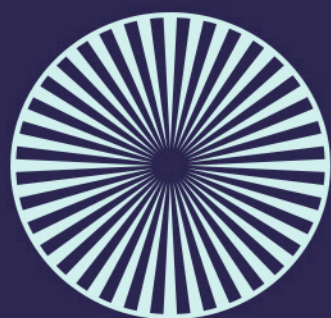


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Carlos Alberto Sánchez
Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr.

Editors

From the Editors

After a brief hiatus, we are pleased to introduce a special double issue of the *Journal of Mexican Philosophy*. Editing a journal is demanding and is more difficult when it is independently operated without a staff, as is the case of our journal. So we are especially grateful to our Editorial Team for helping us get through this rough patch, especially to Manuel Vargas and Clinton Tolley and James Maffie.

The first part our double issue was originally intended to be a special issue of *JMxP*, introduced by our guest editor, Sergio Armando Gallegos-Ordorica. Although no longer a separate issue on its own, the first four papers of Volume 4 were originally presented at UCSD to commemorate the 100th anniversary of José Vasconcelos's birth. As our readers already know, Vasconcelos was one of the most provocative and systematic philosophers of 20th century Mexican philosophy—if not *the* most provocative—and these papers represent the leading scholarship on a philosopher who continues to challenge and provoke us. It is our pleasure to publish this set of papers here.

The second part of our double issue includes two essays: In the first, Suárez Gómez and Imaz argue that Edmundo O'Gorman's concept of historical "invention" develops a philosophy of history according to which historical realities are not simply discovered as fixed facts but are constituted through acts of interpretation and narration, which are subject to change. In the second, Sánchez-Antonio reconstructs the Zapotec philosophical worldview in which darkness and light are complementary primordial forces whose dynamic unity, mediated by vital breath, grounds the structure and ongoing balance of reality. This essay serves in part to help to diversify our knowledge and understanding of indigenous philosophies across the Americas.

In addition to the above two papers, readers will appreciate James Maffie's essay-length review of a new work on Aztec philosophy, *How to Be Grateful: An Aztec Guide to the Art of Gratitude* (Princeton University Press, 2025). We are also excited to introduce what we consider a new genre of philosophical writing: the "book prospective." Give the recent surge of interest in Mexican philosophy, we are also witnessing an increase of the number of translations of Mexican philosophy. However, as anyone who has tried their hand at it knows, translating a text faithfully is a long, laborious effort that can take years—requiring multiple drafts, occasions to test drive the translation, time for friends, colleagues, and students to share their feedback, and so forth. One danger of the amount of time required to translate is that we sometimes discover that more than one of us is working on translating the same text, which conflicts with our aim to make as much of the best Mexican philosophy available in English as possible. In that spirit, we plan to give translators an opportunity to announce their translation to the world—so long as they are

working diligently on it and are far enough along—so that other scholars thinking about translating the same text might choose another or choose to collaborate with those already working on the translation. And, of course, our goal is also to generate some anticipation for the new translation. So, for this issue, we are featuring an in-progress translation of Antonio Caso's *La Existencia Como Economía, Como Desinterés Y Como Caridad* (1943), undertaken Juan Carlos Gonzalez & Alexander Stehn.

We are grateful for all the contributors and hope you enjoy this extended issue of *JMxP*.

The Editors,

Carlos Alberto Sánchez & Robert Eli Sanchez

GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PUBLICATION OF *LA RAZA CÓSMICA*

SERGIO ARMANDO GALLEGOS ORDORICA

La raza cósmica is undoubtedly the most famous and impactful book from the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos. Published in 1925 after Vasconcelos's tenure as Secretary of Education in Mexico's post-revolutionary government, the book has influenced not only various generations of Mexican philosophers but also other scholars in areas such as Latinx and Latin American Studies, Chicanx Studies and Spanish literature in virtue of its philosophical and literary richness. Indeed, *La raza cósmica* is well known for articulating in an enthralling language a compelling—albeit also quite controversial—philosophical vision that threads a narrative of Vasconcelos' journeys and encounters throughout South America (particularly throughout Brazil and Argentina) as a representative and spokesman of Mexico's revolutionary experience, his analysis of the complex relation between the two Americas, his emphasis on the central importance of *mestizaje* (or race-mixing) as a tool to combat white supremacy and his prophetic depiction of a harmonious future of humanity. Because of this, *La raza cósmica* remains today an important work that is often assigned in courses focusing on Mexican philosophy, Latin American history or Chicanx studies. However, despite its enduring popularity, there are still gaps in our understanding of *La raza cósmica*. Some of these gaps are because *La raza cósmica* is often read in a fragmentary manner—only the prologue and the first section on *mestizaje* have been translated into English, and even in Mexico or in other Spanish-speaking countries the book is often not assigned in its entirety in college courses—while other gaps stem from the fact that, though *La raza cósmica* has been widely read by various Latinx and Chicanx scholar-activists and has deeply influenced them, their work has often not been properly engaged with and valued due to persistent racism in academic philosophy circles.

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the publication of *La raza cósmica*, Emiliano Salomón and Manuel Vargas organized, with the support and sponsorship of the

Department of Philosophy of the University of California-San Diego on September 12th and 13th 2025, an international conference that gathered numerous scholars interested in *La raza cósmica* and on Vasconcelos' philosophical legacy. The papers presented at the conference aimed primarily at addressing some of the gaps while also attempting to showcase why some of Vasconcelos' positions and ideas in *La raza cósmica* still remain attractive and fruitful a century after their publication. Considering the deep unity of the papers presented at the conference as well as the insightful ways in which they illuminate previously unexplored aspects of Vasconcelos' thought in *La raza cósmica*, I volunteered to edit and publish a selection of the papers. Given the theme of the papers, the suggestion was made to the editors of the *Journal of Mexican Philosophy*, Robert E. Sanchez and Carlos Alberto Sánchez, to have a special issue of the journal devoted to commemorating the 100th anniversary of the publication of *La raza cósmica* and to further scholarship on Vasconcelos and the complicated philosophical legacy of his most famous book. The resulting special issue of the journal thus displays some of the rich work that was presented at the conference and will hopefully function as a resource for current and future scholars in fields such as philosophy, literature, Latinx and Chicanx studies to have a better and deeper understanding of Vasconcelos' ideas and views in *La raza cósmica*. Here is a summary of the articles in this special issue.

In "From La Raza Cósmica to Aspects of Mexican Civilization: Discrepancies or Continuities in Vasconcelos' thought?", Sergio Armando Gallegos Ordorica offers an interpretation of *La raza cósmica* that involves reading it in juxtaposition to another text authored by Vasconcelos: the three lectures that he offered at the University of Chicago and that were published along with three lectures offered at that same institution by his fellow countryman, the anthropologist Manuel Gamio, under the title *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* in 1926. Gallegos Ordorica contends that, though *La raza cósmica* appears to present at a superficial level the relation between Anglo-Saxon North America and Latin South America as a zero-sum conflict of continental proportions that can only result in one side defeating and dominating the other, a careful reading of *La raza cósmica* together with the three lectures in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* reveals that Vasconcelos views the relationship between the two Americas as crucially marked by a spiritual opposition rather than a material conflict. Because of this, Gallegos Ordorica argues that Vasconcelos really views the two Americas in both works as being capable of transcending in a dialectical fashion their spiritual opposition and, given their similar psychological profiles as well as the common democratic vocations of their respective populations, to build collaboratively a harmonious hemispheric civilization that incorporates the best aspects of each cultural lineage.

Subsequently, in “Imagined communities beyond nationalism: from the Florentine Codex to mestizaje”, Sofía Ortiz Hinojosa presents a characterization of *mestizaje* in *La raza cósmica* as a form of nationalism and situates *La raza cósmica* within a long string of other works produced throughout the history of Latin America from the beginning of the colonial period that exemplify various forms of nationalism. *Contra* Benedict Anderson who argued in his book *Imagined Communities* that nationalism only emerged in the 18th century with the rise of the idea of nation in the social imaginary of various populations, Ortiz Hinojosa defends the view that we find in Mexican—and, more broadly, Latin American—history various examples of works (in particular, Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex*, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora’s *Theatro de Virtudes Políticas*, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s *Neptuno Alegórico*) before the 18th century that articulate forms of nationalism and that Vasconcelos’s *mestizaje* in *La raza cósmica* can be appropriately considered, despite its Pan-American rhetoric, as a form of racial nationalism. Ortiz Hinojosa argues for this claim by showing that Vasconcelos’ *mestizaje*, which echoes some claims of the *criollista* positions articulated by Sor Juana and Sigüenza and which crucially involves a mixed Iberian lineage that brings together other racial groups within the territory of South America, incorporates both elements of a *jus sanguinis* and a *jus solis* into the prophetic vision of the union of the two Americas into an hemispheric nation. Because of this, Ortiz Hinojosa’s essay provides solid evidence that Vasconcelos’ views in *La raza cósmica* demonstrate that Anderson’s conception of nationalism as a product of the 18th century must be revised.

In the third article, which is titled “Hijos de la raza cósmica: a Chicano theology and philosophy of liberation”, Alex Stehn provides an extensive and masterful analysis of how *La raza cósmica* played a crucial role in the development of the vague concept of *la raza* into the central category that structures and animates a vibrant Chicano theology and philosophy of liberation. Focusing on the book *A Chicano Theology* (1987) by Andrés Guerrero—which involves a series of interviews made by Guerrero of nine prominent Chicano/a leaders from the 1960s and 1970s, Stehn shows how Guerrero and his interviewees—which include civil rights luminaries such as Lupe Anguiano, Dolores Huerta and Reies López Tijerina as well as religious figures such as Monsignor Lonnie Reyes and Bishop Gilbert Chavez—relied on some of Vasconcelos’s ideas to articulate a powerful Chicano theology and philosophy of liberation centered on a life of love as the key element to combat successfully racism and to achieve justice, equality and fraternity. In particular, two of the central lessons that Stehn derives from his analysis of Guerrero’s book consist in showing how Guerrero and his interviewees were, on one side, able to use the concept of *la raza* to better understand and voice their experiences of oppression in the US and to devise an effective counternarrative centered on the

notion and the practice of Christian love and, on the other side, also able to use the concept of *la raza* to ground and situate their particular anti-racist struggle as Chicano/as within a cosmic movement aimed at universal human liberation.

Finally, in “How to read *La raza cósmica*”—which is the fourth and final article of the special issue, Guillermo Hurtado offers an exhaustively thorough inquiry of the different discourses that Vasconcelos deploys *La raza cósmica*, showing not only that the book involves multiple discourses but also that these distinct discourses—or discursive levels—interact with each other in subtle ways, sometimes reinforcing a particular claim or view that Vasconcelos stresses and at other times introducing further complexity to a seemingly simple position. In particular, Hurtado distinguishes in Vasconcelos’s book five distinct discourses: (i) a discourse centered on the relationship between the two Americas, (ii) a discourse revolving around the human and geographic potentialities of South America, (iii) a discourse addressing the nature of various distinct races and *mestizaje*, (iv) a discourse offering a philosophy of history and (v) a discourse focused on a series of travel narratives which convey the experiences and encounters that Vasconcelos had in South America. When *La raza cósmica* is read in this fashion—i.e., as an elaborate synthesis of multiple overlapping discourses, Hurtado argues that we can appreciate various things. For instance, one of the key lessons that Hurtado draws from his analysis is that one cannot make sense of why Vasconcelos stressed so much that only the Ibero-American lineage could bring into being the cosmic race in the territory of South America through *mestizaje* and thus usher a higher stage of humanity—which is one of the key ideas of his philosophy of history—if one does not understand his views about the relation between the two Americas and the differences between them. Because of this, Hurtado recommends that, to get a much better grasp of the richness and the complexity *La raza cósmica*, one should not only read the book in its entirety, but also focus on the original 1925 edition.

FROM *LA RAZA CÓSMICA* TO *ASPECTS OF MEXICAN CIVILIZATION*: DISCREPANCIES OR CONTINUITIES IN VASCONCELOS' THOUGHT

SERGIO A. GALLEGOS ORDORICA¹

ABSTRACT: This paper examines an apparent tension between two works by the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos: *La raza cósmica* (1925) and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926). While *La raza cósmica* deploys a rhetoric of struggle and opposition between Latin Americans and Anglo-Saxon North Americans, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* foregrounds complementarity, spiritual kinship, and the potential for mutual collaboration between the two Americas. A superficial reading suggests either a radical change of mind or a case of pandering to an Anglo-Saxon audience. This paper argues for a different interpretation: the collaborative and complementary vision articulated in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is already present in germ in *La raza cósmica*. A close reading of both texts reveals deep structural continuities—particularly the claim that the opposition between Latins and Anglo-Saxons is spiritual rather than material, and therefore productive rather than destructive. The paper concludes that the two works are best read as a single, unified philosophical project and that reading *La raza cósmica* in isolation risks generating a truncated and distorted picture of Vasconcelos' thought.

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina una aparente tensión entre dos obras del filósofo mexicano José Vasconcelos: *La raza cósmica* (1925) y *Aspectos de la civilización mexicana* (1926). Mientras que *La raza cósmica* despliega una retórica de lucha y oposición entre latinoamericanos y norteamericanos anglosajones, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* pone en relieve la complementariedad, la afinidad espiritual y el potencial de colaboración mutua entre las dos Américas. Una lectura superficial sugiere un cambio radical de parecer o un intento de congraciarse con el público anglosajón. Este trabajo propone una interpretación distinta: la visión colaborativa y complementaria articulada en *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* ya está presente, en germen, en *La raza cósmica*. Un análisis detenido de ambos textos revela profundas continuidades estructurales, en particular la tesis de que la oposición entre latinos y anglosajones es de índole espiritual más que material y, por tanto, constructiva en lugar de destructiva. El artículo concluye que ambas

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obras deben entenderse como un proyecto filosófico único y unificado, y que leer *La raza cósmica* de forma aislada conlleva el riesgo de ofrecer una imagen truncada y distorsionada del pensamiento de Vasconcelos.

1. Introduction: A Tension in Vasconcelos' Writings

José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) occupies a singular place in the history of Latin American and Chicanx philosophy. A prolific writer, educational reformer, and public intellectual, he served as Mexico's Secretary of Public Education during the early 1920s, a period of sweeping post-revolutionary cultural reconstruction. His philosophical writings—in particular, *La raza cósmica* (1925)—have exercised a lasting influence not only on Mexican nationalist thought but also on Chicanx intellectual traditions in the United States. As Stehn and Alessandri (2020) have shown, prominent Chicanx feminist philosophers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, whose landmark work *Borderlands/La Frontera* appeared in 1987, drew substantially on Vasconcelos' concept of a cosmic race in developing their own accounts of mestiza consciousness and border identity.

Despite the originality and influence of Vasconcelos' thought, *La raza cósmica* has attracted substantial criticism. Among the problems that some commentators such as Heriberto Yépez (2010) have raised is a charge of serious discrepancies—or, at minimum, a significant tension—between *La raza cósmica* and his subsequent work, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926). The latter text was delivered as a series of lectures at the University of Chicago and addresses many of the same themes as *La raza cósmica*, but in a strikingly different register.

The apparent tension is easy to characterize. In *La raza cósmica*, Vasconcelos portrays Latin Americans and Anglo-Saxon North Americans as locked in a continental struggle for dominance—a struggle that mirrors and extends the prior colonial conflict between the Spanish and the English. He insists that it is imperative for Latin Americans to prevail in this struggle, since only their victory can guarantee the emergence of the fifth or 'cosmic' race, which will synthesize and transcend all previous racial types. In *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, by contrast, Vasconcelos foregrounds not a conflict between the two Americas but rather a mutual complementarity: he stresses the spiritual affinities and the psychological similarities between Latins and Anglo-Saxons, and argues that they can and should collaborate harmoniously in building a hemispheric harmonious civilization in the New World.

This divergence raises a cluster of interpretive questions. Did Vasconcelos fundamentally revise his views between 1925 and 1926? Or was he simply adjusting his rhetoric to suit the expectations of a North American audience at the University of Chicago—what might be called, less charitably, pandering? This

paper aims to answer these questions by examining both texts carefully and in parallel.

My thesis is that neither of these interpretations is correct. Vasconcelos did not fundamentally change his philosophical position between *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, nor did he cynically modulate his rhetoric for an Anglo-Saxon audience. Rather, the collaborative and complementary vision that comes to the fore in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is already present in embryonic form in *La raza cósmica*. The tension between the two works is, on my reading, merely apparent: a product of focusing too narrowly on the rhetorical surface of the earlier text while neglecting the philosophical substance that runs through both. I argue that the two works are best understood as a single, continuous philosophical project, and that reading *La raza cósmica* in isolation—as is the common practice in both academic and pedagogical settings—risks generating a seriously distorted understanding of Vasconcelos' thought.

I proceed in the following fashion. In section 2 I present what many commentators of Vasconcelos take to be one of his central theses in *La raza cósmica*, which is the confrontation and opposition between Anglo-Saxon North America and Latin South and Central America, and I show how an initial reading of *La raza cósmica* supports the claim that Vasconcelos sees this opposition as a fundamentally antagonistic relationship where the inevitable outcome is the subduing of one America by the other. In section 3 I turn to examine *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* and I show that, instead of emphasizing struggle and confrontation, Vasconcelos foregrounds therein complementarity and collaboration between the two Americas. In section 4 I consider in more detail both *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* and I show that, beyond the apparent discrepancies and tensions, there are deep continuities between both texts insofar as they both emphasize that the opposition between the two Americas plays out in the spiritual level and not in the material one. In section 5 I argue that a further sign of the unity between *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is in the fact that they both deploy the same argumentative strategy—namely, the crafting of extended and admiring portraits Latin American leaders who implemented democratic reforms—to show that Latin America has the same democratic potentialities as Anglo-Saxon North America. Finally, I offer in section 6 a brief conclusion that highlights the importance of reading *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* as two moments of the same philosophical project to have a clear understanding of Vasconcelos' philosophy.

2. Vasconcelos' Position in La Raza Cósmica

Any reader who approaches *La raza cósmica* for the first time will quickly encounter a rhetoric of confrontation and opposition. Vasconcelos frames the history of the Americas as a continuation of a centuries-old struggle between two

civilizational lineages—the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon—that has its roots in the colonial rivalries of early modern Europe. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 are invoked as landmarks in a long contest whose American chapter is still being written. Vasconcelos is unambiguous about this historical framing:

Our age became and continues to be a conflict of Latinism against Anglo-Saxonism; a conflict of institutions aims and ideals. It marks the climax of a secular fight that begins with the disaster of the Invincible Armada and gets worse with the defeat of Trafalgar. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 10)

On this picture, the American continent is the theater in which a definitive episode of this long rivalry will be played out. The stakes, for Vasconcelos, are immense. Latin America's unique demographic composition—the fact that all the world's existing racial groups are already present within it—makes it the natural site for the synthesis that will produce the cosmic race. But this possibility is conditional: it can only be realized if Latin Americans put aside their regional and national differences and present a unified front against Anglo-Saxon ambitions for complete hemispheric dominance. The alternative is bleak:

If the Amazon is dominated by the English, either of the islands or the continent, both champions of the pure White, the emergence of the fifth race will be defeated. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 24-25)

The stakes are further clarified by Vasconcelos' vision of what Anglo-Saxon domination of the continent would look like. It is not merely political or economic supremacy of the Anglo-Saxons throughout the continent that he fears, but a racial imperialism that would extend its reach globally:

If the Amazon becomes English, the world metropolis would not be called Universopolis but Anglotown, and the armies would come out of there from there to impose on other continents the stern law of the predominance of the white blond and the extermination of his dark rivals. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, pp. 30–31)

In addition to these passages, the conflict between Anglo-Saxons and Latins emerges in other parts of the book where Vasconcelos contrasts the attitudes of Anglo-Saxons and Latins in the American continent after the revolutions that they respectively mounted against their respective colonial rulers in the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Vasconcelos, despite the American Revolution, the Anglo-Saxons of North America have managed to stay united to their European brethren in a common goal to control the whole continent:

The old colonists of Virginia and New England severed themselves from England, only to grow better and become stronger. Political separation has never been an obstacle for England and her former

colonies to maintain their unity and agreement in regards to the business of their common ethnic mission. Emancipation, instead of debilitating the great race, made it branch off, multiply and spread, all-powerful, over the world, out of the nucleus of one of the greatest empires of all times. Since then, what is not conquered by the English of the Isles fails is taken over and kept by the English of the New Continent. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, pp. 14)

In contrast, Vasconcelos bemoans the provincialist, short-sighted and selfish attitude of most Latin Americans who, with some notable exceptions, lacked a common vision to create a common nation after the Independence wars as well as the will to put aside their differences to unite in the pursuit of a shared goal. This has led, according to Vasconcelos, to a process of “balkanization” of Latin America that has prevented the emergence of a unified Latin American nation that would encompass all of the Latin populations and that would act as an effective bulwark against the imperialistic endeavors of both North American and European Anglo-Saxons:

Despite this firm unity against an invading enemy, our war of independence was limited by provincialism and the absence of transcendental plans. The race that has dreamed of a world empire, that presumed to be the descendants of Roman glory, fell into the puerile satisfaction of creating little nations and sovereign principalities, encouraged by mentalities that saw a wall and not a summit in each mountain range. Our liberators, with the illustrious exceptions of Bolivar, Sucre, the black Petion, and no more than half a dozen others, were dreaming of Balkan glories. The rest, obsessed with the local outlook and a confused pseudo-revolutionary phraseology, simply busied themselves in belittling a conflict that could have been the beginning of the awakening of a new continent. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, pp. 14)

Taken in isolation, these passages strongly suggest that Vasconcelos conceives of the Latin-Anglo relationship across the Americas as fundamentally antagonistic—a zero-sum struggle in which one side must ultimately be subdued. It is this reading that generates the apparent tension with *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*.

3. Vasconcelos' Position in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*

When Vasconcelos delivered his lectures at the University of Chicago in 1926—published that same year as *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*—he introduced what appears to be a substantially different framework for thinking about the relationship between the two Americas. Rather than foregrounding conflict, he emphasizes the spiritual dimensions of the difference between Latin and Anglo-

Saxon cultures and argues that this kind of difference is, far from being a source of irreconcilable antagonism, actually a basis for mutual enrichment and collaboration.

A central move in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is Vasconcelos' distinction between material and spiritual differences. While he acknowledges that significant differences exist between the civilizations of North and South America, he insists that these differences are spiritual in character rather than material. And spiritual differences, he argues, have an entirely different valence from material ones:

It is only material differences that create bitterness and rivalry between men. On the contrary, spiritual differences tend to strengthen human bonds because we derive pleasure from every difference in taste, and every particularity enriches the species. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (2010, p. 47)

This claim—that spiritual differences enrich rather than divide—leads directly to Vasconcelos' positive assessment of the division of the American continent between two distinct civilizational traditions:

The fact that this continent is divided between Anglo-Saxons and Latins must be seen as a blessing because we all yearn for a more elevated and richer spiritual life, and it is only through the labor of particularly talented groups that a type of civilization that encompasses everything can arise. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (2010, p. 48)

Importantly, Vasconcelos does not rest content with emphasizing spiritual complementarity. He also identifies psychological similarities between the two cultures—shared traits that can serve as a basis for genuine communication and understanding across cultural difference. Chief among these shared traits is what he describes as a 'gambling disposition': a taste for risk, a willingness to confront the unknown, a refusal to be governed entirely by calculation and prudence:

Our psychology as a rule is the psychology of a gambler; we gamble with our wealth and with our chances in life; in fact, we even gamble with our lives. A popular saying is frequently applied whenever we hesitate before unknown, possibly unexpected developments: A ver que sale, 'Let us see what comes out of it.' ... A similar psychology can be perhaps traced to the first Yankee miner since nature imposed its influence on the wild and mysterious high plains of the New World. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926, pp. 27–28)

On the basis of these complementary spiritual profiles and shared psychological dispositions, Vasconcelos arrives at his central prescriptive conclusion in *Aspects*

of *Mexican Civilization*: rather than competing, Latins and Anglo-Saxons should adopt a model of cooperation and mutual enrichment:

Instead of the competitive manner of life advocated by the defenders of the pure-race civilization and by the imperialists and conquerors, we shall have to adopt the cooperative, collaborative manner of interracial organization; instead of the struggle for life and the survival of the fittest, a collaboration of all the human efforts for the production of a variety in quality reproduce variations of quality—a salvation brought about by, not through the elect of a certain type more or less strong but through the utilization of every particular aptitude for the purpose of creating superior values. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926, p. 101)

The contrast with the passages quoted in the previous section is striking. Where *La raza cósmica* seemed to insist on the imperatives of conflict and the necessity of Latin victory, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* advocates collaboration, mutual enrichment, and cooperative civilization-building. It is this contrast that motivates the interpretive question this paper addresses: how should we reconcile these two moments in Vasconcelos' thought?

4. Resolving the Tension: Continuities in Vasconcelos' Thought

My central claim is that the tension between *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is, on careful examination, merely apparent. The key to resolving it lies in attending more closely to a passage from *La raza cósmica* that is frequently overlooked by readers who focus on the text's more confrontational rhetoric. In this passage, Vasconcelos articulates a view of opposition and struggle that is quite different from a zero-sum antagonism:

Opposition and fight, particularly when transposed to the realm of the *spirit*, serve to better define the contenders, to take each one to the summit of its destiny, so that they take each opposite to the culmination of its destiny and, in the end, to join them into a common and victorious superiority. Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 21; emphasis added)

This is a remarkable passage, and its significance for interpreting Vasconcelos' overall position can hardly be overstated. What it tells us is that, even within *La raza cósmica*, Vasconcelos does not view opposition as an end in itself or as issuing necessarily in the defeat or elimination of one party by the other. Rather, opposition—when it operates at the spiritual level—is a dialectical process through which both parties are refined, brought to their fullest development, and ultimately synthesized into something higher.

The contrast between material and spiritual opposition is thus not an innovation introduced in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*; it is already operative in *La raza cósmica*, albeit in a less explicit form. Vasconcelos makes this point directly:

If Latin America were another Spain, to the same extent that the United States is another England, then the old conflict of the two stocks would do nothing else but to repeat its episodes on a vaster territory, and one of the two rivals would end up prevailing and imposing itself.

Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 21)

The hypothetical here is crucial: Vasconcelos is not describing the actual situation in the Americas, but a counterfactual scenario that he regards as fortunately inapplicable. Because Latin America is not simply a reproduction of Spain, and because the United States is not simply a reproduction of England, the continental opposition between them does not recapitulate the old material struggle between the colonial powers. It operates at a different—spiritual—level, and this difference is precisely what makes it productive rather than destructive.

This reading is further confirmed by a passage that makes Vasconcelos' collaborative vision explicit even within the context of *La raza cósmica*:

Nevertheless, we accept the superior ideals of the White, but not his arrogance; we want to offer to him, just as we offer to others, a free country where he can find home and shelter, but not an extension of his conquests.

Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1997, p. 31)

The gesture here—acceptance of ideals coupled with rejection of arrogance, and an offer of welcome rather than exclusion—is precisely the gesture of collaboration, not of zero-sum conflict. What Vasconcelos envisions is not the defeat of the Anglo-Saxon but the transformation of the relationship between the two Americas from one of colonial domination to one of mutual recognition and cooperative coexistence. And this future transformation is made possible by the openness of Latin Americans to welcome their northern Anglo-Saxon neighbors, which is underscored by Vasconcelos when he declares: “the advantage of our tradition is that it has greater facility of sympathy toward strangers” (*La raza cósmica* 1997, p. 17). The crux of his project, even in *La raza cósmica*, is collaboration.

5. The Unity of *La Raza Cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*

The argument for the unity of the two works can be strengthened further by attending to sections of *La raza cósmica* that are rarely discussed in the secondary literature (and that have not been fully translated into English): the lengthy passages devoted by Vasconcelos to his journeys through Brazil and Argentina.

These sections, which many readers skip since they are deemed to belong to the register of a travel book instead of a serious philosophical essay, are in fact philosophically important because they pursue a line of argument that is developed further in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*. Both texts make the case that Latin America—despite its troubled history of political instability, coups, and caudillismo—possesses the same democratic potential as Anglo-Saxon North America.

In *La raza cósmica*, this argument is advanced through an extended and admiring portrait of the Argentine president Hipólito Yrigoyen, who is held up as evidence that Latin American political culture can produce democratic leadership of the highest order:

Yrigoyen devoted himself to the government with honesty and tenacity, a masculine tenacity to fulfill his duty and his convictions. But he never used power to annoy or persecute his adversaries. He reformed the legislation, democratized the government, promoted the development of a socialist movement, and he did all this without shedding blood, without exiling anybody, without jailing or harming his adversaries, or abusing of the impunity granted by his position.

Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1948, p. 155-156)

This portrait is not a digression. It is a contribution to a philosophical and political argument showing that the supposed incapacity of Latin Americans for democratic self-governance—a stereotype frequently deployed by Anglo-Saxon commentators to justify paternalism or exclusion, even to this day—is empirically unfounded and ideologically motivated. Vasconcelos is doing, in the idiom of exemplary biography, what a political philosopher might do through argument: he is demonstrating by example that the democratic values associated with Anglo-Saxon political culture are not exclusive to it given that they emerge also in Latin America.

The same strategy is deployed in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, where Vasconcelos turns to the figure of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento—the Argentine statesman, educator, and author of *Facundo* (1845)—as another exemplar of Latin American democratic statesmanship:

Sarmiento devoted all his life to eradicate this militarism, this caudillismo from the Argentine soil. And, after a long, noble struggle, Sarmiento succeeded in gaining control, first, of the educational movement of his country, later, of full power by becoming the president of Argentina. Then, Sarmiento, as president, managed to carry along the policy outlined in his novel years before: the policy of Europeization, the policy of democratization of Latin America as against the policy of the

caudillos that are constantly struggling for personal rule.
 Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926, p. 53)

The structural parallel between these two passages is striking and, I think, deliberate. In both texts, Vasconcelos reaches for the same argumentative form—the portrait of a democratic Latin American leader—to make the same substantive point, which is that democracy is not a culturally specific achievement of the Anglo-Saxon world but a universal aspiration that Latin American civilization is fully capable of realizing.

