

HIJOS DE LA RAZA CÓSMICA: A CHICANO THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERATION

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores how leaders of the Chicano movement developed new conceptions of place, peoplehood, and mission for Mexican Americans by reinterpreting José Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* (1925) to develop their own theology and philosophy of liberation. I focus on Andrés G. Guerrero's *A Chicano Theology* (1987), which contains an extensive discussion of Vasconcelos's text as well as its contemporary meaning for Chicano/a liberation struggles based on oral interviews with nine Chicano/a leaders from the 1960s and 1970s: Lupe Anguiano, Rubén Armendariz, Tomás Atencio, Bishop Gilbert Chavez, Dr. José Angel Gutiérrez, Dolores Huerta, Msgr. Longinus Reyes, Dr. Ricardo Sánchez, and Reies López Tijerina. By focusing not only on what Vasconcelos said but also what he "ought to have said," Guerrero and his interlocutors critically reinterpret *La raza cósmica*: 1) to articulate a counter-narrative against multiple forms of oppression they have experienced in the United States of America; 2) to reframe Mexican American struggles as participating in a cosmic/universal mission of liberation; 3) to develop a productively vague framework for collective self-identification as *la raza*, and 4) to elaborate a "secular-religious" synthesis for "a bilingual, bicultural people" who refuse rigid exclusionary dualisms like Mexican vs. American, Spanish vs. English, theology vs. politics, spirituality vs. philosophy, and theology vs. philosophy.

RESUMEN: Este ensayo examina cómo los líderes del movimiento chicano forjaron nuevas concepciones de territorialidad, de la pertenencia a un pueblo y de la misión para los mexicoamericanos, al reinterpretar *La raza cósmica* (1925) de José Vasconcelos con el fin de elaborar su propia teología y filosofía de la liberación. Me centro en *A Chicano Theology* (1987) de Andrés G. Guerrero, una obra que ofrece un amplio análisis del texto de Vasconcelos, así como una reflexión sobre su significado contemporáneo para las luchas de liberación chicanas, a partir de entrevistas orales con nueve líderes chicanos y chicanas de las décadas de 1960 y 1970: Lupe Anguiano, Rubén Armendariz, Tomás Atencio, el obispo Gilbert Chávez, Dr. José Ángel Gutiérrez, Dolores Huerta, monseñor Longinus Reyes, Dr.

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Ricardo Sánchez y Reies López Tijerina. Al centrarse no solo en lo que Vasconcelos dijo, sino también en lo que «debería haber dicho», Guerrero y sus interlocutores reinterpretan críticamente *La raza cósmica*: 1) para articular una contranarrativa frente a las múltiples formas de opresión que han sufrido en los Estados Unidos de América; 2) para replantear las luchas mexicoamericanas como parte de una misión de liberación cósmica y universal; 3) para desarrollar un marco fértilmente vago para la autoidentificación colectiva como «la raza», y 4) para elaborar una síntesis «secular-religiosa» para «un pueblo bilingüe y bicultural» que rechaza los dualismos rígidos y excluyentes como mexicano vs. estadounidense, español vs. inglés, teología vs. política, espiritualidad vs. filosofía y teología vs. filosofía.

A hundred years ago, the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos published *La raza cósmica: Misión de la raza iberoamericana* (1925).¹ Shortly after his death in 1959, Vasconcelos's work gained a second life as it crossed the U.S.-Mexico border. In the mid-1960s, Mexican American activists, intellectuals, artists, leaders, and poets began calling themselves *Chicanos* and referring to themselves as *la raza*.² Some white journalists and mainstream social scientists followed suit,³ so that *la raza cósmica*, *la raza*, or simply *raza* came to be widely used alongside other group identity terms like "Mexican American" or "Chicano" in the 1970s. This was especially true in the Southwestern U.S., which many Chicanos called *Aztlán*—the mythic point of origin for the Mexica (Aztec) migration story—in a simultaneously poetic and practical effort to re-claim both Mexico and the U.S. as their ancestral, cultural, and spiritual homelands. Translated literally into English, *la raza* would be "the race." However, I agree with some of the earliest Chicano/a leaders that "the people" is a better translation insofar as their focus was on liberating an oppressed people rather than arguing for the supremacy of a distinct racial group.⁴ Regardless of how we translate it, the Chicano movement's innovative uses of *la raza* coincide historically with new senses of place, peoplehood, and mission for Mexican Americans.

¹ José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica. Misión de la raza iberoamericana. Notas de viajes a la América del Sur* (Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1925).

² See, for example, Julian Samora, ed., *La Raza: Forgotten Americans* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

³ For an early sympathetic treatment by a white journalist, see Stan Steiner, *La Raza: The Mexican Americans* (Harper & Row, 1970). The first national-scale social scientific report was: Leo Grebler et al., eds., *The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (The Free Press, 1970). Except for the third editor, Ralph C. Guzman, the report was produced by social scientists who were not Mexican American.

⁴ For example, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (1969) uses *la raza* to name "a new people" and "a union of free pueblos" seeking liberation without ever using the word *race*.

As Manuel Vargas has argued, Vasconcelos “sought to create *a people*, a group with a shared identity, a shared self-understanding, and a collective set of ambitions or values that oriented the group’s social projects.”⁵ Here, I explore how Mexican Americans re-invented the mission and meaning of Vasconcelos’s *la raza cósmica* in the process of becoming Chicanos. By using the Spanish term *la raza* to name themselves, Chicanos and Chicanas signaled their pre-Colombian indigenous roots, their Latin American origins, their marginalized status as a Mexican people cut off from Mexico by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ceded 55% of Mexico’s territory to the U.S., and their resistance to English-only speech. Admittedly, the precise influence of Vasconcelos’s philosophical understanding of *La raza cósmica* cannot be completely disentangled from the increasingly popular usage of *la raza*, but the Chicano movement clearly maintained the basic structure of Vasconcelos’s title in relation to his subtitle: as literal and figurative *hijos de la raza cósmica*, Mexican Americans developed a new sense of *mission* for *la raza* living in the United States of America.

In this article, I trace some important ways that Vasconcelos’s *La raza cósmica* clearly contributed to the productively vague concept of *la raza* as a Chicano theology and philosophy of liberation emerged. Specifically, I focus on Andrés G. Guerrero’s *A Chicano Theology* (1987),⁶ since it is understudied, even by specialists in Mexican American theology.⁷ This is equally tragic for Mexican American philosophy, since *A Chicano Theology* contains an extensive discussion of both *La raza cósmica*’s historical meaning in Vasconcelos’s text and its contemporary meaning for Chicano/a liberation struggles, which Guerrero develops through oral interviews with nine Chicano/a leaders from the 1960s and 1970s: Lupe Anguiano, Rubén Armendariz, Tomás Atencio, Bishop Gilbert Chavez, Dr. José Angel Gutiérrez, Dolores Huerta, Msgr. Longinus Reyes, Dr. Ricardo Sánchez, and Reies López Tijerina.

My article is divided into four unequal sections. The first situates *A Chicano Theology* in the recent scholarly debate over whether Chicano/as misread *La raza cósmica* or did not read it at all. The second presents Guerrero’s biography, since his work grew out of his life, and both have been overlooked by most scholars. The third and longest section explores all six chapters of *A Chicano Theology*, while maintaining a consistent focus on how Guerrero and the nine Chicano/a leaders read and interpreted *La raza cósmica*. Finally, I present Guerrero’s main

⁵ Manuel Vargas, “The Project of a People” in *Mexican Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁶ Andrés G. Guerrero, *A Chicano Theology* (Orbis Books, 1987).

