



Facing Our Dragons **Spiritual Activism, Psychedelic Mysticism and the Pursuit of Opposition**

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Abstract: In my work I am attempting to think about the relationships between self and global transformations in the face of deepening inequality. I am especially interested in engaging post-colonial, antiracist, and feminist transformations of the current forms of hegemonic domination that remain inside our knowledges here in the Western academy. In thinking through such a critical engagement, I keep trying to get at this subtle criticism of knowledge-power but I cannot find the words. I am arguing that the modernist knowledge-power project is still present, still 'here', even if it is no longer/never was the villain it used to be. Specifically, I am critical of the current Western science epistemology that is still with us. And more specifically, I am critical of the continued presence of rationality, objectivity and physics materialism as they continue to order discourse in the academy, in politics and in our popular culture at large. I would like to engage these projects in the spirit of taking up Anzaldúa's charge to work toward subversive knowledges, to take spirituality seriously, to find rituals that can help to banish this hegemonic sterility. Like the confusion inside any borderland, any cauldron of transformation, the way to such rituals is not always clear. I look to Anzaldúa for ways to enact *conocimiento*. Anzaldúa offers a road map that can help us locate the many oasis and pit traps that always lie along this landscape of exploration

In my current dissertation work I am attempting to think about the relationships between self and global transformations in the face of deepening inequality. I am especially interested in engaging postcolonial, antiracist, and feminist transformations of the current forms of hegemonic domination that remain inside our knowledges here in the Western academy. In thinking through such a critical engagement, I keep trying to get at this subtle criticism of knowledge-power but I cannot find the

words. The words available to me do not really get at the critique I am after. What I mean is less than/more than/other than ideology or spirituality or consciousness. I am arguing that the modernist knowledge-power project is still present, still 'here', even if it is no longer/never was the villain it used to be. Specifically, I am critical of the current Western science epistemology that is still with us. And more specifically, I am critical of the continued presence of rationality, objectivity and physics materialism

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as they continue to order discourse in the academy, in politics and in our popular culture at large.

But in trying to provide a criticism of current rational objective materialism, I am faced with constructing a critic with no available words. The critique of rationality that I intend lays at the edges, where it rubs up against other knowledge systems, the contentious knowledge border. This means that by definition, if I am seeking to point out the value of currently 'illegitimate' knowledge practices, the claims I make must be made in language built out of that basic illegitimacy. The available words doom you to communicative failure. You always end up saying what you don't mean.

In this regard, I empathize with the difficulty Gloria Anzaldúa must have felt when trying to discuss 'spiritual activism' (Anzaldúa, 1987b; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Keating, 2000, 2005a). In some ways, that is what I am trying to get at in my own project, trying to talk about experiences that some people discuss under the general heading 'spirituality'. But this is not exactly what I mean because what is usually meant by spirituality is not what I mean by spirituality. When I say spiritual, I do not mean the opposite of what a materialist means by 'material' because in that case we would really be saying the same thing. I mean what can't be said by what they mean by material.¹

In the introduction to *This bridge we call home* AnaLouise Keating describes this type of frame as "a spontaneous shift toward spirituality" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, 18). Keating describes her understanding of spiritual activism as a form of activism that

is committed to a deeper understanding of and reverence for the human world and as a form of spirituality that holds justice and peace as most central to its practices. She argues that for Anzaldúa spiritual activism was a synthesis of social activism and spiritual vision (Keating, 2005b). "This spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation...Spiritual activism insists that we all sink or swim together" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, 18-19).

Gloria Anzaldúa's writings speak very directly to this 'spiritual' that is more than/less than/other than the material that I am attempting to invoke. This is a primary theme in much of her postcolonial radical feminism. She argues against the colonizing forces of hegemonic white Western structures and cultures. She argues against this colonization particularly as it finds its way into knowledges, myths, selves and cultures. Her practice of feminism, her politics of the mestiza, insists on the creation of other ways of knowing, ways that broaden rather than narrow. "The new stories explore aspects of reality—consciousness, hope, intention, prayer—that traditional science has ignored, deeming these nonexistent as they cannot be tested in a lab. In the new stories, post modern science shifts its orientation, no longer holding itself to what can be validated empirically by the senses" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, 561). She argues that our new stories must no longer be held in the thrall of paying the penance of observation at the altar of the 5 sacred senses.