The argument is stated explicitly in both texts. In *La raza cósmica*, Vasconcelos draws on the Argentinian University Reform movement of 1918 as evidence of the democratic energy latent in Latin American civil society: the students who drove this movement employed not armed revolt but peaceful methods—'strikes, discussion, peaceful protests, the confederacy of faculties and universities for joint action' (1948, p. 159). And in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*, he makes the normative claim directly:

The theory that democracy is good for this country but is not fit for such and such another does not find support in facts. The Argentina of the days of Facundo was as miserable as any of the other caudillo countries, and in only one generation, an enlightened intellectual generation, the whole moral contour of the country was changed. The facility of quick, enlightened change in a Latin American virtue. Democracy is the only form of government fit for any country of the New World. Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* (1926, pp. 73-74)

The implication is clear and philosophically significant: if democracy is the only appropriate form of government for all the nations of the American continent—North and South alike—then the relationship between those nations cannot be one of domination or colonial tutelage but must be one of equality and mutual respect. The collaborative democratic vision of *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is thus grounded in a normative political philosophy that is already implicit in *La raza cósmica*.

6. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that the apparent tension between *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* is, on closer examination, a surface phenomenon. The two texts are not in conflict; they are distinct but complementary moments of a single philosophical project. Several structural continuities link them: both distinguish between material and spiritual differences and assign a positive, productive role to the latter; both present the opposition between Latin and Anglo-Saxon Americas as a form of spiritual complementarity rather than a zero-sum conflict; and both advance the argument that Latin

America possesses the same democratic potential as Anglo-Saxon North America, supporting this claim through portraits of exemplary democratic leaders.

The democratic collaborative vision that comes explicitly to the fore in *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*—the call for a 'cooperative, collaborative manner of interracial organization'—is not a departure from the position of *La raza cósmica* but its natural development and explicit articulation. Read carefully, *La raza cósmica* already contains the seeds of this vision in its insistence that the continental opposition between Latins and Anglo-Saxons is spiritual in character, and that spiritual oppositions are dialectically productive, issuing not in the elimination of one party but in the mutual enrichment and ultimate synthesis of both in a higher form of civilization.

This interpretation has consequences not only for Vasconcelos scholarship but for pedagogy. The common practice of assigning *La raza cósmica* in isolation—in courses on Latin American philosophy, Chicanx studies, or the history of political thought—risks producing a systematically distorted picture of Vasconcelos' thought. Students who read only *La raza cósmica* are likely to come away with the impression that Vasconcelos is primarily a theorist of civilizational conflict very much like Samuel Huntington was, an advocate for Latin victory in a continental struggle. Students who also read *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* will encounter a thinker who is equally, and perhaps more fundamentally, a philosopher of complementarity and collaboration who also defends the shared democratic vocation of all the peoples of the New World.

The works of Vasconcelos should not be read piecemeal. *La raza cósmica* and *Aspects of Mexican Civilization* are not two separate works that happen to share a subject matter; they are, taken together, a single philosophical statement about what the Americas are and what they can become.

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IMAGINED COMMUNITIES BEYOND NATIONALISM: FROM THE FLORENTINE CODEX TO MESTIZAJE

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ABSTRACT: For Benedict Anderson, the idea of a nation is a social imaginary that was also birthed in the 18th century. However, a variety of interesting community concepts in the Americas challenge Anderson's analysis. I argue that despite its Pan-American intent, Vasconcelos's concept of "mestizaje" is a form of nationalism, first by examining one pre-Columbian concept of community, and then by analyzing what I characterize as proto-nationalist antecedents in 17th century colonial New Spain. Finally, I look to widely impactful 19th century ideas. As I will show, each kind of social imaginary influences the next, blurring the boundaries between seemingly distinguishable concepts used to designate groups of people. Thus, "nationalism" is not a phenomenon wholly new to the modern period and, despite its pan-Americanism, Vasconcelos's concept of "mestizaje" is a clear member of a well-populated family of quasi-nationalist concepts in the Americas.

RESUMEN: Para Benedict Anderson, la idea de nación es un imaginario social que surgió en el siglo XVIII. Sin embargo, diversos conceptos de comunidad de gran interés en las Américas desafían el análisis de Anderson. Sostengo que, a pesar de su intención panamericana, el concepto de «mestizaje» que nos ofrece Vasconcelos constituye una forma de nacionalismo; para ello, examino primero un concepto de comunidad precolombino y, posteriormente, analizo lo que caracterizo como antecedentes protonacionalistas en la Nueva España colonial del siglo XVII. Por último, considero ideas del siglo XIX de gran impacto. Como demostraré, cada tipo de imaginario social influye al siguiente, difuminando los límites entre conceptos aparentemente diferenciables utilizados para designar a grupos de personas. Así, el «nacionalismo» no es un fenómeno totalmente nuevo en la era moderna y, pese a su panamericanismo, el concepto de «mestizaje» de Vasconcelos se inscribe claramente en una amplia familia de conceptos cuasinacionalistas presentes en las Américas.

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Introduction: The Paradox of Nationalism

Is the “mestizaje” described by José Vasconcelos a kind of nationalism? In order to understand my answer to this question, we must first examine the concept of nationalism, and then look for antecedents to the concept of “mestizaje” in the intellectual history of Latin America to determine whether they fit within proto-nationalist frameworks. I will argue both that “mestizaje” does have proto-nationalist roots and that they extend back to at least the 17th century. In particular, I argue that 17th-century “Criollismo” serves as a natural proto-nationalist antecedent for Vasconcelos’s “Mestizaje”. This position is in tension with *modernization* theories of nationalism, according to which nationalism arises in the 18th century. I will examine Benedict Anderson’s influential version of modernization theory below, using it as a foil to help make the case for understanding “mestizaje” as a nationalist concept as well as for understanding “criollismo” as its antecedent.

However, this foil will also help me qualify the claim and offer an insight that helps resolve a “paradox” proposed by Anderson, according to which nationalism is, despite being “newer,” both a relatively empty concept and a concept that is treated by communities as if everyone either does have or should have a nationality. I will suggest that paradigmatic nationalist concepts are only a newer member of or an altered expression of a family of older and very robust community concepts rooted in the social imaginary. My view agrees in part with Anthony Smith’s ethno-symbolist theory, according to which modern nationalism has antecedents in ethnic community concepts (Smith 1986; 2009). This helps explain why 18th, 19th, and 20th century forms of nationalism do not feel new to the members of those communities. It also helps explain why “mestizaje” fits among the group of nationalist concepts despite Vasconcelos’ own rejection of phenomena like “exclusively national patriotism” (Vasconcelos 1925: 18).

1. Benedict Anderson’s Constructivist Modernization Theory

In the first and second editions of his groundbreaking 1983 book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, the historian Benedict Anderson contends that, “nationality... as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind,” created “towards the end of the eighteenth century.” This is his *modernization theory* about nationalism. He adds that, “once created, [these cultural artefacts] became ‘modular’, capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.” (2006: 4) So, for Anderson, it is after the

creation of modern nationality that it changes into other recognizably altered forms of nationalism.

Anderson lists what he considers “paradoxes” of nationalism: while nationality is a newer concept historically, it is treated by modern communities as if it were formally universal. That is, they treat it as if everyone does have or should have a nationality. Secondly, despite the concept being philosophically impoverished and even incoherent or “empty” according to many, nationalism has immense political power (ibid.: 5).

Anderson ultimately proposes a *constructivist* definition of “the nation:” “it is an *imagined* political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (ibid: 6).

One strength of constructivism is that it helps make sense of the arbitrary and often mythical boundaries of concepts like nationhood. However, constructivism leaves unclear how to decide when a concept of community is or is not a concept of nation or nationality. What distinguishes different “imagined political communities”? How are concepts of imagined communities like race, ethnicity, nationality, or even tribe-group identity interlinked? In the specific case of Latin America, what makes a “pueblo” like and unlike a “raza”? What makes “mestizo” and “mestizaje” like and unlike “criollo” and “criollismo”?

These questions are especially pressing given that political history has traded between these concepts in ways that suggest deep similarities. However, the questions are difficult to answer given that the scope and nature of the communities denoted by those concepts depend on the social imaginary. They extend beyond mere perception. The concepts are also both normative and material: they determine and are determined by the material conditions that create social reality.

Anthony Smith’s *ethno-symbolist* theory resolves some of the difficulties posed by Anderson’s view, ultimately rejecting the strongest version of modernism about nationalism. “While ethno-symbolists agree with the modernist emphasis on nations as active, purposive sociological communities embedded in particular historical epochs, they differ over the period-isation of nation formation and the role of ethnicity” (Smith 2009: 20-21). We could describe Smith as a constructivist but not a modernist, according to which nations are imagined communities that often base themselves on ethnic symbolism. In his seminal book, *The Ethnic Origins of Nationalism*, Smith argues that nations are processes, not static targets, and that they require ethnic cores and historic homelands – invented or otherwise – in order to survive (Smith, 1986: 212-213). My argument could be regarded as partially extending Smith’s largely Eurasian focused analysis to the Americas. However, I do not necessarily see ethnicities as entities that are

any better-delineated than other community concepts.¹ I also am non-committal about whether ethnicity is indispensable to the formation of nation-concepts. What Smith and I agree on is that modern nationalism was not without substantial historical precedents.

Given the ephemeral nature of the social imaginary, consulting specific sources in the history of a particular region becomes imperative. I will examine a few such sources: the 16th century *Florentine Codex*, with its opinionated descriptions of the ethnic groups known to its Mexica informants; the writings of 17th century polymaths like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, which mark the early origins of Criollismo; the writings of the 19th century “libertador” Simón Bolívar, as he describes himself imagining a future Pan-americanism; and finally, the 20th century writings of José Vasconcelos, proposing his theory of “mestizaje.” I choose these texts not because they constitute a definitive tradition, or because they are exhaustive of the potential literature I could draw on, but because they each feature an emphasis on group identity based on the geography or territory of the Americas, a Spanish American (Criollo) appropriative attitude toward indigenous American history and culture (or, in the case of the *Florentine Codex*, a textual basis for this), and a distinction between this territorial-historical American community identity and peninsular Spanish identity. These are the building blocks Spanish American nationalism. Thus I call the earliest of these forms of proto-nationalism.

But before I analyze these texts, I would like to summarize the specific ways Anderson’s own constructivism proposes that nationalism arises and becomes differentiated from its historical antecedents. In many ways my analysis will agree with Anderson’s. My constructivist angle on nationalism concurs with his, that, “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact ... are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished ... by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 2006: 6). However, Anderson seems sure that many political abstractions now taken for granted were *unimagined* or even *unimaginable* before. For example, he suggests that even the idea of *class* came very late, if at all, to the Old Regime in France.

¹ Smith argues that ethnic communities are founded and distinguished by components including a collective name, a common myth of descent or *mythomoteur* that provides a framework of meaning for the ethnic community, a shared history, a distinctive and shared culture which may not require a shared language, an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity (Smith 1986: 24-30). However, while this does seem like a worthy paradigm for ethnic identity, several of these components are missing in groups we may still be inclined to call *ethnie*; furthermore, the fact that this definition (rightly) allows for ethnic groups to contain ethnic sub-groups or to overlap with each other calls into question whether ethnicity need be fully distinguishable from other group concepts in order to be effective at explaining historical processes of group identification.

What is it that made the “nation” something imaginable when it was previously unimaginable? In his book Anderson argues that the “very possibility of imagining a nation” only arose when three cultural conceptual pillars began to crumble: (i) a belief in linguistic objectivism for a particular, usually religiously, privileged language; (ii) a belief in the essentialism of centralized, dynastic social hierarchy; and (iii) a belief that cosmology and human history were interlinked. These beliefs were replaced in many places by the prioritization of local vernaculars, a sense of fraternity or horizontality among the members of the community, and an idea of “homogeneous, empty time” (ibid.: 24; but here Anderson is quoting Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*: 265). According to Anderson, “the nation” arises out of a kind of vacuum of meaning occasioned by the death or degradation of certain religious beliefs. These religious beliefs had offered redemptive narratives that made sense of fatality, accident, and tragedy and that provided the reassurance of divinely appointed sovereign power. The newly conceived nation is imagined as *sovereign* according to Anderson because the demise of the power and legitimacy of religious autocracy required a substitute, an emblem of quasi-pluralist freedom. Anderson also suggests that despite any real, extant inequalities within it, the nation is always “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (ibid.: 7), that is, as a community. So, to oversimplify: it seems the nation distinguishes itself from other community concepts for Anderson because it fills a vacuum left by the degradation of sacred or religious narratives. It makes sense then that he would find this occurring in a distinctive fashion in the modern era.

Print-capitalism plays a major role as catalyst for these changes according to Anderson. Anderson argues that expanding access to print made phenomena like the novel and the newspaper possible, and it is these artifacts that accelerated the process of forming a national consciousness. His book covers fascinating examples from around the globe. Novels and newspapers allowed readers to imagine otherwise unmentioned others as fellow-readers and community members, the subjects of depicted events, or sufferers of described and shared injustices. They also further helped erode identification with a sacred imagined community, like Catholicism, which (in 16th century novellas like *Lazarillo de Tormes* and 19th century novels like *El Periquillo Sarniento*, for example) could be criticized in print publications. Further on I will argue print-capitalism was not the only way to foment a national consciousness.

Anderson does not claim that print-capitalism arose from nowhere. He describes some of the conditions that predated the rise of print-capitalism which also contributed to the forming of a national consciousness. For example, he describes the rise of administrative vernaculars as contributing to the erosion of religious community identity. But Anderson adds the caveat that, “[N]othing

suggests that any deep-seated ideological, let alone proto-national, impulses underlay this vernacularization where it occurred" (ibid.: 55).

He offers similar caveats for thinking that other contributing factors to secularization and anti-dynastic sentiment were sufficient for nationalism, such as the Reformation, growing Enlightenment belief in the impacts of climate and ecology on local culture and character, Liberalism, and even economic factors and interests beyond that of print-capitalism. Instead, for Anderson these were just precursors to the eventual and definitive fertile ground of phenomena like print-capitalism.

In the case of the Americas, Anderson proposes that another definitive fertile ground for nationalism was administrative architecture, an awareness of the difference between the "metropole" and the "province" fueled largely by what he calls "administrative pilgrimages" by "creole functionaries" (ibid.: 65). Indeed, in a chapter dedicated to Creole nationalisms in the Americas, Anderson concludes, "What I am proposing is that neither economic interest, Liberalism, nor Enlightenment could, or did, create in themselves the kind, or shape, of imagined community to be defended from these regimes' depredations ... In accomplishing this specific task, pilgrim creole functionaries and provincial creole printmen played the decisive historic role" (ibid.: 65).

Despite Anderson's breathtaking analytic scope and world-historical sensitivity, I believe he overlooked or understated the impact of the history of ideas on the origins of national consciousness (see, for example, Brading 1973; 1991). While it is true that Spain's chopping-up of its imperial territories and prohibitions on inter-American trade had enormous and lasting impacts on Spanish American nationalism, this was not simply because of "pilgrim creole functionaries" or the very late appearance of the novel and newspaper in Latin America. Instead, other public writing and artwork, like historical narratives, popular religious drama, popular religious choral compositions like *villancicos*, and even triumphal arches could be ways to disseminate proto-national identities and create an imagined community. I will discuss such examples in a moment.

Moreover, these imagined communities are national or proto-national while not seeming directly opposed to dynastic hierarchy (in the case of Sor Juana and Sigüenza y Góngora) or fully embracing secularism (in the case of Vasconcelos, Sor Juana, and Sigüenza y Góngora). For example, as I will argue, Criollo patriotism is proto-nationalist without being especially secular or republican. I will also argue that Vasconcelos' concept of "mestizaje" is nationalist without being secular, and that Vasconcelos defies Anderson's requirement for the nation as an imagined community that replaces "steady, solid simultaneity through time" with another idea of time. Instead, Vasconcelos goes out of his way to create a historical-cosmological narrative of his own. In what follows, I'll begin by sampling some community concepts from the Americas that predate "Criollismo," and then move

into the middle colonial period and beyond. I will discuss Simón de Bolívar's pan-American vision as a modern update on Criollo patriotism: while it seems to meet the conditions of Anderson's definition of nationalism, it is also supra-national, intending to link together many communities under one concept. The last concept I will analyze is Vasconcelos's "Mestizaje." I will argue that "Mestizaje" adopts features of each of these highlighted precedent concepts, while directly challenging Anderson's preferred analysis of nationalism. Vasconcelos' vision is essentialist, non-secular, and embraces a cosmological narrative rather than homogeneous "empty" time.

The upshot of my analysis is that the boundaries of ethnic, racial, and national concepts of community are blurred and often continuous with each other, not unlike the imaginaries, populations, and material circumstances that construct them. This is why nations and nationality can feel perennial or even primordial, as if they were basic aspects of someone's identity, and also why we can coherently claim nations existed prior to the advent of modernity.

2. From the Florentine Codex to Mestizaje

A) Mesoamerican Antecedents: The *Florentine Codex*

How did pre-Columbian communities sort themselves into groups? We can find strong hints in early colonial documents that although imaginary communities in Mesoamerica were classified according to cultural hierarchies, these were not generally based on phenotypes or even on religious beliefs. In the 16th century manuscript often referred to as the *Florentine Codex*, we find Náhuatl-language descriptions of central Mexican peoples from the perspective of opinionated Mexica. As anthropological historian David Tavárez details, in Book 10, Chapter 29, these Mexica sorted peoples or *tlaca* according to a cultural hierarchy, but did not use phenotypic markers as indicators of relevant difference (Tavárez 2025). (The one exception: an acknowledgement in a bone-chilling passage that Spaniards preferred to rape lighter-skinned indigenous women). For example, while the Mexica interviewed in the *Florentine Codex* classified the more rural Otomi and Huasteca peoples as the lowest on their cultural totem pole, especially when it came to taste in fashion and even level of intelligence, they appraised some non-Mexica groups as wealthy or as skilled at hunting or farming. The Mexica also sorted people into speakers of Nahuatl and then *popoloca*, or barbarous peoples. According to this text, all these peoples shared an origin story: these peoples all used to be nomadic *Chichimeca*, and so (except for some easterners like the Olmeca, Huixtotin, or Nonohaulca) were all the same *tlaca*, the same "people." In Book 1 and Book 10 of this same *Codex*, the Nahuatl speaking peoples trace their origins to *Chicomoztoc*, the place of the seven caves. So, while

the Mexica had definite ethnocentric biases, their social categories were not *racial*.

Tavárez points out that several groups otherwise known to the Nahuatl are notably absent from this chapter of the *Florentine Codex*, despite its claim to describe all settlers and founders of cities “who dwelt everywhere here in the land” (Tavárez 2025: 4). Its authors do not mention the Zapoteca or Maya peoples, for example, but they do, curiously, mention the Mixteca. Tavárez does not speculate on this absence much in his article, but one wonders whether perhaps the Mexica had a linguistic or geographic idea of the span of a Nahuatl “nation,” akin to what an ancient Greek might understand as a Hellenic one, a division between “us” and “not-us,” between “ours” and “not-ours.” The Mexica seem to embrace a linguistic ethno-nationalism. They claim the Toltecs as their Nahuatl ancestors because of Toltec use of a Nahuatl dialect. The Mexica contributors to the *Florentine Codex* also disparage the Otomi, whom they displaced when they moved into the Valley of Mexico, and who speak an Oto-Manguean language related to Zapotec and Mixtec.

So shared history and language, but not phenotype, are core to the *Florentine Codex* Mexica’s concept of their *tlaca*. Arguably the Mexica’s concept of their *tlaca* or people fits Anthony Smith’s definition of an *ethnie*, a concept he sees as a building-block of nationalism (Smith 1986). Tavárez remarks at the opening of his article that the, “contemporary emphasis on hybridity and mestizaje ... minimizes how Indigenous people in Mesoamerica conceptualized their own identities through an emphasis on different cultural practices, historical origins, and languages before and after the Spanish conquest” (ibid.: 1). I agree. That said, the historical precedent for this ignorance was laid not long after alphabetized Nahuatl documents like the *Florentine Codex* were produced. Indeed, these very documents would serve as sources for subsequent developments in the concept of Mesoamerican identity. Next I will examine the output of one 17th century luminary who championed an early but strikingly developed form of *Criollismo*, a Spanish-colonial-era form of proto-nationalism.

B) Colonial Nations: Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and Triumphal Arches

Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (1645-1700) is a fascinating and multi-talented figure. His most lasting influence has perhaps been in his zealous collecting of and protection of early indigenous-language documents and pre-Conquest indigenous history, and his related theorizing about the historical ancestors of indigenous American peoples. In short, Sigüenza y Góngora is one of the earliest and most influential of the Criollo “patriots” (Brading 1973), individuals of Spanish ancestry born in New Spain who championed new concepts of belonging in the Americas. Sigüenza’s Novohispanic patriotism harmonized, in his view, with his efforts to study indigenous American history.

In Sigüenza y Góngora's 1680 mixed-media triumphal arch piece to celebrate the arrival of a new Viceroy, Tomás de la Cerda, he went out of his way to criticize the reliance on classical myth and allegory in celebrating important figures and for providing moral models to serve as *mirrors for princes*. Sigüenza argued instead for the importance and relevance of describing real, historical leaders to use as models (see Gallegos Ordorica 2024). Which were Don Carlos's preferred models for the incoming Viceroy? Why, the pre-Conquest rulers of the Mexica, of course! After all, the Viceroy of New Spain was only the latest head of a long line of Mexican leaders.

Sigüenza y Góngora's contemporary, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695), was also commissioned to create a Triumphal Arch: however, even though she chose the god Neptune as her model for the new Viceroy to emulate, Don Carlos went out of his way to try to vindicate her choice. Why would this not fall under Don Carlos' criticism of using myth and fantastical allegory as a model? Well, Don Carlos tells us, citing his sources throughout, this is because the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas are descended from the people of the sunken city of Atlantis. He seems to identify the island-city Aztlán that was said to be the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs with the island-city Atlantis from Platonic myth. The 16th-17th century *Codex Azcatitlan* traces the ancestry of the rulers of Tenochtitlan to Aztlan. Certain colonial-era historians in turn identified or associated Aztlan with the Chicomoztoc of the *Florentine Codex* and of the *Historia Tolteca-Chicimeca*. Atlantis, moreover, was the rightful domain of the god Neptune. (Sigüenza y Góngora takes pains to derive the name Neptune from the Biblical "Nephthium" to avoid un-Christian upshots). In short: for Sigüenza it turns out Sor Juana's choice of emulable leader is *also* proper to the history of the Americas.

This outlines a mythology that will still be adopted as true by José Vasconcelos almost 250 years later.² According to this mythology, on the one hand, the native people of the Americas share a kind of ancestry with the Europeans, in that they all originated in a fabled ancient Mediterranean metropolis. On the other hand, these American peoples are in a way also a separate race. The people of Atlantis, the Platonic myth goes, traced their ancestry to Egypt, a third, more mysterious and more ancient civilization than either the Greek or the Roman.

Another significant aspect of Sigüenza's Triumphal Arch piece is that Sigüenza signs its first main section with the words, "the city of Mexico by everyone's vows ... erected this the 30th of November of the 353rd year since the founding of Mexico," (*"la ciudad de México con los votos de todos... puso el día treinta de*

² This might qualify as the kind of *mythmoteur* or constitutive political myth that Anthony Smith identifies as the heart of ethnicist community identity, should we choose to classify "Americans" as an ethnicity newly invented by Criollo ideology (Smith 1986: 58).

noviembre del año 353 de la fundación de México,") using Mexico's indigenous founding as its formal age. He does not list the years since the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan or even the current year on the Gregorian calendar. This further underscores Sigüenza's opinion that the Viceroy and the Viceroyalty are continuations of, and not substitutions for, pre-Hispanic Mexico. It also explains why he chooses pre-Conquest Aztec leaders as his princely models. He is telling the Viceroy: learn about *our* history, which is now *your* history. Now: who is this "our"?

Sigüenza refers to his community as, "*nuestra Nación Criolla*" (Sigüenza y Góngora 2005 [1680]: 17), "our Creole Nation." Thus Mexico is simultaneously a "nation," a specifically indigenous nation with an indigenous history and distinguished indigenous leaders, and a "Creole" nation. Each of these words is consequential. Sigüenza does not call it a Spanish nation! He is also not suggesting that the Creole nation is new (it is at least 350 years old) or that its composition requires or presupposes a mixing of races.

How can we understand the invocation of a "Creole Nation" here? I suggest the emphasis turns out to be on the territory and how its history unites all people born in the Americas. *Criollo* is someone who is *raised*, who is "*criado*," in the new land. So for Sigüenza, Criollismo, and Creole patriotism, must mean an embrace of a protean *jus soli*, a right to national belonging based on being born in or belonging to a specific land. It is telling that *jus soli*, or birthright, is *the* common way of defining citizenship across the Americas (Price 2024). Although Criollismo appropriates indigenous history and culture as part of this territorial identity, its proposed community is not defined by blood (which would imply a hereditary right to national belonging, *jus sanguinis*) or by racial mixture.

Naturally, because Sigüenza and his compatriots are used to dynastic rulership and to citizenship as defined by a relationship between subjects and rulers, Sigüenza moves to politically link New Spanish viceroyalty to the pre-Conquest Tenocha dynasty. Such a model of citizenship or national identity, while imaginable elsewhere, appears somewhat unique to this particular colonial context.

Sigüenza acknowledges others as belonging to his community when he says any defects in understanding the Mexican past are "ours, because while we all pride ourselves on being lovers of our fatherlands, what is known about them is owed to foreign pens." ("*[E]l defecto es nuestro, pues cuando todos nos preciamos de tan amantes de nuestras patrias, lo que de ellas se sabe se debe a extranjerías plumas*" (Sigüenza y Góngora 2005 [1680]: 17)). Sigüenza draws a clear contrast between "ours/we/us," that is, American-born nationals, and foreigners, like the explorers who have written travelogues about the Americas, missionaries who have interviewed inhabitants, or even collectors of curiosities like Athanasius Kircher.

To make my point about Sigüenza's relevance to Anderson brief, the link between Sigüenza's Creole nationalism or proto-nationalism has nothing to do with Sigüenza's particular status as a functionary, nor with his or the Viceroy's pilgrimage. The geographic separation between the Americas and Spain, coupled with the Spanish disdain for American-born criollos, had clearly been enough by 1680 to have fostered a national consciousness separate from the Spanish one. The Criollo movement had already sought, through figures like Sigüenza, to link itself to – and often appropriate – indigenous American history and through this history to an ancestral territory (for an extensive analysis of other Criollo patriots and their interest in indigenous histories, see Brading 1973).

Another important facet of this particular example is that both Sor Juana's and Sigüenza's triumphal arch pieces were *intended to be viewed by and consumed by the public*, in a shared public space within a shared time-range, and not just for the incoming viceroys. The formal presentation of the arch likely involved a public lecture, public viewings for several weeks or months, and related public spectacles like a military march. No print-capitalism needed!

All of this was deliberately intended to create, not just a guide to virtue for the incoming ruler, but a shared political community. Sigüenza knew that by presenting historical Mexica rulers to his audience, he would be including not only fellow Criollos but also an indigenous public, and evidently also mestizo participants, urging everyone to see themselves as subjects of the Spanish crown. But even though Sigüenza's choice of princely model was appropriative and self-serving, it is nonetheless still subversive: the people gathered in that public square were not being urged to *see themselves as Spanish*, but instead to see this new aristocratic Spaniard as if he were, or were becoming, a *newly naturalized Mexican*.

C) Colonial Communities: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Unifying Spectacle

The work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz exhibits Criollismo of a similar stripe to Sigüenza's, although a bit more subdued. Sor Juana's prologue *Loa* to her sacramental play *Divine Narcissus* features indigenous characters defending themselves against invading and evangelizing Spaniards, who eventually, persuaded that their own religion has similarities with the Spanish one, ask to be told more about Christianity. Thematically Sor Juana's dialogue resembles Sahagún's 16th century *Aztec-Spanish Dialogues*, a bilingual reimagining or recounting of a genuine early colonial interaction between Franciscan missionaries and Nahuatl leaders. Sor Juana includes a *tocotín* or Nahuatl-style drum song in her prologue play.

One reason this piece appears to be a product of Criollismo is that at the end of the prologue play Sor Juana uses both the indigenous character *America* and the Spanish character *Religion* as her authorial mouthpieces: that is, she identifies

with *both* the Native American woman and with the woman representing her profession. As they address the audience, each of these two characters seems to talk as if they're the author of the main play, *Divine Narcissus*. It is as if Sor Juana has already embraced a hybridized American identity, foreshadowing Vasconcelos' centering of mestizos and mestizaje.

More strikingly still, an early scene in the main play has the character "Human Nature" adjudicating a debate between her children or subjects, named Synagogue (an allegory for Abrahamic religion) and Gentility (an allegory for paganism), who are arguing over which one really grasps the truth. Human Nature concludes that both have the right intention, but that Synagogue worships the true god, while Gentility confuses what is apparent and what is real. (Human Nature adds, however, that Gentility may have the truth again in the end). In order to reconcile the two, Human Nature also proposes to write the play that follows, using the "sense" or style of one and the "meaning" of the other. This conciliatory syncretism reflects Sor Juana's choice to write an allegory for the Eucharist using the Greek – pagan – myth of Narcissus: Narcissus will stand as an allegory for Jesus Christ, with the role of his reflection being played by Human Nature. Here Sor Juana embraces a kind of religious symbolic syncretism as a vehicle for endorsing universalism about truth and moral goodness, suggesting all rational cultures have equal access to it.

This religious syncretism as universalism joins hands with an assertion of human racial moral equality. The character of Human Nature is described as having dark skin, echoing the passage in the *Song of Songs*, "though I am black, I am beautiful..." (Solomon 1:5). The main play's prologue play suggests that Human Nature's skin tone is that of the indigenous American people. *Divine Narcissus* concludes when Jesus-as-Narcissus sees Human Nature (purified by Grace, an allegory for Mary) as his mirror image and falls in love with her to such an extent that he chooses to sacrifice himself for her sake. The spurned and white-skinned nymph Echo, an allegory for Lucifer, looks on, consumed with jealousy; she was rejected for her prideful love of her own and Narcissus's surface level beauty more than what is truly beautiful. Thus Sor Juana seems to reject a racist logic that would exclude non-white believers from Christian redemption. In her Platonist vision, God is goodness, and therefore, virtuous people can hail from any race so long as they embrace Christian belief.

Just like with Sigüenza's arch, Sor Juana's play is, counter-intuitively, not written to convince Mexicans to submit to Spain or Spanish religion. Sor Juana tells us in the prologue it is meant to be *performed in Madrid*. It is meant to bring Mexico to the Spaniards! Perhaps the play was meant to show a hypothetical Spanish audience the value of Mexican culture and even appearance, perhaps to convey that human nature is universal, and that the souls of indigenous people, just like Spanish souls, are genuine reflections of God.

