación de la Cultura Ibero-Americana*, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁷ *Bolivarismo y Monroísmo: Temas Iberoamericanos*, p. 23.

the twentieth, encouraged by the “foreign-izing, Pan-Americanizing, Monroe-ist current fomented, without realizing its risks, by men of such eminent capacity as Sarmiento.”¹⁸

In addition to their widely disparate assessments of the impact of the Spanish legacy on Latin America, Vasconcelos and Sarmiento had different views of the U.S. While Vasconcelos was not without admiration for some of the United States’ achievements, he was a staunch critic of U.S. imperialism. During Vasconcelos’ lifetime U.S. intervention was at its height in Latin America, whereas Sarmiento wrote at a time when the threat was beginning to be perceived but had not yet fully manifested itself.¹⁹ The shifts in Latin American views of the U.S. wrought by heightened unequal hemispheric power relations in the twentieth century are evident in Vasconcelos’ emphasis on the need for regional unity, even when he placed this call in the context of a notion of egalitarian coexistence in the Americas that was reminiscent of Sarmiento’s notion of “Ambas Americas.” In 1927, for example, Vasconcelos asserted that Latin America needed to reaffirm and recover its “collective personality,” but that doing so did not preclude recognizing “the worth and rights of the great race that shares with us the responsibilities for dominion over the New World. They and we represent...the two cultures of the New World. That is why it is urgent that...we find a way that these two cultures[,] rather than becoming spent and exhausted in conflict[,] reach an understanding and collaborate in progress.”²⁰ In the prologue to *Indología*, which is a compilation of lectures delivered in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, Vasconcelos suggested that ending the illegitimate U.S. occupation of that island (and the Philippines and

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁹ Between 1890 and 1925 there were thirty-five different instances of United States military intervention (i.e. troops on the ground) in Latin America.

²⁰ Vasconcelos, *Indología: Una Interpretación de la Cultura Ibero-Americana*, p. 17.

Panama) would go a long way toward resolving the widespread ill will it had provoked in Latin America and restore friendly hemispheric relations: “True amity, which existed in the continent during the era of our independence, when all of our liberals turned to the U.S. in search of wisdom and advice, would be reestablished in an instant, to the advantage of both Americas.”²¹

The U.S. was thus never a political model for Latin America for Vasconcelos, as it was for Sarmiento, particularly in terms of race relations. He warned Latin Americans not to fall into the trap of following imported racial theories: “Let us remember that our mission is to unite all the races into a single one. Let us take care not to imitate other peoples who create barriers based on color...Destiny has decreed that the races that live in Latin America should not be kept separate, but rather that they should continue to unite their blood...No color barriers, no barriers of blood.”²² Vasconcelos and Sarmiento may have differed in their estimation of the U.S., but they were both united in situating Latin American political thought’s intellectual orientation toward the Americas rather than Europe, or as Vasconcelos would have it in *Indología*: “Europe, [is] the continent where everything has already been tried...[America] the continent where things are being done.”²³ For Vasconcelos as for Sarmiento, Europe was the past, [Latin] America the future, and that future was mestizo or mixed.

II. Mestizaje: “A Doctrine that Nourished the Hopes of the Non-White Races”

When one compares the two texts in which Vasconcelos sketches his theorization of mestizaje most directly, *The Cosmic Race* and *Indología*, it is striking how much more

²¹ Ibid., p. xxxiv.

²² Ibid., p. 220-22.

²³ Ibid., p. xi.

denigrating statements about non-whites mar the former compared to the latter. To be sure, Vasconcelos continues to traffic in racial stereotypes in *Indología*, but it also contains a much more genuine appreciation for black and indigenous contributions to Latin American culture and identity that is missing from *The Cosmic Race*. When Vasconcelos laments his lack of black ancestry or refers to elements of pre-conquest indigenous peoples' cultures admiringly in *Indología*, the reader is persuaded that he is genuine, as opposed to the disbelief occasioned by statements such as: "Who has not a little of all this, or does not wish to have all?" in *The Cosmic Race* appended to a long list of negative attributes of non-whites.²⁴ Vasconcelos described *Indología* as "in a certain sense only an enlargement" of *The Cosmic Race*, but the difference in tone (at least) between the two texts raises important questions about the reason for the markedly different degree of racial egalitarianism in Vasconcelos' theory of mestizaje present in these two texts.²⁵

