



# DISRUPTING SAVAGISM

Intersecting Chicana/o,  
Mexican Immigrant, and  
Native American Struggles  
for Self-Representation

ARTURO J. ALDAMA

## **DISRUPTING SAVAGISM**

*A book in the series*

**LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE**

Languages, Empires, Nations

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## About the Series

*Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a critical series. It aims to explore the emergence and consequences of concepts used to define “Latin America” while at the same time exploring the broad interplay of political, economic, and cultural practices that have shaped Latin American worlds. Latin America, at the crossroads of competing imperial designs and local responses, has been construed as a geocultural and geopolitical entity since the nineteenth century. This series provides a starting point to redefine Latin America as a configuration of political, linguistic, cultural, and economic intersections that demand a continuous reappraisal of the role of the Americas in history, and of the ongoing process of globalization and the relocation of people and cultures that have characterized Latin America’s experience. *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a forum that confronts established geocultural constructions, that rethinks area studies and disciplinary boundaries, that assesses convictions of the academy and of public policy, and that, correspondingly, demands that the practices through which we produce knowledge and understanding about and from Latin America be subject to rigorous and critical scrutiny.

Arturo J. Aldama’s *Disrupting Savagism: Intersecting Chicana/o, Mexican Immigrant, and Native American Struggles for Self-Representation* is the first book in our series that displaces the idea that “Latin America” is a bounded, existing entity, in which things happen and which Latin Americanists study. “Latin America” has moved to the U.S. and is also reinscribed

in the world at large. In Aldama's book, Mexican anthropologist and indigenista, Manuel Gamio enters into a critical dialogue with Gloria Anzaldúa, which refashions his previous connections with Robert Redfield and U.S. anthropology. Norma Alarcón and other Chicana cultural critics are placed in conversation with "white" and "third world" feminism; while Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa is put in dialogue with Laguna writer Leslie Marmon Silko. And a new reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* is offered through the work of Sonia Saldívar-Hull.

In this groundbreaking study, familiar terms are defamiliarized. *Mestizaje*, neocolonialism, and internal colonialism, of common currency in Latin American scholarship, are redefined. Subalternity and postcolonialism, of common currency in Commonwealth scholarship, are recast from the racial and gender experiences of Chicana/os (and more generally, Latina/os), and thereby revealing the color and gender of epistemology.

Aldama's book is not only of interest because of its novel interpretation of Chicana/os' texts and experiences but also, and perhaps mainly, because it opens up the possibilities of dialogues with the rich tradition of social and philosophical thinking in Latin America. Indirectly, the book is an invitation to imagine Latin America otherwise, that is to say, to critically examine the imaginary of French "Latinity" and U.S. "area studies" in which "Latin America" is still being mapped today.

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A much earlier version of chapter 2 appeared in *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* (1995–1996): 122–46. An early version of chapter 3 appeared in *Cross Addressing: Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*, ed. John Hawley (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 157–81. Some of the ideas on resistance, violence, and decolonization that shape this book were also explored in the following articles: “Millennial Anxieties: Borders, Violence, and the Struggles for Chicana/o Subjectivity,” *AZ Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* (1998): 42–62; and “Visions in the Four Directions: 500 Years of Resistance and Beyond,” in *As We Are Now*, ed. W. S. Penn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 140–68.

I wish to thank *mi padre* Luis, whose brilliance, struggles, and persistence have always been my true inspiration; and *mi hermano* Federico, whose love of writing is infectious. Also, I want to remember the ancestors, the spirits, and the animals—all those who have come before us—who speak in dreams, whose presence I feel, and who truly inspire my sense of wonder. Finally, I want to dedicate this work to Dulce, *mi compañera por vida*, whose wisdom, humor, and unconditional love is the motivating force in my life.

## Preface

Contemporary debates in comparative transethnic cultural studies challenge Anglo-America's protected status as the exclusive holder of cultural and literary value. Chicana/o, Native American, feminist, and postcolonial literary and cultural studies provide a series of crucial challenges to patriarchally driven Anglo-American and Eurocentric theoretical assumptions and literary practices. These textual, theoretical, and inherently political interventions rupture or at least problematize the hermetic seals that have surrounded the uncontested dominance of Eurocentric literary and cultural canons and their ties to the colonial imposition and neocolonial maintenance of social privilege in the political economy of the United States. The disruption of these seals of privilege provides alternate spaces for the articulation of subaltern voices whose "identities in difference" (mestizaje, race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status, and indigenous land claims, to name a few)<sup>1</sup> challenge the discursive economy of a nation-state legitimized through the imperial and genocidal practices of "manifest destiny." Crystallized by the militarized rubicon of the U.S./Mexico border, the rise of Chicana/o, Mexican émigré, and Native American voices opens epistemic spaces that allow the emergence of subjectivities that are "old"—even ancient—in their linkages to the diverse cultural and historical genealogies of the Americas and yet also are radically "new" in terms of cultural and linguistic hybridity.

