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## Hybrid subjectivities, Latin American mestizaje, and Latino political thought on race

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This essay interrogates accounts of race in Latino political thought (and hence claims about how Latinos should approach race in the USA) grounded in a selective borrowing from Latin American philosophical sources on mestizaje. It argues that the uncritical reproduction of certain conceptions of mestizaje in Latino political thought ignores the way in which Latin American ideas about race were developed in direct conversation with US empire and US racial politics, is at odds with contemporary racial politics in the region, and might serve to obscure certain fault lines within Latinidad.

**Keywords:** critical theory; race; Latin America; Chicano/a studies; Latino/a studies; race studies; political theory; political thought

The trope of Latino exceptionality vis-à-vis US systems of racial classification and modes of race-thinking has become a standard and seemingly ubiquitous prelude to any discussion of Latino identity and politics. Indeed, it is common to find arguments in Latino political thought that Latinos – because they bring with them Latin American experiences of racial mixing that challenge and disrupt the binary (black–white), static, and overly biological conceptions of race found in the USA – have key insights when it comes to theorizing race. Latino political theorists and philosophers as diverse as Gloria Anzaldúa, Jorge J. E. Gracia, and Eduardo Mendieta have engaged with key texts in the tradition of Latin American political thought or drawn on particular narratives of the region’s history in order to make claims about the privileged perspective vis-à-vis race that derives from the existential, cultural, and historical position of Latinidad. A central claim of this paper is that much of Latino political thought’s “borrowing” of concepts from certain strands of Latin American thinking on race has not been sufficiently self-critical. Specifically, many Latino political theorists rely on a construction of race in Latin America, and mestizaje in particular, that: (1) ignores the way in which Latin American ideas about race were developed in direct conversation with US empire and US racial politics and (2) is at odds with contemporary racial politics in the region. These omissions have important normative implications, as grounding arguments about how Latinos should approach race in the USA in positive accounts of Latin American mestizaje not only ignore the transnational dimension of debates about race in the Americas, but they also make claims that are directly relevant to debates about racial justice in Latin America, where these more benevolent reconstructions might have very different ethical and political consequences.

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The essay adopts a comparative framework, utilizing a detailed analysis of the relationship between the concepts of *mestizaje* formulated by Gloria Anzaldúa and the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos to illustrate the appropriation of certain Latin American ideas about race by Latino political theorists. It shows how Latino Studies scholars, who for the most part have developed sophisticated and nuanced critiques of US racial politics and Latinos' positioning within it, fail to bring the same care and attention to their analysis of questions of race in Latin America. This selective reading of race in Latin America leads many Latino political theorists to miss a number of normatively relevant facts about ideologies of *mestizaje* in the region, namely that these ideas were often utilized by conservative elites to simultaneously defend the region's standing in light of scientific racism, legitimize their rule over racially diverse populations, and obscure the reality of racism in their countries. As a result, I suggest that while notions of *mestizaje* and hybridity in Latino political thought have moved beyond their Latin American philosophical roots, they still contain sufficient tensions that rather than being derived from overly optimistic readings of Latin America's racial history, a more fruitful approach to theorizing contemporary Latinidad's complex relationship to race should take as its starting point Latinos' lived experience of race in the USA.

### **Latinos and the dilemma of race in the USA**

The claim that Latinos confound US racial categories and have distinct and different understandings of race than other US citizens is ubiquitous in both popular and scholarly accounts of Latinos and race.<sup>1</sup> According to philosopher Eduardo Mendieta, for example:

Hispanics and Latinos are acting as a powerful agent of change in the United States. As people who resist racialization, even if they were products of racial practices, they are also ineluctably altering the grammar of U. S. political, social, racial, and even economic culture. (Mendieta 2000, 46)

Similarly, Linda Martín Alcoff argues that Latinos have an especially vexed relationship with dominant understandings of race in the USA: "we simply don't fit. Racialized identities in the United States have long connoted homogeneity, easily visible identifying features, and biological heredity, but none of these characteristics apply to Latinas/os in the United States" (Alcoff 2000, 24). Part of the problem, as has often been noted, is that the terms Latino or "Hispanic" derived from US census categories are at best overly broad and at worst incoherent, as they encompass individuals from multiple countries of origin, ethno-racial identities, etc.<sup>2</sup> The anomalous status of Latinos vis-à-vis US racial categories have led Latino Studies scholars to grapple with the question of whether and how to think about Latinos as a single group, and of what kind (i.e. should they be considered an ethnic or racial group or both?).<sup>3</sup>

Theorists of multiculturalism have also struggled with the problem of how to classify Latino/as, as they do not fit neatly into the standard typologies used to establish the kinds of rights to which different minority groups are entitled. The literature on multiculturalism assumes that immigrant ethnic groups, national minorities, indigenous peoples, and racial groups are all distinct categories that do not overlap. Will Kymlicka, for instance, has argued that it would be a mistake to treat Latinos in the USA as a single group given that the category encompasses national minorities, immigrants, and exiles.<sup>4</sup> Puerto Ricans and Chicanos in the Southwest, for example, constitute national minorities according to his typology (because they were incorporated into the USA against their will as a result of the Spanish American and Mexican American wars), while Spanish-speaking immigrants from other Latin American countries are more akin to ethnic groups. Cubans who left the island after 1959 do not fit neatly into either category, because they see themselves as exiles, not immigrants. The position of Mexican-Americans is equally

complex, because they include both Chicanos from the Southwest and more recent voluntary immigrants from Mexico whose situation and claims would be more akin to that of ethnic groups. Given that different kinds of minority groups are viewed as justly entitled to different kinds of rights in most theories of multiculturalism, Chicanos whose ancestors historically resided in the Southwest would appear to be entitled to greater terms of accommodation for their original culture, whereas more recent voluntary immigrants from Mexico would be subject to more demands for assimilation.<sup>5</sup>

