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## Finding the Center: Constructing the Subaltern Master Narrative

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## *Finding the Center* Constructing the Subaltern Master Narrative

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**Abstract:** In clarifying the meanings of the notion in use, and in comparing Spivak's and Gramsci's use of the term, I wish to frame an expanded space within which a "subaltern master narrative"—that is, a broad intellectual perspective encompassing a theoretical grasp of the subaltern's social and historical context as it bears on the possibility of action—can be, and actually has been, constructed. I conclude that Gloria Anzaldúa's transculturated master narrative in its method of construction, in its substantive hybridization and fusion of European and indigenous cultural elements, in its representation of the lives and dilemmas of oppressed people—women, Mexican Americans, blacks, gays and lesbians—and in its valorization of the acts of reflexive sympathetic introspection and of representation, and, in turn, by its connection with social action, truly fulfills Gramsci's criterion of the construction of a new hegemony and the transformation of the subaltern as well as the standard of authenticity implied in Spivak's answer to her question. Yes, the subaltern can and does speak!

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Can the subaltern speak? This is the rhetorical question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay titled with the same question (1988). From the essay's very beginning, it becomes clear that the question is not simply one about the subaltern's capacity to engage in articulate discourse on its own behalf. Rather, it is rhetorical, centering on the authenticity and validity of Western intellectuals such as Foucault and Deleuze to *represent* subaltern people in the neo-colonial world and on their home turf. Her position is that Foucault's and Deleuze's affirmative answer to her question is an empty gesture of affirmation of the subaltern, of the oppressed as a

subject serving as a projection of their own experience onto the oppressed, thereby enhancing the exploitation and oppression of the latter by international capitalism. The latter part of the essay focuses on how the British and elite Indian interpretations of widow suicide—self-immolation—was filtered and denatured by these interpretations, and in one case of an activist's suicide undertaken during menstruation, obscured and rendered the intended meaning of the suicide invisible, thereby providing a negative answer to Spivak's question. Thus Spivak's and much of the Subaltern Studies group's focus, begun in the early 1980s, has been on the issue of representation.

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The originator of the notion of the subaltern, the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1891 -1935), used the term as a disguise for the terms “proletariat” or “working-class,” for much of his writing was done while he was imprisoned by the fascists and thus he needed to avoid the prison censor. As a result, the expression became more generic in meaning and later was used by intellectuals to refer to peasants and to ethnic and racial minorities, that is, to historical instances of resistance to oppression excluded by culture-bound followers and interpreters of Marx who are hidebound to Western/European conceptions of class struggle and warfare.

In the *Prison Notebooks* (1971) Gramsci optimistically alludes to the capacity of the subaltern to represent itself by developing critical awareness and class consciousness, although he does not use the latter expression. He mentions that at a point in the development of capitalism when the subaltern understands the divided interests of the capitalist and ruling class in relation to “the broader spheres of the national and international division of labor,” the “subaltern precisely for that reason is no longer subaltern, or at least is demonstrably on the way to emerging from its subordinate position” (1971, p. 202). Thus, it is clear from this observation and from a reading of the rest of this text that Gramsci’s project focuses on the connection and development of the subaltern’s critical consciousness with *action*, that is, revolutionary action evoked, inspired and leavened by heightened consciousness and philosophical sophistication—*praxis*. In fact, his euphemism for Marxism is “the philosophy of praxis.” He is not—as a literal interpretation of the above quote might conceive it—suggesting that understanding or insight automatically dissolves or transforms subalternity into something else: it does mean, as his phrase “is demonstrably on the way” suggests, that a significant process whose ultimate goal is liberation, has started.