This is not a nationalist or even proto-nationalist sentiment in a traditional sense (although see Brading 1973, who argues thematically similar texts by other Spanish Americans were reactions to anti-Criollo and anti-American prejudice in Europe). But it is certainly suffused with the pride and defiance of a voice that knows itself as *other* to Spain and the Spanish crown. Also, just like Sigüenza's arch, Sor Juana's plays are a genre that was typically performed in public before large crowds during religious celebrations. Here, she wanted the Spanish public to be witness to another one. She is announcing this nascent nation to them by means of a shared spectacle.

Sor Juana also sometimes promotes Criollo public consciousness within pieces performed in her own city. Her *villancicos* are key examples of this. These choral poems or songs are composed for religious events, and intended for popular participation: unlike Church ceremonies, which were always in Latin, *villancicos* tended to be in one or more of the public vernaculars. They also tended to be comical or light-hearted. Accordingly, we have Sorjuanian *villancicos* in Spanish, Spanish-Latin, pidgin Portuguese, and even (admittedly spotty) Náhuatl and Afro-Mexican vernacular Spanish. Different groups function as mouthpieces to contribute theological questions, to provide meditations on the theme of the day, and to offer responses to the questions posed. This shared public performance both helped to humanize arcane Catholic dogma and ritual and to offer a bridge for each group to feel included or understood (Gallegos Ordorica 2026).

This shared experience of song and worship was intended to create a shared consciousness and sacred community. Sor Juana, of course, often offers ironic barbs and dramatic contrasts in her *villancicos* that reveal the unrealizability of this endeavor: an uppity student priest who speaks only in Latin comically fails to make himself understood to a commoner; enslaved Black singers plead to the Virgin Mary to advocate for them so they will be free in Heaven; Náhuatl speakers use Nahua religious imagery to worship Mary; at times there are punches-up to authority or the wealthy, or even to a second racial-caste group.

This chorus of voices composes a shared experience, if not necessarily a shared set of identities. But this is Sor Juana reflecting the world around her. The songs she writes are *quintessentially* Novohispanic. They evoke that particular time and that particular place, all at the same time, for anyone listening to them. Because many groups are represented and even lightly satirized, with the main target of criticism being common tragedies of terrestrial and colonial life like hunger, group misunderstanding, and unfreedom, everyone could feel a sense of membership in the community. The 1600s have their own way of producing a "shared consciousness" that Anderson attributes to print-men, newspapers, novels, and print-capitalism in the late 18th century.

D) Bolivar's 19th Century Pan-American Vision

In both the *Letter from Jamaica* and the *Angostura Address*, Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) envisions a future, sovereign, unified pan-American nation. Bolívar's vision is in many senses a Criollo vision: pan-Americanism is only imaginable if one takes, as he does, the shared history of Spanish colonialism as a catalyst for unity. Bolívar refers to Spain as a “parent” to the new nation, in just the way generations of philosophers and historians in the region have. Nonetheless, Spain was a bad and abusive parent, and Bolívar has countably few positive words for inherited Spanish culture. (If anything, he has seemingly adopted the widespread impression of Spanish inferiority relative to other European nations like Britain and France).

Bolívar's vision is not racial. At least, he endeavors to embrace the idea of politically uniting, through emancipation and secular republicanism, groups as diverse as rural indigenous tribes, the formerly enslaved, and wealthy urban Creoles. Bolívar casts the new nation as an assertion of a right to independent self-rule. He also casts the nation as both the birth of a new, ideal future and new *identity* for the people of the region: a self-actualization.

What sort of new identity will the new nation house? Bolívar does not go as far as to imagine that this future requires a particular kind of racial miscegenation or racial overcoming. Instead, the bogeyman is the alleged unvirtuous character of the barbarous – Bolívar uses the word “slavish” – people of the region. But Bolívar's is a genealogical and geographic, rather than genetic, explanation, for this character. It is the rugged land, it is the acculturation to servitude, and the lack of independence previously afforded to the people of the Americas that make them inadequate to the immediate adoption of the freest forms of government, he reasons. As Montesquieu had posited, the character of a government must suit the character of its subjects, which delimits what is possible. (Which is the freest form of government? Bolívar thinks it is the one adopted by the United States. Apparently, Anglo-Americans have more greatly enjoyed autonomy prior to their independence, alongside some other advantages, and thus possess greater virtue).

So far this seems to accord with Anderson's understanding of nationality as a secular solution to the degeneration of religious beliefs and community. However, Bolívar's vision is far from embracing homogeneous, empty time, or even from delimiting the boundaries of his imagined future community: instead he waxes poetic about the manifest destiny of the continent, to allegedly unite all peoples while also enabling a cultural apotheosis.

At the same time, Bolívar's vision has clear links to the Creole consciousness of Sigüenza and Sor Juana's time. He separates the Spanish American nation and its future from that of its Anglo-American counterpart: therefore the unifying core of his community is its Criollo background. Also, with Sigüenza and Sor Juana, for Bolívar, the public is a diverse mass. Its diversity is an opportunity, but it is also a potential undoing. The cacophony of disagreement and misunderstanding,

coupled with the lack of urbane, metropolitan experience, threatens the community's cohesion at every turn. Bolívar's attempted strategy to preempt such natural dissolution was to impose a highly centralized and even authoritarian structure on his proposed new republic, with himself at the helm. The attempt to create unity by sheer force of will failed. Bolívar's vision of a united Gran Colombia was too idealized. I would argue the vision was, not unlike the Jesuit and Vasconcelos case, too detached from local realities, local vernaculars, and localized cultures.

At the same time, Bolívar's seems like a natural candidate for a truly nationalist imaginary. His *Angostura Address* directly aimed to forge a new nation. His *Jamaica Letter* anticipates this through a kind of pure imaginative vision. His nationalism carries a pan-American flavor, which reflects his ambitious dream to create a unified pan-American nation. This suggests Bolívar's supra-nationalism is just one of a variety of forms nationalism can take. Bolívar's vision still captures minds and hearts today, even though the sentiment has not yielded lasting and truly shared popular consciousness.

E) José Vasconcelos's Pan-American Racial Nationalism

José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) proposes a vision of the future for the Americas that is more racialized than any of the imagined communities presented so far. For Vasconcelos, the future will be catalyzed by widespread miscegenation, in a process that will create the ideal, mixed-race citizens of tomorrow, possessing the virtues of each of its hereditary parts: *mestizos* will exemplify the ideal future for the Americas. In Vasconcelos's opinion, a Mestizo nation is made possible by its Iberian (and Catholic) ancestry, which is capable of embracing rather than rejecting differences.

Vasconcelos seems to consciously mix the concept of Mestizo-as-Criollo with the Pan-American ideology he praises in Bolívar, while rejecting Bolívar's anti-Iberian sentiment. (Vasconcelos also mixes his ideology with the social Darwinist theory he otherwise claims to despise in Herbert Spencer and other positivist racial essentialists). For Vasconcelos, Mestizos are only the next in line to hold natural racial dominance, following a cycle that had previously upheld white European, indigenous American, and other racialized groups as dominant.

Vasconcelos is explicitly racist against indigenous peoples in a way that both outdoes and defies the Criollo's more typical appropriative attitude toward indigenous culture. Vasconcelos praises the same mythical Atlantean past that Sigüenza y Góngora championed – intending, not to laud contemporary indigenous Americans in a well-meaning but ignorant way like Sigüenza, but to deprecate them – while he also refers to extant indigenous nations as being in decline. Vasconcelos' teleology for *mestizaje* requires that all indigenous American people belong to one "race" and that this "race" has already peaked in

the past. Vasconcelos ignores all historical evidence that most indigenous Americans do not have origin stories that resemble the Mexica's and dismisses out of hand the Bering Strait theory for the population of the Americas. He also contradicts himself in citing an earlier "mestizo" origin story for the Atlanteans in Egypt, perhaps clumsily trying to tie ancient Egyptian civilization's success to mestizaje, before returning to his stage-based teleological explanation of racial dominance.

Vasconcelos's pro-Iberianism is all but synonymous with his anti-US sentiment. In his view, championing indigeneity is a mistake, partly because for him, indigenous cultural success and indigenous American reality is so far in the past that it is unlikely to be useful in countering the "Saxons;" for Vasconcelos, Indigenists, who see the future for the Americas in indigenous terms, are selling falsehoods. For Vasconcelos, the future for the Americas requires reconciling with and embracing a *Spanish* identity.

It is not a mystery that Vasconcelos flip-flops between this essentially Spanish ethno-nationalist angle – more extreme even than colonial-era Criollismo, which had at bottom a quiet suspicion of Spain and Spanish parentage – and the ideal of "mestizaje." In the same breath Vasconcelos attacks individual nationalisms in the Americas and yearns for a new appreciation of Iberian culture.

For Vasconcelos, *la raza cósmica* is quintessentially *Iberian*. Vasconcelos does not say this explicitly, but as is suggested extensively in his discussions of Roman and Egyptian white-leaning mestizaje, the Iberians are already mestizos themselves, even by the time of the Conquest! "The Saxons," by contrast, seek white racial purity. This is why the Iberian "race" is the proper "bridge" to the eventual dominance of the "cosmic race." Spanish Americans thus have both the *jus sanguinis* or a right by blood and sovereignty over the future *mestizo* paradise, the *jus soli* or right by birthplace.

But for Vasconcelos, none of this apotheosis will be achievable while Hispanic Americans deny or dislike their Spanish ancestry. Spanish ancestry is, as it is even with Bolívar's vision, one of the key *unifiers* of the Americas as one super-nation. (The other is Catholicism: Vasconcelos blames under-conversion of Asians to their lack of incorporation thus far into the *mestizo* racial mixture).

What is the core point? Vasconcelos' *mestizo* vision is clearly a direct evolution of the Criollo concept, taking on the preoccupations and biases of his particular time and perspective. While Bolívar admires the United States and resents Spain, Vasconcelos sees the aggressively capitalist, imperialist, and wealthy United States as a far greater threat than the now much less empowered Spain. Even US culture is a threat, as its positivist scientific ideas, which for Vasconcelos likely represent the repugnant ideals of the Porfiriato, lure young people and businesses to friendliness and obsequiousness toward the United States. Vasconcelos

identifies Catholicism, a clear legacy of Spanish culture, as the needed anti-positivist remedy for pro-US sentiment and the prior failure of pan-Americanism.

3. Imagined Communities Beyond Nationalism

Now I will return to the question of whether Vasconcelos' "mestizaje" is a form of nationalism, using Anderson's theories as a foil. Then I will revisit the question of whether the modernization theory of nationalism is true for the Americas.

It is important to reiterate that I reject Anderson's at times univocal characterization of nationalism. Vasconcelos's *mestizaje* seems to me a clear form of ethno-nationalism. Despite Vasconcelos's anti-nationalist and pro-universalist protests to the contrary, his teleological race miscegenation theory clearly appears to be a substitute form of nationalism rather than a true universalism. We can see in its Bolivarian and colonial antecedents that "the nation" as conceived in the Americas frequently transcends both political boundaries imposed by the Spanish crown and the challenges of complete integration. What is even more important is that Vasconcelos's *mestizaje* was more or less adopted, only slightly sanitized, by the Mexican state, in a form of "official nationalism."

Another aspect of Anderson's characterization of nationalism involves a temporal flavor. Anderson suggests the novel and newspaper contributed to the creation of a "nation" concept because both present a kind of homogeneous *now* shared by everyone reading that particular publication or in that local vernacular, something allegedly unimaginable before print-capitalism. Anderson contrasts this with how, in medieval times, ancient people were often depicted in the same garb as their depictees, obscuring the separation between the "now" and the past.

Finally, before we turn to Vasconcelos again, Anderson's characterization of nationalism emphasizes its secularism. Recall that for Anderson, the nation-concept replaces spiritual and religious cosmological predestination, spiritual community, and religion-based dynasticism as sovereignty with secular mythologies and often local, vernacular-language-based, fraternal and horizontal community concepts.

In contrast Vasconcelos goes out of his way to create a historical-cosmological narrative that centers and lionizes his future imagined "mestizo" race. Vasconcelos' vision is also firmly non-secular. He celebrates the potential Christianization of the world as synonymous with its universalizing empathy, and predicts its fulfillment in this successfully evangelized and evangelizing imaginary "mestizo" community of the future. In Vasconcelos's early 20th century vision, modernization and industrialization are but an intermediary stage in an eventual cultural apotheosis. This is almost an inversion of the much more secular but equally teleological Comtean positivist version of the same.

It just doesn't seem to me that Anderson's analysis about the origins of nationalism is poised to deftly handle battles between competing kinds of

nationalist movements: in Mexico, the dictatorial secular nationalism of the Porfiriato laid the groundwork both for the fraternity-embracing Mexican Revolution as well as for new versions of ethno-nationalism and anti-positivist spiritual revival. The fact that political fates remain intertwined across the Americas – Mexico's was not the only positivist dictatorship – motivated a continued search for a shared Pan-American identity as well. According to the present analysis, 17th-century *Criollismo* and 19th century Bolivarian Pan-Americanism provided tantalizing proto-nationalist and pan-nationalist frameworks atop which Vasconcelos's *Mestizaje* could be built to suit his 20th century interests.

Perhaps Anderson would reply that these features of *Criollismo* and *Mestizaje* render both concepts non-nationalist. On such a picture of nationalism, the concept of a nation and the power of nationalism require horizontality or fraternity as the basis of sovereignty, simultaneity in time of the community, and sometimes a shared vernacular to delimit its boundaries. If one of these is missing, the imagined community is not properly "limited" in the way a national community typically is.

That seems *prima facie* correct. But if we remember the European, Napoleonic 19th century, one thing that seemed important to the continent-wide effects of the French Revolution was precisely its seeming *universality*, what Anderson describes as the "modular" nature of nationalism. Napoleon pushed nationalist, pseudo-democratic ideas onto many places ahead of his advancing armies, and these were well-received. One can imagine at least two mechanisms for this: the first, the humanist universalist element that produced "*égalité*" and "*fraternité*;" and the second, the sort of very specific or delimited community, united often by things like vernacular, that Anderson describes. The second thing resisted Napoleonic imperialism, while the first could sometimes boost it. All of this fits well with the idea that the Napoleonic era was in fact a massive contradiction. The impulse to conquer and absorb pushes against the inherent limitations of nationalism. Even Bolívar, in his 1819 *Angostura Address*, seemed to think democratic republics resist expansionist tendencies, which makes them more "practical" than monarchies (Bolívar 2003: 35), but the opposite has often been demonstrably the case. US American "Manifest Destiny" was not far behind.

So the *criollismo* that predates and shapes Vasconcelos' *mestizaje* is also the model for Bolívar's dream of pan-American unity. The shared creole history of the continent, and broadly shared imperial language, is a formidable basis for a kind of "nationalism" so large in scope that it is almost unimaginable for the often fractured, war-torn European republics. Perhaps what we have instead are competing imagined communities, with differing scopes.

Anderson may have a reply. In a chapter on contemporary nationalisms, he contrasts "official nationalism" with the earlier model. "[O]fficial nationalism

assumes its relevance above all at the moment when revolutionaries successfully take control of the state, and are for the first time in a position to use the power of the state in pursuit of their visions" (Anderson 2006: 159). Though he does not mention Mexico, this understanding is applicable to Vasconcelos' case, as he was ultimately a contributor to and beneficiary of the Mexican Revolution. *Mestizaje* was certainly a form of "official nationalism" promoted by the Mexican state, and assumed, discussed, or even championed by a generation of Mexican writers as distinguished as Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz.

In my opinion, it is the *continuity* of these national or quasi-national concepts across three or four centuries that is the most striking. Rather than a sudden shift in the 18th or 19th centuries, this brief study shows that Vasconcelos' form of nationalism was not especially new at all.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show throughout this piece that the ethnic self-understandings and imaginings of communities in each century in the Americas often have clear nationalist or proto-nationalist characters: they unify differing groups of people, often of varying phenotypes, behavior, and values, into one group with shared characteristics. Often those shared characteristics are historical-geneological, but these can join elements of shared experience, shared location, shared narratives, and shared frustrations to make that diffuse public into a *community* with a shared outlook or aspiration for the future. That community can then be the subject of something as radical as an independence movement, and begin to understand itself as rightfully sovereign.

I did not discuss horizontality very extensively here, partly because the history of Latin America gives as many examples of *failed* and even *actively undermined* horizontality as it gives of *ideals* of horizontality. Bolívar's at first reluctant embrace of emancipation and reluctant inclusion of indigenous people is written about by him as a great and baseline ideal for his future nation. (This also more or less mirrors the structure and history of these pluralist ideals in the continent). But in the same document Bolívar legislates himself as first among equals because he thinks that without his unique competence the whole political project would fall apart. This too is reminiscent of, for example, Sigüenza and Sor Juana's acknowledgement of dynastic rulers as ideal sovereigns, and of missionaries who both wanted to protect and emancipate indigenous people as equal and noble Catholic souls but insisted on always having a Catholic order at the top of the pyramid of otherwise "autonomous" governance. Vasconcelos, too, does much the same when he assigns a seemingly divinely appointed destiny to the "cosmic race": its Catholicism is, for him, synonymous with its cosmic or universal character.

I also did not much discuss the relationships Anderson ascribes to nationalism, time, and perceived destiny. This is not because they are not pertinent, particularly in Vasconcelos's case, but because Anderson's theory is too indebted to Walter Benjamin, whose theories lie outside the scope of the present exercise. These relationships also strongly resonate with what I will call "meta-modernism," an attempt to structurally distinguish the "modern" period from the "pre-modern" period using not just the progression of historical events but looking to identify differences from within the practice historiography as well. It is as if the history of ideas itself is meant to go through a Copernican revolution, because of which certain possibilities or actualities will never be imaginable or actualizable again.

Instead of embracing such "meta-modernism," I favor theories that offer explanatory continuities rather than jarring discontinuities between transitional periods in history. Anderson relies on the idea that if just enough continuous processes join forces, explosive discontinuities will result. Perhaps this is necessary in analyzing conflicts that change the structures of power. However, the heart of Anderson's analysis is that nation-concepts themselves carry a mysterious power that must spring out of insufficient wellsprings. By contrast, according to the present analysis, if the nation and nationalism are distinct concepts conceived in the late 18th century, their mysterious power is a direct consequence of the power of antecedent "proto-nationalist" concepts, rather than largely a result of modern phenomena Anderson favors, like print-capitalism.

Maybe I'm too Latin American to think these structures are ever too radically removed from their pre-revolutionary forms. Revolutions are made, but they are also, like their constituent concepts, often also re-made.

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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

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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⁴² I am grateful to the regular editors of JMxP for permitting me to exceed their standard word count as well as the guest editor, Sergio A. Gallegos Ordorica, for his generous comments and suggestions, which greatly helped me improve the article's focus and conclusions.

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HOW TO READ *LA RAZA CÓSMICA*

GUILLERMO HURTADO*

ABSTRACT: The first edition of José Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* appeared in 1925. Although the book is recognized as a classic of twentieth-century Latin American philosophy, its interpretation has been much debated. In order to achieve a better understanding of the work, five discursive levels are distinguished within the text: the struggle between the two Americas, the destiny of South America, the relations between human races and miscegenation (*mestizaje*), the philosophy of history, and the travel memoir.

RESUMEN: La primera edición de *La raza cósmica*, de José Vasconcelos, apareció en 1925. Aunque la obra es reconocida como un clásico de la filosofía latinoamericana del siglo XX, su interpretación ha sido objeto de intenso debate. Para lograr una mejor comprensión del texto, se distinguen en él cinco niveles discursivos: la lucha entre las dos Américas, el destino de América del Sur, las relaciones entre las razas humanas y el mestizaje, la filosofía de la historia y el relato de viajes.

Keywords: Vasconcelos, *raza*, miscegenation, Latin America.

The first edition of *La raza cósmica* was printed in Madrid in 1925 by the Agencia Mundial de Librería. The book achieved wider circulation after the publishing house Espasa Calpe released a second edition in 1948 and distributed it throughout Ibero-America. It should be noted that the 1925 and 1948 texts are not identical. The second adds a brief prologue, eliminates the chapters on Uruguay and Chile, and cuts several passages from the chapters on Argentina and Brazil. On the centenary of its first edition, I will examine both versions of the book from the perspective of discourse analysis. I will argue that *La raza cósmica* should not be read as a philosophical monograph or a scientific article, but as a multidimensional essay in which biographical, biological, geographical,

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sociological, historical, literary, and philosophical elements are combined. My proposal consists of discerning within the work five discursive levels with different antecedents, traditions, contexts, arguments, rhetorical strategies, and purposes. Although these levels are interwoven within the text, it seems to me that if we distinguish them in order to then reconnect them, we will achieve a more illuminating reading of this classic work of thought in the Spanish language.¹

1. Discourse on the Two Americas

The first discursive level of *La raza cósmica* that I will highlight here concerns the conflict between Anglo-Saxon America and Latin America. The intellectual tradition to which Vasconcelos belongs is distrustful of the powerful neighbor to the north and proposes that Latin American countries unite to resist it. This project goes back to Simón Bolívar's proposal to create a confederation of the nations that had formerly belonged to the Spanish empire. Vasconcelos always subscribed to the Bolivarian ideal, as he believed that this project was the only way in which the countries of Latin America could shake off the political and economic yoke of the United States, which, with its Monroe Doctrine, had declared the entire continent its zone of influence. Vasconcelos's discourse belongs to what we might now call a decolonizing current, with the distinctive feature that it does not find its principal antagonist in Europe—or not only in Europe—but above all in the United States, the new imperial power that sought to subjugate the entire continent.

The struggle between the two Americas is a deep and enduring preoccupation in Vasconcelos's life. The theme reappears again and again in his writings until the end of his days. As a child, the author experienced racial discrimination firsthand when he lived on the border, and later, as a young man, he was outraged by United States interventions in Mexico and other countries. It is no exaggeration to say that his animosity toward the country to the north functions as a compass for his thought. One cannot understand Vasconcelos's disconcerting sympathy with Germany during the Second World War without taking into account that he believed a German victory would liberate Latin America from the yoke of the United States. Nor can one understand his return to the Catholic Church in those same years without recalling that he reached the conclusion that reinforcing our Catholic tradition was indispensable for resisting American cultural penetration.

Vasconcelos maintains that the *raza cósmica* will be the triumph of the Iberian civilization that has known how to mix with other *razas*. However, Vasconcelos carries his reflection beyond that struggle and conceives of it as a definitive moment in the history of humanity. This turn that Vasconcelos gives to his discourse distinguishes it from other writings about the struggle between the two

¹ This paper is a shorter version of a my article “¿Cómo leer la raza cósmica?”, *Diánoia*, Vol 71, Num. 96, mayo-octubre 2006.

Americas. From a reflection on the political history of the continent, Vasconcelos advances toward a reflection on the philosophy of human history. In this way, the triumph of the *raza cósmica* will also be a triumph of humanity, which will reach the highest moment of its becoming. This historical leap cannot be made by the white Anglo Saxons because they have not wished to mix; moreover, they have been determined to exterminate the races that previously occupied their territory—as was the case with the indigenous peoples of the United States—to enslave distant peoples—as happened with the millions of human beings extracted from Africa—and to discriminate against the races they consider inferior—as with the Mexicans who remained in the territory won in the war of 1848. For all these reasons, it will not be the white Anglo Saxons who provide an impetus to the process of forming the new *raza cósmica*; on the contrary, they will most likely do everything they can to obstruct it.

Before Vasconcelos, other authors reflected on the conflictive relationship between the two Americas; one of them was the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó, author of *Ariel*, a work that had great impact throughout Latin America. Rodó contrasted the conceptions of life of the Anglo-Saxon Americans with those of the Latin Americans, affirming that while the former had an advantage in the material domain, the latter had one in the spiritual. This thesis was taken up by Vasconcelos and plays an important role in *La raza cósmica*. Although other distinguished authors such as José Martí, Rubén Darío, Manuel Ugarte, Carlos Pereyra, and the aforementioned José Enrique Rodó had developed the theme of the two Americas in various ways, it was Vasconcelos who injected it with a fully philosophical, even universal character. We can say, therefore, that the treatment of the theme has a before and an after marked by *La raza cósmica*. What characterizes this book is the philosophical turn it imparts to this political and intellectual movement. It would not be easy to imagine the subsequent Latin Americanist philosophy of authors such as Leopoldo Zea without the impetus that Vasconcelos gave to the theme in *La raza cósmica*. And, for the same reason, it would not be easy to conceive of Latin American liberation philosophy without the Vasconcelian antecedent—for example, Enrique Dussel's critique of Eurocentric history owes a great deal to Vasconcelos. Even though these authors may not have adopted the theses of *La raza cósmica*, one can maintain that they are inspired by the spirit, ambition, and loftiness with which Vasconcelos wrote his book.

2. Discourse on South America

The second intellectual tradition into which *La raza cósmica* is inserted concerns South America in particular and its potentialities. What is defended within this current of thought is that South America is a land unique in the world, one destined to become the nerve center of humanity's future. In no few studies of the region, *mestizaje* was seen as a blight; such is the case with *Nuestra América*

(1913) by the Argentine positivist Carlos Octavio Bunge. However, in other studies conducted in those years, *mestizaje*, even with the indigenous race, was valued as an advantage, as the Argentine Ricardo Rojas maintained in his work *Eurindia* (1924). Accordingly, one could say that *La raza cósmica* belongs among studies of this second type, which view the mixture of races in South America favorably. Nevertheless, for Vasconcelos it was important to clarify that this mixture had as its primordial element the white race—or rather, the white races of southern Europe, principally of Spaniards, Portuguese, and Italians. Around this nucleus, the other races were added in a smaller proportion: Blacks, Asians, and Indians.

An approach to *La raza cósmica* from the perspective of discourse analysis must attend to the textual unity of the work. As I noted above, the 1948 edition cut Vasconcelos's visits to Uruguay (pp. 138–50 of the first edition) and Chile (pp. 240–290). The book loses a great deal as a result, because the narration on Chile is one of the most interesting. The section on Uruguay is briefer and more superficial, but it is not without interest. Why were these sections removed in 1948? We can imagine several answers. One is that Vasconcelos was critical not only of the governments of Uruguay and Chile, but also of certain sectors of both countries' societies, which seemed to him dominated by a landowning, militaristic, and foreign-oriented oligarchy. Vasconcelos's stay in Chile was embroiled in a controversy that caused several sectors of the press and public opinion in that Andean country to condemn the attitude of the itinerant Mexican ambassador. The anecdote is as follows: Vasconcelos visited the mausoleum of General Manuel Baquedano, which commemorates the Chilean victory in the War of the Pacific. Vasconcelos was irritated by this gesture of arrogance and declared that the peoples of the Americas should overcome their petty nationalisms and unite as brothers in the struggle against the true enemy: the United States. But Vasconcelos did not merely pass judgment on Chile's proud nationalism; he also openly supported students opposing the government. In a speech to the young rebels, Vasconcelos passionately attacked Chilean landlordism, militarism, and clericalism and held up the Mexican Revolution as an example of a social movement that defended the legitimate interests of the people. It is likely that the editors at Espasa Calpe thought that some Chilean and Uruguayan readers might still react negatively and that, for commercial reasons, it was preferable to eliminate those sections. But it cannot be ruled out that Vasconcelos himself decided to cut them because he no longer identified with the revolutionary message he had delivered in Santiago, given that his political positions had shifted to the right.

There is another explanation for why the Chile and Uruguay sections were removed: both narratives diverted the reader from the argument. The focus of the book was on the journey to Brazil and Argentina; the visits to Uruguay and Chile were irrelevant to one of the principal theses defended in the work, namely, that

the future of humanity lay in the territories of the first two countries. Vasconcelos was fascinated with South America, above all with Argentina and Brazil. One cannot understand *La raza cósmica* without that fascination, which reached the deepest recesses of the author's spirit. There is a South American poetics in *La raza cósmica* that, at times, recalls Neruda's *Canto General* in its exaltation of the natural landscape. The book is the testimony of a man who is spellbound by everything he discovers. It is an aesthetic journey, but also a spiritual one. Vasconcelos was awed by the richness of the territory, the beauty of the landscapes, the abundance of nature. He was also charmed by the people—the beauty of the women, the gallantry of the men, the culture of the cities and the countryside, the spirit of work and progress, the zeal for education and civilization. When one reads the pages of his journey through those regions, one gets the impression that Vasconcelos does not know where to put so much enthusiasm. Nevertheless, as I already noted, Vasconcelos could also be critical of the societies he visited, in which there was nothing equivalent to the transformative process of the Mexican Revolution. Vasconcelos served as an ambassador of Mexico's revolutionary government. For that very reason, his ideas struck the oligarchy of those countries as socialist and subversive.

It must be borne in mind that Vasconcelos's South Americanism does not encompass the entire subcontinent. What he champions is an ideal of the South America that faces the Atlantic—the one that includes Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay, and part of Bolivia. The other South America—the one that, crossing the Andes, faces the Pacific and includes Chile, Peru, Ecuador, and parts of Bolivia and Colombia—falls outside that ideal. The South America that captivates Vasconcelos, as it did many other authors, is the former, not the latter. What excites Vasconcelos is discovering that in Atlantic South America the geographical, racial, cultural, and spiritual conditions existed for building an alternative to the United States—one that could even surpass it. He had not found this in Mexico, Peru, Colombia, or Cuba. In those countries, the geography, the racial mixture, and the social organization did not allow, he thought, for the construction of that option. All they had in their favor was the legacy of Hispanic culture and Catholicism, but that was not enough to surpass the United States.

Vasconcelos's proposal not only excludes the South Americans of the west, but is moreover founded upon a bloody prior exclusion. Those immense territories that Vasconcelos saw as lands of opportunity had—or had had until very recently—as their original owners indigenous populations that had been exterminated, expelled, or subjugated by the South American Creole republics. In this way, the condition of possibility for the new civilization of the *raza cósmica* was planted upon the destruction of indigenous peoples and the appropriation of their lands. Vasconcelos praises the *bandeirantes paulistas* and paints them as peaceful colonizers, but he omits that they killed and enslaved the Guaraní and

other peoples of the region. Whether through ignorance or bias, his historical vision of the region was profoundly mistaken.

This discursive level of *La raza cósmica* does not form part of a tradition of thought about Mexico. Emilio Uranga saw this clearly when, in 1951, he stated that for the young Mexican philosophers—he was referring, of course, to the members of the Grupo Hiperión—Vasconcelos seemed more like a South American philosopher than a Mexican one. Uranga's assertion is too drastic, a typical *boutade* from the philosopher, but as far as *La raza cósmica* is concerned, it carries some truth. The book contains not a shred of philosophy of mexicanness (*lo mexicano*), of reflection on Mexican history and culture, on the characteristics of Mexican *mestizaje*. That the author of *La raza cósmica* is a Mexican is an irrelevant fact, because the work belongs to a long series of reflections on the history and destiny of South America.