Anzaldúa writes as a scholar activist, as a member of the extensive community of feminists of color attempting to engage in intellectual work that speaks to inequality and justice. But for Anzaldúa, her practice of scholarly writing is completely and purposefully bound to her rituals, sacrifices and mystical and spiritual practices. "The

¹ I still struggle with defining 'spiritual' beyond what I know I do not mean. Keating's article from *EntreMundos* struggles with this issue explicitly. See footnote 1 specifically and her chapter more generally for a nice discussion of grappling with spirituality in this sense of spiritual activism.

ability of my story (prose or poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman" (Anzaldúa, 1987a, 66). Anzaldúa pursues her intellectual writing, her activism and her spiritual and cultural disciplines as one practice. This she argues, is what it means to do knowledge differently and to do knowledge so that it returns to a source that leads to 'conocimiento', or consciousness, or deep awareness (Anzaldúa, 2002). This alteration of our conocimiento, or awareness, our consciousness is our work of peace. "Consciousness is as fundamental to the universe as matter and energy" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, 573) and we must learn to be as accountable to consciousness as we are to matter and energy.

Anzaldúa found her spiritual intellectual shamans path in the borderlands of her identities. She drew on the rich practices of Chicana/o 'pagan' Catholicism and its reverence for the old spirits now addressed as virgin and saint and on her Indian pantheons of serpents and magic. She demonstrated and demanded the right to chisel her own place, a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—out of this lineage of feminist spiritual architecture (Anzaldúa, 1987b; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). She argued that the feminist practice of pursuing freedom required such spiritual architecture and that such architecture was to be fashioned out of the lumber available to us in the borderlands of identity. For white woman seekers such as myself, her advice was no different:

Whites, along with a good number or our own people, have cut themselves off from their spiritual roots, and they take our spiritual art objects in an unconscious attempt to get them back. If they're going to do it, I'd like them to be aware of what they are doing and to go about doing it the right way. Let's all stop importing Greek myths

and the Western Cartesian split point of view and root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent. White America has only attended to the body of the earth in order to exploit it, never to succor it or to be nurtured in it. Instead of surreptitiously ripping off vital energy of people of color and putting it to commercial use, whites could allow themselves to share and exchange and learn from us in a respectful way. By taking up *curanderismo*, Santeria, shamanism, Taoism, Zen and otherwise delving into the spiritual life and ceremonies of multi-colored people, Anglos would perhaps lose the white sterility they have in their kitchens, bathroom, hospitals, mortuaries and missile bases. It is in this spirit, in the spirit of multi colored rituals to banish sterility that I seek affinity with the many witches and scholars that also seek to conjure a conocimiento that might "divert the indifferent, right-handed, 'rational' suicidal drive, that unchecked, could blow us into acid rain in a fraction of a millisecond. (Anzaldúa, 1987a, 69)

DEATH AND FURNITURE: OBJECT LESSONS

Lord Sanenori once said, "As for the things we don't understand, there are ways of understanding them. Furthermore, there are some things we understand just naturally, and again some we can't understand no matter how hard we try. This is interesting.

This is very profound. It is natural that one cannot understand deep and hidden things. Those things that are easily understood are rather shallow. (Tsunetomo, 1979)

Haunting us with the 'residues' of what we have

lost. We learn that many people experience the [uncanny] feeling in the highest degrees in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. (Gordon, 1997)

I agree with Anzaldúa' that our work as feminist intellectuals must find ways to engage in "multi colored rituals to banish sterility." And Anzaldúa might be, would be, happy to know that I am attempting to take her advice. I have recently been reading books on Buddhism. Partially this is due to an interest in 'spirit' and partially this is an extension of the same intellectual project that has me reading Haraway and Sandoval and indeed the science fiction and the novels that I am reading too. I have been looking for such rituals in a variety of places.

For example, I was recently reading Shunryu Suzuki, a Zen Buddhist monk. He was discussing truth and knowing from a Zen perspective in contrast with Western science's accumulation and objectivity approach. One point he makes is that Buddhism emphasizes the subjective way of knowing. He argues that "to be caught by the objective side of the truth and rely on it with an idle attitude will not help. Even though we go to the moon, it doesn't help so much. As long as we rely on objective, scientific truth, it doesn't help. Only when each one of us feels the truth, appreciates, accepts, and is ready to follow the truth in order to study the truth, he won't know what to do when something happens to him" (Suzuki, 2002, 137).

This is part of the argument I am making about our current moment still inside 'the objective side of truth'; it misses, inherently, an important knowledge experience. How does this elaborate project we (us in this room or us reading this article) are engaged in hold up when something happens to us? "But at some point we have to face it. None of what we've learned seems very relevant when our lover leaves us, when

our child has a tantrum in the supermarket, when we're insulted by our colleague. How do we work with resentment when our boss walks into the room and yells at us?" (Chödrön, 2000, 115-116).