⁷ In contrast to the work of the “father” of Mexican American theology, Virgilio Elizondo, Guerrero’s book was “largely overlooked” according to Gastón Espinosa, “History and Theory in the Study of Mexican American Religions,” in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, ed. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García (Duke University Press, 2008).

conclusions and offer my own recapitulation of four major ways that Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* was generative for a Chicano theology and philosophy of liberation. *La raza cósmica* was used by Chicanos and Chicanas: 1) to develop a counter-narrative against various forms of oppression they experienced in the U.S.; 2) to reframe Mexican American struggles as participating in a cosmic mission of liberation; 3) to develop a productively vague framework for collective self-identification, and 4) to elaborate a "secular-religious" synthesis.

1. *La raza cósmica*: Vasconcelos's Influential, Unread, or Misread Work?

In his 44-page historical introduction to *José Vasconcelos: The Prophet of Race*,⁸ Ilan Stavans marks a contrast between the "Spanish-speaking world" where *La raza cósmica* "has acquired the status of a classic even though people do not read it" and "the English-speaking world" where Vasconcelos "is perceived as prophetic," especially his opening essay, "Mestizaje." Because Vasconcelos's "impact on Chicano activists, intellectuals, and political leaders looking for self-definition during the civil rights era was decisive,"⁹ Stavans's book offers a new translation of "Mestizaje" by John H. R. Polt and a re-print of Vasconcelos's "The Race Problem in Latin America" (1926). Stavans writes: "By inviting readers to grapple with Vasconcelos's judgments, my hope is to contribute to the understanding of where his charisma as a Prophet of Race comes from and why 'Mestizaje' has become a gospel."¹⁰

After inviting readers to ponder these things, Stavans characterizes "a diverse, heterogenous Chicano constituency (farm workers, urban laborers, college students, housewives)"—i.e., the people who politically coalesced around Vasconcelos's Prophetic Gospel of Mestizaje by calling themselves *la raza* during the Chicano movement—as non-readers:

Intriguingly, none of them appears to have read Vasconcelos in full (granted this is a nightmarish task) or at least tried to understand the extent to which "Mestizaje" is an essentialist text ... as well as a polemical tract that excoriates blacks, Asians, whites, and other ethnic groups.¹¹

Stavans makes the fair points that "the civil rights era is not known for its subtleties" and that "the use of stereotypes was rampant," but it was unfair of him to accuse Chicanos of failing to read Vasconcelos in full. What farmworker, urban laborer, college student, or housewife would have the requisite time,

⁸ Ilan Stavans, *José Vasconcelos: The Prophet of Race* (Rutgers University Press, 2011).

⁹ Stavans, *José Vasconcelos*, 4.

¹⁰ Stavans, *José Vasconcelos*, xlv.

¹¹ Stavans, *José Vasconcelos*, 5.

resources, academic Spanish, or even physical access to all four volumes of Vasconcelos's *Obras completas*?¹²

At the end of his introduction, Stavans doubles down on his speculative claim while narrowing its scope:

There is no proof that leaders like Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Reies López Tijerina read *The Cosmic Race*. Nor, it appears, did the lawyer and activist Oscar "Zeta" Acosta; Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez, author of the poem "I Am Joaquín"; or *Los Angeles Times* journalist Ruben Salazar. Vasconcelos's endorsement of half-breedism was simply in the air.¹³

In short, Stavans presents the Chicano/a intellectual encounter with Vasconcelos as indirect, slogan-based, and partial. He does not name a single Chicano or Chicana as having read *La raza cósmica*, although he briefly discusses the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, who made "the concept of *mestizaje* permeable enough to serve [Mexican Americans] as a platform to relate to other people of color."¹⁴ Nevertheless, Stavans implies that Anzaldúa accomplished this without carefully reading Vasconcelos. Against but after Stavans, Mariana Alessandri and I conclusively demonstrated that Anzaldúa: 1) carefully read Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* in Spanish, 2) assigned portions of Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* and "The Race Problem in Latin America" (1926) in courses like "Chicanos and their Culture" that she taught at The University of Texas at Austin in the late 1970s, and 3) gave a critically transformative queer feminist reading of *La raza cósmica* in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987).¹⁵

Now, I offer definitive proof that Anzaldúa was not the only Chicano/a scholar to read Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* and engage others with his work. Andrés Guerrero's *A Chicano Theology* (1987) presents a careful reading and discussion of *La raza cósmica* with nine Chicano/a leaders, including two whom Stavans explicitly named as non-readers of Vasconcelos: Dolores Huerta and Reies López Tijerina. While this does not prove that Huerta and Tijerina read *La raza cósmica*, it demonstrates that Stavans was unaware of extant scholarly discussions of Vasconcelos by Chicano/as. This is especially tragic in the case of Guerrero's book, since it achieved Stavans's own professed aim "to contribute to the understanding of where [Vasconcelos's] charisma as a Prophet of Race comes from and why 'Mestizaje' has become a gospel."¹⁶

¹² José Vasconcelos, *Obras completas*, 4 vols. (Libreros Mexicanos Unidos, 1957–1961).

¹³ Stavans, *José Vasconcelos*, 43.

¹⁴ Stavans, *José Vasconcelos*, 13.

¹⁵ See Alexander Stehn and Mariana Alessandri, "La Mexicana En La Chicana: The Mexican Sources of Gloria Anzaldúa's Inter-American Philosophy," *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2020): 44–62.

¹⁶ Stavans, *José Vasconcelos*, xlv.

In striking contrast to Stavans's claim that *La raza cósmica* is an unread classic, Chicano historian Agustín Palacios has argued that there was a widespread *misreading*. In "Multicultural Vasconcelos: The optimistic, and at times willful, misreading of *La Raza Cósmica*" (2017),¹⁷ Palacios blames five "Euro-American intellectuals" for portraying Vasconcelos as a multicultural theorist and convincing Chicanos to follow suit. Palacios names philosopher John H. Haddox as "the scholar that had the most influence among Chicanos' (and others') reading of Vasconcelos" through both his classes at The University of Texas El Paso (UTEP) and his book, *Vasconcelos of Mexico: Philosopher and Prophet* (1967). According to Palacios, "Haddox promoted Vasconcelos's *raza cósmica* as an antiracist idea," "chose not to problematize Vasconcelos's demeaning view of indigenous people," ignored Vasconcelos's stereotypical representations of blacks, and "was not aware of Vasconcelos's 1940 support of Nazi Germany."¹⁸

Palacios's criticisms of Vasconcelos's "Euro-American misreaders" like Haddox are thus effectively similar to Stavans's criticisms of Vasconcelos's "Chicano/a non-readers." Their twin criticisms even overlap conceptually when Palacios argues that Haddox's misreading "influenced an upcoming generation of Chicano scholars."¹⁹ For example, after studying with Haddox and earning an M.A. in History from UTEP, Mario T. García published "José Vasconcelos and La Raza" (1969) in *El Grito*, where he argued that "Vasconcelos's 'cosmic race' is not a racist idea."²⁰ According to Palacios, "Proof of Haddox's influence is that Garcia does not cite Vasconcelos directly, only Haddox's *Vasconcelos of Mexico*."²¹ In sum, Palacios argues that there has been a "widespread misreading of Vasconcelos's *la raza cósmica* as a theory of harmonious *mestizaje* that US Latinos can use to undo racial divisions and promote multiculturalism."²² Although I agree with Palacios that we should "interrogate the history of the idea of *mestizaje* and *la raza cósmica* to examine how these interwoven ideologies have at times been complicit with racism and the erasure of indigenous peoples and Afro-mestizos,"²³ I believe it is equally imperative to distinguish between Vasconcelos's *La raza*

¹⁷ Agustín Palacios, "Multicultural Vasconcelos: The optimistic, and at times willful, misreading of *La Raza Cósmica*," *Latino Studies* 15, no. 4 (2017): 416–38.

¹⁸ Palacios, "Multicultural Vasconcelos," 425–26.

¹⁹ Palacios provides one notable exception, "the seminal critique by Nicandro F. Juárez, who in 1972 wrote 'José Vasconcelos and La Raza Cósmica,' published in the well-known and then newly launched *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*" (428). Palacios nevertheless concludes, "As important as Juárez's analysis was, his critique of Vasconcelos was seldom cited in Chicano scholarship" (429).

