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The Chicano/a Subject: A Racial Formation

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Introduction

As the twentieth century gives way to the twenty-first century America is in the midst of re-evaluating its global and domestic identity. America's identity in a global context is being established primarily by economic and political measures. In a domestic context the racial and ethnic complexity of America is continuously being simplified by more appealing notions of a homogeneous identity of American nationalism. While there has been some multicultural advocacy voiced in regards to America's cultural diversity, such a consciousness has yet to supplant the contagious notion of American nationalism. It is becoming increasingly difficult under these conditions for America and the world to recognize the presence of cultural diversity in this country.

Within mainstream pedagogical circles, uncritical notions of American nationalism have become institutionally legitimized because of a subsequent displacement of ethnic and racial identities which are informed by unhomogeneous cultural experiences in American society. The formation of hyphenated identities (i.e. Mexican-Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc.) has trivialized and co-opted culture within this nationalistic social fabric. The patchwork involved in the formation of these identities - the truncation of cultural identity (i.e. Mexican, African, Asian, etc.) by a predetermined and imposed national identity - heeds more culture-specific analysis in the way notions of American nationalism influence textual and ideological constructions of ethnic and racial subjects.

Chicanos/as represent one group that have been culturally misappropriated due to the homogenizing forces of American nationalism. This paper considers how Chicanos/as are increasingly becoming inaccurately perceived in text, especially cultural theory, as subjectively synonymous with other Latino/a and minority groups. Consequently maintaining the mainstream's racial ordering of "others."

The cultural subjective position of Chicanos/as has often conveniently been replaced by the mere rubric of Mexican American, Hispanic, or Latino/a. These interpretations reproduce uncritical representations that consistently fail to explain, represent, and/or correspond with the cultural complexity of Chicano/a culture and identity, thus leading to an inaccurate representation of Chicanos/as as a whole via their institutionally-appropriated subjectivity. Critiques and theoretical explorations, such as the ones in this paper, are a response to the lack of criticism concerning the cultural diversity of ethnic groups like Chicanos/as.

Recognizing the cultural diversity inherent in Chicano/a subjectivity necessitates a cultural conception of Chicanos/as that acknowledges their many possible forms of subjectivity (i.e. historical, social, economic, political, sexual, racial, etc.). Vital to any understanding of Chicano/a subjectivity is the recognition of both male and female subjects (Chabram-Dernersesian 82). Angie Chabram-Dernersesian argues that by

recognizing gendered bodies in ethnic subjectivities, a progressive effort is being made to avoid "nationalism's failure to inscribe gender differences" (84). She also suggests that the explicit recognition of female subjectivity in the cultural title of "Chicano/a" illustrates a self-determination in identity that subsequently opposes convenient labels inaccurately appropriated by dominating patriarchal institutions:

Textually within the very same Chicano/a vernacular which challenged the Eurocentrism of English and Spanish by crossing their borders in illegal codes that would elicit charges of 'illiteracy,' Chicano/a identity is written with linguistic qualifiers . . . which subsume the Chicana into a universal ethnic subject . . . (84).

Notions of American nationalism and their bearing on Chicano/a subjectivity invite critical questions concerning the historical problematic of *mestizaje* in the formation of what some may view as an essential ethnic identity. It is a daunting task for many to even begin decolonizing their minds from states of duality and dichotomy to consider the inherent cultural plurality of Chicanos/as as equivalent to an ethnic identity. However, many Chicano/a cultural theorists utilize the unique experience of being culturally heterogeneous as a social referent from which to justify a "Chicano/a" identity of multiple dimensions. It is meant to recognize the social fact that Chicanos/as are who they are because of multiple cultural influences - one as a result of many. Another approach involves the unifying cognitive and geographic symbolism of *Aztlán*, "the imaginary geography claimed as the true site of Chicano/a subjectivity" (Chabram-Dernersesian 82). Regardless of the means, ultimately conceptualizing the idea of Chicanos/as having an ethnic identity of their own relieves the subject from tendencies of false totalization and ethnic homogenization.