Vasconcelos undoubtedly remained committed to a notion of mestizaje as harmonious fusion in *Indología* that is problematic for a variety of reasons (because it obscures the existence of racial hierarchy and inequality in Latin America, denies the existence of separate racial groups as such in the present, etc.), but there are some key

²⁴ Preceding Vasconcelos' rhetorical question is the following: "This infinite quietude [of indigenous peoples' souls] is stirred with the drop put in our blood by the Black, eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust. There also appears the Mongol, with the mystery of his slanted eyes that see everything according to a strange angle... The clear mind of the White, that resembles his skin and his dreams, also intervenes. Judaic striations that were hidden within Castilian blood since the days of the cruel expulsion now reveal themselves; the melancholy of the Arab, which is a reminder of sickly Muslim sensuality. Who has not a little of all this, or does not wish to have all?" *The Cosmic Race/La Raza Cósmica: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 61-62.

²⁵ *Indología: Una Interpretación de la Cultura Ibero-Americana*, p. lv-lvi.

features of Vasconcelos philosophical and political project that are stated more explicitly in *Indología* than *The Cosmic Race*. Not only does Vasconcelos actually recognize the contributions of black and indigenous Latin Americans and critique the identification with whiteness of the region's elite in *Indología*, he also makes it clear that his aim was not to deconstruct race, but rather to urge Latin Americans to embrace a particular conception of their racial identity as non-whites. There is an interesting moment in the prologue to *Indología* (which is mostly a travelogue of his experiences in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic giving the lectures that compose the book rather than an introduction to its content per se), when Vasconcelos recounts an exchange following the delivery of the lecture on race called "El Hombre" in Puerto Rico. When he was praised by a fellow intellectual for the scientific soundness of his theory of mestizaje, he replied: "Doctor, it is just as arbitrary and as fragile as the idea of white supremacy.' Scientific knowledge, at least certain types of it, is still that, a tool of combat, and our obligation is to make use of it."²⁶ This reply perfectly captures a key assumption underlying Vasconcelos' writings about race (one shared by W. E. B. Du Bois): while "race" may have been an arbitrary scientific construct, it was nevertheless absolutely necessary to not only challenge and debunk ideas of white supremacy, but to formulate 'positive' conceptions of racial identity that could be embraced by Latin Americans (and other non-whites in the Global South).

One of the reasons that *Indología* is a less problematic text in terms of racial hierarchy than *The Cosmic Race* is that its challenge to white supremacy is not articulated solely on behalf of lighter-skinned Latin American elites. Instead, in this text

²⁶ Ibid., p. xx.

Vasconcelos at times explicitly presents his critique of ideologies of white supremacy as rooted in or arising from the experiences of black and indigenous Latin Americans.

Compared to the silences and denigrating statements about these groups in *The Cosmic Race*, in *Indología* Vasconcelos describes the African presence as a key component of Latin American identity, for example, and attributes positive qualities to his indigenous ancestry. Commenting upon those who noted that a prominent Puerto Rican nationalist was a mulatto, he retorted:

As if being a mulatto was not the most illustrious citizenship card in America! I believe even Bolivar was one. He was, if we are to believe the English descriptions, notwithstanding that today they would have him be the descendant of blue-blooded ancestors from I don't know which strain of pure Basque stock. Unfortunately I don't have black blood, but I have a small fraction of indigenous blood and I think that it is to this that I owe a greater breadth of feeling than most whites and a kernel of a culture that was already enlightened when Europe was still savage.²⁷

There are thus moments in *Indología* when Vasconcelos appears to critique Latin American anti-black and anti-indigenous racism. This is a departure from *The Cosmic Race*, where he fails to even acknowledge the internal racism practiced by Latin America's proto-white elites. Such moments of consistency in the application of the critique of the ideology of white supremacy lend a certain credence (by virtue of rendering it more universal and less self-serving) to Vasconcelos' description, made in reference to Puerto Rican nationalism but adapted here to refer to his theory of *mestizaje*, of: "a doctrine that nourished the hopes of the non-white races."²⁸

There are in fact multiple moments in *Indología* where Vasconcelos speaks positively of black and indigenous Latin Americans, and condemns the pretensions to

²⁷ Ibid., p. xxv.

