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# Meaning in Metaphor: An Interview with Otto Santa Ana

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Dr. Otto Santa Ana is Professor in the Cesar E. Chaves Department of Chicana/o studies at University of California, Los Angeles. His interdisciplinary research interests include language and social hierarchies, mass media representation of Latinos, and political humor. His most recent book, *Juan in a Hundred*, focuses on the interplay between language, society, and immigration.

**disClosure Collective (DC):** We want to start by asking you how you define Social Theory?

**Otto Santa Ana (OSA):** Social theories are efforts to make cohesive and comprehensive sense of our world, that can potentially anticipate, or at least describe, the complex and mysterious circumstances in we live. It's the writ large social philosophy. The best known social theorists (Marx, Hobbes, Bourdieu, Habermas) have latched onto a question they see as fundamental to understanding humankind (labor, social contract, habituated daily life, communication) and attempted to build a model of what it is that makes us do what we do.

**DC:** How do you employ a social theory framework within your own research, and can you speak to the relevance of social theory and what it is that you do?

**OSA:** I am not a social theorist. I'm an empirical linguist. Because I am an empiricist, I cannot imagine that any single encompassing social theory will capture the complexity of human life. But I think scholars who engage in social theory, indeed most lifelong scholars, begin with a gnawing worm of curiosity. My worm was planted in me when I had experienced how public school teachers treated the members of my own family in arbitrary ways. I struggled to make sense of linguistic inequity. Language was my entrée into injustice and remains my motivation to political action.

Teachers treated my second cousin, who I have always admired for his intelligence and curiosity, as less gifted and capable in school than me. Early in our small town school years, we were so excited. He more so than me because he always had the answer, raising his hand first, ready with the correct answer. I know because I would sit behind him in class to ensure my own success in classes. But later he became withdrawn. He dropped out of high school, while I went on to the university and ultimately became a professor. My gnawing worm was why Miss Bates and Mrs. Timmons was so unfair to my cousin, who I

always knew was highly gifted and primed for exceptional learning.

Lots of students are not given credit for what they have in themselves, because of their class, gender, race or language. They're judged tacitly as being inferior. As I grew up it seemed to me that the kids dropped out of school were often the smartest kids in the class, the kids who were the most capable. They were not encouraged to continue their formal education. When I arrived at the University of Arizona in the early 1970s, it seemed to me that I was alone in a sea of white faces. The only black faces I saw were janitors. And the brown faces were gardeners who took care of the grounds. As an undergraduate I was so uncomfortable speaking to the white professors that my counselor—literally—was a gardener who I sat down with most Thursday afternoons under the *palo verde* trees because he was an older wiser person with whom I could identify.

I was drawn to linguistics because of the gnawing worm, the conundrum of my early classroom experiences. As I became more sophisticated in my studies, it all made sense; it was the language ideology of the nation that commandeered the teachers' understandings of who the children were. The well-meaning teachers were not aware of their own biases. That is what led me to sociolinguistics and that's why I did work with Bill Labov. His classic article, "The Logic of Non-Standard English," made my public school experience much more clear. The teachers just presumed that the kids that didn't speak Standard English were less smart, less motivated, inferior; that they were incapable and didn't merit equal treatment.

My cousin and I had been treated differently in grade school because we spoke English differently. In the first grade an otherwise caring teacher dismissed his responses and ideas, while accepting my derivative contributions because we spoke English differently. My father spoke English natively, whereas his parents only spoke Spanish. I arrived at school with a full English phonology; my cousin was still acquiring the 24-plus vowels he would readily master. By fourth grade the die was cast, and our educational paths diverged. The irony of my family's story is that neither my cousins or my siblings retained our Spanish, our heritage language as young people. The US language ideology that privileges English over all other languages cheated my cousin out of his academic potential, and later robbed both of us (and millions of others) of direct access to the rich Mexican language and culture that enriched and situated our parents' lives.

**DC:** How do you see the theme of transnational lives fitting within social theory? What kinds of knowledge do you think transnational lives as a study can produce?