The question of whether Latinos should be thought of as a single group, and of what kind, is thus bound up (at least from the perspective of theorists of multiculturalism) with the issue of what kinds of rights they are entitled to; but it is also related to more fundamental questions about how to conceive Latino identity and approach Latino politics. Cristina Beltrán and Jorge Gracia provide two rather different perspectives on this question. Gracia takes as his point of departure the complexity of Latino identity, but then proceeds to try to find a way to name and identify Latinos as a group. He advocates the use of the term “Hispanic,” which applies to

the people of Iberia, Latin America, and some segments of the population in the United States, after 1492, and to the[ir] descendants ... [its use] does not imply that there are any properties common to all of us throughout history. Its use is rather justified by the web of concrete historical relations that ties us together, and simultaneously separates us from other peoples.<sup>6</sup> (Gracia 1999, 52)

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Gracia’s preferred term and the definition of the group he adopts, it is an example of an attempt to identify and conceive of Hispanics or Latinos as a group, even as he is careful to note that in his definition what unites them is a common history and quasi-familial bonds, not shared political views, social experiences, etc. Beltrán, in contrast, is more skeptical of the problematic consequences of thinking about Latinos as a monolithic group with certain paradigmatic shared experiences, and instead wants to recuperate the political and theoretical fruitfulness of their lack of homogeneity (see Beltrán 2010).

Setting aside for a moment the questions of how to conceive *Latinidad* and approach the study of Latino politics, as an empirical matter Latinos’ apparently exceptional status among ethno-racial groups in the USA is not so clear-cut. While it is true that Latinos/as defy the standard typologies in the literature on minority group rights, so too do other groups. African-Americans, for example, were not voluntary immigrants, but they also do not possess many of the characteristics Kymlicka associates with national minorities (such as a language and culture distinct from that of the majority group and a discrete homeland or territory). Moreover, as famously illustrated by President Barack Obama, like Latinos, African-Americans are now a mix of long-standing residents and more recent African and Caribbean immigrants with different countries of origin, languages, etc.<sup>7</sup> Rather than Latinos being more anomalous than other groups, it might thus be the case that the problem lies with how the categories themselves have been conceived.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the trope of *Latinidad*’s racial exceptionalism is derived less from the vagaries of US systems of racial classification and more from arguments Latino political theorists have borrowed from certain strands of Latin American thinking about race, particularly notions of *mestizaje*. In order to assess the usefulness of claims that Latinos/as approach race in ways that challenge dominant modes of US racial thinking it is thus necessary to trace the Latin American philosophical sources of these arguments as well as analyze the ethical and political implications of key silences and omissions in the way that these concepts have been deployed by Latino political theorists. Anzaldúa’s theorization of Latinas’ socio-historical position and legacy of racial mixing as the source of privileged insight about identity and subjectivity in general is a perfect case in point. The following sections analyze in detail her notion of *mestiza* consciousness, trace its indebtedness to José Vasconcelos’ theory of *mestizaje*, and unpack the ways in which

his ideas were themselves both informed by US racial politics and developed in response to the specter of US empire.

### The Vasconcelian roots of Anzaldúa's hybrid subject

The classic account of Latinidad as a privileged form of subjectivity grounded in racial and cultural mixing is Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *mestiza* consciousness developed in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa's phenomenological account of the privileged knowledge available to certain kinds of hybrid subjects was formulated on the basis of three key elements of the Chicano/Latino experience: (1) Chicanos' hybrid position as a people who straddle the USA–Mexico border, (2) an account of Latin American *mestizaje* as a process of racial cultural mixing, and (3) Chicanos' dual identity caught between Mexican and Anglo cultures in the USA.<sup>9</sup> Whether it is strictly the purview of darker-skinned Chicanas/Latinas or queer Latinos/as or is available to a broader range of hybrid subjects, for Anzaldúa the perspective of the *mestiza* is a privileged one:

*La mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity ... She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode ... nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa 1987, 79)

As Beltrán has persuasively observed, Anzaldúa's critique of traditional conceptions of subjectivity simultaneously re-inscribes the position of the *mestiza* as one associated with a certain epistemic privilege and emancipatory potential not necessarily available to other kinds of subjects (see Beltrán 2004). Beyond the question of the limits of her account of hybrid subjectivity as a model for democratic politics, however, what is most interesting for our purposes is how Anzaldúa chooses to represent the philosophical lineage of her theorization of *mestizaje*. I argue that the kind of selective reading of Vasconcelos in which she engages is emblematic of the function often played by Latin American political thought in accounts of Latinos' epistemic privilege vis-à-vis race. It operates as a marker, a symbol, that is invoked to signal an alternate historical racial trajectory, but that is hardly ever seriously analyzed or evaluated on its own terms. Anzaldúa, for instance, draws on Vasconcelos without placing his arguments about racial mixing in Latin America in any kind of historical, political, or philosophical context, in contrast to the way she carefully plumbs the Chicano/Latina experience in the USA for insights about subjectivity, racial solidarity, and cultural negotiation.