²⁸ Ibid., p. xxxi.

whiteness of Latin American elites. Describing the reception to his lectures on race in the Dominican Republic, for example, he reported that excerpts of *The Cosmic Race* (accompanied by commentaries) had been published in a local newspaper, and suggested that it was the preponderance of darker-skinned people in the country that accounted for the positive reception to his argument:

Such a mixed-race country would have to welcome such a talk with interest...I do not exaggerate when I say that in certain sites where people of color are plentiful I was received like a kind of Messiah...I noticed the most interest among the faces of the blacks, because they, in contrast to the mulatto, do not try to hide a truth that cannot be denied, nor do they renege of a color that was the aristocracy of the earth possibly five thousand years ago...The white [man] was then like an albino rat, hidden in burrows or covered by the trees.²⁹

Similarly, *Indología* also contains positive statements about indigenous peoples. While Vasconcelos decried the despotism of the Aztecs and the Incas, he expressed admiration for other indigenous cultures. Of the Mayas and Quechuas it could not be denied that:

the great cities, the prodigious architecture, the splendid decorative art, the full arrangement of the constructions demonstrate that, when the Spaniards arrived in America calling themselves the bearers of civilization, in reality civilization, or at least one of the greatest manifestations of human civilization, not only had already manifested itself, but had already decayed in America...before the existence of Europe as a cultured region, there had already flourished in Central America and the Yucatan, empires and civilizations whose architecture, at least, has nothing to envy of and indeed in many aspects surpasses European architecture proper.³⁰

America, according to Vasconcelos in this text, was thus not empty land upon the arrival of Europeans; it already possessed cultures that were to leave their imprint upon the region's inhabitants. Indeed, in *Indología* Vasconcelos argued that Latin American political thought was shaped by Spanish contact with indigenous cultures during the

²⁹ Ibid., p. xlv.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 116-17.

colonial, and was influenced by both.³¹ It should be noted, however, that *Indología* is not exempt from the occasional stereotypical description of blacks or statements praising the Spanish conquest and minimizing the achievements of pre-conquest indigenous cultures.³² But on balance the “racial eruptions” in this text are overshadowed by the other more positive references to black and indigenous Latin Americans, which represents a marked shift in tone from *The Cosmic Race*.³³

In addition to acknowledging and even at times celebrating the presence of black and indigenous Latin Americans, in *Indología* Vasconcelos also challenged the aspirations to whiteness of the region’s elite. He explicitly recognized mulataje and Afro-indigenous mixture as part of Latin American mestizaje, for instance, and critiqued those who sought to deny it:

I do not advocate merely for the consolidation of a sense of caste among mestizos...Let us continue with our mestizaje, without denying it, but also without boasting about its privileged openness of heart...Let us also pay attention to the fact that alongside the older indo-Hispanic one another humbler mixing process has occurred, that is also important as a factor...and is also endowed with rare virtues: the mixing of Spaniard and black and of Portuguese and black, the mulatto, *which has given so many illustrious sons to our nations*...Add to these mixtures...indigenous mixture, black mixture, and the combination of these two types...add even the Asian migration, located on the Pacific, and you will recognize that our America is already the continent of all the races. For the first time so many and such diverse peoples have united in the same vast region of the world on equal footing.³⁴

³¹ Ibid., p. 125.

³² There are offhand moments when Vasconcelos refers to “the lubricious cry of the black” in a discussion of music or to the presence of a “seductive mulatta” among a group of women, for example, and when he praises the “missionary spirit of Catholicism” as the dominant force that forged Latin American identity. See *ibid.*, p. liii, liv, 80, 124.

³³ I borrow the concept of racial eruptions from Charles R. Hale, “Racial Eruptions: The Awkward Place of Blackness in Indian-centered Spaces of Mestizaje,” Paper Presented at the Conference, Race and Politics in Central America, The University of Texas at Austin, 24-25 February, 2006.

³⁴ Vasconcelos, *Indología: Una Interpretación de la Cultura Ibero-Americana*, p. 81-82. Emphasis added.

While Vasconcelos clearly continued to portray mestizaje as occurring on equal terms in Latin America, two additional elements of this passage are striking: the explicit recognition of black participation in mestizaje, and the implication that Latin American elites should not try to deny or distance themselves from a non-white regional (indeed, global) identity. This double theoretical move is characteristic of the limits of Vasconcelos' theorizing about mixing (even in its most positive version in *Indología*) as an approach to anti-racism. At the same time as it contains a critique of the internalized racism of Latin American elites, his notion of mestizaje, as harmonious fusion resulting in a homogeneous subject, is incompatible with black and indigenous Latin Americans possessing their own distinct identities. We see this clearly in two moments in particular in *Indología*: Vasconcelos discussion of how to approach the education of indigenous peoples, and his refutation of U.S. eugenicist Madison Grant's pseudo-scientific defense of white (Nordic) supremacy.