Driven by 508 brutal years of material and psychic colonialism, the questions of *mestizaje* (racial, ethnic, and cultural mixing), the insidious

processes of internalized colonialism, and the negotiation of identity are complex. What aspects of our hybrid (mestiza/o) identities are celebrated and suppressed, and in what terms? How do we decolonize ourselves without returning to a static and utopic precolonial past?<sup>2</sup> How do these decolonial practices (re)claim and create enunciative spaces (Mignolo 1995) that challenge the violence-driven technologies of imperial and patriarchal subjection? How do we decolonize gender and sexuality from patriarchal and heteronormative practices in the United States, Mexico, and the Chicana/o community (Peréz 1999)? What strategies of decolonization allow our struggles for identity to engage in nonbinary, nonhierarchic, and non-hegemonic articulations of mestiza/o consciousness (Anzaldúa 1999)?

In engaging with these crucial questions, this study is concerned with how Chicanas/os, Native Americans, and *recién llegados* (newly arrived Mexicanas/os) in what José David Saldívar in *Border Matters* (1997) calls the “*transfrontera* contact zone” of the U.S./Mexico borderlands contest symbolic orders in the U.S. nation-state imaginary to represent themselves/ourselves in textual and social spaces. By analyzing how these subaltern subjects disrupt colonially imposed master-narratives that savage, criminalize, and pathologize our diverse subjectivities, this book seeks to understand the complex politics of racialized, subaltern, feminist, and diasporic identities; the epistemic logic of hybrid and mestiza/o cultural productions; and the reclamation of decolonial space.

Informed by poststructuralism, cultural studies, ethnic studies, gender studies and critical race theory, as well as by revisionary historiographic practices, this study seeks to intersect Chicana/o cultural studies with an Americas-centered postcolonial studies, expanding the critical dialogues set forth by the growing body of critical works devoted to the study of literary, cultural, filmic, and the practices of everyday resistance (in the words of de Certeau) in the militarized borderlands.<sup>3</sup> The interdisciplinary exigencies of my critical framework allow me to analyze the politics of subject-formation within the intersections of literature, language, ethnography, film, history, culture, legal discourses, and philosophy, framed by a critical sensitivity to the differences of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality in the sociohistoric contexts of colonialism in the Americas and neocolonialism in the United States.

Although my work is purposefully set against traditionalist methods of scholarly writing where a study unfolds according to a logical *telos* set by this statement, a simple set of questions generates my interrogation of the

politics of representation and subjectivity throughout the study: How are subaltern subjects formed in colonial patriarchal nation-state imaginaries? How do these subjects inscribe themselves in various types of narrative forms or genres? The issues of representation take urgency regarding subjects who are otherized, marginalized, and criminalized by apparatuses of representation by the dominant culture (media, literature, and history and sociology textbooks, for example) and by institutions that maintain and comprise the hegemony of the dominant culture (legal, educational, immigration, and correctional). In this sense, the questions of self-formation versus formation by processes of representation that are out of our control also become these questions: How are otherized subjects spoken by cultures and institutions of dominance? How do otherized subjects speak, and in what terms?

In pursuing the complex issues of representation and agency for subaltern subjects, I do not want to posit some pure and authentic space of “otherness” or alterity that marginalized peoples occupy. Inspired by Emma Pérez’s crucial challenge in *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999) “to decolonize notions of otherness to move into liberatory terrain” (110), my interest is to chart how Chicanas/os, as subjects of the Americas, create counterdiscourses to the master-narratives of the United States.<sup>4</sup> In this desire to chart counterdiscursive autorepresentational practices, my specific interest is to analyze the politics of identity and difference among Mexican *recién llegados*, Native Americans, and Chicanas/os in various types of narrative practice—the ethnography, the novel, the autobiography, and the film. Chicana/o counterdiscursive practices in the realms of the creative, the theoretical, the revisioning of histories, or the actual political manifestations are acts of resistance that signal our historically rooted presence and diverse identities to each other and to others who care to listen and learn.

