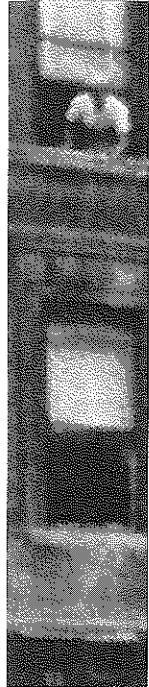


Trying  
To  
Pin  
Myself  
Down  
In  
History:  
Race,  
Sex, and  
Colonialism

Kelvin A. Santiago-Valles



I, like so many blacks, have been trying to pin myself down in history, place myself in the stream of time as significant, evolved, present in the past, continuing into the future. To be without documentation is too unsustaining, too spontaneously ahistorical, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but my future as well.

Patricia Williams

...if we accept the post-structuralist argument that it is language that endows the social with meaning, we must also insist that language, itself, acquires meaning and authority only within specific social and historical settings. While linguistic differences structure society, social differences structure language.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg

Since the emergence of post-structuralism and the social movements of the late-1960s and 1970s, scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities has taken some steps in bridging the study of, what Stuart Hall terms, "the 'insides' of people, ...subjectivity and sexuality" with the study of "social relations, production and the 'hard edge' of productive systems" (Hall, 102-3). This has marked a shift from assuming the content of identity categories to examining the assumptions/truths which conflictively constitute subjects as bound to specific socio-historically grounded identities, from exploring the intersecting topics of historical reality and identity formation to mapping the genealogy of historicized identities.

This article is primarily aimed at raising some questions about—as well as partially exploring—the tensions that exist between post-structuralist and post-colonial perspectives on "race," on the one hand, and the historical social sciences and the humanities, on the other. Ultimately, does "race" necessarily inform the ways in which these academic disciplines are imagined and practised? Is the bridge mentioned and encouraged by Stuart Hall actually possible and is it necessarily raced? Is the very notion of such a "bridge" necessarily heteronormative (suggesting a "marriage" between the disciplines)? Would it be more interesting to perceive such efforts in terms of erasing frontiers or cross-dressing? What is at stake when all of these attempts and practices are only partially successful or even when they fail?

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## Subaltern Writing and the Claims of History

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One of the principal limits of prevailing post-structuralist perspectives in general is that they tend to elide the subjects, recipients, etc. of racial oppression: namely, the subaltern subjects of Western colonialism. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has pointed out in "Can The Subaltern Speak," her critique of Michel Foucault, et al., the seemingly decentered Western author/subject of poststructuralist discourse inevitably becomes recentered precisely because "he" is abstractly theorized within a Crusoe-like universe that originally only contains the West (and no "natives" and/or no "women"). On the contrary, most post-colonial literature and social inquiry arose—within the context of anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles—precisely to address this Euro- or Euro-American-centrism. This went from the turn-of-the-century works of W.E.B. DuBois, José Martí, and Arturo Schomburg to the 20th-century precursors involved in the Harlem Renaissance, the socio-historical work of José Carlos Mariátegui, the literary production of the Caribbean and African exponents of negritude, and the post-war anti-colonial writings of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Amílcar Cabral, and Roberto Fernández Retamar.

However, and as Cherríe Moraga, Barbara Smith, Essex Hemphill, María Lugones, et al. have argued justly, much of the writing and broader social practices of the subaltern subjects of Western colonialism/racism unfortunately continues to define these normative yet colonized social spaces as perpetually in need of centering straight men within these communities. In other words, subaltern national-cultural/racial communities are incessantly imagined and re-membered within heterosexist and masculinist horizons. This is how they are historically represented in lived experience, this is how they are socially represented in memory. The political effects of such perspectives have been disastrous: from the misogynist backlash that followed the Algerian and Viet-Nameese wars of independence to the implosion of the Civil Rights and National Liberation movements within the United States, these last tragedies also partially resulting from the authoritarian substructures of their patriarchal leaderships.

Nevertheless, one of the tensions within most of these critiques from feminist women of color and/or lesbian and gay "Third World" writers seems to be the question of historicity. For example, Audre Lorde, in an essay that has become a touchstone for so many of us ("Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference"), says:

Because of the continuous battle against racial erasure that Black women and Black men share, some Black women still refuse to recognize that we are also oppressed as women, and that sexual hostility against Black women is practised not only by the white racist society, but implemented within our Black communities as well. It is a disease striking at the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear.

