



Cosmic Beauty: Race & Aesthetics in José Vasconcelos' "La Raza Cós mica"

Emily Zhang*

The Winsor School 103 Pilgrim Rd, Boston, MA 02215

*Corresponding Author: Emily Zhang, The Winsor School 103 Pilgrim Rd, Boston, MA 02215

Abstract: In 1925, José Vasconcelos published his seminal essay "La raza cósmica," in which Vasconcelos proposes the theoretical amalgamation of existing racial categories to create a fifth, cosmic race. Whereas some critics argue that Vasconcelos' ideas are exceedingly racist by modern standards, others contend that contextualizing the essay within the eugenics movement reveals progressiveness for its time. In such debates, scholars often focus on, criticize, or defend the racial aspect of the text. Despite the overarching fixation on race, however, to focus on only Vasconcelos' ideas on race is to ignore the larger conversation his essay was a part of: a conversation which included, but fundamentally, was never about race. By analyzing "La raza cósmica" in the context of nation-building, eugenics, and muralism in post-revolutionary Mexico, a more comprehensive understanding of "La raza cósmica" emerges—one that transcends polarized debates about its racial components, based more or less on contemporary sensibilities.

As dust settled after the Mexican Revolution, Mexico was faced with rebuilding and reforming its economy, political institutions, and national identity. During the 1920s, a public hygiene campaign—which connected education, urban planning, cultural aesthetics, and race—spread across the country to bring about a new, modern era.¹ In 1925, José Vasconcelos published his seminal essay "La raza cósmica," in which he proposes the theoretical amalgamation of existing racial categories to create a fifth, cosmic race.² "La raza cósmica" has become central in discussions about Mexican identity; however, the essay remains shrouded in controversy, as scholars debate the ethicality of its contents to this day.

Conflicting interpretations of "La raza cósmica" have shaped its legacy. Whereas some critics argue that Vasconcelos' ideas are exceedingly racist by modern standards and enabled "whitening" policies that spread across Latin America during the 1900s,³ others contend that contextualizing the essay within the eugenics movement reveals progressiveness for its time.⁴ In such debates, scholars often focus on, criticize, or defend the racial aspect of the text. This approach seems intuitive, as the title of the essay translates to "The Cosmic Race." Despite the overarching fixation on race, however, to focus on only Vasconcelos' ideas on race is to ignore the larger conversation his essay was a part of: a conversation which included, but fundamentally, was never about race. The goal of this paper is not to impose judgements as to whether Vasconcelos' ideas were acceptable, but to analyze his essay's underlying

¹ Susan Antebi, "Prometheus Re-bound: Disability, Contingency and the Aesthetics of Hygiene in Post-Revolutionary Mexico," *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 17 (2013): 193, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bpl.org/stable/24582276>.

² Elaine O'Brien et al., eds., *Modern Art in Africa, Asia and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms* (Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 405, digital file.

³ Barbara Celarent, review of *La raza cósmica / The Cosmic Race by José Vasconcelos; A Mexican Ulysses: An Autobiography by José Vasconcelos*, *American Journal of Sociology* 120, no. 3 (2014): 1000, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/680064>.

⁴ Linnete Manrique, "Dreaming of a Cosmic Race: José Vasconcelos and the Politics of Race in Mexico, 1920s–1930s," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2016): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2016.1218316>.

framework of aesthetics. How did aesthetic considerations shape José Vasconcelos' vision of a "cosmic race"?

It is undeniable that "La raza cósmica" includes many mentions of and derogatory statements towards various racial and ethnic groups.⁵ Still, a closer examination of the text reveals that the cosmic race is not a race at all, but rather, humanity itself. By examining the interplay between Mexican eugenics, muralism, and Vasconcelos' time as the Minister of Education, it becomes clear that the pursuit of aesthetics and beauty are central to the idea of a cosmic race.

In "La raza cósmica," José Vasconcelos envisions a future where individuals from Indigenous, European, African, and Asian backgrounds come together to create a fifth, cosmic race. *Mestizaje*, a term that originated in Latin America, refers to the blending or mixing of ethnic and racial groups; this mixing would give rise to a new cosmic consciousness that fosters intellectual and spiritual advancements. The "fifth race" would emerge by means of aesthetic selection: because people are attracted to physically beautiful partners, Vasconcelos argues, the innate preference for beauty will form a new race infinitely superior to all races past.⁶ Despite such an emphasis on aesthetics, however, Vasconcelos does little to define what 'beautiful' means, leaving individuals to decide for themselves. In this new age, marriages would not be dictated by convenience or necessity, but by the abstract concepts of beauty and love; ethnic barriers, already being broken down in Latin America, would completely disappear.

