“I Am Two Parts”: Collective Subjectivity and the Leader of Academics and the Othered

Victor Villanueva

We’re told—quite rightly—that different cultures have different ways of perceiving leaders and leadership (Warner and Grint), that future faculty of color will often opt to remain with their communities than go where the market dictates (Jackson; McMurtrie; Rhoades et al.). This seems so right, this giving back to the community from which one rose, so in keeping with a traditional conception of Gramsci’s “organic intellectual.” Yet here I am, in a truly fine place, yet so far from home (thinking of the title of Dews and Law’s This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class). I reckon I’ll always be a New Yorker, though I have no wish to be there; and I am proudly Puerto Rican, yet hardly connected to the Island. So these studies and observations of leaders of color, on leadership of color, open up all kinds of speculations about the contradictions of this supposed leader—me—a leader of color who leads in overwhelmingly White institutions, still doing what I can to lead others of color, though maybe less lead than advise. And the advice concerns more of these fine places so far from home, where we are most often welcomed but not often understood. So I slip into memory and self-appraisal.

Community of the Collective

More than twenty years ago I wrote an article on Gramsci’s intellectuals. The publisher or the editor shortened my title by one word (and I was too young

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College English, Volume 79, Number 5, May 2017

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in the profession to get all insistent). It was published as “Hegemony: From an Organically Grown Intellectual” (1992). I had wanted to play with a contradiction I perceived in my Self: “Hegemony: From an Organically Grown Traditional Intellectual.” See the difference, the now versus the where from? And maybe the editor simply made a mistake or assumed that all academics are traditional (which of course they’re not) or assumed that I am, perforce, an organic intellectual—a matter I was (and still am) unsure about (and will explore later in this essay). But as I will say, I’ve decided not to dwell much on whether I am what Gramsci defined as traditional or organic, choosing instead to see what I can do with the very notion of the Self, an egotistic strain in an institution that gives rise to egotism, attempting to break from the Subjective that is wrestling with the Collective. I am a White person of color, a Latino, a Puerto Rican, and an academic in all the traditional ways, especially in negotiating the rhetorics of leadership. I am not truly organic, you see; I’ve never wanted to go back to the neighborhoods where I grew up—Williamsburg Brooklyn, more of a Hasidic ghetto with a mix of poor folks, Black, Puerto Rican, Irish, Italian, back then; now gentrified, I’m told—or Bedford-Stuyvesant, the Black and Puerto Rican area, now, more fully Black, I’m told. Understand, I enjoyed my childhood, but I still thought of the neighborhoods as sites for survival much more than as a community. “My community,” in terms of a well-placed set of identifications, did not exist. It was a contested space—blurred, in motion—not a static place with a shared sense of identity, though I often miss the Puerto Rican Spanish and Spanglish chatter, the smell of Puerto Rican foods filling the hallways—not just Puerto Rican food prepared by me (my current neighbors “love the smell that comes from [my] place”; no one to swap a meal with—my cerdo gisao for their mofongo).

There was and there wasn’t community. What I mean by that apparent contradiction is that there were cultures that were mine but none of the unity that constitutes a community. However, I did come to understand bureaucracy and its hierarchies, the institutions within which I would someday become a leader, learning the conventional discourses of leadership. At the age of five, I entered the local parochial school. Everyone in authority there referred to “The Diocese.” I don’t think I ever knew what that meant—except hierarchically: the diocese was headed by a bishop, the man in charge, the bishop of all of Brooklyn. But here I did learn of bureaucracy. The Roman Catholic church remains unquestionably a governmental administration, a bureaucracy, whatever Max Weber’s obvious prejudices against Catholicism (Stark). Catholicism is explicitly governmental in its bureaucracy, born as it was to assume the governance of Rome after the empire fell. And the United States is still so much a version of Rome, with its senate and its presider (though Rome had two praetors—the presider over the
government and the commander-in-chief). So from the age of five, I was subject
to a Roman Catholic bureaucracy—materially and spiritually—and was thereby
prepared for leadership not only in the military but especially in the academy.

