



... y no se lo tragó la tierra
**A Bilingual Analysis in Terms of Mikhail
Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel"**

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Abstract: This sketch is an attempt to illustrate how we can imagine Anzaldúa's "new mestiza" consciousness with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory and Tomás Rivera's *bildungsroman* set in the Texas/Mexico border. More specifically, I attempt to position this effort between Bakhtin's sense of "ideological becoming" and Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" by arguing that Tomás Rivera's novel dramatizes the process from the former to the latter—a reflection of his ability to be on "both shores at once" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 79). Allowing Anzaldúa, Bakhtin, and Rivera to cross-pollinate is to begin to theorize a dialogical mechanism by which border subjectivities fraught with psychic strife can reach ideological independence and speak a subversive narrative for the sake of self-liberation. In short, this article is a meta-mestizaje: a Russian-Chicana hybrid written by a mambo-dancing Cuban-American (Firmat, 1994, p. 83).

INTRODUCTION

The work of Gloria Anzaldúa embodies an attempt to highlight that what we commonly identify as the "I" is a sociocultural mixture rooted in a diversity of languages, which consequently calls for a "new mestiza" consciousness to replace ill-informed notions of racial and ethnic purity. This article is an attempt to illustrate how we can begin to imagine such a consciousness with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory and Tomás Rivera's *bildungsroman* set in the Texas/Mexico border. The result is a bilingual discourse consistent with Anzaldúa's work in combating the sup-

pression of Spanish in America by creating a space for Spanish voices within American literature and culture—a realm in which literary texts play a crucial role in contesting, producing, maintaining, and transforming identities across borderlands (Said, 1993, p. 9). To be more specific, I attempt to position this effort between Bakhtin's sense of "ideological becoming" and Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" by arguing that Tomás Rivera's novel dramatizes the process from the former to the latter—a reflection of his ability to be on "both shores at once" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 79). Allowing Anzaldúa, Bakhtin, and Rivera to cross-pollinate is to begin to theorize a dialogical mechanism by which border subjectivities

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BAKHTIN'S *DISCOURSE IN THE NOVEL*

Bakhtin introduces his concept of *ideological becoming* when discussing the topic of the "speaking person" in everyday life situations. All people, he claims, quite consciously spend at least half of their time talking about what other people talk about: we all "transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgment on other people's words, opinions, assertions (and) information" (Bakhtin, 1934/1998, p. 530). For him, the reason we do this is because we place significant psychological importance on what others say about us and therefore we try to understand and interpret their words for the sake of gaining their approval. In the transmission of another person's speech, we carry the elements of that speech into diverse contexts and manipulate them so that their meanings change entirely, even if they are quoted verbatim. The dialectical interaction between a particular speech and a particular context, then, is what creates specific meanings for us. The aggregate effect of which meanings we reject and which ones we accept is what determines an individual's ideological identity, a process known as *ideological becoming*:

The topic of the speaking person takes on quite another significance in the ordinary ideological workings of our consciousness, in the process of assimilating our consciousness to the ideological world. The *ideological becoming* [emphasis mine] of a human being,

in this view, is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others (Bakhtin, 1934/1998, p.532).

Before we consider a dramatization of Bakhtin's *ideological becoming* in Rivera's work, I need to make one important qualification. The novel is in Spanish, so all of the passages I will be quoting from will be unintelligible to non-Spanish speakers. However, their meaning will become apparent in the commentary that follows each one. If it does not, I provide a translation. With this in mind, we now ask the question: what is the boy's ideological state *before* he begins this process? We can find the answer in the first chapter, *El año perdido* (The Lost Year):

Siempre empezaba todo cuando oía que alguien le llamaba por su nombre pero cuando volteaba la cabeza a ver quién era el que le llamaba, daba una vuelta entera y así quedaba donde mismo. Por eso nunca podía acertar ni quién le llamaba ni por qué, y luego hasta se le olvidaba el nombre que le había que él era a quien llamaban. Una vez se detuvo antes de dar la vuelta entera y le entró miedo. Se dio cuenta de que él mismo se había llamado. (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.7)

The boy hears voices from invisible mouths calling his name. He has internalized them so thoroughly that, at first, he cannot differentiate between them and his own; they are one. Since both his voice and theirs are fused into an undifferentiated whole, they are ideologically (and hence linguistically) homogenous at this stage of his development. Anzaldúa captures this condition by describing herself in poetry:

...alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro, me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio. Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan simultaneamente. (An-

zaldúa, 1987, p. 77)

(...soul between two worlds, three, four, my head hurts with contradictions. I am turned to the north by all the voices that speak to me simultaneously.)

