

If identity is only a game, if it is only a procedure to have relations, social and sexual-pleasure relationships that create new friendships, it is useful. But if identity becomes the problem of sexual existence, and if people think that they have to “uncover” their “own identity,” and that their own identity has to become the law, the principle, the code of their existence; if the perennial question they ask is “Does this thing conform to my identity?” then, I think, they will turn back to a kind of ethics very close to the old heterosexual virility. If we are asked to relate to the question of identity, it must be an identity to our unique selves. But the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation.

The Unquiet Dead

Anarchism, Fascism, and Mythology

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5. The Masked Goddess: Self-Invention and Becoming

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‘Effective’ history, however, deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations. An event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked ‘other.’”

from “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”
by Michel Foucault

In the last section, I critiqued the tendency of some white feminists to create an allegedly positive definition of an oppressed class that carves the boundaries of that oppression upon the bodies of those who “cannot possibly” have experienced suffering. I want to next celebrate some positive efforts towards spiritual and feminist practice, reclamations of culture pasts, and interrogations of subjectivity: the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and, briefly, Saidiya Hartman. These writers, through their experiences of liminality and exclusion, create space for solidarity and mutual struggle through a shared recognition of diverse pain.

Next, we will think through the problems and successes of the struggle for access to spiritual resources by Aboriginal prisoners in Canada. Finally, we will think through a call for oppressed peoples’ cultural nationalism, as well as a critique of post-structuralism that proposes essentialism as a source of power for disenfranchised people. I reply via the work of Jasbir Puar, who calls for *assemblages* over *intersections*. Throughout this section, I meet my complaints about white cis feminists’ tendency to focus upon the white cis female body by interspersing a little poetry and poetics from some gender-variant people of color about their bodily experiences.

While I wish to prioritize the work of people of color in this section, I opened with a Michel Foucault quote, and I will close with the same. I am interested in the kind of history he describes—not a dry history of events, but a genealogy of power relations and their reversals. This reversal he describes, the “entry of the masked other”, is a dynamic and poignant moment within struggle—one that can be used by fascism to justify its battle to destroy the Other, and one that can be used by the Other (no longer other, but now just oneself) to fuel struggle. My interest here is in how the latter can be performed in a nuanced way, one that refuses to guard itself with character armor, or to take up power within the terms of hierarchical society, while still creating space for *becoming*^a, for movement, for social conflict against oppression. How can we, as disenfranchised people, recognize ourselves as actors without becoming subjects—and is this even desirable?

a Becoming will be discussed throughout this section. For a detailed exploration of the topic, see Giorgio Agamben’s *The Open*.

becoming

The process of self-invention through cultural reclamation, bodily reimagining, and the construction of narrative is a necessary part of revolutionary practice for those of us who have long been denied a sense of wholeness—but it is not an end in itself. However doomed our struggles may be, our attempts at self-definition are even more doomed when they are not part of material and social struggle. We must keep our narratives flexible, innovative, and in a state of *becoming*; they must not exclude, but invite, and we must not trespass, but share.

Arendt describes the problem with Marx, an admirer of Darwin, as his investment in history, nature, and the lawful progress of both. What would it mean if we rejected all these false narratives and lived lawlessly in a world of difference? How can we view Haraway's cyborg as a figure of possibility and productive non-utopian crises, to use it "to rebuke the disappearance of the body within post modernism"? What is the value of being at home in the ecological web of one's location, or in centering displacement? How can we marry monstrosity and technology in a way that explores the dialectic introduced by Cardenas in the beginning of this chapter?

I think we ought to begin by putting Foucault in conversation with Lorde. He said:

If identity is only a game, if it is only a procedure to have relations, social and sexual-pleasure relationships that create new friendships, it is useful. But if identity becomes the problem of sexual existence, and if people think that they have to "uncover" their "own identity," and that their own identity has to become the law, the principle, the code of their existence; if the perennial question they ask is "Does this thing conform to my identity?" then, I think, they will turn back to a kind of ethics very close to the old heterosexual virility. If we are asked to relate to the question of identity, it must be an identity to our unique selves. But the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation.

I. self-invention

Wittig's lesbian body is blood and pain and dirt. Kathy Acker's queer body is "fiery storms and other catastrophic phenomena." Mine is more soreness, longing and the inexplicable...

I know the risks, that domestic biosecurity forces in masks may show up at the doorsteps of pirates and those who would create their own autonomous networks of information, but to struggle for a world where people can change their bodies freely, the risk is worth it. We have to find ways to move freely while being motion captured, to imagine bodily insurrection through monstrous forms while swimming in images of perfect statuesque bodies with ideal features magnified to grotesque proportions. Everywhere around me is the image of the perfect body, but I want to exploit the medical system to give me an assortment of parts that is unimaginable and unnamable. I decided along the way that I want to have this body and this life outside of the names I used to have for myself, and now I have it.

"Becoming Transreal", Micha Cárdenas

I am profoundly inspired by the intersectional work of women of color feminists such as [Audre] Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa. Perhaps my poetics have been shaped by a life lived in many borderlands, from my birthplace of Miami, a water borderland, to the US/Mexico border of San Diego/Tijuana, where I lived when I wrote most of these poems, to Los Angeles, a site of constant movement and migration where I live now. I find poetic writing to be a space where I can mix many layers of experience and ideas together and allow a flexible slippage between them.

"Statement on Poetics", Micha Cárdenas

Cárdenas draws a lyrical portrait of what it means for one's own quotidian bodily experiences to be unacceptable, and therefore to live in resistance. In her statement on poetics, she pays genealogical homage to the "borderland" work done by Lorde and Anzaldúa, and her own material experience of living at the edges. These two examples of her work frame our exploration of the contingent futures offered by those who have never been allowed to unproblematically dwell within the dominant paradigm.

In her book *Self-Invention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde*, AnaLouise Keating argues that these three authors transgress the boundaries of both race and gender, conflictually performing multiple identities in the process of re/creating themselves personally, spiritually, and politically. “As they borrow from and rewrite precolonial belief systems, they simultaneously expose the limitation in existing definitions of ethnic, gender, and sexual identity and invent open-ended alternatives.” They create an “embodied metaphysics” out of their lived material experiences that escapes the essentialism and duality that white feminists often reinforce. Keating depicts Allen’s reinterpretations of Native ritual traditions, Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness, and Lorde’s self-re/invention via West African worldviews as forms of feminist spirituality that tend to conflict with the forces of misogyny and white supremacy. Their work shares the following themes.

difference

These authors tend to celebrate difference. Keating thinks this is because they all inhabit multiple identities simultaneously; to generalize this claim, Keating quotes Lourdes Torres’ review of various Latina autobiographies: “The radicalness of the project lies in the authors’ refusal to accept any one position; rather, they work to acknowledge the contradictions in their lives and to transform differences into a source of power. They find being marginalized by multiple discourses, and existing in a borderland, compels them to reject prescriptive positions and instead leads them to create radical personal and collective identities.” This self-basis does not undermine their theoretical work, as feminists tend to agree that the personal is political; one’s own experiences are the most direct source possible.