Because *Borderlands/La Frontera* intentionally crosses disciplinary boundaries and encompasses multiple writing genres, tracing the philosophical sources of Anzaldúa's account of *mestizaje* poses something of a challenge.<sup>10</sup> One of the few thinkers mentioned by name in the text is the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, whom Anzaldúa invokes at the beginning of the chapter where she develops her conception of subjectivity. In the first sentence of the chapter entitled "*La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness*," Anzaldúa cites Vasconcelos by name, recounts his notion of the cosmic race, and describes it as affirming of racial mixing, as inclusive, and as the harbinger of a new hybrid subject. She writes:

Jose Vasconcelos, Mexican philosopher, envisaged *una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color – la primera raza síntesis del globo*. He called it a cosmic race, *la raza cósmica*, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world. Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity. At the confluence

of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly “crossing over,” this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands. (Anzaldúa 1987, 77)

One of the most interesting aspects of this passage is the way in which Anzaldúa subtly alters Vasconcelos’ arguments about the cosmic race to re-position them as speaking to the situation of Latinos in the USA. Vasconcelos developed his theory of *mestizaje* in part to validate Latin American identity against the threat of US imperialism and cultural hegemony (a point to which I return later); there are thus many references to the USA in *The Cosmic Race*, but always in order to set up the comparison with Latin America. He portrayed the USA and Latin America as discrete, separate entities; there is no consciousness of the border in Vasconcelos’ text, despite the fact that he was clearly very aware of it.<sup>11</sup>

By playing on some of Vasconcelos’ terms that have a different resonance when viewed in light of the border, and introducing others such as “crossing over” and “alien,” Anzaldúa swiftly moves from her initial invocation of Vasconcelos to the development of her own account of *mestiza* consciousness without any further direct reference to Vasconcelos. Indeed, he is only mentioned once more in the text; her second reference to him is in a footnote where she briefly explains that: “this [the notion of *mestiza* consciousness] is my own ‘take off’ on Jose Vasconcelos’s idea” (Anzaldúa 1987, (note 1, *La conciencia de la mestiza*) 97). Despite the lack of overt references to him elsewhere in the text, there are various instances where Anzaldúa echoes ideas found in Vasconcelos, such as the evolutionary argument that growing multiraciality represented the destiny of humanity. In the prologue to the 1948 edition of *The Cosmic Race*, for example, Vasconcelos explained that:

The central thesis of this book is that the various races of the earth tend to intermix at a gradually increasing pace, and eventually will give rise to a new human type, composed of selections from each of the races already in existence ... In short, present world conditions favor the development of interracial sexual unions. (Vasconcelos 1997, 3)

In Anzaldúa’s work Vasconcelian pronouncements about the *mestizo* as the epitome of evolutionary progress are reframed to refer to the female embodiment of hybrid subjectivity: “*En unas pocas centurias*, the future will belong to the *mestiza*” (Anzaldúa 1987, 80).

Anzaldúa similarly takes up Vasconcelos’ claim that Latin America is the exemplary site of *mestizaje*/hybridity (the cradle of the cosmic race), and relocates it to the USA–Mexico border region. Vasconcelos portrayed Latin America as a zone of contact between races that facilitated mixing as well as understanding and appreciation of the positive traits of all races. He argued that:

The advantage of our tradition is that it has a greater facility of sympathy toward strangers. This implies that our civilization, with all [its] defects, may be the chosen one to assimilate and to transform mankind into a new type. (Vasconcelos 1997, 17)

In a parallel move, Anzaldúa spatially relocates the archetypal site of racial and cultural encounter to the USA–Mexico border zone, and its Chicana/Latina inhabitants in particular. She writes: “Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures ... *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (Anzaldúa 1987, 78). Anzaldúa thus transposes Vasconcelos’ arguments about Latin America’s facility for racial mixing onto the cultural dilemmas of Latina subjects in the USA, but what remains consistent

across both texts is the portrayal of mestizos as the paradigmatic subjects (and indeed the very embodiments) of a certain kind of radically egalitarian approach to racial and cultural diversity.

### Vasconcelos, mestizaje, and the specter of US imperialism

One of the problems with Anzaldúa's recuperation of Vasconcelos theory of biological, cultural, and spiritual mestizaje is her portrayal of it as a paean to racial mixing that stands in contrast to US notions of race purity, which suggests by extension an implicit contrast between the latter as a building block of white supremacy and the former as a key element of racial egalitarianism. Yet this account of Vasconcelian mestizaje as inclusive is only possible by engaging in a rather selective reading of Vasconcelos' well-known text, which raises important questions about how it can serve as the basis for Anzaldúa's own notion of hybrid subjectivity, with its explicit commitment to racial egalitarianism. In brief, Vasconcelos' argument in *The Cosmic Race* is that Latin America is the vanguard of a historical movement toward the creation of a fifth race that will combine all the best characteristics of all previous races.<sup>12</sup> Latin America's "fundamental characteristic" is that it has produced a "fusion of ethnic stocks," and as a result it is destined to be the: "cradle of a fifth race into which all nations will fuse with each other ... In this fashion the synthetic race that will gather all the treasures of History ... shall be created" (Vasconcelos 1997, 18–19). The anti-racist implications of Vasconcelos' celebration of mestizaje are not clear-cut, however.