²⁰ Mario T. García, "José Vasconcelos and La Raza," *El Grito* 2, no. 4 (1969): 49–51.

²¹ Palacios, "Multicultural Vasconcelos," 426.

²² Palacios, "Multicultural Vasconcelos," 416.

²³ Palacios, "Multicultural Vasconcelos," 432.

cósmica itself and the ways it was creatively reinterpreted (not necessarily misinterpreted) by Chicanos and Chicanas.

By carefully examining Andrés Guerrero's reading of Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* in conversation with nine Chicano/a leaders, my article refutes Stavans's claim that Chicano/as *did not read* Vasconcelos while challenging Palacios's claim that they *misread* him. A better explanation, I argue, is that Mexican Americans engaged in a transformative reading of *La raza cósmica*—both the book and the symbol—by interpreting it through their own oppression and liberation struggles in a new historical, geographical, linguistic, and cultural context. To foreground this context, I offer a brief biography of Andrés Guerrero.

2. Andrés Gonzales Guerrero, Jr.

Apart from a small group of theologians interested in Mexican American or Latinx theology, Guerrero's work remains largely unknown. He does not even have his own Wikipedia page as of July 2026. I have learned about his life through three primary sources: 1) the website of the Andrés G. Guerrero papers (1971-1993) at Michigan State University;²⁴ 2) a 2013 interview with Guerrero conducted by Diana Rivera for the "Mexican Voices - Michigan Lives" oral history series;²⁵ and 3) a 2023 interview with Guerrero conducted by Daniel Reyez for the Mexican American History Project Greeley (MAHPG).²⁶

In 1943, Andrés Gonzales Guerrero, Jr. was born in *El Barrio del Alacrán* of the Second Ward (also known as Segundo Barrio) of Houston, TX, where many Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans lived from 1910 until the early 1950s. When asked, "How many generations of your family have lived in the United States?" Guerrero replied that he was "first generation," on the side of his father, Andrés Sr., who was born in Monterrey, México. On the side of his Native American and Mexican mother Guadalupe born in Crockett, TX, Guerrero said he was "thousandth generation."²⁷ Like other Texas Mexican intellectuals born shortly before him—e.g., Virgilio Elizondo (b. 1935) and Gloria Anzaldúa (b. 1942)—Andrés grew up in a Spanish-speaking household then encountered English through school. Both sides of his family tree—what he calls "a Texas line and a Native American line"—were Spanish-speaking, since "the Spanish language had already been in Texas for over 200 years" and was spoken not only by Texans and Mexicans but also by the Comanche, Apache, and Cherokee in Texas.

²⁴ Diana Rivera, "Finding Aid for the Andrés G. Guerrero Papers," Michigan State University Libraries, 1998, <https://findingaids.lib.msu.edu/repositories/4/resources/5745>.

²⁵ Diana Rivera, "Interview of Andres G. Guerrero," November 8, 2013, <https://d.lib.msu.edu/vvl/1657>.

²⁶ Daniel Reyez, "Andres Guerrero Interview_video," University of Northern Colorado Digital Archives, March 20, 2023, <https://digarch.unco.edu/andres-guerrero-interviewvideo>.

²⁷ Reyez, "Andres Guerrero Interview_video."

In terms of religious upbringing, his father Andrés Sr. was “a very staunch Roman Catholic” and his mother Guadalupe was a Baptist “because she was raised in East Texas.” After finishing high school, Andrés Jr. went to seminary at the University of St. Thomas, a Catholic university in Houston, TX where he studied philosophy and later earned a Master of Theology degree. When asked about his higher education experience as a Mexican American, Guerrero responded:

That's one of the things that one of the professors at St. Thomas asked us.... When I gave the answer, he said, “No, no, no, no.” He said, “That's what the Anglo-Saxon is thinking. I want to know what the Mexicans are thinking.” And I thought to myself, “What the Mexicans are thinking? Well, I didn't even know we could think!”.... This is why the dangers of assimilation are more dangerous than people realize.... You're actually asking people to forget about their identity. And if you study Native American policy in the United States, you will find out that the whole thrust was: “Forget that you're a Native American.”²⁸

Given this context, the task is what Guerrero calls “the quest for the native mind” or “the Chicano mind,” which motivated *A Chicano Theology* (1987). Guerrero admits that he “can't speak for Latin America, Central America, or the Caribbean,” but he insists that Chicanos and Chicanas “have a mission” to understand their own minds.²⁹ Furthermore, to understand and carry out this mission, which constitutes a profound hope for not just the U.S. or Mexico but “the whole hemisphere,” Guerrero stresses the importance of Chicano/a leadership “that is focused around the needs and visions and realms of not only where our people are going as Chicanos and Chicanas, but where the country's going.”³⁰ Although this interview was conducted in 2013, it demonstrates some basic features of Vasconcelos's sense of *misión para la raza cósmica* as it was creatively interpreted by Guerrero and Chicano/a leaders.

In an earlier 2002 newspaper article, Guerrero singled out schools for destroying the Chicano sense of identity and mission through assimilationist policies: “It occurred to me that I couldn't speak Spanish because I wanted to succeed. Who I was had to die when I went to school.”³¹ At 80 years old, when Guerrero was asked about how well Mexican American culture was institutionally represented in 2023, he again articulated an enduring sense of Chicano oppression, peoplehood, and liberating mission:

²⁸ Rivera, “Interview of Andres G. Guerrero.”

²⁹ Rivera, “Interview of Andres G. Guerrero.”

³⁰ Rivera, “Interview of Andres G. Guerrero.”

³¹ Jesse Fanciulli, “A Different American,” *Greeley Tribune*, November 13, 2002, <https://www.greeleytribune.com/2002/11/13/a-different-american/>.

Well, I don't think it's represented at all. We're an invisible people here, a people in captivity....

If you don't change the educational system, you're not going to change anything.... We're not monothinking, we're not monolingual, and we're not monocultural. We're bicultural, bilingual, and we need that reflected in not only in the institution of education, but in the church, all churches.³²

3. *A Chicano Theology* (1987)

Guerrero's book grew out of the dissertation that earned him a Doctor of Theology from Harvard University in 1984: *The Significance of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe and La Raza Cósmica in the Development of a Chicano Theology of Liberation*.³³ One of the things that makes Guerrero's work both interesting and methodologically innovative is how he brings the "Chicano oral tradition" into the more formal disciplinary space of academic theology through transcribed interviews, effectively turning the words of Chicano/a leaders into texts that could be analyzed and synthesized.³⁴

The first chapter of *A Chicano Theology* presents a fairly standard view of Mexican American history as it stood after the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It also runs parallel to Chapter 1 of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), which was published the same year but is much more widely read and cited. Here's a sample passage from Guerrero:

The roots of Chicano history are in the sixteenth century conquest, when two cultures, two world views, and two world powers—the indigenous and the Spanish—merged violently. The Spanish conquistador married or raped the conquered Indian woman. The children born of this union were neither indigenous nor Spanish. Thus began a new race (*La Raza*), which had characteristics of both

³² Reyez, "Andres Guerrero Interview_video."

³³ The chair of Guerrero's dissertation committee was Harvey G. Cox, Jr., the first faculty to introduce Latin American liberation theology to Harvard Divinity School. He was working on *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (1985) while Guerrero was writing his dissertation. Guerrero's other committee members included Nancy B. Jay, a feminist sociologist of religion best known for her posthumously published book *Throughout Your Generations Forever* (1991); Sister Marie Augusta Neal, a sociologist who focused on the changes in women's religious orders after Vatican II and social justice; and Sharon Welch, a social ethicist whose work includes *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (1985).