Here, the north, the direction of the United States, is a state of confusion, not clarity; of “internal strife [that] results in insecurity and indecisiveness.” She calls this state of “psychic restlessness”—represented by the voices in the boy’s head—“mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways...[an] inner war [that] causes *un choque*, a cultural collision.” The boy’s final realization that *it was he who spoke to himself* will be the crucial point of departure from his state of ideological disturbance towards *ideological becoming* and ultimately, independence; it was the first step taken toward a healing of the rift between “the opposite bank [so as to be] on both shores at once” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.78).

How, then, does the process of *ideological becoming* begin? As introduced above, the genesis (or “morphogenesis” [Anzaldúa, 1987, p.81]) occurs when an individual *consciously* repeats another person’s speech in his own words in a context removed from the original site of the utterance. For the boy, the voices he hears spoke in a past context unlike the one he occupies now. Then, he was in their company; now, he is alone and free to create his own interpretation of what their speech means to him. Once he begins to interpret meaning for himself, these voices become unreliable sources of information about who he is because his nascent ideology is now in a state of conflict with theirs—a condition Anzaldúa might say causes ambivalence in a developing “mestiza consciousness”: not only do they tell him *who* he is but also *how* to behave and according to *which* rules. They constitute what Bakhtin defines as the *authoritative discourse*, which demands ac-

knowledgment and allegiance. The oppressive voices of that discourse resonate through the parental, moral, and educational discourses in his social context. Each of them is opposed to his own emerging *internally persuasive discourse*—in a word, what matters to him, what touches him. They deny his discourse all privilege because it does not rely on their divine points of reference. The ensuing dialectical struggle between these two poles and which discourse wins out determines the developmental course of the boy’s *ideological becoming*. Bakhtin puts it like this:

In an individual’s *ideological becoming* [emphasis mine], another’s discourse performs no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth—but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior; it performs here as [emphasis mine]. (Bakhtin, 1934/1998, p.532)

To summarize my story to this point, when the boy first speaks he merely transmits the words of other people uncritically; there is no difference between their noises and his. The moment he realizes his voice is independent and distinct from the ones he has grown accustomed to hearing marks the first step of his *ideological becoming*. This process includes experimenting with and discriminating between *authoritative discourses* and *internally persuasive discourses*. The former demands faithful obedience; he creates the latter by appropriating the authoritative voice and applying it in a variety of contexts according to his needs or whims. This assumption and application of discourse in turn generates new internally persuasive words that further stir up new words that are equally convincing to him; we may venture to say this process is an alternative theorization and novel dramatization of Dewey’s theory of experience

(Dewey, 1938/1997). The result is a collision between *internally persuasive discourses*. Bakhtin again states:

Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values. The semantic structure of an *internally persuasive discourse* [emphasis mine] is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean*. (Bakhtin, 1934/1998, p.534)

The boy moves closer to ideological independence when he transforms elements of his *internally persuasive discourse* into what Bakhtin calls objects of *artistic representation*. This is the “creative motion” that Anzaldúa finds necessary to develop “mestiza consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.80). To put it another way, the boy’s own discourse, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another discourse, sooner or later begins to liberate itself from the authority of others’. This occurs when he *objectifies* his internally persuasive words and applies them to tangible, physical objects, at which point he can interrogate and test them for resiliency and weaknesses before he finally adopts it into his new independent, ideological identity—according to Rorty, into his “final vocabulary” spoken by a “strong poet” (Rorty, 1989, p.26).

DESTINATION: IDEOLOGICAL INDEPENDENCE

With the foregoing in mind, let’s consider Rivera’s illustration of the boy-poet’s religious and social *ideological becoming*. The most significant example of the boy’s nascent religious vocabulary is found in the

chapter entitled *La noche estaba plateada* (The Silvery Night). After having discovered a devilish costume under *Tia* (Aunt) Pana’s house belonging to Don (Mr.) Rayos, he tried on the mask, an act that moved Don Rayos to warn him:

...con el Diablo no se juega. La mayoría (de los que lo llaman) se vuelve loca...al hacerlo ya, como quien dice, se le entrega el alma. (Rivera 1971/1996, p.37)

(...with the Devil you don’t play. Most who call him go crazy...upon doing so, as they say, they give him their souls).

In appealing to *como quien dice* (“as they say”), Don Rayo is summoning an ancient authoritative discursive tradition of fearing the devil, a reference whose function is to bind the boy to obey. Of course, Don Rayo’s regard for what other authority figures have said in the past is what makes his admonition so typical of Bakhtin’s description of the nature of an authoritative voice.

