

## **Toward an Aesthetics of Race: Bridging the Writings of Gloria Anzaldúa and José Vasconcelos**

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### **English Abstract**

This paper examines the relationship between the aesthetic frameworks of José Vasconcelos and Gloria Anzaldúa. Contemporary readers of Anzaldúa have described her work as developing an “aesthetics of the shadow,” wherein the Aztec conception of *Nepantilism*—i.e. to be “torn between ways”—provides a potential avenue to transform traditional associations between darkness and evil, and lightness and good. On this reading, Anzaldúa offers a reevaluation of darkness and shadows to build strategies for resistance and coalitional politics for communities of color in the U.S. To those familiar with the work of Vasconcelos, Anzaldúa’s aesthetics appears to contrast sharply with his conceptions of aesthetic monism and *mestizaje*. I propose, however, that if we read both authors as supplementing one another’s work, we can see that their theoretical points of contrast and similarity help frame contemporary philosophical discussions of racial perception.

### **Resumen en español**

En este trabajo, analizo la relación entre el tratamiento de la estética en la obra de José Vasconcelos y Gloria Anzaldúa. Los lectores contemporáneos de Anzaldúa han descrito su trabajo como una “estética de la sombra” que produce un método potencial para transformar las asociaciones tradicionales entre la oscuridad y el mal, y la claridad y la bondad. Desde este punto de vista, Anzaldúa ofrece una revalorización de la oscuridad y las sombras para construir estrategias de resistencia y una política de coalición para las comunidades de color en los EE.UU. Para aquellos que están familiarizados con la obra de Vasconcelos, la estética de Anzaldúa parece contrastar fuertemente con sus concepciones del monismo estético y *mestizaje*. Sin embargo, este ensayo propone que si leemos a estos dos autores como complementarios, podemos ver que cómo sus diferencias y similitudes ayudan a enmarcar las discusiones filosóficas contemporáneas sobre lo racial.

### **Resumo em português**

Neste artigo, analiso a relação entre o tratamento de estética na obra de José Vasconcelos e Gloria Anzaldúa. Aqueles que analisar Anzaldúa descreveram seu trabalho como uma “sombra estética” que produz um método potencial para transformar as associações tradicionais entre a escuridão e do mal, e da clareza e bondade. A partir desta perspectiva, Anzaldúa oferece uma reavaliação das trevas e sombras para criar estratégias de resistência e de uma coalizão política para as comunidades de cor em os EUA Para aqueles que estão familiarizados com a obra de Vasconcelos, a estética do Anzaldúa parece contrastar fortemente com suas

concepções de monismo estética e mestiçagem. No entanto, este ensaio propõe que se lermos esses dois autores como complementares, podemos ver como as suas diferenças e semelhanças ajudam a enquadrar a discussão contemporânea sobre a raça.

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This paper examines the relationship between the aesthetic frameworks of José Vasconcelos and Gloria Anzaldúa.[1] Contemporary readers of Anzaldúa describe her work as developing an “aesthetics of the shadow,” wherein the Aztec conception of *Nepantlism*—i.e. to be “torn between ways”—provides a potential avenue to transform traditional associations between darkness and evil, and lightness and good.[2] On this reading, Anzaldúa offers a revaluation of darkness and shadows to build strategies for resistance and coalitional politics for communities of color in the U.S. To those familiar with the work of Vasconcelos, Anzaldúa’s aesthetics appears to contrast sharply with his conceptions of aesthetic monism and *mestizaje*. For example, Vasconcelos describes his own philosophical project in a book titled *El monismo estético* [Aesthetic Monism] as an attempt “to extract from shadows and chaos, a little rhythm and light.”[3] In this

passage and others, Vasconcelos appears to be utilizing the same traditional binaries (i.e. rhythm/chaos, shadow/light) that Anzaldúa rejects in her work.

I propose, however, that if we read both authors as supplementing one another's aesthetic frameworks, we can see that their theoretical points of contrast and similarity help frame current philosophical discussions of race in the U.S. Namely, the contemporary literature on racial perception can be linked to these discussions of aesthetics and *la conciencia de la mestiza* [the consciousness of the mestiza]. To defend these claims, I first examine Anzaldúa's writings to trace a relevant linkage to the aesthetic framework of José Vasconcelos. To do so, I examine a genre within Latin American literary theory to place Anzaldúa's work within a distinctly Latin American literary tradition. In the second section of the paper, I examine Vasconcelos' writings on aesthetics and *mestizaje* to point to some of the ways in which Anzaldúa's work expands, continues, or challenges his theoretical views. Finally, in the last section of the paper, I connect my analysis of these authors' works to a recent discussion of racial perception in contemporary social epistemology to show the importance of examining the history of Latin American thought for current debates in philosophy.

### I The Reader with the Book in her Hand

Gloria Anzaldúa begins her 1987 essay, "*La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness*," by offering an epigraph that echoes a famous line by Vasconcelos. She modifies Vasconcelos' quotation, "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu"/"Through my race, the spirit will speak" by beginning her essay with the line "Por la mujer de mi raza/hablará el espíritu"/"Through the woman of my race/the spirit will speak." [4] Interpreters of her work often suggest that this adaptation of Vasconcelos' declaration regarding the future of race in Mexico is a rejection of a previous discourse of *mestizaje* that had been circulating in Latin America since, at least, the early 19th century. [5] Along similar lines, critics often read her appropriation of the language of that discourse as a form of feminist and queer distancing from prior masculinist and heterosexist traditions within Chicano and Mexican political and philosophical thought. Moreover, through Anzaldúa's incorporation of indigenous epistemic and historical methodologies, readers locate in her work a critical form of resistance to the assimilationist politics that characterize the *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* movements of early 20th-century Mexico.

However, distinct from these readings, I would like to suggest that Anzaldúa's appropriation of Vasconcelos and the discourse of *mestizaje* serves as more than a foil for her own critical project. Rather, I read her work as effectively opening a discursive space that begins to explore the important and often painful relationships between the histories of race, gender, and cultural identity in Latin America and the United States, and Vasconcelos' work is a means through which she both challenges and carries on a tradition from Latin American thought.