**OSA:** We're finally getting to the point where we're beginning to recognize that homogeneity is a fiction. I'm very excited to see people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century trying to look at all the diversity—actually actively pursuing diversity to see what knowledge we can bring to the table that hasn't been given equal access so that we can be richer in our understanding of the world. Now we think about multilingualism as natural. We used to think it was only male and heterosexual that was appropriate and normal, and now normal is far wider; we now interrogate the idea of normal. It's just the natural progression I feel that allows us to see the world as far more complicated. We find our similarities come out once we recognize that those people who we were ignoring, who had disappeared, who were effaced from our social world are really there and standing right next to us. So yes, transnationalism is a very appropriate question to address. I see that we are trying to describe the world more accurately. Clearly transnationalism is a central part of our world, far more than a hundred years ago.

**DC:** You're a founding faculty member of about the César Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies. Could you tell us about the founding of that department?

**OSA:** Chicano studies was like Black studies, a reaction to the white academy. It was part of the civil rights movement. Chicanos had been demonstrating in the streets, demanding better education, in Los Angeles since 1968. The “Blow Outs” were led by Sal Castro. Castro was a Lincoln High School teacher who guided Mexican American high school students. Brave Mexican American students marched in the street to demand a better education. Those students demanded a real education at a time when the history curriculum ignored Mexican Americans, when official educational policy forbade Chicano students from speaking Spanish, and where the educational quality was patently inferior, which left students with strong academic abilities little opportunity for college, and which presumed that all Mexican American students should be content with menial jobs. As can be seen in state and national high school graduation rates, and treatment of Latino students in Arizona by successive State superintendents for public education, the battle enjoined by the students of the Blow Outs must continue.

The same principles that Mexican American high school students protested had excluded, dismissed and passed over Mexican American in university curricula and research. By the early 1990s Chicano studies had only a nominal place in UCLA. The institutional structure of teaching and research guaranteed its marginalized position. The faculty who taught Chicano studies courses were formally situated 100% in the department of English or sociology, and held a “zero percent appointment” in Chicano studies. Their home departments of history or political science did not or formally could not give these professors credit for their time and effort in Chicano studies. The faculty who offered Chicano studies courses effectively volunteered their teaching. As far as the university was concerned, they might as well have been teaching astrology or alchemy out of their living rooms. Since it wasn’t institutionalized, Chicano studies was very difficult to maintain, few students could realistically major in this program, and it remained marginal.

So one bright spring day, the chancellor of UCLA decided to eliminate Chicano studies. His timing was impeccable because he chose the day that César Chávez was being buried. This was the one weekend that the world was focused on César Chávez and the plight of Mexican Americans and other people of color for whom he gave his life. Everyone made this connection. To honor César Chávez’s memory and principles of nonviolent political activism, twelve students and three community members, and one faculty member started a hunger strike to protest the loss of Chicano studies at UCLA. They went on for fourteen days. It became an international news scandal as these young people courted death in front of [the administration building]. The chancellor capitulated. He gave Chicano Studies seven faculty positions...by taking them from other departments that had been waiting their turn to add or fill a faculty position. The chancellor both formed the Chicano Studies program and created a tremendous reservoir of resentment against the new program.

I was one of the original seven untenured faculty brought to UCLA’s Chicano studies through a national search. Since our faculty positions had been commandeered from other departments, our credentials were immediately suspect. All seven earned tenure, and we have done very well. We succeeded because we had UCLA allies who helped us navigate the academic minefields. But because our program was created through a political action, we have met with resistance at the campus level. Instead of three or four years, it took ten years for our program to become a department, in spite of the fact that we had 100 majors immediately and have been graduating hundreds of students every year in the major. I wrote the first proposal for a graduate program in 1999, and in 2015 we only admitted our fourth cohort of graduate students. There’s been a lot of pushback from more conservative faculty who still believe we are usurpers.