Thus, while Gramsci hewed to a Marxian line he expanded the purview of Marxian analysis of the “superstructure” beyond the relegation of thought and culture to ideology. For Gramsci, therefore, the focus was not on representation but on the development of subaltern consciousness unto action. This is not to denigrate the Subaltern Studies group’s focus, nor Spivak’s. What then is the point of my elaboration of the meaning of Spivak’s question and Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern? In clarifying the meanings of the notion in use, and in comparing Spivak’s and Gramsci’s use of the term (or shall we say, in comparing their somewhat different emphases), I wish to frame an expanded space within which a subaltern master narrative—that is, a broad intellectual perspective encompassing a theoretical grasp of the subaltern’s social and historical context as it bears on the possibility of action—can be, and actually has been, constructed. By master narrative then, I refer to a discursive rendition of the social world which frames it from a totalizing perspective accounting for how it got that way, offering a theory of the principles underlying conduct, thought, and knowledge, and presenting an account of the spiritual principles underlying human nature and conduct. Hence, “master narrative” refers to a theoretical center, if not an epistemologically absolute claim to truth, as has customarily been the implication of the term “master narrative.”

What I have in mind is the “new mythos,” called the *nepantla* of Gloria Anzaldúa (1942 -2004), a cultural theorist and creative writer, and a Chicana lesbian feminist exponent of *mestizaje*, a fusion of indigenous and European cultures, whom I knew nothing about prior to the deliberations of UMass Boston’s Social Theory Forum committee, which decided to devote its annual 2006 conference to the themes of her life and work. I read *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999) and a catalytic process was evoked that enabled me to pull together intellectual mate-

rial that I had been musing over for several years, particularly material concerning the connections between intellectual activity, creativity and cultural development. Much of this material was suggested by my work on my book analyzing the sources of the ideas of Charles Horton Cooley, whose conception of the self, inspired by Adam Smith and the essay tradition, conceived of it in reflexive terms as a conversational center, and whose aestheticism prompted him to view the social process as an intrinsically creative one. He literally viewed society as a work of art, and characterized tradition as offering a palette for social innovation as opposed to barriers to societal development and change (Jacobs, 2006).

Cooley's innovative theories prompted me to search for novel ways of viewing culture as more than a static thing and as something better articulated through his view of the creative social process. Here I ran across the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's notion of transculturation, of which I will have more to say below. Secondly, I asked what significance Anzaldúa's integration of the spiritual elements of her own background—the mythology of the native Mexican (e.g., Aztec, Olmec, etc.) religion and Catholicism—with her (multi)cultural linguistic (i.e., Mexican American Spanish and English) and intellectual self and her gender and sexuality (lesbian)—her *mestiza* consciousness—held for an answer to Spivak's question. Here was a theorist who had constructed an understanding of social and cultural change and development using metaphors derived from her existential and intellectual matrix as a chicana, a lesbian, a writer. In short, she was a transculturator who in seeking to globally and creatively integrate her social, cultural, spiritual, personal-psychological, gender, sexual, activist and intellectual selves, produced a "narrative of action" which organically coheres (Turner, 1993, p. 47).

Ortiz's notion of transculturation, ex-

pressing the "different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another...necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture," and, in addition, "carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation" (Ortiz, 1995 [1947], pp. 102-103). Ortiz's genius lies not in the stark enunciation of this notion but in his personification of it through his narrative of the lively counterpoint of tobacco and sugar production and their associated cultural elements in Cuba. Moreover, as the contrapuntal musical metaphor suggests, "This type of dialogued composition which carries the dramatic dialectic of life into the realm of art has always been a favorite of the ingenuous folk muses in poetry, music dance, song and drama. The outstanding examples of this in Cuba are the antiphonal prayers of the liturgies of both whites and blacks, the erotic controversy in dance measures of the rumba, and in the versified counterpoint of the unlettered *guajiros* and the Afro-Cuban *curros*" (pp. 3-4).

