Rubén Darío, American Imperialism, and Latin America in the 19th century
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In the late nineteenth century, United States intervention in Latin America increased rapidly to the point that Latin American intellectuals began to protest the sometimes corrosive influence of the ‘Giant from the North.’ Although not noted for his political writing, the famed Nicaraguan poet, journalist, and diplomat Rubén Darío was among those commentators. While Darío critiqued the strength of the United States and the way it used and at times abused its power, he also recognized that Latin American countries should emulate the unity of the United States. His greatest fear of United States intervention was the way it introduced global capitalism into Latin American society and politics. To counteract United States influence, he recommended that Latin Americans celebrate their Spanish heritage and their relationships with the former mother country. Also, Darío argued that the continent should look to its proud indigenous past and its Catholic faith to create a more unified Latin America. In that way Latin America could adopt some political features from the United States example, but not lose its cultural soul. Darío’s literary evolution displays his despair over the condition of the Latin American but also hope for future Latin American unity. At the same time, his diplomatic missions led him to take the Spanish side as the United States became increasingly more interventionist in Latin America in the late 19th century.

Félix Rubén García Sarmiento, better known as Rubén Darío, was born in the small town of Metapa, Nicaragua on January 18, 1867 and died in León, Nicaragua on February 6, 1916. He came to be regarded as a treasure of Nicaragua and a renowned poet in the western world. Even after his death, British diplomats or businessmen venturing into the Latin American region were advised that they should speak the languages, know the dances, and “be able to quote Rubén
Darío.”¹ He was an intelligent and secluded person and his writing was influenced by Greek history, as well as Spanish, French, German and even United States literature. He became a poet and diplomat for his country and later in his career a voice of Latin America. Although, he received this honor he wrote, “I am not a poet for the masses. But I know that inevitably I just go to them.”² According to Raymond Skyrme, Darío’s poetry was “ancient in its origins” and “from its modern resurgence in the Pre-Romantic period it pervades much of Romantic literature.”³ Cathy Jrade noted that Darío felt that modern progress was “the enemy of fantasy and the mystery as to who has been confined to the idea of utility.”⁴ The mixture of Romantic poetry and modern politics in his writing, according to Rex Hauser, kept “alive the craftsmanship of a pre-industrial age, even as they are well aware of Latin America’s entry into the industrialized ‘modern world …. [even] …. perhaps those of a state between feudalism and capitalism.”⁵ While not necessarily used to focusing on political ideology, “many of the authors from Spanish and Spanish American Modernism were directly or indirectly mixed in politics.”⁶ The fusion of Romanticism and modern politics is what best defined the type of literature that Rubén Darío helped create.

Foreign policy outside of Latin America had little to do with Darío’s early poetry and he focused on the beauty of the culture and history of the southern continent. His early books *Azul* (1888) and *Prosas profanes* (1896) did not present clues regarding topics of anti-Americanism, ¹ H.S. Mackintosh, "Politics and Economics in Latin America," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (July 1945), in JSTor [database online], 20 April 2011, 340.
but they do critique the Latin Americans while romanticizing the history of the people.\textsuperscript{7} It was not until after the Spanish-American War that his poetry voiced his opinions about American “gunboat diplomacy,” and in 1905 \textit{Cantos de vida y esperanza} became available.\textsuperscript{8} With the publishing of this book, Darío took a solid stance against the policies of the United States and his writing was aimed directly at American actions. Cathy Jrade described Darío as the “undisputed head, spokesman, and intellectual center of gravity” critiquing American aggression.\textsuperscript{9}