Because of my interest in exploring the relationship between different genres and the inscription of subaltern subjectivity, my work departs from a single genre analysis. Instead, I interrogate the politics of identity along with representation vis-à-vis the tensions between the speaking and spoken subject across different sites in narrative. Specifically, I examine the politics of subjection and resistance in the following texts: the ethnographic transcription *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life Story* (1931) by Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio; *Ceremony* (1977) by crossblood Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko; *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mes-*

tiza (1999) by Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa, recently reprinted with a scholarly introduction by Sonia Saldivar-Hull; and the film *Star Maps* (1997) cowritten and directed by Miguel Arteta. By examining the power relations as well as the historical and cultural context in each narrative site, I consider how a subject is spoken and how a subject speaks. The arrangement of the texts challenges the viability of differing narrative forms to inscribe “self-formed” subjectivities. Chapter 1 examines theories of the Chicana/o subaltern speaking subject, chapter 2, the ethnographic subject, chapter 3, the literary subject, chapter 4, the autobiographical/testimonial subject, and chapter 5, the cinematic subject. By unraveling the power relations in each narrative site I show how they are tied and tie themselves into the larger networks of ideology that are central to the maintenance of nation-states where imperial patriarchal subjects regulate dominance by disciplining subjects positioned along axes of race, class, gender, ethnic, and sexual differences.

Part I of this book, “Mapping Subalternity,” attempts to understand how mestiza/o subjects and postcolonial contest and resist their formation in colonial imaginaries as fierce and noble savages, traceable to the medieval social constructions of the “Wilde Man” and “Wilde Woman”—originary representations that unfortunately continue to have enormous resonance in the dominant imaginaries of the early twenty-first century in film, media, literature, and popular culture. After tracing the genealogy of how native peoples are “spoken” of as savages in the anthropology of the “Indians” of the “New World,” the model that I use to understand the tensions of the speaking and spoken subject derives directly from theories of the speaking subject vis-à-vis Emile Benveniste, Louis Althusser, Kaja Silverman, and Julia Kristeva.

Chapter 1 brings these scholars’ theories to bear on subaltern peoples struggling against sociocultural marginalization, critiquing their tendencies to reproduce bourgeois, culturally homogeneous subjects. To understand postcolonial subjectivities, I compare Kristeva’s notion of the “subject-in-process” with the third-world-women-produced theories of subjectivity of Chandra Mohanty, Chela Sandoval, and Norma Alarcón. Mohanty’s and Alarcón’s models of oppositional and relational consciousness bridge the analysis of subalternity in the United States, Latin America, and the third world. They enable a politics of identity that responds to colonialism and neocolonialism, empowering subjects inferiorized along the axes of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, Chicana/o

struggles for identity overlap with people of color in the United States and subaltern peoples in decolonizing and industrializing countries. Because what sustains my study is the articulation of speaking subjects, I also address my own processes of representation while deconstructing at points my own presence as a speaking subject writing about the interplay of the speaking and spoken subject in the texts of my study.

Chapter 2 traces diasporic politics of liminality in south-to-north border crossers in the foundational ethnographic study *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life Story* (1931), a collection of Mexican émigré testimonies by Manuel Gamio, the pioneer of modern *indigenismo*. Although these testimonies provide the first major opportunity to view the violent effects that the U.S./Mexico border produces for Mexicans, Gamio frames these narratives with racial typologies that link to racist ideologies circulating in the United States and Mexico. Gamio privileges the “white” Mexican males, depreciating the “Indian” subjects as more “ignorant.” Chapter 2 analyzes the tensions between Gamio’s ethnographic project and the autobiographic impulses of the Mexican immigrants.

To discuss the politics of the ethnographic subject, I consider Bakhtin’s notion of “centrifugal-discourse” as well as poststructural theories of “writing culture,” highlighting narratives that testify to the violent historical forces at play. In the social and historical climate, the Mexican Revolution of 1910 caused massive upheavals of Mexicans. In the United States, the race-based congressional decisions of the Race and Labor Immigration Debates of the 1920s “pulled” Mexicans up to service U.S. agricultural and industrial needs. The immigrants were forced to live and work in “internal” colonies as second-class citizens, until 1931 when ethnic scapegoating (similar to that of today) led to the first mass deportation that even included fifth-generation residents.

