

# The Smile of the Slave: Synthesis and Protest in Alfonso Reyes<sup>1</sup>

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*La cultura americana es la única que podrá ignorar, en principio, las murallas nacionales y étnicas.* Alfonso Reyes, 1942.

*Lo cierto es que, en Hegel como en Marx, nos seduce más el sueño de progreso y de libertad que los accidentes del método dialéctico.* Alfonso Reyes, 1955.

## I

In societies where the politics of race are governed by ideologies of segregation, rhetorics of mixing can exert significant critical force. This has certainly been the case in the United States. Already in 1903, W. E. B. Dubois was pointing in this direction with his famous idea of double-consciousness. Today, as theories of hybridity proliferate against the tyranny of purism,<sup>2</sup> and as mestizo identities emerge as an explicit challenge to racial profiling of all sorts,<sup>3</sup> “mixing,” blending, and transgressing borders have become familiar tropes in the practice of radical cultural politics.

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<sup>2</sup> Two cornerstones of this body of cultural theory include García Canclini 1989 and Bhabha 1994.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Alcoff and Mendieta 2003, Rodriguez 2002.

The hasty conflation of mixing (whether rhetorical or real) with emancipatory activity can also signal the exceptionalist provincialism of American critical discourse. Taken at their most basic, ideas of mixing—as the merging of races, cultures or cultural traditions—that may appear heterodoxical in one context, can also operate as the very heart of mainstream, national identity construction in another. This is true for many Latin American nation-states.

Mexico is a case in point. Whereas in the US theories and practices of mixing can yield deconstructive insight and a politicization of bland pluralism, in Mexico they are associated with an ideology that has historically worked, as ideologies do, to legitimize an existing set of power relations and to marginalize a significant segment of the national population. This Mexican ideology of national identity tends to go by the name of *mestizaje*.

In this essay, I trace the rise of *mestizaje*, first as it emerges historically as a political category harnessed to nation-building in late-nineteenth-century Mexico, and then insofar as it informs the work of the essayist Alfonso Reyes (1889-1959), one of the most influential theorists of Mexican and Latin American cultural identity of the past century. Reyes's essays—which span five decades and 26 volumes of collected works—have long been considered foundational for Latin American writers of more substantial international fame, from Jorge Luis Borges to Octavio Paz. While often considered a “mere” aestheticist, Reyes's life-long preoccupations with—and active participation in debates on—Mexican national identity and the epistemological relations between Latin America and Western civilization make his thought a rich source of both cultural theory and political insight. Given the critical focus on the occidentalist,

aesthetic concerns for which he is famous, it is somewhat surprising to find the more immanent problems of race and nation, and their Mexican articulation in *mestizaje*, as themes to which Reyes returns throughout his life.

Reyes's work both confirms and complicates long-standing ideologies of race and nation in Mexican letters. And yet even as one of Mexico's great, unconventional thinkers of his generation, Reyes ultimately endorses at the rhetorical level a set of biopolitical theories and practices of *mestizaje*, the implications of which are precisely conventional. These implications are most strongly felt at the site of the Mexican figure and real communities often referred to as "Indian", which, as is well-known, tends to serve as *mestizaje*'s negated other.<sup>4</sup> I will show the ways in which Reyes's critical project—even as an aesthetic one—is committed to and reproduces this long-standing, exclusionary discourse on national identity. But, perhaps more importantly, I also attempt to demonstrate how Reyes's own work carries within it the theoretic means for thinking the nation beyond *mestizaje*. My argument is enabled by reading Reyes's idea of "synthesis," first against a dominant nineteenth-century discourse of *mestizaje* in Mexico, and then against his own idea of "protest."

What Reyes will call "synthesis," in an older and less euphemistic language tends to be thought about in terms of *mestizaje*. Rooted in racialized theories of human reproduction and classification, *mestizaje*, like the synonymous "hybridity," has always

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<sup>4</sup> The discursive formation of the Mexican national subject categorized as "the Indian" (*el indio*) is a theme whose extensive bibliography I won't detail here. To be clear, however, let me note that what I mean to indicate by "the Indian" is the outcome of a historical trajectory of identification: one that dialectically homogenizes (the monolithic Indian) and diversifies (distinct indigenous communities) and that depends upon a colonial gaze backed up by force. The Indian thus functions rhetorically as both emblem and social relation. This complex history is what I mean to indicate by placing the Indian in quotation marks here at the outset (and which will be implied henceforth); in doing so I attempt to invoke the explicitly referential ambivalence of the Indian, at once indicating real subjects and communities so

held strong cultural connotations. As recent work by thinkers as divergent as Serge Gruzinski and Jesús Martín-Barbero indicates, many have made important attempts to move *mestizaje* beyond its origins in theories and narratives of race.<sup>5</sup> And yet constructing a rigorous theory of cultural or epistemological mixing articulated through the language of *mestizaje* that effectively transcends these racialized conditions of possibility has proven difficult. It is as if “race,” as the Eurocentric normalization of human difference, exerts a gravitational pull through which *mestizaje* seems always destined to return. Without amassing citations, let me simply assert that the primal “mixing” that allows *mestizaje* to be thought is that which is effected through a persistent coloniality of power that brings differently-constructed groups of people into contact with each other, often by force: groups of people that will precisely constitute the objective referent for various, Eurocentric ideologies of “race.”<sup>6</sup> The racialized groups of people at issue in the Mexican case are typically generalized under the headings “Indian” and “European.” The tenacious contradictions of indigenous sovereignty and national hegemony are thus at stake in the Mexican discourse of *mestizaje*. When, in a recent address, Mexican president Vicente Fox refers to “our indigenous brothers,” the social and political distance that he implies marks the project of *mestizaje*.<sup>7</sup> That is, the historic task of *mestizaje* has been to mediate and transcend that distance, converting “our indigenous brothers” into “we Mexicans,” or better, simply “us.”

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(self)defined, and the socio-historical process by which those subjects and communities enter into discourse and society as particular unities and/or an overarching totality.

<sup>5</sup> Gruzinski (2002): 19. Martín-Barbero (1993): 2.

<sup>6</sup> I take the term “coloniality of power” from Anibal Quijano, who uses it to indicate the on-going nature of colonial relations of power within modern societies. On the relations between the coloniality of power and the idea of race, see Quijano 2000, 533-42; 554-6.

<sup>7</sup> Fox 2003.

While the history of theorizing *mestizaje* is nearly homologous with the historical construction of America itself, it becomes an explicit project of nation-building in late-nineteenth-century Mexico. This context of theorizing *mestizaje* is particularly interesting because it predates the tendency to think mixing negatively, as a strategy for eventually erasing race as a relevant social category, that we see from the post-World War II period through today.<sup>8</sup> By this I mean to say that, in Mexico, racial mixing was theorized not as a route to *racelessness*—it was not a move to get beyond race—but rather as the necessary precondition for the production of a *national race*. From the Restored Republic (1867-72) through the *Porfiriato* (the long presidency of Porfirio Díaz, 1877-1910), state intellectuals explicitly presuppose that overcoming social and political restrictions of race can only happen through an intensification of the ideological construct called “race.” As I will demonstrate below, *mestizaje* operates within this paradoxical framework as it becomes the mode of solidifying a Mexican identity by effectively articulating race in two essential discourses of state formation: nation and historical time. The value of going back to an earlier moment in the ideological consolidation of *mestizaje* is not to expose formative errors, but rather to confront us with our own veiled repetitions of this once explicitly racialized discourse, and to remind us of its presence (even as a negation) in the work of a foundation of modern criticism such as Reyes. To be entirely clear: I am taking neither a squeamish nor a self-evident position on race here. In other words, I will not be calling for the exorcism of either race or Reyes from the

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King’s famous gesture toward a “colorblind society” is thus exemplary, but not exceptional, in the impulse toward racelessness of post-WWII thought on race. See for example, key articulations such as Sartre 2001 (1948): 137 and Baldwin (1951): 679. The Eurocentric embrace of Latin America as an ideal space for transcending race—precisely through *mestizaje*—can be seen in the UNESCO-sponsored critique of race and its turn to Brazilian race relations as a potential world-wide model. See Wagley et. al. 1952.

contemporary critical vocabulary. Rather, by tracking the vicissitudes and deceptive contradictions of race within both a generalized historical trajectory and the particular work of a totemic figure like Reyes, I think through the ties that bind race, nation and culture, and that frustrate the movement toward social and political ideals such as, for example, justice and love.