³⁴ To justify his oral interview methodology, Guerrero cites the academic works of Robert Coles, Robert Jay Lifton, and Teófilo Cabestrero: "The listening approach used by both Coles and Lifton gives the interviewees an opportunity to speak their mind and to develop their point. Cabestrero's method of questioning helps clarify so as to leave no doubt as to what the Chicano leader means on a certain issue" (33).

groups. At first these children had a difficult time; both groups rejected them. Neither the Spanish nor the indigenous wanted them. The Spaniards labeled these children *mestizos*—a mixture of Spanish and indigenous. This phenomenon of the New World was called *mestizaje* (5).

At the end of this paragraph, Guerrero cites Virgilio Elizondo's dissertation—*Mestizaje: The Dialectic of Cultural Birth and the Gospel*—that made him the first Chicano theologian.³⁵ Like both Anzaldúa and Elizondo, Guerrero jumps from Mexican *mestizaje* to the experience of Chicano/as in the U.S.: "Today, Chicanos are *mestizos* and they call themselves *La Raza*. Chicano is the name we gave ourselves after the second conquest in the nineteenth century by the gringos" (5).

In other words, Chicanos came into existence as a people when they named and distinguished themselves, both from what Anglos had called them (Mexicans or Mexican-Americans) and from their Mexican ancestors, who did not experience the second conquest in the same way. Through their *Indigenous* and *Mexican* ancestry and post-1848 experiences living as *Mexican Americans*, *la raza* slowly develops a multi-generational critical consciousness, which was accelerated by the Chicano movement. Guerrero thus explores the political, spiritual, and philosophical process of Chicanos becoming aware of their "cosmic experience of oppression" from which "a theology of liberation for Chicanos has to be born" (19). He interprets *cosmic* as "synonymous with universal," "something that excludes no one," something that must specifically "include the worldview of the oppressed and the colonized" (19).

Although Guerrero's full discussion of Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* does not come until Chapter 5, he introduces Vasconcelos in Chapter 2 because "the word *cosmic*, as understood through the Chicano tradition, is best described in Vasconcelos's monograph" (19). This is a remarkable claim, since Guerrero is effectively saying that Chicano reality is best described in a book that predates Chicanos' individual and collective realizations that they were oppressed yet simultaneously called to liberate themselves and all humanity. To explain Vasconcelos's prophetic vision, Guerrero provides his own translation of this passage from *La raza cósmica*:

What is going to come out of there [Latin America] is the definitive race, the synthesis race or integral race, made with the genius and with the blood of all peoples, and at the same time more capable of true brotherhood and of a vision truly universal (20).³⁶

³⁵ Virgilio Elizondo, *Mestizaje: The Dialectic of Cultural Birth and the Gospel*. 3 volumes. San Antonio: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1978.

³⁶ Since Guerrero provides this quote and all other quotes from Vasconcelos in English, the translations are presumably Guerrero's. His footnotes consistently cite pages from José

As a matter of historical fact, both philosophy and theology as academic disciplines excluded Mexican Americans up through the late 1970s. Likewise, prior to the Chicano movement, the church excluded them from holding leadership positions. As Guerrero puts it:

Although 75 percent of the Catholic population of the Southwest was Chicano, Chicano bishops were not consecrated until the early 1970s. The systematic denial of spiritual leadership to Chicanos constitutes a form of spiritual colonization.... Just as we are treated as strangers in our land, so we are also treated as strangers in our own church, which has existed in the Southwest since the 1500s (25).

In ways that are strikingly parallel, philosophy and theology in both university and church settings claimed to be universal, to occupy themselves with the concerns of humanity, even as they systematically excluded not just Chicanos but many other minoritized groups. Guerrero rehearses various ways that Chicanos have experienced physical, psychological, cultural, linguistic, and spiritual colonization, but *A Chicano Theology* makes a distinct contribution by assigning a *cosmic* significance to their experience while articulating a corresponding sense of liberating mission for *la raza* in the U.S.

Despite his profound criticisms, Guerrero maintains that “the church as an instrument of liberation is our last hope” (166). This is a fascinating reversal from the dominant narrative of secular schools and universities that present themselves as Mexican Americans’ best (if not last) hope. Guerrero writes:

Besides being of a different color and class, Chicanos also speak a different language. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo guaranteed us protection of our religion, of our property, and of our civil rights, but it did not mention specifically the protection of our Spanish language, even though that should be included in our human rights. Both Catholic and Protestant churches played a major role in the survival of the language. The Protestant churches trained a Chicano Protestant clergy who spoke both English and Spanish. The Catholic Church, in spite of having a foreign or gringo clergy, also trained its clergy to speak Spanish. So the secular forces suppressed the Spanish language while the religious forces nurtured it (27).

Guerrero’s claim echoes my experience living and teaching in the South Texas borderlands for the last 16 years. In the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), more than 80% of households speak Spanish at home. Therefore, almost every church—whether Catholic, Protestant, or Restorationist—offers Spanish or bilingual masses and

Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cosmica: Misión de la Raza Ibero-Americana*. Madrid: Aguilar, S.A. Di Ediciones, 1961.

worship services. If a person works in the RGV as a priest, pastor, or bishop, they probably speak Spanish or are learning it. In contrast, most professors at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) where I teach do not speak Spanish, and only a few are invested in learning it. Apart from dozens of heretics like me who teach bilingual courses,³⁷ most UTRGV professors are still teaching Chicano students to think exclusively “in the English tongue of their conquerors” (27), whereas RGV churches facilitate Spanish, English, and bilingual worship according to the languages of their congregations.

To highlight the social, psychological, and spiritual harm that results from forcing an English-only education on a bilingual people, Guerrero quotes from a 1966 National Education Association report:

The harm done the Mexican-American child linguistically is paralleled, perhaps even exceeded, by the harm done to him as a person. In telling him that he must not speak his native language, we are saying to him by implication that Spanish and the culture which it represents are of no worth. Therefore (it follows) the people who speak Spanish are of no worth. Therefore (it follows again) this particular child is of no worth. It should come as no surprise to us, then, that he develops a negative self-concept—an inferiority complex.³⁸

Summing up their “cosmic experience of oppression,” Guerrero writes:

Racially, most Chicanos look native American and are poor. We speak Spanish; the educational curriculum strengthens our inferiority complex. Traditionally, our church has been irresponsible in developing a native clergy and native leadership. Today we are millions of people with no representative voice in church or government. We are beginning to realize our situation of oppression and to look for ways to fight toward liberation (30).

After empirically establishing that it is fruitless to look *inside* the church or academy for insight into symbols like *La raza cósmica* because “Chicanos were kept out of the church hierarchy, out of the priesthood, and out of Catholic academe,”³⁹ Guerrero’s third chapter looks to the “Chicano oral tradition” *outside*

³⁷ Alexander V. Stehn, “Philosophizing in Tongues: Cultivating Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Biliteracy in an Introduction to Latin American Philosophy Course,” *APA Studies on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2022): 7–16.

³⁸ *The Invisible Minority: Report of the NEA-Tucson Survey on the Teaching of Spanish to the Spanish-Speaking* (National Education Association, 1966), 11.