She then adds:

Differences between ourselves as Black women are also being misnamed and used to separate us from one another. As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and as a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from expression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. (Lorde, 119-120)

Here Audre Lorde broadly gestures to racially gendered wage inequalities in the United States and instances of homophobia within the Black community, as well mentioning the brutality and exploitation that limit women-of-colour's reproductive health here and in other countries. Yet there does not appear to be any broader sense of the unevenly changing and contradictory institutional materiality that contextualizes these atrocities making them not only possible, but usually reasonable—even to most of their victims. I could have picked any other example from Audre Lorde's work or from any of the other exponents of this genre of criticism. This is usually the terrain of autobiography, where one clearly gets a sense of how personal experience (i.e., an individual history) authorizes a particular viewpoint, thus empowering specific members of oppressed groups to tell their story and change their lives.

Important as the reinscription of memory is within these testimonial and empirical points of departure, at times such perspectives give me the impression of assuming that experience is a transparent event through which the ultimately unfettered (i.e., spiritually) self—literally—speaks for itself. These viewpoints appear to offer an extremely individualized examination of the political, economic, and cultural apparatuses that have structured such experiences in different ways, making them meaningful to these individual subjects. In this sense—and only in this sense—they would seem to assume that experience is not a social and historical product.

Do notions of "Black nationhood" or "Black women" ultimately make any sense, even within narratives of memory, without the not

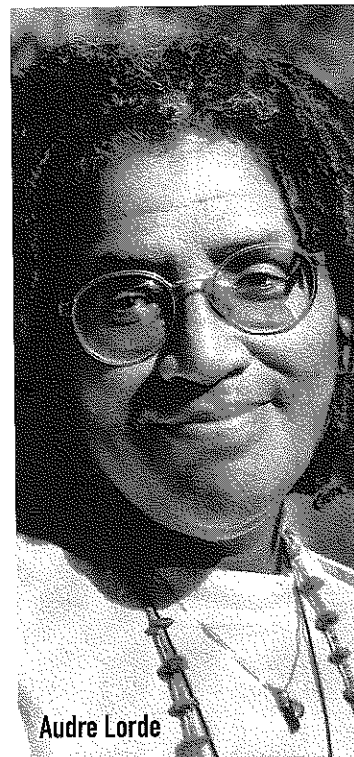
always named referent of "origins," "lineage," "descent," etc.? Aren't these referents always already evocative of the "natural" and of its principal signifiers (i.e., race and sex)—which, by the way, was one of the points made by Patricia Williams in the first epigraph, above? How can subaltern social subjects "pin ...[ourselves] down in history, place ...[ourselves] in the stream of time as significant" without examining the processes and structures of this history?...Or, rather, am I making the mistake of posing a far too constraining view of history: am I overlooking the pluralism, the "altern[ative]," within "subaltern" histories? Are these testimonial narratives offering another, different, yet just as pertinent, perspective on what history and the writing of history means?

What about the other, presumably more macro-structural, ways in which these personal experiences have been affected and even determined by the transformations and conflicts within these institutions and technologies of power—changes to a large extent due to the resistances of oppressed groups?...Which brings us back, not only to the second epigraph by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg that opened this paper, but also to the questions raised in the work of Michel Foucault—the same scholar I have just criticized for being Eurocentric (not to mention misogynist).

The journey from the historical social sciences to the humanities, as well as the intellectual transvestism between the two, has raised numerous questions about what exactly is history and historical writing. Although many of these questions are still hotly disputed, one of the threads in the drag apparel draping both the historical social sciences and the humanities displays an acknowledgement and a working through of the textual[ized] structure of history and society.

Nevertheless, has there been a shift in the opposite direction or an attempt to don the other's clothing (from the humanities to the historical social sciences)? What does such a shift or cross-dressing look like, in this case? More specifically, if the work of feminist women of colour, et al. has had some impact on the new ways of thinking and doing historical research (and even on white scholarship), what impact have the new historical forms of inquiry had on the work of "Third World" women authors? Are or should subaltern poets and other "Third World" women literati really be compelled to address such questions? Perhaps the answer lies in writings such as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Playing in the Dark*, and/or Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

I am not criticizing Audre Lorde, et al. for not being historians or—Oh, my!—sociologists. This critique is aimed, rather, at subaltern perspectives that tend to simplify or to not even recognize the importance of addressing something else. I am referring to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—who is also not a historian—has called the need to re-examine "how historical narratives are



Audre Lorde

negotiated" (Spivak, 269). Shouldn't this too be an important part of "dismantling the master's house?" Are these two different ways of doing the same thing (i.e., history) or, rather, do they suggest that the distance between the camps—both in terms of academic fields and in terms of intellectual drag—of the historical social sciences and that of the humanities is insuperable?