3. Discourse on the Races and *Mestizaje*

Vasconcelos has been criticized for not defining with precision what he means by "*raza*"; however, this criticism should be leveled at all who participated in the racial debate of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including those with scientific pretensions. The discussion about races revolved around that polysemous concept—something that now strikes us as not only lacking in rigor but very dangerous from a political and ethical standpoint. The breadth of the concept of "*raza*" generates no few difficulties when it comes to understanding what exactly Vasconcelos is arguing. At times, he gives the impression that race is something exclusively biological, as when he affirms that there are four original races: the white, the yellow, the black, and the red. However, it soon becomes evident that this classification is not exhaustive, because a premise of the book is that there is a historical struggle between the white Saxon *raza* of the United States and the white Iberian *raza* of the Latin American countries. These two *razas* in conflict are, in turn, not pure but mixtures. The white Nordic *raza* of the United States is a mixture of English, German, Dutch, and Scandinavian peoples, among others, while the white Iberian *raza* of the Americas is a mixture of Castilians, Catalans, Basques, Portuguese, Arabs, and Jews, among others. An additional difference between these two *razas* is that, in the second, besides southern white races, there is a mixture with Indians and Blacks. In this way, we can see that by "*raza*" Vasconcelos refers not only to the four pure races but also to instances of *mestizaje* with delimited geographical and chronological coordinates. In that sense, "*raza*" would be a synonym of "*people*" (*pueblo*), understood as a variegated conglomerate of human beings who live in a region and share ancestors, language, religion, and culture. Thus Vasconcelos affirms that the *raza* of the United States has a Protestant culture and that of Ibero-America has a Catholic one, and that while the former inclines toward material and technological

goods, the latter inclines toward the aesthetic and the spiritual. In the end, the difference between the two *razas* is between two civilizations; for this reason, the strictly biological question can recede into the background. In Ibero-American society there has been greater racial inclusion of Indians and Blacks. And it is that openness that allows Vasconcelos to maintain that Ibero-America will be the land in which the new *raza cósmica* will arise.

To understand the discourse on *raza* in the book, it is useful to examine it from a dialectical perspective. The starting point is to determine against whom it is aimed. The opponent in *La raza cósmica* is the white supremacist who defends the following two theses:

(R1) The white Saxon race is superior to all others and, for that very reason, has the right to dominate, enslave, or even eliminate them.

(R2) The mixture of the white Saxon race with any other is always descending—that is, the *mestizo* will be inferior to any white Saxon; therefore, miscegenation between that race and the others must be prohibited.

White supremacism, wielded by authors such as Francis Galton, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, Madison Grant, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, had an enormous impact worldwide: it was the foundation of the Nuremberg Laws, promulgated in 1935, and of the laws that, until 1967, prohibited interracial marriage in the United States. It should be emphasized that white supremacism is a pseudoscientific ideology of European and American colonialism. In Latin America, too, we had fervent defenders of this doctrine. Prominent intellectuals of the region have affirmed that the problem of our countries is their racial composition. Among them, we may point to the Mexican Francisco Bulnes and the Argentine José Ingenieros. These authors not only suffered from what José Enrique Rodó had called *nordomanía*—the excessive admiration for everything associated with the United States and northern Europe—but were convinced that the only salvation for our countries was the eventual eradication—violent or peaceful, abrupt or gradual, physical or cultural—of what they considered inferior races. The adoption of white supremacism within Latin America is connected with what Pablo González Casanova called the internal colonialism (*colonialismo interno*) of the Creole elites, but also served as a justification for those elites' alliances with foreign capital. Vasconcelos saw and denounced all of this, and it gives his argument an incontestable value and relevance.

Against (R1), Vasconcelos affirms that, although the white Nordic race may be the dominant one in economic, military, and technological terms at the time he writes his book, it does not follow that it is superior to the rest. The white Nordic race has not always been dominant and will not always be so; therefore, its power over other races has no natural foundation. On the other hand, against (R2), Vasconcelos affirms that miscegenation is not always recessive, that some mixed

razas are not inferior to the supposedly pure races that preceded them and that they can even surpass them in certain respects. Nations with *mestizajes*, such as Mexico, should not feel lesser than those of the white Nordic race that seeks to dominate them within a racist colonial regime. For this reason, the philosophical defense of *mestizaje* is a way of combating colonialist ideology, both external and internal.

Up to this point we could summarize Vasconcelos's critique of white supremacism. That critique was just, timely, and courageous, and for it alone *La raza cósmica* deserves a place on the list of classic works of thought in the Spanish language. The problems begin when we examine the propositional ideas about races and *mestizajes* that Vasconcelos offers in his book. Here we discover many loose ends and not a few highly questionable ideas.

The simplest way to refute white supremacism is to deny the existence of races and, therefore, of racial mixtures. Vasconcelos does not follow this strategy. He accepts the existence of races and *mestizajes*. Under that assumption, the second simplest way to refute white supremacism is to uphold the thesis of the equality of all races and, therefore, of all racial mixtures. However, it is evident that Vasconcelos does not subscribe to the equality thesis. The proof is that he affirms that the *raza cósmica* will stand above all others that have ever existed—above all, above the white Nordic race that at the beginning of the twentieth century dominated the world mercilessly.

Vasconcelos affirms that there are historical moments in which some races surpass others and therefore exercise dominion over them. However, it must be noted that this superiority is never permanent and never absolute. Before the white Saxon race was the predominant one, others held that position: Persians, Romans, Mongols. Nevertheless, Vasconcelos maintains that although in certain historical periods some races are better than others in some respects, they are never so in all respects. For example, one might concede that whites are better than Blacks in some matters, but this does not imply that Blacks cannot be better than whites in others. In this way, one could maintain that each race has a unique value, and therefore none has the right to eliminate another, since humanity would lose something valuable in so doing.

As for *mestizaje*, Vasconcelos argues, against the supremacists, that miscegenation is not always descending—that the best traits of the mixed races can be preserved. Moreover, drawing on Mendelian biology, Vasconcelos defends the stronger thesis that from racial mixture a race better than the originals can arise—that is, that *mestizaje* can be ascending. The *raza cósmica* is the ascending *mestizaje* of all human races. For this reason, it would be the highest moment in the evolution of the species.

However, it must be observed that Vasconcelos does not claim that any mixture of existing races would be superior to the white Nordic race. That mixture

would have to be based on a precise proportion of each of them. What is that proportion? An exact balance among the four original races—that is, 25% of each? Or a mixture in which one predominates over the rest? Vasconcelos states with complete clarity what he thinks on the matter. The mixture of the *raza cósmica* will resemble the one that existed in regions of Brazil and Argentina—that is, one in which the factor of the southern white race predominates, with a smaller proportion of the other races: Black, Red, and Yellow.

But what guarantee is there that the final mixture will have that proportion? Why not suppose, for example, that the predominant racial factor in the future will be the Yellow race? Vasconcelos's answer is no less than disconcerting. What he affirms is that the *raza cósmica* will be the result of a human inclination that, over the years, will manage to impose itself above all others. What will lead us to achieve the perfect mixture is the pursuit of beauty. The most beautiful individuals of each race will come together to procreate still more beautiful individuals. The ugly, the ungraceful, will gradually die out. No one will want to procreate with them. What is more, they themselves will step aside, out of shame. As with all eugenics, this process inevitably entails a measure of cruelty.

It is striking that Vasconcelos does not seem troubled by the possibility that the *raza* of the most beautiful might not also be the most good, or the most just, or the most wise. It is important to bear in mind that Vasconcelos does not propose a moral, political, or epistemological utopia, but an aesthetic one—and, to a degree, a eudaimonic one. The beauty Vasconcelos speaks of is primarily physical, though he also takes into account, without fully clarifying it, a spiritual dimension. In any case, if the *raza cósmica* will resemble that of South America, it will be because of the beauty of its members, not because of any other political, economic, or moral factor. It is hardly necessary to insist that this propositional moment of the discourse of *La raza cósmica* is very tenuous—so much so that it can hardly be taken seriously. The inevitable conclusion is that, despite his rejection of white supremacism, Vasconcelos continues to adopt some form of racism. In several passages of his book, he makes denigrating comments about Blacks and Asians that stain his discourse and that have been highlighted by his detractors, who are not few.

In *La raza cósmica*, Vasconcelos does not deal in depth with the phenomenon of *mestizaje* in Mexico. For this reason, it should not surprise us that the authors who defined the discussion on racial and cultural *mestizaje* in the first half of the twentieth century were others, such as Andrés Molina Enríquez and Manuel Gamio. No one took the fantastic *raza cósmica* into account when thinking about Mexican *mestizaje* in those years. It is evident that, for Vasconcelos, although the average Mexican *mestizo* is not necessarily inferior in every respect to the white Anglo-Saxon, he is not a model of the *raza cósmica*. Vasconcelos implies as much when he states in *La raza cósmica* that in Mexico *mestizaje* has not been

completed—that there is still too large a proportion of pure Indian race that has not mixed with the southern white. Moreover, Vasconcelos asserts that the Mexican indigenous race is a tired race (*raza cansada*), whose moment in history had passed. The redemption of Mexico's Indians consisted in integrating—racially, through *mestizaje*, and culturally, through education, culture, and religion—into Mexican Creole society. Vasconcelos was not an indigenist (*indigenista*); that much is clear.

In sum: the discourse on the races and *mestizaje* in *La raza cósmica* is marked by its contrasts. In its pages there is material both to praise and to repudiate.

4. Discourse on the Philosophy of History

The fourth discursive level of *La raza cósmica* that I distinguish here is the philosophy of history. Read in this way, the book belongs to a distinguished Mexican tradition of thought that includes the names of Gabino Barreda, Antonio Caso, Samuel Ramos, Leopoldo Zea, and Edmundo O'Gorman. This philosophy of history is set out by Vasconcelos in the third section of the book's first chapter. It should be noted that Vasconcelos had already conceived this doctrine before his journey to South America. In his essay "Nueva ley de los tres estados" ("New Law of the Three Stages"), published in Mexico in 1921, he had formulated in broad strokes the philosophy of history that he would later develop in *La raza cósmica*. This shows us that when he traveled to South America, the author already carried with him a preconceived idea about how to fit his experiences into a scheme devised beforehand. However, the journey allowed him to reformulate his ideas in a more articulated manner. In particular, what Vasconcelos developed in *La raza cósmica* was the combination of his theory of universal *mestizaje* with his law of the three stages of humanity.

Gabino Barreda had adopted from the philosophy of Auguste Comte the doctrine that humanity passed through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positivist. Antonio Caso had distinguished three concepts of human existence: as economy, as disinterestedness, and as charity. Vasconcelos offers another triad, according to which humanity passes through three stages: the material or warlike, the intellectual or political, and the spiritual or aesthetic. The first is based on the demands of the material. The second is the one in which humanity currently finds itself. Reason directs, but turns its back on feeling. Norms dictate the direction of action but take no account of the imagination. In the third stage, which Vasconcelos believes is being gestated, the orientation of human conduct will be dictated not by reason but by feeling. Instead of obeying, people will seek to create. Beauty, not goodness, will be the most admired value.

Why not suppose that the third stage of humanity can be reached without universal *mestizaje*? Why not imagine that human beings, of any race, of any

originating culture, can live in accordance with the principles of beauty and the spirit? Vasconcelos's answer is that as long as the white Anglo-Saxons continue to dominate the world, that ideal can never be realized. The values upon which that stage of humanity would be founded are contrary to the ones they uphold. The only way humanity can reach that ideal is if the white Anglo-Saxons lose their hegemony. And here is the turn Vasconcelos gives the argument. It is not a matter of waging war against the white Anglo-Saxons; if some other race—the Yellow race, for instance—were to defeat them by their own means, those of military technology, industry, and finance, then all that would happen is that another race would take the place of the white Anglo-Saxons, but humanity would not take a step forward in its progress. To advance, one must not defeat the white Anglo-Saxon but incorporate him into a new *raza*, a new way of understanding the world in which the white Anglo-Saxon will cease to be what he is now: the dominator of the world. Against the racial hatred of the white supremacists, Vasconcelos offers universal racial love. Instead of races killing one another, he proposes that all of them mix, moved by desire, sympathy, and love.

A question for understanding what that final stage of human history would look like is what culture the *raza cósmica* would have. Would it be a mixture of all existing cultures, or one in which the antecedent of one of them in particular would predominate? Would that mixture of cultures not erase all individuality of peoples? Samuel Ramos posed these questions to Vasconcelos in a colloquium on *La raza cósmica* held in 1948. We do not know the answer Vasconcelos offered on that occasion, but we can imagine it. The culture of the *raza cósmica* could not be identical to that of any of the existing *razas*; it would have to be different. Consequently, there would no longer be, as there is now, a diversity of cultures; instead, there would be a single global culture, the same everywhere. It is understandable that Vasconcelos has been criticized from an indigenist perspective, because his idea of cultural *mestizaje* presupposes the disappearance of the original American cultures. However, one must bear in mind that Vasconcelos anticipates the disappearance not only of the original cultures but also of the rest of the national Creole/*mestizo* cultures of the continent. In the end, all national cultures would be superseded by that of the *raza cósmica*.

It is evident that Vasconcelos considered that the culture of the *raza cósmica* would have more to do with European culture than with those of other civilizations. Its ethics, for example, would have a Christian orientation. However, the Western culture adopted by the *raza cósmica* would have to be purged of all the harmful elements that have developed within it: materialism, scientism, mechanicism, industrialism, militarism, savage capitalism, and Bolshevik communism.

Could Vasconcelos be reproached for the fact that his philosophy is, in the end, one about the destiny of a single *raza*—the Ibero-American, crucible of the future

raza cósmica? Should philosophy not always be a universal reflection, above any human particularity? Vasconcelos has an answer: Latin American philosophy cannot be neutral because the philosophy of the white Saxon *raza* has never been so—it has always been in the service of the political and economic interests of that *raza*. The true universality of philosophical thought can only be achieved when human beings cease to think from the standpoint of their racial, cultural, and political interests. What is sold to us as "universal philosophy" is, in the end, theirs.

What does the book offer us? A utopia? In 1948, Villoro maintained that it was, rather, a prophecy. The difference is enormous: a utopia is a fantasy; a prophecy is an announcement. Understood in one way or the other, Vasconcelos's conception of history, founded on the racial struggle rather than the class struggle, was naive and profoundly mistaken from a Marxist standpoint. One need not be a Marxist to doubt that Vasconcelos's prophecy will ever be fulfilled. Rather than as a utopia or a prophecy, I think the book can be studied as a myth. Interpreted in this way, we can explain why it begins with the account of the extravagant legend of Atlantis. If Atlantis is the mythical origin of civilization in the Americas, the *raza cósmica* would be its mythical destiny. The power of this myth explains why *La raza cósmica* continues to gain thousands of new readers every year. Over the course of a century, its readers have found in it a poetic power that continues to captivate them. One must bear in mind that Vasconcelos's philosophy of history does not claim to be scientific; its purpose is another: to provide a profound meaning to existence, to offer an exhaustive vision of reality, and to share a solid motive for action—and only when it is understood in this way can it be judged fairly.

5. Discourse of the Travel Memoir

The fifth discursive level of *La raza cósmica* is the one that recounts the details of his journey to the Southern Cone from August to December of 1922. This narrative is an antecedent of the fabulous memoirs Vasconcelos wrote a decade later. Here we find all the biographical, literary, and essayistic attractions that the author would later deploy in his memoirs. Some suppose that the account of the South American tour is irrelevant to the first part of the book, which deals with *mestizaje* and the philosophy of history. This seems to me a serious error, since it loses sight of the fact that Vasconcelos's theory of *mestizaje* is sustained—argumentatively, but above all rhetorically—by his narration of the journey to South America. The book is a unity that must be read as such. Or, put another way, the five discursive levels I have distinguished here constitute a communicative totality.

La raza cósmica deserves inclusion among the classic works of intellectual travelers of all times. Vasconcelos traverses not only territories of mountains and rivers, but of ideas and fabulations. There are antecedents of Mexican travelers who found admirable aspects abroad that were worth making known in their

country. What distinguishes Vasconcelos's journey from previous ones is that, instead of heading north, he went south.

Another important difference between Vasconcelos's journey and those of other Mexican travelers is that his expedition does not go to gather information but, principally, to impart it—to explain to the countries visited the highest meaning of the Mexican Revolution, which was viewed with suspicion. Vasconcelos realizes that, on an educational level, Mexico had nothing to teach the nations of the south. In all of them, primary schools and universities functioned better than in Mexico. However, on a political, legal, and social level, Mexico did have something to teach them. The multitudes of students and workers who congregated to listen to Vasconcelos came to know the representative of a revolution that promised to change the reality of Mexico but also served as an example for all the countries of Latin America. That socialist, Latin Americanist, anti-imperialist public, which had been loyal to Vasconcelos, was left bewildered when, at the end of 1933, the author returned to Argentina with a very different discourse: speaking ill of the government of Lázaro Cárdenas and the Spanish Republic, and defending a position that verged on fascism and the most retrograde Hispanism (*hispanismo*). Another disturbing tendency was beginning to become visible in Vasconcelos's discourse before the Second World War: his repudiation of Judaism.

The travel diary in *La raza cósmica* has two interspersed voices: that of the man and that of the ambassador. These two voices sometimes come into conflict. On a diplomatic mission, one is not free to say whatever one wishes or to move about freely. However, Vasconcelos did everything possible not to be constrained by his function as the head of an official Mexican government delegation, and this gets him into trouble on not a few occasions. The autobiographical narration of that tension between the two perspectives is, without a doubt, one of the novelistic attractions of the book.

As already noted, the second edition of 1948 eliminated the sections recounting the visits to Chile and Uruguay, but also cut several parts of the journeys to Argentina and Brazil. The expurgated paragraphs almost always have to do with political positions with which Vasconcelos no longer sympathized in 1948—such as his encounter with a group of anarchist workers who told him about the military repression in Patagonia—with certain traits of local societies and cultures that displeased him—such as the superficial atmosphere of the Buenos Aires Jockey Club—with the aim of erasing from the narrative several figures from whom he had become estranged—such as Leopoldo Lugones, whom he publicly criticized in 1925 for his support of the Chilean military coup—or with certain intimate matters he decided to cut out of discretion—such as the romance he had with a beautiful Argentine lady who believed the author was unmarried. The old man of 1948 censored the young man of 1925.

Vasconcelos the traveler is a man of contrasts. He frequently gives the impression that he sees what he wants to see, that he idealizes people and landscapes. At other times, by contrast, he is very critical—sometimes with discernment and fairness, and other times with superficiality and unfairness. With regard to the former, it should be added that Vasconcelos had already formulated in *Estudios indostánicos* (1920) the thesis that civilization is a product of warm lands and that, in the near future, when the domination of the northern Europeans, who live in cold lands, comes to an end, the civilizing impulse will return to the torrid zone. Therefore, when Vasconcelos travels to Brazil, he already carries that idea in his head; he does not formulate it there. In *Estudios indostánicos*, the author had also declared that the great creations of humanity had been made by *mestizo* peoples, not by supposedly pure races, such as the blond Aryans of northern Europe. What is novel in *La raza cósmica* is the conviction that the final stage of history will be realized by a universal *mestizaje* that will develop in the tropical zone of South America. Vasconcelos acknowledges that when he shared his ideas with the haughty Uruguayan intellectuals, they received them with derision. The Uruguayans replied that they were white Europeans. The idea that the future of humanity would be built by a *mestizo raza* in the warm zone of Brazil struck them as an eccentricity of the Mexican visitor. Many times, one gets the impression that Vasconcelos is disconnected from the places he visits, from the people with whom he speaks. However, we should not reproach him for the fact that, like Don Quixote on his journeys through La Mancha, he does not always see things as they are. Among other things, *La raza cósmica* is a fabulous travel book to an imagined future of humanity.

6. Conclusion

A critical reading of *La raza cósmica* faces several difficulties. Although its reflections are often captivating, its arguments are not always clear. The book puts forward powerful and edifying ideas, but it has weak flanks and even uncomfortable ones. This explains why, even to this day, it provokes such divided reactions. In this essay, I offer a hermeneutic key to the work based on the distinction of five discursive levels within it: the struggle between the two Americas, the destiny of South America, the relations between human races and *mestizaje*, the philosophy of history, and, finally, the travel memoir. I maintain that a thorough understanding of the book requires the interconnected examination of these five levels. A corollary of my analysis is that the book must be read in its entirety, without skipping—as is common—the part in which the author narrates his journey through South America. Another corollary is that to

assimilate its original message, it is indispensable to consult the text of the first edition, that of 1925.²

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HISTORY AS INVENTION: EDMUNDO O'GORMAN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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History is like love. It is a hallucination in which a person attributes virtues to someone, who, perhaps, does not even possess them.

—Edmundo O'Gorman

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is twofold. On the one hand, we seek to provide an analysis of the theoretical and philosophical work of O'Gorman regarding history. A lot of work has been done to understand the value of O'Gorman's contribution to decolonial studies and how his notion of *invention* was a breakthrough in the field. Now, we seek to understand how the very notion of *invention*, read as an epistemological category, was transversal to his work and allowed him to not only rethink the status of America's being, but the status of historical knowledge. On the other hand, we aim to put O'Gorman's contributions to the field of philosophy of history on the map. Many of his questions, reflections, and interests can contribute to historical and contemporary discussions in the field, particularly those that have to do with realism, the nature of historical facts, and the role that imagination and narrative play in historiography.

RESUMEN: El propósito de este ensayo es doble. Por un lado, buscamos ofrecer un análisis de la obra teórica y filosófica de Edmundo O'Gorman en torno a la historia. Hasta hoy, se ha tratado de comprender el valor de la contribución de O'Gorman a los estudios descoloniales y cómo su noción de «invención» supuso un avance decisivo en el campo. Ahora, pretendemos entender cómo esa misma noción de invención—interpretada como categoría epistemológica—atravesó toda su obra y le permitió replantear no solo el estatuto del ser de América, sino también el del conocimiento histórico. Por otro lado, aspiramos a poner en relieve las aportaciones de O'Gorman al ámbito de la filosofía de la historia. Muchas de sus interrogantes, reflexiones e intereses pueden enriquecer los debates históricos y contemporáneos de la disciplina, especialmente aquellos relacionados con el realismo, la naturaleza de los hechos históricos y el papel que desempeñan la imaginación y la narrativa en la historiografía.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Edmundo O’Gorman (1906-1995) was a Mexican historian and philosopher whose work ranges from meditations about the being of America, to Mexico and Creoleism, the Virgin of Guadalupe, contributions to the theory of history, to impeccable translations of English-speaking historians and philosophers such as Robin George Collingwood (Matute, 1997). Much attention has been given to his idea of the “invention of America” and how that contributed to the emergence of decolonial studies. For example, Walter Mignolo (2005) referred to his work as a “turning point” in understanding how European modernity heavily influenced the understanding of the inhabitants, the lands, and power relations that emerged since Columbus set foot in what is now called America. José Rabasa (1993), inspired by O’Gorman’s notion of “invention,” explicitly talks about neocolonialism and Eurocentrism in the literary and epistolary formation of the idea of “The New World”. In 2012, Rabasa also retrieves three fundamental ideas—Intention, Invention, and Reduction to Absurdity— from O’Gorman’s work to understand the emergence of America in European consciousness. Recently, Sánchez Prado (2023) has taken O’Gorman’s ideas to think through a process of decolonization, not just in the historiographic field, but in philosophy as well.

As mentioned above, another important contribution of O’Gorman’s work was in the field of theory and philosophy of history. Although there are Latin American authors, especially Mexican thinkers (Matute, Fernández Castro, Suárez Gómez, Díaz Maldonado, Hernández López), who have paid special attention to this area of his writings, it has nonetheless been neglected in American and Anglo-Saxon Academia. This is partly because most of O’Gorman’s work has not been translated into English, particularly his contributions to this field. Although a lot of work needs to be put into translation, this article starts with a more humble goal, which is to shine a light on O’Gorman’s contributions in the field of philosophy of history and recognize how his reflections align him with classic authors—such as Benedetto Croce, R.G Collingwood, Arthur Danto, Louis Mink, Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, etc.— that changed the ways we think about history and the historical endeavor. In this sense, O’Gorman continues a tradition that started with nineteenth-century historicism, but he also pioneers many of the arguments against historical realism. Most of his writings were published in the 40s and 50s, preceding classical texts such as Mink’s “The Autonomy of Historical Understanding” (1966), Danto’s 1962 “Narrative Sentences” or White’s *Metahistory* (1973). O’Gorman’s criticisms of positivism and realism as well as his idea of invention pushed, in many ways, how history is thought about and taught in history departments across Mexico and Latin America.

Thus, the purpose of this article is twofold. On the one hand, we seek to provide an analysis of the theoretical and philosophical work of O’Gorman regarding history. As previously mentioned, a lot of work has been done to understand the value of O’Gorman’s contribution to decolonial studies and how his notion of *invention* was a breakthrough in the field. Now, we seek to understand how the very notion of *invention*, read as an epistemological category, was transversal to his work and allowed him to not only rethink the status of America’s being, but the status of historical knowledge. On the other hand, we aim to put O’Gorman’s contributions to the field of philosophy of history on the map. Many of his questions, reflections, and interests can contribute to historical and contemporary discussions in the field, particularly those that have to do with realism, the nature of historical facts, and the role that imagination and narrative play in historiography.

Alongside his research on the history of America, in 1945 O’Gorman produced a series of theoretical texts that present both a sharp critique against positivist historiography developed in Mexico at the time and a new program for an alternative way of writing and understanding history. His critique, which intertwines philosophical, theoretical, and methodological considerations, begins by refuting historiography’s eagerness to imitate the model of impartial pretensions of the empirical sciences and its derived concepts of past, truth, and knowledge. Of the former, O’Gorman says that it has been thought of in the same terms that physicists think of their objects of study, i.e., as objects composed of a given nature. This understanding of the past produced a type of historiography capable of adding erudite details to the descriptions of past events without offering what he calls “genuine knowledge”. As he states in an article published in 1945, it is “pure documentarianism disguised as history”¹ (1945:180).

Against this way of thinking about history, O’Gorman turns to historicism. The category refers to an eclectic movement nourished by phenomenological, hermeneutic, and existential reflections that started in Europe, which allowed for an innovative dialogue between philosophy and history (Matute, 2002: 32). O’Gorman’s interpretation of historicism pivots on the defense of historicity as a fundamental characteristic of human existence. A defense that yields two essential premises: 1. if human beings are first and foremost historical entities, then everything they create shares the same nature; and 2. by accepting the philosophical principle of historicity, historiography takes the role of gathering and interpreting how that historical human condition has been understood over time. O’Gorman links these two premises as follows: “History should be understood no longer as an event that “happens” to man and which, just as it happened to him, might not have happened to him, a mere contingency and accident that in no way

¹ All of O’Gorman’s quotes were translated by the authors of this article.

affects him, but as something that constitutes him in his spiritual being; history, therefore, is a modality of what we call life (1977:12).² Under this lens, history becomes a “pragmatic-vital” program, whose main aim was to enable us to “recognize ourselves in the past and to assume the intimate unity of our life with history” (1947:183).

2. QUESTIONING REALISM

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, an important concept that crossed O’Gorman’s work was that of invention. When talking about the so-called discovery of America, O’Gorman argued that America could not refer to a piece of land that was suddenly unveiled in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. Rather, the name America referred to a collection of different ideas that had been held about the land, its inhabitants, its history and its relationship with the rest of the cosmos over the years. America’s “being” was thus not discovered but constructed or, better yet, *invented* throughout time. In his words:

America did not make its appearance in culture and history as the result of the sudden revelation of a discovery that would have exhibited suddenly a supposed being mysteriously lodged, since always and forever, in the lands that Columbus found, but as the result of a complex ideological process that ended, through a series of attempts and hypotheses, by granting them a peculiar and proper sense: that of being the “fourth part” of the world”. (1977: 135)

The main philosophical commitment behind this insightful thesis is that discovering means finding something that is already made or formed and simply revealing its nature. On the contrary, to invent something is to “give it a being.” This invention framework was latent in his prior philosophical work regarding history. Let us now look at how this idea was present and how it played a key role in his understanding of historical knowledge.

A constant theme throughout O’Gorman’s philosophical and theoretical work on history was the critique of what he called “the traditional view of history”, also referred to as realism. He explained it in the following terms: “In short, for this

² *La invención de América. El universalismo de la cultura de Occidente* (*The Invention of America. The Universalism of Western Culture*), was initially published in Spanish in 1958. An expanded English edition, titled *The Invention of America. An Inquiry on the Historical Nature of the New World and The Meaning of its History*, was released by Indiana University Press in 1961. This version, based on a series of lectures dictated at Indiana University between November and December 1958, contains several additions including a genealogy of the idea of the discovery of America, the cultural context in which the idea was conceived, as well as a “final speculation” on America’s destiny in world history. In 1977 O’Gorman translated the expanded English edition back into Spanish and published it through Fondo de Cultura Económica. This is the edition used in this article. All of O’Gorman’s quotes were translated by the authors of this article.

way of thinking there is no essential difference between knowing the human past and knowing any other reality. It is, therefore, a school that likes to conceive itself as realistic, although, of course, it is clear to no one that in such an equivocal concept lies the whole problem of the past.” (2007:14) It is important to pay attention to his remarks because as previously mentioned, very early on (40’s and 50’s) he made certain claims that are still being discussed in the philosophy of history today. In his writings, O’Gorman criticized the dream of producing a history that could reach an impartial truth. Moreover, his critical work was accompanied by a proposal of what he calls “a revolutionary historical consciousness”, meaning a new way to think of the historical endeavor. In what follows we present both the critical arguments and his novel approach to historiography.

In 1991, O’Gorman presented “Fantasmas en la narrativa historiográfica” (Ghosts in historical narratives) after receiving his *honoris causa* at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico. In this later piece, he brings together a lot of what he claimed in past texts, particularly in one of his first theoretical essays written in 1945 “Consideraciones sobre la verdad en la historia” (Considerations on Truth in History); but in his Ph.D. dissertation *Crisis y porvenir de la ciencia histórica* (*Crisis and Prospect of the Historical Science*) from 1947; and in “La vida como historia” (Life as history) from 1956. In 1991, O’Gorman claimed that three ghosts still haunted the historical discipline: the ghost of essentialism, the ghost of causality, and the ghost that is untrusty of the historical imagination. In the following section, we unpack the first two of these ghosts to then move to his understanding of imagination and narrative in the historical discipline. We argue that the first two respond to his critical project and the third to his positive account of history.