In the essay on public education in Latin America in *Indología* Vasconcelos praised the educational efforts of the Spanish missionaries, disputed the notion that the destruction of indigenous culture that accompanied the conquest was a loss, and rejected the creation of separate schools for indigenous education. Contradicting his recognition of anti-black and anti-indigenous racism in Latin America elsewhere in the text, Vasconcelos portrayed mestizaje as a harmonious process by which Spanish Catholic missionaries inducted willing Indians into a superior culture:

Not a few Indians, as they became educated, entered fully to take advantage of social life in a civilization like ours, which never established barriers of color or blood...The missionaries have been accused of...extirpating the beliefs of the conquered people...A conqueror who brings only violence, as he remains within the subjected people bears its influence and is absorbed, but for that [to occur] it is necessary that the subjected people possess a culture...In our continent, material

conquest was accompanied by the destruction of indigenous ideology; but the ideology that was destroyed was replaced [by another], and I do not believe anyone will seriously deny that the replacement was advantageous.

Vasconcelos' denial of the existence of any pre-conquest indigenous culture worthy of survival contradicts other statements elsewhere in the text, but it is entirely consistent with the homogenizing imperative of his theory of *mestizaje*. Considering the alternatives to indigenous integration, for example, he argued that the U.S. model of creating Reservations was "the path of death by isolation." Nor did he believe that they could have preserved their own cultures; instead, via *mestizaje* indigenous Latin Americans were able to become the "co-author of a great culture."³⁵ As Minister of Education Vasconcelos rejected U.S.-style school segregation, a policy that was apparently abandoned by some of his successors who (perhaps influenced by *Indigenismo*?) created Indian schools.³⁶ Separate education was a mistake, he argued, if for no other reason than that "it might end up being difficult to pin down who should fall within it and who should not, as many of those who favor the American system would have been interned as Indians, if they were to present themselves in the U.S."³⁷ Perhaps because he was blinded by his fervent adherence to Catholicism and the Spanish legacy, Vasconcelos was unable to envision indigenous Latin Americans as anything except (at best) co-contributors to

³⁵ Ibid., p. 144-45.

³⁶ *Indigenismo* was a type of nationalist ideology that glorified some aspects of indigenous cultural heritage, primarily as a relic of the past, which became influential in various countries in Latin America during the first half of the twentieth century. It was a construct of mestizo elites, not indigenous people themselves, and was characterized by nostalgia for an imagined, folklorized notion of indigeneity. *Indigenismo* became official state policy in Mexico after the Revolution of 1910-1920, with the aim of integrating indigenous peoples, not their autonomous development. Alan Knight has argued that *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* co-existed as official ideologies during the Mexican Revolution. See Alan Knight, "Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910-1940," in Graham et al., *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, p. 71-114.

³⁷ Vasconcelos, *Indología: Una Interpretación de la Cultura Ibero-Americana*, p. 160.

mestizaje, but it was also accompanied by a critique of the propensity of Latin American elites to imitate “foreign methods, poorly understood” as well as their delusions of whiteness.

Vasconcelos’ critique of the racial self-hatred of Latin American elites is clearest in the appendix to the essay “El Hombre,” which is devoted to a discussion of Madison Grant’s arguments in favor of white supremacy and racial segregation in *The Passing of the Great Race*.³⁸ Vasconcelos begins by disputing the empirical soundness of Grant’s claims but quickly moves on to a scathing critique of Latin American elites who failed to see the threat posed by global white supremacy. He writes:

Because of the little white blood we have, we think as if we were an outpost of colonization among the Indians...This spiritual servility is what leads me to renege of some of our own and to say once and for all that we are not white. This assertion is particularly scandalous to the semi-whites who gad about Europe pretending to be Parisian. Very well, let them hide behind the door of any of the luxury hotels they tend to frequent off of the sweat of the Indian slaves and they will see how they, who lord it over the Indians, are treated by any of these citizens of France; immediately they will hear themselves being called mixed. The white Argentinean...as much as the dark Mexican or the Dominican or the Cuban... We belong to a colonial, semi-independent population threatened by the white imperialisms of Europe and the United States...*our greatest hope of salvation lies in the fact that we are not a pure race, but a mixed one, a bridge to future races, an aggregate of races in formation...that can create a more powerful race than those that emanate from a single tree...If we were not mixed, what would we be but at most a decayed and lesser Spain...?*³⁹