³⁹ Guerrero quotes *The Fact Book on Theological Education: 1975-1976* to establish “that our [U.S. Latino] representative power in academic theological circles is almost nil.” Guerrero draws a similar conclusion about the U.S. Catholic Church’s hierarchy where “60 percent of our bishops have Irish surnames; 30 percent have German surnames; 4 percent, Slavic; 2 percent, French; .08 percent, Spanish Only one bishop has been a Chicano” (29).

of the ecclesiological and academic structures by interviewing nine Chicano/a leaders in 1981. Here, I reproduce the exact names and titles given by Guerrero while shortening and paraphrasing the bios he provided:

1. *Lupe Anguiano*, president of National Woman's Employment and Education, Inc. in San Antonio, TX, defends women against church and state leaders who undermine the role of women in society and Chicano culture.
2. *Rubén Armendariz*, Chicano theologian and educator, directs the Latino Studies Program at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. Originally a Presbyterian minister from Galveston, TX, he moved to direct the first accredited theological program for U.S. Latinos.
3. *Tomás Atencio* is working on his Ph.D. in sociology at the University of New Mexico. He is a member of the Presbyterian Church and president of Academia, a nonprofit dedicated to teaching and developing Chicano culture in New Mexico.
4. *Bishop Gilbert Chavez*, auxiliary bishop of San Diego, California, was among the U.S. bishops accused of being "Marxist subversives" and thrown into jail at gunpoint by military police in 1976 while discussing the plight of the poor at an Inter-American church conference in Ecuador. Guerrero notes: "[Chavez] told me that questions on liberation theology could not be discussed. His bishop had asked him to refrain from making statements on the subject" (35).
5. *Dr. José Angel Gutiérrez*, founder of La Raza Unida Party. Before Gutiérrez, Anglos (15 percent of the population) controlled the political, social, economic, and ecclesiastical order of Crystal City, TX, while Chicanos (85 percent of the population) controlled nothing.
6. *Dolores Huerta*, vice-president of the United Farm Workers, has devoted her life, together with César Chavez, to the fight for justice and dignity for farm workers. Besides being an organizer, she is the mother of twelve children.
7. *Msgr. Longinus Reyes* is chancellor of the diocese of Austin, Texas, one of the oldest *colonias* of Chicanos in that state. Reyes was born in Lockhart, twenty miles outside of Austin, to a migrant farm-worker family.
8. *Dr. Ricardo Sánchez*, Chicano poet, is the only Chicano leader I interviewed who has written extensively. He has published nine books of poetry. Sánchez is also the only one I interviewed who can speak from the side of those who have been imprisoned, which has been the fate of many Chicanos.
9. *Reies López Tijerina*, an evangelical Pentecostal minister. Tijerina and others in *La Alianza Federal de Pueblos Libres* possess land grants which

state that they are the legal and rightful owners of large sections of the Santa Fe National Forest and other sections of the Southwest.

Guerrero chose these nine because of their leadership, “love for our Chicano community,” and their availability. He spent a day with most of them in their own homes, sharing meals along with “their feelings, fears, struggles, and hopes” (37). Besides counting two women and seven men, Guerrero explains: “None was rich; two were poor, three were lower middle class, and four were middle class. All were struggling. Six were employed, two were unemployed, and one was about to lose his job. All were generous with their time and energy. Their *casa* was my *casa*. All showed a common joy and peace with life and a happiness that comes from a sense of purpose” (37). Besides tying this “sense of purpose” to *la raza’s* “sense of mission,” I would further note their religious diversity: five Catholics, two Presbyterians, one Pentecostal, and one anti-authoritarian poet who might today be called “spiritual but not religious.”⁴⁰

In each interview, Guerrero investigates and documents the “Chicano oral tradition” by discussing twelve themes: 1) *Machismo y La Mujer*, 2) Racism-Classism, 3) Education and Labor, 4) Violence and Nonviolence 5) *El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz* (Benito Juárez), 6) The Land, 7) Fatalistic and Anarchistic Tendencies, 8) The Catholic Church, 9) Theology, 10) The Symbol of Exodus, 11) The Religious-Spiritual Symbol of Guadalupe, and 12) The Secular-Spiritual Symbol of *La Raza Cósmica*. Guerrero’s presentation of the first ten themes runs for over 60 pages, then concludes: “A Chicano theology of liberation must take into account the Chicano oral tradition in order to speak to Chicano needs and to find avenues of expressing Chicano potential and capability” (95).

Guerrero’s careful preservation and theological analysis of the “Chicano oral tradition” resonates with more recent metaphysical claims. In “On the Distinctive Value of Mexican American Philosophy: Beginning with the Concerns and Intuitions of Mexican Americans” (2018), Lori Gallegos de Castillo and Francisco Gallegos offer a tentative list of concerns and intuitions that are widely held by the Mexican-American community and “illustrate how beginning from these particular starting points might alter the way we think about philosophical issues.”⁴¹ Guerrero’s oral interviews follow a more social scientific, or at least empirical method, that establishes not only the concerns and intuitions of Chicano/a leaders, but also their own theological and philosophical thinking about some of the same themes raised by los hermanos Gallegos, especially: 1) identity, 2) heritage and tradition, 3) language, and 4) social, political, and moral recognition. Since 30 years separate these publications, and their Mexican

⁴⁰ Guerrero does not specify the religious affiliations of Gutiérrez, Huerta, or Sánchez at the time of the interviews, but I have classified them as Catholic, Catholic, and spiritual but not religious based on the available evidence.

American authors come from completely different places and disciplines, the fact that they name and address overlapping “shared themes” is a powerful illustration of what Guerrero called the “cosmic experience of oppression” from which “a theology of liberation for Chicanos has to be born” or what los Gallegos call the “the orientation and areas from which the Mexican American philosophical investigation has and may continue to proceed.”⁴²

In Chapters 4 and 5 of *A Chicano Theology*—on *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and *La raza cósmica*, respectively—Guerrero weaves the “Chicano oral tradition” together with more traditional scholarly analysis of religious and philosophical texts. Again, there are striking parallels or “shared themes” with *Borderlands/La Frontera*, since Anzaldúa’s third chapter not only provides a detailed analysis of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* but even quotes directly from *Propios de la misa de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* and *La Virgen Ranchera* as they appear in Guerrero’s Th.D. dissertation, which Anzaldúa cites across three different footnotes. Similarly, Anzaldúa’s Chapter 7 gives her own “take off” on Vasconcelos’s *La raza cósmica*. Drawing upon some of the very same texts as Anzaldúa, including the Nican Mopohua, Guerrero writes: “To understand the symbol of Guadalupe is to understand the essence of being Mexican” (96) and “Guadalupe was and continues to be the mother of the oppressed native Americans and mestizos in Mexico and in the Chicano Southwest” (99). In light of his aim to develop a Chicano theology of liberation, Guerrero also notes that her title is “libertadora de las razas oprimidas” (102).

Through the extensive interviews that he conducted with Chicano/a leaders, Guerrero also presents Guadalupe as a living symbol of: 1) faith, 2) identity, 3) hope, 4) woman against *machismo*, and 5) liberation. Since my focus here is on *la raza cósmica* and Chicano liberation, I will simply note that Guerrero is especially attentive to the ways in which “the symbol of Guadalupe has not been proclaimed as a liberating symbol,” since the institutional church “has sided with the oppressor and has used Guadalupe to placate the Indians and the Chicanos” (115-116). After devoting a dozen pages to the interviews, Guerrero concludes that Chicanos must “redefine Guadalupe as a symbol of liberation” by “opening up other areas of consciousness,” including Chicanos’ “cosmic global unity with the oppressed” (117). Like her title as “*libertadora de las razas oprimidas*,” Guadalupe’s “cosmic dimension” also connects her to *La raza cósmica*.

Even before Chapter 5, *La Raza Cósmica* comes up repeatedly as Guerrero quotes from his interviews. For example, when discussing “Theology,” Dolores Huerta said: “When you talk about religion, it is still a political issue, especially when you talk about the history of *La Raza Cósmica*, or the history of the Chicano. Religion has been a very political thing for the Mexican” (83). Ricardo Sánchez, the interview subject most critical of the institutional church, said:

A new theology of liberation, true liberation, would be all inclusive, would perhaps give people the sense of destiny and dignity that they need, the psychological and spiritual reinforcements that they are lacking, the reflection that human beings are human and that they all have the right to thrive, to enjoy, to love, and that they are all not only capable of loving but worthy of being loved (84).