By placing the material and symbolic tale of Don Tabaco y Dona Azucar in a transcultural frame Ortiz succeeds holding the theoretical center ground, the ground of popular culture and the people's religion.<sup>1</sup> This is the vantage point—a space outside the neo-colonialist shroud—from which the subaltern can and does speak. This is not to say that occupying a theoretical cen-

<sup>1</sup> In his valorization of Afro-Cuban popular and folkloric dance and music Ortiz underscores Gramsci's declamation that every man is a philosopher and that, in the case of his Cuba as well as Gramsci's peasant Italy, "This philosophy is contained in 1. language itself [rumba is nothing if not musical poetry] ...; 2. 'common sense' and 'good sense' [to wit, Afro-Cuban folkloric wisdom]; 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled under the name of 'folklore'" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 323). Gramsci thought it necessary that folklore, expressing "popular feelings be known and studied...and...not...be considered something negligible" (p. 419).

ter guarantees the truthfulness of what one says; it simply affords the *opportunity* to avoid the pall of domination through consent—of hegemony.<sup>2</sup> The genius of Ortiz's idea lies in its understanding of culture and its creation and development as a dynamic and intrinsically creative process containing within it room for individual and group agency.<sup>3</sup> I suggest that Gloria Anzaldúa's "*mestiza* consciousness" incarnated in her attempt to construct a "new mythos," whether or not she is aware of the term transculturation, grasps and applies Ortiz's notion to the creation of what I call her master narrative. To wit:

In a constant state of mental

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<sup>2</sup> Rodriguez-Mangual in her study of Lydia Cabrera, for example, states that Ortiz did not avoid this pall, but rather, "follows conventional anthropological methods" and "he does not open up a discursive space for informants themselves—the actors—to dialog about their own culture and those who invent the means of its representation" (2004, pp. 56, 57). Elsewhere (Jacobs, forthcoming) I compare Anzaldúa with Cabrera and dispute Rodriguez-Mangual's "biting of the hand" that fed her and Cabrera, via insisting that Ortiz hewed to the stance of the "distant observer who does not participate in the culture he studies" (p. 47) whilst simultaneously "setting the stage...for Lydia Cabrera's approach to transculturation," the very notion pioneered by Ortiz himself (p. 17). John Beverly (1999, pp. 43-45) seems to share Rodriguez-Mangual's opinion of Ortiz, suggesting that both Ortiz and Coronil manifest a somewhat occult anxiety that "racial and class violence from below will overturn the structure of privilege inhabited by an upper-class liberal intellectual like Ortiz in a country like Cuba, where a majority of the population is 'black'...and, at least until the revolution, overwhelmingly poor...(p. 45). I do not wish to *dismiss* Rodriguez-Mangual and Beverly here; rather I do want to qualify their somewhat facile dismissal of Ortiz. In both cases, might not these authors be manifesting Bloom's "anxiety of influence" wherein they evince a reluctance to acknowledge and applaud the creativity of a precursor such as Ortiz, a male coming from an upper class background and an easy target, who openly acknowledged and recanted his earlier racism, and then went on to develop landmark concepts and books appreciative of the Afro-Cuban cultural heritage (Bloom, 1997 [1973])?

nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a dark-skinned mother listen to?...That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the *mestiza* stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs (1999, pp. 100-101).

In the preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa describes the border crossing experience of transculturating the new mythos: "Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being 'worked' on." Moreover this carries the sense of participating in a collective awakening: "I have the sense that certain 'faculties'—not just in me but in every other border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened" (1999, p. 19). Isn't this the subaltern speaking? Logically, it would seem that the heightened consciousness, the absence of diffi-

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<sup>3</sup> Here I note as well the fact that culture is not creative in a willy-nilly way, although it often may appear so. I simply want to say that it, indeed, can, and often does, operate in such a way as lay a "dead hand" on our consciousness and behavior in putting us to sleep to the mechanical quality of our actions. Thus, it can zombie us as well as make us creative and conscious participants in the social world, as, for example, in our ethnocentric exclusion and victimizing of the "other."

dence already have dissolved her subalternity, but from the Gramscian standpoint, this can be construed as the construction of the new hegemony he envisions. As mentioned, Anzaldúa calls this new mythos a “liminal in-between space”—*nepantla* (Keating ed., 2000, p. 168).