If, in the end, we are all just telling stories (viz., fashioning disputed narratives of lives and events) with extremely varied socio-political effects, is it even fair to raise the following questions? How does the connection between past history, current historical practice, and subaltern memory/identity become masculinized and heterosexualized in each of these different subaltern communities? How do race and sex give meaning to the organization of historical knowledge and subaltern/colonized memory and how do these meanings vary across time? Doesn't overlooking issues of historicity eventually lead to reinscribing metahistorical paradigms and timelessness? Recalling the Patricia Williams epigraph, again, wouldn't this be "too unsustainable, too spontaneously ahistorical, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but ...[our] future as well?" If this is not an ahistorical posture, what does ahistoricism mean then? If, on the contrary, this is indeed an ahistorical posture, doesn't it run the risk of reinforcing the meaningful conceptual territory, not only of machista and homophobic subaltern practices, but also of the still hegemonic Euro-and Euro-American-centric subject?

## The Colonial Question

Hence, we are back to the problem of colonialism. To my mind, this is one of the fundamental political, economic, and cultural apparatuses that has, not only socially structured, but historically defined and produced subaltern experiences (both individual and collective). Any discussion of colonialism in the United States today is immediately complicated by the fact that, particularly within the academic discipline of History (with a capital "H"), colonial matters are usually understood to be a question that was resolved in 1776—just as any discussion of white supremacy tends to evoke the bad old days of Jim Crow and legal segregation. I think these perspectives—which are commonplace even among post-structuralists, feminists, and queer theorists—need to be seriously re-examined. As bell hooks has argued, speaking of white supremacy and, particularly, of colonialism in the present tense helps to de-individualize and re-historicize racial/national-cultural conflicts and hierarchies within contemporary North America. What would a post-colonial perspective mean, then, within this context? What



W.E.B. DuBois

follows are some suggestions regarding conceptual points of departure.

The history and current reality of colonialism is not only about how oppressed cultural-national/racial groups have been created. It is simultaneously about how the very categories and structures of "race," "nationality," and "ethnicity" originated and continue to be socially produced, embodied, and "naturalized" in various ways (particularly in how they are gendered, sexualized, and class-determined). This is another way of saying that subaltern experiences have been affected and even determined by the transformations and conflicts within colonialist institutions and technologies of power, which, in turn, is another way of saying that the history of actually existing colonialism is still about the world as we know and live it today, under Western hegemony.

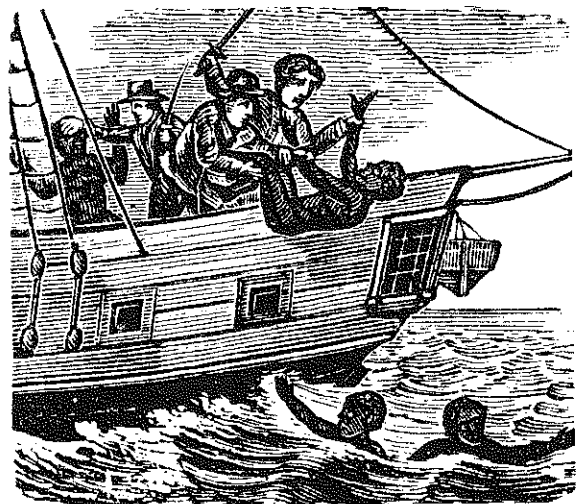
At issue are the cultural practices and representations that necessarily accompanied and helped make possible a particular collection of colonialist and neo-colonialist enterprises that, not accidentally, and as Samir Amin has shown in *Eurocentrism*, coincided with the creation of a world capitalist market: the phenomenon otherwise known as the "Rise of the West."