To support this reading, we must first begin examining Anzaldúa's work from within a tradition of writing in Latin American literature.[6] Sylvia Molloy argues in her essay, "The Reader with the Book in his Hand," that Spanish American autobiographical writing can often be characterized by modes of textual transfiguration wherein an author places her-/himself within a scene of reading. Molloy claims that the creation of a scene of reading becomes a means whereby an author can place her-/himself within a literary tradition, i.e. an author can defend her/his authority or right to be placed within a particular body of literature as such. Many Spanish American authors of the 19th and early 20th centuries—Vasconcelos among them—took great pains to demonstrate that the books that formed their character and modes of self-presentation were European classics. Moreover, Spanish American autobiographers would often attempt to claim a classic work as their own through intentional changes to the meanings and connotations of the works that they were reading. Or as 19th century Argentine intellectual Domingo Faustino Sarmiento described such appropriations, writers would alter a classic text by "translating the European spirit into the American spirit, with the changes that the difference in setting required." [7] The orchestration of such scenes of reading would then result in the development of divergent sets of interpretations for a given text, interpretations that often derived their specificity from their intellectual and cultural context in Latin America and, perhaps more importantly, from the author's particular political or philosophical position within that context.

Molloy focuses on how many authors within Spanish American literature, in their autobiographical works, have discussed their own positions toward practices of translation and citation. She claims that for many such prominent authors, "The Book is not the ultimate goal but a prefiguration: a dissonant concert of texts, of broken bits of writing, it is the substance for beginnings." [8] She suggests here that the translation of a book from its original language into Spanish for many Spanish American writers and educators was not merely viewed as an act of mediation. Rather, translation was a form of political posing, i.e. a posture that made visible to one's readers the very modes of articulation that would be the resources for her/his own authorial voice. Molloy describes this as a "prefiguration of self." In many cases, authors would consider classic texts as the antecedent conditions of their own literary development. Such texts would become, in Molloy's words, the "literary springboard" that would project the author "into the void of writing." [9]

In this sense, then, i.e. in throwing of oneself into an intertextual exchange, the author uses other works of literature to set up the conditions through which she/he can shape the distinct voice of the authorial self. One extended example that Molloy uses to defend the presence of this theme within Spanish American autobiographical writing is the work of Sarmiento. However, Molloy also traces the practice of using citationality as a prefiguration of the self in the writings of Victoria Ocampo, Jorge Luis Borges, and Vasconcelos as well. Her analysis begins in the early 19th century because this period most clearly instantiates what she calls "a crisis of authority" in Latin American political and philosophical thought. This is, namely, a distinct genre of autobiographical writing in Spanish American literature that became pronounced alongside various independence

movements in Latin America. At that time, the authority of “the Crown and Church” was being vehemently challenged, and many Spanish American authors were renegotiating their respective compartments toward previously available sites of legitimation. Molloy writes of this period: “If one no longer writes oneself down for King or Church, for whom, then, does one write? For Truth? For Posterity? For History?”[10] The resulting processes of self-figuration serve as a distinguishing trend within Spanish American autobiographical literature, with acts of citational posing often occurring through a number of registers of articulation, including, national, cultural, pan-national, and humanist discourses.

Thus, the significance of citationality as a prefiguration of the self, i.e. as a practice that simultaneously conflates and distinguishes one’s authorial position, carries unique resonances in post-colonial Latin America. The authorial “I” that is both paying respect to a preexisting tradition through its citational practice is, at the same time, the very “I” that is resisting, rejecting, and transforming the previous meanings of that tradition. In a double-movement of both inclusion and distinction, the author “with the book in her hand” is enacting epistemic and political boundaries as forms of resistance.

Turning now to Anzaldúa’s writings on literature and aesthetics, we can begin to trace a connection not only to this structuring element of much post-colonial Latin American writings, but also more directly to the writings of Vasconcelos. In a recent book-length treatment of the topic of Latina/o aesthetics, María DeGuzmán examines what she calls Anzaldúa’s “aesthetics of the shadow.”[11] DeGuzmán’s interpretations of Anzaldúa’s conceptions of nepantlism and “the Shadow self” offer a strong case for reading Anzaldúa’s work as a rejection of traditional Western philosophical dichotomies such as subject/object and mind/body, as well as Manichaeic dichotomies that hierarchically locate light and goodness above darkness and evil. DeGuzmán offers a compelling analysis of the author’s transvaluation of these traditional dichotomies via her reinscription of the productivity of, what Anzaldúa calls “the Shadow self.” The Shadow self for Anzaldúa, DeGuzmán claims, “comprises the unacceptable aspects of ourselves, the unsocialized, supposedly animal-divine ones that rebel against man-made rules and categories.”[12] In “Entering into the Serpent,” Anzaldúa writes of *la facultad* [a capacity/faculty], which is an ability to shift one’s perception, to see things differently and experience in a new register. Such a shift in perception includes breaking out of our previous modes of experience and exploring the Shadow self. She writes:

We lose something in this mode of initiation, something is taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance. There is a prejudice and a fear of the dark, chthonic (underworld), material such as depression, illness, death and the violations that can bring on this break. Confronting anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness and that thrusts us into a less literal and more psychic sense of reality increases awareness and *la facultad*. [13]

In the final section of the paper, I will discuss this emphasis on ignorance and resistant imaginings. However, for now, this passage presents some relevant elements of



Anzaldúa's transvaluation of traditional dichotomies. First, while she acknowledges the "fear of the dark, chthonic (underworld)," which are elements of apparently more traditional distinctions, her account of this new form of perception encourages exploration into these depths. The Shadow self for Anzaldúa is also a dwelling of ambiguity and darkness that promotes creativity and embodied agency. DeGuzmán writes that Anzaldúa "converts [the Shadow self] into a space of (in)habitation, a place where we are invited to dwell." [14] For Anzaldúa, a state of being "torn between ways," i.e. nepantlism, is a site of productivity, but it is also a space that yields to, in DeGuzmán's words, "a terrifying openness to possibility and the willingness to act on possibility against the socioeconomic, historical, and psychological odds, most of which spell injustice and harm to the many for the sake of the few who manage to acquire privilege and security in their social system." [15] DeGuzmán also importantly links this site of transformation and terror to the traditions of mysticism, to which I will also return below when exploring Vasconcelos' work. [16]