One of the problems is that Vasconcelos' own text at various points undermines the ostensibly anti-racist implications of mestizaje. As the internal contradictions in the text reveal, Vasconcelos in a number of instances reproduced or left intact racist evaluations of non-whites as inferior. *The Cosmic Race* contains many stereotypical, derogatory descriptions of non-whites; a fact that undoubtedly complicates or at least should give us pause about the extent to which Vasconcelos' celebration of racial mixing should be equated with full-blown racial egalitarianism. Consider this typical passage regarding the benefits of racial mixing:

The Indian, by grafting onto the related race, would take the jump of millions of years ... and in a few decades of aesthetic eugenics, the Black may disappear, together with the types that a free instinct of beauty may go on signaling as fundamentally recessive and undeserving, for that reason, of perpetuation. (Vasconcelos 1997, 32)

He also describes blacks at various points in the text as "eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust," and as examples of "uglier stocks" and "inferior races" (Vasconcelos 1997, 22, 32). Other non-white groups are described in similarly unflattering terms; he cites the Chinese tendency to "multiply like mice" as a reason for limiting Asian immigration to Latin America and, in a passage ostensibly celebrating the benefits of racial mixing, refers to the remnants of "sickly Muslim sensuality" among the Spaniards, all the while asking: "Who has not a little of all this, or does not wish to have all?" (Vasconcelos 1997, 19–22).

Anzaldúa's omission of these passages in Vasconcelos' text is emblematic of the way Latino political thought tends to engage in a selective reading of Latin American sources as well as the region's history when it comes to race. *The Cosmic Race* fails to function as an anti-racist text domestically, for example, because it does not contain any acknowledgement or critique of racial hierarchy *within* Latin America. This is hardly a coincidence. Once Vasconcelos' arguments are placed in context it becomes clear that Latin American ideas about race in the first half of the twentieth century were self-consciously being formulated in light of the threat of US imperialism and in direct conversation with racial politics in the USA.<sup>13</sup> There is thus undoubtedly an anti-colonial dimension to Vasconcelos' theory of mestizaje, and even an anti-racist one, at least

when it is viewed in light of the USA's relationship to Latin America. One of Vasconcelos' explicit aims in *The Cosmic Race* was to challenge negative assessments of Latin America rooted in racist condemnations of racial mixing as leading to degeneration, a popular premise of the scientific racism of the time. His defense of mestizaje was thus a defense of Latin American capacity; it was explicitly designed to refute negative assessments of Latin America because of its large multiracial population. But Vasconcelos also went beyond simply arguing that mestizaje did not lead to racial degeneration. He also deployed another popular trope among Latin American thinkers in the early decades of the twentieth century confronted with the expansive military, political, and economic power of the USA: the claim that at least where it came to race relations, Latin America had successfully avoided the poisonous racial politics of its more powerful Northern neighbor. The trope of Latin America's racial advantage vis-à-vis the US thus emerges at a specific historical moment and serves a certain anti-colonial function for Latin American elites, yet one of its more problematic consequences is the way in which it tends to elide racism in the region in order to assert Latin America's superior racial politics in comparison to the USA.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that Anzaldúa does not reproduce the racial eruptions that plague Vasconcelos' text, however.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the conception of hybrid subjectivity she develops not only reformulates Vasconcelian mestizaje and takes it in entirely novel directions by focusing on feminism and queer sexuality, but it explicitly tries to correct Latin American racial hierarchies that silence black and indigenous contributions to mestizaje. Anzaldúa's account of mestiza subjectivity was clearly formulated as an anti-racist project, as she highlights rather than avoids issues of racial hierarchy within Latinidad. Anzaldúa argued that acknowledging internal racism is necessary to facilitating alliances between subordinated groups in the USA:

before the Chicano can have unity with Native Americans and other groups, we need to know the history of their struggle and they need to know ours ... each of us must know our Indian lineage, our afro-mestisaje, our history of resistance. (Anzaldúa 1987, 86)