Keating sources this approach in the very feminist nature of these authors’ mythmaking; “consequently, the new meanings they create deconstruct conventional western gender categories, as well as cultural systems of difference.” While this strikes me as a “natural” consequence of writing from a feminist perspective, not everyone finds it so—we have already reviewed how often white cis feminists found it “natural” to reinscribe gendered difference in their writing. But Paula Gunn Allen described her necessary relationship to liminality—living on the border—as an outgrowth of her identity: “In an 1990 interview with Jane Caputi she associates her lesbianism with her Native American worldview and explains that “perversity (transformationality)... constitutes the sacred moment, the process of changing from one condition to another—*lifelong* liminality.” Within this worldview, liminality, difference, the inessential, is centered as sacred rather than problematized as exceptional; the Other is yourself, over and over again, which makes the violent process

“politics of the open end”, might we unabashedly stumble upon? Rather than rehashing the pros and cons of identity politics, can we think instead of affective politics?” However, affect is “always already within signification, within narrative, functioning as a form of critical resistance to dominant modes of being and becoming”; it too can be captured, and Puar asks “What do we make of the economic circuits that have already fully invested in affect—risk management, for example—and our collusion with these capitalist endeavors through our production of theories of affect?”

Each new theoretical framework we elaborate will provide new opportunities for us to betray ourselves. The only solution I see is to not become comfortable, to refuse to build a home within a framework that is secure enough that it may begin to be co-opted by others; to keep moving, to stay in struggle, to be always becoming our difference in a way that provokes wrath and evokes solidarity. Audre Lorde, who did this best, explains its grave importance:

We must define our differences so that we may someday live beyond them.

So this is a call for each of you to remember herself and himself, to reach for new definitions of that self, and to live intensely. To not settle for the safety of pretended sameness and the false security that sameness seems to offer. To feel the consequences of who you wish to be, lest you bring nothing of lasting worth because you have withheld some piece of the essential, which is you.

And make no mistake; you will be paid well not to feel, not to scrutinize the function of your differences and their meaning, until it will be too late to feel at all. You will be paid in insularity, in poisonous creature comforts, false securities, in the spurious belief that the midnight knock will always be upon somebody else’s door.

But there is no separate survival.

now for a view of ourselves not as intersections, but as *assemblages*: flows of power “where particles, and not parts, recombine, where forces, and not categories, clash”, “affect^g in conjunction with representational economies, within which bodies interpenetrate, swirl together, and transmit affects and effects to each other.” This allows her to elucidate the forces acting upon bodies without affirming essentialist definitions of the body; indeed, the framework itself does not really allow her to do so. Assemblage theory puts even the integrity of the body itself into question, and recognizes the infinite multiplicity of the forces acting upon and through it at all times. If anything, it needs to be accompanied by a bit of materialism to keep it from straying into utter ethical abstraction.

The assemblage framework recognizes affect as a shaping force within social interaction and identity, rather than strictly a byproduct of those forces; it disrupts linearity and ethical clarity, rather than glorifying, for example, queers as those who have solved the basic problem of resisting gay assimilation. “Queerness as an assemblage moves away from excavation work, deprivileges a binary opposition between queer and not-queer subjects, and, instead of retaining queerness exclusively as dissenting, resistant, and alternative (all of which queerness importantly is and does), it underscores contingency and complicity with dominant formations.” In contrast, Puar frames identity as “one aspect of affect, a capture that proposes what one is by masking its retrospective ordering.. what one was—through the guise of an illusory futurity: what one is and will continue to be.” It tends to reaffirm subjecthood, as does intersectionality more generally; but rather than the intersection between our various identities or experiences, the concern is now the juncture between our identities and our membership within various populations under management and control. To further identify ourselves with those populations, to affirm our own subjecthood, is in part to offer ourselves up as consumers or prisoners. As Norma Alarcón asked in her essay in *This Bridge Called My Back*: “Do we have to make a subject of the whole world?”

Puar sees the academic turn towards considerations of affect as a signal of identity fatigue; we have long since found the dead ends to the identitarian approach. Puar wonders: “If we transfer our energy, our turbulence, our momentum from the defense of the integrity of identity and submit instead to this affective ideation of identity, what kinds of political strategies, of

^g Affect: how bodies tend to affect each other; the way one seems. Affect is synesthetic and by “nature” indescribable except on the slant; it is “that which escapes.” (Massumi in Puar 207)

of Othering those not yourself rather impossible.

Celebrating difference without oppressively inscribing it takes many forms. There is the basically necessary intervention, made by these authors but also by many others, of theorizing a meaning of *woman* that is not founded solely in white experience, and of pointing out this failure in the work of others. In her “Open Letter to Mary Daly”, Audre Lorde asks why, in her book *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly drew her Goddess figures only from Greco-Roman mythology. Lorde opens: “With a moment of space in this wild and bloody spring, I wanted to speak the words I have had in mind for you.” This is a reference to the murders of twelve black women in the Boston area during that time—a pointed contextualization of Lorde’s critique within the actual violence that racism like Daly’s tends to perpetuate. Lorde continues, “I wondered... why are her goddess images only white, western european, judeo-christian? ...Well, I thought, Mary has made a conscious decision to narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western european women. Then I came to the first three chapters of your Second Passage, and it was obvious you were dealing with noneuropean women, but only as victims and preyers-upon each other. I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power.” While Daly might have defended herself from Lorde’s critique by saying that she confined herself only to speaking within her knowledge base, Lorde points out that Daly *was* talking about women of color, but absent a presentation of their cultural contexts and spiritual predecessors. This sort of unconscious bias and ignorance on Daly’s part is an example of the ways in which the white gaze tends to cut non-white subjects from history and paste them into a white landscape.

After incisively, painfully dissecting Daly’s racism, its impact upon women generally, and upon Lorde herself, Lorde appeals:

I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women... When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise. ...Mary, I ask that you remember what is dark and ancient and divine within yourself that aids your speaking. As outsiders, we need each other for support and connection and all the other necessities of living on the borders. But, in order to come together we must recognize each other. Yet I feel that since you have so completely un-recognized me, perhaps I have been in error concerning you and no longer recognize you.

This remark burns to the heart of the conflict: the blurriness of coercive homogeneity that breeds alienation, versus the recognition of difference that creates the possibility of connection.

While many cis white feminist authors, even if lesbian-identified, could not seem to help but push essentialist hate through their appeal to the feminine Divine, Audre Lorde shows us another way. When she describes “becoming Afrekete” in her autobiographical novel, *Zami*, she is drawing in large part upon the Yoruban/Fon God/dess Eshu/Legba. This figure is multiply-gendered, masculine and feminine at the same time: *essentially liminal*, if you will. Keating proposes that Lorde here evades the dualistic replacement of God the Father with Goddess the Mother performed by Daly, and even that made by Luce Irigaray (a more sympathetic figure than Daly by far.) Anzaldúa, too, reclaims the slur *mita’y mita’* (half and half) to describe the queer dweller within the Borderland: “half and half: both woman and man, *neither*, a new gender.” This is an interesting counterpoint to the white second-wave assertion of the essential difference of the woman-oriented woman, and is instead somewhat like Monique Wittig’s description of the free human as someone outside the gendered paradigm of the heterosexual patriarchy. Like Wittig, Anzaldúa argues that patriarchal constructions of gender imprison men as well as women; she opposes the binary reinforcements of gendered division that so many other feminists seem determined to affirm.