While DeGuzmán offers a convincing examination of these aspects of Anzaldúa's aesthetics of the shadow, her reading of the philosophical traditions through which Anzaldúa draws her conceptions of the transformative and symbolic agency of the aesthetic of the shadow can be supplemented by an examination of the work of José Vasconcelos. That is, DeGuzmán places Anzaldúa's work in dialogue with a tradition of European analyses of depression and melancholy, including the work of Julia Kristeva and Carl Jung. I do not reject her claim that such resonances can be found in Anzaldúa's work; however, I do believe that an analysis of the transformative power of alternate perceptions and ways of experiencing *un otro mundo* [another world] of the self can be extended beyond Anglo-American and European traditions as well. To be fair, DeGuzmán's book is itself a testament to this project because she places Anzaldúa within a rich tradition of Latina/o writers. Yet, even with this apparent end in mind, DeGuzmán does not interrogate Latin American philosophical traditions that may have undergirded or supported Anzaldúa's aesthetics.

As I suggest above through Molloy's work, we should also locate Anzaldúa's authorial positioning within philosophical traditions in Latin America. To emphasize this hermeneutical lacuna within contemporary Anzaldúa scholarship, we should note that DeGuzmán is not the only contemporary scholar that reads her work within a plurality of traditions that omits reference to Latin American philosophical histories. For example, in an essay on Anzaldúa's critique of traditional Western epistemology, Amala Levine argues that Anzaldúa uses Toltec and Aztec imagery and concepts to challenge traditional Western epistemic frameworks that have cleaved distinctions between the mind and body, and the spiritual and the material. Levine cites U.S. transcendentalism, European Romantic Idealism, Amerindian shamanist spiritual practices, and Eastern wisdom traditions as precursors to Anzaldúa's epistemic and aesthetic sites of influence. [17] Again, we see that a significant part of the Latin American decolonial project in the spirit of Anzaldúa's work has been omitted. Namely, in her later works Anzaldúa was keenly aware and critical of forms of U.S. neocolonialism and cultural imperialism and how these affected non-Western/Global Northern geopolitical spaces,

specifically including Latin American nations. In the last essay published during her lifetime, Anzaldúa sharply criticizes the United States' involvement in various military coups driven by economic interests and the U.S. government's relative neglect of the suffering of economies that have been ravaged by its free-market neoliberal policies. [18] Thus, although philosophers such as Vasconcelos, Samuel Ramos, Leopoldo Zea, Antonio Caso, and others who were prominent theorists in their respective eras could not be said to align their political and philosophical views fully with those of Anzaldúa, we can say that there are many shared modes of resistance to forms of U.S. cultural, intellectual, and economic imperialism among all these thinkers. In this sense, I claim that we should begin tracing Anzaldúa's citation of Vasconcelos' famous motto, "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu," to the substantive political and philosophical questions that Vasconcelos was engaging.

## II Vasconcelos and el espíritu de la frontera

As a brief biographical note about Vasconcelos, he too was no stranger to *la frontera* [the borderlands]. From roughly the ages of 5 to 13 years old, he lived in Piedras Negras, Mexico, and during this same period, attended school in Eagle Pass, Texas. In his autobiography, Vasconcelos writes that in his home in Piedras Negras, his "conscious life" began.[19] In this vein, he writes of, what Anzaldúa would call, *los choques culturales* [the cultural clashes] that he confronted while living on the Mexico-U.S. border. He states:

When they asserted in class, with very childish, but offensive judgments that one hundred Yankees could make a thousand Mexicans run, I would stand up to say 'That's not true.' And, even worse, it irritated me further if some student spoke of the customs of Mexicans alongside those of Eskimos and said 'Mexicans are a semi-civilized people.' In my home, we asserted the contrary, that Yankees had recently acquired culture. So I stood up to repeat 'We had the printing press before you did.' Then, the teacher would intervene, calm us down, and say 'But look at Joe, he is a Mexican, isn't he civilized? Isn't he a gentleman?'[20]

Here, Vasconcelos compares the differing cultural educations he is receiving at home in Piedras Negras and in school in Eagle Pass. Interestingly, in this passage, Vasconcelos recounts how he was implicated and embodied in the comparative educations that he received. Proof of civilization, for his U.S. instructors and classmates was the presence of his ability to exemplify certain "gentlemanly" qualities and methods of learning.[21] We see that, from an early age, the ability to demonstrate a form of erudition to an Anglo-American audience would be a constant source of struggle for the author. Such an authorial positioning harkens back to the authorial struggle for legitimation that we find in the genre of Latin American autobiographical writings. However, in this context, Vasconcelos attempts to situate himself as a participant in a dialogue with the U.S., which during this period is continuing to emerge as a rising global power.

Also from this early recollection in his autobiography, we can see that Mexican and U.S. cultural and political differences are cited as constitutive of Vasconcelos' first

“conscious” moments of life. Moreover, we see that Vasconcelos implicates himself in struggles for national political representation during the time. Molloy calls his autobiographical position in his work, “a myth in which one man’s recollections will be translated and reformulated with a communal reading in view.”[22] As the title of his autobiography indicates, he represents himself as the “Creole Ulysses,” and he portrays his life as a mythic quest that speaks on behalf of the collective struggles of Mexico. Similarly, throughout *Ulises criollo* and his other writings, including *La raza cósmica*, we can find further iterations of a fundamental opposition to U.S. cultural and political imperialism. Even his staunch Catholicism in later life is described as a political positioning against U.S. cultural dominance. He writes:

The North American ruling class wanted to see Catholicism disappear from Mexico, for it represented Latinity, the type of civilization which makes us what we are, and which stands in the way of their moral conquest, a conquest which would consolidate their interference in the fields of economics and politics .... The die was cast; my campaign would be an effort to bring Mexico back to her own identity; for that purpose I would have to take a radical stand against all the enemies together ...[including] Yankee liberal opinion, inclined to Protestantism.  
[23]

If we then read this passage as a professed concern with strategic resistance to U.S. cultural and political dominance, we can also better understand this period of Vasconcelos’ writings in the 1920s and thereafter, which include his famous work, *La raza cósmica*.