Vasconcelos’ frustration with the aspirations to whiteness of Latin American elites is palpable in this passage. Moreover, it is noteworthy that in it the strategy of racial

³⁸ Grant’s book originally appeared in 1916, but Vasconcelos cites the French translation published in 1926. In line with the book’s thesis that the superior Nordic race needed to be defended against the threat of inferior races, Grant was an advocate of restricting immigration to the U.S. from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia, and of racial classification/anti-miscegenation laws that helped codify the “one-drop rule” in Virginia in the 1920s, which became a model for other segregation statutes in the South.

³⁹ Vasconcelos, *Indología: Una Interpretación de la Cultura Ibero-Americana*, p. 104-05. Emphasis in original.

comparison functions, not to obscure Latin American racism, but rather to demonstrate the need for an anti-colonial critique of global white supremacy.

In this Vasconcelos was very much in sync with his African-American contemporary, Du Bois. Indeed, both he and Du Bois recognized the need to formulate anti-colonial movements that could challenge global white supremacy and unfettered capitalism. Vasconcelos believed that his theory of *mestizaje* had a positive role to play in the reconstitution of a Latin American identity that could be more than a servile imitator of European or U.S. ideas. It is thus a mistake to view Vasconcelos and Du Bois' ideas about race as fundamentally at odds.⁴⁰ Vasconcelos' aim was certainly not to deconstruct or disavow the notion of race, but rather to encourage Latin Americans to embrace a particular conception of their racial identity as non-white, mixed race peoples.⁴¹ In order to confront U.S. imperialism, Vasconcelos argued that Latin America needed to develop its racial unity and strength, as well as unite politically. He argued that while the region was viewed as a dispersed set of twenty nations, the truth was that:

⁴⁰ Greg Carter, for example, points to Vasconcelos' celebration of mixture as a foil to what he sees as Du Bois' advocacy of a mono-racial conception of African-American identity. See Greg Carter, *The United States of the United Races: A Utopian History of Racial Mixing* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). The distinction between a mono-racial (which may recognize mixture but highlights a unified result) and a mixed-race approach to identity (which attempts to emphasize membership in multiple groups) is useful for clarifying the similarities between Du Bois' and Vasconcelos' racial projects. While Vasconcelos is often lauded as a proponent of the mixed-race approach, his theory of *mestizaje* in fact emphasized the achievement of a uniformly mixed and homogenous *mestizo* subject among Latin Americans. The publishers' guide to *The Prophet of Race* also connects the two thinkers, suggesting that: "Vasconcelos is to Latinos what W.E.B. Du Bois is to African Americans—a controversial scholar who fostered an alternative view of the future."

⁴¹ For the argument that Latin Americans historically "dismantled" race through *mestizaje*, see Eduardo Mendieta, "The Making of New Peoples: Hispanicizing Race," in *Hispanics/Latinos in the United States*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Pablo de Greiff (New York: Routledge, 2000).

“Latin America [exists], not as a vague geographic category, but rather as a perfectly homogenous ethnic group... We constitute a homogeneous racial whole, as homogeneous as any other homogeneous race on earth, and this single race, the Iberian-American race inhabits a large and continuous area of the New World.”⁴² It was this sense of common racial identity that would allow “the Iberian-American race” to regain “consciousness of its unity” and move toward “spiritual fusion and political confederation.”⁴³ Vasconcelos was thus critical of those Latin American intellectuals (such as Martí) who claimed that race did not exist.⁴⁴ In order to demonstrate that it did, he would repeatedly cite examples of the heightened racist climate in the U.S. during the nadir era, and more specifically, to how this affected Latinos.

III. Latin Americans, Latinos, and U.S. Racial Politics During “the Nadir” Era

Despite his assertion in 1926 that he had no intention of writing any more about “these trite issues of race and Iberoamericanism,” Vasconcelos continued to do so.⁴⁵ *Bolivarismo y Monroismo* (published in 1934) contains his most extensive discussions of Latinos and U.S. racial politics. There are a number of references to U.S. racism in *The Cosmic Race* that function as a foil in comparison to which Latin America’s superior racial harmony is revealed, but they are not about the experiences of Latinos. In contrast, *Bolivarismo y Monroismo*, written after he lost his bid for the presidency in 1929 and during his second period of exile between 1930 and 1940 (a significant portion of which

⁴² Vasconcelos, *Indología: Una Interpretación de la Cultura Ibero-Americana*, p. 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁴ Martí famously argued that: “there are no races.” See José Martí, “Our America,” in *José Martí Reader: Writings on the Americas*, ed. Deborah Shnookal and Mirta Muñoz (New York: Ocean Press, 1999), p. 119.