The suggestion here seems to be that for Latinos it is acknowledgement of their own complicated racial genealogies that will make solidarity possible. In keeping with this position, Anzaldúa gives a privileged role to indigeneity, unlike Vasconcelos (who either ignored or dismissed indigenous contributions). *Borderlands/La Frontera* is peppered with references to indigenous symbols and concepts derived from pre-Cortesian thought.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these important differences between their conceptions of mestizaje, it is still necessary to consider what kinds of tensions are built into Anzaldúa's argument that mestiza subjectivity is anti-racist because of its acknowledgement of contradictions, when Vasconcelos' account of mestizaje sought precisely to deny or gloss over racial hierarchies in Latin America. By not mentioning and critiquing the problematic elements in Vasconcelos' text Anzaldúa engages in a highly selective reading that is arguably emblematic of the distorted, or at least extremely partial, use of Latin American philosophical sources in Latino political thought. Beyond this, however, reading Anzaldúa's attempts to recuperate mestizaje in light of Latin America's racial history and Vasconcelos philosophical and political aims (the production of a narrative of Latin American racial exceptionalism that could ground an anti-colonial critique of the USA) suggests that there are important caveats about the anti-racist potential of mestizaje that she fails to consider. In other words, if mestizaje in Latin America did not function as a form of racial egalitarianism, then mestizaje as such is not inherently anti-racist, and the question is then: what is it about how Latinidad functions within the context of US racial politics that might enable the concept of mestizaje to "travel" in such a way as to resist or challenge the prevailing racial logic productively? Moreover, Vasconcelos is representative of one among a number of different strands of thinking about race within Latin American political thought, which points to a missed opportunity by Latino political



theorists to recover more radical strains in this tradition on which to base their approaches to race (see Von Vacano 2012, 16).<sup>17</sup> When Latino political theorists base claims about race and *Latinidad* in overly simplistic portrayals of *mestizaje*, they thus fail to grapple with the philosophical and political project of *mestizaje* in Latin America, which was often anything but culturally inclusive or racially egalitarian.

### Mestizaje and racial hierarchy in Latin America

One of the most striking features of Latino political theorists' engagement with race is the disparity between the great complexity, thoughtfulness, and care with which they address Latinos' position within US racial systems and the dilemmas of Latino identity, compared to the arguably less nuanced way in which they engage with questions of race in Latin America. Anzaldúa is not the only Latino political theorist to selectively draw on certain Latin American philosophical sources in order to ground arguments about Latino exceptionalism vis-à-vis race. In formulating answers to key questions about how Latinos should approach rights struggles in the USA, Latino political thought has drawn on a remarkably sanguine account of Latin America's racial past. Paradoxically, given the key role narratives of *mestizaje* are accorded in establishing Latinos' racial exceptionalism, historically accurate or complex representations of how these tropes have functioned in Latin America tend to be absent from Latino political thought, as if they were immaterial to the overall theoretical project of charting a course for *Latinidad* vis-à-vis race. In order to argue that *mestizaje* can function as a corrective to overly biological and binary notions of race in the USA (which it well might), Latino political theorists thus end up claiming that it *did* function that way in Latin America, whereas there it clearly not only did not dismantle racial hierarchy, but in fact rather served to cement and reinforce it. By eliding over several normatively relevant facts, namely the use of myths of *mestizaje* to obscure racism and legitimize the rule of dominant groups, Latino political theorists end up reinforcing a narrative that is increasingly being challenged in the region itself, which places them at odds with the most progressive forces critiquing racism and cultural exclusion in Latin America.

Perhaps in response to the critiques of narratives of harmonious *mestizaje* that have emerged in Latin America in recent years, some Latino political theorists have argued that while these are contested narratives, the historical accuracy of more benevolent accounts of *mestizaje* is irrelevant insofar as they are being deployed as a heuristic device to illuminate the difference between Latin American approaches to race and those in the USA. This is the position adopted by Eduardo Mendieta in an essay arguing that Latinos should resist racialization and thereby transform dominant modes of thinking about race in the USA. He explicitly stipulates that:

The historical narrative [of Latin American *mestizaje*] I present is merely propaedeutic and heuristic. I offer one reconstruction. I am sure that there are other ways of reconstructing the contrasts and comparisons I am going to make between the United States and Latin America. The core of my argument, however, is not rooted in my historical reconstruction, but the latter does offer some warrants for the plausibility of the former. (Mendieta 2000, 47)

This argument is insufficient, not because Mendieta is incorrect in claiming racial systems have differed in the USA and Latin America, but rather because it ignores the fact that ideas about race in Latin America and the USA were not developed in isolation. In fact, as we saw with Vasconcelos, accounts of Latin America's racial advantage as a result of *mestizaje* were formulated precisely in response to the threat of US imperialism. To reproduce such claims today without paying sufficient attention to the context in which they emerged is thus to practice a kind of willful naiveté about their philosophical and political aims.

Other Latino political theorists have argued that while the accounts of *mestizaje* put forward by Latin American thinkers may have served to obscure racial diversity in the region by imposing the idea of a homogenous national type, the concept can nevertheless be recuperated and deployed in different ways. This is the approach adopted by Jorge Gracia, who argues that Hispanics have a shared history of profound and near-universal *mestizaje*, which did not entail homogeneity or amalgamation. He acknowledges that: “this conception of *mestizaje* is contrary to that used in much of the Latin American discussion where *mestizaje* is often used to eliminate or at least to obscure differences” (Gracia 1999, 109–110). Instead, Gracia wants to argue for a conception of *mestizaje* as an egalitarian relationship of borrowing and lending absent power relations. He describes it as a “two-way street ... founded on the tacit acceptance of what the other has to offer, even in cases in which it originates in a relation of dominator-dominated,” and claims that *mestizaje* “can be egalitarian and self-assertive” (Gracia 1999, 118–119). Gracia thus portrays *mestizaje* as an egalitarian mode of cultural borrowing and racial intermingling that is not hostile to difference.