Vasconcelos’ writings in aesthetics and philosophy of history are particularly helpful to further understand some of the themes discussed in *La raza cósmica*. He writes of three stages of human evolution in *La raza cósmica*: the material/warlike, the intellectual/political, and the spiritual/aesthetic. First, it would be a mistake to conflate these three periods with Comtian notions of social evolution.[24] Vasconcelos spends considerable time in many of his writings distinguishing his project from those of both Comte and Spencer.[25] To more adequately understand his conception of historical development, we should attend carefully to the figure that Vasconcelos cited as “the most important philosophical innovator of [his] time,” Henri Bergson.[26] In a 500-page tome dedicated to the history of philosophy, Vasconcelos interprets the future of philosophy, namely the aesthetic philosophy stemming from his own work, to be directly influenced by Bergson. What this affiliation and citational posing indicates is that Vasconcelos’ views on historical development were radically distinct from the positivist and Spencerian views of the late 19th century and early 20th century. Furthermore, it is here in his theory of aesthetics that we will begin to see interesting parallels with Anzaldúa’s conception of the aesthetic of the shadow and *la conciencia mestiza*.

He writes in his analysis of Bergson in *Historia del pensamiento filosófico* [History of Philosophical Thought] that “the evolution of the species is not the result of the causality that Darwinism assumes, rather it is a stream that flows through *el elan vital*, it collides [*choca*] with obstacles, bifurcates itself and changes according to a unity that



stems from the same force and origin.”[27] He further claims that Bergson “liberated” Mexican philosophy from Spencerianism and pragmatism and that Bergson’s theoretical work “definitively shattered the myth of scientific positivism.”[28] Finally, making a comment about his own potential philosophical writings, he states that the development of a reading of the aesthetics of Bergson’s theory “is virgin territory,” and he later implies that his aesthetic theory of rhythm and harmony can supplement Bergson’s view.[29]

Thus, because he sees himself as a direct inheritor of the ideas of Bergson, i.e. he prefigures his own philosophical voice through the writings of the author. As such, there remain few, if any, resonances of positivism, Spencerianism, or Social Darwinism in these works. Additionally, if we examine what he calls “the philosophy of the future [*la filosofía del porvenir*],” he describes the next stage of philosophical understanding as a synthesis of “nature, man, and the heavens.”[30] The new “philosophical artist [*el artista filósofo*]” will be able to combine the “currents” of the human spirit to resolve the tensions between “natural causality” and the human animal’s “dynamic free will.”[31] The example that he mentions in this passage discusses two perspectives of our understanding of melody. On the one hand, “a melody is a natural sequence of sounds,” but it is also, as he states, “a process of spiritual signification.”[32] The aesthetic work that he believes will become the work of the future is to develop a sensibility about how spiritual meanings and natural causality are interrelated. Note here that he intends to develop a sensibility, i.e. a new perception, and not a form of theoretical knowledge in this area of inquiry. The task ahead, he claims, is to interpret the movement of history—i.e. *el elan vital*—through the interpretive sequencing of music, including rhythm, melody, harmony, and beauty.

If we now turn to *La raza cósmica*—a text that he does not bother to mention in his brief description of his own philosophical writings in his 1937 *Historia del pensamiento filosófico*—we can reinterpret his view of history and the “cosmic race” in terms of his aesthetics. He writes in the section titled “Mestizaje,” that the domination of the white race will be temporary, and that “their mission is to serve as a bridge [*su misión es servir de puente*].”[33] He points to the current political and epistemological forms of dominance instantiated by European and European-descended races. Yet, at the same time, he holds out hope for a future in which no kind of “violent domination” would exist and in which enlightened epistemic and moral perfection becomes an aesthetic ideal, rather than something gained through “violence or economic pressure.”[34]

This account of human evolution, then, is fundamentally linked to his views about the new perception developed within his writings on aesthetics. Vasconcelos considered himself a systematic philosopher, and believed that empiricism, morality, and aesthetics all had to be synthesized within one philosophical framework.[35] The key to understanding the fundamental synthesis among these often contrasting areas of inquiry, he claimed, was more attention to art, and in particular, music and literature. Vasconcelos sought to connect themes from his earliest works on Pythagoras and ancient theories of music with modern aesthetics and scientific theory.[36] Along these

lines, his analyses of various mystic traditions were also aimed at developing an understanding of the relationship between aesthetics, the limits of perception, and the relationship between the human and the divine. In this light, we can better interpret his account of “a cosmic race” as a biological and anthropological view about the unfolding of patterns of rhythm and synthesis in human evolution. Given his commitment to a grand synthetic account of all forms of human inquiry, his biological and anthropological views by the 1920s too sought to reconcile the emerging distinctions between the natural and the social sciences and their opposition to religious and philosophical thought. He writes in *La raza cósmica* that empiricism cannot adequately account for the rises and declines of great human civilizations throughout human history. Such a “vast and comprehensive theory” will only be possible via “a leap of the spirit [*un salto del espíritu*], nourished with facts, [and such a theory] can give us a vision that will lift us above the micro-ideology of the specialist. Then we can dive deeply into the mass of events in order to discover a direction, a rhythm, and a purpose.”[37] Given his earlier views in *El monismo estético*, we can now see that his philosophical anthropology is driven by his aesthetics. His conception of human development thus naturally resides within his all-encompassing system of philosophical synthesis, a new synthetic style that he described as “the Symphony [*la síntesis de la sinfonía*].”[38]