Reyes's theory of synthesis reaffirms an old and ideological articulation of race, nation and historical time, repeating in the process the many failures associated with that articulation under the aegis of *mestizaje*. But to stop there would be to foreclose the more crucial questions regarding the possibility of difference within his repetition. Does Reyes glimpse an escape from the ideological mode of *mestizaje* that he is not quite ready to pursue, and from which we can today benefit? Is it possible that Reyes's failure to take his "synthesis" past the logics of *mestizaje* can point us toward the necessary delinking of the race-nation articulation that still underwrites—every day more blatantly—the internationalist structures that are currently in crisis? In order to offer some provisional answers to these questions, I will first need to go back to an earlier moment in thinking about *mestizaje*, taking up Reyes again at the end.

## II

The relations between race and nation present themselves as constantly transforming and always open questions. These difficulties are surely linked to the quagmire of territory, birth, citizenship and sovereignty that complicates the modern nation form in its relation to national subjects.<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of what follows, I will simply be taking at face value the basic thesis that race and nation are interdependent.

This articulation between race and nation tends to be thought in terms of their relations to a common historical time. There is a lot of current (and, indeed, not so current) theory that we could cite to support these claims.<sup>10</sup> But let me stick to the context at issue here, and extract my evidence from the Mexican texts that were most explicitly engaged in this historical project. For example, in the rather hyperbolic introduction to his *Forjando patria* (1916) (programatically subtitled *pro-nacionalismo*), Reyes's colleague Manuel Gamio stages this discursive intersection of race, nation and time:

In the great forge of America, on the gigantic anvil of the Andes, centuries and centuries have wrought the bronze and iron of virile races... They were miniature *patrias*: Aztec, Maya-Kiché [*sic*], Inca... that perhaps later would have combined and fused until they embodied great indigenous *patrias*... It was not to be. Upon the arrival of Columbus with other men, other blood, other ideas, the crucible that unified the race was tragically overturned and the mold, where Nationality was forming and Patria was crystallizing, was shattered ... Today it is the revolutionaries of Mexico who must grasp the mallet... of the ironsmith so that from the miraculous anvil will surge the new *patria*, fused of iron and bronze.<sup>11</sup>

At least three temporal vectors symptomatically conflate at this scene of nation formation sketched by Gamio, a student of Franz Boas and Mexico's "first" modern anthropologist. Historical time narrates a series of moments (pre-Columbian, conquest, Revolution)—at once destiny ("it was not to be"), contingency ("perhaps later would

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<sup>9</sup> See Agamben 1998 [1995]: 126-35.

<sup>10</sup> In thinking the relations between race, nation and time, I am most closely following the conclusions drawn by Étienne Balibar in his work on "fictive ethnicity and ideal nation" (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991 [1989]: 96-100).

<sup>11</sup> Gamio 1992 [1916]: 5-6. Unless otherwise noted in the list of works cited, all translations from the Spanish are mine.

have combined”) and agency (“today it is the revolutionaries of Mexico who must”)—that amount to the material conditions of possibility in which the nation resides. There is the time of *anthropology*, which constructs a scene of distinct national elements, heterogeneous in their cultures and “levels” (bronze, iron) of civilizational development. And there is the time of *national ideal*, which points the way to a future, articulate and whole *patria*. America, realized in Gamio’s Mexico, is a project, at once immanent and transcendent, whose participants emerge from a primordial past and an urgent present to propel the *nation*—Mexico—into the future: as Reyes put it at about the same time, national participants would “engender a common soul.”<sup>12</sup> The old indigenous nations even in their false start, must be made to participate in the shaping of the new, national race. And here we find the problem at the heart of the discursive intersection of race, nation and time that the Mexican discourse of *mestizaje* attempts to articulate. The Indian has historically named the problem—racially other, stuck in time, a national stigma—and *mestizaje* its solution, the motor that propels national consolidation, social evolution and, in theory, political inclusion.

This equation between multicultural and multitemporal heterogeneity exhibits a notable durability in Mexicanist discourse. For example, the positivists that dominated the Mexican intellectual scene in the latter third of the Nineteenth Century framed the problem in similar terms, even if with distinct social and political implications. In an 1898 speech honoring the late Comtean positivist Gabino Barreda, Ezequiel Chávez, a leading *Científico*, credited Barreda and his educational reforms with insightfully diagnosing the symptoms of the “frightful scream of anarchy” that had plagued Mexico

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<sup>12</sup> Reyes 1992 [1915]: 16.



for much of that war-torn century.<sup>13</sup> The “contradictory ideas” (e.g. Jacobin liberalism and monarchist conservatism) that drove national brothers to kill each other during the War of Reform (1857) were merely indicative of a deeper impasse: “Mexicans... found themselves in diverse stages of progress and each one harbored a different conception of the world.”<sup>14</sup> For many of the Mexican positivists—whose materialist progressivism was always tempered by a deeper commitment to old metaphysical formulae—this crisis of “progress” had less to do with anything like the uneven distribution of material resources than with spirit or soul. More precisely, it had to do with that spirit’s location in historical time. Chávez reports that the Mexican nation, as Barreda saw it, suffered from a “more deeply-rooted insanity” that stemmed from its disarticulate condition of multitemporal heterogeneity, an “anarchy of thought” rooted in an anarchy of time.<sup>15</sup> He concludes: “[Barreda] saw that this evil stemmed from disparate souls that pertained to different centuries; he became certain that in Mexico, there were at the same time prehistoric souls of the stone age... souls of conquistadors from the sixteenth century... and the select sons of the nineteenth century [the Comtean positivists].”<sup>16</sup> Any contemporary reader would have immediately “recognized” the Indian in the “prehistoric souls of the stone age.” Multitemporal heterogeneity is a long-standing strategy for thinking about the racially-marked, social incommensurability that divides the nation.

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<sup>13</sup> The basis of Barreda’s educational program, and the basis of his notion of science in and of itself, is the notion of a universal positivism. In other words, positivism as not simply a method or a practice, but as an ideology that names an entire way of life. Its commitment to “science” underscores the political appropriation of many of its precepts with the ascent of the group that would both depend upon and often challenge the Díaz regime, and that, beginning 1893, would be called the *Científicos* (see Hale 1989: 11, 21-2).