But who exactly can be represented by the Chicano/a subject, and how could the Chicano/a subject differ from the Mexican American, Hispanic, or Latino/a subjects who are often contextualized interchangeably? Critical attention to class, cultural, and political stratifications within Spanish-origin communities returns us to the ideological struggles over the "naming" or self-designation that first gave rise to the wide use of "Chicano/a" in the 1960s (Noriega, xiii). Marc Pizarro reminds us that "the term 'Chicano' [sic] emerged from the social upheaval of 1960s America as a symbol of the efforts of Mexican-descent peoples in the United States to define themselves" (145). Essentially, Chicanos/as are a people of Mexican descent, born and raised in the United States.

Furthermore, "Hispanic" and "Latino" come into play as more general terms meant to encompass a broader ethnic and racial cohort of people that can collectively be historically traced to a common Spanish origin (Borunda 187). These respective subjectivities can be used to reference multiple racial, national, and ethnic communities in one shot given that they are presumably all linked by Spanish ancestry. While the term "Mexican American" can also conceivably represent both an American born person of Mexican-descent as well as possess historical linkages to the Spanish, it is primarily meant to identify those subjects who wish to acknowledge their cultural connection to Mexico first beyond anything else; they are American but foremost of Mexican descent (Borunda 187). The Mexican American subject also signals an identification with the ideals of a pre-1960s Mexican American generation that was strongly influenced by conservative McCarthyist ideals; including strong doses of American nationalism. But for the purposes of this paper the Chicano/a subject is meant to identify only those who voluntarily ascribe to being Chicano/a, whether for political, cultural, or other purposes.

This paper concentrates on three broad discursive areas that are capable of showing how conceptual mediators have sheltered the mainstream consciousness from acknowledging the agency and self-determination of Chicano/a subjectivity. The first section looks at the process of racial reasoning that has conceptually melted the Chicano/a subject into a normalized state for intellectual consumption by the status quo. Of particular importance to this discussion is the cultural commodification of the Chicano/a subject and the limited prospects in the social space of America of attaining a comprehensible and acceptable discourse in mainstream thought. The second section centers on the relevance of the Gramscian and feminist moments in Cultural Studies to the institutional corporatization of Chicano/a subjectivity. Specifically addressed is how notions of hegemonic social power and gender difference impacted early efforts at dehomogenizing and relieving the Chicano/a subject from the ethnic packs of overly-generalized minority discourse. The last section looks at the possible cognitive use of the U.S.-Mexico border by American mainstream consciousness in its appropriation and/or displacement of Chicano/a subjectivity. Specifically discussed is its dependency on the physical presence of the geopolitical U.S.-Mexico border in its ideological dealings with Chicano/a subjectivity. In sum, this paper serves to show how the Chicano/a subject has evolved into a problematic and sometimes frustrating figure in Cultural Studies.

Racially Reasoning the Chicano/a Subject

The intertwining of personal and social identity is fashioned in terms of the historically prevailing conceptual order. How we comprehend others and conceive our social relations and how we come thus dialectically to some sort of self-understanding are molded by concepts central to the dominant socio-discursive scheme (Goldberg 2).

The subject of social analysis is increasingly being conceived in racial terms. Racial thinking has become increasingly normalized in order to dislocate the racist tendencies inherent in the homogenizing constructions of Western civilization. The mainstream's acceptance of racism's inherent irrationality rests solely on presumptions of institutional reasoning that embody traditional principles of thought that are believed to be based on "objective, neutral, impartial, and universally valid sociopolitical and moral values" (Goldberg 118). An uncritical acceptance of these principles allows the mainstream consciousness to run an ideological course of peripheral ignorance. In other words, cultural diversity and specificity is ignored because it is believed to exist in the social margins of American life, and thought consequently. The culturally static racial ideologies of mainstream America become references from which to use in appropriating cultural variations and complexities existing in America. In this racialized context, Chicanos/as exhibit little hope of surviving as cultural and ethnic subjects. Instead, they are herded onto the long list of ethnic others who exhibit eccentric non-homogeneous cultural traits or values awaiting institutional racial processing. Hence the cultural inaccuracies of racial reasoning in mainstream American thought.