Mentions of race in "La raza cósmica" are numerous and often contradictory. Although Vasconcelos repeatedly states that the cosmic race is not a white race, his derogatory messaging around other racial and ethnic groups suggests his belief that, perhaps, it should be. The cosmic race, Vasconcelos explains, "[is] a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones,"⁷ and thus preserves the best qualities of each race. He emphasizes that although white Europeans have imperialized much of the world in the past, "domination by the whites will...be temporary...The white race has brought the world to a state in which all humans and cultures will be able to fuse with each other."⁸ Although Vasconcelos asserts that the cosmic race will only be white if people choose for it to be based on "the free choice of personal taste,"⁹ when he characterizes the Chinese as, "under the holy counsel of Confucian morals[,] multiply[ing] like rats,"¹⁰ the implication is that "the white race"¹¹ inherently has more positive traits than others. In doing so, Vasconcelos accepts the premise that there are distinct races, each with characteristics inherent to it, and suggests that these races matter. By claiming that the cosmic race includes the "treasures" of each race, he implies that there are negative traits inherent to each race as well.

Due to such contradictory messaging, Vasconcelos has been criticized for enabling "whitening" policies that spread across Latin America throughout the twentieth century.¹² Arturo Ulsar Pietri, then director of Venezuela's Office of Immigration and Colonization, voiced his concerns about "La raza cósmica" in 1937. He explains, "It was even more impossible to appreciate the Indian than the Spaniard...The words 'laziness' and 'bad habits' constantly appear when the colonial chroniclers speak of the Indian...Nor do blacks constitute a contribution that could benefit the race."¹³ In other words, while Vasconcelos' idea was that the cosmic race would take the best parts of each race, existing prejudice

⁵ Celarent, review, 1000.

⁶ O'Brien et al., *Modern Art in Africa*, 410.

⁷ O'Brien et al., *Modern Art in Africa*, 412.

⁸ José Vasconcelos, "The Cosmic Race," in *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, by Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson (n.p.: Duke University Press, 2022), 16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2rr3g8m.9>.

⁹ O'Brien et al., *Modern Art in Africa*, 410.

¹⁰ Celarent, review, 1000.

¹¹ O'Brien et al., *Modern Art in Africa*, 405.

¹² Jesús María Herrera Salas, "Ethnicity and Revolution: The Political Economy of Racism in Venezuela," *Latin American Perspectives* 32, no. 2 (2005): 78, JSTOR.

¹³ Salas, "Ethnicity and Revolution," 78.

against people of color—whether that was against Chinese, Indian, or Black individuals—made it so not every race was perceived to have positive qualities to begin with.

Vasconcelos' stance on race is confusing at best. Despite the contradictory and often prejudicial nature of his stance on race, however, for Vasconcelos to say that the cosmic race will preserve the best traits of each race is to acknowledge that people inherently differ within racial groups and have individual characteristics. When individuals are being aesthetically selected by their peers, race is fundamentally irrelevant, as such a selection would assess each person based on their unique individual traits, rather than their race or ethnicity. The cosmic race is thus not a combination of various races, but a combination of individual people, each with their unique features and characteristics. The concept of race itself is based on the categorization of humanity into subgroups based on perceived physical and/or cultural differences.¹⁴ Thus, to be a subcategorization of the human species, race relies fundamentally on the notion that there are multiple races. If there is only one 'race,' a cosmic race, then there is no race at all, only humanity itself.

It is clear that race was a key topic of discussion in "La raza cómica." To understand the broader conversation that the essay was a part of, however, it is important to look at the rise of eugenics in post-revolutionary Mexico. During the time of eugenics, one's physical and mental impairments and/or disabilities were portrayed as inextricable from their visual appearance. By claiming that individuals already aesthetically select among themselves, Vasconcelos addresses the perceived need for eugenics with a completely passive approach. His essay, thus, creates an overarching framework of aesthetics and beauty that includes, but reaches beyond just race.