I am alluding to the politico-economic structures and dominant knowledges, constituted specific social-geographic spaces and their subordinate inhabitants. Referenced is any and all encounters marked by national-cultural/racial hierarchy and inequality. This conceptual point of departure allows for a critique of the era of colonialism (including neo-colonialism) that aspires to question the nexus of power and knowledge that made and still makes such colonial situations possible. The intention is to anticipate and further a non-colonialist age by identifying and critiquing, not just the socio-economic and political roots of colonialism, but also the systems of meaning and ideological representation that ground colonialism. Broadly understood, this is what I mean by a post-colonial perspective.

Given the sadly pervasive reality of neocolonialism, my use of the term "post-colonial" is very different from a simple allusion to the period after a former colonized people have gained political (though not economic) independence. In my mind, the economic, political, and particularly cultural effects of neo-colonialism are still colonial. A post-colonial perspective, on the other hand, designates the political, economic, and cultural efforts to uproot and dismantle colonialism altogether—particularly its Western underpinnings.

Likewise, I use the term "colonized" to denote all those populations and spaces that became the object of national-cultural/racial oppression by the West as part of the historically concurrent and overlapping emergence of capitalism, colonialism, and chattel slavery on a world scale 500 years ago. The colonized subjects were thus produced as part and parcel of the transformation of "Christendom" into "Europe" and of Christian





universalism into Eurocentric universalism. It is no accident that the rise of the colonialist culture of capitalism also brought into "common" —that is, Western— usage the term "ethnic": This signals the shift from the Greek "éthnos," meaning "nation" and "people," to the Catholic-Latin "ethnics," referring to "heathen," "pagan," and "savage;" hence, the intertwined genesis of modern racism, colonialism, and nationalism. As Trinh Minh-ha has pointed out,

[T]he perception of the outsider as the one who needs help has taken on the successive forms of the barbarian, the pagan, the infidel, the wild man, the "native," and the underdeveloped. Needless to say, these forms whose meanings helplessly keep on decomposing can only exist in relation to their opposites. ...Thus the invention of "needs" and of the mission to "help" the needy always blossom together. The



Full Man, the Church, the Humanist, the Civilized-Colonist, and the Professional-Anthropologist all have a human face and are close male agnates descending from the same key ancestor. (Minh-ha, 54)

The opposite of the colonized, i.e., the "colonizer," primarily refers to Europeans, their recognized descendants, and the social space thus constituted as dominant within national-cultural/racial hierarchies. Such a process has constructed both these subordinate and hegemonic spaces and their corresponding populations as two poles within a colonial relationship. In other words, both the various "mother countries" (or metropolises) and their respective colonies —overseas and internal, direct and indirect (neocolonies)— are colonial social spaces; both the racially/national-culturally hegemonic social subjects (the colonizers) and the subaltern subjects (the colonized) are colonial subjects.

**This colonial reality produced the world that Jean Paul Sartre described in the 1950s as numbering "two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men [sic], and five hundred million natives" (Sartre, 7).**

In more immediate terms: the United States today and the university where I teach are colonial spaces where we are all colonial subjects; but some of you are colonizers while some of us are colonized. Japan is the only exception that confirms this originally Western taxonomical rule. This colonial reality produced the world that Jean Paul Sartre described in the 1950s as numbering "two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men [sic], and one thousand five hundred million natives" (Sartre, 7). Or, to place this in the more immediate context of the wars over Western hegemony, the lethal results of the Gulf War of 1991 were officially translated in the United States in terms of the "unfortunate deaths" of 100 heroic U.S. soldiers vs. over 200,000 unforeseeable cases of "collateral damage" among Iraqi "natives."

To my mind, this is part of what is at stake in the ways that past history, current historical practice, and the prevailing forms of identity/memory are produced, particularly within the sciences (social or, allegedly, natural) and the humanities — Marxism, feminism, queer theories, and post-structuralism included. Both colonizer and colonized social subjects continue to resurface intertwined within these lived texts and textualized lives.

On the other hand, and as in the case of their late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century forerunners, most post-colonial writing persists in fashioning the subaltern subject of Western colonialism along strict masculinist and heterosexist lines. This too overlooks issues of historicity insofar as it reinscribes the metahistorical timelessness of always already sexed/oppressed races/nationalities. In this manner, these perspectives also end up validating the still hegemonic epistemologies of ahistoricism. Any timelessness ultimately resonates

with the metahistory of Euro- and Euro-American-centric subjects: male, propertied, and sexually "correct."

The questions thus remain: How does race (as well as sex, nationality, and class) give meaning to the organization of historical knowledge, existing colonial memory, and the lived colonial present? And what are the implications of all of this?

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