The boy, however, disregards these words and instead resolves to *a las meras doce (hablar con el)* [to speak with him at midnight]. Given his earlier epiphany in *El año perdido*, i.e., that it was he who spoke to himself, we come to see his *internally persuasive discourse* emerge:

Consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself; the process of distinguishing between one’s own and another’s discourse, between one’s own and another’s thought, is activated rather late in development. When thought begins to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way, what first occurs is a separation between internally persuasive and authoritarian enforced discourse, along with a rejection of those congeries of discourses that do not

matter to us, that do not touch us (Bakhtin 1934/1998, p.534).

For the boy, the essential act was to call on the Devil himself to prove whether he existed or if the authoritative discourse he had heretofore believed with fearful faith would fail. At this point in the story, then, the boy is solely listening to his *internally persuasive discourse*. As I stated earlier, this type of discourse awakens other new, independent and conflicting words that are objectified and tested before ideological independence results.

The above internal dispute and resolution is well illustrated in the remainder of *La noche estaba plateada*, where we hear him speak with two distinct and conflicting voices. The story continues with *el empezó a hablarse* (he began to speak to himself):

Voice 1:... *a lo mejor se me aparece*. (maybe he will appear)

Voice 2: *No, no creo*. (No, I don't think so)

Voice 1: *Si no hay diablo a lo mejor no hay tampoco...* (If the Devil does not exist maybe there isn't ...)

Voice 2: *No, más vale no decirlo*. (No, best not to say it)

Voice 1: *Pero si no hay diablo a lo mejor tampoco hay castigo*. (But if the Devil does not exist maybe punishment doesn't either)

Voice 2: *No, tiene que haber castigo*. (No, there must be punishment)

After having summoned and cursed the Devil, he said the following:

Voice 1: *Pero si no hay diablo tampoco hay...* (But if the Devil does not exist there cannot be ...)

Voice 2: *No, más vale no decirlo. A lo mejor me cae un castigo* (No, it's best not to say it. A punishment may befall me)

Then, in a decisive moment, he resolves his own conflict; his first voice emerges vic-

torious:

Voice 1: *Pero, no hay diablo. A lo mejor se me aparece después. No, se me hubiera aparecido ya. ¿Que mejor ocasión que en la noche y yo sólo? No hay, no hay* (Rivera 1971/1996, p.40). (...but, the Devil does not exist. He may show himself later. No, he would have already appeared. What better occasion than at night and with me alone? He doesn't exist, he doesn't exist)

The boy's ideological resolution is significant for two reasons. When the boy openly cursed the Devil, he, in effect, changed an *internally persuasive discourse*—"the Devil does not exist"—into an object of *artistic representation*. To adduce Rorty's notion of an "ironist" (Rorty, 1989, p.73), the boy projected his newly created metaphor into the silvery night in order to test the resiliency of his *ideological becoming*. Consequently, the boy jettisoned the dreadful Devil concept from his vocabulary because he simply did not show up. Once again, what he realized is that it was he who spoke to himself. In Anzaldúa's formulation, he overcame his earlier ambivalence by a "third element" she calls a "new consciousness—a mestiz[o] consciousness...[whose energy] comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.81). Finally, having reasoned that the Devil did not exist from his private exercise of *artistic representation*, the boy raised his progressively independent voice against the existence of God himself in the presence of his mother—perhaps the ultimate test for his growing *internally persuasive discourse*. In the chapter... *y no se lo tragó la tierra* (...and the earth did not swallow him), the narrative voice tells us that:

...*la primera vez que sintió por su tío y su tía...y más cuando su mamá y su papá clamaban por la misericordia de Dios. Su mamá le notó lo enfurecido*

que andaba...(y le dijo) que todo estaba en las manos de Dios y que su papá se iba a aliviar con la ayuda de Dios (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.44).

(...the first time he felt hate and anger was when he saw his mother cry for his uncle and aunt...and even more when his mother and father clamored for God's mercy. His mother noticed how angry he was...[and told him] that everything was in the hands of God and that his father would feel better with His help)

Boy:...*n'ombre, ¿usted cree? A Dios, estoy seguro, no le importa nada de uno. ¿A ver, dígame usted si papá es de mal alma o de mal corazón? ¿Dígame usted si él ha hecho mal a alguien?* (...no, do you think so? I am sure that we do not matter to God. Let me see, tell me if dad is ill of heart or soul? Tell me if he has wronged anyone?)