The question of the difference of bodies has proved a tricky one for anti-essentialist materialist feminists—but it needn’t. Keating asks, “[C]an we simply ignore the female body and, by extension, the fact that women’s bodily experiences have been controlled, defined, and marginalized by specific cultural ideologies? ...Can we write (about) women’s gender-specific bodily experiences without reinstating male/female dichotomies?” Certainly; it is done by writing about a wide variety of women’s bodies and bodily experiences, including trans feminine people’s bodies and experiences. While inclusivity can be gestured towards in large survey texts, the more important work of creating space for trans feminine and gender queer voices is a necessary reparation for cis feminists to perform. By writing about their own queer bodily experiences, Anzaldúa and Lorde began to open that space for others, as Cárdenas acknowledged at the opening of this section.

I think it is no coincidence that McClaurin’s critique of post-structuralism is so similar to Means’ critique of Marxism. Both speak to real problems experienced by people of color in struggle against white supremacy to open spaces for their existence within this struggle. I think that, whatever our ethnicity, we should abandon the struggle to become free in this world, to be ever-more ethical subjects and consumers, and turn instead to the complicity, rebellion, and solidarity illustrated for us by Lorde and Anzaldúa (as well as struggles discussed in section 8.) I am interested in, all at once, taking seriously the indisputable fact that people of color, white women, and trans people of all races have been oppressed in this country for generations; in affirming subjugated narratives; and in honoring the phenomenons of double consciousness, intersecting worlds, and multiple flows of power that many of us experience. I believe that the personal is political, and that political action takes place on all levels—in one’s self-conception, in small social interactions, and blows struck against the institutions that maintain hierarchies. I am interested by how people can reclaim their cultural pasts and speak their current lived truths without serving these forces—to neither be silenced and restrained from taking up power, nor to take up power in a way that ultimately serves the oppressors.

This is a tricky thing; sometimes it is a clear-cut refusal to cooperate with power even when it benefits you as an oppressed person, but more often it is an issue of tone. Deleuze, probably one of the post-structuralists of whom McClaurin is critical, calls for the project of *becoming*, as did Foucault in the opening quote. In contrast to an identity of “limited and measured things, of fixed qualities, permanent or temporary which always presupposes pauses and rests, the fixing of presents, and the assignation of subjects”, he describes: “The paradox of this pure becoming, with its capacity to elude the present, is the paradox of infinite identity (the infinite identity of both directions or senses at the same time...) It is language which fixes the limits (the moment, for example, at which the excess begins,) but it is language as well which transcends the limits and restores them to the infinite equivalence of an unlimited becoming.” It is this *becoming* that I see as a solution to the conundrum of forming identity that resists enclosure.

Intersectionality, theorized first by Kimberle Crenshaw and other critical race theorists of the 1990s, enhanced our understanding of how multiple forces of privilege and oppression rely upon each other and inflect each person’s life. This was a great advance, but proved its own limit, as we see in the innovation of white identity politics and the soft cages of social justice organizing. Jasbir Puar, following the work of Deleuze and Guattari, argues

precise time that others are being singled out as the new and primary Other: the presumed terrorist... Arabs and those mistaken for them, whether or not they have actually committed acts of terror. “The terms of degeneracy have shifted such that homosexuality is no longer a priori excluded from nationalist formations.” This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion also serves to queer the terrorist body and leaves black and brown, gender non-conforming, undocumented, and otherwise unacceptable queer people out of the new, “homonationalist”, gay citizenry:

Conspicuous consumption, class privilege, or signs of class inhabitation or rehabilitation through upward mobility—the “market virility” that Nast speaks of—join stability, longevity and duration, affective modalities nostalgically invoked as lost attributes of postmodernism, to present a recognized, well-integrated, publically valorized, and productive kinship formation: labor, nation, and simulated fertility—the productive citizen... These are attributes of the ascendancy of whiteness that stand in deep contrast to the black welfare queen, the accused Muslim terrorist who must register with the INS or expatriate himself and his family, and the incarcerated black or Latino prisoner.

This is aided and abetted by certain former Others who have become acceptable; Puar notes that the “ascendancy of whiteness’ in biopower incorporates the multiplication of appropriate multicultural ethnic bodies complicit with this ascendancy... Koshy adds ‘the accommodation of new immigrants and the resurgence of white ethnicity’ as compelling factors that ‘obscure the operations of race and class’ in transnational contexts.” The authors of *Night Vision*, a 1990s critique of neo-colonialism, call this process as it is occurring in the United States *desettlerization*—a reshaping of the terrain to oppress everyone more subtly and fully, which granting of rights fundamentally reaffirms the right of white settlers to exist here in the first place. Once we are finally given our own trees, we can no longer perceive the forest. This is no mere philosophical problem, but a real deepening of oppression, trickle-up misery; as *Night Vision* puts it:

...for a white woman to go to medical school and become a doctor, several Afrikan women must die to pay for it. We put it that way deliberately, to bring your mind up short. White women in particular assume that their careers are only a positive thing for the world. But since white culture doesn’t support itself, doesn’t produce its own daily necessities, every breath that white women take costs somebody else something. ...many women in the Third World must be robbed of necessities of life to pay the bill. White men don’t pay it, that’s for sure.

The feminist tenet that the personal is political is an important part of anti-fascist struggle, as well as broader struggles. Hitler acknowledged this in the inverse in a speech he gave at the National Socialist Women’s Nuremberg Party Rally in 1934:

If we say the world of the man is the state, the world of the man is his commitment, his struggle on behalf of the community, we could perhaps then say that the world of the woman is a smaller world. For her world is her husband, her family, her children and her home. But where would the big world be if no-one wanted to look after the smaller world? How could the big world continue to exist, if there was no-one to make the task of caring for the small world the centre of their lives? No, the big world rests upon this small world! The big world cannot survive if the small world is not secure.

The false dichotomy he set between the smaller and bigger world was a strategic move; destabilizing both is vital to our struggle. And those of us who were never able to perform the socially-assigned roles that fascism would like to reinforce are positioned to open the way. The authors of *Night Vision* say: “When european capitalism reshaped gender under its rule, they did so around class & race... Only upper-class women and women from the middle classes, the Lady & the Housewife, could truly become these artificial women, of course. By definition, colonial and lower-class women were excluded, had *failure to gender*, we might say.” [italics mine] Lorde, in her *failure* on their terms, may show us how to succeed in our sabotaging of gender and all that rests upon it.

For some, this sabotage has taken extreme forms. A member of Red Zora, an armed women’s liberation group in the 1970s, said in an interview with a German women’s magazine of the time: “The more women try to have legal women’s institutions instead of armed liberation, the less we have and the weaker we are. Which then only becomes the further excuse for more accommodation to the patriarchy, in a downward gutter spiral. Armed liberation *is* extreme. It is both mother and daughter of a new culture, which thrives only in a state of illegality and danger. ‘Women’s life is a conspiracy.’ This has been true throughout modern history.” Women continue to take up arms in self-defense all over the world. Whether or not we find ourselves operating in such a state of illegality, we are all in danger from the heteropatriarchy and its enforcers. Failing to comply with their demands, and conspiratorially, intentionally, joyfully living otherwise, is the only way to open spaces of safety and pleasure.