In Darío’s earlier works, he praised the Latin American people but pointed out the turbulence of the countries. Darío recognized this disunity in the poem, \textit{To Columbus}: “Ill-Fated Admiral! Your poor America,/ Your beautiful, hot-blooded Indian Virgin,/ the Pearl of your dreams, is now some hysterical/ women who has convulsions, tics, and pallid skin.”\textsuperscript{10} He continued: “A disastrous spirit has occupied your land./ Where once united tribes lifted their maces high./ An endless civil war has gotten out of hand:/those of the same race fight and watch each other die.”\textsuperscript{10} Darío continued to write in the poem about dictators halting the growth of the countries, “There is no limit to treacherous ambition./ Dreams of freedom are scattered among the nations.”\textsuperscript{11} In another poem, \textit{Race}, he describes the Latin American people: “Holy Water and swords/have both been essential the former to spread blessings,/ the latter to spill the wine/ of blood. Together, like this, they nourished our race for centuries.”\textsuperscript{12} The misfortune of the country is evident in \textit{To Columbus}: “The horror, the wars, the constant malarias/ are doomed paths from which our luck has not recover: Poor Admiral, yes, you, Christopher Columbus, /

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 271.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 272.
\textsuperscript{9} Jrade, \textit{Rubén Darío and the Romantic Search for Unity}...., 9.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., \textit{Race}, 45.
pray to God for the world you discovered!” Darío became worried about Latin America, writing, "But with our posterior social and political state, intellectual narrowness and historical periods more in favor of a bloodshed bulletins than noble songs arrived." He also feared the increase of “materialism” due to the rise of positivism in Spanish America. He became "disgusted and scared about the social and political life that kept my native country in a regretful state of embryonic civilization, not any better in neighboring lands.” He noticed that "there was the feared imperialist threat of the United States.” Darío’s early poetry showcased that he was troubled by the infighting of Latin America and believed it was retarding the growth of the country.

Darío wanted to help Latin America and hoped to unite them, and the first thing he wanted to use was the indigenous history of Latin America. Darío saw the cultural beauty of the past civilizations believing, "If there is poetry in our America, it is in the old things; in Palenke and Utatlan, in the legendary Indian and in the courtly and sensual Inca, and in the great Montezuma on the golden seat.” He admitted that, "I leaned towards the past, to the old mythologies and the splendid histories.” For example his poem Caupolicán "presents very well the topic of heroism and exaltation of the native Auracano race.” He wrote that the "blood of prolific Hispania, solid, distinguished races, show the former gifts that in olden days were your triumph. / May the old enthusiasm return, may the passionate spirit return/ that will rain down

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13 Ibid., To Columbus, 111.
14 Acereda and Guevara, Modernism, Rubén Darío, and the Poetics of Despair, 269-270.
16 Acereda and Guevara, Modernism, Rubén Darío, and the Poetics of Despair, 271.
18 Acereda and Guevara, Modernism, Rubén Darío, and the Poetics of Despair, 271.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
tongues of fire on that epiphany.”  

Even later in his career his poetry still displayed a love and admiration for Latin American history, "The America of the great Montezuma, of the Inca,/ the fragrant America of Christopher Columbus,/ Catholic America, Spanish America.”  

The past of Latin America was something Darío was proud of believing, "For the sunlit blood of a golden race;/ for an ancient armor and the helmet of heroic deeds." He always considered himself, "the son of America…[and]…a grandson of Spain."  

Darío's writing showed that "there follows an analysis of the United States as powerful, great, and rich, and of Spanish America as a home of artists since its ancient Indian days.” He admired the indigenous history writing, saying "there was a great treasure of poetry in our epic prehistory, in the conquest and even during the colony.” Later he believed one way to resist the United States was to emphasize the difference. "The Spanish and Indian mix in American territory [is] an affirmation of human, moral, and cultural values, against the Anglo-Saxon civilization.”

Darío served as a diplomat from 1892 until 1915 and did this as a main source of income. Ideas of Darío's seem to contradict each other at times and this is mostly because, “Darío was much more a poet than a politician.” It was because of his amazing ability to write poetry that he “never was, strictly speaking, a political thinker and did not have a concrete ideological program.”  