A central element of Gracia’s account of *mestizaje* is a historical narrative of Latin America as a space of encounter par excellence, such that cultural and racial diversity became a part of the very fabric of the region that has been viewed as a *de rigeur* fact of social life, not a problem to be managed. Given his preference for conceiving of *Latinidad* as encompassing people of Hispanic descent in Iberia, Latin America, and the USA, it is not surprising that this trope of Latin America as a space of harmonious encounter is especially prominent in Gracia’s *Hispanic/Latino Identity*. He refers to 1492, the founding moment after which it makes sense to speak of “Hispanics,” for example, as the “point in history when *we came together* ... the encounter of Iberia and America” (Gracia 1999, 50–51, emphasis added). Gracia acknowledges that the members of the group he wants to call Hispanics did not come together on equal terms, and that there are problems with the language of encounter that he adopts (Gracia 1999, 89–90).<sup>18</sup> He also recognizes that “the encounter between Europeans and Amerindians was one of the most cataclysmic and catastrophic events – especially for Amerindians – in the history of humankind” (Gracia 1999, 100). He mentions the “atrocities committed during the encounter,” but notes that some Iberians (such as Bartolomé de las Casas) denounced these atrocities early on (Gracia 1999, 60–61). Framing the issue in this way misses the point, however, which is not that all Spaniards and Portuguese were perpetrators of the evils of the conquest, but rather that the facts of conquest and colonization mean that there is serious symbolic violence, and significant ethical and political implications, to representations of this event as an “encounter” (with all the peaceful connotations of the term) when peoples on equal footing “came together” (which similarly implies some sort of voluntary association). This is probably not how Gracia would characterize the conquest, but these are the implications of the rhetorical terms he chooses to adopt, especially when one considers the history of the use of the trope of encounter and harmonious *mestizaje* in Latin America itself.

The idea of *mestizaje* as a process of harmonious fusion that began during the colonial era has been both a standard element of Latin American political thought and a highly contested one, precisely because of the undemocratic character of the political projects it has often served to legitimize. In Nicaragua, for example, descriptions of the country’s national identity and culture as the result of the harmonious fusion of European and indigenous elements put forward by Conservative political thinkers in the 1930s and 1940s served to naturalize and justify patriarchal conceptions of political power concentrated in the hands of the descendants of *criollo* families that allegedly embodied this political ideal. Emblematic of this portrayal of *mestizaje* as a process entirely devoid of power relations, as fusion on equal terms, is the claim by Pablo Antonio Cuadra (one of the country’s most prominent intellectuals of the twentieth century) that:

There are two separations which are the premises of Nicaragua's existence as a cultural entity: the separation of the Spaniard from his native world and the separation of the indigenous people from their cultural and existential world... Once these two separations take place a simultaneous process of fusion of these two currents begins and in the measure that this fusion goes indigenizing the Spaniard and Hispanicizing the Indian in *Nicaragua*, the new limits of what will later be known as "Nicaraguan culture" become clearer and more defined.<sup>19</sup> (Cuadra 1963, 9)

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, these claims, which had become established tenets of the country's official nationalism, were challenged and critiqued by political thinkers associated with Sandinismo who sought to show how the trope of harmonious fusion not only downplayed indigenous resistance to the conquest, but also served to mask the violence and conflict inherent to the process.<sup>20</sup> They rejected the Conservatives' characterization of Nicaraguan history as beginning with "a dialogue" between a Spanish *conquistador* and an indigenous *cacique*, and instead argued that the country's "history began with the fierce struggle of the Indian against the Spanish colonizer, which was sustained – without any dialogue – during the three centuries of Iberian domination" (Wheelock Román 1974, 1). Clearly, characterizations of the historical process of *mestizaje* as peaceful dialogue and encounter between two (or more) cultures, versus as the result of forcible conquest and colonization, have played an important role in struggles over the kinds of political systems (authoritarian or more inclusive of popular or non-white populations) that have been constructed in Latin America.<sup>21</sup> The point is that these are contested representations within Latin America itself, and they are contested precisely because they have consequences in terms of how political and racial power are distributed.

Indeed, Latino political theorists in the USA who adopt benevolent accounts of *mestizaje* stand in sharp contrast to the strong criticisms of such narratives by increasingly vocal contemporary indigenous and black movements in Latin America, which tend to argue that theories of harmonious *mestizaje* have served to legitimize racial hierarchy and discrimination in the region. The approach of many Latino political theorists to race – which seems to be to emphasize hybrid subjectivity and fluid identities drawing on Latin America's history of *mestizaje* – is thus out of step with what are arguably the most progressive forces struggling against racism and cultural hierarchy in Latin America: self-identified black and indigenous movements that are striving to remake their countries in order to address the racial discrimination and social, political, and economic exclusion that have characterized Latin American societies to varying degrees.<sup>22</sup> There are scholars who suggest that *mestizaje* in Latin America might have contained more emancipatory possibilities than has been acknowledged by black and indigenous activists and recent scholarship on race in the region, however.<sup>23</sup> Yet these efforts to temper Latin American critiques of *mestizaje* seem to be a response to the juxtaposition between its current disavowal in the region and the exaltation of hybridity outside it (including in Latino political thought).