<sup>14</sup> Citations of Chávez are from Zea 1943, pp. 187-89.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## III

The race-time (dis)articulation is expressed as a problem of history. This expression is at the root of a striking discontinuity in the nineteenth-century Mexican discourse on the Indian. That discontinuous move is the thorough transformation of the young Indian of the New World that appears throughout colonial writing (children of God, innocent victims of Satan, etc.) and becomes a sign of the inclusive redemption of humanity (e.g. Las Casas, Vitoria, Montaigne) into an old, decrepit Indian that must give way to a vigorous, new social and cultural vanguard. I doubt that a joint-point signaling this shift could be identified with any precision (I at least have not been able to locate one), as its apparent discontinuity is the cumulative result of many sociohistorical forces and intellectual trends. However, Gabino Barreda, in his momentous *Oración cívica* (1867), recites the shift very succinctly, foreseeing the vogue in Spencerian social evolutionary theory in spite of his own philosophical predispositions.<sup>17</sup> The speech is of great historic importance because it served as a *de facto* announcement of the liberal state's later appropriation of the positivist doctrine, converting it from an elitist and slightly esoteric philosophy of Masons, to the social and political theory that would come to officially guide state policy over the following four decades, and, according to Charles Hale, unofficially guide it through the Twentieth Century.<sup>18</sup> The president Benito Juárez was in attendance, and after hearing the address, so the story goes, he promptly promoted

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<sup>17</sup> I will resist the temptation to repeat Hale's majesterial untangling of the differences between Comtean and Spencerian positivism within the positivist movement in Mexico (205 *passim*). Suffice it to say that Barreda was a Comtean who understood progress as ending in a "collective and hierarchical whole" (Hale 213), and rejected Spencer's social and Darwin's biological notion of constant transformation undergirded by a struggle for survival (208-9; 215-7). Eventually, however, with the ascent of Justo Sierra, Comte and Spencer were reconciled under the banner of the *Científicos* (217).

Barreda to the commission charged with authoring the *Reforma* state's educational plan.<sup>19</sup> The speech gives no explicit attention to the Indian as an actual or potential actor on the contemporary scene, a practice of making Indians invisible that would persist, with a few notable exceptions, until the early-twentieth-century eruption of *indigenista* interest that would follow the Revolution. As noted above with Chávez, the positivists theoretically understood the Indian problem as a problem of spirit and consciousness, and imagined that Mexico under the principles of liberal positivism was a world where no social barriers would hinder Indians. They could accomplish the requisite spiritual evolution by leaving behind their "superstitions" (i.e. capitulating to the forces of acculturation). Juárez himself, the republic's president and beacon of liberalism, was, after all, an Indian. Herbert Spencer's increasingly-accepted naturalization of social "evolution" would take care of those that didn't follow the upwardly-mobile example of Juárez.

Barreda's one brief allusion to the Indian, then, especially couched as it is in the context of both *race* ("raza") and *time*, is something to be considered.

The address is a liberal-positivist tour-de-force, in which Barreda hits most of the key notes: fervent anti-clericalism; limited popular sovereignty and equal rights before the law over monarchy and militarism; the rights of capital and private property over collectivism; and, most importantly, history as a struggle between worldviews in which the progressive forces will always eventually triumph in the natural evolution (or

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 8; 12-13.

<sup>19</sup> See Zea (1943: 55-6). The commission was called the Junta Directiva de la Instrucción Pública del Distrito Federal, and represented, in the words of Agustín Aragón, "una progresiva y completa relación entre el poder público y la educación popular" (cited in Mares's prologue Barreda 1941: xi). Mares's prologue to Barreda's *Estudios* (1941) offers an efficient account of Barreda's professional life. Barreda's contributions to the national preparatory educational system were influential for several decades, and formed most of Reyes's generation of the Ateneo de la Juventud that would later undertake a fierce rebuke of its positivist principles. See, for example, José Vasconcelos's 1910 speech "Don Gabino Barreda y las

transformation) toward eternal liberty, order and progress. The end result of this emancipation will be the end of politics itself, with the emergence of an ideal civil society where ideas are exchanged, but never imposed, and where altruism reigns over egoism. The name of the ultimate expression of the progressive forces within this struggle is “science,” and those most committed to its hegemony are the new liberals that call themselves “positivists.”<sup>20</sup> Science, with its reliance upon demonstration instead of revelation, submits to its laws the inferior sciences (1941 [1867]: 76) of religion, morals and politics (79-80).<sup>21</sup> But positive science exhibits a mystical capacity of its own: the capacity, indeed the responsibility, to organize a national history.

Barreda’s *bête noire*, true to his Comtean doctrine, is “anarchy.” His historiographical thesis is that anarchy of thought produces a falsely anarchic narrative of history, which in turn exacerbates the lack of order and liberty in Mexican society. Citing Comte, he asserts the need to triumph over the “painful collisions that anarchy,

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ideas contemporáneas”, in which Barreda is applauded for dethroning the church and Hispanism, and then promptly displaced in favor of an extended critique of positivism and defense of idealism.

<sup>20</sup> I am of course guilty here of a gross flattening of the dynamic and diverse intellectual movement known as “positivism.” As Zea (1943) repetitively points out in his classic study, and as Hale (1989) corroborates, Mexican positivism develops within the context of vigorous debates, and it has legacies on both left and right in terms of today’s political spectrum. Zea proposes a positivism that emerges out of Mexican liberalism from its combative phase (Mora, Melchor, anti-clerical), to its dynamic phase (Juárez, Barreda, Sierra; anti-clerical *and* anti-Jacobin), to its static, militant phase (the *Científicos*, Díaz, replacement of *liberty*, order and progress with *peace*, order and progress). Hale’s study of late-nineteenth century liberalism is widely regarded as the most sophisticated treatment of the tensions and contradictions that mediate positivism, liberalism, conservative-liberalism, and “scientific politics”. However, despite his critique of what he perceives as Zea’s reductionism, he concurs that liberalism and positivism are interdependent and often name each other (23; see also 17, 18, 22), and ultimately reaffirms the same historical trajectory of ideas that Zea traces (3). According to Zea’s interpretation, positivists see their competitors (clericalism and Jacobinism) as dangerous because they attempt to “impose” their ideas on others. This imposition of ideas is the ultimate sin for positivists, and also their blindspot, since they exempt scientific “demonstration” from the taint of “imposition” because it allegedly operates in a set of terms (logical exposition and material demonstration) that anybody can understand. Militant positivists, however, will reserve this right of demonstration only to those that can speak and understand the language of science, belying the exclusivity of their universality. In the end, I find that Zea’s conclusion is unassailable: positivism, despite vigorous internal debates within the liberal state, is the name of the ideology of the Mexican bourgeoisie (or, for Hale, the “liberal establishment”), and privileges social order

which today reigns in souls and ideas, everywhere provokes” through a “truly universal doctrine [that] reunites all intelligence [orig: *inteligencias*] in a common synthesis.”<sup>22</sup> History must be usurped from the novelists<sup>23</sup> and resituated in the proper domain of science: “subject, like all the rest [of the sciences], to the laws that govern it and that make possible the foresight [orig: *previsión*] of events to come, and the explanation of those that have already passed.”<sup>24</sup> A nationalist message inhabits this account of the visionary powers of science. Understood as a system, with a logic and purpose, as opposed to a “series of events...strange and exceptional,” Mexico can take back its history, “terrible” but “fertile,” from the “petty, bad-faith politicians” that would represent the Mexican spirit as “a sad exception in the progressive evolution of humanity.”<sup>25</sup> Reading national (pre)history as a formula, Barreda sees only one logical conclusion on Mexico’s horizon: “mental emancipation.”<sup>26</sup> An emancipation “characterized by the gradual decay of old doctrines, and their progressive substitution by modern ones.”<sup>27</sup>

Here we have a guiding dichotomy of old and new, within which the Indian will be ascribed a specific place. Barreda explains the condition of this “progressive substitution” by resorting to the standard dialectical notion of the *germ*, the seed of self-destruction already lodged in the heart of a project of domination. The agent of its transmission is a metaphor of “inoculation”, whereby the contagious few transmit to the

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(i.e. static hegemony) over all else. But cf. Hale (23), who ascribes this ideological function to “liberalism.”