Luis Sáinz de Medrano wrote about what he called, "Darío's indecisions," believing that, “these indecisions find similar parallels in religion, for example, and corroborate our vision

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23 Darío, Derusha, and Acereca, To King Oscar, in Cantos de vida y Esperanza, 67.  
26 Acereda and Guevara, Modernism, Rubén Darío, and the Poetics of Despair, 269.  
27 Ibid., 270.  
28 Ibid., 265.
of Spanish and Spanish American Modernism as an attitude towards life that is as varied as it is contradictory.”

Darío believed that “in many cases, he was the defending voice of the threatened Spanish America from his position as consul in Spain.” Although, Darío was considered the voice of the Latin American countries and spoke against politics, it should be stressed that he had an ambivalent attitude about it.

When Darío served as a diplomat in Madrid he witnessed the impact that the United States had on Spain, how the loss of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines affected people, he felt closer in relation to his neighbors from the North. The repercussions of the Spanish-American War witnessed by Darío along with the fear of it spreading into the rest of Latin America influenced a change in his poetic composition. In 1905, he released his most political book *Cantos de vida y esperanza*. The preface read: “If in these songs there is politics, it is because politics appears universally.”

His boldest attempt to write against the United States was the poem, *To Roosevelt*, in which the poet called President Theodore Roosevelt the “future invader” and “Alexander-Nebuchadnezzar” because of Roosevelt helped to found Panama as a country in order to control the Panama Canal project. Darío's book included many political poems against the United States and *Cantos de vida y esperanza* was different from his previous writings because he recognized the impact of the actions of the United States not just on Latin America but on the Spanish-speaking world.

Darío's fear of the United States led him to become more sympathetic with Spain and hope to have a better relation with the former sovereign. He wrote about the importance of Spain's culture and heritage being recognized in Latin America. His writing shows his pride in

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29 Ibid., 265.
30 Ibid.
31 Darío, Derusha, and Acereda, Preface, *Cantos de vida y Esperanza*, 29.
32 Darío, *To Roosevelt*. 
being a descendent from Spain. In To Roosevelt he wrote, “Beware. Spanish America lives! / There are a thousand cubs set loose from the Spanish Lion.” Darío's ministry position most likely influenced his decision to side with Spain during the Spanish-American War, where he wrote, “[I am] nonetheless a friend of Spain's when I see it attacked by a brutal enemy [United States] whose ensign is Violence, Force, and Injustice.” Darío wrote that the Latin Americans “will salute the splendid light that will come from the East,/ august East in which all will be changed and renewed/ by the eternity of God, the infinite activity./ And so may Hope be the enduring vision in us,/ distinguished, fructiferous races, blood of prolific Hispania!”

He was fearful of Spain's loss of Cuba and how it might affect Latin America. It seems that, “the blowing up of the Maine, the military intervention against Spain, and the defeat of the Spaniards caused in him an anti-American reaction[s].” In the Triumph at Caliban, he wrote, “No, I cannot and will not be a part of them; I cannot be a part of the triumph of Caliban.” He expressed his admiration for Cuba and of wanting to fight for it: “You are very beautiful, most certainly, and great and glorious service is done you by your sons who struggle because they wish to see you free and bravo, too, to that Spaniard who will not yield peace because he fears to lose you.” Darío had always been recognized as an “Ibero-American poet,” feeling comfortable with the customs of Spain and the impact of the Spanish nation on Latin America. After the Spanish-American War, “there was an increase in sympathy toward Spain and frequently claims

33 Ibid.,
34 Darío, Stavans, Hurley, Simon, and White, “Triumph at Caliban,” Selected Writings, 512.
35 Darío, Derusha, and Acereda, The Optimists Salutation in Cantos de vida y Esperanza, 65.
36 Acereda and Guevara, Modernism, Rubén Darío, and the Poetics of Despair, 271.
to a pan-Hispanic identity,” for Latin Americans giving Darío an audience in agreement with him.\textsuperscript{40}