Keating observes, “Generally we assume that cultural identities are permanent unchanging categories of meaning based on biology, family, history, and tradition... Take the rhetoric of authenticity that associates ethnic identity with the discovery of genuine, previously erased cultural and historic traditions. In such instances, meaning relies on unitary notions of an authentic past. However, I would argue that these authentic identities are created, not discovered.” This self-invention is different from white appropriations in the name of self-invention: the authors are not operating from a position of societally-granted power, but are rather transgressively taking up their own power, both invented and inherited from disenfranchised cultures. It is this claim to authenticity on the basis of one’s own personal experience, knowledge, and ideas, rather than some anthropologically discovered past, that makes this act a radical attack on the sites of social power rather than a reinforcement of them. To dismiss the idea that your practice and life need to be validated by another is to begin a practice of actual authenticity—that is, to refuse to pursue authenticity, or to use it as a weapon against others. *Night Vision*: “...what is ‘natural’ to race, to gender & nation keeps changing, evolving just as class does, as society develops and new needs and conditions emerge. In modern times, the ruling class decides what gender, race & nation are, while the oppressed fight back by liberating and redefining for themselves these building blocks of human culture.”

The success of these authors with this approach does not mean that critique should be respectfully silenced; an interplay of questioning dialogue remains central to the practice. Keating raises questions about Allen’s right to draw from a multiplicity of Native traditions; Allen also denies that white people can participate in “Indian religion” while simultaneously offering up Native myths for white consumption. I am not convinced of Allen’s innocence in this regard—but it seems rude for me, a non-Native person, to dictate how she interacts with traditions to which she bears a closer relationship than I. Perhaps I am demonstrating my ignorance.

Keating makes a stronger claim in defense of Gloria Anzaldúa’s mythic reinvention of Coatlicue, an Aztec goddess whose head was severed because of her pregnancy, and from whose neck two snakes rose: “...Anzaldúa adopts this mythic figure to invent an ethnic-specific yet transcultural symbol that represents the particular forms of oppression experienced by Mexican Americans, as well as those experienced by third world peoples, western women of all colors, homosexuals, and those who differ from the dominant

McClaurin sums up her evaluation: “Moreover, while postmodernists and poststructuralists demand the demise of Master Narratives and Grand Theories, the place of subjugated narratives and marginal/minority/“native” perspectives in theory building remains unclear and tenuous. And so, while categories and rhetoric have shifted, power relations in everyday life remain enmeshed in identity politics as constituted within a modernist and essentialist cultural worldview. As Hartsock points out, it is difficult to see how the eradication of subjectivity can be politically deployed in the shaping of a new world order.” Instead, McClaurin proposes the tactic of autoethnography: the ethnography of the *particular* as a solution to the problem of double consciousness. This sort of ethnography is “a critical, reflexive, strategic weapon”; it “represents the speaker/writer’s subjective discourse, but in the language of the colonizer.”

McClaurin poses real questions, but an inadequate solution that seems likely to serve enclosure via identification. Each time a new explanation of an oppressed people is put into circulation, it becomes captured by the totality and becomes a new mechanism of control. Offering people representation in society via citizenship (e.g., gay marriage) or commodities (e.g., commercial hip-hop) simultaneously enhances the image of inclusivity and liberalism for the mainstream culture; silences/buys off/defangs the larger movement, reducing it to only its most radical fringe, which can then be incarcerated or mocked into oblivion; and creates a new body of patriotic and/or spending citizenry, ready to oppress the new Others. No one has the energy to oppose the wars we’ve been having in the Middle East for the last fifteen years the way that they did Vietnam; we are too busy enjoying the freedom to buy and marry, and, besides, didn’t some number of those people try to take that very freedom away from us? Even if we are not convinced that these wars are entirely just, we are scared, and buy into society as a means for producing a sensation of safety; meanwhile, our neighbors go off to become embittered or to die in increasingly ugly conflicts which have no right side.

Jasbir Puar illustrates one example of this phenomenon in her pathopening work *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. She argues that some LGBT people, historically disenfranchised from whiteness (that is, the dominant framework of superiority in American culture, the space of civil rights, representation and normalcy^f), are being welcomed into society at the

f “The ascendancy of whiteness is a description of biopolitics proffered by Rey Chow, who links the violence of liberal deployments of diversity and multiculturalism to the “valorization of life” alibi that then allows for rampant exploitation of the very subjects included in discourses of diversity in the first instance.” (Puar 3)

III. Theorizing ourselves

I was born in the gut of Blackness
from between my mother's particular thighs
her waters broke upon blue-flowered lineoleum
and turned to slush in the Harlem cold
10 pm on a full moon's night
my head crested round as a clock
"You were so dark," my mother said
"I thought you were a boy."

"To the Poet Who Happens to Be Black and the
Black Poet Who Happens to Be a Woman", Audre Lorde

In an essay called "Theorizing A Black Feminist Self in Anthropology: Toward an Autoethnographic Approach", Irma McClaurin advocates for "the value of strategic essentialism for Black Women as a productive standpoint strategy." She argues that opposing essentialism is a white man's game—that it is well and good to preach the death of the subject among those who have long been constituted as such, but that, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese says, many people who have historically been denied voices "are eager to seize the abandoned podium." She quotes Nancy Hartsock, who argues that post-modernists offer only critiques, no suggestions for how to replace oppressive frameworks with new ones; Hartsock calls for women to use their own lives as a basis for creating alternative realities, "an account of the world sensitive to the realities of race and gender as well as class."

While Hartsock's call appears close to the work I praised earlier, McClaurin's embrace of essentialism poisons her project. McClaurin seems to share the current project of American liberalism, which welcomes new subjects into the fold, restructuring the American narrative to accommodate them, without changing at a fundamental level. This liberal project attempts to support the idea that America was founded on freedom—that Native genocide, slavery, and other historical evils were aberrations from that principle that can be corrected rather than proofs that freedom through government has never been possible. History suggests that these reforms, while they will bring immediate relief to the lives of some, will serve to further strengthen the forces of capitalist productivity, enclosure, surveillance, and domination. Those of us who have contended with "identity politicians", people building social power for themselves on the basis of their oppressed predicates, now look with horror as their tactics seized and used by the alt-right—what was once a depressing twist become a weapon in the hands of whiteness.

culture's norms. She associates Coatlicue's primary split with the double consciousness she experiences as a dark-skinned woman in contemporary U.S. culture and with the hierarchic division between reason and intuition found in Enlightenment-based knowledge systems. By rewriting Coatlicue's mythic fall, she synthesizes cultural critique with the invention of new ways of thinking." Anzaldúa is sharing her spiritual heritage in a way that can be only uniquely hers by transparently reinventing this figure to represent her needs, her analysis, her struggle, and offering identification with her in the spirit of solidarity to variously oppressed people. Her right to do so is founded not only in her ethnicity, but in her personal lifetime of suffering and struggle.

Taking up these spiritual/historical figures is a complex matter. Ta-Nehisi Coates considers Saul Bellow's contemptuous rhetorical question "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?" in relation to his struggle to find the ethnic heritage he felt he needed to relate to while in college. Ultimately, he found Ralph Wiley's answer to be his own: "Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus. Unless you find a profit in fencing off universal properties of mankind into exclusive tribal ownership." Coates concludes, in retrospect: "My great error was not that I had accepted someone else's dream but that I had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft." While I believe we can use our dreams of escape as a means of constructing a real way out—not just for ourselves, but for everyone—Coates is right that mythology alone will never suffice to make this world a livable one, particularly not when it is constructed on the terms of our oppressors. He remembers his shock when attending Howard University: "My history professors thought nothing of telling me that my search for myth was doomed, that the stories I wanted to tell myself could not be matched to truths. Indeed, they felt it their duty to disabuse me of my weaponized history. They had seen so many Malcolmites before and were ready." Oppositional mythology is often related to the kind of cultural essentialism that justifies both white supremacy and reactionary cultural nationalism, and has to be partially undone before it can expand to include more truths.