At nineteen, I became a member of the US military, “the ultimate in bu-
reaucratization” according to Weber (qtd. in Miewald 129–33). I was drafted,
then enlisted and reenlisted, living the continuing irony of the military as a safe
haven for the poor. After the army, at twenty-seven, I joined the academy as a
community college student, with the goal of swapping my GED for a bona fide
diploma, and a decade later as faculty, holding a bona fide PhD. And there’s no
doubt that the academy is a bureaucracy. We called it an “academic discourse
community,” a community in terms of ways with words—but not a home. Still,
it’s where I found purpose, often in challenging the discourse of the academic
discourse community. And I understood, eventually, how it operated: in some
sense another military with its ranks, in some sense another Church—a hierarchy
with a clear spiritual sensibility (despite its nonsecular claims). I have found a place
amidst what Ian Hunter says is the contradictory role of bureaucratic leaders in
the academy: the degree to which we are a part of a governmental (bureaucratic)
structure yet hold on to the pastoral ways that remain tied to the religious history
of education. This becomes magnified when class and gender, sexual identity,
and racism get thrown into the mix—not just pastoral but deeply political, yet
the political is not to be voiced when one is a leader within the bureaucracy.
Faculty members can, but leaders ought not. I was always taken by the stories of
Wayne Booth, writing from the perspective of the liberal humanities educator,
praising the role of virtue in what we do—most explicitly in Modern Dogma and
the Rhetoric of Assent—pastoral, while serving as dean at the Chicago University.
He lived the contradiction that Hunter describes. So must the person of color,
the woman, the queer, silencing that political aspect at risk to the Self.

The Decentered Community/Collectivity

The army sergeant and the academic leader both knew the contradictions to
be carried. The two communities had long ago become one for me, two com-
nunities that are never served equally well. And here I’m thinking the Puerto
Rican who doesn’t know the Island, the Nuyorican who left New York before
the term Nuyorican was even coined, the soldier ordered to speak English even
when among Latino friends. My community had to be Americans of color, the
traditionally excluded Latinos y Latinas, African Americans, Asian Americans,
Pacific Islanders, and American Indians, all of us who became a part of the United
States by way of colonialism and the individuated colonization that is slavery.
“Of color” is my community. But then the academy also became and remains
my community, insofar as it provides the place where I live and work and where I choose to be. Within this community, I have often taken on formal leadership roles, going back to when I was still a graduate student, doing what was expected while working for the recognition of and betterment of the Other, my colonized community. These two communities have never been served equally well historically, yet I am trying, always, to do so. Theoretically, as I’ll explain in what follows, there’s Gramsci’s hegemony, the sociologist José Maurício Domingues’s “collective subjectivity,” and the particular brand of post-Marxism that comes from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe—they all come together to provide a way for me to think about leading, holding onto the traditions of the academy while trying to change the traditions so that those of us who are perforce othered can be more than “recognized” or “accommodated” when we’re faculty, rather than always somehow diminished, operating from a deficit, when we’re students. My jobs have always involved me in tradition and change for changes in tradition. I’ll explain.

To get at community as the space of the possible (Change) and the place of experience (Tradition, including the tradition of othering, even when intentions are good), requires some explanation. The term subjectivity, for instance, seems to no longer be as prevalent in our conversations. As a brief recap, here’s how Nick Mansfield begins a conversation: “Subjectivity . . . defies our separation into distinct selves and encourages us to imagine that . . . our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience” (3). Or as Gramsci would put it,

Every man [or woman], in as much as he [or she] is active, i.e., living, contributes to modifying the social environment in which he [or she] develops (to modifying certain of its characteristic or to preserving others); in other words, [she or] he tends to establish “norms,” rules of living and of behavior. (Selections 265)

Subjectivity, then, looks to the spaces and places that make me who I am and points to the ways that I respond to society or the ways I react within society.