The poet felt coldhearted towards the United States for most of his life because of the United States intervening in Latin America politics and this showed in his writing. The feeling felt throughout Latin America “during the last decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the U.S. experienced a political aggression that filled the Hispanic would with fear.”\textsuperscript{41} The power and fear of imperialism came through in Darío's writing describing the United States as “[a] mighty colossuses fall, bicephalous eagles disband, /and something has begun like a vast social cataclysm/ across the face of the orb.”\textsuperscript{42} Darío always recognizing the economic power of the United States conveyed it in his image saying, “No, I cannot and will not be a part of those buffaloes with silver teeth.”\textsuperscript{43} He would warn Latin American after the loss of Cuba from Spain that “the greed of the Anglo-Saxon, the appetite the Yankee has shown, the political infamy of the government of the North; and how useful, how necessary it is for the Hispanic nationalities of the Americas to be prepared for the boa constrictor's next strike.”\textsuperscript{44}

His writing had an abundance of religion symbolism for Latin America and believed with religion they could avoid United States imperialism. Darío was seen as an “Occultist…[having] ....to a core of wisdom that has been the property of the wise since the beginning of time…. [and] ....believe in the fundamental unity of all religions and that each religion perpetuates through its emblems and allegories the same fundament truths.”\textsuperscript{45} Darío could then use, “this Faith…with a framework with which he could aspire to discover a transcendental and unified view of the

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{41} Acereda and Guevara, Modernism, Rubén Darío, and the Poetics of Despair, 268.
\textsuperscript{42} Darío, Derusha, and Acereda, The Optimists Salutation, in Cantos de vida y Esperanza, 63
\textsuperscript{43} Darío, Stavans, Hurley, Simon, and White, “Triumph at Caliban,” Selected Writings, 507.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 509.
cosmos.”46 Although there was strong religion in his writing “the importance of Catholicism to Darío's poetry is not limited to religious vocabulary or references to the divine liturgy.”47 He was always proud of his religion and the strong faith of Latin Americans, writing in To Columbus: “The Cross you brought us never seems to diminish./ When will corruption in revolutions be shown?” 48 When Darío wrote To Roosevelt, he ended the poem with, “and, even accounting for the rest, you lack one thing: God!”49

Darío was ambivalent about the power of the United States. Though he was still angry for America's actions in Cuba and Panama at the Pan American Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1908, he wrote the poem Saluting the Eagle. In this poem Darío accepted the ideas and wanted help from the United States. He wrote, “Yet your open wings have symbolized enduring peace/ and in your beak and your claws is the necessary war…. and you've witnessed cataclysms and struggles between races/ and you're present in the dreams of the Apocalypse/ and you're the bird that strong empires have sought.”50 After the Pan American conference and Saluting the Eagle, people of Latin America became enraged at his new stance and disagreed with his sudden praise of the United States. According to Alberto Acereda and Rigoberto Guevara, Dario’s seeming change of position may have been because “he feared, no doubt, having gone too far in his apostrophe To Roosevelt, and in his Salutations from the Optimist. Darío, then, took advantage of the event of that Conference [Pan American] to amend with the powerful adversary nation.”51

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46 Ibid.
48 Darío, Derusha, and Acereda, To Columbus, in Cantos de vida y Esperanza, 111.
49 Darío, To Roosevelt.
50 Darío, Stavans, Hurley, Simon, and White, Saluting the Eagle, in Selected Writings, 127.
51 Acereda and Guevara, Modernism, Rubén Darío, and the Poetics of Despair, 280
Darío later critiqued his olive branch to the United States in which he replied, “What do you want, my friend! They are the most powerful ones.”