Anzaldúa's mythology, meanwhile, affirms the importance of one's cultural experiences and the power one can find within them, while also asserting her agency in constructing herself. It reminds me of the (mostly unspoken) clash between queer people of *nouns* versus *verbs*. There are those who have always known themselves to be queer—"born this way"—and those whose experience has been a process with many moving parts: nature, nurture, and autonomous decision-making. The search for rights and legal protection

often relies upon naturalistic arguments, ones that frame gayness or transness or brownness almost as a disability^b—God or nature created you *different*, meaning less than the norm—so it is wrong for others to oppress you because it is cruel to persecute those “less than.” This tends to erase the possibility/lived fact of joyously, deliberately experiencing one’s own personal variance in defiance of social expectations—not living in spite of expectations, but living one’s truth, regardless of how it was formed. This approach can be problematic when it relies upon uncritically taking up others’ experiences, particularly when they involve a good deal of unchosen suffering, as in the case of straight cis people appropriating queer culture. Still, far better that straight girls experimentally kiss each other while drunk at queer dance parties than that we try to keep them in their lane, policing our hard-won garden of oppression. We must create space for *becoming*, not only for *being*.

challenge not complacency

While I previously identified white feminist deployments of “nature spiritualities” as an essentializing and depoliticizing force, these authors’ evocation of a multiplicity of brown Divine women serves instead as a challenge that removes the possibility of simple solutions. “Lorde’s metaphors of Woman combine transcendence with immanence... she declares that her power, although divine, is not other-worldly: she ‘did not fall from the sky’, nor does she descend gently ‘like rain.’ Instead, she ‘comes like a woman’—like an Amazon warrior woman—with a sword in her hand.” Keating sums up:

...Allen, Anzaldúa, and Lorde use mythic traditions to introduce additional levels of complexity into their works. They reject the male bias found in conventional western narratives; however, they do not simply “displace” or “delegitimize” specific stories or myths. By incorporating precolonial creatrix figures such as the Laguna Pueblo Thought Woman, the Mesoamerican Coatlicue, and the Yoruban MawuLisa into their writings, they invent new images of female identity that affirm their experiences as U.S. lesbians of color. Yet their revisionist mythmaking goes beyond the challenge to existing definitions of womanhood. As they replace the Judeo-Christian worldview with modes of perception drawn from Native American, Mexican Indian, and West African mythic traditions, they offer far-reaching critiques of western culture’s binary structures. ...In short, they develop transformational writing and reading practices that simultaneously politicize and spiritualize their work.

^b And, of course, many people with “disabilities” have fought against the same narrative as it is applied to them. I have found Amanda Baggs’ video manifesto “In My Language” particularly educational and moving.

no less myself. I find Means’ evocation of “oreos” and related slurs offensive, and wonder if he is making a gesture towards maintaining his personal political power with Native American circles as an “authentic” possessor and transmitter of culture, in contrast to certain other indigenous individuals. Despite this, he is also communicating that we do not possess inherent racial, biological destinies, and that wars against cultures must be distinguished from race wars. He seems to convey the possibility of being “white outside, red inside”, and would call those people simply “human beings.” I enjoy the idea that whiteness is the *actual* state of exception, from which one could pass into humanity, like Wittig’s escape from gender; Means’ is a statement which values border confusion and sharing. It is still concerning to me as a materialist; but materialists are whom his speech is specifically directed against, after all. I could imagine many white people, fascinated with what they imagine to be Native cultures and spiritualities, using this statement as a justification for their practices while ignoring Means’ larger message about cultural imperialism. To me, this speech is a good example of the limits and concerning implications of black and brown cultural nationalism—not the same as white nationalism because of history and social power, but ethically concerning nonetheless. Double consciousness may be a revolutionary motivator, but I fear the consequences of reactionary identity formation among the oppressed as well as among the privileged. If we want freedom for all, we cannot sacrifice solidarity on behalf of autonomy. Moreover, when we define ourselves on the basis of our predicates instead of our affinities as a means of group identification, we ignore our chosen differences in favor of those exacted upon our bodies by the power we oppose. As *Night Vision* sarcastically points out, those terms never even made sense, and continue to be primarily used to justify the extraction of cultural wealth:

Indians never united against the British or the Spanish precisely because they weren’t a race. They didn’t consider themselves any closer to other native peoples than to these new European peoples. That’s why there wasn’t an American Indian movement back then but there is now, now that they’ve been given a common language, a common ‘res’ experience, a common situation—and have been made into a race by euro-capitalism.... De-populating the hemisphere of its original societies was and is fundamental to world capitalism; it’s what made ‘America’ possible. ...Isn’t it interesting that even white feminists are asserting their Master race privilege to appropriate whatever they want of Indian women’s lives & cultures.... Don’t think this is racism, because for white women this is our race. And isn’t it our gender, too?

can only result in a total disharmony and a readjustment which cuts arrogant humans down to size, gives them a taste of that reality beyond their grasp or control and restores the harmony. There is no need for a revolutionary theory to bring this about; it's beyond human control. The nature peoples of this planet know this and so they do not theorize about it. Theory is an abstract; our knowledge is real.

This is a fairly essentialist statement, if one I am interested in entertaining; he asserts that “the nature peoples of this planet” bear truth in a way others do not. While some Marxists might argue that to de-mystify the world is central to the project of opposing oppressive forces that tend to mystify as a means of extracting value from the oppressed, Means argues instead for a holistic view of the harmony of all inter-related parts—a redeeming essentialism, one that counters a cold and alienating deconstructionist view. (This dualism is often a fundamental part of the white ecological mindset, as we have seen.) However, Means was careful to explain that he was speaking of the European cultural mindset, rather than Europeans as a monolithic racial force, a clarification specifically meant as an anti-essentialist gesture, though one that winds up being problematic itself:

At this point, perhaps I should be very clear about another matter, one which should already be clear as a result of what I've said. But confusion breeds easily these days, so I want to hammer home this point. When I use the term European, I'm not referring to a skin color or a particular genetic structure. What I'm referring to is a mind-set, a worldview that is a product of the development of European culture. Peoples are not genetically encoded to hold this outlook, they are acculturated to hold it. The same is true for American Indians or for the members of any other culture.

It is possible for an American Indian to share European values, a European worldview. We have a term for these people; we call them “apples” — red on the outside (genetics) and white on the inside (their values). Other groups have similar terms: Blacks have their “oreos”; Hispanos have “coconuts” and so on. And, as I said before, there are exceptions to the white norm: people who are white on the outside, but not white inside. I'm not sure what term should be applied to them other than “human beings.”