⁴⁵ Vasconcelos, *Indología: Una Interpretación de la Cultura Ibero-Americana*, p. lvii.

was spent in the U.S.) contains a number of references to the racial politics confronted by Mexican-American communities in the Southwest and newer Latin American immigrants. Analyses of Vasconcelos' writings about mestizaje have not sufficiently considered the extent to which he may have been influenced by the heightened racism and racial terror that characterized "the nadir" era of U.S. race relations during the early 20th century, which also coincided with heightened anti-immigrant sentiment.⁴⁶ Writing to a Latin American audience prone to dismiss the significance of race, Vasconcelos felt the need to justify the continued salience of racism. Against adherents of both liberalism (for whom race was not a legitimate political category) and Marxism (who believed that the relevant category was international class struggle), he argued that in the 1930s there existed at a global level, a "policy firmly rooted in the fact of the inequality between men on the basis of color and race...Race may be debatable as a biological thesis, but that does not render any less true the fact that race produces important and notable socio-economic consequences everywhere."⁴⁷ The aim of Vasconcelos' analysis of domestic U.S. racial politics in *Bolivarismo y Monroismo* was thus not to assert Latin America's greater racial harmony, but to persuade the region's intellectuals about the continued salience of race.

Unlike Sarmiento, who lived in the U.S. during Reconstruction, a period during which the country seemed committed to racial justice, Vasconcelos lived and wrote during the post-Reconstruction period when white supremacy was explicitly codified as

⁴⁶ This is widely understood by scholars as the period after 1890 (when northern Republicans ceased supporting the rights of Southern blacks) through the early 20th century, extending until around 1940. It was characterized by open adherence to white supremacy, heightened anti-black violence, lynching, segregation, and legal racial discrimination.

⁴⁷ Vasconcelos, *Bolivarismo y Monroismo: Temas Iberoamericanos*, p. 57.

the law (and ideology) of the land. *Bolivarismo y Monroismo* in particular reveals that Vasconcelos was very much aware of the heightened racial terror and anti-immigrant sentiment that characterized the U.S. during “the nadir” era. The text contains numerous references to the Ku Klux Klan, for example, and to lynching and racial segregation. Many of Vasconcelos’ descriptions of U.S. racism are aimed at showing the contradiction between its self-conception as a democracy and the reality of racial subordination. “Black freedom is a myth in the U.S. South,” he wrote, “and the killings due to racial hatred, the lynchings, tell us that our Indians would have nothing to gain” by being incorporated into such a system.⁴⁸ Indeed, the almost casual way in which Vasconcelos incorporates information about lynching into the text speaks to how ubiquitous racial terror was during this era, and to how widespread knowledge of it was. In a discussion of how Latin American newspapers tended to report issues from a U.S. lens, for example, he suggested that were the reverse to occur, the media company in question: “Would last as long as a lynching does, that is two or three hours.”⁴⁹ Moreover, Vasconcelos did not portray racism as something that was restricted to the South. He described segregation as feature of the entire country. There is a “chasm that in North America separates the white Methodist from the black Methodist. Not even to pray do Anglo-Saxons and blacks gather together in the same church.”⁵⁰

In *Bolivarismo y Monroismo* Vasconcelos reiterated his critique of Latin American intellectuals’ tendency to deny race and to identify with whiteness. He suggested that too many Latin American intellectuals were willing adherents of notions

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 28.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 92.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 69.

of white supremacy. In Latin America, he argued: “the doctrine of the Ku-Klux-Klan has been broadcast with the endorsement of our intellectual heroes...Preaching the survival of the fittest was satisfying to many of our brown professors, as if by proclaiming it they could escape the supposed penalty of their color.”⁵¹ Of course, part of Vasconcelos criticism was directed at those who decried the effect of the Spanish legacy on Latin America, but it was also aimed at those who affirmed (like Martí) that race did not exist. To refute this claim, Vasconcelos argued that race relations within the region could not be understood outside the context of global white supremacy:

Race does not exist, habitually shouts the [Latin American] pariah forced to serve as a wage laborer, now to the English, tomorrow to the French. But the French, the English, the Germans, the oppressors, practice caste within their territories...[we can believe race does not exist] when we see the English sharing a table with the Hindus, their co-nationals within the [British] Empire, or the day that the Yankees share a railroad car with their black compatriots. The warning I am formulating does not seek to establish among us petty distinctions, but rather to demonstrate the extent to which we live deceived.⁵²

As a result of this repeated insistence that race relations within Latin America were not taking place in a vacuum, in this text the comparison between the U.S. and Latin America functions less as a foil to demonstrate Latin America’s more egalitarian racial politics (as it does in *The Cosmic Race*), and more as the basis of a critique of mistaken Latin American racial self-conceptions that sought to align the region with whiteness. Vasconcelos was thus quite clear about the fact that Latin American elites were often blind to their actual subordinate position within global white supremacy. A key component of this argument was an analysis of where Latin Americans were placed within domestic racial hierarchies in Europe, and more centrally, the United States:

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁵² Ibid., p. 61.

The super-white criollos of our continent tend to smirk at North American racial distinctions, believing that they are beyond the reach of the metric that is applied to the Indians, the rule that affects the Chinese and the blacks. If the occasion allows, they will learn right away that light skin bestows a rank that lasts only as long as their pesos. The instant they search for work, they will learn that racism places the Spaniard...in a similar category as the Berber.⁵³

Because even white Latin Americans were viewed as at best “pseudo-whites” in the U.S., the region’s elite should abandon its futile aspirations to whiteness.

In fact, *Bolivarismo y Monroismo* contains Vasconcelos’ most extensive analysis of how Latinos fit into U.S. racial politics. In addition to prefiguring contemporary discourses about Latinos who claim to ‘discover’ race once they arrive in the U.S., Vasconcelos was also an acute observer of the treatment of Latin American populations that had become part of the U.S. as a result of imperial expansion, such as Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans in the Southwest. The latter, he argued, represented a warning for what awaited Latin America if U.S. imperialism continued unchecked:

The example of Texas, conquered forty years ago, shows us what the Latin American could expect from such an advance of racial imperialism. The entire Mexican population, that is Hispanic-American, of California and Texas, a population the majority of which is as white as the whitest Argentinean criollo, as the whitest Spaniard from Castile, now finds itself subordinated, dispossessed of its property, its language bastardized, proletarianized in body and soul.”⁵⁴

Vasconcelos observed not only the forced assimilation of Mexican-Americans, but also noted that all Latinos faced racial discrimination in employment. “Every worker from Argentina or Mexico that offers his labor in the sweatshops of Yankeeland discovers, right away, that the nature of his blood bars him from the best jobs.” And this fact could not be attributed to Latinos suffering from a language barrier, as “Jews and blacks speak

⁵³ Ibid., p. 58.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

good English.”⁵⁵ A constant theme in Vasconcelos analysis of Latinos’ place in the U.S. racial order is the claim that all Latin Americans were equally subject to racism once they reached the U.S., whatever their skin color:

There is no race, we think, until the day that crossing the U.S. border reveals that we have already been classified, and before being given the opportunity to define ourselves. And it will be totally pointless at that moment to recall the vague lineages and literary opinions that want to situate us in the Mediterranean or Scotland...the foolish and naïve Latin American who in his country believed that race had been abolished and that all men are equal discovers, shortly after moving to the U.S., that there is a rigid unwritten hierarchy that determines one’s place in society and also one’s salary. And if he digs a bit more deeply he will verify that the highest positions in the land...all are in the hands of the aristocracy of the *pure bloods* of New England.⁵⁶

While Vasconcelos was clearly aware of the racial terror to which African-Americans were subjected, he argued that Latinos suffered greater discrimination in employment. He suggested that there was a salary scale that matched “the racial classifications of the Department of Immigration,” with Northern Europeans at the top followed by Southern Europeans and the Irish, “blacks with U.S. or British citizenship, the Chinese, and at the bottom of the scale, South Americans and Mexicans.”⁵⁷

There are important caveats to be raised about Vasconcelos’ claim that Latinos were at the bottom of the U.S. racial order—African-Americans, for example, also suffered from racial discrimination in employment, in addition to being the objects of racial violence—what is most interesting about this argument is that it was intended to persuade Latin Americans to embrace a racial identity as non-whites. It was a direct rebuttal of Latin American arguments ‘against race’:

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 62-63.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 63-64.