Once we became a department, we named our department the César Chávez Department of Chicano/Chicana Studies. So we’re the only named department without a foundation or any sort of endowment. It reminds us of the reason why we exist, and the legacy that guides our work. We attempt

to combine social activism and rock solid scholarship. We strive to be activist scholars who do not compromising either side of the term.

**DC:** What do you see as the most important thing for the next generation of scholars?

**OSA:** This is a broad question. I will answer as if I were asked by a potential graduate student. How do you make your way into academia? First, lead with your heart. Find the gnawing worm that motivates you, that makes up your intellectual passion. I see a lot people who go into graduate school for the wrong reasons. Two, you have to be cognizant that academia is not a meritocracy. You have to go in with your eyes open.

Professors often tend to want to reproduce themselves, rather than attending to the passions of students and their future scholarship and career. I tend to presume that no student really wants to study what I have pursued, and try to judge a student's capacity and their conscious awareness of their motivations to pursue graduate school. Three, as you seek to refine the research questions that address your motivating intellectual passion, you must also recognize, as a graduate student, that you are in control of your education. You must be consciously strategic about making decisions. The academic world is far more competitive than it was when I was coming up. I wish you luck and clear eyed perspectives on what really is out there.

**DC:** How is your work, such as *Brown Tide Rising* and *Juan in a Hundred*, received in the Mexican-American community?

**OSA:** A former student of mine once attended a conference of US military veterans. While there he saw a vet reading my book, *Brown Tide Rising*, in the hotel lobby. [My former student] took a picture and put it on Facebook for me and said, "Hey, look, there's someone reading your work." I'm flattered and humbled because people do read it. It's very gratifying.

When I undertook the research that I wrote up in *Brown Tide Rising*, I had to create a methodology to empiricize a promising theory, conceptual metaphor theory. Its leading theoretician, George Lakoff, was creative and prolific. But he came out of the tradition of formal generative linguistics of the 1960s. In this tradition it was perfectly fine to treat his personal intuition as the only source for data he needed make any and all claims about the linguistic phenomenon he described. He claimed, on the basis of his intuited examples that he generated, he could make binding statements about how all American English speakers used conceptual metaphors to construct their views on their world, even as far as claiming he can intuit their political leaning regarding the presidential elections.

In contrast I was trained by William Labov, and he had demonstrated unequivocally that no individual has privileged access to the language a community of people use, much less the worldview of others. Indeed, American English is not a self-contained and codified "language." Instead language used in social life clusters around registers (namely speech styles, pronunciation patterns, vocabulary groupings). This means no one speaks all of any language. Each speaker of American English has more or less developed competences in using specific language resources. In formal linguistics the concept of the ideal native speaker should be dropped. In empirical sociolinguistics we now gingerly consider rather than presume shared meanings and resources within so-called speech communities. Thus to describe the heterogeneous language use of communities of speakers, one had to develop a methodology to gather appropriate data and to analyze these data. Whereas Lakoff just knew, on the basis of self-generated examples, what conceptual metaphors American English speakers use to construct their understanding of United States. His NATION AS FAMILY metaphor (based on no evidence beyond his own intuitions) led

him to two subsets of metaphors, that he associated with the contrasting political views of our nation: the liberal NURTURING PARENT metaphor versus the conservative STRICT FATHER metaphor.

When I began the work that led to *Brown Tide Rising*, I presumed I had no idea that the guiding conceptual metaphors would be. I presumed that I could not know without careful empirical study. This method uncovered guiding conceptual metaphors that were hidden in plain sight. Seven years of actual discourse in the US national public sphere (national and state newspapers) did not turn up a pattern of use of NATION AS FAMILY metaphors. Rather I found four highly productive metaphors: NATION AS HOUSE, AS BODY, AS CASTLE and AS SHIP. These guide thinking about how Americans think about the abstract political concept called “nation.”

One of the most politically and empirically salient metaphors turned out to be: IMMIGRANT AS ANIMAL, a conceptual metaphor I could not have anticipated. It’s difficult and often tedious work. But if we allow the inductive method to reveal the conceptual metaphors that people are using, we are often astonished at the findings.