This is interesting, terrible, and important as a critique to my general proposal. The internal-facing process of proving who is “really” a member of an ethnic group has been a source of great pain for many people of color,

That is, their work is not merely descriptive or inventive; it acts in direct conflict with white supremacy and the heteropatriarchy. As Keating says, these authors are “agents of transformation who use myth to bring about concrete material change.” While it is a revolutionary act for a person of color to know themselves and live into their power, these authors do not stop there—they have fought/are fighting for actual social change in the world. Anzaldúa describes herself as writing her body from and into the world—a spiritual, magical, and material act, one that does not stop at identity. This orientation towards action and struggle, in company with their resolute disinterest in essentialism and serving power, helps to prevent their mythmaking from stultifying into a new framework of oppression. Instead, these authors create opening: a landscape upon which to perform *becoming*, one rich with knowledge, suffering, complication, and joy. Within, they describe their own experiences and choices to *become*, opening the way for the rest of us to do the same. They do not build high fences around this land, nor patrol its borders. Rather, we are invited to traverse our own series of crevasses and canyons, peaks and valleys, warring with and creating the world around us as we move. For we readers to live in community with these authors, recognizing not only our pleasurable similarities but the delightful impossibility of our consensus, is to have tools for our daily conflictual interactions in the world: swords in our hands.

Displacement as a dis/place from which to fight

Saidiya Hartman tells us,

The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger. Torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider. She is the perpetual outcast, the coerced migrant, the foreigner, the shamefaced child in the lineage. Contrary to popular belief, Africans did not sell their brothers and their sisters into slavery. They sold strangers: those outside the web of kin and clan relationships, nonmembers of the polity, foreigners and barbarians at the outskirts of their country, and lawbreakers expelled from society. In order to betray your race, you had first to imagine yourself as one. The language of race developed in the modern period and in the context of the slave trade. The very term ‘slavery’ derived from the word ‘Slav’, because Eastern Europeans were the slaves of the medieval world.

...For Europeans, race established a hierarchy of human life, determined which persons were expendable, and selected the bodies that could be transformed into commodities. For those chained in the lower decks

of a slave ship, race was both a death sentence and the language of solidarity. The vision of an African continental family or a sable race standing shoulder to shoulder was born by captives, exiles, and orphans and in the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade. Racial solidarity was expressed in the language of kinship because it both evidenced the wound and attempted to heal it. The slave and the ex-slave wanted what had been severed: kin. Those in the diaspora translated the story of race into one of love and betrayal.

In Hartman's narrative, race itself is founded in forcible displacement; a difference generated by material action that has since become essentialized. But her project is not one of healing this displacement through cultural palinogenesis; that she identifies as a toxic path. Rather, she finds strength, revolutionary inspiration, and an empathy based in pain from her relationship to these unquiet dead. As fascists occupy the semiotic—and sometimes literal—territory of *home*, we must explore the terrain of displacement.

Hartman journeyed to Ghana to retrace ancient slave-trading routes, in an attempt to make sense of her ethnic history and narrative in a way that broke free of this narrative of race. She was met with hostility, contempt, and indifference... as she had half-expected. "The country in which you disembark is never the country of which you have dreamed. The disappointment was inevitable. What place in the world could sate four hundred years of yearning for a home? Was it foolish to long for a territory in which you could risk imagining a future that didn't replicate the defeats of the present?" Indeed, she says, "Most Ghanians were Christian, respectful of hierarchy and authority to a fault, straitlaced, and wary of foreigners in need of love. The country that most of us had come running from was the one of which they dreamed. They would have traded places with us in the blink of an eye." This experience of hers profanes the myth of return propagated by some black nationalists and many white supremacists. The original sin of forcible departure via enslavement does not negate the current struggles of the Ghanians she met, and the reality of black suffering in the United States does not affect its mythic status as a post-scarcity land of possibility and freedom for some abroad.

Hartman tells the story of U.S. black liberationists who went to Ghana when it won independence, shedding tears of celebration. In particular, she says, "An apocryphal story captures the bittersweet quality of these tears. Vice President Nixon, who attended the ceremonies [of Ghanaian independence] as the head of the U.S. delegation, asked a group of jubilant men, 'How does

And, of course, these complications are by no means limited to gender. While people are cited several times in this book as saying that the Creator does not see color, that race is essentially imaginary—a sentiment I am happy to echo—when a non-Native woman was hired to perform Aboriginal spiritual functions at a prison, inmates protested until she was replaced. This protest, equally, makes sense to me. This tension illustrates the difference between non-indigenous people being invited to show up with respect and a willingness to be peripheral to other people's culture, and the forcible insertion of non-Native people, either by themselves or by the system, into private religious ceremonies. To show hospitality towards white participants is not the same as to invite wholesale white appropriation and dominance over one's culture.

oppressed nationalisms

"The theory relieved me of certain troubling questions—this is the point of nationalism..."

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, on black nationalism

There is, of course, no united indigenous perspective on these issues; indigenous Americans are not a homogenous group, a fact that many would-be allies seem to find unclear. Russell Means, formerly a prominent member of the American Indian Movement and one of the defendants in the Wounded Knee trial I referenced earlier, offered one perspective in his 1980 speech at the Black Hills International Survival Gathering. Rather pointedly, he framed his call in European words: those associated with cultural nationalism, politically reminiscent of Fanon, Césaire, and other philosophers/actors who have underpinned the forces of black nationalist formations. Means spoke against the Native use of Marxism, seeing it as a form of cultural suicide for indigenous Americans to adopt European frameworks, even those that intentionally position themselves as anti-colonialist. He spoke against the European de-spiritualization of the world, seeing this as the fundamental driving force of environmental destruction and genocide:

There is the traditional Lakota way and the ways of the other American Indian peoples. It is the way that knows that humans do not have the right to degrade Mother Earth, that there are forces beyond anything the European mind has conceived, that humans must be in harmony with all relations or the relations will eventually eliminate the disharmony. A lopsided emphasis on humans by humans—the European's arrogance of acting as though they were beyond the nature of all related things—

which includes smudging with sweetgrass. The teaching imparts a view of proper sexuality, between male and female, and characterized by consent.

While teaching consent is important in all communities, linking consent and heterosexuality—especially in the context of the male-on-male sexual assault that sometimes occurs in prison—is an irresponsible and homophobic gesture. By asserting, as Campbell's teaching goes on to do, that the sacred pipe reflects the natural order of the universe as well as how human sexuality is supposed to function, homosexual interactions are implicitly portrayed as unnatural, unhealthy, and on the level of unconsensual sex in general. However, these are the teachings of just one practitioner. Many Aboriginal cultures have legacies of respect for what Western society would call homosexuals or transgender people, as Lorde, Anzaldúa and Allen have discussed at length; the cultural terms of the situation are simply different than they are in dominant white society. Perhaps, for example, my objection is nonsensically rooted in a Western conception of gender that is not relevant to this Elder's cultural framework. And, while I am afraid his teaching may inculcate or affirm homophobic viewpoints in his audience, or hurt queer people receiving his teachings in ways similar to how homophobic perspectives within the Abrahamic religions have impacted queers for centuries, this one person's perspective does not broadly indict Native spiritualities. Moreover, it is deeply hypocritical for white observers to search for homophobia or sexism only within the cultures of people of color... as it not only exists but is heavily armed within white society. Such efforts are likely to produce more of the oppression we ostensibly oppose, as we saw in the case of Mary Daly.