Rubén Darío even before his rivalry with the United States always respected some of the ‘New World Intellectuals’ of the United States. One writer he admired was Walt Whitman and in his poem, *Saluting the Eagle*, Darío praises Whitman’s acceptance of the United States, “Welcome, oh magical Eagle that Walt Whitman loved so well.” Darío’s admiration of Whitman did not change his opinion of democracy and he wrote: “But abominating that democracy which is poisonous to poets (pace suce worshipers of it as Walt Whitman).” Along with Whitman, Darío also had respect for Edgar Allen Poe, “Their Whitman with his hatchet-hew verses is a democratic prophet in the service of Uncle Sam; and Their [United States] Poe, Their great Poe, a poor swan drunk on alcohol and pain, was the martyr to his dream in a land where he will never be understood.” Darío describes Poe as the “lyrical Prometheus.” Darío was not a fan of all the writers of America, writing, “Whitman borders on Homer; Mr. Mark Twain borders on Christy’s Minstrels, who in a theater in New York showed me a curious side of the Anglo-Saxon soul, with their caricatures of the Chinese, of the Irish, and of the Negroes, which team in jovial dailies of the happy land of Uncle Sam.”

Darío understood the strength of the United States and did not like the materialism and the rich-poor dichotomy, along with the capitalistic ways of the United States as a country. He understood that “the expansion of such modernization resulted in increased capitalism and the

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56 Ibid., “The Misfits,” 403
presence of the United States of America in the Spanish American World.”

The image of the United States cities were illustrate in a letter he called, “Triumph at Caliban”: I have seen those Yankees, in their overwhelming cities of iron and stone, and the hours I have lived among them, I have spent in a state of vague dread and anguish.” In the poem Great Cosmopolis, he wrote, “But on the banks by the river, / the dying are cold and shiver, and worse still, God lives here, / in grief.” He noticed the capitalism of the United States, “Red-faced, corpulent, gross, they make their way down their streets pushing and shoving one another, brushing against one another like animals, on a hunt for the mighty dollar.” He implied in his writings not only the capitalism, but also their involvement in foreign politics, “The Yankee loves his chains, of course. / Every dog and any horse, / his yacht and the football game he won. / But he truly adores happy days, /harmony and forceful ways.” He described Uncle Sam as “tall with fierce eyes that glow. /His coat is his flag, you know/ so is his hat and tuxedo. / He might not be a ladies' man/ but everyone can see his plan/ with his stars and stripes in hand/ ready to fight in any land.” Darío believed that the Latin American culture was just better than the American culture. Darío wrote the poem The Country of Sun, which he “dedicated to a Cuban female artist and was written during the poet's stay in New York in 1893. The whole poem is advice from Darío to the artist to return to her native land, the island of Cuba, because there everything will be more sympathetic to her spirit than the hard ‘island of steel,’ New York's Manhattan”

He recognized the strength of the United States, and Darío believed that the Latin American culture should accept help from the United States to a certain extent allowing them to

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58 Acereda and Guevara, Modernism, Rubén Darío, and the Poetics of Despair, 263.
59 Darío, Stavans, Hurley, Simon, and White, “Triumph at Caliban,” Selected Writings, 507
60 Ibid., The Great Cosmopolis, 129.
61 Ibid., “Triumph at Caliban,” 507.
62 Ibid., The Great Cosmopolis, 133.
63 Ibid.
64 Acereda and Guevara, Modernism, Rubén Darío, and the Poetics of Despair, 272.
create a stronger Latin America. He was in awe at the power of the United States and knew that the United States believed that, “‘Ours,’ [United States territory] they say, ‘is the biggest in the world’ …And indeed, one feels oneself in the land of Brobdingnag: they have Niagara Falls, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, twenty-story boxes, dynamite and cannons.” He recognized the colossal power to the North, and was willing to welcome them with open arms in *Saluting the Eagle*, writing “But, Eagle, don't forget the Condor. He's your brother on the great heights./ The Andes know him, and know, like you, that he looks at the Sun./ *May this grand never end*, says the poet./ Let the two of you join in a plenitude of harmony and strength.”