Eugenics first emerged in Latin America towards the end of the nineteenth century, in response to discussions surrounding national identity, evolution, and progress.¹⁵ In the context of Mexico, eugenics policies were implemented due to a perceived need—by doctors, scholars, activists, and other Mexican elites—to bring about a new, modern era after the Mexican Revolution.¹⁶ As Professor of Latin American literature Susan Antebi explains, "Eugenics goes to work on specific bodies considered 'problematic,' by attempting to eliminate their bodies, their particular features, or their chances of passing such features to future offspring...[Eugenics was a] state-sponsored imperative to identify such bodies and make them—or their negative qualities—disappear."¹⁷

Defining what exactly is "problematic" was equally important to the eugenics movement as was eradicating such features or traits. During the early 1900s in Mexico, a range of categories were deemed "disabilities," including: alcoholism, incapability, and epilepsy.¹⁸ The 1917 Law of Familial Relations stated that marriage ought to be regulated for the "benefit of the species,"¹⁹ as according to that law, marriage is intrinsically tied to certain physiological and moral responsibilities. Therefore, it was deemed responsible and necessary to "legally incapacitate those incapacitated by nature," among whom, the impotent; those with syphilis, tuberculosis, or chronic, incurable, and hereditary or contagious diseases; and alcoholics. Furthermore, the First Mexican Congress of the Child, held in Mexico City in 1921, approved the forced sterilization of criminals.²⁰ Such individuals were thought to leave their descendants with genetic inheritances that rendered them incapable of physical or intellectual work²¹—eugenics was a push to combine natural and artificial selection, to mitigate the reproduction of the "unfit."

¹⁴ Robin O. Andreasen, "Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?," *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000): 654, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bpl.org/stable/188702>.

¹⁵ Manrique, "Dreaming of a Cosmic," 2.

¹⁶ R. Sánchez-Rivera, "The Making of 'La Gran Familia Mexicana': Eugenics, Gender, and Sexuality in Mexico," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2021): 162, accessed November 26, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12308>.

¹⁷ Antebi, "Prometheus Re-bound," 194-195.

¹⁸ Antebi, "Prometheus Re-bound," 193.

¹⁹ Ley Sobre Relaciones Familiares, Considerando, 1917.

²⁰ Manrique, "Dreaming of a Cosmic," 3.

²¹ Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt, *The Science and Politics of Race in Mexico and the United States, 1910–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 22, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

To understand the role of aesthetics in "La raza cósmica" and the broader eugenics movement, it is important to note that public education campaigns targeted and represented "impairments" as being visually identifiable.²² Thus, in his essay, José Vasconcelos addresses the need for eugenics with an alternative mechanism: an aesthetic selection.²³ In "La raza cósmica," Vasconcelos writes, "The laws of emotion, beauty, and happiness will determine the selection of a mate with infinitely superior results than that of a eugenics grounded on scientific reason... Only a long lasting experience will be able to show the results of a mixture no longer accomplished by violence, nor by reason of necessity, but by the selection founded on the dazzling produced by beauty and confirmed by the pathos of love."²⁴ Vasconcelos' personal idea of "beauty" is inconsequential, given that an aesthetic selection is based on the unique "love" every individual feels, and the traits they personally find beautiful. Vasconcelos contends that when each person pursues their own aesthetic preferences in a partner, the society that results, whatever it may look like, is sure to be magnificent.

In his criticism of the essay, Ethnic Studies scholar Jared Sexton argues that though Vasconcelos' mechanism for the reproduction of the fittest differs from that of eugenics, "its ends remain frighteningly consistent—a 'selection' more efficient than a brutal Social Darwinism. Less carnage, less coercion, and less political controversy, this appears to be 'evolution' at a discount."²⁵ Although it is true that the "ends" are the same, the key distinction in mechanism cannot be disregarded. While it is possible that Vasconcelos is overly optimistic or simply unrealistic in his theories, "La raza cósmica" responds to the perceived need for eugenics in a more peaceful, "beaut[iful]," and passive way. If disabilities and impairments are visually identifiable, then the human tendency to seek visually appealing partners will naturally result in a selection independent of "violence" or "scientific reason." Eugenics are not necessary, Vasconcelos argues, as the end result will be accomplished anyways by way of human nature and aesthetic preference.

