

# From Oppression to Negotiation: Constructing a Generative Identity

Yi Shan Lea

Central Washington University

**Abstract.** This paper is inspired by Winnicott's theory in psychoanalysis about the "specific quality experience" from which people's world/self consciousness awakens and in turn a self-identity shapes. The paper is mainly a phenomenological inquiry about experiences and consciousness specifically in the realm of rebellious consciousness of the oppressed. The author reviews narratives and recounts on people's political mobilization. The author selected two political mobilizations, one on Cuba in the 1950's and the other the Neo-Zapatistas in 1994. It results in themes generalize are violence, vicarious experience of power, and identity representation and transformation.

**Keywords:** Winnicott, transitional phenomena, social mobilization.

## 1. Introduction

This paper is inspired by Winnicott's theory in psychoanalysis about "specific quality experiences" from which people's world/self consciousness awakens and in turn self-identity shapes. A central concept of Winnicott's on quality experience, which he coined "transitional phenomena" (1971), determines a person's subjectivity. The traditional psychoanalysis approach postulates narrative is experience-determinant in the same way as concept only acquires its meaning if it is related to experience. However, his work challenges us further but to wonder, "what gives those experiences a particular quality that makes them valuable." Winnicott was vague but had related it to be an experiential phenomenon as "something indescribable, [and] undefined" (Guerra, 2006, p. 69). In the "transitional area" one's perpetual state of attachment undergoes a transition of change and moves to another state of being and engage in "play" or negotiation of relationship. The theory of Winnicott, the transitional phenomena, points to the potency to uncovering the phenomenological experiences wherein people as the oppressed undergo to become historical agents of change. The author seeks to explore people's intuitive states of engagement in perceiving meanings and the transpired resonance for rebellion pertaining to social political organizing. From the critical education perspective, the author intends to distill a "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire, 1970), referring to pedagogical practices which engage people in consciousness raising for active participation and self-determination.

The oppressed experiences a familiar attachment to the oppressors, even habituated to the dehumanizing condition. The attachment commands power over the oppressed and deters from taking risks. The thought of potential punishment by the master and the habituated fear for the violent oppressor effectively neutralize the indignance of the oppressed. Systematic oppression is not a private business, neither a cultural preference, nor a random phenomenon or a divine test/punishment. The phenomenological inquiry on oppression and successful revolutionary organizing efforts is important to overcome the systematic historical subjugation and to break from the persistent private suffering.

It necessarily needs a better understanding on the polemic relations between the oppressed and the hegemony. Next will present contexts as snap shots first of the Cuban Revolution against the Batista government and next of the Zapatista Mayan rebels who surprised the world at the dawn of NAFTA signing on January 1, 1994 that consolidates a global neoliberal economic platform between North America and Mexico.

From a black and white TV screen, we saw a young robust Fidel Castro in the intensity of guerrilla war declaring his conviction for establishing Cubans' economic and political independence from the colonial capitalist empire. He spoke to the camera "When I have accomplished (the revolution), I will shave my beard" (Stone, 2004).

Six decades later Fidel Castro already sheds the image of dressing in military fatigue and the inseparable habit of smoking cigars, however his beard still remains constant. His beard may be a forgotten relic to modern memories of first world about the years of Cold War. It has the reminiscent power revealing the on going antagonistic relations between the capital consumer societies and the socialist world; condemning the persistent economic blows imposed by the US economic embargo since the years of John F. Kennedy of which resolution is long over due, however urgent and painful in the daily lives of Cubans. It is a transcendental declaration of resistance against the capital greed and a reminder of the unfinished revolutionary struggle, which is relevant and potent in understanding so as to resolve global crisis of our epoch!

In 1994, on the 1st of January, the world under the neoliberal yoke woke up to an era of revolution that bears the name, Zapatismo. The then clandestine rebels took control many municipals by surprise with their army EZLN based in the Lacandona jungle in the southeastern Mexico. The Zapatistas after breaking the first dawn in 1994 with armed forces till this day are still a conspicuously mask wearing force, widely recognizable these masked faces of revolution have become as a massive international population resonates with the similar narrative of anti-oppression and anti-capital and identifies with the indigenous struggles and their stories of oppressions. Over the past 18 years of rebellious organizing activities, the Zapatistas have strategized a different type of revolutionary war against neoliberal disintegration and fragmentation to continue their struggle for reclaiming the cultural economic constitutional autonomy for the Mayan indigenous population.