This gives rise to the question of how “I” becomes I, a question taken up by all kinds of theorists and theories of subjectivity, from Husserl and phenomenology to Freud to Foucault. But for us here, we need to think of subjectivity in terms of power—the powers we are subjects of and the powers we are subjected to. The play on words comes from Louis Althusser but is a part of Foucault’s reading of Nietzsche. With Foucault and others, the means whereby we come to know the self or the means whereby the self is made to know and to accept is through language. That is, subjectivity is brought into play rhetorically, particularly the interpretation of subjectivity that is most concerned with power.
And like Althusser or the other structuralists, Brazilian sociologist José Maurício Domingues reminds us that individual subjects aren’t always aware of the psychological influences in any action they undertake. That is, the I, the Self, the space of the possible is never truly known, so that there is always an incomplete understanding of the actions we take and the reactions and rationalizations that we undertake in composing our sense of ourselves. I have written much about contradiction (an important matter for Gramsci, in terms of subjectivity): being assimilated and never assimilated, a part of and apart from (e.g., Villanueva, Memoria 2004).

For Domingues a solution to the contradictions and ambiguities comes by way of a “decentering of the subject,” breaking free of this worry about the self and coming to think more about the collective as a member of the collective (“Collective Subjectivity” 41). The questions for Domingues become (1) how much is the Self a knowable self? (2) How much of it is part of that felt experience that contributes to our self-composure? And (3) how much is the Self a product of the social systems of which we are a part? I think of that common expression: “You don’t know me.” Domingues makes me think: “Not only don’t you know me, I don’t even know me, in the sense you are imagining.” In some displaced version of the nature-nurture debate, I have to question how much of my self is a product of my history, my distinctive sets of experiences and memories, and those consequential spaces of possibility that I can’t consciously tap but that beckon me onward nevertheless. There’s nothing new in this, I know, but it gets me to an important space in terms of the contradiction of leadership as a person of color in traditionally White institutions—where one belongs and not. Stay with me a bit longer.

Anthony Giddens writes in The Constitution of Society that we are more than products of the social and that there is more to the social than a conglomeration of individuals. Even if we nurture our sense of nature, we are subjects of and subjected to a “balanced” relation between the two; that is, we are products of the social and we are individuals. But there’s a reason to put quotes around balanced. The word suggests equal weight. We can’t know that, of course, though we speak with therapists and priests and intimates, trying to work that out. Domingues writes that perhaps it is best if we let go of the individual as the subject of subjectivity and think rather of the collectivity as the space of possibility. And this, I think, is how to let go of the contradictions, still carry them, but let go of the emotionally draining question of whether the person of color (or woman or queer) is to be defined as organically rooted in a place or to be discovered amidst the contested traditions of prevailing institutions. Traditional or organic, traditional and organic, neither one fully. Can’t know. Let it go.
Latinas and Latinos in the United States and the indigenous throughout the hemisphere (and of the islands and nations of the Pacific) have been taking issue with modernism. The most notable of these to us in the United States has been Walter Mignolo, in part because he resides at a US university and is involved with literary theory. But there are others, like Enrique Dussell who caught my attention a couple of decades ago (Villanueva, “On the Rhetoric”). These decolonial theorists see the threat in contemporary modernism that is discussed in Mignolo’s telling title, The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Domingues, however, is something of a defender of modernity for Latin America, in that he identifies it with the rise from the dependency that economists call neocolonialism to a “flourishing of democracy” (Latin America 75) and “a greater social pluralism” (121). For decolonial theorists and for world-systems theorists, (even as Mignolo takes issue with the views of the world-systems theorists, in that they’re European and Eurocentric, if not in their theories) to invoke “modernism” is to invoke colonialism—modernism could not be were it not for colonialism—so that the result and even the purpose of this modernism was to give rise to the few who could accumulate. And as Rosa Luxemburg explains, imperialism (the flipside of colonialism) serves the function of providing for the accumulation of capital.