Gloria Anzaldúa’s discussion of the syncretization of *Coatloapeuh* and La Virgen de Guadalupe (in chapter three), more than simply being a dry historical account, is a genealogy of the creation, transformation and development of contemporary chicano culture, and moreover, of its constituent gender roles as that totality bears on the development of a “new consciousness.” There she carefully delineates the trajectory of first the Aztecs, then the conquistadores’, transformation of the Aztec’s original female and serpentine pantheon into “a synthesis of the old world and the new [La Virgen], of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered,” wherein “*La cultura chicana* identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish) (1999, p. 52). This genealogy, tracing “The Loss of the Balanced Oppositions and the Change to Male Dominance” and the associated transformation of the image and mythology of the serpent and *Cihuacoatl*, the Serpent Woman represented, or incarnated in the contemporary (modern) split consciousness of rationality and of the spirit, *is truly a masterful sociology of culture*. It frames the dilemmas and the oppression of chicanos and other people of color in the U. S., gays and lesbians, accounts for the origins and operation of oppression and points the way out by limning a new mythos, a self-conscious syncretism of extant and avant-garde spiritual paths. As Gloria Anzaldúa suggests, other syncretized mythologies (e.g. Vodun, Santería, shamanism) embody and suggest similar narratives (p. 59). She tells us:

Don’t give me your lukewarm

gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of the entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture (1999, p. 44).

Here the architectonics of a master narrative derived from subaltern culture(s) are mapped. Being quintessentially interstitial, its beauty lies in its non-exclusivity, its additive quality making no claim to absolute truth. As she says, “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms...on the straddling of two or more cultures” (1999, p. 102).

For Anzaldúa the serpent (“the mental picture and symbol of the instinctual in its collective impersonal pre-human [form]”) represents the dark forces of the unconscious—our deep inner selves. In an interview she remarks that the “female body and serpents are two of the most feared things in the world, so I used the serpent to symbolize female sexuality, carnality and the body. Snakes used to represent to me the body and everything that was loathsome, vile, rotting, decaying, getting hair, urinating, shitting, all the conditioning I’ve had—that all people have—about the body, especially the female body” (Keating ed., 2000, p. 102). (From the standpoint of depth psychology, these body sites and functions represent loci or points of psycho-socialization trauma in the pre-adolescent life cycle, and, with respect to psychic memory, regression and fixation and the anchoring of neurosis.) Interestingly she connects this with shame, her shame of having begun to menstruate at the age of three, which was accompanied by great pain and her and her

parents' shame of her abnormality (1999, p. 65).<sup>4</sup>

For Anzaldúa the shame of her experience is connected with the symbol of the mirror—the looking-glass self—“an ambivalent symbol. Not only does it reproduce images (the twins that stand for thesis and antithesis), it contains and absorbs them.” As such (here she uses language reminiscent of Cooley and Mead), it represents, “Seeing and being seen. Subject and object. I and she” (1999, p. 64). Thomas Scheff (2003) calls this connecting of self and the emotion of shame “the Cooley/Goffman conjecture” or current of the symbolic interactionist tradition in sociology. In the Anzaldúa master narrative it thus represents the incorporation of a reflexive component. She calls it “the Coatlicue state” or descent into the underworld of the self and the unconscious associated with the place of the dead: “When I reach bottom, something forces me to push up, walk toward the mirror, confront the face in the mirror.” But she resists: “I don't want to see what's behind *Coatlicue's* eyes, her hollow sockets,” for “Behind the ice mask I see my own eyes” that will not look at her. These aspects of the self include being “a second-class member of a conquered people who are taught they are inferior because

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<sup>4</sup> In an interview she says of her premature menstruation that doctors could not figure it out: “it's a very rare hormonal disturbance or dysfunction. As far as I know only two people—including myself—have ever been diagnosed with it,” and she attributes it not only to a physical-medical cause, but to “some other entity or spirit [which] had entered my body” which was not used to incarnating in human bodies (2000, pp. 19-20). The pain and trauma associated with this condition, as Anzaldúa writes about and refers to it in a number of places, should forestall facile references to her sexuality as though she were a kind of sexual athlete or acrobat. One can, indeed, should, imagine, how such trauma created obstacles and issues for her to work through and struggle with her entire life. In underscoring this I am not refuting or dismissing Anzaldúa's narrative, but noting the multilayered aspects of pleasure and pain as these figure in her complexity as a writer, thinker and activist.

they have indigenous blood, believe in the supernatural and speak a deficient language.” Exasperated, she asks why she has to make sense of it all, for each time she does, she must kick out “a hole in the boundaries of the self” and drag the shed “old skin along, stumbling over it.” Nonetheless, the knowledge derived from the process “makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious” (1999, pp. 70-71).