The additional context of Vasconcelos' roles as the Mexican Minister of Education and a key patron of Mexican muralism reveals that "La raza cósmica" is a part of Vasconcelos' lifelong push to beautify Mexico as a whole. Vasconcelos first publicly articulated his "aesthetic" ideal of what later became the cosmic race in 1916.²⁶ After founding the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) in 1921, José Vasconcelos served as its first minister from 1921-1924.²⁷ During that time, Vasconcelos conceived the Mexican public art model and jump started the revival of Mexican muralism.²⁸ Originally a Greek idea, the belief that aesthetically pleasing environments correspond with more effective learning motivated José Vasconcelos to help bring back Mexican muralism for the purpose of decoration. Furthermore, similar to his visions of a cosmic race, Vasconcelos saw art as essential to nation-building. Art has the power to connect people across cultural, ethnic, and political boundaries, and Vasconcelos used murals to showcase Mexicans' shared traditions and history. Under Vasconcelos' leadership, the Ministry of Education launched a massive mural painting campaign, bringing together Mexico's most gifted artists. Vasconcelos wanted murals he commissioned to be distinctively 'Mexican,' but he left little to no specific parameters as to what exactly that looked like, except that they be beautiful.²⁹

Because Vasconcelos ties together aesthetics and national identity, both in terms of muralism and the cosmic race, loose connections between art and the cosmic race can start to be drawn. Since 1922, the

²² Antebi, "Prometheus Re-bound," 193.

²³ Alicia Azuela, Colleen Kattau, and David Craven, "Public Art, Meyer Schapiro and Mexican Muralism," *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994): 537, JSTOR.

²⁴ O'Brien et al., *Modern Art in Africa*, 410.

²⁵ Jared Sexton, "The Consequence of Race Mixture: Racialised Barriers and the Politics of Desire," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 248, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000101588>.

²⁶ David S. Dalton, "Science and the (Meta)physical Body: A Critique of Positivism in the Vasconcelian Utopia," *Revista Canadiense De Estudios Hispánicos* 40, no. 3 (2016): 535, JSTOR.

²⁷ Dalton, "Science and the (Meta)physical," 535.

²⁸ Azuela, Kattau, and Craven, "Public Art," 535.

²⁹ K. Mitchell Snow, "The Philosopher as an Artist Writ Large," in *A Revolution in Movement: Dancers, Painters, and the Image of Modern Mexico* (n.p.: University Press of Florida, 2020), 78, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15pjz72.10>.

Secretaría de Educación Pública has been based out of the historic center of Mexico City and well-decorated with art. Commissioned by José Vasconcelos, an impressive series of Diego Rivera murals decorate the two interior courtyards of the SEP headquarters. These murals picture scenes of rural Mexican life, as well as the revolutionary struggles of the daily Mexican. By including both the revolutionary effort, in addition to hopes for the future, the murals allude to Mexico's past, present identity, and future as well.³⁰

It appears that a correlation, but no distinct overlap exists between Vasconcelos' patronage of muralism and his theories of a cosmic race. However, his artistic imagery and references to the Ministry of Education in "La raza cósmica" demonstrate that aesthetics are central to his ideas of both reviving muralism and conceiving a cosmic race. In his essay, Vasconcelos uses vivid, artistic language—"aesthetics," "art," and "shining"—when he says, "The aesthetics of cloudiness and grays will be seen as the sickly art of the past. A refined and intense civilization will answer to the splendors of a Nature swollen with potency, habitually generous, and shining with clarity."³¹ In addition to his word choice and "splend[id]" imagery, Vasconcelos makes the connection between art, aesthetics, and the cosmic race most apparent in his concluding remarks. He remarks, "In order to express all these ideas that today I am trying to expound in a rapid synthesis, I tried, some years ago, when they were not yet well defined, to assign them: symbols in the new Palace of Public Education in Mexico...in the center, a monument should have been raised that in some way would symbolize the law of the three states: The material; the intellectual and the aesthetic."³² In his conclusion, Vasconcelos' draws a clear, direct connection between his work as the Minister of Education and his ideas of a cosmic race—the cosmic race, while undoubtedly commenting on race, is really a part of his broader efforts to find and create beauty.

Trying to beautify the world was an idea closely intertwined with race during Vasconcelos' time, due to the work of public education campaigns and eugenic ideas. "La raza cósmica" certainly was not without harmful statements towards certain racial or ethnic groups, namely the Chinese. More important than Vasconcelos' personal views on such groups, however, is that the inclusion of race allowed Vasconcelos access to broader conversations about aesthetics and beauty. Vasconcelos argues that if everyone selects romantic partners based on their personal ideals of beauty, whatever it may look like, the resulting society is sure to be sublime.