Mother: *Pos no.* (Well, no)

Boy: *Ahí está...N'ombre, a Dios le importa poco de uno los pobres...* (There you have it, the poor matter little to God)

Mother: *Ay, hijo, no hables así. No hables contra la voluntad de Dios. M'ijo, no hables así favor. Que me das miedo. Hasta parece que llevas el demonio entre las venas...* (Oh, son, do not speak like that. Do not speak against the will of God. My son, please do not speak like that. You are frightening me. It seems as if you have the demon in your veins)

Boy: *Pues, a lo mejor. Así, siquiera se me quitaría el coraje. Ya me canso de pensar; ¿por qué?...como usted misma dice, hasta que se muere uno, no descansa. Yo creo que así se sintieron mi tío y mi tía, y así se sentirá papá.* (Well, maybe. Even so, my anger would not leave me. I am tired of thinking. Why?...It is as you say it, no one rests until they die. I think that is how my uncle and aunt felt,

and my dad also).

Mother: *Así es, m'ijo. Solo la muerte nos trae el descanso a nosotros.* (That's how it is, my son. Only death brings us rest)

Boy: *Pero, ¿por qué a nosotros?* (But, why us?)

Mother: *Pues dicen que...* ("Well they say that..."—here she summons the authoritative voice to make her point)

Boy: *No me diga nada...* (Don't tell me anything [he has heard enough of this voice])

After a similar fate befell his younger brother, the boy erupted with righteous indignation:

...maldijo a Dios despues de haberlo querido hacer por mucho tiempo. Al hacerlo sintió el miedo infundido por los años y sus padres (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.44).

(...he cursed God after having wanted to do it for such a long time. Upon doing it he felt the fear with which the years and his parents had filled him)

Authoritative discourse does not relinquish power to *individually persuasive discourse* very easily. Fear is its close ally:

Esa noche no se durmió hasta muy tarde. Tenía una paz que nunca había sentido antes...para cuando amaneció su padre estaba mejor...a su hermanito también casi se le fueron de encima los calambres. Se sorprendía cada rato por lo que había hecho la tarde anterior (había maldito a Dios)...había nubes y por primera vez se sentía capaz de hacer y deshacer cualquier cosa que él quisiera... (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.44)

(That night he did not fall asleep until very late. He felt a peace un-

like any he had felt before...when he woke up his father was feeling better...the cramps had nearly left his little brother. He surprised himself every now and then each time he recalled the night before [he had cursed God]...there were clouds in the sky and for the first time he felt capable to do and undo whatever he wanted ...)

...including his religious ideology.

The boy's growing religious independence, although strong, was soon faced with mounting challenges from other powerful *authoritative discourses*. In the chapter *La primera comunión* (The First Communion), the nun who organized it taught him the sins of the flesh, the mortal and pardonable ones, as well as sacrilege. After the lesson, she continued:

...ahora ya saben que ustedes son almas de Dios, pero que pueden ser almas del Diablo. Pero cuando vayan a confesarse tienen que decir todos los pecados, tienen que tratar de recordar todos los que hayan hecho. Porque si se les olvida uno y van a comulgar entonces sería un sacrilegio y si hacen un sacrilegio van al infierno. Diosito sabe todo. (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.44)

(...now you know that you are God's souls, but that you can be souls of the Devil. But when you go to confession you must confess all your sins, you must try to remember all the ones you have committed. Because if you forget and take communion, that would be sacrilege, and if you commit sacrilege you will go to hell. God knows everything.)

At first, the boy does not seem capable of resisting the fear her ominous words inspire within him. Instead, visions of hell-

fire forced him to carefully count all the sins he had committed (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.54). En route to his confession, he witnessed a couple copulating in a tailor shop, an act whose memory he could not free himself from. His guilt was so great that he felt he had committed the sin himself (perhaps feeling a bit of oedipal jealousy). Its cause, it seems, was the nun's *authoritative discourse* whose guidelines explicitly condemned such behavior. While his first instinct was to fear his sins and confess them to a priest, his second, more important impulse, was to skip confession altogether! He had already developed enough ideological independence to ignore church mandates—fear God, fear the Devil, and now, confession. That is why his ensuing *internally persuasive discourse* is understandable:

Voice 1: *Mejor no voy a comulgar. Mejor no me confieso. No puedo ahora que sé (los pecados del cuerpo), no puedo* (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.54). (It's best I do not go to communion. Best if I do not confess. I cannot now that I know the sins of the flesh, I cannot.)

However, just like a child continues to stumble in spite of having learned how to walk, the boy's fledgling independence was still vulnerable to parental asphyxiation:

Voice 2: *Pero ¿qué dirán mi papa y mi mama si no lo comulgo?...y mi padrino, ...tengo que confesar lo que ví* (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.54). (But, what would my dad and mom say if I do not take communion...and my godfather? I have to confess what I saw.)