Take death for example. Death is always the bottom-line argument for objectivists—"ok pomo girl, talk your way out of death." In a sense, this actually makes death a perfect example for objectivists.² Death epitomizes the 'real'. It can be counted and observed and all (most?) (some?) agree that its prevention is truly a universal truth. However, I also think that death, as concrete, bottom-line-holding-up-objectivism, is also a fundamental fly in the objective ointment. Because no matter how many analyses we run on those numbers our own death continues to stare us in the face with a fear that we cannot rectify with quantification.

Objective knowledge cannot see all the important truths there are for us to see. Further an over reliance on objective knowledge acquired with a fetishized rational intellect such as we continue to be present with in the academy today actually clouds our vision in significant ways. I can see that when I look at scientist, hard-core-atheist materialists. I see that despite their certainty about 'the nature of it all' they struggle just as deeply as anyone when death comes and touches them and their loved ones. Now, I am not trying to make the same argument as Christian Scientists (the self-identified ones I mean here) who say 'evolution is great but you have to believe in God to feel good'. I am not talking about believing in god to ease our fear of death. I don't believe in god either, at least not in this conventional sense. But what I mean is that in our rational objective society, our re-

² For a good discussion of the rhetorical uses of death and table thumping as rhetorical arguments for realism see "Death and Furniture: the rhetoric, politics and theology of bottom line arguments against relativism" (Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995).

lationship with death is a glaring side effect of our current regimen. From our denial to our sanitation to our callous inflicting of it, death haunts us even here in the well lit tower.

I have met many materialist realist scientists who insist on the physics cosmology, their certainty in their own eventual return to the Great Energy Cycle and their own lack of fear of such a Natural Process, but I only believe a very few number of these people. And I know that whether I am giving this as a talk or as a text, that if I look around at my audience, there are many eyes that fear death and that when death comes there's not a book in the lab that's going to help ease that ache. And so, back to Roshi's point about knowledge...the objective knowledge can only help in some ways but it will not help us lose our fear of dragons.

PSYCHEDELICS AND MYSTICS

If you wish to go up the mountain,

Ask the man who walks up and down everyday.

—Ram Dass

Any premature closing of our accounts with reality which fails to take into account all of these other states of consciousness is an error on man's part because man has to be pretty pompously presumptuous to assume that he's already found out the way. (Dass, 1974, 56)

Anzaldúa comes to similar conclusions as she works critically with Western hegemonic knowledge. Anzaldúa believes that part of our own practice as Western intellectuals must be to face our deeply important dragons. The dragons that we do not believe in have much to teach us. Anzaldúa advocates a practice of spiritual activism for Western scholars attempting to move

outside of the colonial logics that still circle the tower like so many fire breathing reptiles. In my current work I am looking for locations that speak directly to Anzaldúa's urgings for moving toward such oppositional knowledges. I am currently interested in practices of mysticism and the occult, or what I have come to call heretical magic. And specifically within that larger body, I am interested in practices that have been informed by psychedelic practices engaged in mysticism, what I have come to call psychedelic mysticism.

As I mentioned previously, another location that I have been exploring in this regard is Buddhism. I was recently reading Dainin Katagiri's (2000) explanation of the role of the intellect in the context of Zen Buddhism. Katagiri's entire explanation speaks to my own critique of current hegemonic materialist knowledge in academic social science. I have experienced this resonance with other Zen writing and I can tell that such explanations are influencing my thinking and writing.

I began to wonder if perhaps I should focus on Zen rather than psychedelic mysticism for practices of spiritual activism. After all, Zen has become a relatively 'mainstream' and acceptable crossover for Western intellectuals, at least for intellectuals interested in oppositional consciousness. But this would completely change the context of the practices and parallelisms that are central to the way I see current materialism. The occult and specifically the tradition of the psychedelically informed mystical occult are deeply bound to current materialism as both have exemplified Western pursuits of answers.