Despite these musings on Vasconcelos’ work, I do not, however, want to propose that his views would be immune to criticism for Anzaldúa. In fact, it is clear that Anzaldúa’s *conciencia de la mestiza* offers several important critiques of his work. For example, Anzaldúa’s discussion of the “evolutionary continuum” that joins the *mestiza/o* and the queer can be read as a model for resisting various intersecting forms of sexual and cultural oppression, which are forms of oppression that Vasconcelos never addressed.[39] Notably, Vasconcelos also failed to adequately attend to the tremendous sexual violence that marks the history of race-mixture in Latin America. To this point, Anzaldúa’s conception of *la conciencia de la mestiza* requires recognition of the violence against women and “the wounds” that are inflicted on women of color.[40]

Moreover, while the educational reform that Vasconcelos conducted with the aid of the queer poet and educator Gabriela Mistral presents him as having a somewhat complicated relationship with the sexual politics of the nation, he clearly wrote disdainfully about emancipation movements for women and for gays and lesbians. Most notably, in a posthumously published volume of his autobiography, he considers sexual liberation and women’s liberation as forms of “decadence.”[41] Finally, another site worthy of criticism within Vasconcelos’ writings is his particular form of devaluation for indigenous and, more strongly, for African-descended peoples and cultures in Latin America. His comments on “aesthetic eugenics” and the eventual disappearance of the ugliness of “lower races” mark the limitations of his early views about racial oppression. [42] While I believe that a great deal of interpretive philosophical work remains to be done on the writings of Vasconcelos, I do not wish to overlook these injurious points of contact that fail to support contemporary Latina feminist value structures. Rather, I wish to highlight how both authors were confronting similar philosophical problems in their respective historical contexts. This, then, begins to shed light on reasons why

Anzaldúa's citation of Vasconcelos is a significant invocation of such a previous historical precedent.

Yet, even with recognition of these differences, the points of similarity among the new forms of perception that Anzaldúa explores through nepantlism, *la facultad*, and the path of *conocimiento* strikingly resemble and echo aspects of the project outlined in Vasconcelos' aesthetics. Namely, both authors sought to interpret racial and cultural struggle via certain forms of aesthetic development. While Vasconcelos' views about the cosmic race entailed a new stage of human perception deriving from the "fruition of the highest faculties," Anzaldúa also sought to examine the intricacies of new faculties of perception for their promises of productivity and creation. *La facultad* and the ambiguity of the Shadow self, for Anzaldúa, as I describe above, is a site of creation and productivity. However, the main point of contrast for these two thinkers is that Anzaldúa's aesthetics of the shadow retains the terror and ugliness that also reside within such new possible modes of perception. Vasconcelos' cosmic race, he claims, will contain no such ugliness or darkness, only love, well-being, and beauty. As such, we see an important distinction between the new modes of perception offered through the authors' respective works. *La conciencia de la mestiza*, for Anzaldúa, is not the synthetic culmination of the most beautiful qualities of human development. Rather, it retains and invokes the Shadow self, i.e. those unresolved and multiplicitous elements of ourselves that continually challenge and thwart us. The Shadow self is also the site through which we can find resistance to hegemonic frames of reference and where we can find resources to break out of our complacency with previous modes of perception. In this sense, I would like to now turn to recent literature in social epistemology to connect and reframe the writings of Anzaldúa and Vasconcelos for contemporary philosophical study.

### III Racial Perception and the Aesthetics of Anzaldúa and Vasconcelos

Over the last several decades, contemporary social epistemologists have been examining how perceptual practices have impacted and are impacted by social conditions of racism, sexism, colonialism, and other forms of injustice and resistance. Among these philosophers, Linda Martín Alcoff's analysis of racial embodiment in *Visible Identities* raises an important point. Alcoff argues that "any adequate account of race" must include analysis at both an "objectivist" and "subjectivist" level. Namely, she claims that race cannot merely be studied from its either third-personal or first-personal perspectives, i.e. as an object of analysis on the one hand, or as a condition of lived experience on the other. Giving attention to the latter, Alcoff pursues a subjectivist approach in her book to elucidate some of the ways in which racial perceptions are thoroughly social processes. Building her view largely from the work of Frantz Fanon, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Antonio Gramsci, Alcoff argues that perceptual practices that recognize forms of racial difference are "sedimented contextual knowledges" that can be rooted to specific historical and cultural locations.[43] She claims that like Gramsci's notion of a "common sense" based in class distinctions and social modes of production, racial knowledges are also a kind of "common sense" that are based in

cultural and historical practices.[44] Both first- and third-personal experiences of race depend on sedimented forms of racial common sense that foreground specific modes of perception. Perceptual habits of picking out and distinguishing certain modes of phenotypical and embodied difference are culturally and historically constituted. Thus, visual practices, for example, that foreground certain shades of skin color, hair texture, or eye shape serve as markers for racial identities and collectively rely upon a racial common sense located within a particular social context.

To then link this contemporary work in social epistemology with that of Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa, we must recall that Vasconcelos' account of *mestizaje* is largely drawn from his philosophical beliefs about synthetic social and historical practices. In this sense, the account of aesthetics that undergirds his philosophical project was an attempt to retain an internally differentiated mode of experience. His conception of *la filosofía del porvenir* was an attempt to bring together scientific and axiological philosophical questions of perception and embodied being. The new consciousness that Vasconcelos proposed, i.e. the dominant thought of the new philosophical artist offered a simultaneous shift in perceptual and other social forms of engagement with the world.