Attend he did, but confess he did not. From the above internal dialectic emerged an independent synthesis that allowed him to at once preserve his ideological integrity *and* prevent his parents from finding fault in him, which would have made his *ideological becoming* needlessly difficult:

...cuando me fui a confesar y que me

preguntó el padre por los pecados le dije solamente que doscientos y de todos. Me quedé con el pecado de carne. (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.54)

(...when I went to confess and the father asked me about my sins I told him I had committed two-hundred and of every type. I withheld the sin of the flesh)

The conclusion he came to is quite obvious: *authoritative discourses* may expect obedience from those who listen, but the limit exists where they conflict with his *internally persuasive* ones. He remained true to his emerging ideological self, a decision that empowered him to see the hypocrisy and sinister character that often typify *authoritative discourses*:

Al regresar a casa con mi padrino se me hacía todo cambiado, como que estaba y no estaba en el mismo lugar. Todo me parecía más pequeño y menos importante. Cuando vi a papá y a mamá me los imaginé en el piso. Empecé a ver a todos los mayores como desnudos y ya se me hacían las caras hasta torcidas y hasta los oía reír o gemir aunque ni se estuvieron riendo. Luego me imaginé al padre y a la monjita por el piso... (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.54)

(When I returned home with my godfather everything seemed as if changed, as if I was and was not in the same place. Everything seemed smaller and less important. When I saw mom and dad I imagined them on the floor. I began to see all the grown-ups as if naked and as if their faces were twisted, and I even heard them laugh and moan although they were doing neither. Later I imagined the father and nun on the floor ...)

The boy's first communion was not the first time he had shown such shrewdness. The earliest example is in the interlude adduced above in which the boy drinks the holy water. We see it again in *La mano en la bolsa*. Doña Bone had just killed *el mojadito* (the wetback) and was colluding with Don Laíto. He tells us about the demands of her *authoritative discourse* and the response of his *internally persuasive* one:

...me hicieron que les ayudara a arrastrarlo y echarlo al pozo que yo mismo había hecho. Yo no quería muy bien pero luego me dijeron que le dirían a la policía que yo lo había matado...me acordé que mi papá les había pagado por la comida y el cuarto y de que hasta los americanos los querían muy bien...tenía mucho miedo pero como quiera lo eché al pozo. (Rivera, 1971/1996, p.54)

(...they made me help them drag him and toss him into the well I had dug. I did not want to, but they told me they would tell the police I had killed him...I remembered that my dad had paid them for my room and board, and that even the Americans liked them...I was very scared, but I put him in the well nonetheless.)

His reaction suggests a possible revision of Bakhtin's theory of *ideological becoming*. The boy's instinct was to resist because he was afraid. But, rather than balk, he took account of the politics (in terms of the preponderance of power) inherent in his predicament. The novel does not tell us he is an illegal Chicano immigrant in the United States, but the threat of police intervention may suggest deportation given that the blood on his shirt could have been considered incriminating evidence. He also remembered his dependence on them for his food and shelter. The police notwithstand-

ing, he may have faced eviction and hunger had he refused to cooperate. Moreover, their popularity with *los Americanos* may have hurt the credibility of any possible complaint he may have brought to them. His decision to ignore his fear and help them bury the *mojadito* suggests that *ideological becoming* does not happen in a dialectical vacuum; its end (ideological independence) may be reached more effectively if the individual is keenly aware of his position relative to those who are either in a position to help or hurt him and acts accordingly. Given the exigencies of the moment, the boy tempered his *ideological becoming* with a practical stroke: shoveling dirt, he buried the wetback.

CONCLUSION

Bakhtin's theory of *ideological becoming* traces the dialectical path the boy travels on his way toward ideological independence. The one vital element the theory does not describe, but Rivera intelligently accounts for, is the shrewdness necessary to distinguish between when it is politically expedient to act according to one's *internally persuasive discourse* and when to do what is necessary to keep oneself fed and out of the elements. Politics notwithstanding, both Chicanos (Anzaldúa and the boy) are participating in the same project: the creation of a new story, a new culture, a new value system within which we can all connect. She theorizes it—"the struggle is inner"—and Rivera via Bakhtin acts it out toward the end of ideological independence (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.87).

At end of the novel, the boy crawls to a dusty dark post under a house so that he is free to think about what he pleases. All of the voices he has heard during the past year march across his memory in an aural parade. In solitude he can selectively appropriate, objectify and test their words in the private context of his developing mind.

This trustworthy process has so far won him ideological independence, at least in the realm of religion. However, there is more work for him to do. *Authoritative discourses* will continuously threaten to crush his tenuous hold on ideological freedom. After all, he is only a boy.

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