<sup>21</sup> Barreda, 1941 [1867]: 76, 79-80.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 72.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 72-3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 75-6 .

traditionalist multitude the germ of the modern, which, if properly nurtured, will overwhelm the decadent effects of “old doctrines”. It was precisely this kind of mental and spiritual infection that caught hold of Father Hidalgo, inspiring a *priest* to spark the flames of independence that, according to Barreda’s interpretation, would soon be turned against clerical privilege.<sup>28</sup> While Catholic clericalism and Hispanist conservatism are Barreda’s explicit targets here, the germ metaphor is especially effective in resolving a deeper paradox of Mexican national identity. If the Mexican nation is to represent the ultimate expression of *modern* man, doing away with its traditions of clericalism and Hispanism, on what necessarily *timeless* narrative can that nation’s legitimacy possibly rest? Barreda’s solution: even if its germination is new, in that it is only now being fully nourished by the rise of positivism, the germ itself is present at the very origins of the nation. It is, in fact, the timeless element of the Mexican race itself: “In that epoch, the principal germs of modern renovation were in full effervescence in the old world and it was precisely that the conquistadors, already impregnated with those seeds, inoculated, even against their will, the new population that would result from the mixing of both races.”<sup>29</sup>

Three important things happen at this tropic invocation of the “germ.” First, science, a “weak child,”<sup>30</sup> is shown to have a gestation period concomitant to that of the nation itself. Its youth echoes Mexico’s claims to a progressive future, but also stretches back, timelessly, to an Old World that predates the historical arrival of “Mexico.”

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 71-7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 78. On the mystical notion of the germ or seed as a scientific metaphor for not only theorizing human essence but also producing racial difference in Enlightenment thought, see Kant 2000 (1777).

<sup>30</sup> Barreda 1941 (1867): 79.

Second, Mexico's claim to racial singularity, *mestizaje*, is appropriated as the vehicle or medium for this development. The mestizo becomes the dynamic element in society, an extremely important quality for the positivists, who framed their struggle with the church as a question of dynamism (begetting progression) versus stasis (begetting retrogression). This mestizo dynamism would be echoed by Mexico's finest positivist thinkers, in the work of Vicente Riva Palacio, Justo Sierra, and Andrés Molina Enríquez.<sup>31</sup> Third, the indigenous inhabitant of the New World, the Indian, is suddenly no longer new, but old, placed alongside retrograde forces such as the church and the land-owning aristocracy.<sup>32</sup> This is the ambivalent condition of the Indian as constructed in nineteenth-century Mexican discourse: the Indian as necessary participant in and erasure from the national project; an "inclusive exclusion"—so to speak—that forms the very logic of *mestizaje*. The Indian participates in the building of a new race and a new spirit, yet is excluded from the modern on account of cultural antiquity: stuck, in the various positivist models, alternatively in a "theological," "mystical" or "animistic" stage of development. This foundational erasure is exemplified in Barreda's address, which nowhere mentions actual Indians *at all*, much less as part of the national project. Their participation is an allusion, a reference, a receptacle, the sublated element of that primordial dialectic, the synthesis produced through the "mixing of both races."

This theory of the Indian's oldness will prove tenacious, and is still in full force at the outset of post-Revolutionary *indigenismo*. Gamio's early studies on the indigenous communities of the Valley of Teotihuacán, for example, issue a dire report on not simply

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<sup>31</sup> The key texts here include Palacio's contributions to the mammoth *México a través de los siglos* (1884), Sierra's *Evolución política del pueblo mexicano* (1900-2; 1940), and Molina's *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (1909).

<sup>32</sup> See Hale (1989): 4.

the material poverty, but the general *decadence* of the Indian.<sup>33</sup> And reciting the oldness or antiquity of the Indian is still a powerful trope, showing up in the contemporary Mexicanist canon in the work of writers from Paz to Anzaldúa.<sup>34</sup> However, the figure of the decadent, or backward, Indian also responds to an influential current in greater Western philosophy: the general schematization of cultural difference that fixes the “races” at particular coordinates of geographical location and unilinear history. Versions of the teleological stagism that would emerge from this scheme were strong in divergent thinkers, such as Comte, Spencer and Savigny, who had a profound influence on Mexican positivism. But it is a logic of progressive transformism that first hits its stride during the Enlightenment, a philosophical moment underwritten by over two centuries of colonial expansion. If Kant worked to reify a European binary that distinguished, within Europe, the “modern” North from the “traditional” South (Mignolo 2000: 732),<sup>35</sup> as well as an Occident versus an Orient, then it is Hegel that would give this geo-temporalized racism its most elaborate form on a global scale.

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<sup>33</sup> The study in question was published in 1922 under the title *La población del Valle de Teotihuacan*.

<sup>34</sup> Paz 1950 (and throughout later work); Anzaldúa (1987): 5. Contemporary indigenous activists are well-aware of the power of this trope, and appropriate it into their own strategies of resistance and revolt in multiple ways. Thus it is common to find activists performing antiquity by invoking a transhistorical narrative of cultural and territorial heritage. In turn, statements on the vigor and even youth of indigenous movements are not contradictory to this stance, but rather complementary insofar as they operate within the same discursive formation. Subcomandante Omar, of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, is emblematic in declaring: “Nos persiguen por ser diferentes. Ya quisieran que fuéramos viejitos o viejitas para que ya no se preocupen. Se equivocan, porque nunca seremos viejitos. Unos vamos muriendo y otros retoñando, así que aquí la lucha va a estar todo el tiempo joven.” Bellinghausen 2003. This could be read against Anzaldúa, for whom the appropriation of the Indian is consistently an appropriation of an old Indian, overcome by a new culture: “By 1650, only one-and-a-half-million pure-blooded Indians remained. The *mestizos* who were genetically equipped to survive [Old World diseases] founded a new hybrid race and inherited Central and South America” (1987: 5). Perhaps Anzaldúa is speaking in pure metaphors here, but it is worth pointing out the well-known fact that many living, even flourishing, communities that configure themselves as some version of “pure-blooded Indian,” have actively questioned this inheritance.

<sup>35</sup> Mignolo (2000): 732.



In both *Philosophy of Mind* (1830) and the *Philosophy of History* (1837 [first posthumous edition]), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel clearly articulates the New World tension between decadence and vigor that the project of Mexican national identity will strive to resolve. While he occasionally characterizes the Indians as “just like small children”, the far greater emphasis is upon decadence and inviability: “with regard to the original inhabitants of America, we have to remark that they are a vanishing feeble race... When brought into contact with brandy and guns, these savages become extinct.”<sup>36</sup> Note the naturalization (and utter historical malpractice) of the colonial project: not “are extinguished”, but “become extinct.” Yet this extinction is also a rebirth: “The indigenous races of this continent are dying out; the Old World is refashioning itself in the New.”<sup>37</sup> America, in fact, is pure *future*, holding no interest whatsoever for a philosophy of History: “What *has* taken place in the New World up to the present time is only an echo of the Old World—the expression of a foreign Life; and as a Land of the Future, it has no interest for us here, for, as regards *History*, our concern must be with that which has been and that which is” (1956 [1835]: 87).<sup>38</sup> America, for Hegel, *had not yet been*.<sup>39</sup> The colonialist logic of modernity is clear: America, marching forward, does so at the expense of the ahistorical (or prehistorical) native Americans. While for Hegel the Indian is outside of History altogether, his nod to an *American*

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<sup>36</sup> Hegel 1971 (1830): 45.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 41.

<sup>38</sup> Hegel 1956 (1837): 87.

<sup>39</sup> The notion of an America-yet-to-be is still strong in representations of Latin America, and can be seen in the common references to the “potential” or “opportunity” of Latin American economies in the business press. Two good artistic representations include Carlos Fuentes’s *Una familia lejana* (1980), which ends with a vision of Euro-American twins *in utero*; and Jorge Bodansky’s film *Iracema: Uma Transa Amazônica* (1975), which juxtaposes exploitive poverty (indigenous women that prostitute themselves to survive) with constant references to road construction (and exclamations of Brazil as a “país grande”), and then these development projects with the biopolitics of colonization (“transa” refers at once

future—indeed, America as the place where “the burden of the World’s History shall reveal itself”<sup>40</sup>—simultaneously, and I think unintentionally, reinscribes the Indian as modernity’s very condition of possibility. For it is the accumulation of indigenous land and blood that propels the Old World into *its* future. America moves forward in time, making History, at once leaning upon and effacing the Indian.