Robin James has recently argued that contemporary critical race theorists have begun exploring the ways in which systems of privilege and oppression use aesthetics “as the main vehicle or medium to organize society.”[45] Drawing from the work of French social theorist, Jacques Rancière, James defends the Greek meaning of *aisthesis*, which means “having to do with sensation and sense perception.”[46] James argues that systems of privilege and oppression, like white supremacy, distribute advantages and disadvantages via perceptual registers of experience. While a great deal of political philosophy, she claims, concerns itself with the *content* of specific political relations, she, like Rancière, attends to the *form* of our political relations.[47] This formal mode is comprised of embodied perceptual practices of engagement that we undertake and experience. She states:

To use one of Rancière's examples from *Disagreement*, ancient Greek political philosophy framed the distinction between citizen and non-citizen in terms of qualitatively different kinds of vocal expressions: citizens could “speak,” but non-citizens could only groan and moan inarticulately. So, the aesthetic distinction between speech and groaning, between logically composed expression and mere noise, is what is appealed to when determining someone's political status .... If political philosophy wants to be critical of domination, it must, as Rancière argues, attend to “the perceptible organization” that legitimates specific actions and agents as political ones.[48]

Thus, the distribution and organization of sensible experience is a structuring part of the very systems of oppression and privilege that many contemporary social and political theorists analyze. In this sense, then, I propose that we find a relevant common thread among the work of theorists like Anzaldúa, Vasconcelos, and Alcoff.

To support the contemporary relevance of such an idea, consider Alcoff's analysis of racial embodiment in *Visible Identities*. First, Alcoff too proposes that racialization processes are dependent upon modes of seeing and perceiving difference within a given hermeneutical context. She states that social identities are "'sites' from which we perceive, act, and engage with others." [49] She describes such sites as "hermeneutical horizons" that "influence our orientation toward and responses to future experiences." [50] The relevant connections here to Vasconcelos' views are that both theorists are dealing with questions of racial mixture and impurity and looking for ways to discuss our abilities to combine phenomenological descriptions of lived experiences of race. Moreover, both Alcoff and Vasconcelos grapple with corporeality as it is presented through our perceptual registers. Each author systematically analyses habituated practices of perceiving human bodies according to culturally and historically sedimented conceptions of race. Alcoff's normative epistemic position is that racial perception occurs via "learned practices and habits of visual discrimination and visible marks on the body." [51] She is critical of cognitive accounts of race that place the locus of "seeing race" in pre-discursive forms of perception. As she states, "Sight does not lead in a direct line to race." [52] Rather than leaving behind discussions of perception and turning to ethical or political questions that focus on conceptions of agency or normative theory, Alcoff claims that perhaps "we ... simply need to learn to see better." [53] Thus, she calls here for a combined normative and metaphysical criticism of racism and racial perception. Her account then can be considered an analysis of the aesthetics of racial perception.

To then continue drawing some relevant ties between this contemporary account of racial perception and the work of Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa, we can point to the ways in which both Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa explore critiques of Anglo-American and Anglo-European aesthetic norms to create new modes of racial perception. For example, both authors draw from various forms of mysticism to examine epistemic elements of embodiment, including Hindu, Jewish and Spanish Catholic traditions. Also by abandoning discourses that link purity with perfectionism, both Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa develop conceptions of beauty and order based on the combination of inherently imperfect materials. Finally, while Vasconcelos directly critiques positivism, in a manner similar to what Alcoff will do over half a century later, he also pursues such critiques by combining normative and metaphysical analyses of anti-mestizo and anti-Mexican forms of racism and racial perception.

A focus on mixed racial identities is a fruitful place to examine the points of convergence among these two authors on this last point. First, Alcoff's general philosophical field of inquiry is the *metaphysics* of mixed racial identities. However, she is pursuing questions within the domain of social ontology, methodologically her analysis of mestizaje and race mixture focuses on the contextual nature of such identities. In the U.S., she claims there are competing discourses of purity that render mixed racial social positionalities alienating and as potential barriers to self-knowledge. She writes: "the epistemic authority and credibility that accrues to nearly everyone, at least with respect to their 'ownmost' perspective, is denied to the mixed race person.



Vis-à-vis each community or social location to which s/he might claim a connection, s/he can never claim authority to speak unproblematically for or from that position.”[54] Alcoff’s analysis of mixed racial identities, then, places at the center of discussion the manner in which discourses of purity block crucial self-knowledge for mixed race persons.

However, such existential and ontological questions have a long history within Latin American philosophical thought generally, and Vasconcelos stands out among this tradition as a prominent figure in such discourses. Namely, while other theorists such as Leopoldo Zea and Samuel Ramos (both of whom Alcoff cites in her analysis) offered critiques of U.S. cultural and political imperialism, Vasconcelos was a precursor to these theorists and one whose synthetic projects within Mexican philosophical thought carried great influence. Alcoff, noting this tremendous influence, too invokes Vasconcelos through Anzaldúa’s citation and rightly notes that for him “the mestizo represented something like a biological and cultural vanguard.”[55] Yet, in a critical vein, she incorrectly places his views within a Hegelian conception of world-historical change. While it may be true that Vasconcelos and other philosophers of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México believed in a progression of historical development, their views are not easily reflected through Hegelian views of history. As I mention above, the work of Bergson, among other European intellectuals of history, were more poignantly endorsed in Vasconcelos’ writings. The conception of synthetic philosophy that Vasconcelos defended was opposed to what he called “the unilaterality [*la unilateralidad*] of Hegel’s views of development.[56] He also introduces Hegel in his writings on the history of philosophy as having a conception of humanity that is “colorless” or insipid [*su humanidad es incolora*] and that leads to a “monstrous theory of the state” [*a construir su monstruosa teoría sobre el Estado*].[57] In these writings, we can see that Vasconcelos did not unequivocally endorse an Hegelian conception of historical change. Importantly, Vasconcelos points to Hegel’s inattention to questions of race and humanity, and notes the unidirectional nature of Hegelian dialectics. As I mention above, a more central figure on historical change for Vasconcelos was Bergson. For example, he describes Hegel as a classic representative of a form of Intellectualism within philosophy, whose views were based in the movement of rationality throughout history. However, in his description of Bergson, he writes that “the influence of Bergson for all of us in Spanish America has been enormous,”[58] and that, after Bergsonism, Intellectualism could not return to what it once was.[59] Finally, recall the account of *el elan vital* that I mention above and the bifurcated trajectories of this vital force that Vasconcelos appears to prefer over unidirectional conceptions of evolutionary development. Here again, then, through these critical stances against Hegelian conceptions of history, we see an important point of convergence between the writings of Vasconcelos and Alcoff.