Positive as well as negative accounts of Latin American *mestizaje* are thus part of a transnational debate about race in the Americas that is directly relevant to struggles for racial justice in both the USA and Latin America. If the emancipatory or transformative move in the USA is for Latinos to resist race and embrace *mestizaje* and hybridity, in Latin America it is quite the opposite: those who are struggling against racism and cultural hierarchy do so on the basis of an expansive critique of *mestizaje* and narratives of harmonious encounter. This suggests that the political and ethical valences of *mestizaje* are not a given; it is appealing in the US context given the way the combination of the one-drop rule and a racial imaginary focused on a black/white binary has obscured multiraciality, but in Latin America it served a very different purpose. Moreover, benign reconstructions of Latin America's racial past also have important consequences for who can identify with a Latino identity constructed on that basis in the USA.

### Re-conceptualizing Latino political thought on race

If the seemingly uncritical adoption of a romanticized narrative of Latin American *mestizaje* by some US Latino philosophers appears highly problematic when viewed in light of contemporary anti-racist struggles in Latin America, it might also serve to obscure certain fault lines within *Latinidad* in the USA. Do Latin American conceptions of *mestizaje* really provide a more emancipatory foundation for racial politics in the USA such that it is necessary to turn to them to ground claims about potential Latino contributions to the theorization of race? According to Diego Von Vacano, for example, the “synthetic paradigm” of race (which he claims is distinctive to Latin American political thought) “has ethical value for modern, multi-cultural societies,” because it offers a socially constructed, fluid understanding of race that does not posit racial groups as discrete and immutable entities (2012, 19, 160–164). While Von Vacano is careful to note some of the problematic consequences of the synthetic paradigm in Latin America detailed above, claims such as his that revalorizations of *mestizaje* can be usefully transposed to the US context also raise fundamental questions about Latino identity. One such question is whether the recourse to *mestizaje* will serve to obscure existing racial hierarchies within Latino communities and continue to render invisible the existence of black and indigenous Latinos within *Latinidad*. How can indigenous Latinos identify as Hispanic, for example, if doing so means adopting the kind of historical narrative of harmonious encounter espoused by Gracia? A second key question is whether doing so bypasses more fruitful alternative foundations for Latino political thought on race. For example, instead of heuristic excursions into Latin American ideologies of *mestizaje*, could an analysis of Latinos’ lived experience of race in the USA serve as a better way to ground Latino contributions to theorizing race?

Not all Latino political theorists have argued that the role of Latinos should be to transform US racial thinking on the basis of Latin America’s more progressive history of racial mixing; by way of conclusion I thus want to point to three potential alternative sources for rethinking Latino political thought on race, all of which engage directly with the racial politics of *Latinidad*. One alternative suggested by Linda Martín Alcoff is to focus on how Latinos are racialized in the USA. She points toward an alternative phenomenology of Latinos and race grounded in their lived experience of racialization in the USA (where phenotypically varied as they are, Latinos are viewed as part of a non-white racial group) that can then be compared to that of other subordinated racialized groups (see Alcoff 2006, 227–247).<sup>24</sup> Another potential source for Latino political thought on race could be to highlight the experiences of those groups rendered invisible by traditional narratives of *mestizaje*, such as black and indigenous Latinos. The emerging scholarship on Afro-Latinos, for example, emphasizes the way in which different notions of race move across and between transnational communities that span the USA and Latin America, as well as Afro-Latinos’ negotiations between blackness and *Latinidad* given that both are often assumed to be mutually exclusive (Dzidzienyo and Oboler 2005; Flores and Román 2010). Finally, plumbing the fissures within *Latinidad* – especially those produced by national/regional/and social class hierarchies – might be another avenue to ground theorizing about Latino contributions to the praxis of race in the USA that is anchored in their lived experience. The literary scholar Claudia Milian, for example, has argued for the need to interrogate the way that certain identities and experiences (black, brown, indigenous, Central American) have been obscured in dominant constructions of *Latinidad* and Latino studies (see Milian 2013). All of these suggestions for an alternative theoretical approach to the complex racial politics of *Latinidad* tread a similar path to the one gestured to by Anzaldúa’s brief comments on how cross-racial solidarity among Latinos and other subordinated racial groups in the USA could be forged on the basis of exploring each group’s internal hierarchies and knowing each other’s histories. Such an approach would also be

more consistent with the poignant realization that drives Latino political thought's engagement with race in the first place: the philosophical potential embodied in the lack of homogeneity within Latinidad.