## IV

The problem with this model for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mexican intelligentsia—a problem which also displays the fantastic nature of colonial history that was accessible to Hegel<sup>41</sup>—was that the Indian had not met the philosopher’s diagnosis of extinction, nor even weakness. While the various genocides carried out against indigenous peoples at several points in the history of the Americas had left their population greatly reduced, indigenous communities, especially in Mesoamerica, still comprised a substantial part of the population, including a majority in several regions. Not only were their numbers vast, but their threat to the integrity of the Mexican state very real. This threat was exercised with some frequency during the nineteenth century: in *guerras de castas*, implacable pockets of autonomy (in Oaxaca, Yucatán and Sonora), and even the 1810 outbreak of the War of Independence itself, whose main protagonist was not the emergent

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to the trans-Amazon highway project and to an “Amazonian fuck”). Thanks to Malcolm McNee (personal communication) for pointing out this word play to me.

<sup>40</sup> Hegel 1956 (1837): 86.

<sup>41</sup> In a reading of Hegel in the context of anti-colonial resistance, Susan Buck-Morss concludes that “[w]hat *is* clear is that in an effort to become more erudite in African studies during the 1820s, Hegel was in fact becoming dumber... It is sadly ironic that the more faithfully his lectures reflected Europe’s conventional scholarly wisdom on African society, the less enlightened and more bigoted they became” Buck-Morss (2000): 863-4.

bourgeoisie—mostly cowering behind locked doors—but rather the largely Indian, peasant masses.<sup>42</sup>

The ascendant liberals, and later the positivists, attempted to meet this challenge to both national hegemony (horizontal identification) and state sovereignty (vertical authority). Their diagnostic efforts would consistently reduce it to a problem of time, that is, multiple historicities or multitemporal heterogeneity. Thus José María Luis Mora, the most important theorist of early Mexican liberalism and a contemporary of Hegel, argued against the “revolution of men”, which only brought about reaction and misery, and in favor of what he called a “revolution of time.”<sup>43</sup> This revolution was a function of the state: “The ability of those that guide the State consists principally in knowing the necessities born of the degree of civilization to which men have arrived.”<sup>44</sup> If the anthropological mandate on history is to understand the past as a foreign country, then for the Mexican, urban intelligentsia, the past was the immediate countryside. The necessary task that Mora perceived was to get everybody on the same page, to the same “degree of civilization,” the same moment in universal history. Again, in the work of Mora, like in the work of Barreda, the Indian is notable as an absence: Mora here is specifically writing against clerics, conservatives and *caudillos*, all of whom he understands as obstacles to progress. And yet it is the Indian that presents the greatest challenge to this revolution of time, as Mora suggests years later on a diplomatic mission to London, where he wrote of “the need not only to bring the Indian uprisings [*las sublevaciones de castas*] to a halt, but to make them impossible in the future.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> On nineteenth-century indigenous resistance to the state, see Reina 1980, 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Mora 1994 (1830): 344-8.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 347.

<sup>45</sup> Mora 1994 (1849): 277.

Just as their diagnosis of the problem of national hegemony was to some extent informed by their participation in the Eurocentric, world philosophical subculture, so would the nineteenth-century Mexican intelligentsia also find a solution there.<sup>46</sup> The solution, as we saw with Barreda, would be premised upon the mixing of the races, or *mestizaje*. Its formulation, however, was not a mere repetition of European models. It was a repetition with a difference. Mexican *mestizaje*, when theorized as a potential route to national consolidation and as a positive mark of national identity, was typically opposed to the highly influential notion of a degenerate hybridity as theorized by famous racists like Gobineau, Le Bon, Spencer, Agassiz and Gumplowicz. But rather than draw on those largely discredited voices, a more provocative argument would be to propose that the affirmative politicization of race-mixing corrected a racialized foundation of the Enlightenment itself: that is, the necessary correlation between race and nation. It did so by taking it at its word.

In his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1797) Immanuel Kant briefly addresses the question of “the character of the races.” The ensuing discussion, however, is limited to what Kant identifies as a contradictory law of nature that governs racial reproduction. He argues that “In fusing different races, nature aims at *assimilation*”.<sup>47</sup> Since such mixture “gradually extinguishes [the races’] characters,” it “is not beneficial to the human race.”<sup>48</sup> At the same time, however, “proximity of kinship, as is well known, results in infertility.”<sup>49</sup> How to escape this impasse and avoid both the

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<sup>46</sup> I take the term “world philosophical subculture” from Hewit (1984).

<sup>47</sup> Kant 1974 (1797): 182.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

assimilative dangers of hybridity, and the sterile dangers of inbreeding?<sup>50</sup> *Intraracially*, Kant proposes, nature effects a miraculous reversal, and makes “the exact opposite [of assimilation] its law: that is, nature’s law regarding a people of the same race (for example, the white race) is not to let their characters constantly and progressively approach one another in likeness... but instead to diversify to infinity the members of the same stock and even of the same clan.”<sup>51</sup>

The Mexican intelligentsia would finish the dialectic.<sup>52</sup> It was a strategic move, since assimilation was precisely what they sought. Given the alleged backwardness of the Indian, exogamic assimilation into Europe, via *mestizaje*, could be a route to historical, and hence, national—and, for the Comtean positivists, mental, political and spiritual—emancipation. It was not an antiracist gesture. Rather, it was a correction of Eurocentric racism as read from within a specific set of historical conditions, that is, from *within* a legacy of colonialism and the periphery. Key theorists of nineteenth-century, European race science—Gobineau, Gumplowicz—would reproduce a version of Kant’s paradox, proposing that even the most homogeneous national races are in reality hybridized heterogeneities: for them, the gravest danger to national integrity—race-mixing—was also its condition of possibility.<sup>53</sup> Mexican *mestizaje*, then, could be understood as a *necessary fusion* whose assimilating effects held the key to producing a

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<sup>50</sup> The nineteenth-century race scientists would invert these “dangers” and worry about the excessive assimilation of racial endogamy and the infertility of racial exogamy.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> By way of clarification, I should note that I am not attempting to determine any kind of direct “influence” between Kant and Hegel and, say, Barreda and his Mexican contemporaries. Neither, however, are they invoked at random. I am simply harnessing them as prominent examples of Late Enlightenment thought, which is to a large extent reproduced as it is transformed through the specific historical needs of later 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western philosophers and scientists. The state intellectuals of the Reforma and the Porfiriato are active participants in these trends.

<sup>53</sup> The texts where they most explicitly work through this paradox are Gobineau’s *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853-5) and Gumplowicz’s *Rassenkampf* (1883). See Young 1995.

new race, that is, as with the goals of both Barreda and Gamio, a new *national* race. Once forged, Kant's law of intra-racial differentiation could be invoked. By seizing the dialectical conflation of opposites in the racist contradiction, where hybridity is both condition and limit, they radicalize it. This was precisely the Mexican liberal-positivist re-framing of the mestizo: the dynamic element of society, representing a radical move forward in a brand new world.

## V

It is widely recognized that Alfonso Reyes's generation of intellectuals, whose coming of age parallels the crumbling and eventual collapse of the Porfiriato, represents the ideological hinge that links pre- and post-Revolutionary Mexico. Nietzsche, who was enthusiastically endorsed by Reyes's circle, famously wrote of the iterative revolt of the young against their predecessors. Yet Reyes, who understood the activist idealism of his generation as integral to the Revolution itself, was nonetheless always careful to credit positivist mentors like Barreda and Sierra with preparing its necessary pre-history. The fact that there would be a certain degree of discursive continuity persisting through the Revolution alongside the radical discontinuities in national hegemony and state sovereignty thus comes as no surprise.