**DC:** What do you think of the metaphor of a scar or a wound for the U.S./Mexico border, or any other metaphors for the border?

**OSA:** Consider conceptual metaphors to be conventionalized sets or clusters of related ideas. You can either attempt to retrieve them from public discourse, as I do, or create and promulgate them to promote a new way of thinking about a topic. Metaphors are shortcuts of conceptual reasoning, analogies, that always foreground some information and background other information. Consider love (which Lakoff did get correctly). There are only three metaphors that we use in everyday English to speak about love. But, if you actually think about what love is all about, it’s a far more complicated notion. It’s the most important thing in our world. We use metaphors as shorthand and then forget that they are conventions rather than self-evident realities—that’s why we’re blinded by them. The metaphors for love in Korean or Navaho do not correspond to those of American English. These analogies are culturally-contingent heuristics that we automatically use to make sense of a very complex reality.

You should also reflect on families or clusters of semantically related metaphors. So the BORDER AS SCAR, that’s been used a lot; it also opens up a conceptual space that doesn’t exist in reality. Notice that SCAR is directly related to the NATION AS BODY metaphor. Indeed, BODY is the same productive metaphor that Thomas Hobbes famously employed in his opus, *The Leviathan*, in 1650. You cannot directly attribute SCAR to Lakoff’s metaphor of nation.

If you are generating new productive metaphors to promulgate new ways of considering a topic, think strategically. Scholars, following Anzaldúa’s lead, have taken the BORDER AS SCAR concept very far. I would urge you to explore multiple metaphors. As scholars, you should be both complicating your world and looking at it in new ways. I would urge you to think about considering very different, even orthogonal metaphors, for any particular topic. Try sets of complementary metaphors. When you read the work of poets and scholars, you can draw from these sources. Each new metaphor will give you insight to aspects of that reality that other metaphors will not. Each will foreground and background different sets of material. Complicate your metaphors, contest them, juxtapose them.

**DC:** Could you talk about how you see creating metaphors that are productive, that are nourishing and life-giving?

**OSA:** A great example can be found in the history of science because we see a succession of scientific models (i.e. metaphors), that become the succeeding scientific paradigms that people operated with



across time. The histories of the physical, natural and social sciences are all based on a succession of conceptual metaphors that have been sequentially replaced by more observationally adequate conceptual metaphors. In the study of psychology, the metaphors of MIND have changed across time. One familiar example that I have used before is the increasingly obsolete MIND AS COMPUTER metaphor. This metaphor was preceded by the MIND AS ANIMATE BEING metaphor that arose in the recent decades in psychology. In fact, philosopher John Searle notes that thinkers across history have appealed to the latest technological device to conceptualize the brain. Thus in Searle's own youth, the brain was described as a telephone. Much earlier some referred to the brain as a telegraph. Searle states that an early British neurobiologist metaphorized the brain to be a loom, which was the first automatic weaving machine able to produce highly intricate patterns. Also in the 18th century we can find a more general form of this metaphor, namely MIND AS MACHINE. Earlier still Leibniz's metaphor was the mill, the most complicated technology of the 17th century. Searle even notes that ancient Greeks described the workings of the brain as a catapult. Each theorist uses metaphor as the basis of their model of nature and society. So, if we take social issues that are challenging and are problematic in our lives today, we should try to see what the limitations of those metaphors are and be poetic about seeking metaphors that are more encompassing.

Let's return to US public education. Public education is commonly understood to be a PATH. Look at the language we casually use to talk about education: we speak about our *curriculum vitae*, the *courses* we take, the *battery* of exams that we have to *pass* to graduate. Education is considered a path that individuals chose to *take* from ignorance to educated. Hence in the US it is considered a matter of personal choice, and the responsibility of success or failure lies direction on the student. When we use that metaphor, we impose that metaphor's framework of success and failure, of volitional responsibility and private responsibility on an elementary schoolchild. At base, the adults and institution are not implicated in the failure of a child who drops out, or off the path of education. Consider, we wouldn't allow a fourteen-year-old to get married, to make a mistake of that sort. We would say that that child was immature, not of age to make these adult decisions. And yet, we regularly allow the fourteen-year-old to drop out of school and say that it's their fault for having dropped out when, in fact, the child has been pushed out of an institution that does not accommodate that child's needs.