In this sense, we should not reduce Vasconcelos’s views on history and change to Hegelian dialectics, and, in light of this reading, we can develop a fruitful dialogue with theorists like Alcoff who attempt to bridge discourses of science and axiology for the purposes of understanding mixed racial identities. What is novel, then, about this

reading of Vasconcelos' philosophical views is that it highlights his proposal of a synthetic philosophical system that was attentive to, and even exalted racial mixture rather than purity. Moreover, such a system, he claimed had "social well-being, sympathy, and beauty [la comodidad social, la simpatía y la belleza]" at its evaluative core. Recalling here Alcoff's critique of the alienating effects of rhetorics of purity within the U.S. for mixed-race persons, we can see some relevant critical commonalities between these figures.

Turning now to the relationship between these discussions and Anzaldúa, we should note that conceptions of racial mixture included for Vasconcelos a cultural movement called *indigenismo*, which sought to exemplify the importance of the indigenous influences in Mexico's national culture by implementing national museums and educational curricula that would facilitate this form of recognition.[60] This emphasis placed *culture* at the fore of discussions regarding national unity, i.e. rather than perceptual racial distinctions among bodies. This is an important element of *mestizaje* that Anzaldúa notes and uses in her own theoretical framework to both support and critique Vasconcelos' philosophical views and his prominence in Mexican and Mexican-American history. Drawing from his anti-imperialism and his profound but negligent optimism for a productive role for racial mixture, Anzaldúa seeks to underscore both the creative potential of *mestizaje* and its "Shadow side." We should note that the citations that serve as the prefiguration of the self for Anzaldúa, like her invocation of "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu," are not exclusively from any one distinguishable canon that define, for her, an oppositional system of values. Rather, as she writes in this famous passage from *La conciencia de la mestiza*, her authorial positioning becomes a tactic of resistance and survival:

Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is [la nueva mestiza] able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically .... The new *Mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view ... She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.  
[61]

As readers of Anzaldúa's work have often noted, her articulation of the multiplicity of the self and its tactical methods and manifestations is a unique marking of her authorial and philosophical voice. Citational acts of prefiguration in her writings draw from many sources, including music, film, poetry, academic, religious, and literary texts, folk tales, family history, and so on. However, all such sources stem from and pertain to distinct sites of cultural production as well, including Mexican, Chicano, Chinese, Anglo-American, European, Afro-Caribbean, Aztec, Incan, Mayan, Navajo, African-American, Nahuatl, Jewish, and so on. Thus, in focusing on the relationship between the philosophical writings of Anzaldúa and Vasconcelos, I do not wish to reduce her work to merely one axis of interpretation. Instead, I claim that her readers are better able to consider "the good, bad and the ugly" of Vasconcelos' views from within the critical

framework that she offers. That is, Anzaldúa draws a distinction among the racism of Vasconcelos and the important and productive elements of his work, invoking “the spirit” of his project rather than the concrete political and social consequences of the account of *mestizaje* that he provided.

Connecting this positioning of Anzaldúa via Vasconcelos’ anti-U.S. imperialism and attention to racial mixture, there are several ways in which Alcoff’s conception of racial perception is well-supported by Anzaldúa’s work. Alcoff and Anzaldúa each offer frameworks for understanding resistance not via iterations of harmonious couplings among a group’s beliefs or affective compartments. Rather, both theorists find productivity in the friction or *los choques* among differing epistemic, political, and aesthetic frameworks. In this vein, Alcoff’s account of racial perception is acutely tied to ethical frameworks for understanding entrenched forms of social and individual ignorance and ethical frameworks for interpreting *non-intentional* habits of perception. This implies a kind of slippage between our intended actions, our actual practices, and the normative uptake of those practices. Consider, for example, how people’s occurrent judgments about their predicted biases fail to map their behavior when performing in implicit association tests or in other forms of empirical analysis.[62] In her work analyzing rapid judgment and implicit association, Alcoff argues that “snap judgments” seem to be an important aspect of day-to-day human interaction. However, such judgments present problems for accounts of moral responsibility. Namely, as she states: “if [rapid judgment] is truly beyond conscious deliberation, unsusceptible to unpacking, as it were, it seems to be both exempt from accountability and not subject to improvement.”[63] The point Alcoff is raising here is that our implicit associations and our explicit judgments create ethical and epistemic dissonance. As she suggests in the paper, such forms of dissonance can lead to forms of fatigue or, in other cases, serve as motivations for an individual to attempt to adjust her/his behavior. Namely, our unconscious attitudes and biases create friction for us and thus compel us to act or to fail to act.

In this sense, we find a commonality between the Alcoff’s work and Anzaldúa’s writings. As I mention above, Anzaldúa’s conception of *la facultad* and the Shadow self are ways of examining ignorance and perception as well. Modes of individual agency and political resistance can be both terrifying and optimistic with respect to their potential efficacy within a broader social context, and this is the state of *Nepantlism* that Anzaldúa examines. So too, Alcoff goes to considerable length to examine the ways in which epistemic responsibility hinges not on the sole culpability of individuals and the outcomes of their actions, but also on the broader social contexts in which their actions can be taken up and rendered meaningful. Anzaldúa and Alcoff all distribute epistemic and moral responsibility at both an individual and group level. Similarly, each theorist distributes ignorance and non-intentional modes of perception to a social level as well. This type of epistemic distribution entails that possibilities for effective political resistance are also social and not merely individually intentional phenomena. It is the possibility of creative imaginings via *los choques* of one’s epistemic positioning that

capitalizes on hermeneutical gaps and facilitates radical social imaginings that can challenge dominant epistemic frameworks.

These are then only a few ways in which U.S. social epistemologists could benefit from recognizing the diversity among Latin American and Latina/o frameworks of resistance, including the series of shifts and citational posings within the writings of theorists such as Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa. Further research on the respective works of Anzaldúa and Vasconcelos is still needed within U.S. philosophy. However, by tracing their relevance to current debates in philosophy, we can see that their points of contrast and similarity help facilitate new modes of analysis, and in Anzaldúa's words, only by attention to these tensions, can U.S. philosophers turn this "ambivalence into something else." [64]

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## Notes

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[2] María DeGuzmán, *Buenas Noches, American Culture: Latina/o Aesthetics of Night* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 31.