The Revolutionary intellectuals' confrontation with the old-guard positivists of course yielded many welcome insights and helped overturn absurdities—both philosophical and sociological—that had become conventions. Nevertheless, repetitions are sometimes simply repetitions, with any real “difference” operating at an abstract level

of form as opposed to evincing the kind of institutionalization and embodiment entailed in real ideological transformation. This certainly seems to be the case when reading a liberal humanist like Reyes in the context of a critical history of the idea of race in Mexican discourse on the Indian, such as that which I have attempted to sketch out above. In this context, and especially through the writings of a thinker as subtle as Reyes, it can be somewhat jarring to find an unselfconscious sublimation of *mestizaje* that ultimately reinforces the race-nation articulation asserted by the liberals, positivists and *Científicos* of the nineteenth century. Make no mistake: in Reyes, *mestizaje* is rarely thought as an *explicitly* racial category, nor even an *exclusively* national trait (it is ultimately *internationalist*). Rather, as I maintained at the outset, *mestizaje* in Reyes is generally inflated to the level of intellectual “synthesis.” But these tendencies should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the very aesthetic practices through which he articulates his intellectualized (and internationalist) synthesis to the ground of material (social, cultural and national) (re)production still resonate biopolitically and operate euphemistically: it becomes a way of moving beyond not simply “conflict” in general, but the *specific conflicts* of cultural heterogeneity visited upon the state by the oppositional force embodied in the persistent existence of the Indian. In sum, synthesis, like *mestizaje*, “moves beyond” the Indian as such.

An affirmative theory of *synthesis* is the key idea that guides Alfonso Reyes’s numerous writings on America. For Reyes, synthesis represents the ideal of transforming the world’s various disarticulations into an organic and articulate whole. It has implications for all areas of life. In society, it connotes mutual benefit and agreement over conflictive difference. In politics, it means democracy. In the realm of nation-

states, it connotes internationalism. In knowledge production, it translates as interdisciplinarity. In aesthetics, it means the constant evolution of beauty through human agency. Reyes understands America as the place where a potentially universal synthesis finds its conditions of possibility already at work.

This sublimation of synthesis dominates his later, popular work. In “Notas sobre la inteligencia americana” (1942 [1936]), he declares that “the American mind [orig: *la inteligencia americana*] is called to perform the most noble, complementary function [vis-à-vis Europe]: that of establishing synthesis.”<sup>54</sup> And again, in “Posición de América” (1942), he clarifies that the universalizing impulse of the American mind marks “an organization qualitatively new, and endowed, as with all synthesis, with transcendent virtue... [which becomes] a new point of departure.”<sup>55</sup> By “new point of departure” he means nothing less radical the fact that the American propensity toward synthesis ushers in a new world-historical stage. It involves discourse-quaking implications that will force a rethinking of the basic categories through which we ascertain the world: from race to culture, from ontology to epistemology, from philology to poetics.

“Synthesis,” nevertheless, is a very familiar mode of positing the cultural, intellectual and spiritual value of America. It firmly places Reyes alongside his generational compatriots, whom, with José Vasconcelos as the most notable example, sublimated the reconciliation of presumed “opposites” through all kinds of felicitous “mixing” as Latin America’s contribution to world culture.<sup>56</sup> Reyes was perhaps the most

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<sup>54</sup> Reyes 1992 (1942), p. 233. Throughout his writings, Reyes uses “America” in the hemispheric sense.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 244.

<sup>56</sup> José Vasconcelos was one of the most energetic and recognizable intellectual figures of Mexico’s immediate post-Revolutionary period. His *La raza cósmica* (1925) is frequently cited as a basic text in the history of confronting ideologies of segregation with theories of mixing.



tenacious in maintaining this project in the face of the turn to disillusionment that would become a generic mark of Mexico's post-Revolutionary aesthetics. To his credit, this tenacity separated him from colleagues such as Vasconcelos himself, who by 1937 was converting his optimistic theories of mixing into a kind of nightmare of cosmic monsters (he imagined a fantastic alliance between Indians, Jews, Bolsheviks, and international capital), and who would soon be tempted by the purism of National Socialism.<sup>57</sup> Read in this context, and within the larger crises of the modern ethos of progress that defined the World War II era, Reyes's commitment to synthesis and reconciliation takes on a notably critical tone.

Read in Mexico, Reyes's turn to synthesis resonates less radically. In Reyes, the new humanistic Indian still operates rhetorically just like the old positivistic portrait of the Indian, that is, as the sublated part of a historical dialectic. A kind of trace element, the Indian's humanity resides in its participatory erasure in the production of a future man. On an ideal plane, the movement is not incomparable to Hegel's theory of universal history, later revised by Barreda for the specific case of Mexico. Forced back down to the world of material interactions, it becomes a kind of sociological vitalism, apparent in Vasconcelos, but most systematically theorized through Henri Bergson's *élan vital* and Gabriel Tarde's ideas on social imitation. Indeed, we can find in Reyes a commitment to the language of Tarde's theory of social history as a kind of progressivist and total race war wherein peoples rise up or flicker out through their capacity to foment imitation.<sup>58</sup> In his address "Posición de América", Reyes posits that "if [genetic foci of

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<sup>57</sup> Vasconcelos (1937): 133-7.

<sup>58</sup> On Tarde's slippage between theories of individualistic, fashion-driven imitation, to biologicistic, race-driven models of human progress and cultural survival, see Chapter 7 ("Extra-logical Influences (continued)") of his *The Laws of Imitation* (1962 [1903]).

culture] do not succeed in expanding themselves [beyond certain limits] in due time and in conserving themselves through educative reiteration, then they disappear.”<sup>59</sup> What seems to be proposed as a hardly assailable natural fact, however, in the next lines of the essay becomes readable as *the naturalization of a social contingency*: “the only means of salvation,” by which he means the harmonization of individual creativity and social stability, “consists in intensifying transmission through communication and learning.”<sup>60</sup> Hardly ignoble goals, and moreover, indicative of the fact of human agency—that is, decision, policy, politics—in at least partially determining—through “educative reiteration”, which is to say *active* reiteration—the shape of the human future. He continues: “The watchword of America is the watchword of improvement [orig: *mejoramiento*], sustained in the possibility of avoidance and choice.”<sup>61</sup> True to his vitalistic tendencies, American synthesis, for Reyes, represents not an end, but a new beginning, and moreover, a beginning that promises constant “improvement.”

*Mejorar la raza*: that this improvement is, to put it lightly, problematic for the autonomy, or even survival, of indigenous communities and cultures is quite explicit in “Posición de América” and other late essays. That it is a central premise from the earliest moments of Reyes’s work can be demonstrated through a quick exposition on his classic essay, *Visión de Anáhuac (1519)* (1915).

*Visión de Anáhuac* is mostly a poetic rendering of and meditation upon the first European apprehension of the “nature” of the New World (thus its 1519 subtitle, in reference to Cortés’s early incursion) that would later become America or, more precisely in the context of the essay, Anáhuac, that is, Mexico. It concludes by attaching these

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<sup>59</sup> Reyes 1992 (1942): 240.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid. 241.

“first impressions” to an aestheticist narrative of national history. Along the way it offers insights into basic questions of language, representation, poetics and national-cultural identity. It is one of Reyes’s two or three most beautiful texts, exerting its influence most spectacularly in Gabriel García Márquez’s famous Nobel address (1982), which clearly draws inspiration from it.