3. CRITIQUE TO ESSENTIALISM

When O’Gorman talks about essentialism, he refers to a philosophy that commits to the belief that things, subjects, territories, historical data, etc., have an undisturbed or *essential nature* that remains the same throughout time. O’Gorman’s famous thesis that America was invented takes the rejection of essentialism to heart. As a matter of fact, throughout *Crisis y porvenir de la ciencia histórica* O’Gorman argues that America functions simply as a case study. What matters to him is to demonstrate philosophically that every historical entity is not something given but constructed. In this sense, O’Gorman takes to heart José Ortega y Gasset’s famous statement—that humans do not have nature, they have history— but applies it to a historiographic problem, a terrain that the Spaniard philosopher never reached.

In the case of America, what is being rejected is that America had an essence before Columbus encountered it. As Susana Nuccetelli (2020:16) rightly points out, O’Gorman engages critically with the notion of Columbus’s *discovery*, not to pass the baton to someone else or to dismantle its ethnocentric consequences,

but to critically engage with the notion of America itself, as a formed and consolidated territory that had an identity prior to Columbus's voyage.³ What the Mexican historian seriously takes as a problem is that the term America depends deeply on our conceptual and analytic framework. In other words, America is an idea that was constructed through time, its "nature" is historical, and as such it has no essence, rather, echoing the words of Ortega y Gasset, it has a history. This is why O'Gorman chooses the thesis of invention: the idea of America and its inhabitants formed throughout time and relied on previous conceptions and frameworks to construct what it is today.

This argument against essentialism is not something that he used exclusively for his *Invention of America* thesis. As previously stated, he took essentialism to be a ghost in the historical discipline.⁴ Part of the problem with this uncomfortable tenet is that it makes us think that the past is something there to be *discovered*,

³ Decolonial theory has taken up O'Gorman's work as a crucial reference, although it has been interpreted in different ways. In *The Idea of Latin America* (2005), Walter D'Almeida Mignolo argues that O'Gorman's concept of invention marks a pivotal moment in the discipline, revealing the Eurocentric narratives that have long obscured indigenous perspectives. O'Gorman, according to Mignolo, established the foundation for the concept of *coloniality*, understood as a system of domination that persists even after formal colonization. Through discourses of salvation, progress, and the common good, coloniality perpetuates control, abuse, and the subjugation of marginalized groups. Enrique Dussel, another prominent decolonial theorist, agrees on the significance of the invention of America, but rejects O'Gorman's description of America as an extension of Europe, arguing that such a view implies the equality of American and European peoples. As Dussel explains in *The Concealment of the Other* (1994) the relationship between Europeans and Americans was one of subordination and exploitation, rather than identity. Dussel extends O'Gorman's critique by emphasizing the *concealment* of indigenous identities, genealogies, and cosmovisions prior to 1492.

⁴ Another classic work in O'Gorman's corpus is *Mexico. El trauma de su historia* (Mexico. *The Trauma of its History*). Published in 1977, the work studies how nineteenth-century Mexican independents planned the consolidation of the nation based on the belief that they had to choose as a model to imitate between two available "Americas": the conservative one of Hispanic heritage and the liberal one of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Each model produced a metaphysics of the nation encompassing views on its past, present, and future, together with specific political agendas. O'Gorman finds problematic the historiography that simplistically frames Mexican independent history and the formation of its national identity in terms of an unresolved conflict or "trauma" between conservatives and liberals. To challenge this he denies the assumption that both models are strictly opposing and immutable. Hence, if in *The Invention of America* he offers a non-Eurocentric reinterpretation of the history of the continent, in *Mexico. The Trauma of its History*, he denies the Manichean belief that national identity was—and still is—forged on the choice of one pre-given model over another. His concluding remarks on American history serve as a corollary to the conclusions reached in *Mexico. The Trauma of its History*: the being of historical entities, such as America or Mexico is constituted on the basis of the interpretations ascribed to them over time. These interpretations that are not an *a priori* model, program or agenda but an aggregate of contingent theories, opinions, and expectations are always changeable.

something that has a particular nature that is static, formed, and ready to be unveiled. O’Gorman puts it in the following way:

Historical entities, whatever they may be, are not what they are by virtue of a supposed essence or substance that would make them what they are. In other words, their being is not inherent to them, it is nothing more than the meaning that the historian grants them in a given circumstance or more clearly stated, in the context of the system of ideas and beliefs in which he lives. (2007[1992]:105)

In this sense, O’Gorman insists that the past has been repeatedly thought of as something with a foreign nature, independent of how we think about it. “The traditional view” has understood the past as something with an essential nature, with “a being that is inherent to it”. Interestingly, O’Gorman makes the analogy that for this traditional perspective the past is like the moon: “a reality independent of us, of our life” (2007[1945]:14), and as such we can allegedly establish a well-delimited break between *us*, the subjects of knowledge, and *that* the object to be studied. O’Gorman insists that traditionalists conceive the past and the present as ontologically different things. The past seems to be like the moon, foreign, objective, and with a particular nature. The present is more subjective, and a more or less stable space from which we embark on our mission to *discover* the past. O’Gorman makes it clear that for traditionalists there is an aspiration to get to know the totality of that foreign past-land. In this sense, O’Gorman continues, the past seems to be “the result of something that comes to man from outside, something that is intrinsically foreign to him, something, in short, heterogeneous to what he will call ‘his nature’, which, of course, is conceived as ahistorical.”(1947:230)

Furthermore, because of this fundamental ontological commitment to the nature of the past, traditionalists believe that it can be known in its totality, “since the past is an independent reality, each and every one of the facts of the past, from the most important to the smallest detail, claim the same right to be known in the total vision of historical knowledge.” (2007 [1945]:15) Thus, he argues, there is a fetishism to discover new documents and bring to light unknown data, whatever the nature of that data is. The idea here is that every little piece of information can rebuild the totality of the past. In a way, the prevailing thought is that historians just need to recover all the pieces of information (sources, archives, data) to finally complete the task of bringing the past anew. To discover the past means to complete the whole picture of it. Once all the pieces fit together the true nature of the past will reveal itself.

Another way that O’Gorman presents his criticism against essentialism is by pointing out a need to create unity, something absolute. O’Gorman argues that traditionalists have a particular problem regarding unity and plurality in history. On the one hand, they argue that the more accounts of the past, the closer we are

to truth, but on the other this recognized plurality gets immediately denied in service of a unitary vision of history where all of these accounts accumulate and produce a total view of the past. In his words, “variety was accepted only to be immediately denied, for the benefit of a goal that, by definition, would put an end to the process, paralyzing history forever.” (2007[1956]:39) This essentialist aspiration for absolute truth had important consequences for the Mexican thinker, for one, it made the historical effort a static endeavor. Think about it this way, if we reveal all there is to reveal about a particular period of the past, then why should we keep studying it? Once we have “discovered” the past, our work as historians is done, nothing more to do but to move on to a new era. This, of course, does not happen in the historical discipline. People study certain epochs and characters for years, sometimes their whole lives. Such is the absurdity O’Gorman argues, to which the ghost of essentialism leads. (2007[1992]:106)

Thus, for O’Gorman traditionalists historians that commit to a realistic picture of the past have established a regime in the historical discipline that: 1. takes the past to have a particular nature or essence that can be discovered. 2. makes the past something foreign that can be known in its totality if we only collect all the pieces to reconstruct it, and 3. denies plurality in service of a unified truth, or it invites plurality only when it serves a unitary view. Now let us move on to the second ghost, that of causality. It is no surprise that a lot of his criticisms of essentialism transpire to his challenges to causality.

4. CRITIQUE OF CAUSALITY

David Brading (1997) and Sánchez Prado (2023) recognized David Hume’s influence on Edmundo O’Gorman’s thought. In 1942 O’Gorman translated Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and in 1991 O’Gorman still refers to the Scottish philosopher and his critique of the logical relation between cause and effect in his own critique of realism. O’Gorman recalls that for Hume the “mysterious force” that links two events as cause and effect is nowhere to be found. O’Gorman takes this critique to the field of philosophy of history and points to the problematic infinite regress that this commitment entails:

Take as an example a thesis that is widely used today, according to which the discovery of a small island by Christopher Columbus on October 12, 1492, caused the “meeting of the Old and New Worlds.” Well, if this had been the case, there is no reason to stop the causal sequence at that “encounter”, since it would have to fully understand the history of America that has since happened and that which is yet to happen. And if we project the argument backward and consider that Columbus’s discovery would also have to have been caused by the effect of a previous event and so on, we would arrive - depending on whether our inclination was

mythological or scientific - either to the fall of our first parents or even some transcendental event that occurred in the age of caves, and that is to fall short, since we could go back to the moment of emergence of the amoeba sea that generated the human species. (2007 [1992]:107)

According to O’Gorman, this is a complete absurdity but one that inevitably emerges if we assume that cause and effect are unproblematically discovered during a historical investigation. To avoid this nonsense, O’Gorman continues, it is central to *create a link* between historical occurrences. Let us dig a little deeper into this idea by bringing in his 1956 text “History y Vida.” A great part of this work tries to understand the notion of a historical fact and how realists and idealists have thought of it as a self-contained entity that simply gets attached to others of the kind by some sort of invisible historical hand. The notion of historical fact becomes relevant to discuss because, for one, it reveals the problematic notion of causality and it connects to the essentialist ghost that haunts the historical discipline.

O’Gorman holds that realists have a peculiar commitment to the existence of historical facts understood as this sort of “raw material” that historians use to construct historical narratives. For realists, he argues, historical knowledge consists of a sum of facts that, once “discovered” are considered definitively known. They believe that what is “found out” simply aggregates and explains how a particular occurrence came to be (2007[1945]:18). This brings us back to the notion of causality and the idea that by simply aggregating facts causality is revealed and the effects are uncovered. Let us expand on this by using the assassination of Caesar, an example that O’Gorman himself uses, to illustrate how realists conceive the presence of causality:

Fact 1: Brutus was born in 85 B.C.

Fact 2: The Civil War starts in 45 B.C.

Fact 3: Brutus surrendered to Caesar and granted him amnesty.

Fact 4: Julius Caesar is named the eternal dictator of the Roman Empire.

Fact 5: Brutus meets with “libertarian” senators.

Fact 6: Cesar is murdered.

For realists, it seems that these occurrences are already facts themselves. It would also seem that if we simply ordered these facts, we would have a causal link that explains Caesar’s assassination. But is that possible O’Gorman asks? Is it that causality is self-contained in the facts themselves? How can causality reveal itself? Again, if causality is self-revelatory and exhausts historical explanation, where do we stop? Do we need to establish a causal link between the birth of Brutus, Caesar, and all the conspirators? How far does causality go? But even when we organize the information chronologically, causality does not seem to emerge, something needs to be done for us, the readers, to understand what the cause of the

assassination was. But even more so, is there only one cause? Also, is this list of information facts themselves? Or are they occurrences that historians select and convert into facts? O’Gorman radically questions the idea that “a cause” is something that is discovered, rather it seems that it is something that we grant with a particular intention. In the same line, he critically considers what we should understand as a fact.

To move beyond both ideas—causality as manifested and fact as discovered—the Mexican thinker argues that we need to further explore the notion of intentionality. To do so, he starts by introducing two examples of “facts”, one is a storm in a faraway land, and the other is, precisely, the assassination of Caesar. At first glance, the storm seems to be foreign to the lives and destinies of humans, we can even characterize it as a “natural fact” instead of a historical one. The assassination of Caesar, on the contrary, seems to be a “historical fact” because it affected the course and direction of Roman civilization. But O’Gorman pushes the argument and asks, what if we think about the storm in a different circumstance? Let us say, as preventing or making it possible to win a battle between two contending armies? (2007[1956]:42) O’Gorman notes that if we agree that in this case, the storm is historical because it affected the lives of human beings, then we regard an occurrence with the category of “historical” when “we tacitly assume that this event was animated by the intention of producing the effect it produced, and it is precisely this intentionality that authorizes the conceptualization of the event under the category of historical fact.” (2007 [1956]:42)

Let us unpack what O’Gorman means in this brief and rich paragraph. For an occurrence to qualify as “historical fact” it must have a particular intentionality attached to it. Thus, a storm is historical if and only if one sees the storm as a cause or consequence of “x” human action. Note that O’Gorman is extremely careful to point out where this intentionality comes from. To enrich his analysis even more, he recalls that for idealism, intentionality came from a “transcendental subject” that gave actions a particular purpose, direction, and intention. For realists, the attribution of intentionality is always made by postulating a “true” intention for the event, that is, an intention that appears to be *the* intention with which the event was truly carried out (2007 [1956]:46). For both idealism and realism, the intentionality of a fact is something external to the historian. To discover facts become a metaphysical quest where either the intention of the transcendental subject is revealed or the true intention of the historical subject is discovered. But what is fundamental to note and criticize about these views is that the capacity for inscribing intention “does not lie in those entities, but exclusively in man, depending on the need he has to make the attribution and constitutive intentionality of the fact.”(2007 [1956]:44) Thus, he claims that a “historical fact” and the intentional cause that we grant it with, will always be essentially human, but not because it “marks the course of a civilization” (assassination of Caesar) or

“it decided the result of a battle” (a storm) but because it is us, humans, that grant them with such intention! In other words, for O’Gorman, past human actions and their results can only be explained by reasons that historians give, not by causes that are intrinsic to the events themselves. In this sense, we are reminded of the three historicist principles that we discussed at the beginning of this paper. For O’Gorman a) humans are historical beings and that entails having a mutable and changing nature. Therefore, b) everything humans create is going to share that historical mutability. “Facts” are not an exception here. The intention that we apply to past occurrences is something that can change. Again, causality is not an essential quality of occurrences, it is rather an intention that gets assigned to occurrences. Finally, c) because there is no intrinsic quality to facts or even the past itself, it follows that the nature of the past is also historical, and thus always mutable.

In this sense, O’Gorman argues that facts do not respond to a metaphysical calling, they also do not reveal a self-contained causality, rather they respond to a “gnoseological requirement of intelligibility of the historical act.” (2007 [1956]:55). One cannot deny, O’Gorman argues, that there are past occurrences—he calls them the substance or vital support of historical facts—but they are not there as metaphysical prepacked entities. Rather, these “vital supports” get credited with a posteriori intentionality—that of being the cause of “x”—provided by the historian. The Mexican thinker suggests that “the assassination of Caesar”—as well as the concept of “humanity” or “rational spirit”—are “pale metaphysical entities” and as such they should not constrain us. Rather, because they respond to our own need for inscribing intention to the world, we (historians), are free to use them, modify them, or give them a different meaning (2007 [1956]:58).

In other words, for O’Gorman historical knowledge is relative because the very “raw material” of history, meaning “historical facts”, is dependent on the historian. In this sense, when an event is coined as historical, “its meaning as such is not beyond us; we grant it with that quality, and thus with that being.” (2007[1956]:47) Indeed, O’Gorman continues, attributing meaning is a need of the *subject* and not a demand of the *object*. He insists that what is at play here is a hermeneutic operation, not one that reinstates an original meaning, but one that responds to the needs of the historian. (2007[1956]:45) In the end and taking the argument even further, O’Gorman holds that there are no proofs in history: “There are only conditions that interpretation must face” but these conditions can be very different, and they can respond to very different intentions. This is why, he explains, the same set of documents can produce contrary interpretations. Of course, both must explain in some way the existence and content of that view, they must justify it, but the “original proof” is not something set and done, it is just a condition that invites or sparks an interpretation. Thus, because historical

facts are not self-contained entities but only constructions that allow historians to justify and give an account of a particular view of the past, we must agree that historical knowledge is forever changing, this is why O’Gorman argues that history is not an “accumulative science” and part of its essence is constant renewal (2007[1956]:47). He concludes that historiographic knowledge is a way of adapting the past to the demands of the present, “that is, an operation that consists of putting the past (conceived under the species of historical fact) at the service of life.” (2007[1956]:56)

In the end, for O’Gorman, we cannot know the totality of the past not only because the nature of the information changes depending on the attribution of intention, but also because there is no totality to discover in the first place. Just as America was an idea that acquired meaning over time, a historical fact is also an idea (an abstraction) that is constructed and acquires full meaning when placed within a story. In this sense, a fact is not self-revelatory, it only acquires significance and relevance when a narrative accompanies and places that fact as a beginning, a middle, an end, or the cause or consequence of something. In this sense, for the Mexican thinker, the historical method “will not be the method of the simple accumulation of what is ‘found out,’ but it will be the *narrative method*, the only one truly capable of giving an account of human life, of our life, our true reality.” (our emphasis, 1945:18) The attribution of intentionality and the construction of a narrative is not something to be discovered, it is something that is constructed and crafted and, in this sense, it becomes an invention. Now let us investigate the role played by imagination in this way of conceiving historical inquiry and writing.

5. THE LACK OF IMAGINATION

O’Gorman identifies a third ghost haunting historiography: the ghost that is mistrustful of the historical imagination. Born of the idea that the past can be found, unveiled, and unequivocally described in historical discourse, this ghost, O’Gorman tells us, is simply illusory.

We must agree that not all events leave tangible remnants. It is such an obvious idea that it seems absurd to even raise it. For even in the hypothetical cases where such a thing can be dreamt up, there are always gaps to be filled, relationships to be suggested, hypothetical links to be proposed. History is more than a discipline that only accumulates, captures, and audits data. With a touch of poetic license, its essence lies in the alchemical transformation of chronicles into narratives. But for this idea to be credible or even thinkable as a possibility, an ontological gap is necessary, which realism does not realize because it defends that the existing reality transcends all articulation of the subject. O’Gorman, on the other hand, from his historicist position, not only places the weight on the

subject and his ways of knowing, rather than on the object, but does so by giving the imagination a leading role:

We must note, then, that by sticking to the information used, however exhaustive it may seem, leaves in the shadows areas of events that can only be illuminated by the imagination, that *quasi-divine* inventive faculty whose contribution is a substantive element of what can and should be considered as the rationality peculiar to the historiographic task. (2007[1992]:108).

By conceptualizing imagination in such a way, this faculty, naturally ascribed to the artistic domain, enters the realm of history from the heights, positioning itself as a basic tool without which it is impossible to write history. O’Gorman demonstrates this by showing the presence of imagination even when it is most vehemently denied: positivist historiography. He argues that despite the purportedly objective aims of this tradition, which defends that history is simply a heuristic activity driven by the factual and truthful description of the facts registered in the documents, the only criterion by which an investigation is terminated is when historians “feel” they have succeeded in gathering enough material to be able to adequately present the event in question (2007[1992]:95). That *feeling* which is present in historiographical practice regardless of one’s school of thought, and which manifests itself in many different ways, for example as intuition or even as a practical necessity to end the research in order to meet a deadline, transcends what any historical evidence can testify to. In this sense, and contrary to the realist ethos that allegedly focuses exclusively on the records, it points to the existence of processes that go beyond the documents. All that which lies outside the text but which forms an essential part of the historiographic activity, impossible to determine in a scientific scheme, which is why O’Gorman describes it as a “*quasi-divine*” faculty, constitutes the imagination.

O’Gorman, nonetheless, goes even further. He conceives imagination not only as something that is needed on the more empirical level of historiographical practice, i.e. when an investigation is about to come to an end, rather, it is essential to historical knowledge. At this point, his position is incredibly similar to that of Collingwood from whom he translated the *Idea of History* in 1952. In this book, we find a section entitled “The historical imagination” in which the English philosopher mentions that imagination is not ornamental but structural to historical knowledge (2004:323). For both Collingwood and O’Gorman, imagination is not capricious, arbitrary, or merely fanciful; it appears as what is most proper to historical thinking insofar as it allows for the construction of networks of meanings of events that occurred in the past and resonate in the present.

O’Gorman’s of imagination is always given with an eye on the problem of truth. If we accept imagination as an indispensable ingredient of historical

knowledge, are we denying the existence of truth? If the historian's creative faculties are essential to the construction of historical narratives, does this compromise the pursuit of veracity? O'Gorman is resolute in his assertion: the acknowledgment of imagination does not equate to historical deception. Rather than a mere product of evidence meticulously woven into a narrative fabric, rather than mere correlation, *historical* truth is a profound, almost "revelatory" moment. He dramatically terms it an "apocalyptic insight" deeply intertwined with the historian's personal experiences, her unique worldview, and her capacity to forge connections between the past and the present. (2007[1992]:108) The key to his argument lies in distinguishing scientific from historical truth. The latter, he says, does not dwell in the facts but "behind" them. (2007[1976]:96) It is the function of the historical imagination to put together *this* truth that is neither self-evident nor given in advance, that cannot simply be unveiled. A truth that is nothing more than the choice and defense of a particular way of attributing meaning to a series of data that are relevant to the historian's life horizon. A defense that does not imply that documentary work is superficial or even dispensable but is always subordinated to a greater philosophical principle: that which denies that truth can simply be discovered. If it were so, O'Gorman asserts, "history would have been written once and for all" (2007[1976]:96).

The critique of the idea that the past can be revealed once and for all and therefore does not require imagination to rethink it in terms of new findings, new needs, and new ways of thinking about the world, was a constant in O'Gorman's life. The discussion appears in the more mature texts, informed by his historiographical practice on the history of America and Mexico, to name two examples, but also in his early writings. In this sense, the discussion about discovering or inventing historical knowledge resurfaces again in his meditations about the historical imagination. Against the belief that one can discover or uncover the past, which is presumed to be there, ready to be dusted off, O'Gorman places the belief that the past must be invented using historical imagination to respond to specific needs dictated by the historian's life. Again, O'Gorman reiterates that "truth in history is nothing other than the adequacy of the human past (selection) to the vital demands of the present." (2007[1945]:18) In other words, the authenticity, if not the veracity, of history is at stake in its ability to impact the present.

O'Gorman's elevation of imagination to the status of epistemological faculty transcends the frontiers of historical writing to settle in a larger ethical discussion regarding human freedom. A discussion that is set out at greater length in *The Invention of America*, and not in his texts expressly dedicated to the philosophy of history. Here he argues the following:

As long as man conceives himself as something already made for all time according to a previous and unalterable model, he will have to

imagine that his world has the same unchangeable structure or nature. But, conversely, if man conceives himself no longer as something definitely made, but rather as a possibility of being, the universe in which he finds himself will not seem to him an insurmountable limit and an alien reality, but an infinite field of conquest to carve out his world, the product of his effort, his technique and his imagination. (...) It will be, then, a world in the process of being made, always a new world." (1977:76)

The recognition of imagination as an essential component of history implies a twofold ethical resolution. To account for this, it is worth remembering that one of the most characteristic features of realism is its adherence to what is there: the historian must display the facts as they "really happened". In this supposed adherence to the past without any interference from the narrator, history is deprived of any kind of transformative aspiration. This spirit is, precisely, contrary to the ideal of reality as something already given, ready to be discovered. For O'Gorman, to demand that history renounce the desire to imagine things differently is to "dehumanize" it (2007[1976]:93). And so, against this dehumanization, he proposes an almost utopian vision that thinks of the real as always in the process of being conceived in another way. From this follows his two ethical considerations:

First, for O'Gorman, the realist defense that the past can be told once and for all implies assuming that there are totalitarian ways of imagining the real. And that, he points out in several texts, is nothing but the breeding ground of "despotic dictatorships" (2007[1976]:98). Second, the attempt to eliminate subjective influence by renouncing imagination undermines the historian's responsibility. O'Gorman suggests that the historical truth emerging from an imaginative act acknowledges the unique and particular nature of history, demanding that historians take ownership of their work. When facts are believed to speak for themselves, the author's signature becomes irrelevant. Instead, O'Gorman advocates for a view of history that not only celebrates the multiplicity of perspectives as an antidote against any form of absolutism—ideological, political, cultural, etc.—, but demands that historians take responsibility for their interpretations. Thus, by acknowledging the subjective nature of historical understanding and the role that imagination plays in the transformation of mere occurrences into histories, historians can engage in a more critical exploration and use of the past.

7. CLOSING REMARKS

In the 1960s, in one of the polemics between Edmundo O'Gorman and Marcel Bataillon, on the occasion of an anniversary of the "discovery" of the Americas, the latter referred to the former pejoratively as a "philosopher-historian" (1965).

Some years later, both Walter Mignolo (1984) and Álvaro Matute (1996) revisited the term with a positive connotation, as part of a praise of the Mexican historian's thought due to his acute historical analyses based on philosophical premises. This article is a continuation and celebration of that attempt to achieve a systematic reflection on history. It is also a recognition of O'Gorman's legacy and his never-ending defense of history as an autonomous and independent discipline that needed to find its epistemological grounds outside of the traditional sciences. In this regard, we claim that O'Gorman inaugurates and is one of the most important representatives of a Mexican historiographic tradition that is both critical and propositional of the simple and complex question: What is history?

Throughout the discussion we have proposed here, we have been able to review nearly fifty years of a prolific and complex academic production that insists on the need to provide a philosophical foundation to the historiographical task. It is a foundation that, as we have already mentioned from the beginning, is based on the historicist premise according to which everything that constitutes the human being is marked by its changing, perennial, accidental condition. The unfolding of this premise impacts historical activity at all levels.

At the most practical level of research development, adhering to the idea that things do not have a given nature, but a constructed, or rather, invented one, implies the recognition and defense of imagination as the mechanism that allows us to transform a series of data into coherent narratives. Theoretically, the principle of historicity requires approaching the past by thinking of it as sets of ideas and beliefs that account for a certain way of understanding the world in a given time and space. From this stems the idea that historical entities such as America do not have in themselves a being that can simply be discovered, but that it is necessary to invent. If we think about the effects of this defense of historicity we arrive at the discussion of historical knowledge as an exercise that allows us to recognize and foster historical consciousness. A consciousness that, while inviting us to recognize our historical nature, also invites us to recognize that what we say, think, and know about the world shares that same ever-changing nature.

Lastly, O'Gorman's philosophy of history implies an ethical dimension that is both critical and proactive. On the one hand, his idea of thinking of history as an antidote to any discourse that is assumed to be absolute, unquestionable, and immutable, is incredibly relevant. O'Gorman's philosophy of history helps curb totalitarian, exclusionary, and discriminatory discourses that we hear with some frequency nowadays. On the other hand, the call to exercise a historical and critical conscience is also a plea for the freedom of people to imagine other ways of conceiving their past, present, and future. O'Gorman says it clearly when he insists that human beings and their creations are not given entities, but entities always in the process of becoming.

The above allows us to insist, as we did at the beginning of this text, that O’Gorman’s proposal can well be placed in line with that developed by authors today recognized as key signatures of reflection in the philosophy of history. However, a considered reading of his work also forces us to recognize some of its silences. One in particular interests us, because it opens the door to reflect on how to update his legacy in the contemporary context of the 21st century.

O’Gorman states that the only method to account for the principle of historicity in historiographic practice is the narrative method. In his work, we find few specific prescriptive reflections on it. Be that as it may, we can fill in some of the gaps by clarifying that the idea of the historical imagination implies for O’Gorman the reintroduction of the question of the poetic in historiographic practice. In O’Gorman’s words, it entails the acceptance of historical knowledge as a “liberating act” that reveals the “creative force of conscious life” (2007[1956]:65). O’Gorman insisted that the capacity to invent history was something like developing a skill. The transformation of occurrences into narratives, the description of intentionality, and the creation of meaning could not be simply learned from a textbook. It was the cultivation and constant exercise of an almost poetic or artistic ability that enabled these capacities to be at play in constructing historiography. We think that his idea of “the narrative method” had something to do with this constant exercise and acknowledgment of the aesthetic nature of the historian’s work.

Furthermore, to say that history is a creative invention entails a certain discomfort for those who assume that the discipline is a science that provides absolute and immutable truths. For figures like O’Gorman, on the contrary, invention is a celebration of the freedom of human beings to be the architects of a certain sense of their life horizon, and a call to take responsibility for the ideas we believe and the beliefs on which we stand. It is a poetic but also an ethical invitation.

We would like to end these reflections with a phrase from O’Gorman that in some way serves as a beacon towards which to direct our efforts.

I want history as unpredictable as is the course of our mortal lives; a history susceptible to surprises and accidents, to fortunes and misfortunes . . . a history free of the shroud of essentialism and the straitjacket of an allegedly necessary causality; a history that is only intelligible under the light of the imagination; a history-art, close to its literary narrative cousin; a history of daring flights and always as suspenseful as our loves; a history that mirrors the changes in the manner of man’s being, which thus reflects the movements of whim so that the degrading metamorphosis of man as a mere plaything of an inexorable destiny does not operate when we focus on understanding the past. (2007 [1976]:109)

Today, almost thirty years after O’Gorman’s death, we ask ourselves how to carry on his legacy and this dream. It seems to us that by way of some annotations to be developed in the future, we should think of pedagogical mechanisms that allow us to teach our students to exercise their critical and imaginative historical conscience. If history as an invention is, above all, a creative practice, it may be time to teach our history students how to exercise critical and imaginative writing. One of the avenues that it left open is a call to think, collectively, about new pedagogies to come.

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ZAPOTEC PHILOSOPHY: STRUCTURE AND FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

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ABSTRACT: The present article aims to present a synthesis of the structure and fundamental concepts of Zapotec philosophy through the study of some cosmogonies and foundational myths found among the Mixtecs, Mayans, and Zapotecs, as well as the linguistic study of key terms recorded by Father Córdova in his *Vocabulary of the Zapotec Language* (1578). The fundamental concepts that structure the thought of the *binnigulaza* –people (*binni*) of ancient (*gula*) light (*za*)– are darkness and light, synthesized in the phrase *xi-quèla* (light-darkness), as the absolute unity unified and differentiated by a third articulating element, the vital breath (*pe-tào*), which sustains the perpetual movement (*quèla na-zàa*) of opposites (light-night, fire-water) to maintain the balance of the primordial forces (light-darkness/fire-water) and make life possible. In conclusion, the essay argues that the complementary and differential relationship of darkness-light/fire-water is the foundation that upholds the philosophy of the Zapotecs.

RESUMEN: El presente artículo tiene como objetivo exponer una síntesis de la estructura y los conceptos fundamentales de la filosofía zapoteca mediante el estudio de algunas cosmogonías y mitos fundacionales presentes entre los pueblos mixteca, maya y zapoteca, así como a través del análisis lingüístico de términos clave registrados por fray Juan de Córdova en su *Vocabulario en lengua zapoteca* (1578).