The categorization of the Chicano/a subject obviously nullifies any recognition of its cultural qualities. But why? What is the purpose for displacing culture? Quite frankly, culture is continuously being undermined by the priorities of adhering to the global and domestic agendas of American nationalism. In order for the Chicano/a subject to be recognized in this mainstream American context it must be presented in such a way that makes it appealing for mainstream ideological consumption. Any representation of the Chicano/a subject in a cultural or ethnic form is foreign to mainstream recognition, and thus automatically appropriated as other. In order for the Chicano/a subject to be

recognized within this mainstream American context it must conform to the rational standards designed to normalize subjects. Basically, the Chicano/a subject must be commodified to a mainstream form. Through commodification the Chicano/a subject is accessible to the mainstream consciousness, albeit at the expense of cultural and ethnic recognition.

Creating a mainstream interest in the Chicano/a subject brings it closer to the hearts (Western reason) of American acceptance. As bell hooks states, "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). Commodity culture in America exploits conventional thinking by working the idea that racial difference marks one as other. Commodifying ethnic subjects like Chicanos/as hides culture behind a veil of a nationalistic and racial agenda, only to be revealed when so chosen by curious mainstreamers. Having said that, the other is sold to the mainstream as "primitive" and "exotic," capable of serving as an alternative to the norms of mainstream life. This primitive state of culture and ethnicity becomes a place for cultural exploration in an ethno-cultural safari of sorts (hooks 22). Mainstream curiosities about how ethnic culture looks and feels are sated in the textually controlled cultural terrain of the other. However, even as culture and ethnicity become commodified as resources for mainstream pleasure, experiencing the primitive occurs in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the status quo (hooks 25). That is why the presentation of the Chicano/a subject in a mainstream context is showcased as a primitive cultural other instead of as an autonomous cultural subject.

Currently the commodification of difference between Chicanos/as and the mainstream promotes paradigms of consumption wherein the inherent Chicano/a culture is not only displaced, but denied through a vigorous racial process of contextualization (hooks 23). By displacing it as other, the mainstream institutionally reconstructs Chicano/a subjectivity in a commodified form; it reinterprets Chicano/a subjectivity in a way that makes it suitable for mainstream consumption. "Chicano/a" becomes an exotic alternative to dominant racial ideologies, rather than a subjective cultural signifier to represent a unique cultural and ethnic experience. This process of interpellating the Chicano/a subject for mainstream consumption draws on the fundamental notion of creating meaning through language discussed in N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*: "A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things" (33).

Commodification of the Chicano/a subject is also a way of silencing cultural voices which, if allowed to speak, may successfully undermine the systemic racial reasoning of the mainstream ideological current flowing through American consciousness. This fear of resistance by Chicanos/as through their cultural subjectivity justifies institutional control on what the Chicano/a subject can represent. Commodification of the Chicano/a subject acts to preserve a sense of power over the cultural appropriation of ethnic others as well; a neo-imperialistic form of controlling the ethno-cultural subject. There exists an underlying claim in the racial characterization of Chicanos/as that suggests they are incapable of exhibiting rational mainstream values, metaphysical attitudes, epistemological principles, or cognitive styles without institutional intervention, thus justifying why institutional control of the Chicano/a subject is warranted (Goldberg 58). This uninvited intervention limits the prospects for the development of an independent discursive space where the cultural voice of the Chicano/a subject can be spoken and heard. In hindsight, it also reveals the institutional puppeteering of Chicano/a subjectivity.