[3] "Vamos pues, por ahora ... a procurar extraer de la sombra y el caos, un poco de ritmo y de luz." Vasconcelos, José. *El monismo estético*, in *Obras completas de José Vasconcelos, Tomo IV* (Mexico, D. F., Libreros Mexicanos Unidos, 1961), 20. All translations of the work of Vasconcelos in this paper are my own unless otherwise noted.

[4] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 99.

[5] For example, Alicia Arrizón and Marilyn Grace Miller read Anzaldúa as largely rejecting Vasconcelos' theoretical framework.

[6] Molloy limits her analysis to a literary tradition marked by Spanish colonial conquest.

[7] Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Obras de D.F. Sarmiento Tomo III* (Santiago: Imprenta Gutenberg, 1885), 167. Translated in Sylvia Molloy, *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 26.

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid, 17.

[10] Ibid, 4.

- [11] DeGuzmán 2012, 31.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera*, 61.
- [14] DeGuzmán, *Buenas Noches, American Culture*, 33.
- [15] Ibid
- [16] Ibid, 32.
- [17] Amala Levine, "Champion of the Spirit: Anzaldúa's Critique of Rationalist Epistemology," in *EntreMundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Palgrave MacMillon, 2005), 173.
- [18] Gloria Anzaldúa, "Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound: The Coyolxauhqui Imperative—la sombra y el sueño," in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham, Duke University Press, 2009), 306-307.
- [19] José Vasconcelos, *Ulises criollo*, ed. Claude Fell (Paris: ALLCA XX, 2000), 28.
- [20] Ibid, 33.
- [21] Ibid, 32-33. Another noteworthy aspect of this autobiographical moment is that when referring to Mexicans that attended his school, he writes that he includes students living in Texas whose parents are U.S. citizens because they too were united by "common cause through reasons of the blood."
- [22] Molloy, *At Face Value*, 190.
- [23] José Vasconcelos. *A Mexican Ulysses: An Autobiography*, trans. W. Rex Crawford (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 223-224.
- [24] Novoa, Adriana. "Darwinism in Spanish America: Unity and Diversity in José Rodó and José Vasconcelos," *Darwin in Atlantic Cultures: Evolutionary Visions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality*, eds. Jeannette Eileen Jones and Patrick B. Sharp (New York: Routledge, 2010), 237-259.
- [25] For example, he directly places special critical emphasis on how Spencerians mistakenly endorse Lamarckian conceptions of the heritability of acquired traits, which, in a post-Mendelian era, was already an outdated view of evolutionary inheritance. José Vasconcelos, *Historia del pensamiento filosófico* (Mexico City: Ediciones de la Universidad de México, 1937), 363-370.
- [26] José Vasconcelos, "Bergson en Mexico," in *Homenaje a Bergson* (Mexico City: Imprenta Universitaria de UNAM, 143), 135.
- [27] Vasconcelos, *Historia del pensamiento filosófico*, 480.
- [28] Ibid, 480-481.
- [29] Ibid, 481; 529-530. Cf. Bergson's analysis of rhythm and consciousness in Bergson, Henri. "The Aesthetic Feelings," in *Time and Free Will: An Essay of the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (New York: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1910), 14-17.
- [30] Ibid, 531.
- [31] Ibid
- [32] Ibid
- [33] Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La raza cósmica*, trans. Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 9 [49].
- [34] Ibid, 25-26.



[35] Vasconcelos, *El monism estético*, 10.

[36] *Ibid*, 19.

[37] Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica/The Cosmic Race*, 8 [48].

[38] Vasconcelos, *El monism estético*, 10.

[39] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera*, 107.

[40] *Ibid*, 109-110.

[41] Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 127. His condemnation of these movements appears to have been associated with the political beliefs of Antonieta Rivas Mercado. Such beliefs eventually lead to her suicide, according to Vasconcelos.

[42] I would add, however, that in his 1926 Chicago lectures, he writes that “The standards of beauty change with the times and the people.” He then adds: “but there is one thing probably certain and it is that physical beauty is closely related to comfort and peace of mind. In other words, a race of slaves cannot be beautiful because hard work and misery tend to leave their imprint on the body.” Thus, we might interpret his discussion of beauty and ugliness in *La raza cósmica* in light of this discussion of the historical and cultural conditions that produce aesthetic standards, rather than viewing such standards as essential to differing racial groupings. José Vasconcelos, “Similarity and Contrast,” *Aspects of Mexican Civilization: Lectures of the Harris Foundation 1926* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1926), 39.

[43] Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 184.

[44] *Ibid*, 185.

[45] Robin James, “Oppression, Privilege, & Aesthetics: The Use of the Aesthetic in Theories of Race, Gender and Sexuality, and the Role of Race, gender, and Sexuality in Philosophical Aesthetics,” *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 2 (2013): 104.

[46] *Ibid*.

[47] *Ibid*.

[48] *Ibid*, 105.

[49] Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 287.

[50] *Ibid*.

[51] *Ibid*, 196.

[52] *Ibid*, 204.

[53] *Ibid*.

[54] *Ibid*, 279.

[55] *Ibid*, 281.

[56] Vasconcelos, José. *Manual de filosofía*. In *Obras completas de José Vasconcelos Tomo IV* (Mexico, D. F., Libreros Mexicanos Unidos, 1961), 1095.

[57] *Ibid*, 1089.

[58] *Ibid*, 1168.

[59] *Ibid*, 1170.

[60] Indigenismo also has been heavily criticized for its means of representing indigenous peoples and cultures.

[61] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera*, 101.

[62] Cf. Eric Schwitzgebel, "Acting Contrary to Our Professed Beliefs or The Gulf Between Occurrent Judgment and Dispositional Belief," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91 (2010).

[63] Linda Alcoff, "Sotomayor's Reasoning," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 1 (2010): 128.

[64] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera*, 101.

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