If one owns all of the natural resources with which to realize profit, one is able to accumulate more—given that accumulation for the sake of further accumulation is pretty much the definition of capitalism. In other words, Latin American decolonial scholars tend to read modernism and capitalism as interdependent. Domingues, however, reads modernism as making democracy possible, with the greatest problem being modernism’s ties to capitalism, particularly the imposition of the neoliberal economics of the “free market.” His aim—and what is, to my mind, particularly interesting for the leader of color in predominantly White institutions—is to move sociological theory beyond the agency-structure binary, to break through the conception of subjectivity as an individual issue, placing it within collectivities—a collective subjectivity (see especially Sociological Theory). In terms of the rhetoric of leadership, when it comes to the leader of color, the binary of self and other always has one faithful to the One and at odds with the Other: Do I stand up, bravely, for the Other? Or do I defend the power of the institution? Must I always find compromise? Or get relegated to leader of the Other but not of the institution, the token leader of the tokenized? Do I insist on academic discourse as it’s currently defined (or given shape)? Or do I insist on the rhetorics (more than the dialects) of the Other? The code? The code as meshed? Leader? Leader of color? Leader who happens to be of color? Always an internal struggle.

Because individuals are psychologically complex, affected by all sorts of stuff in the mind, consciously or not, our subjectivity is necessarily decentered. There
is no central, centered being that we can tap. Nor is there some essential(ized) collective. But the collective and the individual can acknowledge a collective memory. For a collective subjectivity to be realized, the collective must share memories. It is the shared memories, then, that help to establish the genre of a movement, the pattern or form—a conditioning causality “decisively contributing to shape social life” (“Collective Subjectivity” 42). In between these two causalities—the goal and the memories—there is, according to Domingues, collective causality.

Why is all of this important? Because those of us who seek to change the system while working within the system are caught in a bind. We work in a bureaucracy that is generally amoral, insofar as it is guided by rules that might have moral intent but function as simply “the rules.” That bind can lead to an emotional schizophrenia. Students who first come to Friere inevitably ask if they are the oppressed or the oppressor. And the answer is yes. Both. But what if we saw ourselves as members of collectives, not neatly balanced but not necessarily opposed? A TA functions as both—a giver of assignments and grades (a teacher) and the recipient of assignments and grades (a student), and, economically, holds many of the same responsibilities as a full professor (oppressor) with less pay than a grocery checker (oppressed). I am positioned as a traditional leader within the collective that is the university. I am also a member of the community of color. These two positions are not intentionally opposed: a difficult matter to explain to folks of color who find themselves the victims of the system and to those in power with good intentions and outrageous ignorance; difficult for me when I find myself teaching the written form of Standard American English and opposing the Standard or when fully recognizing that Spanish is no less the language of the oppressor than English (just different oppressors historically) as I demand the right to speak and write in my other native tongue. These difficulties shape the collective and individual possibilities of decentered subjectivities.

Post-Marxism, Collective Subjectivity, and Leadership

The problem with Domingues, a common problem with those seeking change, is that the one collective he focuses on is class. Domingues makes gestures toward ethnicity, racism, and gender (but not sexual identity) in describing collective subjectivities. Gramsci was not so limited. Laclau and Mouffe—labeled “post-Marxists,” though they are in effect reading the complexity of Gramsci—provide a way to continue with Domingues’s theory despite his limitations. That is, whereas Marxism, and thereby Domingues, reduces the ultimate social grouping to class, the post-Marxist recognizes other forms of antagonisms (or in Mouffe’s
more rhetorical turn, with agonism), so that gender, race, LGBTQ identities, and anti-imperialism can enjoy (or not) the same status (or lack thereof) as class.