## **2. Hegemony, Counter Narratives, and Power**

Freire's literacy campaign from which he developed *the pedagogy of the oppressed* with the Brazilian peasants for political consciousness was feared by the then Brazilian military coup that overthrew a reform minded government. Hegemony persuades by discourse of inevitability and intimidates by inducing fear and threat of punishment. Critical theorists, and activists have demonstrated contradictions in democracy that governs by manufactured consent (Chomsky, 2000). Even more so after 9-11 in 2001, national security issue has been a ploy for shaping the public opinion; the anti-terrorism propaganda has rallied consensus over engaging in military intervention in the middleeast. Evident are the US immigration policy and economic relations with Mexico and other Latin American countries in which immigrants are portrayed a source of crimes, also threaten the American citizens' job opportunities.

The Cuban revolution and the Zapatistas have changed the histories and have marched down the path with calls against the historical colonial oppressions. As relatively small groups of people, rather than stormed the winter palace of the empire to seize power, revolutions depend on collective wills on making changes and political education raising critical consciousness. Che Guevara admonished the transgression of power that renders people as objects of manipulation; contrarily, "people must liberate themselves" and act to construct the conditions and to effect a revolution. The historical inquiry of organized cultural change is imperative to reckon with the fallacy of capitalism and neoliberalism that robs and occupies the center of human ontology in the world of relations. Follows will present people's mobilization to overcome oppression.

In light of Winnicott's transitional phenomena and Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed this paper aims to extrapolate the induced pedagogical quality experiences and in the resulted collective actions through a phenomenological inquiry. The discussion will include narratives, from documentaries, news reports, and literature, of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara and those of SCI Marcos who led the Mayan indigenous uprising to rebel against the neoliberal economic cultural racial oppression.

## **3. Discussion: The Thematic Universe of Cultural Actions**

Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed articulates literacy as critical reading of "the word and the world." The emergence is observed by people's consciousness of their own oppression and interrogating their relationship to the domination that consist of the multiple agents of inflictions, internalization, and perpetuation. This form of literacy experience subverts the colonial model of "banking education" (Freire, 1970) thereby creates *pedagogical* spaces for "voices of those having no voices" in the words of those

Zapatistas. Hence, the discovery of people's thematic universe according to Freire's pedagogy potentially reveals people's narrative of struggles and mobilization toward liberation. The themes from these two political mobilizations are violence, enchant, power and identity in multiplicity.

### **3.1. On Violence**

Fanon (1963) has written insights on violence in decolonization of the oppressed for cultural post-colonial liberation. Chomsky (2002) also elaborates similarly that histories of the foreigners who then turned colonists accomplished their conquests of the native lands are rampant with violent acts to the natives. Violence can be turned on to themselves among the oppressed. Violence of such form reveals the internalized oppression as a contradiction of the oppression who are the victims of the domination at the same time who are capable of inflicting oppression like mini-oppressors. Che Guevara wrote to seize power from the colonists is the necessary means to the end. The leaders of the Cuban guerrilla war and the Zapatista's uprising understand fully the hidden message in the use of organized force. In his response to a child's letter on being a soldier over the Chimia Radio (2004), SCI Marcos said he being a soldier today for the indigenous autonomous struggle is for the purpose that the children today and the adults of the tomorrow will be free and need not take up arms to fight for their own survival.

The abuse of power enters the subliminality of the oppressed. The compliance of the oppressed is voluntary and oppression becomes internalized. Fanon discusses the colonists' tactics that "in scaring [the oppressed], the atmosphere of myths and magic operates like an undeniable reality...Zombies, believe me, are more terrifying than colonists. And the problem now is not whether to fall in line with the armor-plated world of colonialism, but to think twice before urinating, spitting or going out in the dark" (Fanon, 1963, p. 19). Yet the use of violence is a necessity in the polemics as the natives versus the colonists; it implicates a break from a history of colonization about the conquered land written by the colonists to the conquered peoples assuming the authorship of their history of decolonization. And "in colonial countries only the peasantry or the indigenous is revolutionary"(p. 23). Violence in the revolutionary context transforms the former fear in the oppressed into a massive demonstration of power through destructive acts. The formerly amplified fear is potentially channelled into a matching size of power heading to a point of no return.