Darío even believed that the United States could help the Latin American countries by, “[Giving] us the secret of the way you labor in the North.” He even was willing to remove himself from the European influence: “The way our children might cease to be cut from Latin cloth/ and learn perseverance, vigor, character from the Yankees.” Darío's poem *Saluting the Eagle* wanted the United States to “let your presence be fertile for these many nations/ that admire its banner of constellations and stripes.” It seemed that Darío “bore no ill will to the United States, even if, like his Spanish-American contemporaries, he ordinarily feared the acquisitiveness of the neighbor to the north.” In reality it seemed that Darío, “was never hostile—his reaction was closer to alarm.”

Darío's political writing has seemed to be about the imperialism of the United States, either being fearful of the United States or frightened of Latin America disunity; this led Darío to hope for a nationalist type of unity for the Latin American countries. At the age of eighteen in

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66 Ibid., *Saluting the Eagle*, 125.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 127.
70 Watland, *Poet-errant; a Biography of Rubén Darío*, 201.
71 Ibid., 155.
1865, Darío believed, “Spanish America in the future of the world!”

He lost the hope of the future of the Latin American countries after the loss of Cuba to the United States believing that, “[This] is why our race must unite, as body and soul unite.”

In 1912, the United States started to engage in military interventions in Darío’s home country of Nicaragua, overthrowing the president. This led to Darío taking refuge in Argentina where he stated, “Everyone will approve of my preference for the Sun of the South over the Stars of the North.”

Darío also conveyed his confidence in Latin America in his poem, *The Swans*, believing that Latin America’s future was going to be okay, “and a white one [Latin America] added: ‘The sunrise will always abide./ always!’ Oh, people from the lands of harmony and sun, rest assured, Pandora's box safely carries Hope inside.”

The hope was that the disunity was going to cease writing that, “May so many scattered strengths unite, shine, support one another;/ may all form a single bundle of ecumenical energy.”

Darío dreamed of a unity of Latin America as, “one continent and another renewing the old bloodlines,/ in spirit united, in spirit and longings and language,/ see the moment coming when new anthems will be sung./ The Latin race will see great dawn of the future; in a thunder of glorious music, millions of lips.”

It was in his writing that he did not want to be “associated with a specific country…[but]…links his movement with Spanish America as a whole.”

Although some historians believe that, “Throughout his entire life, Darío remained a proponent of the cause of Central American political unity” It does seem clear that in his earlier years Darío did want a Central American unity, “He [Enrique Anderson Imbert]...
noticed several manifestations of political liberalism in Darío's poetry before 1888- his support for Central American unity, his attack on political tyranny. Towards the end of his life Darío wanted not just a Central American unity but Latin America to be recognized as a world power. “For Rubén Darío and his friends, Modernity and cosmopolitanism were synonymous. They were not anti-Latin American; they wanted a Latin America that would be contemporaneous with Paris and London.”

In conclusion, Rubén Darío ended up becoming a spokesman for the Latin American countries against the United States and their actions in Latin American countries. He would write about the capitalism in the United States and how they affected the rich-poor dichotomy. He also wrote passionately about the United States intervening in Latin American politics. Darío witnessed the actions of the United States first hand in Panama and later in his life when the United States overthrew the Nicaraguan government that had sponsored Darío's diplomatic missions, leaving the poet without a home for about a year of his life. Darío did understand the power of the United States and admired them for their ability to grow into a world power; he also recognized the ‘New World intellectuals’ in Walt Whitman and Edgar Allen Poe both who influenced his career. Darío became worried about the loss of Spain in the western hemisphere after the Spanish American War and feel a close hurt with Spain after their loss of Cuba to a United States intervention. Darío recognized the vision on the horizon that was coming from the United States and was fearful of the Latin American countries and their future; especially with all of the infighting of Latin America and the gap of wealth in the countries. He believed that the future could be salvaged because of a strong indigenous history and believed that God was on the side of the Spanish-speaking Americans. He proposed that the Latin Americans emulate what he

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recognized in the United States and their overall power. Most of all he believed that the culture of Latin America was strong and that a unity was best to resist the actions of the United States and their ‘gunboat diplomacy', and a strong pride in Latin American culture.