More quotes could be summoned from Guerrero's interviews, but notice how both Huerta and Sánchez—like Guerrero—see religion and theology as political and philosophical. In fact, some of the dualistic categories that most professional philosophy in the U.S. has inherited—e.g., religion vs. secular political philosophy, theology vs. philosophy, or spirituality vs. philosophy—simply fail to capture the ways of living and thinking that are embodied by the Chicano/as whose views are brought together throughout Guerrero's *A Chicano Theology*. Guerrero discusses various forms of oppression that afflict Chicanos while simultaneously highlighting their political and spiritual struggles to achieve liberation for themselves and the rest of humanity. In other words, the book works to articulate a liberatory mission for *la raza* (Chicanos in the U.S.) that is nevertheless *cosmic* in scale, i.e., universal in its aims and scope. Guerrero consistently insists that this mission is political *and more* insofar as it is spiritual, religious, philosophical, physical, racial, linguistic, sexual, psychological *and more*: "All the interviewees agreed that Chicanos are oppressed and need to concentrate on various aspects of liberation" (94).

This background helps us make sense of Chapter 5: "The Secular-Religious Symbol of *La Raza Cósmica*." To inhabit Guerrero's Chicano theology is to understand that there is no more contradiction in the hyphenated term "Secular-Religious" than there is in the term "Mexican-American." And yet, Chicanos *experience* the allegation or even imposition of a contradiction along various axes of oppression. Indeed, Guerrero notes that Vasconcelos himself experienced "discrimination at the hands of white Texans" because he "had lived in the United States and had gone to school in Eagle Pass, Texas" (118). To elaborate a little, the Vasconcelos family moved to Piedras Negras in 1887, and José attended elementary school across the border in Eagle Pass from 1888 to 1894. All we have to do is imagine that little José—*Joe* to his Anglo teacher, who either could not or would not pronounce *José*—had stayed in Texas rather than returning to Mexico after elementary school. This José, the Chicano, would never have become the *Mexican philosopher* José Vasconcelos because it was socially, economically, and institutionally impossible for a Mexican-American to become a person that scholars would later call "a philosopher" at the turn of the 20th century in the United States.

Returning to the actual experiences of young José Vasconcelos, his racialized experience of English-only borderlands schooling as a binational, bilingual, and bicultural child, undoubtedly shaped his philosophical reflections on Mexico and

the United States, on Latin American and Anglo American civilizations, and on *La raza cósmica*. To be clear, this does not make Vasconcelos Chicano, but it does mean that his childhood experience overlaps in a *cosmic* way with the experiences of some of the earliest Chicano/as who are recognized today as theologians and philosophers. Virgilio Elizondo in San Antonio, TX, Andrés Guerrero in Houston, TX, and Gloria Anzaldúa near Hargill, TX—each grew up speaking Spanish at home, then encountered English in school where teachers could not or would not even say their names in Spanish. Their early schooling experiences, like Vasconcelos's, are extremely particular and context-specific, but they are also experiences that thousands of my students today at UTRGV consistently relate to, even though most attended elementary schools in Texas 120 years after José Vasconcelos and 60 years after Andrés Guerrero. I've even had students who grew up in geographically distant contexts—e.g., Brazil, China, India, Israel, and French Guiana—tell me that they can relate powerfully to the experiences of their Mexican American classmates when they reflect on their own experiences of schooling. Using the terms of Guerrero's intellectual framework, this means that we are talking about a *cosmic* experience of oppression that can point us to a *cosmic* experience of liberation for not just Chicanos but all linguistically colonized, excluded, or oppressed peoples.

On Guerrero's own reading of both *La raza cósmica* (1925) and *Indología* (1926), Vasconcelos developed a *cosmic* vision for *la raza* as part of a larger missionary vision for the human race that was directly opposed to the "scientific" forms of racist Social Darwinism that were then common in Europe, Latin American, and the United States. Guerrero quotes extensively from Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1962), including his discussion of John Hay's presentation of "the Manifest Destiny of Anglo-Saxons" to expand across Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines as an irresistible "cosmic tendency." Guerrero's point is that there *already was* a race that understood itself as the "cosmic race"—the Anglo-Saxons of the United States—whose mission was to colonize and civilize the earth's other inferior and mixed races.

Guerrero thus presents Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* as an alternative to the "cosmic tendency" of Anglo-Saxon racism:

Racism is a social disease. We have not found a cure for it yet. With *La Raza Cósmica* Vasconcelos initiated an ideology that attempted to find a cure. I believe he was ahead of his time with this ideology in spite of its limitations. It stressed the inclusivity of the four races. Racism is also a living nightmare. Unlike a nightmare, though, it does destroy. It destroys its victims and it destroys the racists. The best way to end a nightmare is to jump right into it and be devoured

if necessary. I have never been devoured by it, but in the process of fighting it, I wake up (122).

While recognizing Vasconcelos's ideology as imperfect, Guerrero makes the case that Vasconcelos "jumped right into" the living nightmare of racism and tried to wake us up by presenting *mestizaje* as "an inclusivistic model of social-racial integration" (123). We ought never pretend that Vasconcelos was writing from some kind of magical place outside the nightmare, or even that we have entirely woken up. But just as importantly, we should recognize that Chicano/as could not help but to read and interpret *La raza cósmica* through their own experiences inside the living nightmare of racism in the United States, which constitutes a different interpretive locus.

In the early 1980s, when Guerrero was conducting his interviews and writing his dissertation, there was still no widely available English translation of *La raza cósmica*. The now standard English translation by Didier Jaén was published in *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition* by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1997. Although it was originally published on a much smaller scale in 1979 by the *Centro de Publicaciones* in the Department of Chicano Studies at California State University, Los Angeles, Guerrero seems to have been unaware, writing that the book "has not been translated into English" (123) and telling his interviewees: "No le conviene al Anglo-Saxon que este libro sea traducido" (124).

In any case, Guerrero writes that "Vasconcelos is important to the whole discussion of Chicano identity 'because this man has provoked much needed discussion and reflection on who we are' (José Angel Gutiérrez)" (123). And while Guerrero never goes so far as to suggest that Vasconcelos had Chicanos specifically in mind, he characterizes Vasconcelos as "a *mestizo* coming to the aid of other *mestizos*" and critically interprets his work in relation to the U.S. Civil Rights movement:

His thought was similar to the "Black is beautiful" movement in the United States during the late sixties. In trying to prove his point, Vasconcelos ran into trouble when he used the racist model of the eugenicists, with whom he was in dialogue. This model places the white first and the black last in its structure. By coming to our understanding of La Raza from the following analysis of our own perspective and within our own dialogue, we will, I hope, build a truer concept of our experience (with its nonracist model) than Vasconcelos, who was dialoguing with racist purists (124).

In short, Guerrero is no apologist for Vasconcelos. He presented the "shared theme" of *La raza cósmica* to each of his interviewees by introducing Vasconcelos's book and its influence on Chicanos, which he summarizes like this:

Chicanos, who have been downtrodden for nearly one hundred and fifty years in the Southwest, adopted the term *La Raza* as a

rallying cry for unity and justice during the late sixties and early seventies. Chicanos were proud of being members of *La Raza* once again. In your opinion what are the positive and negative aspects of this symbolic concept? In our present-day reality of oppression what new light—if any—could we shed on it? Observing the historical development of this concept, is it a viable symbol for liberation?

Guerrero's first pragmatic point here is that Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* has been historically influential, and his even more pragmatic question is not "What exactly did Vasconcelos mean by *la raza cósmica*?" but rather "Is it a viable symbol for liberation?" (125).

Below, I present Guerrero's seven thematic reflections on this symbol's pragmatic viability for liberation in dialogue with nine other Chicano/a leaders. By quoting extensively from the interviews, Guerrero conducts a dialogical exploration of *la raza cósmica* as a productively vague symbol that brings diverse people(s) together in ways that generate rather than foreclose multiple interpretations of their identities and missions as distinct yet connected.