#### **3.1.1. Counter Discourse on Violence**

The Cuban revolution and the Zapatistas' resemble in the beginning though taking on a separate path in tactics of violence. Che and Fidel Castro's guerrilla group garnered support and was joined in force from the rural peasants. Their militant activities were carried out with and consisted of a relatively small size of number of people triumphed over the Batista's army trained, well equipped and financially supported by the US. Facing the formidable Batista army the Cuban revolutionary guerrillas conducted their clandestine activities through great precision, effectiveness, and flexibility in their operation of weapons and soldiers to destruct the opposition. The guerrillas in the mountains were mostly men; Fidel and Che Castro also commented on the physical demand and required fitness of soldiers between 16 year olds and not beyond the age of 45 (Guevara, 2007).

Che and Fidel Castro often related to the humane treatments to the captives and provided medical treatment to the Batista's wounded combatans (Guevara, 2003). Amid the daily destructive militancy to debilitate the Batista regime, there were construction, and rural development under way as soon as the rebel army entered. The real violent acts, which the majority of the Cuban peasants endure as daily occurrence, include deformity by hunger, slow death by curable diseases, political repression by illiteracy and exploited labor by the plantation capitalists. There were teachings by the guerrillas to the illiterate peasants, and medical assistance by medical soldiers in the mountains; Fidel even took on serving as godfather during religious baptisms performed by the accompanied priests (Beto, 2006). They did not leave behind their own wounded and weak soldiers without addition accompany or dead soldiers without conducting burials.

The Zapatistas have the support base of Mayan communities consistent of the young, the old, and children in addition to the EZLN military army formed by the both sexes. The Zapatistas in their first uprising in 1994 had resulted limited numbers of death and wound (Conant, 2010); since then they have conducted their struggle by non-violent tactics, which they call *weapons of words* via floods of media exposure, also internet communication system, radio and newspapers. The Zapatistas emphasize speaking

the true words of their gods in building their political cultural autonomy as it functions to congeal the Mayan identity. That words as weapons is exemplified as follows to awaken the consciousness of the wider society. Upon being offered “pardon” by the government to forgive their rebellion, Marcos responded to the political posture,

For what do we have to ask pardon? For what are you going to pardon us? For not dying of hunger? For not shutting up in your misery? For not having humbly accepted our gigantic historic cargo of neglect and abandonment? For having risen in arms when we found all other avenues closed? ...For being conscious and well prepared? For having carried rifles into combat, rather than bows and arrows? For having learned to fight before doing battle? ....For not surrendering? For not selling ourselves? For not betraying ourselves?...What should ask for pardon, and who can grant it? (2001, p. 68).

*Weapons of words* expose the political contradictions of the world, the words and the actions. The real violence is the colonial conquests of the Mayan race by the Spaniards and the persisted cultural ethnic genocide for the past 500 years.

### **3.2 To Enchant**

The counter discourse on violence by the Zapatista armed struggle projects an imagery of the oppressed situated being in a permanent state of war of non-violence. Hence framing the revolutionary message and reinventing imageries of the oppressed are meant to awake and to engage the world’s consciousness with their struggle against oblivion as one major purpose. The other is to enchant the hearts and minds with their mythic cultural tradition by becoming and weaving themselves into the myth of the changed history.

Mobilization to achieve revolution differs fundamentally from domination. The former is by enchantment, the latter is by force. Rubin (2004; 2002) writes extensively on mobilization by seeking genealogy of resistance from cultural meaning and historical origin. Similar with Guerra’s position on engagement of consciousness through meaningful experience, Rubin affirms effective mobilization is consciously constructed and carefully formulated. Mobilization has both emic and etic perspectives in response to the cultural rituals, and people’s stories to create the conditions which people intuit the need for rebellion. Mobilization is fluid like flood as we already make similar reference to violence that unleash power in the natural forces; yet mobilization differing from riots of destruction so as to achieve revolutionary goals should select and essentialize forces to become power of people. In the process, there creates resonance between the insiders and outsiders perspectives from the by the revolutionaries and cultural creatives. Che and Fidel’s revolution was founded on Marxist and Leninist class struggle with the broad base of peasant support. The socialist anti-capitalist ideology was resonated by the peoples who have been subjugated to the colonialist yoke no less than the past 500 years (Fanon, 1963). A non-violent aspect of revolution stipulates popular education as seen in the examples of the Zapatistas and the Castro and Che’s revolutionary pedagogies. The evocation of mythical history of the culture and the race enchants the global spectators and the peasant or indigenous Mayans to reimagine for a class and cultural theology of liberation