Keywords: *Zapotec Philosophy; Binnigulaza; Zapotecs of Oaxaca; Isthmus of Tehuantepec.*

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1. The Study of Language as a Method for the Reconstruction of the Philosophical Thought of the Zapotecs

This article employs an interdisciplinary methodology that combines "decolonial hermeneutics" (González-Romero 2021) stemming from the decolonial turn proposed by Nelson Maldonado Torres (2008), "whose origin lies in horror at the 'world of death' created by colonization" (Maldonado-Torres 2008, p. 63), and a way to resist the "coloniality of being" (Maldonado-Torres 2007) through a Zapotec philosophy. To achieve this goal, I will utilize to some extent "language philology" (Cruz 1946; de la Cruz 1994, 2007; Belmar 2015) for the linguistic study of some words provided by the *Vocabulario en lengua çapoteca* by Juan de Córdova (1578). The work draws from a decolonial perspective by being cautious of the translations offered by Córdova—and particularly of certain words influenced by the late-medieval Christianity of the 16th century. To do so, I will analyze some words, review their translations and analytical breakdowns to compare the translations with Zapotec from the Isthmus and, whenever possible, with Proto-Zapotec. However, this will not entail a detailed philological study of the Zapotec language but rather means I'll apply philology to the study and "breakdown of some words to reconstruct the semantics and thus the embedded thought in the language" (Braque 1993, Swadesh 1978, 1960).

The work also seeks to recover some cosmogonic myths of the Mayas, Mixtecs, and Zapotecs to complement the "philological study of the Zapotec language" (Cruz 1946; De la Cruz 1994, 2007; Belmar 2015), which is considered a method that aims to achieve "a profound understanding of the language and literature whose philosophy is sought to be unraveled" (De la Cruz 1994) by comparing its current semantics with the Zapotec language of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico.² This work proposes that part of the cultural reconstruction of critical thought in ancestral cultures can be accomplished through the linguistic analysis of the Zapotec vocabulary by Juan de Córdova (1942 [1578]). In this way, I will conduct a study of the language, supported by "philology as a method for the reconstruction of Zapotec thought" (De la Cruz 1994), with the intention of "recovering the validity and sense of the traditions, even mythical ones, which should undergo a suitable philosophical hermeneutics" (Dussel 2015,

² It is worth mentioning that the author of this work is a native speaker of his mother tongue, Zapotec, specifically the variant spoken in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, particularly in San Pedro Comitancillo, Oaxaca, Mexico.

p. 93) to affirm them, reevaluate them, and elevate them to a dignified and necessary philosophical interpretation. "The method of interpretation (hermeneutics) is philosophical; the text or story may be mythical, poetic, or non-philosophical, but the result of the interpretation is hermeneutically a philosophical work" (Dussel 2015, p. 93).

2. Structure and Fundamental Concepts of Zapotec Philosophy

The present article is a synthesis of the ideas developed in the extensive book titled, *The Philosophy of the Zapotecs: Towards a Transmodern Global Inter-Philosophical Dialogue*, soon to be published. Based on the results of the research conducted, I consider that the philosophical structure of the Zapotec world is unitary (obscurity: primordial unity) and dual (obscurity-light), composed of two elemental forces: obscurity (*quèla*) and light (*xilla*, *peà-nij*) articulated around a third energy or vital breath (*petào*) that gave rise to everything that exists in the universe, in the cosmos, and the existing life on the planet. To arrive at this concept, located in the phraseme *xi-quèla*, or *cilla-quèla*, light-obscurity, I had to start from the analysis of myths about darkness-light, fire-water, sun-moon, etc., found among the Mayas, Mixtecs, and Zapotecs. A significant portion of these myths was recovered by Miguel Bartolomé (2021), who tells us that "day and night, light and obscurity, fire and water, sun and moon, constitute a very ancient archetype that appears in various mythologies worldwide, making it a universal theme" (Bartolomé 2021, p. 29).

In the precolonial *Vindobonensis Codex of the Mixtecs* concerning cosmogonic myths on page 52, it can be interpreted that in "the year and day of darkness and gloom, before there were days or years, the whole world was in great obscurity, everything was chaos and confusion" (Krickeberg 2022 [1968], p. 138). In the beginning, "everything was darkness and then came the light" (Ortiz 2006). From darkness emerges light -the primordial counterpart of obscurity- and with it time-space, days, and nights. "The Mixtec origin myth follows this scheme: at first there was darkness, for then light would come, in the midst of confusion the primeval gods arrive, who will give birth to the other gods" (Terrazas-Tello 2017, p. 88). Friar Gregorio García tells us that "on the Day of darkness and gloom, before there were Days or Years, the world being in great obscurity, everything was a chaos and confusion" (García 1729 [1607], p. 327).

The Maya-Quiché tale from the *Popol Vuh* (2019 [1701-1703]) tells us: "Everything was suspended, in complete calm, without moving, with nothing

existing, neither time nor space [...]. There was still nothing together, nothing made any sound, everything was immobile [...]. There was only silence, rest in darkness [...]. Then [came] the Word [...]. And everything was made in the midst of darkness" (Popol Vuh 2019 [1701-1703]), pp. 21- 22). Víctor de la Cruz gathered some oral accounts in his book *Ti Libana Nuchsschi'lu* (A Hidden Marital Discourse); in which important foundational myths are collected to celebrate the marriage of man (sun-light-fire) and woman (moon-darkness-water) in Zapotec culture.

It is the original darkness. The air is going to blow, and it is here where the light comes. She, our mother, binds this marriage. They entered, raised their faces, and found the light of the creative breath. Ha! Only then did they find it, intelligence guided them until they beheld the sky and reached where God is (Orozco cited by De la Cruz 2007, p. 146).

From "the original darkness. The air is going to blow, and it is here where the light comes" (Orozco cited by De la Cruz 2007, p. 146) emerges the earth and life. In this cosmogonic context, I understand the air as the creator's breath, the vital energy that emerges with the birth of light, the living fire. I propose the following scheme: from darkness will emerge light, and from light, the vital breath. The wind or vital energy is associated with the appearance of the sun. However, the "light of the creator's breath" (De la Cruz 2007, p. 154) comes from the primordial darkness. So, what is darkness? and how to understand its pre-original qualities before the emergence of light and vital energy.

In Nahuatl philosophy, there is a self-generating force that appears implied in the term "*moyocoyatzin*: *Ayac oquiyocux*: 'no one made or invented it; *ayac oquipic*: 'no one gave it being or form [...], *Moyocoyani* 'the one who invents himself" (León-Portilla, 1977 [1956], p. 165, p. 170), Darkness is the uncaused energy that gives origin to everything, but it itself has no origin, beginning, or end. I can say that darkness 'no one invented or gave it form; it exists beyond all time and place' (León-Portilla, 1977 [1956], p. 170), as it contains time and space within itself before the creation of everything.

The notion of darkness is found in the Zapotec word "*quèla*" or "*quèela*" as recorded by Friar Córdova in the ancient Zapotec of the Oaxaca Valley, meaning "to be the being of anything" (folio 377, column 3) or "night the night" (folio 283, column 2). In studies conducted by the Zapotec philosopher Gregorio López y López (1955, 1947), readers are told that "*quèla*," or "*guenda*" and/or "*guela*" as

is pronounced in the Istmo Zapotec, is darkness or depth, meaning something that is deep, great, profound, or far from light. Additionally, López y López tells us that "guenda" is "a unitary and absolute whole in which things are found as parts [...], the unity from which all things emerge" (López y López 1955, p. 89).

The primordial darkness is seen as a unitary whole that contains everything and where all originates, being the original unity and the principle from which everything emerges. It is described as an "unfathomable energy" (López y López 1961, p. 15) or an "eternal source of creative power" (León-Portilla 1979 [1956], p. 177). The darkness represented by the term "*quèla*" contains the "idea of motherhood: the gravity of things manifesting everywhere. The principle is mother, she is "the mother of all things in labor"... an unfathomable energy that produces, gives birth, and generates all things. Therefore, "Guenda gives birth to everything; it gives birth to actions, thoughts, gives birth to the world and to God. Moreover, what can we talk about if not what being gives birth to? Even more: being (guenda) also gives birth to language itself, gives birth to the word, gives birth to the logos" (López y López 1961, p. 16) gives birth to light.

Our wise Zapotec, Wilfrido C. Cruz, was probably the first and only one to say that darkness (*quéla*) and light (*cilla*) are the metaphysical foundation of Zapotec mentality. The "words *cilla* and *guéla* constitute the pillars of a transcendental dualism in Zapotec mythology" (Cruz 1946, p. 58) that encompasses both their actions and their being. The relationship between darkness and light is, in my view, the philosophical foundation of the Zapotecs. This is what I will argue throughout this article.

3. Darkness and Light. Essence and fundamental concepts.

Let's examine darkness as the first primordial force that gives rise to everything. Gregorio López y López, in a small text titled Zapotec Philosophy (1955), initially presents some of the central concepts of *binnigulaza* thought. One of them is the notion of *quèla*, *guèla* or *guenda*, as it is called in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which basically means darkness, night, but also connotes depth and unknowingness. In Juan de Córdova's vocabulary, I find the term *quèla* as "to be the being of anything" (folio 377, column 3), although the linguistic function of "*quèla*" is to serve as a "nominative" and "verbal noun" according to the *Arte de la lengua zapoteca* (2023 [1578]). But what does it mean to be the being of anything? As I can see in this complex translation, the words "being" and "the

being" appear twice, as two constitutive moments of the same unit associated with primordial darkness.

I want to propose a hypothesis of reading here, and I believe that the first being (*quèla* or *guenda*) is associated with darkness, and the "being" (*cilla* or *pèanij*) is linked to light. The unity of both shows the essence of anything. Darkness is being or the essence of the being of anything. In modern Zapotec from the Isthmus, it is said *xiya-guéla* (*xilla-quèla*) or *xerá-guéla* when the night is ending, clearing, or becoming light during the dawn process. Our hypothesis is that darkness is being (the primordial essence) and the "being" is the light that constitutes the fundamental unity (*xilla-quèla*) of darkness cleared by the sun at dawn. This is what I will argue in the following pages.

For Gregorio López y López, the absolute and total notion, the deepest and most universal, the most abstract and general concept found within Zapotec thought is expressed by the term "GUENDA" (López y López 1955, p. 4) or "*quèla*" as recorded by Córdova in the Oaxaca Valley. López y López arrived at this reconstruction of "*guenda*" through the analysis of the language, noting that this term is used in many linguistic expressions such as *guenda-nabani*, *guenda-róo*, etc. Córdova, in his work *Arte del idioma zapoteco* (1886 [1578]), emphasizes the importance of "*quèla*" by stating that it serves as a "nominative" and "verbal name" given that "*quela*, has countless meanings and such strength that wherever it is employed, it carries meanings along with it, and brings everything together" (Córdova 1886 [1578]), p. 106). In the *Arte del idioma zapoteco*, Córdova notes that "*quela*" primarily means "until" or "until that" (Córdova 1886 [1578]), p. 106) or "it signifies the being of man or his property, xiquela peni" (Córdova 1886 [1578]), p. 106).

"Why is *quèla* or *guenda* considered the deepest and most universal notion found in the Zapotec thought? And how is being related to darkness?" I searched in Córdova's vocabulary and found that *quèla* or *quèela* means "at night" (folio 117, column 1), it also means "property or essence of anything" (folio 330, column 2) or "essence or being" (folio 187, column 3). Darkness is being, the unity from which everything is born and originates. But what is darkness? It is the deep, the profound, where light cannot reach and therefore remains as an incomprehensible, deep, unknown zone.

The darkness is the originating unity from which everything is born, the being, the principle from which everything sprouts, emerging into the light. But what is this being and how does it relate to darkness? One of the few words recorded by

Father Córdova for "being" is "*titacacani*," which was translated as "being" (folio 377, column 3). "Now, the access we have to delve into the semantics of this word is the Zapotec language, and we are going to attempt to break down the word in the following way: *ti-taca-cani* or *pita càca-ni* according to Córdova's analytical separation". It was found that "*titacaca*" was recorded as "happen something by occurring" (folio 389, column 3) or "occur" (folio 005, column 2). The lexical unit "*taca*" was translated as "power verb. s[cilicet]. power to make give" (folio 318, column 2), and in the variant of Zapotec spoken in Comitancillo, Oaxaca, Mexico, it is said "*ràca*" or "*gàca*," which means "to do." The linguistic unit "*taca*" was also recorded as "being or becoming. s[cilicet]. thread. Fis" (folio 217, column 1), or with the action of "throw the ball or bounce" (folio 059, column 3) or "to engender being with union" (folio 166, column 4). The particle "*ti*" or "*pi*" as referred to by Córdova in the analytical separation of the word, "*pi*" or "*bi*" as it has been vocalized in the Zapotec of the Isthmus, means air or wind, related to vital breath (*pi*, *pee*).

Meanwhile, the following lexical unit *cani* has several equivalents, such as "for, beyond, or too much". s[cilicet]. *es*" (folio 321, column 4) or "more" (folio 259, column 3), *tacaca* means "to get used to or use something" (folio 008, column 2), perhaps related to what is done or the action of doing or being. The first semantic link I find in the root *taca* or *ràca* of the verb "to be" is "to do," and doing encompasses the concepts of "[...] to be able to do to give" (folio 318, column 2); being is power, ability, and giving. In the Proto-Zapoteco of Kaufman, the particle *taca* was reconstructed as follows: "akka (N,C,S;Ch) vC to be able, to be capable//to be possible; to happen, to occur, to become//to happen" (Kaufman 2016 [1993], p. 11). Being and power are related, like the force to do, move, happen, or occur something. Let's remember that the term *titaca+cani*, which translates to "being" (folio 377, column 4), has other equivalents; for example, *tita-càca* is recorded as "to happen as an event" (folio 389, column 3), it is also found as "to occur" (folio 005, column 2) or that which happens, occurs, or appears.

Semantically, being is associated with doing, with the power to give, as the action of happening, occurring, or what appears as fact or given. Thus, the lexical unit "*càni*" also refers to being and doing, and when it is combined with the expression "*ni-càca-ni*," it is translated as "that which is to come, what is to be" (folio 422, column 1). In the variant of Zapotec spoken in Comitancillo, "*ni-càca-ni*" has been sonorized as "*ni-gàa-cani*," which is understood as that which must be done or what should be done, carried out at the moment or in the future of an

action; it once again indicates the action of doing something, the power to do, give, or carry out an act. Being here is associated with the power to do or the impulse to make something happen. Now, the lexical unit "*taca*," which I mentioned has been sonorized as "*ràca*" in the Zapotec of Comitancillo and refers to doing or accomplishing something, has also been sonorized as the expression "*nàca*," which in the variant of Zapotec spoken in the Isthmus means "I" or "what I am." The root "*nà*" or "*naa*" as recorded by Córdova means "mom mother of child" (folio 255, column 4) and interestingly, the beginning of being, of the self or what I am, is the mother, so "*naa*" was recorded as "I" (folio 236, column 3). In the Zapotec of Comitancillo, the particle "*naa*" has been sonorized as "*ñaa*," whose semantic equivalence is "mother."

Gregorio López y López, in his analysis of "*guenda*" or "*quèla*," tells us that the "Principle is mother, is gozaana of all things [...], motherhood: the pregnancy of things manifesting everywhere. The always imminent birth [...], revealed at every step its inexhaustible energy impregnating things with unprecedented violence" (López y López 1955, p. 90). This inexhaustible energy of the always imminent birth, or what always does or gives, can be found in the term "*táca-ca-tija*," which translates as "to endure always or infinitely something" (folio 148, column 2). *Tàca* has been sonorized in the Zapotec of Comitancillo as "*ràca*" or "*nàca*," which means to do (*ràca*) or I am (*nàca*), and the lexical unit "*ca-tija*" has been sonorized as "*catija*," which means that which is repeated, over and over, and I find it in the vocabulary as "enduringly" (folio 310, column 4), "enduring thing" (folio 310, column 4), or simply "perpetually or continuously" (folio 411, column 3); by adding both grammatical units, "*táca*" (to be or to do) and "*catija*" (enduringly), I could translate it as that which perpetually [*catija*] or continuously is [*táca*] or is done [*táca*] enduringly [*catija*], the "inexhaustible energy" (López y López 1961, p. 15) or "eternal source of creative power" (León-Portilla 1979 [1956], p. 177) of what continuously does, gives, grants, or bestows. The term "*nicatija*" means "infinite without end" (folio 234, column 1) or "enduring thing thus" (folio 148, column 2). The maternal principle is the force that gives, does, and accomplishes; it is energy, power, force of giving, birthing, engendering. The one who gives birth is the mother, the womb of the earth, the primordial darkness.

For example, the terms *xi+àa* or *xi+na-yàa* are translated as "to be iterum, the being that each one or creation has, and it is also taken as essence." (folio 377, column 4), the being is what each person has in their making, in their constitution, that is, the essence or essential part of anything. In the *Arte del idioma zapoteco*,

Córdova tells us that "to say, the being of one, they say. *xijnacapeni*. L. *xiquelapeni*" (Córdova 1886 [1578], p. 42). Therefore, the term *xi+n+àca-ni* is translated by Córdova as "to be the essence of anything" (folio 377, column 3), that is, the essence that constitutes anything. In Comitancillo Zapotec, *xi+n+àca-ni* has been sonorized to *xhi-nácani*, and is used to ask what does that mean. Thus, 'being' is the maternal principle (*xi* or *chij*), the clean essence (*na-yàa*) with which things are made. However, in this complex linguistic construction *xi+na-yàa* include not only being, darkness (*quèla*), but the-being, light, (*péa-nij* or *cilla*), its primordial counterpart, the sun, the clarity (*na-yàa*) of what is clear (*chij-yàa*) in the primordial darkness. Now, the term *xi+n+àca-ni*, which has the same semantic equivalence as *quèla* (darkness), is translated by Córdova as "to be the essence of anything" (folio 377, column 3). The particle *xi*,³ I consider it as the linguistic apocope of the lexical unit *chij*, which is translated as "day" (folio 138, column 4) or "time generally" (folio 400, column 4). For example, the morpheme *yy* has the same sonorization and the same semantic equivalence "day" (folio 138, column 4), *chèe* is also "day" (folio 138, column 4) and *copijcha*, which refers to the sun, is also translated as "day" (folio 138, column 4).

As for the morpheme *yàa*, it is translated as "recent thing or fresh" (folio 359, column 3), referring to what is green, fresh, like the clarity of dawn. In the variant of Zapotec from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, it is used to indicate what is clean (*na-yàa*), also what is high (*na-yaà*), up, meaning towards the sun, the generator of clarity and the clearing of darkness at dawn. From now on, in all linguistic constructions of being (darkness) and the-being (light), we will see the following lexical particles: *xi*, *chij*, *chee*, *xee*, *ci-lla*, or *chij-yàa*, as grammatical particles that refer to light, clarity, and dawn. In this sense, the particles *xi*, *chij*, *chèe* or *xèe*, and *cilla*, signify day, clarity, dawn, associated with the sun (*copijcha*), and it can be understood that the-being is the principle of light that opens, clears the original darkness at dawn.

The particles *xi* or *chij*, *chèe* or *xee*, *xi-lla* or *cilla*, are used to translate "day," and when the particle *xi* is combined with the morpheme *tèe*, I find *xi+tée* indicates "origin" (folio 295, column 1) or "beginning of everything" (folio 327, column 4), undoubtedly associated with dawn, the clearing of darkness by the sunlight. David

³ According to Velma Picket (2013), the particle "*xi*" evolved into "*xti*," serving as a possessive prefix. For us, "*xi*" can be a contraction of "*chij*"; "*xi*," "*ci*," "*yy*" can be contractions of "*chij*," and "*xee*" of "*chèe*." The terms "*xi-lla*" or "*cilla*" are used to translate as "day." The day or the dawn associated with the day is the origin or principle.

Tavares tells us that "the majority of the manuals used *xila* or *xilla*. This term could mean 'clarity', 'gift', 'cotton', or 'feather'" (Tavares 2022, p. 109) linked to the clarity or brightness of the sun and feathers with altitude. The morpheme *tee* has several equivalences, in this translation context I choose "ash" (folio 105, column 2); in Comitancillo Zapotec, *xi-tèe* is said to the ash left by embers, that is, what remains after the fire. The origin is associated with dawn, with the emergence of light, the clearing of darkness. The term *xi+llàa* has several meanings, some of its equivalences are "heat generally" (folio 068, column 2) or "heat of the sun that has in itself" (folio 068, column 2), and it is related to the principle (*xi*) of clarity, of what is clean (*llàa* or *yàa*) generated at dawn by the sun. The generating force of dawn was recorded by Father Córdova as [*coqui-*]*cilla-tào*, [*coqui-*] *xèe-tào*, or *coquixèe coquicilla*, which all have the same translation "infinite and beginningless god. They called him without knowing who" (folio 140, column 4). The lexical unit *coqui* was recorded as "lord of caste" (folio 377, column 2) or "great lord" (folio 377, column 2). Whereas the particle *xèe* appears with the following equivalences: "totally" (folio 407, column 2) or "eternal thing or eternal" (folio 192, column 3). According to Eduard Seler, "*xee* and *cilla* are synonymous. They are regularly used together as a compound, with the meaning of 'principle,' 'origin'." (Seler 2001, p. 16).

The morpheme *çoo* was translated as "time generally" (folio 400, column 4), and *quij* is "fire" (248, column 4) or "fire" (folio 201, column 3). The term *ci-llàa* or as I currently say in Comitancillo Zapotec *chij-yàa* is a clear day, *chij* is "time generally" (folio 400, column 4) or "day" (folio 138, column 4), and *yàa* is "recent or fresh thing" (folio 359, column 3), meaning a recent, fresh day, or the recent time of dawn. And the augmentative ending *tào* means "very, very early, very truly, very big, very morning" (folio 277, column 4), referring to the greatness, the supreme, and the sacredness of dawn, the clearing of the night. David Tavares tells us that "tao means 'great, sacred, grand'" (Tavares 2022, p. 140). By collecting the meanings of Zapotec, I can say that *co-quij* is the lord (*co* or *çoo*) of fire (*quij*), of the great (*tào*) day (*chij*), clean, clear (*yàa*). It is the great (*tào*) lord (*co* or *çoo*) of the time (*chij*) fresh, new, clean (*yàa*) of the dawn (*ci-llàa* or *chij-yàa*), considered a god, "totally" (folio 407, column 2), great, generator of time, fire, heat, day, and clarity.

Victor de la Cruz (2007) locates said luminosity or "the creator principle: *Lòo Copijcha* (sun-face)" (De la Cruz 2007, p. 138) in the face/eye (*lòo*) of the sun (*copijcha*). Linguist Eduard Seler defined the solar star as "the creator deity that is

also the soul, the spirit, the living principle of all things and the lord of the morning [...] and of the twilight of the evening, who is also designated by the interpreter as the first light that illuminated the earth" (Seler 2001, pp. 16-17), cleared the night and gave clarity to the world. There are two primordial forces that sustain the order and structure of Zapotec philosophy: darkness and light. Darkness, which becomes a pre-creator energy that "contains everything within itself" (Lara-González 2004) where "everything was in complete calm, there was no time, no space, and nothing was standing" (Popol Vuh 2019 [1701-1703]). From the "original darkness, light is born" (Ortiz 2006) as some interpret page 52 of the *Codex Vindobonensis*. A first force, darkness, associated with primordial waters, the moon, women and fertility, will have preeminence, since being is feminine, it is the force that gives birth, sprouts, because from it light is born, the clarity of the world. In the primordial darkness there was still no time, space, light, etc., but everything was contained in it as "the germ of all things" (Popol Vuh 2019 [1701-1703]). As the cosmogony of the Mixtecs has told us, in the "beginning there was darkness, so that later the light would come," (Terrazas-Tello 2017, p. 88).

There are two sacred forces or energies that constitute the metaphysical support of the entire Zapotec thought system. On one hand, we have the primordial darkness, associated with primordial waters, women, fertility, the humid, and childbirth. And on the other hand, we have the light, associated with the sun, the fire of life, men, virility, the dry, and procreation. This is "the creator deity or the androgynous god that unfolds into creative duality" (De la Cruz 2007, p. 143) to engender and generate life. There are two elemental forces: *pitào cozáana*, associated with the father fire, and *pitào huichàana*, related to the mother of primordial waters. I find that *cozáana* has the following equivalences: "creator or maker of all animals" (folio 098, column 3), "mother who begets or gives birth" (folio 252, column 3), or "begetter who begets or gives birth" (folio 167, column 1).

The term *pi+tào co+zàana* is translated as "creator or maker of all animals" (folio 098, column 3), "god of hunting" (folio 141, column 1), or "god of the animals to whom hunters and fishermen sacrificed so they would help them" (folio 141, column 1). Eduard Seler believes that "*Pitào Coozáana* or *Coozáana tào* can be translated as the engenderer or supreme father" (Seler 2001), associated with the sun, light, the man who hunts for sustenance, and "*Pitào huicaana* as 'goddess of generation,' the supreme partner of the sun" (Seler 2001). I found that *huichaana* is recorded as "creator of men and fish in this way" (folio 098, column 3) and "god

or goddess of children or of generation to whom women in labor offered sacrifices" (folio 141, column 1), related to primordial waters. Thus, for example, the lexical unit *huechaana* can also be understood as "water, the element of water" (folio 014, column 2), the humid, the woman.

While *Pitào Coozàana* is associated with the sun, the sustainer of all, *copijcha*, which was translated as "solar planet" (folio 383, column 1) or "day" (folio 138, column 4) and *huechaana* associated with primordial waters, or *cocijo*, "god[ess] of the rains" (folio 141, column 2), of the primordial waters, *niça* means "water" (folio 014, column 2). Water (*niza*) is associated with darkness (*quèla*) and the sun (*copijcha*) or fire (*chij*) with light. Interestingly, light, in its linguistic construction, integrates darkness (*quèla*) as a nominalizer; for example, *pianij-quela nayànij* or [*pianij-quela*] *xianij* is "light" (folio 249, column 2), which means that from darkness (*quela*) comes light (*pianij*), the clarity (*nayànij*) of the light of dawn (*pianij*), or the light (*pianij*) clears the darkness (*quela*) to illuminate (*xianij*) with its light. "The king star forms the day and the night; it generates with its apparent course over the horizon, time; it is the author of the life of all beings that fill the earth" (Cruz 1946, p. 49).

Fire-water and light-darkness are the two primary forces that engender and generate everything. The relationship fire-water, light-darkness is the essential unity that structures and orders the philosophy of the Zapotecs. Where we can see the union of both primary forces or energies, *quèla*, associated with darkness, and *chij*, *xi* or *na-yàa* at the beginning (*xi*), to the clean (*na-yàa*), to the clarity of the sun (*copijcha*), is in the following linguistic construction: *xi+quela-na+yàa* which is translated as "essence of man or thing" (folio 187, column 3), "being once more, the being that each one has or is made, and also taken as essence" (folio 377, column 4).

The term *quela* or *quèla*, as I have mentioned in previous pages, is "night the night" (folio 283, column 2) or "at night" (folio 117, column 1). While the last lexical unit *nayànij* was recorded as "luminous thing" (folio 248, column 4), "illuminated" (folio 024, column 3), "radiant" (folio 356, column 2), "shining thing" (folio 350, column 1) or "white thing with radiance" (folio 056, column 1). If I further divide the word *nayànij* into three morphemes *na-yà-nij*, I can say that the particle *na* or *náa*, means "mom mother of child" (folio 255, column 4) or principle and support; the particle *yà*, in the context of this translation, may be a suffix of adverbial derivation, and can be used to add or determine the clarity, the green, or the freshness of anything, undoubtedly associated with dawn. Córdova simply

translates *ya* or *yàa* –without delving into– as "bath of fire or heat like an oven" (folio 419, column 1) or "fresh recent meat or fish or such" (folio 200, column 3). The particle *nij*, was recorded as "murmur of people that sounds and is not understood what they say or is" (folio 278, column 2), specifically it is the "root of the verb speak" (De la Cruz 2007) which alludes to speaking or the action of speaking, manifesting or saying something in that process of clarity that produces light.

For example, if I divide the expression *nayà+nij* into two particles: *nayà* or *nayàa* means "clean thing water, clothing, glass, or mat, etc." (folio 245, column 4), "clear thing not turbid" (folio 077, column 2), "white or clear thing" (folio 056, column 1), and when it is "white thing with brilliance" (folio 056, column 1) it appears or is shown, all thanks to it, as "form or figure" (folio 199, column 3) like a "new thing" (folio 284, column 3), "pretty thing" (folio 246, column 2) or as "beautiful thing" (folio 053, column 3). And the root *nij* or *nñij*, as I have said refers to speech and day, so the clean is also in speech, in the word, in understanding.

It is important remember that the word "light" was recorded by Córdova as *pianij*, or more properly as *pea-nij*. The particle *pea* has many equivalences, including "style, mode, or manner, or custom" (folio 190, column 2) or as "property or being of any object" (folio 330, column 2), and in this context of translation, it can be understood as the being of anything, or the essence (*pea*) of speech (*nij*). Now, if I subdivide the lexical unit *pe-a* into two more elementary particles, *pe* or *pee* is "wind or air" (folio 425, column 4), "soul or spirit" (folio 022, column 4) or "spirit or breath" (folio 186, column 4), the suffix *-a* accompanies the lexeme *pe-a* to indicate, in a grammatical function, that this force or breath is the essence or way of being of someone. And the lexeme "*nij* is the root of the verb 'to speak'" (De la Cruz 2007). So, light is the force or impulse of speaking, of clarifying, clearing with words. Light is also integrated in the linguistic construction of life, where *ti+çòo-pàni-a* means "to have life" (folio 425, column 3), and *ti+çòo-nàa-ya* has the same translation "to have life" (folio 425, column 3).

The particle *ti* serves in this context of translation as a habitual prefix to particularize or delimit something, for example in the Zapotec variant of Comitancillo, *ti-huachij*, it means one (*ti*) afternoon (*huachij*); the lexical unit *çòo* is "generally time" (folio 400, column 4) or "what usually happens" (folio 189, column 2), and in the *Arte del idioma zapoteco* (1886 [1578]), Córdova tells us that *çòo*, in its grammatical function, is a temporal adverb, *pàni-a* or *pea-nij* is to live or light, so *napani* means "resurrected or alive" (folio 357, column 3). The term

napani not only indicates the living, but also when involved in the linguistic construction of light and speech, it means "sharp or diligent" (folio 015, column 1) in understanding, in thought, in speech. In both cases, the lexical units *pàni-a* and *nàa-ya* refer to life, and in our context of translation of the Zapotec of the Isthmus, to cleanliness (*nàa-ya*), to the clarity opened by light (*pea-nij*). In the Zapotec variant of Comitancillo, *bèa-nij*, it means to see or look, indicating that the look or seeing is possible in the clearing, in the cleanliness (*nàa-ya*) opened by light; *xe-yáani-guéla* is translated as the night is clearing, it's dawn. Light is associated not only with speech, but also with life and seeing in the cleared, in the clarity of dawn. Life, speech, and seeing are possible thanks to the clarity of light that clears the darkness.