One aspect of the “nature” of the New World that Reyes aestheticizes is the indigenous civilization of the Aztecs (Mexico) as first understood by the Spanish militia under the leadership of Hernán Cortés. It is a brilliant portrait, faithful to the wonder expressed in Cortés’s letters and Bernal Díaz’s petitions, a staging of a crucial scene in the emergence of modernity attentive not only to the appropriation of new markets, but of new subjects. Representing the Indian as a sensual and sentient being is central here: “Their speech is a pleasant song. Those *xés*, those *tlés*, those *chés* that so alarm us when written [orig: *que tanto nos alarman escritas*], flow from the Indian’s lips with the gentleness of *aguamiel*.”<sup>62</sup> *Que tanto nos alarman escritas*: in terms of an interpretation of the Indian in Reyes, this is the key fragment in the text. It immediately pegs Cortés’s perspective to “ours,” with the “nos” suggesting a reading (or listening) subject that has had to *translate* the Indian into *its own* dominant mode of communicational transmission. Moreover, it speaks to an intercultural impasse, whereby that which is as sweet and soft as “*aguamiel*” becomes “alarming,” precisely “to us,” when incorporated into, included within, an “other” civilization, a Western canon: *que tanto nos alarman escritas*. It is a reflection of significant gravity: the Indian, for Reyes and for America in general, can

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 242.

<sup>62</sup> Reyes 1992 (1915): 6.

only be included as an exclusion, a source of alarm emerging from someplace outside of the national “nos.”

The alarming nature of the Indian within Western discourse is not a slip on Reyes part, but an avowal of the national politics of *Visión de Anáhuac*, precisely regarding their articulation to race. These politics are stated through the historical trajectory that allows Reyes to integrate his pre-national “vision” into an overarching narrative of nation-building. This meta-narrative traces “three races”—Indian, white, mestizo—each linked to one of “three civilizations”—Aztec, Spanish, Porfirian.<sup>63</sup> By the time of the Revolution that marked the Porfiriato’s demise, then, the *racial* component of an eventually total synthesis appears to be well advanced, the third race and third civilization embodied in the Porfirian state, what Enrique Krauze calls “the triumph of the mestizo.”<sup>64</sup> This implies the move from Porfiriato to Revolution as the end of the beginning, as American synthesis can now free itself and unfold in other areas of worldly life. But in simultaneously relying upon the previous move from Aztec to Spanish empires, it also announces the beginning of the end. Reyes here links the lifespan of civilizations to tasks rooted in production—the State, man’s abstraction, against Nature—symbolized in the draining of the lake.<sup>65</sup> The Spaniards arrive as the Aztecs accomplish their stage of this trans-historical mission: “When the desert creators [the Aztecs] finish their work, social terror irrupts” (4).<sup>66</sup> Upheaval strikes, but it is soon met, for Reyes, by a conquest that masks a liberation. For the Indian is old, a “cyclopean civilization”, indeed, “a noise...

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Krauze (1997): 205-44.

<sup>65</sup> Reyes could not have chosen a more brutal metaphor for civilizational tasks here. Marco Antonio Anaya Pérez has studied the devastating effects of draining the lakes in Mexico’s Central Valley on indigenous-peasant life. See especially Anaya Pérez (1996): 55-88.

<sup>66</sup> Reyes 1992 (1915): 4.

[that] was prolonged, exhausted”<sup>67</sup> under the tyranny and “social terror”<sup>68</sup> of a brutal dictator, the “sickly [orig: *doliente*] Moctezuma.”<sup>69</sup> The Spanish militia senses a “bloody rite” behind the “savage drum” in the distance.<sup>70</sup>

Reyes thus posits the conquest as a rescue, yet also as a process through which the Indian exerts its cultural force against, and in the conqueror. But this force evinces itself negatively, as a loss. His subsequent analysis of an indigenous poetic fragment reveals that its meaning is necessarily lost to “us,” a translation of a translation, its singularity residing in an inaccessible past: nothing can compensate, he writes, for “the loss of indigenous poetry as a general and social phenomenon.”<sup>71</sup> The Indian’s status as inner-exterior or included-exclusion of the nation is clear, both at the level of perspective—“that which *we* know of it [indigenous poetry]”, “that which *we* imagine of it”<sup>72</sup>—and tense—“that which *could* have been,” “the Indians *used to sing*,” “they *used to transmit* from generation to generation,” etc.<sup>73</sup> He notes in concluding that *tradition*, by which he means the “absurd perpetuation of indigenous tradition”, must be abandoned, if by tradition we mean something like a fantastic return to a lost history.<sup>74</sup> The productive activity that creates a new history, a national history, is that which “unites us with yesterday’s race” (and, as if to reveal in spite of himself the persistence of race within culture, he goes on to clarify “without speaking of blood”) through the “effort to subdue

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., my emphasis.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., my emphasis.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 16. While Reyes is here writing against the extravagancies of *both* Indianism and Hispanism, the tone and word choice makes it clear that, even while critical, he holds out more hope for something like the latter than the former: “no soy de los que sueñan en perpetuaciones absurdas de la tradición indígena, y ni siquiera fío demasiado en perpetuaciones de la española.”

our nature” and “the cotidian emotion before the same natural object,” and that ultimately “[u]nites the community as well”.<sup>75</sup> In short: this “shock of sensitivity with the same world cultivates, engenders a common soul” (*ibid.*).<sup>76</sup>

The production of a new race, a national race, is a natural process insofar as it is *in man’s nature* to resist Nature, a process aesthetically tied into the inexorable movement of history itself: three races, three civilizations, three steps in a local instantiation of a universal history.<sup>77</sup> The indigenous poem, whose partial presence certifies an absence, inspires both celebration and eulogy, the Indian’s funeral party through which the indigenous civilization enters into something bigger than itself. But of course, as I noted earlier, Reyes—whose vitalism typically avoids slipping into nihilism—also insists upon the role of human agency and active decision in the vicissitudes of history. The politics of this decisiveness runs up against his naturalization of indigenous loss and also—in the face of the simultaneous rise of Aryanism abroad and increasingly critical *indigenismo* at home—against his intensifying insistence upon the irrelevance of race for America.<sup>78</sup> It would seem that race in Latin America does matter, in fact if not in theory. And this point must be, at some level, clear to Reyes. For the set of decisions that announce a terrifying mode of dealing with “the Indian problem” represent another kind of funeral procession that creeps alongside Reyes’s aesthetic eulogy, relinking the formation of community, that which “engenders a common soul,” to

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> For a spectacular review of the Western tradition of viewing man as that animal which forges its own genre through production, praxis and will, see Agamben (1999 [1994]: 68-93). Decades later, Reyes takes a less progressivist view on these stages of universal history, insisting upon their persistent coevalness (1979 [1955]).

<sup>78</sup> For example, his comments on the irrelevance of race and nation for America coincide with the 1940 First Inter-American Indigenist Congress which took place in Pátzcuaro (Mexico). Its *razón de ser* was precisely to discuss problems of race, nation and state policy in the Americas.

a biopolitics whose eugenic impulse is clear. As late as 1902 the “third civilization” realized in the Porfirian state would press forward with the march of progress by dispatching 8,000 federal troops to Sonora. Massacres and mass deportation of the tenacious Yaqui civilization would follow.<sup>79</sup>

## VI

Reyes’s theory of synthesis generally repeats the basic logic and many of the failures of *mestizaje*’s articulation of race, nation and time in the Mexican scene. But out of the creative *mélange* of materialism (both positivist and vitalist) and idealism that Reyes handles with considerable dexterity and rigor, there emerges a second key idea, already suggested through his commitment to human agency in the face of historical processes. This idea is “protest.” Re-reading its presence in Reyes’s work—indeed, its primacy within the *activist* theory of culture that Reyes promotes—sharpens the focus on the problems (or at least impassés) that his persistent turn to synthesis cannot resolve. Moreover, rethinking Reyes’s interest in protest opens an immanent space to read Reyes against himself, perhaps disarticulating the race-nation couplet that can only ultimately endorse the Indian’s doom. Again, we can observe the operations and centrality of the idea—this time protest—by returning to one of Reyes’s first major works.

