Voices from the Margin: Subaltern Self-Fashioning in some American and Indian Texts

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We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative.

- Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*

Voices from the ‘Fourth World’

The question is certainly not mine — “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak, *Marxism*). Nevertheless, the added dimensions that have accrued to that seminal question since it was first posed by Spivak in 1988 compel us to reconsider it. With the emergence of an increasingly Westernized mand capitalist middle class in several of the erstwhile colonized countries of the global South, the dialectic of identity and alterity that that question had so challengingly adumbrated with respect to race, class, ethnicity, and gender, needs to be extended beyond the parameters of postcoloniality and patriarchy (where, needless to say, it still
resonates). It must now additionally embrace the politically charged space of what
George Manuel and Michael Posluns have dubbed the “Fourth World” of the

The Aboriginal World has so far lacked the political muscle to emerge: it is
without economic power; ... While the Third World can eventually emerge as
a force capable of maintaining its freedom in the struggle between East and
West, the Aboriginal World is almost wholly dependent upon the good faith
and morality of the nations of East and West.

This is because, while the Third World is able to exploit Western technology
through its interiorization of Western sociality and education, the indigene “is
unable to comprehend Western technology unless it can be used to ... enhance
traditional life forms; and it finds its strength above and beyond Western ideas of
historical process” (Manuel and Posluns 6).

The people of the Fourth World are not merely the Fanonesque victims of
colonization *per se*, but multiply othered in being also the victims (the men as
well as the women) of what Indian historian Vijay Prashad calls “the bourgeois
landlord State” (Prashad 171). As the objects of a hegemonic semiotic system
constructed on the one hand by Western ethnological fictions of primitivism and
aboriginality, and on the other by Statist stratifications of race and class, in what
ways can the disinherited indigene speak himself or herself?

Drawing on Nietzsche’s *The Use and Abuse of History* and Foucault’s
“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” postmodern historiographers such as Hayden
White and Dominick La Capra, or feminist historians such as Appleby *et al* in
books like *Telling the Truth About History*, have posited the idea of the textuality
of history, of history as narrative or emplotment, thereby opening up the
possibility for alternative histories. In his “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts”
Dipesh Chakrabarty writes — “The expression ‘minority histories’ has come to