My students and I recognized the limits of the EDUCATION AS PATH metaphor, and sought alternative metaphors that would be better suited to the circumstances of the child. My undergraduates came up with alternative metaphors. They proposed the alternative metaphor of EDUCATION AS CULTIVATION. In this metaphor each child is likened to tree or vine that is carefully cultivated over years, and the school is an orchard or vineyard that is tended by loving and technically sophisticated viticulturalists. The timeline for productivity is not one year or one test, but a lifetime.

Alternatively, my students proposed that education be considered a construction site, and students construct knowledge like a builder builds a house. The cluster of associated metaphors—KNOWLEDGE AS CONSTRUCTION, TEACHERS AS ARCHITECTS and MASTER BUILDERS, STUDENTS AS APPRENTICES working to become journeymen—is a tremendous metaphor that we should use. These two metaphors, EDUCATION AS CULTIVATION and AS CONSTRUCTION, do not put the onus of educational failure on the child, but on educators and the schooling system. These metaphors are very much more apt for the circumstances of our public education system. Notice that these metaphors also fit the NATION AS (A MORE OR LESS CULTIVATED) BODY POLITIC, or the US AS (A MORE OR LESS WELL-CONSTRUCTED) HOUSE, which links the future prosperity of the nation to the quality of the public education. This linkage is entirely missing in the three productive conceptual metaphors that structure public education today, of which EDUCATION AS PATH is one.

**DC:** What is the place of education in combatting harmful metaphors, especially working to remove

racism from the way we orient ourselves to education?

**OSA:** In 2015 I think we're moving too slowly. But we did elect an African-American to the presidency twice. This was only a dream of my generation, when I was in my twenties. And it took until I was sixty for it to happen, but I'm glad that it has occurred. There is lots of hope; but there will always be a correspondingly strong push back. Political and ideological power is a finite resource. The problems we face today are very large. There going to be pushback, complacency, and indifference. In our society we have allowed public education to flounder, which has created an electorate that is not particularly sophisticated and easily manipulated. This puts our democracy at risk. I often employ two quotes on the political power of discourse and metaphor in discourse that are pertinent at this point as well. Foucault claimed that about the power in discourse. He wrote: "As history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle. ...Discourse is the power which is to be seized." Then there is Nietzsche. He was no defender of the weak. But he focused on the core feature of power. He once wrote: "What is Truth? It is a flexible army of metaphors...in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transformed, bejeweled, and which after long usage seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding." The struggle for power is the struggle for hegemonic discourse, and metaphor is the jewel of that and all concept building language.

**DC:** There's a lot of resonance between the metaphors used for Latinos and African-Americans. Can you speak to those parallels?

**OSA:** The metaphors used to racialize different groups of people have similar features. They are always demeaning. They are always limiting. And they're always delimiting so that they allow non-Othered people to sit comfortable and self-assured in their unmerited place of privilege. One lesson that I have learned in my work in *Brown Tide Rising* is that conceptualizing metaphors are most powerful when they are taken as matter-of-fact givens. The more that we question what privilege is and the more that we recognize and contest the terms with which the Other is constructed, the less natural and commonplace these metaphors become. Metaphors are conventions, not natural divisions in our world, so they can be altered. When privileging metaphors are toppled, then people will be seen as coequal in their differences. But it's a long term process. Privilege has its perks, so those who enjoy those perks will not readily give them up. That's why I try to do a little work in humor because I thought I had this glimmer of hope that I could inoculate young people about racist jokes and ethnic slurs. That's what led me to think about humor, how it affects children, in particular.