Gamio, in collusion with Robert Redfield, deploys a racist ethnographic apparatus that determines “the worth” of the informants based on how “white” or “Indian” they appear. Part 2 of this book, “Narrative Disruptions,” however, considers how writing and speaking subjects of the Americas use epistemologies of subject-formation whose symbolic orders and signifying practices engage in plays of *différance* that emerge from such cultural matrices as matrifocal tribal stories that predate the conquest of the Americas, along with multilingual language plays (Caló, Nahuatl, Spanish, English) in the U.S./Mexico borderlands (Arteaga 1997). Reflecting contemporary Native American mixed-blood and mestiza/o identities,



Silko and Anzaldúa invoke precolonial signifying forces into postmodern forms of representation to resist neocolonial forces of subjection and containment. Silko and Anzaldúa inscribe an Americas-based epistemic space that radically decolonizes the enunciation of subjectivities by recovering and hybridizing Nahuatl (Anzaldúa) and Laguna (Silko) “writing” practices denigrated by the colonial imposition of logocentrism (Mignolo 1995). What I find so subversive and empowering about *Ceremony* is the way that agency—even the colonial conquest of the Americas—is given to “Indian” stories of witchery; in *Ceremony* stories generate the universe. In the case of Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* (re)articulates a politics of decolonial sexuality that resists patriarchal and heterosexist social orders in nationalist, nation-state, colonial, and neocolonial imaginaries and grounds the inscription of identity to the materiality of bodies violated by colonial and male violence.

Chapter 3 considers how Silko’s *Ceremony* problematizes issues of blood quantum and racial essentialism where blood quantum is putatively tied to issues of ethnicity. To paraphrase the vulgar logic of racial essentialism in the imaginary of the West of manifest destiny, mixed-race native peoples are seen as “halfbreeds”: even though halfbreeds are not “real” Indians, you can’t trust them because they are half breeds and therefore part savage. In *Ceremony* it is Tayo, a Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and Anglo “mixedblood,” who undertakes the painful process of decolonization, rather than the “full-blood” characters of Rocky and Emo. Tayo is reclaimed by a worldview that emerges from the heterogeneous language play of Puebloan matri-focal tribal stories. I contrast the status of Tayo with the status of mixed-bloods to an actual legal case that determined entitlement (authenticity) based on blood quantum and tribal out-marriage. This case, *Santa Clara v. Julia Martinez*, ruled against the recognition of a child born outside of the tribe because the mother married outside of the tribe. As a counterhistory, *Ceremony* reclaims links between the Pueblos and the central valley of Mexico and creates a literary sentience of the Americas. In this sense I argue that *Ceremony* is a counterdiscourse that reconceptualizes the politics of identity as a ritual that seeks to embrace and resolve the contradictions imposed on mixedblood peoples negotiating their mestizaje in codifying and conflictive cultural and legal systems of binary logic.

Chapter 4 examines *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, a multi-genre autobiographical historical testimony by Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands* negotiates the real and the discursive in ways that chronicle and challenge the multiplicity of oppression that impinges on Chicana/o and

Mexicana/o communities along the U.S./Mexico border; oppression that travels across the registers of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In the first part of the chapter, I examine how subaltern and feminist autobiographical writings challenge the bourgeois, Eurocentric, and male-dominated field of autobiography and autobiographical studies. I survey such feminist, Latin American, and Chicana interpretive models as the “Out-law Genre” by Caren Kaplan, “Autobiographic Manifesto” by Sidonie Smith, “Testimonio” by John Beverley, and “Border-Feminism,” the introduction by Sonia Saldívar-Hull to *Borderlands*. Then I examine how *Borderlands* challenges the practices of internalized colonialism and offers strategies of decolonization that provide an epistemic and political space that embraces the contradictory fullness of mestiza/o identity. Anzaldúa reconceptualizes Chicana/o identity to embrace the Mesoamerican past as a living cultural and psychic force that informs and sustains the present. *Borderlands* bridges the separation between Chicana/o and Native American autobiographic, literary, and historical expression, articulating a consciousness of the Americas that confronts sexism and homophobia in these communities.

In chapter 5 I consider how the film *Star Maps* (1997) by the new-generation filmmaker Miguel Arteta provides dramatic insight into the power relations that drive the racial and (as we shall see) the sexual commodification of *recién llegado* and first-generation immigrant Latina/o bodies in contemporary Los Angeles. *Star Maps* dramatically shifts the politics of Chicana/o representation in mainstream film by directly indicting the racialized hegemony of the Hollywood Film and Television Industry and by critiquing pathological gender/power relations in the traditional Mexican family reconstituting itself as part of the emergent immigrant class in the United States. In this chapter I analyze how the film critiques the transmission of nascent heterosexist norms of the patriarchal family structure by how a father justifies prostituting his son as part of the macho ritual of teaching him to be a “real man.” By illustrating the elasticity of the U.S./Mexico border, where Mexican and Central American south-to-north border crossers (or those perceived as such) continually negotiate violence-enforced borders/barriers through everyday resistances, *Star Maps*, as a cinematic border text, grounds the struggle for decolonizations to the materiality of racialized bodies in the urban ethnoscares of Los Angeles.