3.1 *La Raza Cósmica* as a Symbol of Universality

Guerrero begins with Ricardo Sánchez, since "poets concern themselves with the heart and soul of a people" (125). Sánchez claimed that "our cosmicity comes from within us" and that "to go into yourself" is to discover "our humanity, our universality" (126). Sánchez also claims that many people, including Vasconcelos, fall into the trap of looking for their own humanity somewhere else:

Vasconcelos was caught in that trap. A lot of Mexican intellectuals were looking outward. They looked to Europe, they looked everywhere but within themselves. That's a fault of Vasconcelos in the sense that in the process of identifying himself, he leaned too far toward Europe to find the answer (125-126).

In 2026, criticizing Vasconcelos for his Eurocentrism is common, but Guerrero notes that Sánchez's critique provides a valuable lesson insofar as Vasconcelos was *also* oppressed:

Some of the oppressed who are treated as nonbeings believe that in order to be, they have to prove themselves to the "beings" in the status quo. The tragedy of this enterprise is that in the process of trying to confirm yourself you lose your own reality; you adapt to the models of the status quo and consequently you forfeit your own identity. Your identity can only be given by the models engendered by your own experience. As a consequence you do not liberate yourself; instead you assimilate into something else (126).

While Guerrero does not say so here, this passage describes experiences that both he and Vasconcelos had in Texas elementary schools where they worked hard at

becoming white, English-speaking boys called “Andy” and “Joe” *rather than* “Andrés” and “José.” But even more important than this psychological insight is Guerrero’s intellectual insight: “Whatever theology we as Chicanos are going to have someday is going to be created from within ourselves” (126).

3.2 *La Raza Cósmica* as a Symbol of Auto-Identificarse (Identifying Oneself)

Guerrero opens with a quote from José Ángel Gutiérrez:

Es importante para nosotros usar la palabra “raza” hoy en día porque uno tiene que primeramente auto-identificarse. Uno para poder ser tiene que saber quien es y para saber quien es, es muy sencillo: uno se dice quien es; uno se da su propia identidad.

This quote in Spanish is rich, both explicitly and by implication. It presents Spanish as a language in which people, including Chicanos, can think, theologize, and philosophize. But it is also the language that U.S. schools teach Chicanos to stop speaking. José Ángel Gutiérrez’s act of speaking Spanish in an interview, like Guerrero’s act of transcribing it in a Harvard dissertation that became a book, are practices of *autoidentificarse* like the ones that Gutiérrez enacted in 1970 when cofounding a U.S. political party whose official names are both Spanish (El Partido Nacional de La Raza Unida) and Spanglish (La Raza Unida Party) because these are languages that Chicanos speak in addition to English.

Turning to a biblical interpretation, Guerrero cites Genesis 2:19-20, where God brings the animals to Adam, the first human being, to name them. Guerrero interprets: “Hence one of the first human responsibilities was to designate everything by naming it. Difficult as it may seem, man/woman also have the responsibility of naming themselves” (127). This is yet another “cosmic” aspect involved when Chicanos *auto-identificarse* by calling themselves *la raza*: “We have taken the first step toward liberation—a step that is not only social and political but also theological. It addresses the theological problem of naming who we are. *Somos mestizos. Somos la raza*” (128).

3.3 *La Raza Cósmica* as a Symbol of *Mestizaje*

Vasconcelos was trying to put across that Hispanics represent all the rainbow of colors of people, that once you are brought into the family, once you belong to the family of La Raza, color is not an issue. There is something more than color that binds you (Rubén Armendariz).

According to Guerrero, the emergence of Chicanos as a “mixed” people who have come to identify themselves as *la raza* gives new meaning to Vasconcelos’s *mestizaje* by translating it into a North American context. For instance, Dolores Huerta defies the typical black-white binary of the U.S. when she says: “*Mestizaje* is the bridge between white and black” (130). In Guerrero’s own words, “*Mestizaje* works. It accomplishes through action what humanists believe in theory. Two

different races can marry and make it work provided they see the process of liberation going on. Two cultures can blend to create a new humanity different from the two parents" (130). While Guerrero does not directly discuss his own *mestizo* identity here, the fact that he is the son of a Mexican born in Mexico and a Native American Mexican born in Texas further illustrates his point.

3.4 *La Raza* as a Symbol of Hope

Guerrero quotes Msgr. Longinus Reyes as saying: "The Chicanos could be the hope for the whole hemisphere" (31). Guerrero explains: "Chicanos can be a hope because they relate to both the *latino* world and the gringo world. They can be a bridge bringing these two cultures together" (131). Although Guerrero and others use the term "gringo" throughout *A Chicano Theology*, they also recognize that it is a part of who they are. As Guerrero writes:

Together with this *corazón*, warmth for others, is the gringo impulse. Chicanos have been educated in Anglo-Saxon schools; we learned their administrative skills and technology; we know the gringo thought, their stereotypes, their attitudes. We live with the gringo. We have adopted many of their strengths and sad to say even their weaknesses. But our *corazón latino* gives our gringo impulse a deeper meaning because of our warmth for humanity, for the *compadrazgo* (132).

3.5 *La Raza* as a Symbol of Unity

Tomás Atencio said that people first and foremost *feel* like they are part of *la raza*, making it "the unifying principle of the people who are not doing too much reflection" (133). But it can nevertheless serve as "a unifying principle intellectually" insofar as Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos can unite under this symbol, making it "a powerful concept because of the unifying strength it carries" by including "the cosmicity of all the blood mixtures possible." As Guerrero states, "I have never heard the terms black *raza* or white *raza*. Those terms would destroy the whole concept of *La Raza*. They would destroy the secular-spiritual unity" (132). For this reason, "the people" is a better translation of *La raza* than "the race" insofar as "'race' implies color, but in *La Raza* color is not stressed" (133).

3.6 *La Raza* as a Symbol of New Creation

The quote from Rubén Armendariz that Guerrero uses to begin this section and the dialogue that ensues brings us back to our earlier question about whether Chicanos did not read, misread, or transformatively read Vasconcelos:

Theologically, for me, [*La Raza*] has a certain eschatological dimension. One thinks about the Kingdom of God as a reality when

people will not see those differences.... Does the family of God speak in terms of racial groups, in terms of ethnic groups, in terms of color? No, it speaks about a whole family of God in a diversity. In a contemporary sense, if we want to speak about a New Creation, Vasconcelos said it in a very secular way, *La Raza Cósmica* (133).

Guerrero is obviously sympathetic to Armendariz's interpretation but presses him further

Vasconcelos established a hierarchy of values with the whites first and the blacks at the end. In his concept of *La Raza* he unintentionally falls into the trap by presupposing that white is superior to black. Would you address that issue? (134)

Armendariz replies: "One cannot get into his life, or understand why he did that. The theme of *La Raza Cósmica* in itself is not racist" (133). Like Guerrero, Armendariz makes a pragmatic decision to focus on the theologically liberating possibilities of *la raza cósmica* rather than on its racist carryover, but this need not be construed as a misreading of Vasconcelos since there is sufficient evidence that Guerrero and his interlocutors are aware of the limitations and contradictions of *La raza cósmica* as a text. Moreover, Armendariz explicitly wants to carry the meaning of *La raza cósmica* beyond Vasconcelos's text, stating: "I would like to tie it with the theme of the New Creation, which I don't think has been done yet" (134).

3.7 *La Raza* as a Symbol of Liberation

Guerrero claims that "the symbol of *La Raza* has a great contribution to make toward the redemption and the salvation of the human race" (135). Again, we see an emphasis on the *spiritual mission* of Chicanos. In the words of Lupe Anguino, who sees the blending of races and cultures as "spiritually significant," the experience of *La raza* and their contribution to the human race "has not been treated adequately by our educational, cultural, and intellectual centers" (135). Guerrero summarizes:

Racially we are all the different colors of people. Economically we are poor in a rich country. Politically we are millions of people but invisible. Culturally we are a combination of four major cultures. Socially we interact with many people who have also been mixed and look like us. Spiritually, because of our *mestizaje*, we have characteristics that encounter and include others (137).