Tell us then, messieurs theorists, that the problem of race does not exist in America; tell that to the Mexicans expelled after they had forged patrimonies in territories such as Texas and California that used to be theirs and where a treaty guarantees them asylum. Preach it to the South American workers[,] who to find a decent job in the United States would have to join Unions that *do not admit them*, because, despite their socialist ideology, they do not reserve places within their ranks neither for blacks nor negroids nor Mexicans or South Americans. That is reality as it exists.⁵⁸

Vasconcelos' solution to global white supremacy and U.S. imperialism, which was for Latin Americans to embrace non-whiteness, was not one that was necessarily shared by other Latin Americans at the time, however, or even U.S. Latinos. As Vasconcelos observed, Latin American denials of race functioned as pleas for inclusion into whiteness, not as a challenge to it: "Our snobbery points in the direction of the strong...it obscures the servile desire to reject the ethnic reality that constitutes us. The timidity and mimicry of an inferior species leads our Europeanizers and Saxon-izers to view themselves bovaristically as different from what they are. But such a false, ineffective, posture precipitates ruin instead, it does not prevent it."⁵⁹ Mexican-Americans in the U.S. also sought to avoid the heightened racism of the nadir era by means of inclusion into whiteness. When the U.S. census introduced "Mexican" into the "race or color" category in 1930, for example, the Mexican government and its representatives in the U.S., along with Mexican-American organizations such as LULAC (the League of United Latin

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 59. Vasconcelos appears to be referencing the term, "collective Bovarism," coined by the Haitian intellectual and politician Jean Price-Mars (1876-1969), an advocate of Negritude, who used it to describe the way the predominantly-mixed Haitian elite embraced their European ancestry while denouncing any ties to their African legacy. It is a reference to Flaubert's famous character Emma Bovary.

American Citizens) “all vigorously protested the exclusion from whiteness” and succeeded in having Mexicans re-classified as white in the census.⁶⁰

By way of conclusion, I want to consider what we might learn from juxtaposing Vasconcelos’ call in the 1920s and 1930s for Latin Americans to challenge global white supremacy by embracing a non-white racial identity with the contemporary literature on de-coloniality emerging from the region, as formulated by Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, etc. Contemporary advocates of the ‘de-colonial option’ have critiqued the epistemological effects of racism on Latin American political thought, suggesting that their predecessors in this tradition did not sufficiently break away from Western modes of knowing. Catherine Walsh, for example, argues that: “critical thought in Latin America tends to reproduce the meta-narratives of the West while discounting or overlooking the critical thinking produced by indigenous, Afro, and mestizos whose thinking finds its roots in other logics, concerns, and realities that depart not from modernity alone but also from the long horizon of coloniality.”⁶¹ While Vasconcelos certainly did not share this appreciation for knowledge produced by black and indigenous Latin Americans, his valorization of mestizaje during the first half of the twentieth century was part of an anti-colonial philosophical and political project that is most clearly articulated in texts such as *Indología* and *Bolivarismo y Monroismo*. Vasconcelos’ theorization of mestizaje fell short of being fully de-colonial for a variety of reasons, among them the inability of homogenous conceptions of mixed-race subjectivity to envision the existence of multiple,

⁶⁰ See Jennifer L. Hochschild and Brenna Marea Powell, "Racial Reorganization and the United States Census 1850–1930: Mulattoes, Half-Breeds, Mixed Parentage, Hindoos, and the Mexican Race," *Studies in American Political Development* 22, no. 01 (2008): p. 81.

⁶¹ Catherine Walsh, "Shifting the Geopolitics of Critical Knowledge," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): p. 224.

overlapping, and simultaneous identities, not to mention his dubious (at best) commitment to racial egalitarianism. What *Indología* and *Bolivarismo y Monroismo* do demonstrate, however, is that Vasconcelos did formulate an important critique of Latin American aspirations to whiteness and reproduction of European ideas that anticipates some elements of contemporary de-colonial thought. While these thinkers undoubtedly possess a much more sophisticated conception of race than Vasconcelos, their primary intellectual project appears to be the recruitment of knowledge produced at the margins in the service of decolonizing Latin American political thought, it is not to envision a truly de-colonial approach to racial politics in Latin America. Vasconcelos likewise failed to do the same, in large part because his project was anti-colonial in a hemispheric context (insofar as it challenged U.S. imperialism and global white supremacy), but was only internally de-colonial to a limited extent.

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