Waldram also discusses the difficulties incarcerated practitioners and visiting Elders have had in relation to female guards touching sacred objects, or being present for rituals while menstruating; they explain that women are seen as spiritually powerful, especially when menstruating, and that they could have a destructive impact on the ceremonies. Again, this is not necessarily a simple case of misogyny, because those lenses are designed for discussing white, Western culture. That does not mean that women do not suffer misogyny within Native cultures, or that outsider women interacting with Native spirituality do not deserve rights—but it means that each difficult interaction must be handled with specific understanding, intention, and a willingness to be open to the complicated perspectives made necessary by these interwoven histories and oppressions. That is true in all instances of oppression; it is just easier to see when we are trying to be careful of each other's obvious wounds and histories. There are no good solutions to a world still governed by prison.

it feel to be free?' 'We don't know,' they replied. 'We're from Alabama.'" Still, Hartman reflects, "I envied them. In the sixties it was still possible to believe that the past could be left behind because it appeared as though the future, finally, had arrived; whereas in my age the impress of racism and colonialism seemed nearly indestructible. ...I knew that no matter how far from home I traveled, I would never be able to leave my past behind. I would never be able to imagine being the kind of person who had not been made and marked by slavery. I was black and a history of terror had produced that identity. ...There was no going back to a time or place before slavery, and going beyond it no doubt would entail nothing less momentous than yet another revolution."

This hopeless, fundamental, and permanent displacement is a reality of many struggles, from those of the African Diaspora to that of the refugees now arriving on the doorstep of a Western Europe that offers no refuge. It is a rebuke to the essentialist notions of home, place, and belonging that are so important to fascism. There is the idea of making a new home for oneself, but even those new homes remain contingent: "The slave and the master understand differently what staying implies. The transience of the slave's existence still leaves its traces in how black people imagine home as well as how we speak of it. We may have forgotten our country, but we haven't forgotten our dispossession. It's why we never tire of dreaming of a place that we can call home, a place better than here, wherever here might be. It's why one hundred square blocks of Los Angeles can be destroyed in an evening. We stay there, but we don't live there. Ghettos aren't designed for living."

Visiting Ghana brought Hartman no remedy for her sense of displacement. The chief of a town she visited, Salaga, told her as she left, "Salaga is your home. Come and build a house here. We welcome it." But this brought her no comfort. "I was an orphan and the breach between me and my origins was irreparable... At last someone was saying, 'There is a place for you here,' and it sent me running in the opposite direction. But I was not seeking a proxy for a relationship severed centuries ago. Fictive kinship was too close to the heart of slavery's violence for my comfort. Perhaps this was the bastard's view, disloyal to both blood and house." It is this *disloyalty*, generated by *displacement*, that generates such rich and creative critique from those exiled to the borderlands, beyond possibility of any belonging.

II. Practice

They are right when they say
all women bleed.
Perhaps this is our menstrual cycle. Minstrel cycle. 28
days of blood. How many murders?
Lip-sync contests?
Tranny shows?
As if blood could only flow
from one orifice.

“Cycle Undone”, Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán

Bodies—cultural, corporeal, terrestrial—converge, accrue meaning through layers, weaving of communal and personal memory... . . . Stories nest, within and adjacent one another, linking fragments and history/herstory, as the narrative moves toward, and away from, wholeness.

“Carved Crimson into the Bark of a White Page: A Queer/Trans Womanist Indigenous Colored Poetics”, Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán

Indigenous prisoners in Canada have fought, through hunger strikes and other forms of activism, for the right to practice certain spiritual ceremonies with the aid of Aboriginal Elders. They have won formal consent in many places, but often continue to face hostility from prison guards and authorities. James Waldram, author of *The Way of the Pipe*, hopes to demonstrate to such authorities why supporting the practice of Native spiritualities within prison is in their best interest. He intends to explain and legitimize these practices for prison authorities and the therapeutic community, to remove them from the realm of strictly cultural/religious practices that are only sometimes tolerated and to instead situate them as necessarily available therapeutic experiences. His is an inherently colonialist goal, if one done with good intentions—it is the same conundrum faced by all sympathetic allies who wish to negotiate between the cultural practices of the oppressed and those in power. I will examine Waldram’s motives to find how these practices and their advocates are in solidarity with Aboriginal and prisoner struggles; how these practices and/or their explanation serve to undermine those struggles; how these Native practitioners negotiate their spiritual practices within the context of an extremely oppressive environment—and how this relates to issues of cultural identity. I will use the terms Aboriginal, Native, and indigenous to refer to Native American people throughout this section.

individual experiences are situated within the historical context, Elders make the individual responsible for change in their own life. This is simultaneously empowering, realistic, and an unfair distribution of responsibility. While it is true that the victims of racism are frequently the primary agents of opposing racism, it is hardly just.

While it may not feel relevant to atheist readers, it would be patronizing and ignorant to ignore the practitioners’ understanding of healing/resistance as stemming from Divine sources. I am reminded of the Lakota spiritual practice of the Ghost Dance, in relation to both the Wounded Knee massacre of the 1890s and the Wounded Knee standoff of the 1970s, at which Russell Means announced, “The white man says that the 1890 massacre was the end of the wars with the Indian, that it was the end of the Indian, the end of the Ghost Dance. Yet here we are at war, we’re still Indians, and we’re Ghost Dancing again.” The Ghost Dance was originally performed both in *substitution* to violent resistance to white domination, and as *escalation* of that resistance—though it did not have any obviously violent aspects, it still affected whites strongly enough that they murdered 300 Ghost Dancers and children over it, and put Means and others on trial for their related “occupation” a hundred years later. This is a kind of weaponized spirituality, one that Anzaldúa also claims as part of her self-definition as a poet-shaman—she writes resistance into the world. Native spiritual practices are not reducible to therapy or culture—they are acts of Divine connection and, under white supremacy, resistance. White culture will continue to suppress them to the extent it finds them a threat.

While I feel that for indigenous people, particularly those living in conditions of intense repression, to connect to spiritual practices that have historically been a part of their culture exists in stark contrast to the appropriative white practices I examined in the first half of this essay, I do not want to fall into a culturally relativistic trap that condones and supports all interpretations of that spirituality as performed by indigenous practitioners. I must object to the teachings of the Saulteaux Elder Campbell Papequash that Waldram cites in relation to healthy sexuality and the sacred pipe:

In this teaching, Campbell emphasizes that the pipe exists in two pieces that must be put together properly to communicate with the Creator. The stem is viewed as masculine and the bowl as feminine. When the stem is inserted into the proper place in the bowl (i.e., the stem hole, and not the bowl), the pipe comes together properly in unity. Furthermore, this unity of stem and bowl can only be achieved after the proper ceremony,

despite the cultural blurring produced by the conflation of various tribal practices and participants into these ceremonies—was of great benefit in recovering from personal trauma, refraining from participation in violence, and healing from white supremacy at large. However, some inmates feel unable to participate in ceremonies behind the walls of a prison, believing that to do so would be sacrilegious, as prisons are far from sacred ground. For those who grew up in a traditional environment, the differences between their culture and the culture of the Elder who works at the prison—or the sort of pan-Aboriginality often offered—are sometimes too vast. Still, individuals from all of these trajectories may have cultural needs met by these spiritual practices. For the latter two, this was often their first opportunity to undo their internalized racism and form healthy, positive identities as Native people. Waldram sees prison practices of Aboriginal spirituality as a form of mythic healing; the narrative, delivered sometimes through symbols and sometimes more directly, is something like, “This is who we were; this is what happened to us. Here is the wrong way in which we have been living; but, through these changes in attitude and lifestyle, we can live right again. Someday the world will be better.” This stands in interesting relationship to the current experiments with cognitive-behavioral therapy among “at-risk” youth in Chicago^e, which focuses simply on getting youth to think through their options and not respond immediately with violence, rather than on changing their entire worldview. While the two projects share the same goal from an institutional standpoint (rehabilitating black and brown men at risk of performing or suffering from violence), this effort around access to Aboriginal spirituality is much bigger than rehabilitation—it can create a shift in worldview that recenters practitioners in their community and history.