Now, when Gramsci explicitly discusses the collective it is a kind of “Social Conformism.” It is conforming because of Gramsci’s particular understanding of the State, so that his “collective” are those who serve the economy:

Educative and formative role of the State. Its aim is always that of creating new and higher types of civilization; of adapting the “civilization” and the morality of the broadest popular masses to apparatus of production; hence of evolving even physically new types of humanity. (*Selections* 242)

The critical collectivity with all its subjectivity is found in Gramsci’s development of civil society. Here, subjectivity is both individual and collective—in much the same way as Domingues, or at least in my appropriation of Domingues for understanding the leader of color. Arguing against the notion of the superstructure that is created by the economic base, Gramsci looks to the subjective using *catharsis* as his focal point:

The term “catharsis” can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment, that is the superior elaboration of the structure into the superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from “objective” to “subjective” and from “necessity to freedom.” Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. (366–7)

The superstructure is a collective, affected by subjects, “the minds of men [and women],” insofar as,

nobody is disorganized and without party, provided one takes organization and party in a broad and not a formal sense. In this multiplicity of private associations (which are of two kinds: natural, and contractual or voluntary) one or more predominates relatively or absolutely—constituting the hegemonic apparatus of one social group over the rest of the population (or civil society). (264)

In very Gramscian terms, I belong to a “multiplicity of private associations,” as do we all. Like many people of color, I identify with, and am identified with, groups that are generally seen to have diverging interests. I have been told that I don’t look Latino when living in the Pacific Northwest, but I am assumed to be Latino when in South Florida. On forms, I check that I am Latino (or Hispanic, depending on the form) and I check White (because we’re divided into Black or White). That is, Latinos are subject to a racialization even though we are not a race. We’re indigenous; we’re European; we’re African; eight Latin American presidents were of Arab ancestry; a former president of Peru was Japanese. And
our lifeways are different. Puerto Ricans eat variations on bananas; Mexicans eat variations on peppers (and folks are surprised, here in the West, when I say I don’t like spicy food). In other words, we are a multiplicity of private associations, yet we recognize a common US and Western Hemispheric memory, a pattern, a common memory, a collective causality, like when all Latinos are Mexican immigrants, including Puerto Ricans. I contain two collective subjectivities that themselves comprise competing and conflicted identifications that shape the modes of leadership that I enact.

Gramsci characterized intellectuals as organizers, technicians, and experts who articulate the experience of social groups. In Volume II of *Prison Notebooks*, he writes:

> Every social group, coming into existence on the primal basis of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, a rank or several ranks of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and a consciousness of its own function not only in the economic sphere . . . but in other spheres as well. (199)

Gramsci noted that, while intellectuals may think of themselves as independent and disinterested, their work is embedded in social relations that distinguish their function from that of other groups. In a footnote on Italian history, he notes,

> By intellectuals must be understood not those strata commonly described by this term, but in general the entire social stratum which exercises an organizational function in the wide sense—whether in the field of production, or in that of culture, or in that of political administration. (*Selections*, 97–79)

Gramsci looked to education as the sphere of activity in which intellectuals were developed, but he called for intellectuals to take on an “active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator” (10).

All academic leaders of color contain at least two collective subjectivities. And if we assume leadership, we are caught in a hegemonic bind. Though the word *hegemony* tends to be used to signify domination, hegemony’s root is the Greek ἥγεμονία (*hēgemonía*) which not only meant “rule” but “leadership” (Fontana). Domination by force is what Althusser (1971) would call a “repressive state apparatus” (RSA) and is what Gramsci himself simply called “political society.” Hegemony, however, operates by what Althusser called “ideological state apparatuses,” the ideologies and their rhetorical strategies with which to gain consent (qtd. in Villanueva, “Hegemony”). It really doesn’t matter if that consent is obtained by a traditional intellectual or an organic intellectual—or even the “new intellectual,” the permanent persuader (24). An individual leader is a particularly Western European manifestation, always, really a figurehead,
since no single leader is ever truly single. We act in the name of collectives—whether the university or the othered; we become parts of, most often giving less voice to, our very personal subjectivities than to subjectivity of the collective within which we lead.