In this regard, I am going to rely on and be in dialogue with 'the psychedelic experience'. Such experiences are, I know, both illegal and controversial. But it is the fact that they are 'controversial' that makes them potent. It is their illegitimacy as 'evidence' that makes them useful for a discussion of 'evidence' bound up in continued rational-

ity. Not only am I going to rely on such experiences as 'evidence', I am further going to accept that psychedelics broadly are a valid location for and practice of consciousness exploration. I am also going to accept the legitimacy of such exploration as evidence for an academic and even for a social scientific dialogue.³

PSYCHEDELICS AS WESTERN FORM OF MYSTICISM

Hakim Bey

So around the mid-twentieth century, technology begins to shift away from an imperial-gigantic from to a more 'inward' dimension, with the splitting of the atom, the virtual space of communications and the computer. And it was around that same time that the really serious psychedelics began to show up—mescaline, psilocybin, LSD, DMT, ketamine, MDMA, etc. etc. ...There is a very interesting link between technology and the psychedelic experience. (Bey, 1996, 10)

Hakim Bey is an activist poet philosopher whose writing speaks to my own projects perhaps as much as Gloria An-

³ Keating discusses this issue in her introduction to *Interviews/Entrevistas*. She calls Anzaldúa to ask her if she really wanted to go forward with publishing her controversial personal revelations including her use of psychedelic drugs. Both Keating and Anzaldúa recognized that drugs, not to mention her other experiences with hallucination and psychic experiences, are still open to intense stigmatization in this war on drugs culture. Anzaldúa assured Keating that she was aware of these issues and that Keating should go ahead. These experiences had been an important part of Anzaldúa's practices and that such knowledges as she was advocating required working with the illegitimate.

zaldúa. Hakim Bey floats in a variety of leftist and occult communities. His more dominant associations are anarchism and radical Sufism but he has had some involvement in the psychedelics scenes as well. I found his article "Cybernetics and Entheogenics: From cyberspace to Neurospace" (Bey, 1996) useful for establishing the connection of psychedelics and a Western mystic tradition. In this article he states,

Is it fair to make this comparison? Yes, to the extent that entheogenesis and cybertech are both concerned with information and therefore with epistemology. In fact, we could call both of them 'gnostic systems'—both are implicated in the goal of knowing that emerges from the gulf that seems to separate mind/soul/spirit from body. So the entheogenic version of this knowing, however, implies enlarging the definition of the body to include neurospace, while the cybernetic version implies the disappearance of the body into information, the 'downloading of consciousness'. These are perhaps both absurd extremes, images rather than political situations; they are also potent myths, powerful images. (Bey, 1996, 16)

In "Cybernetics and Entheogenics" Hakim Bey comments on the history of LSD. One comment is that LSD is the first synthetic psychoactive, "before it is the primitive world of plants" (Bey, 1996, 9). In this, perhaps the early LSD moment can be seen as quintessentially Western. It's the occult we would expect the West to build. The Eastern Buddhist tradition began under a bodhi tree and the West's began in a lab inside a sensory deprivation tank. I am bringing together science and the occult because they have already been brought together. Perhaps they have never been separate. Sci-

ence only pretends. Dr. Jekyll does not like to talk about Mr. Hyde but who would read his book if he didn't? And so looking back at 'science' 'now' can tell us about the occult now and vice versa. I have been looking for ways to get at this. And this is where Hakim Bey is useful. LSD is the first psychedelic born in the lab. The first drug made for cyborg consciousness. Materialized in a lab. Created in a lab. Ingested in a lab. Studied in a lab. Leaked from a lab. It is interesting to examine LSD as 'modern', the cyborg to the 'natural', 'pure' mushroom. LSD does seem to signify the 'culture' to the other-ed 'nature' in the psychedelic literature. Its another continuation of the old tropes and also a new and interesting comparison simultaneously.

GLORIA ANZALDÚA: UNCOVERING MY FATHER'S NAKEDNESS

I sit here before my computer, Amiguita, my altar on top of the monitor with the Virgen de Coatlapeuh candle and copal incense burning. My companion, a wooden serpent staff with feathers, is to my right while I ponder the ways metaphor and symbol concretize the spirit and etherealize the body. (Anzaldúa, 1987a, 75)

To facilitate the 'movies' with soundtracks, I need to be alone, or in a sensory-deprived state. I plug up my ears with wax, put on my black cloth eye-shades, lie horizontal and unmoving, in a state between sleeping and waking, mind and body locked into my fantasy...Once I am up, I can sustain several "shorts" of anywhere between five and thirty minutes. Usually these "narratives" are the offspring of stories acted out in my head during periods of sensory

deprivation. (Anzaldúa, 1987a, 70)

As I have said, I would like to look at practices of psychedelic mysticism. I am looking to these practices for the ways that they can enact *conocimiento*. I am looking to this tradition as one example 'spiritual activism'. A location where 'threshold people, agents of change, spiritual activists who employ liminal states of consciousness and ways of thinking as they enact their visions. By doing so they serve as models for others" (Keating, 2005a, 7). I believe Western psychedelics provides a model that is useful to walk through for how it does and does not employ these chemically induced liminal states for both the spiritual and the activist aspects of a *conocimiento* project.