Like Anzaldúa, who tells us that a "mestiza consciousness" must intentionally move "toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than

excludes,”⁴¹ Guerrero draws upon Vasconcelos’s idea of *la raza cósmica* to reject the alleged inferiority of Chicanos and highlights their spiritual mission to “encounter and include others.”

4. Conclusions and Perspectives

In his final chapter, Guerrero sets out “the essential elements of a Chicano theology” derived from an analysis of the experiences of the Chicano/a leaders he interviewed, the religious symbol of Guadalupe, and the secular-religious symbol of *La raza cósmica* in relation to Jesus’s liberating proclamation of “good news to the poor,” “liberty to the captives,” and “freedom for the oppressed” from the Gospel of Luke. Here, I will pass over Guadalupe to focus on *La raza cósmica*, but Guerrero emphasizes that both symbols have been and can be used in both oppressive and liberatory ways.

Paraphrasing Vasconcelos, Guerrero writes: “The mission of *La Raza* is to give rise to people ethnically and spiritually. It is to declare the equality of whites, Blacks, and Indians on (Hispanic) soil” (148). Guerrero also provides his own translation of Vasconcelos to draw a connection between Jesus’s mission and *la misión de la raza cósmica*:

Jesucristo, the author of the major movement of history, who announced love of all men. This love will be one of the fundamental dogmas of the fifth race [*La Raza Cósmica*] which ought to arise in [Latin] America. Christianity liberates and engenders life, because it contains universal revelation, not a national one (149; Guerrero’s brackets).

Next, Guerrero provides his own gloss that draws upon the broader “Chicano oral tradition”: “Vasconcelos ought to have said that these qualities apply to all races of people, not just to *La Raza Cósmica*. A Chicano theology must stress this point in going beyond one race” (148). Guerrero further supports his point by paraphrasing Vasconcelos himself: “If [*La Raza*] should fail to love, it will forfeit its mission of being the seat of a humanity made from all nations and races of people” (148). Once again, we see that Guerrero’s value criterion for the symbol of *la raza cósmica* is its capacity to move us toward both particular and universal loves, without which, we necessarily forfeit our mission.

While discussing what “Vasconcelos ought to have said,” Guerrero also rejects Vasconcelos’s aestheticization of love. He connects Vasconcelos’s message to Luke’s Gospel, but criticizes Vasconcelos for adding: “Life founded on love will reach to express itself in forms of beauty” (149). Guerrero insists: “Chicano theology must maintain that life founded on love will reach to express itself in

⁴¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (The Critical Edition)*, ed. Ricardo F. Vivancos-Pérez and Norma Elia Cantú (Aunt Lute Books, 2021), 149.

forms of justice, equality, and humility" (149). He also critically argues that "when [Vasconcelos] speaks about the third level of social existence, the aesthetic, his real class sentiments and eugenic models are expressed" (149). As an example, he quotes this passage from *La raza cósmica*:

The ugly will not procreate, nor will they desire to procreate. . . .
Poverty, defective education, the scarcity of beautiful types, the misery which causes people to be ugly, all these calamities will disappear from the future states (149).

Just as Guerrero rejects Vasconcelos's aesthetics for racist eugenism—"the ugly will not procreate,"— he also rejects Vasconcelos's aesthetics on the grounds of classism—"the [economic] misery which causes people to be ugly." Vasconcelos here "contradicts the Lukan message of liberation: *los pobres* do not fade away; they are raised up" (149). In contrast, "For a Chicano theology, racism is evil and must be overcome by nonracist models. Our oral tradition provides us with some of these models: cosmicity, *entre la gente*, *mestizaje*, hope, and *liberación*" (150).

This means that Guerrero never treats the symbol of *la raza cósmica* as absolute. Its interpretation and use must be tested against the criteria of love, justice, inclusivity, equality, and the role they play in the process of liberation:

Chicano leaders who recognize the process of liberation can use the symbol of La Raza to strengthen in the people the impulse to break those chains of oppression that keep them terrorized. A Chicano theology must admit the dangers and ambiguities inherent in the symbol and then give direction to reconstruct and re-create more humanizing models of liberation. In giving direction to a Chicano theology the symbol of *La Raza* can be used to denounce the evils of racism and to announce the era of a new humanity in which color is not a determining factor for superiority or inferiority (150).

More simply: "All theology in order to be Christian has to be nonracist; otherwise it is not Christian theology. For the Chicano theologian the hidden danger in using the symbol of *La Raza* is to slip into racism" (153). Many Chicanos call themselves *la raza*, but this act of self-naming can only be truly liberatory if it does not fall into the trap of deprecating or oppressing others. In the words of José Angel Gutiérrez: "*Uno para saber quien es, se dice quien es. Se da su propia identidad*" (153). Guerrero applies this to the cases of other minoritized groups in the U.S.: "Blacks call themselves black in their process toward liberation; American Indians call themselves native Americans" (153). The key is for people to develop a theology from their own experiences of oppression and perspectives on liberation without negating the equal and opposite need to develop, in the words of Tomás Atencio, "a powerful intellectual tool to understand and to be understood by the world community" (152).

In the end, “We cannot separate theology from the experience of a people” (159). As a people who exist “between two worlds: the impoverished and the rich,” Chicanos should “opt for the poor” and align themselves “with the theologies of liberation from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and North American movements—Black, feminist, Asian, and Native American” (159). Existing “in between” or as “mixed” was traditionally understood as negative, but “Chicano theology must take a new positive direction by using *mestizaje* symbolically to reinforce our identity and our positive cultural attributes” (160). Rather than seeing themselves as “stuck in the middle” Chicanos can see themselves as “a bilingual, bicultural people” or “the juncture point at which the two worlds meet” (160).

Guerrero’s impressive methodological achievement was to hold the historically fixed and specific (e.g., Vasconcelos’s philosophical text) together with the evolving and vague (the living oral tradition of Chicano/a leaders) in a productive tension, making *A Chicano Theology* simultaneously scholarly, rooted in the experiences of a people, and politically engaged. Moreover, Guerrero’s creatively critical appropriation of Vasconcelos is itself a philosophically liberating act. *A Chicano Theology* works to transform and unlock the liberatory potential of *la raza cósmica* in a way that demonstrates how the most valuable ideas in a text can be recovered and critically extended by marginalized readers and communities who bring their own experiences of oppression to bear. Guerrero’s act of intellectual and scholarly liberation effectively embodies a theological project that is at once particular to his Chicano identity and universal in its aspirations insofar as he invites other Chicano/a individuals and oppressed groups to respond and contribute to the broader project of *liberación*.

To recapitulate, Vasconcelos’s *La raza cósmica* was generative for a Chicano theology and philosophy of liberation in four ways. First, Chicanos and Chicanas used *la raza cósmica* to articulate a counter-narrative against various forms of oppression they experienced in the U.S. *La raza cósmica* offered a theoretical and practical alternative to the racist Anglo-Saxon rhetoric of Manifest Destiny cloaked in the “scientific” language of Social Darwinism. Second, *La raza cósmica* was used to reframe Mexican American struggles as participating in a cosmic mission of liberation. This insistence on the “cosmic” significance of Chicano experience distinguished Chicano liberation theology and philosophy from a merely ethnic or regional theology and philosophy. Third, *la raza cósmica* contributed to a broader framework for Chicano collective self-identification. The productive vagueness of *la raza* enabled a diverse constituency—e.g., farm workers, students, clergy, poets, academics, politicians, allies, etc.—to coalesce around a new shared identity with more porous racial and economic boundaries, something more like “the human race.” Finally, *la raza cósmica* was used to elaborate a “secular-religious” synthesis. According to Guerrero, this is in fact characteristic of

Chicano/a thinking, which refuses dualisms between theology and politics, philosophy and spirituality, theology and philosophy.⁴²

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