“La sonrisa” appears in *El suicida* (1917), a philosophical tract whose frequent recourse to stories recalls Nietzsche and foreshadows Borges’s more tightly woven *críticas*. Like *Visión de Anáhuac*, it was written during Reyes’s sojourn in Spain. While it lacks the explicitly national project of *Visión de Anáhuac*, it accompanies the earlier essay in participating in the vigorous Spanish debates (Unamuno, Azorín, Baroja,

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<sup>79</sup> See Hu-DeHart (1988): 162-5.

etc.) around the social function of the modern intellectual. The specific goal of the chapter called “La sonrisa” is to prepare the way for the unfolding of a theory of history based on the emergence of dialogue. What I offer here is a willful extraction of that chapter from its immediate context, with the aim of reading its idea of “protest” against the racialized implications of “synthesis” that I attempted to underline in *Visión de Anáhuac*.<sup>80</sup>

The smile signifies the birth of consciousness with its attendant capacity for philosophical self-reflection. It is Nature’s supplement, a metaphor for man’s (*sic*, and throughout) apprehension of the world that transcends animal need: “When the child begins to awaken from his animal sleep, deaf and laborious, he smiles: god has been born unto him.”<sup>81</sup> The smile reveals the animal’s humanity as Reyes links it to man’s unique capacity for generic self-production (and the sublimation of this capacity to the production of the gods). Moreover, it confirms Schlegel’s reduction of the universe to irony: “Irony,” Reyes concludes, “is the mother of the smile.”<sup>82</sup> The immediate attitude of man before the world is irony.<sup>83</sup>

In endorsing this Romantic notion of irony, I understand Reyes to be signaling the human(ist) condition of striving to know an unknowable world. He goes on to convert this epistemological condition into a kind of existential impasse. On the one hand, “the world excites our irony”<sup>84</sup> as consciousness permits infinite intellectual heights tied to physical limits. On the other hand, the unknowability of these physical limits—that is,

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<sup>80</sup> For an efficient review of the historical conditions of production of these essays, and a critical interpretation of their intellectual context, see Conn (2002).

<sup>81</sup> Reyes (1917): 237-8.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 239.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 240.



Nature—simultaneously inspires reverence and awe.<sup>85</sup> How to avoid, then, descending into the nihilism of ultimate meaninglessness and lack of affirmation that Hegel feared was Romantic irony’s inevitable conclusion? How to rescue any sense of purpose, any seriousness, from the world-as-toy?

Reyes responds with something along the lines of what Hannah Arendt would later theorize, in *The Human Condition* (1958), as *vita activa*. Not work and production, as the yoke harnessed to the natural world (and which was central to his narrative of Anáhuac), but *activity*, as the actions that give the world meaning and that tends toward willful repetition, realized in ritual, imitation, pleasure, creation, spontaneity. Whereas Arendt’s *vita activa* turns toward the specifically political, we would do better to call this repetitive activity in Reyes *culture*: what he goes on to exemplify as the savage’s exaltation of tattoos over food, the beggar’s aesthetic appreciation of the coin (Reyes’s examples, not mine).<sup>86</sup> Again, Reyes invokes the smile, that perfectly human activity that “does not nourish and the game that does not multiply”<sup>87</sup>: the most human of all activity is repetitive and imitative but not productive (not work, but play, “juego”), creative but not procreative (“no multiplica”). It is this culturalist and activist (and not materialist in the *productive* sense) perspective that will allow Reyes to anchor what he proposes as a kind of inverted theory of historical man. In effect, what he proposes is a conceptualization of man not as a historical formation (a product of history) but as simply a perpetual *formation-in-progress* (a movement toward history). Man, for Reyes, is the child of that which does not yet exist.<sup>88</sup> Or, man’s existence is only relevant as a future

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 238.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 240.

overcoming of non-existence: “Man exists so that that which does not yet exist may exist.”<sup>89</sup> Man invents, and this inventive capacity emerges as culture (e.g. the savage and the tattoo, as mentioned above). Man invents *culturally*. And as we saw in *Visión de Anáhuac*, one of the primary environments that gives cultural activity meaning is the historical formation called the nation. Modern man realizes cultural invention *nationally*. The Indian returns here, neatly inscribed in this cultural-national model. For the Indian, as we clearly saw in *Visión de Anáhuac*, exists *precisely and exclusively as a future man*. Indeed, as its very condition of a future possibility, the nation—the third civilization, the third race—sacrifices the Indian.

But, as Reyes himself will later assert, the dialectics of history do not march inevitably, teleologically, uni-directionally. The smile—irony’s child—speaks to the birth of consciousness. History, however, is that which allows consciousness to be thought. As the movement of man through and against nature, history is propelled from a source other than the smile. That source is *protest*: “the frequent, constant state, that which gives humanity its seal, and that, likewise, deserves to be called... the human state, is that of protest.”<sup>90</sup> The very state of the human condition, protest, is *suggested* in the smile: “Man smiles: consciousness emerges.”<sup>91</sup> But it is only through a second smile that protest is *realized*, that is, *historicized*: “If man had not protested, history would not be... Does man smile a second time? He protests, nature no longer suffices.”<sup>92</sup> And this second-order smile is a particular smile with a particular protagonist that speaks to a

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid. I should note that whether or not this quality distinguishes man from animal is unimportant to Reyes (he suggests that it does not). What is important is that it is common to *all men*, shifting the question of the origins of man from spiritual essence to the contingencies of history.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 241-2.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 242.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

particular agency. For it is the smile of the *slave*. The slave's consciousness and protest—what we might go as far as to call resistance—move history: “While the master is not doubted, nothing happens. When the slave has smiled the duel of history begins.”<sup>93</sup>

Now, I have little doubt that Reyes wields this Hegelian trope much in the manner that Hegel did: not as a pedagogy of the oppressed, but as a metaphor for the cunning of reason behind History's grand schemes. But Reyes would also comment, years later, on the eternal and mystical movement of the dialectics of history that frustrates those seduced by final ends: “we are seduced more by the dream of progress and liberty than by the accidents of the dialectical method.”<sup>94</sup> He says virtually the same thing in “La sonrisa”: “For the process to remain open, for the world to move [orig: *marche*], somebody must remain forever displeased [orig: *disgustado*].”<sup>95</sup> If repression knows no bounds, neither does its dialectical opposite: protest, the activation of the “displeased” that propels life, indeed, that “saves nature from sure exhaustion.”<sup>96</sup> Life itself must be dialectical. This is what Reyes promotes as the national dialectics of mestizo Mexico. Yet the Indian remains *disgustado*. A whole series of dialectical challenges to both nation and state emerge: integration without synthesis, activity without production, autonomy without exclusion, cooperation without coercion, protest without war. That moving to meet these challenges today will require a new internationalism that shatters the race-nation articulation seems clear. I have attempted to work out how such a project would be similar to the models of historical action apparent in Reyes's work. But within the national context at issue here, the realization of such projects will require us to go

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Reyes 1979 (1955): 480.

<sup>95</sup> Reyes (1917): 242.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

beyond Reyes. For it will require properly placing Mexico's state-sponsored thesis of synthesis—*mestizaje*—into its current dialectical condition in which its national-cultural antithesis is—as it was for Barreda before Reyes and as it is for the Mexican Supreme Court today—the indigenous communities.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> On September 5 of 2002, the Mexican Supreme Court dealt a blow to indigenous self-governance and national participation by finding unconstitutional several conditions—conditions with deep and wide support among Mexico's indigenous communities—crucial to the so-called *reforma indígena*.

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