This narrative restructuring also occurs on a political level, allowing people to understand their histories as partially the result of living under colonialism and oppression rather than as the inevitable consequence of racial or personal evil. Waldram says about the counseling inmates receive from Elders, “A specific individual’s problems are therefore placed within the context of historical factors; these problems are invariably defined as a loss of culture and spirituality leading to a crisis in identity. Treatment, then, entails cultural and spiritual education with the goal of rebuilding self-esteem and pride as an Aboriginal person.” People’s experiences of sacred circles sound not unlike people’s experiences with feminist consciousness-raising groups—a place to discuss problems, offer non-prescriptive feedback, and build a sense of solidarity through sharing similar identities and experiences. However, after

^e See the group “Becoming A Man”, working in collaboration with the University of Chicago Crime Lab.

If it is a revolutionary act for people of color to understand and love themselves, this must be particularly true for Native prisoners. Native people in North America, although individual and community experiences vary widely, are coming generally from the collective trauma of centuries of disenfranchisement, deliberate cultural destruction, murder and torture, and continued life under white supremacy. In specific, many Native people were imprisoned or murdered in the past for practicing these same spiritual traditions. For many Aboriginal people today, the legacy of white supremacy includes living in poverty, struggles with alcoholism and/or drug use, domestic violence and sexual assault; many suffer from PTSD. In both the US and Canada, indigenous people are arrested and imprisoned at vastly disproportionate rates. This means that a large percentage of the Native population are living in the traumatic environment of prison while also struggling with personally traumatic pasts. To one degree or another, these prisoners have also been disenfranchised of their culture, forced to exist within a white context with which they have varying levels of familiarity and comfort. The entire criminal justice system is at odds with traditional Aboriginal value systems; traditional indigenous prisoners are often seen as defiant by racist prison authorities in situations of simple cultural conflict (e.g., not making eye contact is a sign of disrespect in white culture, but a sign of respect in many traditional Native cultures.) 84% of the 249 Aboriginal inmates Waldram spoke to saw prison as a racist place.

Waldram met with some resistance in persuading Native practitioners to speak with him; he says “While confidentiality was offered, some inmates were not easily convinced that no matter how honest and sincere we were, ‘information’ would not find its way to the administration and ultimately be harmful to them. ...I found myself walking into an environment in which ‘research’ was a dirty, exploitative concept.” Nor were these inmates wrong. While Waldram may have felt a personal commitment to not passing on information to the authorities about specific transgressions, his larger intention of convincing prisons that Native spirituality practices are safe and produce docile, reformed prisoners *helps to make that claim the case*. The prison only finds these healing practices acceptable insofar as they serve the goals of the prison; to believe the institution at large cares about healing inmates or serving the cultural needs of people of color is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of prison—arguably the most violent enforcer of white supremacy within North American society today.^c To some degree, the radical potential this project may have had in terms of challenging the existence of the prison system or its right to incarcerate indigenous people is

^c See *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander.

dethorned by this process. To render indigenous spirituality more intelligible to white eyes is, in part, to continue the process of colonial exploitation.

If one conceives of prisons as instruments of domination and oppression rather than flawed but necessary social institutions, everything comes a bit more into focus. The extent to which prisons oppose the performance of these spiritual practices is the extent to which they are still married to the old, explicitly violent forms of human management through cultural disenfranchisement; the degree to which they support it is a reflection of their new interest in fostering self-management and self-rehabilitation among inmates—the self as the final privatization of corrections. On a practical level, “the spiritual path is also a path of nonviolence”—and, while teaching non-violence to people who have often been submerged in domestic or gang violence can be an extraordinarily needed intervention, it is also a means of defanging the resistance of oppressed people.^d Waldram says explicitly: “It is evident that... the sweats [sweatlodge ceremonies] also serve an important institutional function, by reducing stress and illegal activity within the prison.” One practitioner became such a success through his combination of practicing Aboriginal spirituality and completing a psychological program at a psychiatric correctional institution that he was invited to stay in a semi-professional capacity after he completed his program, presumably with the hope that he would produce more model prisoners.

To be clear: I am not intimating purely coercive motives on the part of the prison, nor accusing this prisoner of being an evil collaborator. Rather, I am pointing to the unintended consequences of pursuing a positive project within an inherently coercive and oppressive environment. Waldram notes about traditional forms of therapy within prison, “This form of treatment seeks to control and redirect their thought processes towards more socially acceptable, non-criminal goals. However, these goals are often interpreted by Aboriginal inmates as “White” goals which, by definition, are unattainable by Aboriginal men. Some men see the related therapeutic processes as serving only to further their assimilation and oppression.” While therapy can be of real help when trying to heal from the violence, racism, poverty, patriarchy, and other factors that often affect people who have ended up in prison, it is perhaps sadly true that this new approach will serve to further their forced assimilation and oppression by means of feeding indigenous people back their own culture, as properly digested and regurgitated by their occupiers. Waldram laments that recidivism is still used as the yardstick for rehabilitation—indeed, it is only a relic of how prisons have historically been

^d See *Pacifism As Pathology*, Ward Churchill.

organized that anyone thinks they are about preventing people from breaking the law. For internal change—the transformation of the individual into the perfect citizen, as Arpinati dreamed for Italians—to become the provenance of justice system statistics is far from a liberatory development. Waldram is faithfully practicing anti-racism the best he knows how, and attempting to serve as an advocate for the prisoners he spoke to and the project that is immediately helpful in their lives. However, he consistently falls short in his understanding of the newest operations of racism, and his work may help to facilitate it. This contradiction is exemplified within his sharp critique of the opponents of Aboriginal spirituality within prison: “How could this form of healing ever expect to receive a fair hearing when the very methods used for the assessment are derived from, and continue to inform the cultural system that historically has oppressed Aboriginal people and currently feels compelled to criminalize them and throw them in jail?” Certainly; does he think that the new information *he* is providing will be used by this same cultural system any differently? Waldram serves as a perfect example of the problem of ally politics.

However, given the realities of our present situation, practicing Native spirituality in prison seems from the outside like an alternative still saturated with resistance, especially in contrast to being forced to cooperate with traditional prisoner rehabilitation tactics. It offers practitioners the ability to heal on their own terms—quite apart from the goals of the prison. The Elders who serve prison populations have often experienced prison themselves, are seen to have greater understanding than other therapists or religious leaders, and are usually viewed as trustworthy by prisoners. Their services do not advance one towards parole, unlike AA, and are therefore felt by prisoners to be more authentic. They focus on helping the inmate build a positive self-image, and do not focus on past wrong-doing or lawbreaking, unlike most prison therapeutic systems; they are also sometimes able to offer a culturally-situated view of mental illness that honors and respects rather than pathologizes the individual. They provide traditional ways of acknowledging and moving through wrongdoing that address inmate’s feelings of guilt and atonement to those they’ve harmed in a way that prison may not—a means of addressing harm in a way that operates outside the ongoing harm of the correctional system. Many Elders are also willing to continue supporting people after they have been released from prison, a critical link often missing for former prisoners.

Prisoner practitioners largely report that connecting to indigenous culture—however disparate their previous relationships to their indigeneity were, and