I do see Western psychedelic traditions and practices as having much to offer intellectuals attempting to work through the residual emptiness lingering in the modernist project of rationality, objectivity and physics materialism. However, as I look through those practices and stories, I continue to be uncomfortable with the lack of discussions of power in the 'analysis' or 'mystical' aspect of psychedelic research projects. This is one of the reasons I would like to look at Anzaldúa's work.

I see a variety of ways that she is also purposefully and publicly engaging in a mystical practice with the intention of it informing her intellectual work. She clearly draws on experiences of hallucination and visions. She too has used psychedelic experiences in her various spiritual ritual seeking (Keating, 2000). Her practice is mystical, not just contemplative or spiritual. I would like to look more closely at her work around transforming consciousness through mystical practice as a form of feminist praxis.

Specifically I look to *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza* (Anzaldúa, 1987a). This work is non-traditional in both content and form. This piece is partially intellectual, partially poetic and partially autobio-

graphical. The themes of consciousness, power, knowledge, practice and feminism which inform all her work broadly are still central in *Borderlands*, but so is her reliance on mysticism and vision and hallucination. The format of her work is also an exercise in vision. She mixes poetry and prose and languages and metaphors to create a tapestry whose gestalt is somehow an example in black and white. She both speaks and speaks to *conocimiento*.

As I walk through Anzaldúa's understandings of spiritual activism and mysticism as feminist praxis, I can envision two themes that I would like to pay close attention to inside psychedelics as a path of *conocimiento*. One theme is dualism as a problematic epistemology. Psychedelic mysticism often relies on unexamined dualist tropes in their own analyses. On the one hand, psychedelic mysticism has been deeply heretical to Western knowledge. It interrogates the supposed separation of subject and object. It reminds intellectuals that rationality is only one way of knowing the world and a limited way at that. Psychedelic mysticism seeks toward oppositional consciousness. It often moves toward discourses emphasizing love, peace, holism, nonviolence and the development of views of the human world as sacred. However, psychedelic mysticism is not a new, more perfect replacement knowledge for an old flawed enlightenment system. These practices occur in the real world with real people who are all themselves embedded in global webs of power. I would like to examine psychedelic mysticism in the ways that it moves toward spiritual activism. But I would also like to problematize these stories and practices by looking at ways that they are still not accountable to power, where spirit remains detached from active.

I am interested in looking at feminist and specifically postcolonialist feminist deconstructions of masculinist knowledge traditions for ways that they replicate patriarchal realities by not being accountable to

current intersectional axes of power. In addition to masculinism, the psychedelic literature is also often unaccountable to colonialism and the politics of location in a global capitalist system. Nature remains an exoticized other for the 'civilized' world. The transcendence of the pure spirit or mind or consciousness over the muddy, tainted body is often maintained in ways that replicate dualisms associating women with the sex and dirt of the Old Testament and leaving brown bodies as representing the sacred garden in which the lonely civilized white man can reclaim his lost 'authenticity'.

Anzaldúa's work provides an excellent frame for thinking through such problems as these. Her work is situated inside the postcolonial or third wave feminist tradition. That tradition understands power as intersectional and coconstitutive. She pays attention to patriarchy and to race and to colonialism and to their intersections. Further, because her own experience is also centered on a mystical transformation of the knowledges of Babylon, she provides a very concrete sense of what nodes of power are most likely to be troublesome as we think about oppositional consciousness.

In order to fully engage psychedelic mysticism as a complicated path for pursuing spiritual activism, I would like to look at both its promises and failures. I would like to engage these projects in the spirit of taking up Anzaldúa's charge to work toward subversive knowledges, to take spirituality seriously, to find rituals that can help to banish this hegemonic sterility.⁴ Like the confusion inside any borderland,

⁴ Alexander uses this question in a recent chapter on spiritual activism. She asks "What would taking the Sacred seriously mean for transnational feminism and related radical projects, beyond an institutionalized use value of theorizing marginalization? (Alexander, 2005, 326)" This is a question that I feel is central to Anzaldúa's work and is central to what I am asking in these conversations with psychedelic practices.

any cauldron of transformation, the way to such rituals is not always clear. Again, I look to Anzaldúa for ways to enact *conocimiento*. Anzaldúa offers a road map that can help us locate the many oases and pit traps that always lie along this landscape of exploration.

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