In the beginning, let us remember that it is "the original darkness [after it]. The air will blow, and it is here where the light comes." (Orozco, cited by De la Cruz 2007, p. 146). The air or vital breath is associated, as I have shown, with the light. However, in our view, following the scheme indicated by the *Popol Vuh* and the *Codex Vindobonensis*, first there is darkness and then comes light, and from it, vital breath is born or comes along with it. Light is a manifestation of the energy of life, of vital heat. Therefore, the third concept in the philosophy of the Zapotecs that articulates both is the term *Pe-tào* or *Pi-tào*. *Pe-tào* is "the breath of life, the basic force in living beings that drives to remain and preserve life" (Cruz 1935a, 1935b, 1946, De la Cruz 2007; Marcus 2008).

Francisco de Burgoa interprets the lexical unit *pi-tào* as the "soul of the world" (Burgoa 1989 II [1674]) or the "great breath" (Cruz 1935a, 1946) that sustains all things with life. In Zapotec philosophy, everything "that breathes and speaks has life. Life is breath and breath is air. According to the Zapotecs, this element is essential for the existence of all beings and so important that from a transcendental, psychic, and mythological point of view" (Cruz 1946, p. 126). In Córdova's vocabulary, *pi-tào* appears as "true living God" (folio 140, column 4) from his Christian perspective. Although Joyce Marcus (2008) considers that "*pe-tào* or *pi-tào*, is not a God with Christian properties, but an animated vital force that is in all things." Breaking down *pe-tào*, I can say that *pe* or *pee* is "breath" (folio 022, column 2) "spirit or breath" (folio 186, column 4) or "soul of someone" (folio 029, column 2). In the Isthmus Zapotec, the lexical unit *pe* or *pèe* has been sonorized into *be* or *bi*, which colloquially means air or wind. In fact, the grammatical root that generally implies mobility and action in animals, plants, and

all natural beings and phenomena "is pe, pi, be, bi, a name for air, breathing, the element that animates everything that lives or moves" (Cruz 1946, p. 47).

The intensification particle "tào" was recorded as "very, very before, very truly, very big, very early morning" (folio 277, column 4), which functions as a grammatical augmentative ending to indicate that something is very big, superior, high, or supreme. If I gather the senses of both morphemes, pe+tào or pi+tào literally means breath (pe) supreme (tào), "great breath" (Wilfrido 1935a, 1946) or, by semantic transposition, energy/impulse (pe) sacred (tào). For example, I can see more clearly, in the lexical unit penepàa, the conceptualization of pe-tào as energy/breath that propels or moves something, which was translated by Córdova with the following meanings: "life - the vital principle, in the animal, or in the man who moves and gives life" (folio 425, column 3), "spirit - the one that gives life to what lives and gives it motivating virtue and being" (folio 186, column 4), "polr of our heart" (folio 323, column 3) or "pulse - that which makes it beat, which is the virtue" (folio 333, column 2). But it was also recorded in Córdova's vocabulary as "generative virtue in women" (folio 427, column 2), "motivating and vegetative virtue" (folio 427, column 2), "power or generative or productive force that every seed has" (folio 323, column 3) or simply as "virtue of any natural thing that gives it being" (folio 427, column 3).

Pe-tào is the great (*tào*) being (*pe*), the great breath, the supreme spirit that animates all things to emerge, to remain alive, it is the vital principle that keeps all things alive created by the relationship of darkness/light in the cosmos and fire/water on the earth. *Pe-tào* is the great breath contained in the primordial darkness, which when producing light, generates the vital breath of all things. *Pe-tào* is what holds together, in a moving trinity, the darkness and the light; the vital breath (*pe-tào*) is the third co-primeval element that puts in differential and complementary relationship darkness (*quèla*) and light (*pea-nij*). Mathematically, darkness would be the One, the cosmic egg that contains everything, and light would be the Two, the cosmic unfolding of light, to generate the Three, the breath, the vital energy contained in the original darkness and that becomes manifest or visible when light emerges. The vital breath is the third binding force that simultaneously unites and separates light and darkness, generating life. Conceptually, darkness could be the Tloque Nahuaque that Francisco Javier Clavijero translated as "one who has everything within himself" (Clavijero 1917, p. 254). From the darkness that "has everything within itself," light emerges, and

from this emerges the great vital breath that sustains and maintains life, which is why I speak of "the light of the creator breath" (De la Cruz 2007, p. 146).

Philosophically, darkness represents stillness, as stated in the *Popol Vuh*, where it is mentioned that initially "everything was in complete calm, there was no time and space, and nothing was standing" (2019 [1701-1703]); and from this stillness emerges movement, that is, light, heat, and from it, emerges the relationship that keeps together the opposition between darkness and light. In other words, it is the relationship (vital breath) that keeps movement (light) in stillness (darkness). Stillness (darkness-*quèla*) generates movement (light-*chij*), and this produces the relationship (vital order-*pe-tào*) that keeps united, but not completely together, both supreme forces (darkness/light) to sustain the energy of the cosmos and the vital order on earth. The fundamental unity of both forces can be seen in *chij, quèla* which Córdova translates as "day and night" (folio 138, column 4), light and darkness. That is why when both sacred energies, light and darkness, are united, it is called *xi+quela* or *chij-quèla*, which is translated as "being the being of anything" (folio 377, column 3). And when the being of light (*xi, cij, cilla, pea-nij*) and the being of darkness (*quèla*) are united with the great (*tào*) impulse (*pe/pèe*), or the vital breath (*pe-tào*), in this complex linguistic construction *xi+quela n+àca %dios*, it means "being the being of god" (folio 377, column 3), but not the Judeo-Christian God of Córdova, but the absolute unity, the third binding force, the vital breath (*pe-tào*) that unites and separates in movement the mother darkness/water and the father light/fire.

The vital breath (*pe-tào*) is what maintains the harmony of the opposing forces (*chij-quèla*), the balance of the vital order (*pe-tào*) that darkness (*quèla*) and light (*xi, cij, xilla, chèe, péanij*) have creatively generated in the universe and on planet Earth. The lexical unit *pe-tào* also signifies movement, which, along with light (*pej-nij*), moves and sustains things. *Quela nazàa* or *quela cànazàa* are translated as "movement," *quèla* is being or principle of action, doing, giving, and *nazàa* or *cànazàa* in the Zapotec language of the Isthmus means to walk or what is walking, what is in motion, in other words, alive (*na-pèa-nij*), or that which has life (*pe-tào*), life and movement have the same linguistic construction, *lé-cana-zàa* is "to live," what moves has life.

The third basic element is the breath (*pe* or *pèe*) or movement (*quela nazàa*), also recorded by Córdova as *xòo*, meaning "impetus" (folio 231, column 1), "earthquake" (folio 395, column 4), or more accurately as "effort of man with which he works, or vigor," (folio 083, column 4); in other words, the principle, the

force that moves and sustains everything. Therefore, we can talk about *pe-tào xòo*, the great (*tào*) breath (*pe* or *pèe*), of the force (*xòo*), of vital movement (*pe-tào xòo*), and since vital energy is contained in the primordial darkness and in the light that makes it emerge, I can speak of *pe-tào quèla* (dark energy) and *pe-tào copijcha* (light energy) and *pe-tào xòo* (energy of movement) as the fundamental forces that constitute the vital order of life.

An example of the relationship between darkness (*quèla*) and light (*peaj-nij*) can be seen in the linguistic construction of the word for "thought" in the Zapotec language. The term "*quela-ticij-lào-ni*," which translates to "thought like this" (folio 309, column 4), breaks down as follows: "*quela*" refers to darkness, "*ticij*" can be interpreted as a day, and "*lào-ni*" as in the eye in the center. Through semantic transposition, I could understand "*quela-ticij-lào-ni*" as putting the eye, the gaze, at the center of darkness and light, representing the essence from which all things are made. In the Zapotec language of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the word for thought is "*guenda-na-beá-ni*," or following the schema of the language from the Oaxaca Valley as written in the 16th century by Córdova, "*quèla-pea-nij*," which combines darkness (*quèla*) and light (*peanij*).

A philosophical interpretation of these two terms, "*quèla-peanij*," which construct the concept of thought, allows us to say that thought is made of darkness (*quèla*) - the deep, the incomprehensible - and light (*peanij*), which seeks to clarify the incomprehensible within the word, in the heart. Thought in the Zapotec language of the Isthmus consists of two forces: darkness (*quèla*) and light (*pèa-nij*) that create life (*na-pèa-nij*), but also enable seeing (*pèa-nij*) and speaking (*nij*). The clarification (*na-yàa*) of the darkness (*quèla*), the profound, the unknown, allows for seeing (*pèa-nij*), speaking (*pèa-nij*), and living (*na-pèa-nij*). Thought is the light of darkness that illuminates, cleanses, and clarifies, shining with the dawn (*ci-llà, xi-llà quèla*) life (*na-pea-nij*), sight (*pea-nij*), and speech (*nij*). Thought is what clears away (*na-yàa*) the darkness (*quèla*) to illuminate, brighten, clarify with light (*pea-nij*) in the clarity (*na-yàa*).

The wise individuals entrusted with understanding and interpreting the deepest part (*quèla* or *guenda*), the heart (*làchi*), and the organizing principles of the cosmos, nature, and mankind were called "natural philosophers" by Bernardino de Sahagún in the General History of the Things of New Spain (De Sahagún 1829 [1545], p. 341). These "nature sages" (Matus 1994, p. 27), as our Zapotec intellectual Macario Matus referred to them, played a fundamental role in the lives of the communities. Natural philosophers had profound knowledge of

the cosmos, Mother Earth, and human beings; they were considered wise, in other words, philosophers. Juan de Córdova recorded in the vocabulary the term "*peni tana-chij*" as "lover of philosophy" (folio 196, column 4), where "*peni*" is person, "*tana*" or "*nàna*" as rendered in the Comitancillo variant of Zapotec signifies to know or be aware, and "*chij*" as I have previously established is day, time, or light. Therefore, a philosopher is a person (*peni*) who knows (*tana*) about the day, light, or time (*chij*) or is a person (*peni*) of light, of the day (*chij*) who knows (*tana* or *nàna*).

Another complex linguistic construction, "*[peni-]na+còo-pèa-làchi quela na+ciña o pènilàchi-qui+chijño ticha-q[ue]che-là-yòo*," translates as "wise philosopher" (folio 196, column 4), where "*peni*" is the person who "*na+còo-pèa*" in the Comitancillo variant of Zapotec means "*na-gòo-bèa*," or one who measures or has the measure of things, in this case, the heart, the will, the desire (*làchi*) to keenly (*na+ciña*) know or be aware of the being or essence (*quèla*) of all things. Analogously, the philosopher is the person (*peni*) who has the will or desire (*làchi*) to know (*tana* or *nàna*) through the light (*chij*), the word (*ticha*) of all peoples (*q[ue]che*) of the earth (*là-yòo*).

In Proto-Zapotec, Fernández de Miranda (1995) reconstructs "**'za* (A, R, VA) *day*" (Fernández de Miranda 1995, 205), "*tza* (N, C, S; Ch) *s di*a//*" (Kaufman 2016 [1993], p. 48), and "**'za* (A, R, VA) *to walk*" (Fernández de Miranda 1995, p. 205). In the reconstruction of the word for sun in Proto-Zapotec, the particle "*tza*" also appears in its linguistic reconstruction as "*ko+ kwit za* (N, C, S, W; Ch) *s sun//sun; di*a//*" (Kaufman 2016 [1993], p. 48). Analytically, "*ko+ kwitza*" phonologically pairs with the Zapotec of the Oaxaca Valley as "*co[ko]-pij[kwi]-cha[tza]*" or "*co-pij-cha*," or "*go[ko]-bi[kwi]-cha[tza]*" or "*go-bi-cha*" in the variant of the Isthmus Zapotec; remember that the particle "*cha*" (*tza*) in Córdova's vocabulary means "all day" (folio 403, column 4). The morpheme "*tza*" or "*zà*" also comes in the linguistic construction of the sun ("*co-pij-cha*" or "*co-pij-tza*") where the particle "*tza*" or "*zà*" is day, undoubtedly referring to the sun, the philosophical foundation of time, day, walking, clarity, light; therefore, I maintain that the root "*tza*" is the day linked to the sun, in other words, the light. Therefore, I interpret "*binni-gula-za*" as the elderly people (*binni*) of the day (*za*), of the light (*za*), in other words, the wise old people, philosophers who have walked in time, in the light; hence the philosophy of the Zapotecs is essentially a philosophy of light.

4. Conclusions

Darkness is the energy that contains everything, it is the "original unity where everything is born" (López y López 1961) and from it, as stated in the precolonial *codex Vindobonensis and the Popol Vuh* (2019 [1701-1703]), comes light, its primordial partner that will accompany it to create everything that exists. Darkness (*quèla*) represents rest, and from rest arises movement, in other words, light (*xilla*, *peajnij*), heat, and from it, the vital breath (*pe-tào*) appears, maintaining the complementary and differential opposition between darkness and light. Rest (darkness) generates movement (light) and this produces the relationship, the vital order (*pe-tào*) that keeps unity, but not completely merged, both supreme forces (darkness/light) to sustain the energy of the cosmos and the vital order on Earth. *Pe-tào* is the great breath contained in the primordial darkness, which, by generating light, produces the vital force (*pe-tào*) of all things. *Pe-tào* is the vital energy that keeps unity, in a moving trinity, darkness and light; the life impulse (*pe-tào*) is the third elemental force that puts the complementary and differential relationship between darkness (*quèla*) and light (*pea-nij*) as the foundation of Zapotec philosophy.

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REVIEW OF *HOW TO BE GRATEFUL: AN AZTEC GUIDE TO THE ART OF GRATITUDE*

Translated and introduced by Frances Karttunen and Camilla Townsend
Princeton University Press, 2025

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Two of the world's foremost Nahuatlists, Frances Karttunen and Camilla Townsend, have teamed up to give us a flawless and highly readable English translation of the mid-sixteenth-century Nahuatl manuscript *How to be Grateful: An Aztec Guide to the Art of Gratitude*. (The original manuscript is untitled. Scholars commonly refer to it as the *Bancroft Dialogues* simply because of its ownership by the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley).¹ Karttunen and Townsend also offer readers an illuminating introduction chock full of details regarding the provenance and social-historical context of the text as well as interpretive tools needed for approaching the text. The English translation comes to roughly 65 pages, making it a very manageable size for teaching. Karttunen and Townsend are to be commended for including the original Nahuatl text side-by-side on opposing pages with their translation, thereby enabling more ambitious readers to compare the two. Nahuatl was the spoken language of the Mexica and of their neighbors in the central highlands of Mexico. Other Nahuatl-speakers included the Tlaxcalteca, Texcoca, Chalca, and Tepaneca. Although ethnically diverse (and often at war with one another), contemporary scholars refer to them generally as "Nahuas" and their shared philosophy as "Nahua Philosophy." Scholars sometimes use the term "Aztec" to refer to the Mexica alone, and other times to refer to all nearby Nahuas living in the central highlands of Mexico.

How to be Grateful makes available to scholars, instructors, and students a mid-sixteenth century, hybrid colonial document that presents indigenous Nahua moral thinking during the early days of *longue durée* of Conquest, colonization, and Christian evangelization. It also promises a glimpse into pre-Conquest Nahua ethics as well. Regarding the latter, however, one must proceed with extreme care

¹ Karttunen and Lockhart (trans & intro), *The Bancroft Dialogues* (1987).

(more anon). *How to Be Grateful*, as Karttunen and Townsend explain in their introduction, was one of a growing number of texts written in Nahuatl that were authored by native Nahuatl-speakers during the mid-sixteenth century. These were the first texts ever to be written in alphabetized Nahuatl seeing as pre-Conquest Nahuatl was not a written language. Although the Mexica and their neighbors had “books” and “writing,” these took the form of highly stylized glyphs, pictographs, and ideograms. Unfortunately, the lion’s share of these were immolated by Christian clerics seeking to extirpate all manner of past idolatry and replace it with Christian doctrine. Nahuatl thus only became lettered at the hands of the Franciscans and their native Christianized Nahuatl-speaking students and assistants, and only then principally—although not exclusively as Karttunen and Townsend -- in the service of imperial control and Hispano-Catholic conversion. Rarely, therefore, do we hear in the early colonial sources pre-Conquest Nahua voices unmediated or unaffected by the interests and consequences of colonization, conversion, policing, and extirpation.

The author of *How to Be Grateful*, who Karttunen and Townsend identify simply as “Pablo of Texcoco,” appears to have been one of a select few young native Nahuatl-speakers schooled by the Franciscans in written Spanish and Nahuatl.² Pablo hailed from Texcoco, a fellow Nahuatl-speaking, city-state (*altepetl*) that was allied with the Mexica and located across the Valley of Mexico on the eastern shores of Lake Texcoco. The denizens of Texcoco were ethnic Alcohua, not ethnic Mexica. Pablo himself lived one or two generations after the fall of Tenochtitlan (1521). The Nahua community in the valley of Mexico included elders who had survived the holocaust of invasion and plague and who retained memories of the pre-Conquest era. And yet, as Karttunen and Townsend explain, younger Nahuas “still lived very much within a [pre-Conquest] Nahua frame of reference” (p. xxix).

As Karttunen and Townsend tell it, Pablo’s text consists of conversations which Pablo “*had heard or read or imagined*” (p. xviii) (emphasis mine). It would seem, therefore, that *How to Be Grateful* should not be approached as a modern-style ethnography but more along the lines of a personal memoir consisting of real and imagined events, conversations, and people. This notwithstanding, the result was a text that “would ultimately convey to future generations the values of his

² For further discussion, see Burkhart (1989); Leeming (2022); Ríos Castaño (2014), and Maffie (2025).

people and the mental world they inhabited, one that revolved around gratitude to past generations and expectations of future ones" (p. xviii). What we find in *How to Be Grateful* are ordinary, daily conversations taking place within and across generations of Nahuas. Karttunen and Townsend point out that these conversations are united by a common thread: viz., gratitude towards others broadly construed as thankfulness, appreciation, and acknowledging the value of others' efforts. Nahua wisdom, they suggest, consists of "understanding oneself as a small part of a greater interdependent whole, not only of a living community but also of a collective constituted across generations" (p. xlvi). Although the conversations found in *How to be Grateful* do not make this clear, this greater living moral community also included what many contemporary anthropologists, Mesoamericanists, and indigenous scholars refer to as "other-than-human persons," i.e., earth, sun, moon, mountains lakes, animals, plants, and human artefacts such as statues, houses, cooking pots, digging sticks, and weapons.

Throughout *How to Be Grateful* we read dialogues in which Nahuatl-speakers express gratitude (as well as courtesy, appreciation, and respect); examples of Nahuatl-speakers demonstrating their gratitude in how they behave, talk, and treat others. What we see are *illustrations* of Nahuatl-speakers speaking to people before and after the Conquest. Conversing with one another in this manner was one of the ways both pre- and post-Conquest Nahuas actively promoted both personal and collective well-being and well-orderedness. The conversations also illustrate a wealth of other indigenous attitudes such as respect and concern for the well-being of others and the community. Accordingly, Karttunen and Townsend might also have appropriately entitled their translation *How to Be Respectful, How to Appreciate Others, or How to Act in a Manner that Produces Social Harmony*.³ We also read a sample of contemporary exhortations to young people regarding how they should behave (pp. 111-115)

What we do *not* find in *How to Be Grateful*, however, are dialogues in the *Socratic* sense of interlocutors exchanging syllogistic arguments "pro" or "con" regarding the moral status of gratitude. What we do *not* find are Western philosophical-style proofs aimed at *demonstrating* the moral value of gratitude and by such means convincing readers that they *ought* to be grateful. What we find instead are dialogues which aim at persuading people to be grateful *by example*. In this regard, then, what we find are dialogues that better resemble the

³ I owe this point to Alex Stehn (Mesoamerican Philosophy Reading Group (3/30/26)).

Analects of Confucius than the dialogues of Plato (e.g., *Gorgias*, *Crito*, or *Theaetetus*).⁴

Did Pablo compose this text for reading by future generations of literate Nahuas as well as Spaniards? Karttunen and Townsend imply as much. They stress that Nahuas such as Pablo did not operate solely as amanuenses to the Franciscans. Nahuas authored their own texts with their own purposes in mind, quite often unbeknownst to their Franciscan and Spanish overseers. Karttunen and Townsend write, "...sometimes they demonstrated clear Christian influence in their writings, but sometimes they simply wrote down what Nahua elders—who spoke no Spanish and knew little of Spanish culture -- wished them to record." *How to Be Grateful*, they conclude "demonstrates that [Pablo] could do both" (p. xxxii). This remark suggests that pre-Christian Nahua, Nahuatlized Christian, and Christianized Nahua speeches, concepts, and words are to be found side by side in the text. Disentangling them from one another (assuming one deems such a project fruitful if even possible) poses daunting challenges to scholars, instructors, and students alike. Karttunen and Townsend later remark (p. 159n18), "The purpose of these dialogues was partly to train clergy, to make them aware of polite forms and help them avoid being the object of mirth." This suggests that Pablo's principal intended audience (at least in the short term) consisted of literate Spaniards participating in the evangelical project and "spiritual conquest" of what is now Mexico. According to Karttunen and Townsend, the fact that the text's dialogical format was wholly alien to indigenous speech genres together with the didactic purpose of the text clearly indicate that "the original impetus" for writing *How to Be Grateful* "came from an outsider" (p. xl).

It seems therefore that Pablo was motivated *simultaneously* by the desire to record indigenous ways of talking and thinking about the world both before and after the Conquest, on the one hand, while also instructing Spanish clergyman how to speak Nahuatl properly so as to more effectively extirpate those very ways of talking and thinking about the world and replace them with new Christian ways, on the other. Karttunen and Townsend are fully aware of this apparent conflict. On the one hand, they write, Pablo's dialogues "serve the purposes of the Christian friars in the late sixteenth-century Mexico," while on the other hand, Pablo's "dialogues capture and convey a Nahua cultural framework" that Pablo

⁴ Greg Moses impressed this point upon me (Mesoamerican Philosophy Reading Group (4/27/26)).

“fervently wished to preserve for posterity” (p. xl). It would seem that these aims are at odds with one another, are they not? Regardless of how we choose to answer this question, the foregoing serves as evidence of Pablo’s own *agency* and *indigenous colonial perspective*—and thus serves as an instance of what Gerald Vizenor (White Earth Nation) calls indigenous “survivance” under colonialization.⁵ After all, Pablo writes what he himself has chosen to write. He is no mute dummy of Spanish ventriloquism.

Let’s take a closer look at the text. Karttunen and Townsend divide the original text into three parts (although no such divisions exist formally in the original). On what basis do they do so? They dub the first (pp. 5-29) and third (pp. 67-129) parts “The Present” seeing as they contain Pablo’s selection of contemporary, mid-sixteenth century dialogues among Nahuatl-speakers (including their ways of acting, behaving, talking, ways of greeting, exchanging pleasantries, of social interaction with others). The second part (pp. 30-65) entitled “The Past,” contains Nahua conversations from the pre-Conquest past. As mentioned above, Pablo’s text contains conversations that he “had heard or read or imagined” as well as selected and edited, and therefore do not amount to what we might think of as objective ethnographic reporting. Part II, according to Karttunen and Townsend, shows clear evidence of Pablo’s having read and drawn from materials culled in the 1550’s by Bernardino de Sahagún’s trilingual (Nahuatl, Latin, Spanish) Nahua assistants as part of Sahagún’s writing of Book VI of his magisterial, twelve-volume, bilingual Spanish-Nahuatl text, *General History of the Things of New Spain* (commonly known as the *Florentine Codex* (1578-79)).⁶

I suggest the first and third parts comprising “The Present” might appropriately be entitled, “A lesson in conversational Nahuatl, or how to speak to your parishioners like a Nahua while still thinking as a Hispano-Christian.” They present Pablo’s selection of proper Nahua ways of talking, greeting, exchanging pleasantries, and social interacting with others *through the normative lens of Christian morality*. What we see here are examples of conversations representative of everyday Nahua social life into which have been *interjected* Christian theological and Christian moral concepts and judgements. We also see Pablo aiming to instruct Spanish clergy on how to use Nahuatl effectively when

⁵ Gerald Robert Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice,” in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. University of Nebraska Press (2008), p. 1.

⁶ For supporting, argument, see Karttunen and Lockhart (trans) (1987), pp. 12-13.

speaking about Christian theology and morality and when passing moral judgments on Nahua behavior. In doing so Pablo employs what Ben Leeming calls “doctrinal discourse,” that is, the “language, both spoken and written, that was developed to communicate the dogmas of Hispano-Catholicism to the Indigenous people of New Spain.”⁷ As Leeming explains, doctrinal Nahuatl discourse consisted of the Nahuatl-Christian lexicon that was used to communicate the central concepts of Christianity to Nahuas. It was “a *bicultural*, hybrid linguistic discourse” based upon “the early intercultural exchanges of the 1520s through the 1540s.”⁸ We also witness clear examples of colonial discourse in Section II, “The Past,” albeit many fewer than in Parts I and III. Consequently, it would be a mistake to entitle Section II as “How Nahuas (really) spoke about things in the past.” Here, too, we see Pablo instructing Franciscan clergymen how to speak effectively to their Nahua parishioners and in so doing, participating in the Hispano-Catholic evangelical project by promoting his fellow Nahuas’ evangelization. If Pablo’s stated aim was to record faithfully how Nahuas spoke in a pre-Christian past, then he spoke disingenuously. Indeed, by importing language taken from contemporary colonial discourse into “The Past,” Pablo would appear to have been aiming at convincing colonial Nahuas that their ancestors employed Christianized Nahuatl concepts. Would they have known that these terms had been repurposed and *resemanticized* as part of the evangelical project?

How shall we understand Pablo’s text? Imagine a continuum of indigenous-authored, hybrid colonial discourse consisting of *Christianized* Nahuatl texts at one end, and *Nahuatlized* Christian texts at the other.⁹ What we find in Parts I and III of *How to Be Grateful* would seem to fall closer to the *Christianized* Nahuatl end of the spectrum, while Part II would seem to fall closer to the spectrum’s center. What’s more, although none of the works on this continuum authored by native Nahuatl-speakers are “authentically” pre-Conquest, one and all are nevertheless “authentically” Nahua, are they not? After the Conquest, we see Nahuas thinking and writing *as* Nahuas. We see active indigenous survivance, not passive

⁷ Ben Leeming, *Aztec Antichrist: Performing the Apocalypse in Early Colonial Mexico*. Louisville: Colorado University Press (2022), p. 92.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 111, 93 (emphasis mine).

⁹ For examples of what I consider to be *Nahuatlized* Christianity, see Leeming (2022) and Louise M. Burkhart, “The Amanuenses Have Appropriated the Text: Interpreting a Nahuatl Song of Santiago” in Brian Sawann (ed), *On the Translation of Native American Literatures* Washington, DC: Smithsonian (1992), pp. 339-355.

indigenous survival, as Vizenor argues.¹⁰ That is, we see Nahuas actively participating in the emergence of a post-Conquest, hybrid world. Needless to add, not all Nahuas participated in this project. Others, especially those in rural areas, resisted colonization and evangelization by continuing their old ways. They, too, were “authentically” Nahua.

Nahua doctrinal discourse, as Leeming explains, was generated in a variety of ways, two of which appear in *How to Be Grateful*. One consisted of creating neologisms in Nahuatl meant to express concepts that had no ready analogue in Nahua culture or language. Leeming cites for example, *cuaatequia*, “to throw water on the head,” for “baptism.” A second way involved repurposing already existing Nahuatl words to mean something new, something Christian. Here Leeming cites the Nahuatl word, *tlatlacolli* (*tlahtlacolli*), which as Louise Burkhart has shown, originally meant “spoilage or damage” but was repurposed to mean “sin.”¹¹ Pre-Conquest Nahua religion and ethics had no concept of sin, be it “original” (the sin of Adam) or “actual” (the sin committed by individuals).¹² (Pre-Conquest Nahua religion and ethics were also non-eschatological and non-soteriological.) As we’ll see below, Pablo uses “*tlatlacolli*” in this Christianized sense in a conversation occurring in “The Present.” The term does not appear in the conversations occurring in “The Past.” “The Past” also happens to be the section modeled after Sahagun’s Book VI, which purports to represent the pre-Conquest Nahua past. As Karttunen and Townsend point out, both Pablo’s “The Past” and Sahagun’s Book VI show irrefutable signs of Franciscan interference—albeit far, far less than other contemporary texts such as fray Juan Bautista Viseo’s *Huehuetlatolli*.¹³ Obviously, the degree of Christian editorial heavy-handed

¹⁰ See Vizenor, *Survivance* (2008).

¹¹ Leeming (2022), p. 93; Louise Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press (1989).

¹² Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth* (1989).

¹³ Karttunen and Townsend (p.146n30) argue that one of the most egregious instances of Franciscan manipulation is fray Juan Bautista Viseo’s *Huehuetlatolli* (Fray Juan Bautista Viseo, *Huehuetlatolli, que contiene las pláticas que los padres y madres hicieron a sus hijos y a sus hijas, y los señores a sus vasallos, todas llenas de doctrina moral y política*, México: s.n. [1601]). Although allegedly based upon fray Andrés de Olmos’ earlier (1547) collection of pre-Conquest Nahua *huehuetlatolli* or “wisdom discourses,” there is no evidence supporting the claim that Bautista’s collection of twenty-nine “wisdom discourses” actually included any of Olmos’ original *huehuetlatolli* (see: Julia Madajczak, “Sebastian Purcell: Discourses of the Elders. The Aztec Huehuetlatolli: A First English Translation,” *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* (2024); Andrew Laird, “Discourse of the Elders: The Aztec Huehuetlatolli: A First English Translation,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 01/14/25). Andrew Laird argues that even Olmos’ original text was already

editing, reconfiguration, and revision vary from one colonial-era text to the next, and even vary within one and the same text (as we see in *How to Be Grateful* and in Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*). Finally, what shall we make of the fact that Pablo restricts the lion's share of his terms taken from Nahua-Christian doctrinal discourse to "the Present"? Is Pablo implicitly (and intentionally?) indicating to his readers that these terms were *not* used in the pre-Conquest "Past," and that they are instead creations of the colonial Christian evangelical project? It is difficult to know. Yet it is important to remember that the conversations of "the Past" are not entirely free of colonial terms either.