**DC:** Could you tell us more about your work on humor?

**OSA:** In 2006, I was leading a class; that was the year of the Great Marches where millions of immigrants and their supporters were out in the streets peacefully protesting for immigrant rights. My class was on metaphor analysis, and I said "You can study anything that interests you so long as it deals with immigrants and the media. Anything." So this kid says, "I love Jay Leno, but I hate his jokes." And that juxtaposition was so cool, so unexpected. I had never studied humor, but that is when I began.

Long story short, I realized that I'd done all the work on newspapers in *Brown Tide Rising* and the work on television news in *Juan in a Hundred*, and none of my students were reading that newspapers or watching network television news programs. They were watching Colbert and the Daily Show at that time. That's what interests, your demographic, the 18-30 year olds, and that is where you get your



political information. Through humor. That became extremely interesting for me.

I read this wonderful piece by Michael Billig, the British sociologist, on the history of the philosophy of humor. It turns out people have been studying humor for two thousand years. Aristotle and Plato wrote seriously about humor. They considered (correctly) that humor is an aspect of human nature, and they asked what does for us. Billig realized that every scholar of humor seeks an answer, trying to find something which is universal to our species. But we're all blinded by our cultural limitations. Each philosopher had his blind spot. Thus Aristotle lived in a slave-based economy, so he was blind to the fact that slaves were as human as he was. Freud wrote about humor; all his sexual jokes are just amazingly hilarious. But, he could not see race. He refused to see anti-Semitic issues. It was like he was blind to it.

And so I asked, "What am I blind to?" The one blind spot I have noted is that I tended to believe that humor is based in language. That's because I'm a linguist. But I laugh just as much at Buster Keaton's silent movie slapstick as I laugh at Robin Williams' verbal pyrotechnics. And I (we) respond in the same way to non-verbal and verbal humor. I am now a heretical linguist, since I believe humor is not fundamentally based in language.

That led me to think about humor in a different way. What that allows me to do is to place Robin Williams and Jonathan Swift and Aristophanes as different kinds of verbal humor, the cultural aspects of humor. But the foundations of laughter are pre-human. I looked for theories that would let me set up a non-linguistic based humor. It turns out Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson proposed an evolutionary narrative for the origin of humor that said our antecedents laughed together for five million years before humankind appeared to foster social affiliation. I am trying to flesh out a model of humor that builds on their work, and that of a great number of scholars from many disciplines, from biology to anthropology to philosophy and history. It is an ambitious project—but it's also a hoot!

**DC:** A lot of the people in leadership now grew up watching television versions of the cowboy hero stereotype you discuss. Do you think those narratives influenced our leadership, especially white males?

**OSA:** Yes, I do. The automatic reaction of Neocons in any international crisis is to send out the special forces. And if we are afraid to send out the special forces, we'll just bomb them from our drones. Now we don't have to send in the cavalry. We can send in the droids. But this is precisely the same response.

**DC:** Do you think it's possible to use the cowboy narrative to build a bridge between conservative mindsets and immigrant stories? Maybe re-casting the immigrant saving his family as the cowboy hero?

**OSA:** This already sounds like a great movie! Have you written the screenplay? Who would Hollywood cast as the immigrant hero? Matt Damon? Russell Crowe? Mark Wahlberg? Movies about immigrant lives almost invariably involve hegemonic heroes with a tan. Or they revolve around a White hero who saves the downtrodden and teaches the good town folk to be better Christians, like Harper Lee's classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

I shouldn't be so cynical. In the article you are referring to, "The Cowboy and the Goddess," I found clear evidence that the news writers are already using the Inanna story-type to capture the complexity the US immigrant experience, rather than repeat the simple American Cowboy story. This bodes well for a long-term change in our nation's view of immigrants. Each immigrant Inanna news story troubles the simple and false myth of the Cowboy western. The immigrant Inanna story challenges the values of the western myth, because it forces US news viewers to see the immigrant as a real person, rather than as a caricatured villain. Each time this takes place, the once taken-as-normal hegemonic worldview is challenged. But what we need to finish the transformation is a new narrative for the nation.

I likely will not hear an American president speak at a future State of the Union address about the nation with a post-empire narrative.