Anzaldúa's construction clearly connects the self and the psychic realm with blended sociocultural forms of native and European mythologies and hybrid linguistic elements, and uses these to engage in struggle around issues of gender, race and ethnicity in American society. Thus her transculturation embodies reflexive consciousness-raising and the call to action—praxis. A critical component of this linkage of self and social action is Anzaldúa's commitment to writing.

### CONCLUSION: CONOCIMIENTO, OR WRITING THE SELF AND SOCIAL ACTION

Anzaldúa resolves the issue of representation, not through addressing the issue directly, but through the act of writing, for she does not quibble over whether the subaltern can or cannot represent or be represented. She is “street,” and “represents,” taking the matter boldly into hand, proclaiming writing to be a part of the new consciousness, and deriving its name from the Aztecs' words for the red and black ink used in their codices: *Tlilli*, *Tlapalli*—The Path of the Red and Black Ink. “They believed that through metaphor and symbol, by means of poetry and truth, communication with the Divine could be attained, and *topan* (that which is above—the gods and spirit world) could be bridged with *mictlán* (that which is below—the underworld and the region of the dead” (1999, p. 91). This includes creative, that is, the writing of sto-

ries, and discursive, writing. Here she encapsulates Gramsci's adage about every man being a philosopher side by side with his proclamation of the value of folklore. Gloria Anzaldúa is a conscious, but not overly rationalized or rationalizing, agent of transculturation whose testimony shamanically bridges the spirit world, the quotidian realm *and* the darkness of the unconscious:

When I create stories in my head, that is, allow the voices and scenes to be projected in the inner screen of my mind, I "trance." I used to think I was going crazy or that I was having hallucinations. But now I realize it is my job, my calling, to traffic in images. Some of these film-like narratives I write down; most are lost, forgotten. When I don't write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I *do* write. I can't stomach it, become nauseous, burn with fever, worsen. But in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make "sense" of them, and once they have "meaning" they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy (1999, pp. 91-92).

She tells us, "The writer as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman" (p. 88). This is in contrast to Western art, which is simply "'psychological' in that it spins its energies between itself and its witness' and is sequestered from the people in museums. As she puts it: "Tribal cultures keep art works in honored and sacred places in the home and elsewhere. They attend them by

making sacrifices of blood (goat or chicken), libations of wine...The 'witness' is a participant in the enactment of the work in a ritual, and not a member of the privileged classes" (p. 90).

Anzaldúa fulfills Gramsci's criterion of the organic intellectual creating a "new culture" which "does not only mean one's own individual 'original' discoveries. It also, and most particularly, means the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered, their 'socialisation' as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 325). Speaking of the conquistadores, she tells us, "Not only did they completely reconstruct people's identities but they also falsely constructed the whole of America." The task is for mestizas and native women to "use the pen—or should I say the keyboard?—as a weapon and means of transformation," thereby "reclaiming the agency of reinscribing, taking off their inscriptions and reinscribing ourselves, our own identities, our own cultures," effectively using "the very weapon that conquered America...against them" (2000, p. 189). This represents a union of the intellect with action: "Con los ojos y la lengua en la mano: you tie in the sensitive, conscious political awareness with the act of writing and activism" (p. 183).

I conclude that Anzaldúa's transculturated master narrative in its method of construction, in its substantive hybridization and fusion of European and indigenous cultural elements, in its representation of the lives and dilemmas of oppressed people—women, Mexican Americans, blacks, gays and lesbians—and in its valorization of the acts of reflexive sympathetic introspection and of representation, and, in turn, by its connection with social action, truly fulfills Gramsci's criterion of the construction of a new hegemony and the transformation of the subaltern as well as the standard of authenticity implied in Spivak's answer to her question. Yes, the subaltern can and does speak!

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