## Notes

1. A typical article on Latinos and the census in the *New York Times*, for example, argued that there is a sharp disconnect between how Latinos view themselves and how the government wants to count them. Many Latinos argue that the country's race categories – indeed, the government's very conception of identity – do not fit them. The main reason for the split is that the census categorizes people by race ... But Latinos ... tend to identify themselves more by their ethnicity, meaning a shared set of cultural traits, like language or customs. (see Navarro 2012)
2. Currently the Latino/Hispanic category in the US census is not a racial category, as those who identify as Latino can still also choose to check one or more of the existing racial categories (black, white, etc.). There is a change being considered for the next census converting Latino into a racial category, however. This proposal from the Census Bureau has generated significant controversy among many Latino organizations. Some oppose the change because they argue that Latinos are multiracial and conceive their identity in cultural and ethnic (not racial) terms, while others fear that racial hierarchies and asymmetries within Latino communities, and the existence of specific sub-groups such as Afro-Latinos, will be re-invisibilized if they are no longer allowed to also designate a racial identity (see El Nasser 2013).
3. Throughout the paper I use the term “Latino/a” to refer to populations of Latin American descent living in the USA. Unlike the US census, I do not understand Europeans from Spain or Portugal as part of this group, and I also differentiate them from people still living in Latin America, whom I refer to as Latin Americans throughout the essay.
4. According to his systematic theory of minority group rights, national minorities deserve full protection from the state because they possess full-fledged societal cultures and have generally been incorporated into multination states against their will, through conquest or colonization; they thus cannot be said to have chosen to become members of the multinational states in which they now find themselves. Immigrant ethnic groups, in contrast, are entitled to certain polyethnic rights (financial support and legal protection for certain practices associated with particular ethnic or religious identities) but not to other collective rights open to national minorities, such as self-government, because in most cases they voluntarily decided to leave their homelands as individuals or family groups to become part of another state, and therefore cannot in all fairness expect to recreate their original societal culture in a different society (see Kymlicka 1995, 49–58).
5. It is ironic that according to the precepts of multicultural theories of justice Chicanos in the Southwest would have the most rights to the preservation of their original language and culture, given that they are one of the Latino communities in the USA that is most assimilated to Anglo culture and is less likely to speak Spanish (the latter often as a result of forced Anglicization in public schools).
6. Usage of the terms Hispanic and Latino reflects the larger debate about how to define the parameters of the group. While they tend to be used interchangeably, Gracia includes Europeans from Spain or Portugal within his definition of Hispanic, so those whom I call Latinos in this essay would be a part of the larger group that he refers to as Hispanics.
7. For a discussion of recent black immigrants to the USA and how they are viewed in relation to dominant representations of African-Americans, see Greer (2013).
8. For a critique of the clear-cut distinctions between different types of minority groups presumed in most theories of multiculturalism, see Hooker (2009).
9. Presumably Anzaldúa viewed the notion of mestiza consciousness as extending to Latinos as a whole rather than being restricted to Chicanos in particular. The text is ambiguous on this point, however, hence the persistent question of whether the hybrid subjectivity she describes is available to non-Latinos or even differently positioned Latinos: i.e. would upper-class, fair-skinned, straight Latinos experience the kinds of dislocations she describes as constitutive of mestiza consciousness?
10. Anzaldúa's text was also influenced by Chicano nationalist discourses (see Beltrán 2004, 597–602).
11. As a young boy Vasconcelos lived in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, on the Mexican side of the border, and attended an English-language primary school in Eagle Pass, Texas, until the age of 14.

12. There are other important texts in which Vasconcelos develops his ideas about race and Latin American identity; I provide only a very abbreviated sketch of his arguments about *mestizaje* in *The Cosmic Race* here, as this is a widely read text.
13. Between 1890 and 1925 there were 35 different instances of US military intervention (i.e. troops on the ground) in Latin America. This led many Latin American intellectuals to worry about the dangers to Latin American culture and identity posed by US imperialism.
14. One of the clearest examples of this is José Martí's famous essay, "My Race," published in 1893, in which he argued that Cuba did not have a race problem while indicting and cataloguing the various racial fault lines in the USA (see Martí 1999).
15. I borrow the concept of racial eruptions from Hale (2006).
16. In the chapter on *mestiza* consciousness, for example, in addition to Vasconcelos she also references the concept of *nepantlismo* (which is described as derived from an Aztec word meaning torn between ways) and the Aztec goddess Coatlicue (see Anzaldúa 1987, 78, 84). Like other Chicano writers (including the older nationalists that she both draws upon and critiques, and many of her feminist contemporaries), Anzaldúa deploys an overly romanticized portrayal of indigenous peoples that looks to the past rather than to contemporary indigenous movements, even as she does give a privileged role to indigeneity.
17. Von Vacano identifies Vasconcelos as one of the key Latin American thinkers to have formulated a "synthetic" approach to race.
18. While Gracia is correct that "encounter" is in some ways an improvement over "discovery," I think "arrival" would be an even better term.
19. I purposefully turn to an example drawn from a different Latin American country here to demonstrate both the breadth of political thought on race in the region, and how local intellectual debates and political struggles shaped discourses of *mestizaje* in different countries. For a discussion of how political theorists might approach the question of how political ideas travel, see Gordy (2014, 1–16).
20. Sandinista thinkers tended to portray this primarily (although not exclusively) in terms of social class conflict.
21. For a more detailed discussion of the role played by different conceptions of *mestizaje* in various strands of Nicaraguan nationalism in the twentieth century, see Hooker (2005).
22. The scholarship on the struggles of black and indigenous movements in Latin America in recent decades to gain rights to the preservation of their cultures and to redress racial discrimination is quite extensive. A few noteworthy examples include: Hanchard (1994), Paschel and Sawyer (2009), Safa (2005) and Yashar (2005).
23. See, for example, de la Cadena (2005) and de la Fuente (2001).
24. There is increased empirical research on Latino/African-American relations, for example, that could be used to ground such theorizing; see Telles, Sawyer, and Rivera-Salgado (2011).

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