#### **3.2.1. Power and Identity of Multiplicity**

When interviewed by Stone in making the documentary *Comandante* (Stone, 2004) on his reflection of the Cuban socialist revolution and anti-capitalist orientation in the Cuban politics, Castro looks into the eyes of the film maker, Oliver Stone, and expresses he is aware of differing perceptions and criticisms about himself, his steadfast conviction for social change in the class based cultural struggle is what matters most to himself. In terms of the significance, after having sustained for several decades of national hardship due to the economic effect by the U.S. imposed embargo, Cuba a tiny country and the United States of America as the global super power should be remembered similarly as the story told in the Christian Old Testament, David and Goliath.

In the tradition of literacy, fable stands out as a genre that teaches moral values and characters. Its utility grants the storyteller to interrogate social injustice and to engage the public readers in a reflexive identification with and seeing him/herself being the protagonist as the actor and the victor. The mystery of

the famous Zapatista leader SCI Marcos persists. His real identity is hidden behind a ski mask since 1994 for security reason. One of the most frequent questions he was asked is, “Who is Marcos?” On television, he was prepared to reveal his face by taking down his ski mask. Like a performing artist, Marcos held out a mirror in his hand to his viewers to see the reflected image for themselves. He has said why he wears a mask is for people to see themselves better. Marcos and the Zapatistas who wear masks have demonstrated their military power seen as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) on the first uprising on January 1, 1994 in their movement fighting for the rights of the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Since then the power to inspire people’s mobilization has grown far and beyond the military demonstration. The Marcos’ identity integral to the Zapatista anti-neoliberal struggle has undergone a transition of identity transformation struggle.

Marcos is gay. Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10pm, a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains.

Marcos is all the exploited, marginalised, oppressed minorities resisting and saying 'Enough'. He is every minority who is now beginning to speak and every majority that must shut up and listen. He is every untolerated group searching for a way to speak. Everything that makes power and the good consciences of those in power uncomfortable.

“Marcos” are those who identify themselves as the oppressed.

#### 4. Conclusion

The mass congeals during decolonization responding to the heroic action; the representation of a shared identity of the oppressed drummed up by their famous leaders are integral to the revolutionary spirits. The projected images and myths about Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and SCI Marcos convey to their peoples their consistent revolutionary praxis in continuing the anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal struggles. Their unique personas of independence, charisma, repeated conviction to revolution, and courage to risk it all are powerful in inspiring actions and emulations. Thereby, political climate for radical change as in the term by Winnicott, the transformative or transitional phenomena, are created that assist the oppressed to cross the threshold of empowerment onward for liberation.

#### 5. References

- [1] Subcomandante Marcos. Subcomandante Marcos sin pasamontañas real. [Video file]. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hInS5X66tLk&feature=related>
- [2] J. Conant. *A Poetics of Resistance: The Revolutionary Public Relations of the Zapatista Insurgency*. Oakland, CA: AK Press. (2010).
- [3] C. E. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*. US: BN Publishing. (2007).
- [4] F. Beto. *Fidel & Religion*. Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press. (2006).
- [5] Subcomandante Marcos. *Ya Basta*. Oakland, CA: AK Press. (2004).
- [6] O. Stone. (Producer & Director). *Comandante* [DVD]. (2004). Available from <http://www.amazon.com>
- [7] J. Rubin Meanings and Mobilization. *Latin American Research Review*, 39, 3, October (2004).
- [8] C. E. Guevara. *Che Guevara Reader*. Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press. (2003).
- [9] N. Chomsky. *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many*. Tucson, AZ: Odonian Press. (2002).
- [10] Marcos. *Our Word Is Our Weapon*. Ponce de Leon, Juana, ed. New York: Seven Stories Press. (2001).
- [11] P. McLaren. *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*. New York. NY: Roman & Littlefield. (1999).

- [12] P. Freire. *Teachers as Cultural Workers*. Colorado: Westview Press. (1998).
- [13] D. W. Winnicott, *Transitional objects and transitional phenomena in playing and reality*. New York: Basic Books. (1971).
- [14] P. Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, Continuum. (1970).
- [15] F. Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press.(1963).