My interest in mestizaje, neocolonialism, and the decolonization of identity across the various ethnographic, literary, autoethnographic, and

social texts is not only academic and theoretical but also comes directly from negotiating a decolonization of my own subjectivity, as well as from an exploration of my family history and the various lineages and heritages that form me as a speaking subject. In a simple and direct sense these texts and theories, especially those by Silko and Anzaldúa, enrich the understanding of my own identity and that of other *mestizas/os* whose presence and genealogies are conveniently denied and erased in the national citizenry of the United States. Moreover, by investigating Gamio and the racial attitudes that were deployed across his ethnographic apparatus and their complicity with Mexico's racial pyramid I am able to gain insight and historical compassion into the generation of my *abuelas* (grandmothers) who suppress and are ashamed of their Otomie, Mayan, and African lineages of their *mestizaje*.<sup>5</sup>

I was born in Mexico City. My father is Mexican and my mother is Guatemalan and Irish. I came to California, first San Francisco and then Sacramento, when I was eight. I was born *güero*, blondish with light skin. My family loved that I was the first to have blue-green eyes. They thought I looked "less" Mexican (whatever that means?); less than my *prieto* (dark-skinned) father, and more *güero* than my mother who is light skinned with dark brown hair and coffee-colored eyes.

I remember the first couple of years of school in the States. Having just arrived from Mexico, I did not speak English. My blond-haired teacher with perfect teeth loved Chinese kids because they were so "quiet and studious," and she wished Latino kids were more like them. She did not know what to do with me, so for at least a semester and a half I was put in the back of the class and told to play with blocks, clay, and make scissor cutouts. From the second day of school on I became very nervous, starting at the last fifteen minutes of class. My goal was to get home without getting my ass kicked by a group of white, mainly Irish American, marauding second graders who hated "greasers, spics, and dirty Messicans, who don't speak American." *They wanted to kick me back to Mexico, and I wanted to go.* One day, when I could not walk to school because there were shootings in the Golden Gate Park, I asked my mom why everybody hated me so much, and why nobody understood me. She told me that I had it easier than my brother because he is darker, like my father, and that all I needed to do was learn English as fast as I could. I told her I did not like the sound of English, and she got mad at me.

According to my *abuela* (grandmother) on my father's side, I am a de-

scendent of Otomie, Chichimeca, African (four generations back), and Basque peoples. The Chichimeca and Otomie territories are the areas where my Mexican family originated. They come from Guanajuato, which in Otomie means “the place of frogs.” This was a center for the 1810 Revolution of Mexican Independence led by some of my ancestors, the brothers Juan and Ignacio Aldama.<sup>6</sup> The basket in which counterrevolutionary forces hung the head of Juan Aldama is still mounted on the northeast corner of the great granary of the *Alhóndiga* in Guanajuato. In the other corners hang the baskets of the other revolutionary leaders: Captain Ignacio Allende; Father Miguel Hidalgo, whose “Grito de Dolores” inspired the revolutionary uprising where *gachupines* (members of the Spanish bourgeoisie) were ransacked and killed by the masses of Indian and mestizo peoples; and Mariano Jiménez, who led many successful insurrections against the Spanish royalists. Descendants of the Aldama family eventually moved to Mexico City.

My mother is Guatemalan (Spanish and Mayan) and Irish, and she was born to migrant farm workers in Los Angeles. My Guatemalan grandmother came to Los Angeles as a refugee. Along with her seven brothers and sisters, she was raised by her mother who sewed for people and never learned English. My Irish American grandfather, a lanky man who when wearing his cowboy boots is over six feet tall, must have married my grandmother, who is less than five feet tall, because he thought that she would never question his authority. However, she divorced this violent man, himself orphaned by parents who fled hunger and persecution in Ireland. My Irish grandfather once chased me and my brother out of his trailer because he didn’t want “*no damn thieving Mexicans in his house.*” Being a mixblood Chicano I learned to negotiate contradictions early on in life.

This recognition of my own historicity in this continent, as well as the contradictions of negotiating mestizaje (further complicated by my specifically mixed genealogy) in a transnational context at the interstices of the United States and Mexico, drive the questioning of mestizaje, identity, decolonization, and resistance throughout this book.