Chicano/a Subjectivity in the Gramscian and Feminist Moments of Cultural Studies

The Gramscian moment in Cultural Studies was important to all subjectivities simply because of the urgency it evoked to reflect on the institutional position and intellectual practices of cultural studies. As a direct response to the problematic of structuralism in Marx's epistemology, Gramscian intervention in cultural studies seemed to broaden the possibilities of cultural analysis including non-class subjectivities as legitimate points from which to conduct observations. The multicultural tide that swept across cultural studies during the Gramscian moment not only "radically displaced some of the inheritances of Marxism in cultural studies," according to Stuart Hall, but it also provided a legitimate theoretical space for ethnic and cultural subjectivities (281). Chicano/a subjects were popularly showcased in cultural studies due in part to the turn toward cultural and ethnic specificity during the Gramscian moment.

However, the Gramscian moment must also be kept in a tightly critical perspective, so as to not assume that the unveiling of hegemonic and structural forces in cultural studies automatically liberated cultural and ethnic subjects like Chicanos/as. On the contrary, the Gramscian moment as a postcolonial project was nonetheless embedded in and imbued by Western academic epistemologies and discourses. The academy's "cultural imperialism" imposed its power not by force, but instead by effective ideological and textual means of disseminating a Eurocentric discourse that assumed the normality and preeminence over everything "occidental" - i.e. the construction of the Chicano/a subject as both subjugated and exotic (Abrams 236). It is important to make clear the point that Chicano/a subjectivity's attainment of a theoretical space in Cultural Studies as a result of the Gramscian moment did not necessarily secure a space for its cultural voice. It could speak, but only under the scripted lines of reason and understanding accepted by Western discourse. In essence, the Chicano/a subject was still a predetermined racial subject even as it was breaking out of the mold of minority status and becoming specifically recognized as the "Chicano/a subject."

Legitimizing a theoretical space for Chicano/a subjectivity in cultural studies was done so for two reasons during the Gramscian moment. First, to understand that under the premise of hegemony the organic intellectual was to know more than the traditional intellectual, thus explaining why discursive representations of the Chicano/a subject usually appeared as the makings of an advanced intellectual "white" mind whose ethnographic authority was not to be cross-examined or questioned (hooks 26). The second reason was to attempt to bridge the gap between the organic and traditional intellectuals by placing sole responsibility on the organic intellectual to transmit knowledge "to those who [did] not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class" (Hall 281). This would involve using the Chicano/a subject, as intended by the organic intellectual, as a conduit through which to assimilate the Chicano/a masses.

Revealing the hegemonic problematics inherent to cultural studies due to Marxism led to a number of discursive ruptures during the unfolding evolution of cultural studies in American academies (Hall 282). The most relative one to Chicano/a subjectivity was the interjection of feminism. It opened the question of the personal as political. The Chicana subject could now be viewed as a political force with voice and agency. The introduction of the Chicana subject shifted the notion of power to consider gender as another space where hegemonic forces lay (Hall 282). Gender-based hegemonic forces in the context of Chicano/a subjectivity revealed that hegemony was not only a problematic of class structure, but also one of culture and ethnicity. Hegemony was now crossing and going beyond the limited scope of national borders and going international. The realization of hegemony's existence across national and cultural lines opened the mind of cultural studies to the possibility that hegemony occurred across the globe. Nonetheless, the

feminist moment in cultural studies served to acknowledge the gendered nature of power (Hall 283).

The feminist moment in cultural studies incited critical questions and concerns regarding the normalized patriarchal representation in all subjectivities. With regard to Chicano/a subjectivity, the feminist moment drew national attention to a feminist revolt within the Chicano/a community that up until that moment had been deemed an internal ethnic situation. Chicana voices were now being heard around America and the rest of the world, and not only in the barrios. It was no longer required for Chicanas to embody themselves as males, adopt traditional family relations, or dwell only on their racial and/or ethnic oppression in order to be recognized (Chabram-Dernersesian 83). They were creating their own independent cultural and political voice. In the larger picture however, it did little to break the stigma of racial otherness appropriated to Chicano/a subjectivity.