So, what exactly are the evaluative terms taken from Christian-Nahuatl doctrinal discourse that Pablo employs in Parts I and III, "The Present"? By way of helping both readers and instructors navigate the hybridity of *How to Be Grateful*, I offer the following discussion of these Nahuatl terms and their Hispano-Christian *resemantization*.

(1) Page 9 of the text reads, "Beware lest you neglect yourselves; beware lest you follow the path of the rabbit, the deer; beware lest you fall from a precipice, lest you fall in the river." The corresponding Nahuatl phrases (p. 8) are: *tochtli*

heavily Christianized (Laird, *Aztec Latin* (2024), p. 181). Dr. Francisco de Loya (diocesan provisor for the indigenous peoples of Mexico City at the time) commented in his 1601 *Aprobación* of Bautista's text that Bautista "added and inserted new, important and necessary contents", with the consequence that "the twenty-nine speeches in Nahuatl and six translations in Spanish conveyed a Christian message and most of them addressed Christian themes (quoted in Laird, *Aztec Latin* (2024), p. 181; cf. also 94-5, 277-78).

Mónica Ruiz Bañuls argues that Bautista's collection essentially reproduces the *Proverbs of Solomon* and *Sirach* (or *Ecclesiasticus*) along the lines of the pedagogical prescriptions of Erasmus of Rotterdam, reflecting the influence of Erasmian humanism upon Franciscans at the time. (Mónica Ruiz Bañuls, *El huehuetlatolli como discurso sincrético en el proceso evangelizador novohispano del siglo xvi. Pról. de fray Francisco Morales OFM* (Rome: Bulzone Editore, 2009; see also Aysha Pollnitz, "Old Words and the New World: Liberal Education and the Franciscans in New Spain, 1536–1601," *Transactions of the Royal History Society*, 29 (2017), 142-46. For discussion of the influence of Erasmus upon Franciscan thought in Spain and Mexico, see Laird, *Aztec Latin* (2024) and Martin Austin Nesvig (editor and translator), *Forgotten Franciscans: Works from an Inquisitional Theorist, a Heretic, and an Inquisitional Deputy* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press (2011)).

As Julia Madajczak remarks, Bautista's huehuetlatolli is "the ideological work" of a sixteenth-century Spanish friar "pursuing an evangelizing and educational effort. Scraps of Nahua philosophy may still be lurking in [these] but the moral values and ideal behaviors they describe have been edited to become acceptable to Christians" (Julia Madajczak, "Sebastian Purcell: Discourses of the Elders. The Aztec Huehuetlatolli: A First English Translation," *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* (2024)). In sum, it would amount to a grievous error to see Bautista's profoundly Christianized text as a window into pre-conquest Nahua ethics.

("rabbit"), *macatl* ("deer"), *motepexihuiti* ("fall from a precipice"), and *anatoyahuia* ("to throw oneself into a river").¹⁴ As Karttunen and Townsend explain, these were traditional metaphors used for telling people to avoid mischief and not stray from the straight and narrow path. According to Burkhart, the Nahuas conceived deer and rabbits as creatures who lived unbalanced, erratic, unstable, and chaotic lives in disordered places such as wild grasslands.¹⁵ This was contrasted with the well-ordered, stable, balanced, and indeed "civilized" lives that walking upon the straight and narrow path of morality promised human beings. Nahuas conceived straying from the moral path in terms of slipping, faltering, and tripping and in terms of falling off cliffs and falling into torrents.¹⁶ As Burkhart notes, pre-Conquest Nahua religion did not presuppose a Good v. Evil dichotomy. Indeed, Good v. Evil plays absolutely no role whatsoever in Nahua religion, cosmogony, or ethics. (Nor, for that matter, did they talk of "deities" and "gods." One wonders, therefore, are they properly understood as "religion"?)

The Nahua did not conceive the history of the world in terms of a Manichean-style struggle between Good v. Evil or between a benevolent God and malevolent Devil. The notions of good (goodness) per se and evil (badness) per se were wholly absent. As a result, the project of Christianizing the Nahuas involved imposing upon them a normative framework and conceptual superstructure that was entirely alien to them. Powerful other-than-human persons such as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca acted in both benevolent and malevolent ways towards humans. The pre-Conquest Nahua world was not the simpleminded, black v. white world of Christianity. In sum, talk of deer and rabbit, like talk of falling into precipices or slipping into rivers, were autochthonous metaphors that were adopted and repurposed by colonial-era Christians (be they Spaniard or Nahua) for purposes of conversion.

¹⁴ See *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present). Karttunen and Lockhart translate the passage as follows:

Do not let yourselves go, do not follow wild ways; do not fall into the abyss of sin. Serve your God, your ruler; beware lest you neglect yourselves, beware lest you follow the road of the rabbit, the deer, beware lest you fall from a precipice, beware lest you fall in the river (Karttunen and Lockhart [1987], p. 109)

¹⁵ Louise Burkhart, "Moral Deviance in the Sixteenth Century: The Rabbit and the Deer," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 12 (1986), pp. 107-139.

¹⁶ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth* (1989).

(2) Page 13 reads: "... and keep yourself so that you do not live badly and in vice." The corresponding Nahuatl passage (p.12) reads "*Titlapiaz* ("watch over yourself," "take care of yourself") *amo titlanempoloz* ("do not waste, do not spoil, do not damage") *ihuan* ("and") *timopiaz* ("guard yourself," "keep yourself") *amo* ("not") *teuhtli* ("dust," "filth") *tlazolli* ("garbage," "filth," "disordered stuff") *ticnemitz* ("to go around," "to live," "to dwell"). We see here an instance of the Hispano-Catholic appropriation and repurposing of pre-Conquest Nahua concepts to mean something new and different. The Christian evangelical enterprise appropriated and repurposed the autochthonous notions of *teuhtli* and *tlazolli* ("dust, filth, stuff out of place, anything disordered, disordering and disorderly") to mean "sinfulness, vice, immorality and moral corruption." They reconfigured *tlazolli* and *teuhtli* to make them fit onto Christianity's dichotomous, Procrustean Bed of Virtue v. Vice, Sacred v. Profane, and Good v. Evil.

Let's focus briefly upon *tlazolli*. *Tlazolli* acted as a basic pollution concept in pre-Conquest Nahua religion and ethics. *Tlazolli* traditionally referred to that which is rotten, worn out, used up, disintegrated, deranged, and decayed: e.g., excrement, vomit, nasal mucus, dirt, muck, slime, rags, and random bits of straw or hair. It referred, in short, to stuff out-of-place (or improperly placed). That which is characterized by *tlazolli* is disordered, deranged, and displaced. As such, it exists at the opposite end of a continuum from that which is clean, well-ordered, well-arranged, well-integrated—that is, stuff-in-place (well-placed or in its place). *Tlazolli* (filth, disorder) was seen as both cause and consequence of human misbehavior. It induced humans to slip into excessive, licentious, and perverse sexual behavior that sullied and besmirched both actors and those around them. *Tlazolli*-causing behavior rendered humans dirtied, damaged, imbalanced, and deranged. This could result in disease—both physical and mental, individual and communal—and even death.

Despite equating *tlazolli* with pollution, filth, and bodily discharges, Nahua religion and ethics nevertheless regarded *tlazolli* as entirely *sacred*. Both the well-ordered and the disordered, the pure and the polluted, and the clean and the dirty functioned as equally essential aspects of the sacred dynamic whole of reality. The sacrality of *tlazolli* is dramatically illustrated by the existence of *Tlazolteotl* (literally, "Sacred *Tlazolli*", more commonly mistranslated as "Goddess of Filth"), a powerful female-gendered, other-than-human person associated with pollution, filth, etc. *Tlazolteotl* played a prominent and essential role in the ecological recycling of the fertilizing life-energy of disorder throughout the Nahua cosmos.

What's more, Nahua religion and ethics knew nothing of the concept of "the profane" as opposed to "the sacred." Everything was sacred, including disordered stuff and disordering behavior. Consequently, in order to make *tlazolli* useful to the Christian evangelical project, *tlazolli* had to be denied its vital, life-renewing role in Nahua metaphysics. It had to be desacralized, reconceived, and shrunk in order to be squeezed into the profane side of Christianity's sacred v. profane dichotomy.

The passage above also equates *tlazolli* and *teuhtli* with vice or the morally vicious. But here, once again, this is a product of Christian handiwork. Pre-Conquest Nahua religion and ethics knew nothing of the concepts of virtue and vice (as conceived by Catholicism), i.e., as mental dispositions inclining one towards good and evil (sin), respectively. Although Nahua ethics obviously praised and condemned human beings and their behavior, it did *not* do so in terms virtue and vice. These are Christian concepts. One should not, therefore, be misled by the fact that Book X of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* contains well over one hundred and twenty indigenous descriptions of different types of people (or social roles), accompanied by descriptions of good and bad examples of each: e.g., the good ("*virtuosa*") vs. the bad ("*viciosa*") mother, the good ("*virtuoso*") vs. the bad ("*vicioso*") father, child, warrior, commoner, ruler, scribe, featherworker, farmer, cacao seller, and so on.¹⁷ In the "Prologue to Book X", Sahagún explains that he had undertaken this task in order to make available to Catholic preachers ("*predicadores*") the Nahuatl words needed for cultivating Christian virtues and extirpating pagan vices.¹⁸ Towards this end, the *Florentine Codex* contains Nahuatl descriptions alongside Spanish ones, enabling priests to learn the Nahuatl words they needed for preaching, policing, and punishing. Sahagún is less interested in providing an ethnography of Nahua views of good vs. bad parents, children, rulers, etc., than he is in identifying, collating, recording, and highlighting indigenous ways of talking about these behaviors so that this language can be repurposed and redirected by Christian missionaries towards converting indigenous peoples. What's more, as Victoria Ríos Castaño argues Book X's categorization and lists of virtues and vices are ultimately derive from European discourses on virtues and vices, confession manuals, and the like.¹⁹

¹⁷ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* (1953-82), BK X:1-71.

¹⁸ "Book X: The People," in Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* (1953-1982).

¹⁹ Victoria Ríos Castaño, *Translation as Conquest: Sahagún and Universal History of the Things of New Spain* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2014), Ch.3.

(3) Page 89 includes the phrase “with our sins and wrongdoing.” The corresponding Nahuatl occurs on p. 87 and reads “*totlatlacocol*” (“our sin,” “our fault,” “our defect”) and “*totlapilchihual*” (“our wrongdoing,” “our fault,” “our sin”).

(3a) Let’s look first at “*tlatlacocol*.” *Tlatlacocol*” represents another instance of Christian appropriating and repurposing a previously existing Nahuatl word. Stephanie Wood (ed) glosses “*tlatlacocol*” as “mistake, fault, defect, sin, vice, a wrong, a mistake, something evil.”²⁰ “*Tlatlacol*” derives from “*tlacoa*,” meaning “to damage something or to sin.”²¹ As Burkart explains, although pre-Conquest Nahuas used the term to refer “mistakes and misdeeds... it did not have the sense of personal moral responsibility, an affront to God that induces guilt in the offender, that the Christian idea carried.”²² Here, once again, we see a pre-Conquest, autochthonous Nahua notion of error, defect, and fault being reconfigured in alien Christian terms of sin, moral evil, moral fault, corruption, and deviation from the commandments of a single, omnipotent, omniscient, and all benevolent divine legislator. More generally, we see pre-Conquest Nahua ethics being reconfigured as a morality, i.e., a moral system defined in terms of the existence of transcendent, universal moral truths, laws, principles, or commandments; and a moral system that evaluates the rightness vs. wrongness and virtuousness v. viciousness of behavior in terms of those. Pre-Conquest Nahua ethics, however, was not underwritten by this sort of timeless, universal, transcendent metaphysical foundation. Pre-Conquest Nahua ethics eschewed abstract, transcendent universal norms, laws, and commandments. It denied not only the existence of a fundamental metaphysical opposition between good and evil but the very concepts of goodness and evil per se. This does not mean, of course, that there was no such thing as good (*qualli*) and bad (*amo qualli*, literally, “un-good” or “not good”) behavior. Pre-Conquest Nahua ethics evaluated human behavior concretely, contextually, and consequentially in terms of furthering versus occluding human, societal, and cosmic balance. Furthermore, Nahua ethics

²⁰ *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present) <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tlatlacolli> (accessed 6/11/26).

²¹ *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present). <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tlacoa> (accessed 6/11/26).

²² Louise Burkart, “Nahua Moral Philosophy,” <https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/home/nahua-moral-philosophy> (accessed 6/12/26).

was entirely “this worldly,” i.e., both “in the world” and “of the world” (to borrow Christian phrases). Ethically right behavior involved the creative negotiation and balancing of competing yet mutually complementary paired forces (such as hot v. cold, dry v. wet, above v. below, and male v. female) as they emerge in the concrete circumstances of our everyday lives.²³ In sum, following Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Gilles Deleuze in this regard, I submit that pre-Conquest Nahua ethics is more appropriately understood as an “ethics” rather than as a “morality.”²⁴ What see happening during the mid-sixteenth century in New Spain with texts such as *How to Be Grateful* is the attempt to *transform an ethics into a morality*, i.e., indigenous Nahua ethics into Judeo-Christian morality.²⁵

(3b) Consider “*totlapilchihual*.” Karttunen and Townsend translate it as “our wrongdoing.” Wood (ed) glosses *tlapilchihual* as “sin, defect, fault, failing.” The related term, *tlapilchihualiztli*, means “a defect; something poorly made or done; a sin; or the act of sinning.” Related, too, is “*pilchihua*,” “to commit a sin, to commit a fault.”²⁶ Here again, we see a normative albeit morally neutral pre-Conquest concept being repurposed as a morally charged, Christian concept.

(4) The phrase “other demons who are false gods” appears on p. 91. The corresponding Nahuatl “*itztlacateteto catca tlatlacatecolo*” appears on page 90. As Karttunen and Townsend explain (p. 156n7), pre-Conquest Nahuas had neither concept of nor word for “devil” or “demon.” Entirely malevolent (like entirely benevolent) beings simply did not exist in the pre-Conquest Nahua universe.

²³ For further discussion, see: James Maffie, “In Huehue Tlamaniliztli and la Verdad: Nahua and European Philosophies in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Colloquios y doctrina cristiana*,” *Inter-America Journal of Philosophy* 3 (2012): 1-33; James Maffie, “The Role of Hardship in Mexica Ethics: Or, Why Being Good Has to Hurt,” *American Philosophical Association Newsletter for Indigenous Philosophy*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2019): 8-17; and James Maffie, “The Nature of Mexica Ethics,” in Colin Marshall (ed), *Comparative Metaethics: Neglected Perspectives on the Foundations of Morality*. London: Routledge (2020), pp. 60-80.

²⁴ The distinction between ethics and morality was introduced by Spinoza, transfigured by Nietzsche in *Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, and then further developed by Giles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Robert Hurley (trans). (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988) and Giles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Trans. Martin Jouhin (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

²⁵ For further argument, see Maffie, “In Huehue Tlamaniliztli and la Verdad: Nahua and European Philosophies in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Colloquios y doctrina cristiana*,” *Inter-America Journal of Philosophy* 3 (2012): 1-33.

²⁶ *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present)
<https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tlapilchihualli>
<https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/pilchihua> (accessed 6/5/26).

Consequently, the Franciscans had to invent a neologism to refer not only to the Christian Devil (who was responsible for indigenous peoples' countless grave errors and confusions) but also to the many "demons" indigenous people falsely worshipped. So, with the help of their Nahuatl assistants, they came up with "*tlacatecolotl*." "Tlacatecolotl" or "human horned owls," combines the words "human being" ("*tlacatl*") and "horned owl" ("*tecolotl*"). Pre-Conquest Nahuas had already associated the horned owl misfortune, adversity, and affliction as well with ill-intentioned humans who possessed the power to assume the guise of animals (such as jaguars)—human beings known to the Spaniards as "sorcerers" and "shape-shifters." During the colonial period, "Tlacatecolotl" was used broadly to refer to anyone engaged in pre-Conquest religious practices.²⁷

Lastly, appearing throughout all three sections of *How to Be Grateful* are numerous pre-Conquest Nahuatl terms or phrases used traditionally to refer to powerful other-than-human persons such as Tezcatlipoca but repurposed by colonial discourse to mean "God" as conceived by Christian theology. Prominent among these is "*totecuiyo*," ("our *tecuhtli* ["our great lord"]") which was repurposed to mean "our great Lord God."²⁸ "*Totecuiyo*" also commonly appears a part of the diphrasing "*in tlacatl in totecuiyo*," meaning "His Person, Our Lord," and as part of the phrase "*totecuiyo in ilhuicahua in tlalticpaque in techihuani in teyocoyani*" ("Our Lord, Master of heaven and earth, progenitor [maker of people], creator of people"). Pablo also employs the repurposed Nahuatl "*ipalnemoani*" ("The Giver of Life")²⁹ and "*in tloque in nahuaque*" ("the All-Pervasive," "Lord of

²⁷ See: Online Nahuatl Dictionary, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present). <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tlacatecolotl> (accessed 6/12/26); Louise M. Burkhart, *Before Guadalupe: The Virgin Mary in Early Colonial Nahuatl Literature*, Institute for Mesoamerican Studies Monograph 13. Albany: University at Albany (2001), p. 26; Louise M. Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday: A Nahuatl Drama from Early Colonial Mexico* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (1996), pp. 183–184; Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, Book 10 -- The People, No. 14, Part 11, eds. and transl. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe and Salt Lake City: School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1961), p. 31.

²⁸ Online Nahuatl Dictionary, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present) [humanities.org/content/totecuiyo](https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/totecuiyo) (accessed 6/12/26). See also: Katarzyna Granicka, "His Body Will Appear in All of the Mirrors: Explaining Christian Doctrine to the Nahuas in the 1548 *Doctrina Cristiana*," *Religions* 14 (2023). <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/12/1487> (accessed 6/10/26).

²⁹ Wood (ed) glosses this as: "'He Through Whom One Lives,' or that which, or by means of which, people live; Giver of Life; a deity that is part of the Ometeotl Complex, primordial parents of deities and humans, creation; also came to be used to refer to the Christian god." Online

the Near, Lord of the Close,” “The Always Imminent Lord”)³⁰ to refer to the god of Christianity.

The foregoing raises a host of intriguing questions. For example, does employing such pre-Conquest Nahuatl terms *Nahuatlize* (indigenize) the god of Christianity, *Christianize* pre-Conquest powerful other-than-human persons such as Tezcatlipoca, or both? What is the result? Does “*in tloque in nahuaque*,” for example, carry a pre-Conquest meaning in “the Past” but Christianized meaning in “The Present”? Does it refer to Tezcatlipoca in “The Past” but to the one true Christian god in “The Present”? How can we be sure which of these Pablo meant? Does Pablo leave the meaning intentionally vague in order to allow future readers (indigenous or European) to think that pre-Conquest Nahuas (in particular, his fellow Texcocans, as opposed to the Mexica) actually had a notion of (and worshipped) the one true Christian god all along (and that Texcocans therefore deserve favored treatment by the Spanish conquerors)?

Finally, the foregoing raises the possibility of a semantic gap between what the a monolingual Spanish priest *believed* he was saying to his Nahua audience when following Pablo’s script, on the one hand, and what his Nahuatl-speaking audience *heard* him saying (i.e., how they understood and interpreted what he said), on the other hand. It would seem we have plenty of reasons to think that these two were often not identical.

In sum, as a hybrid Nahua-Christian text, *How to Be Grateful* raises a panoply of exciting yet also stubbornly thorny questions for scholars, instructors, and students alike. If one is happy with lively classroom debate as I expect most instructors are, then this is your textbook. Impeccable and colloquial English translation, informative introduction, glossary, manageable size, and affordability make this an ideal text for undergraduate and graduate level courses on Nahua (Mexica, Aztec) philosophy, indigenous Mesoamerican philosophy, indigenous philosophies of the Americas, Mexican colonial-era religion, Latin American philosophy, and comparative world philosophy.

Nahuatl Dictionary, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present)

<https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/ipalnemohuani> (accessed 6/12/26).

³⁰ See Online Nahuatl Dictionary, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present) <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tloque-nahuaque> (accessed 6/12/26). Willard Gingerich glosses it as “The Always Imminent Lord” (Mesoamerican discussion group 6/15/26). Pre-Conquest Nahuas commonly used the phrase to refer to Tezcatlipoca.

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BOOK PROSPECTIVE

ANTONIO CASO'S *LA EXISTENCIA COMO ECONOMÍA, COMO DESINTERÉS Y COMO CARIDAD* (1943)

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We write to announce our work-in-progress: an English translation of the second and final 1943 edition of *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad* by Antonio Caso (1883-1946) [henceforth, *Existencia*]. In what follows, we explain why it is important to introduce Caso to a wider Anglophone audience, why we chose this text for the first book-length translation, and why we are undertaking this project right now.

1. Why Caso?

Caso holds a preeminent place in the history of Mexican philosophy and culture. His peers, successors, and commentators consistently recognized him as a founder of twentieth-century Mexican philosophy given his definitive rejection of Porfirian positivism, founding role in El ateneo de la juventud, and decades-long institutional influence in post-revolutionary Mexico after creating then twice chairing the Philosophy Department at the National University of Mexico. Speaking on behalf of both the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua at Caso's funeral, José Vasconcelos called him not just "the most eloquent voice of Mexican philosophy" but also the "universal Mexican" by whom "our nationality achieves a distinguished place in contemporary thought" (1946: 307-308, our translation). At a 1947 event in homage to Caso held at the UNAM's Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, just one year before the inaugural meeting of El grupo hiperión, Emilio Uranga urged those present to cultivate a "true scholarly dedication" to Caso's work (220, our translation), and Leopoldo Zea called upon his generation "to consider Antonio Caso [our] teacher" while working "to make Mexican reality an object worthy of philosophical reflection" (108, our translation). Similar quotes could be multiplied from any of the fourteen Mexican and U.S. scholars published in *Homenaje a Antonio Caso* (1947), but we will simply echo Edgar Sheffield Brightman's lamentation that Caso was (and still is) not better known in the Anglophone world:

If his books were translated into English, or if our intellectuals had devoted more time to read them, much would have been gained for inter-cultural understanding. [...] The language barrier and the culture barrier, which are

still unreasonably high and wide, have prevented Caso's voice from reaching all the people in the English-speaking world whom it should have reached (188, our translation).

Over 75 years later, the "Philosophy in Mexico" entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy re-affirms Caso's legacy as the "leading figure of Mexican philosophy in the first decades of the 20th century" (Hurtado and Sanchez 2025). In short, Caso's philosophy constitutes essential reading for both experts and beginners in the history of Mexican Philosophy specifically and Latin American Philosophy more generally.

In addition to the widespread philosophical influence of his printed work, Caso was widely referred to quite simply as *el Maestro* [the Teacher]. By redefining philosophical pedagogy after positivism, Caso effectively shaped philosophy as a humanistic, ethical, and culturally reflective practice across Latin America, especially as Mexico emerged as an intellectual center in the first half of the twentieth century. One of Caso's most influential students, Samuel Ramos, has had multiple works translated into English (1962, 2025). And the next generation of Mexican Philosophers—which includes Uranga, Zea, Jorge Portilla, Rosa Krauze, and Rosario Castellanos—worked squarely in the philosophical space that Caso first opened.¹

We also believe that Caso's philosophical work is deeply relevant today. His diagnosis and critique of the existential issues that plagued Mexican life and culture in the first half of the twentieth century are surprisingly applicable to life in the contemporary USA and worldwide. Caso worried that the people of his time were increasingly prone to reducing existence to mere economy. That is, they viewed existence in general through the prism of the struggle for survival, material wealth, and dominance. According to such an interpretation, one has a duty to look out for themselves and their own group's survival above all else, e.g., Donald Trump's slogan of "America First!" In response to this reductionistic worldview, Caso observes that artistic productions and acts of charity are also facts, aspects of human existence that cannot be reduced to self-interested economy. While he does not go so far as to say that self-interest or economic considerations should be banished, he urges us to remember that they amount to just one aspect of human existence. Caso's clarion call to understand this aspect alongside the other aesthetic and ethical dimensions of our human existence is just as important today in the contemporary Anglophone world as it was in early 20th century Mexico.

Beyond the cultural specificity and philosophical universality of his central message, Caso's work has the built-in potential to reverberate beyond the Mexican

¹ For example, consider the third chapter of the *Analysis of Mexican Being*, where Uranga names Caso as the first Mexican philosopher to initiate a wave that rejected positivism (2021 [1952]: 133).

context because he is deeply knowledgeable about and conversant with not just other Mexican and Latin American intellectuals but also a wide variety of European and U.S.-American thinkers. Scholars interested in comparative or cross-cultural approaches to philosophy and its history will thus greatly benefit from engaging with any of Caso's texts.

2. Why the 1943 *Existencia*?

If one were going to read only a single book by Caso, the 1943 edition of *Existencia* is the clear choice. It offers an impressively broad array of original insights across the domains of ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, economics, philosophical psychology, and more. Caso's most basic aim is to reject any worldview that reduces human existence to any one perspective and to achieve a philosophical synthesis of various scientific, aesthetic, ethical, and religious perspectives on existence. The nine chapters are divided into three sections: the first detailing what it means to understand existence as economy, the second detailing what it means to understand existence as disinterest, and the third detailing what it means to understand existence as charity. As one of Caso's final publications, the 1943 *Existencia* contains his most refined and comprehensive treatment of themes first sketched in the 1910s and developed throughout all his subsequent work. To date, his 1916 essay "La existencia como economía y como caridad" is the only complete work translated into English (2017), whereas his *Obras Completas* span 12 volumes (1971-1985). Krauze's comprehensive study, *La filosofía de Antonio Caso* (1985), calls *Existencia* Caso's most personal work and shows how the 1943 edition constitutes the most complete articulation of his mature thought, a true magnum opus.

The 1943 *Existencia* also features Caso's most extensive engagement with contemporary, recent, and historical trends in Kantian philosophy, post-Kantian continental philosophical movements like vitalism, existentialism, and phenomenology, as well as U.S.-American pragmatism. For instance, his first three chapters dedicated to analyzing the reduction of existence to economy broach key ideas from Kant's Critique of Teleological Judgment; surveys of late-19th and early 20th-century philosophies of biology, physics, and mathematics; and critical appraisals of the contemporary neo-vitalist philosophy of Henri Bergson. Along the way, Caso directly engages with philosophers like Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, J.S. Mill, and William James.

The final edition of *Existencia* also adds four new chapters to the 1919 edition and features his most detailed discussion of aesthetics, which is immediately evinced in the renovated title that newly centers *desinterés* as one of the book's major perspectives on existence. Caso's theory is anti-individualist, in that aesthetic values turn us away from conceiving of existence in a merely self-

interested way, and, as such, aesthetic reflection becomes a necessary condition for the possibility of morality. It is this sustained and original treatment of aesthetics that led Samuel Ramos to celebrate his teacher as the founder of aesthetics in Mexico (Ramos 1947). As González (forthcoming) argues, the 1943 *Existencia* is the culmination of an original aesthetic theory that deserves to be more widely studied.

Caso's final new chapter is an essay on faith [*fe*], presented not as a set of beliefs so much as an existential orientation toward metaphysical transcendence: "To believe in God is not the work of pure reason but rather action joined with understanding and will" (1943: 195, translation ours). Just as Caso's penultimate chapter on hope [*esperanza*] introduces temporality and futurity as essential dimensions of human existence, faith names the fundamental trust in meaning that makes loving or charitable acts possible and intelligible.

3. Why Now?

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned reasons to study Caso beginning with the final edition of his most significant work, one might still wonder, why now? Our translation responds to the general moral and philosophical imperative to combat the "insularity of Anglophone philosophy" (Schwitzgebel et al, 2018). We see ourselves as part of a larger project to rewrite (and right) history and philosophy by addressing linguistic injustice (dominance of English over Spanish) and an asymmetry of influence (English to Spanish translations vastly outnumber Spanish to English translations), ultimately aiming to reduce Anglophone ignorance about Latin American Philosophy generally, Mexican philosophy more specifically, and Caso most specifically. We also see the surge of recent scholarship on the history of Mexican Philosophy in the Anglophone world as the fifth of a series of increasingly specific and overlapping historical and conceptual waves:

- 1) Latin American Philosophy exists in the eyes of Anglophone philosophy through anthologies, introductory textbooks, encyclopedia entries, etc. For example, Sánchez Reulet 1954, Gracia 1986, Gracia and Vargas 2018, and Sanchez 2019.
- 2) Mexican Philosophy exists in the eyes of Anglophone philosophy,² as a place with a history of philosophical production from the Aztecs prior the arrival of Europeans (De la Cueva 1966) to contemporary Mexican Americans (Sánchez and

² Carlos Sánchez (2023) adopts Guillermo Hurtado's distinction (2021) between *filosofía mexicana* (work of and about Mexican philosophy in Mexico, usually in Spanish) and "Mexican philosophy" (work of and about Mexican philosophy done by philosophers outside of Mexico, usually in English). We earmark this distinction as an occasion to recognize the contributions that scholars writing in Spanish have made to these five waves, although our focus is on Mexican Philosophy in the Anglophone world.

Sanchez 2017). Like other historically-and geographically situated philosophies, Mexican Philosophy can be used to understand our world today (Sánchez 2023).

3) Specific Mexican philosophical traditions exist in the eyes of Anglophone philosophy, e.g., not just 'Mexican Philosophy' as though all Mexican philosophy is the same but "Mexican Existentialism" (Sánchez 2025).

4) Specific Mexican philosophers exist in the eyes of Anglophone philosophy. For example, Antonio Caso (Haddox 1971) or Jorge Portilla (Sánchez and Gallegos 2020).

5) Significant works by specific Mexican philosophers are made available in unabridged English translations (e.g., Ramos 2025 [1940], Uranga 2021 [1952], and Sánchez's 2012 translation of Portilla 1966).³

Our translation of Caso's *Existencia* promises to keep this last wave rolling. We wager that translating the most important text written by the philosopher who paved the way for Mexican existentialism—the philosopher who literally wrote the book on *Existencia*—is an important step in the effort to further understand, contextualize, and popularize the history of Mexican existentialism specifically, Mexican philosophy more generally, and Latin American philosophy more broadly.

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³ A number of significant English translations from the middle of the 20th century started this wave before it mostly died out in the 1980s: Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1961), O'Gorman's *The Invention of America* (1961), Ramos's *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (1962), Leon-Portilla's *Aztec Thought and Culture* (1963), Sierra's *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People* (1966), and Zea's *Positivism in Mexico* (1974).

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