**So What?**

Not long ago I made the case for a subversive complicity in the conceptualization of basic writing—a basic writing across the curriculum—as a way to subvert the inherent deficiency model of basic writer. In some sense it was a case for “rhetoric” in that non-specialist way, a kind of humanistic conception of leadership that is engaged with the practical experience of social groups and also involved in the educational sphere where intellectuals develop a critical awareness of contested ideologies. More precisely, I argued, “Sometimes rhetoric actually is about duplicity, Plato notwithstanding” (Villanueva, “Subversive Complicity” 4). That, at least, was part of the argument. But there were other dimensions to it: that we should not assume to be the sole purveyors of critical consciousness, that we learn from other disciplines about the political situations that matter to us—racism from sociologists, gender and sexuality from women’s studies—in short, that we really should take advantage of the institutions of which we are a part. Now that some time has passed from the original writing, I would phrase it this way: we must abandon the “lone academic,” recognizing that we all tend to be too busy to be that old-style intellectual—if he ever existed (invariably a “he”)—who could sip brandy and puff his pipe while talking with professors of other departments in the dark, wood-paneled, leather-chaired lounge. Instead we can belong to a collective, asking, even over email, what might be a good book to read, recognizing that we are collective subjects subject to and subject of collective causalities. And I said in that same article from a few years back that we can, in Fanon’s words, enter into “a world of reciprocal recognitions” with students (qtd. in Villanueva, “Subversive Complicity” 7). I haven’t changed my mind.

But I have come to realize that I am not living a contrasting consciousness, really: the academic, the man of color, trying to be faithful to my community of the othered and faithful to my community of academic discoursers (and academics). It makes for too many conflicts of consciousness. It further decenters. I have come to see that as a member of collectivities with their subjectivities, their own decenteredness, I can be organic, traditional, maybe even “new.” Our rhetoric is a collective code-meshing, a subjective meshing, maybe, at home as I am with the language ways of the streets from which I came and the streets on which I walk now, recognizing two sets of memories—and more—memories that are
me and memories that are us, even different “usses.” Rather than a subversive complicity, a collection of collective subjectivities leads to that utopian hope of a successful program for which I am the official leader and might well see successful students—not that we all get along but that we all get a real chance at making change even as we understand multiple traditions.

Notice the I and the we, the collectivities in this poem:

*I am two parts/a person*  
*boricua/spic*  
*past and present*  
*alive and oppressed*  
given a cultural beauty  
. . . and robbed of a cultural identity  
*I speak the alien tongue*  
in sweet boricuense thoughts  
know love mixed with pain  
have tasted spit on ghetto stairways  
. . . here, it must be changed  
*we must change it*  
*I may never overcome*  
the theft of my isla heritage  
dulce palmas de coco on Luquillo  
sway in windy recesses I can only imagine  
and remember how it was  
*But that reality now a dream*  
teaches me to see, and will  
*Bring me back to me.*

“Here” by Sandra María Esteves

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Notes

1. *Nuyorican* seems to have first appeared in a 1964 collection of poems by Jaime Carrero (*Jet Neorriqueño*), the year I left New York. But the term became truly famous through the Nuyorican Poets Café in 1975.

2. I put quotes around “free market” because as Fernand Braudel notes, capitalism is the anti-market. Especially in the third of his three-volume work on civilization and capitalism, he describes a pyramid of trade, wherein the base is barter, followed by the true market—say, your local farmers’ market—then capitalism, which is not driven by freedom but by monopolization and accumulation. The “free market” is a rhetorical ploy, a welcomed euphemism.

3. I have to give credit to Kylie Smith, who introduces Gramsci’s conception of subjectivity, though I finally differ with her reading of Gramsci as tied to individuality, given especially within this context, his section on “Organisation of National Societies,” in which individuals are inherently tied to collectives (*Selections* 264–5). Still, I would not have made the connections I’ve made without Smith’s reading of Gramsci.
Works Cited