The U.S.-Mexico Border as a Conceptual Determinant of Chicano/a Subjectivity

Chicano/a subjectivity can sociohistorically be linked to the U.S.-Mexico border. It is from the notion of national convergence implied by the geopolitical U.S.-Mexico border where theoretical considerations about the cultural contact and overlap of Chicano/a culture emanate. From the mainstream perspective, which contextualizes the border as strictly a national contact and containment zone, Chicanos/as and their unique border culture go subjectively unnoticed. Their unique experience of living a life consumed with cultural transcendence across and between national and psychological boundaries is displaced and ignored in favor of the mainstream objective to maintain racial order as implied by those national boundaries. Hence the reason why Chicano/a identity is often unrecognized as cultural, and subsequently displaced by national census labels like Mexican American, Hispanic, or Latino/a. The cultural mixtures elicited by immigration and border migration are homogenized by American nationalism and subsequently rationalized away by the American mainstream consciousness (Saldívar 10).

The mapping of cultural theory within the discourse of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is an invitation to literary scholars, historians, Cultural Studies critics, anthropologists, feminists, and mass culture critics to redraw the borders between "people with culture and people between culture" (Saldívar 17). It could also be an invitation to get rid of borders altogether. It is a continuation of the work in Chicano/a studies to have Chicanos/as perceived as agents with culture - attributes that the dominant mainstream denies because it believes that culture lives somewhere else. This kind of critical analysis on border culture makes it possible to delineate Chicano/a "subjectivity" from mainstream "consciousness." Saldívar proposes that Chicano/a subjectivity focuses on the "who am I" and "who are we" questions of culture (27). On the other hand, mainstream consciousness "embraces the notion of a consciousness of self as an active mental and moral self-production" (27).

It is no wonder then that the political conjure or image of the U.S.-Mexico border is fixated in the mainstream consciousness as being equal to in nature to Chicano/a subjectivity. But there is nothing inherently natural to the border itself. So in this regard Chicano/a subjectivity can never be anything more than a political endeavor, when in fact it should be viewed as a legitimate cultural representation. If it is true that the mainstream consciousness displaces any consideration of a border culture, as attested by Saldívar, then the Chicano/a subject cannot have cultural significance. Chicanos/as must conform their subjectivity to being Mexican American, or strictly Mexican, when issues concerning ethnic or racial culture are addressed.

If Chicano/a cultural studies is to flourish in the next century, it must begin to place a greater research emphasis on the ways in which lived memory and popular culture are linked (Saldívar 35). Recalling history and integrating it into the discourse of popular culture, which is understood across national, ethnic, and racial lines, serves to bypass the barriers of racial reasoning, cultural commodification, and the unbending mainstream consciousness. It could serve as a means to disseminate cultural information about Chicanos/as and hopefully correct their inaccurate subjective appropriations. While new technologies certainly lend themselves to new forms of exploitation, they also serve as new forms of resistance and struggle (Saldívar 35).

Conclusion

My purpose in this paper was to briefly introduce some of the sociohistorical factors that have contributed to the current representational dilemmas facing the Chicano/a subject. I have specifically omitted from my analysis an absolute definition of what constitutes Chicano/a subjectivity simply because of the subjective multitudes capable of being included as part of the overall Chicano/a subject. In issuing a strict definition, I would have been following in the ideological footsteps of the mainstream consciousness which has so frequently ignored cultural and subjective specificities in order to uphold the set hegemonic racial order of ethnic and cultural representation. Instead of misleading the reader with strict indoctrinations of Chicano/a subjectivity, I have chosen to use Chicano/a subjectivity as an example of the broader discursive problem of misinterpreting ethnic and racial subjects. Racial reasoning and efforts of normalization, popular theoretical currents in Cultural Studies like hegemony and feminism, and geopolitical markers like the U.S.-Mexico border are, I am sure, discursive counterparts with other ethnic subjectivities. In locating and de/reconstructing systems of reason accountable for subjective misinterpretation, we are engaging a progressive effort to rectify the representational misfortunes of all ethnic subjectivities in American life and thought.

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