More analysis is warranted on how Vasconcelos' ideas connect and diverge from other theoretical and cultural frameworks, including the Négritude movement of the 1930s³³ or the positivism movement that emerged in the late-eighteenth century.³⁴ Although Vasconcelos outwardly opposed other popular schools of thought, perhaps his work furthered such movements by advancing a new perspective on *mestizaje* and Latin American identity.³⁵ In many ways, the ideas put forth in "La raza cósmica" may have jump started a century of Indigenous erasure and Latin American exceptionalism to racism, as countries in the region continued their quest for communal, national, and uniquely Latin American identities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andreasen, Robin O. "Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?" *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000): S653-S666. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bpl.org/stable/188702>.
- Antebi, Susan. "Prometheus Re-bound: Disability, Contingency and the Aesthetics of Hygiene in Post-Revolutionary Mexico." *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 17 (2013): 193-210. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bpl.org/stable/24582276>.
- A. S. Dillingham. *Oaxaca Resurgent : Indigeneity, Development, and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Mexico*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2021. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

³⁰ A. S. Dillingham, *Oaxaca Resurgent : Indigeneity, Development, and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2021), 119-120, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

³¹ O'Brien et al., *Modern Art in Africa*, 409.

³² O'Brien et al., *Modern Art in Africa*, 410.

³³ G. R. Coulthard, "Parallelisms and Divergencies between 'Negritude' and 'Indigenismo,'" *Caribbean Studies* 8, no. 1 (1968): 36, JSTOR.

³⁴ Dalton, "Science and the (Meta)physical," 535.

³⁵ Dalton, "Science and the (Meta)physical," 535.

- Azueta, Alicia, Colleen Kattau, and David Craven. "Public Art, Meyer Schapiro and Mexican Muralism." *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994): 55-59. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bpl.org/stable/1360475>.
- Celarent, Barbara. Review of *La raza cósmica / The Cosmic Race by José Vasconcelos; A Mexican Ulysses: An Autobiography by José Vasconcelos*. *American Journal of Sociology* 120, no. 3 (2014): 998-1004. Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/680064>.
- Considerando de la Ley Sobre Relaciones Familiares.
- Coulthard, G. R. "Parallelisms and Divergencies between 'Negritude' and 'Indigenismo.'" *Caribbean Studies* 8, no. 1 (1968): 31-55. JSTOR.
- Dalton, David S. "Science and the (Meta)physical Body: A Critique of Positivism in the Vasconcelian Utopia." *Revista Canadiense De Estudios Hispánicos* 40, no. 3 (2016): 535-59. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bpl.org/stable/24913517>.
- Hilton, Ronald. "José Vasconcelos." *The Americas* 7, no. 4 (1951): 395-412. <https://doi.org/10.2307/978353>.
- Karin Alejandra Roseblatt. *The Science and Politics of Race in Mexico and the United States, 1910–1950*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).
- Lear, John. *Picturing the Proletariat : Artists and Labor in Revolutionary Mexico, 1908–1940*. Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Series in Latin American and Latino Art and Culture. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).
- Manrique, Linnete. "Dreaming of a Cosmic Race: José Vasconcelos and the Politics of Race in Mexico, 1920s–1930s." *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2016.1218316>.
- Miller, Marilyn Grace. *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race*. N.p.: University of Texas Press, 2004. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/705722>.
- O'Brien, Elaine, Evelyn Nicodemus, Melissa Chiu, Benjamin Genocchio, Mary K. Coffey, and Roberto Tejada, eds. *Modern Art in Africa, Asia and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms*. Blackwell Publishing, 2013. Digital file.
- Salas, Jesús María Herrera. "Ethnicity and Revolution: The Political Economy of Racism in Venezuela." *Latin American Perspectives* 32, no. 2 (2005): 72-91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30040277>.
- Sánchez-Rivera, R. "The Making of 'La Gran Familia Mexicana': Eugenics, Gender, and Sexuality in Mexico." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2021): 161-85. Accessed November 26, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12308>.
- Sexton, Jared. "The Consequence of Race Mixture: Racialised Barriers and the Politics of Desire." *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 241-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000101588>.
- Snow, K. Mitchell. "The Philosopher as an Artist Writ Large:." In *A Revolution in Movement: Dancers, Painters, and the Image of Modern Mexico*, 78-93. N.p.: University Press of Florida, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15pjz72.10>.
- Vasconcelos, José. "The Cosmic Race." In *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, by Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, 17-21. N.p.: Duke University Press, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2rr3g8m.9>.

Citation: Emily Zhang "Cosmic Beauty: Race & Aesthetics in José Vasconcelos' 'La Raza Cósmica.'" *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 11, no. 7, 2024, pp. 15-20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.1107002>.

Copyright: © 2024 Author. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.