

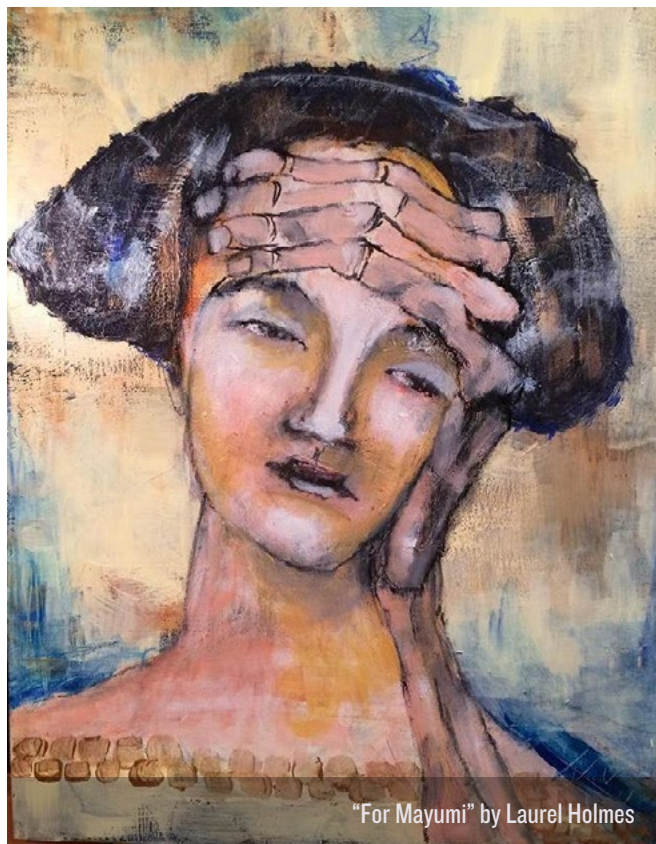
From Status-Quo Stories to Post-Operational Transformation

ANALOUISE KEATING

“STATUS-QUO STORIES” IS MY TERM FOR people’s foundational beliefs about the world—potentially malleable beliefs so deeply embedded in our psyches that we treat them as permanent, unchanging facts. Status-quo stories represent our unquestioned acceptance of already-existing knowledge systems, realities, and beliefs. Status-quo stories powerfully guide our expectations and direct our interactions with others, although we typically don’t recognize these stories as beliefs but instead take them as accurate, factual statements about the world. Statements like these often signal status-quo stories:

- “It’s *always* been this way.”
- “That’s just how things are.”
- “Live and let live.”
- “People gonna do what people gonna do.”
- “Don’t rock the boat.”
- “It is what it is.”

Status-quo stories are self-fulfilling. When we live our lives—or sections of our lives—according to these stories, we don’t try to make change because we assume that change is impossible to make.



“For Mayumi” by Laurel Holmes

The status-quo is so normal, so natural, so *permanent*, so God-given, that it can escape our imaginations even to try.

Oppositionality often functions as a status-quo story.

OPPOSITIONAL STATUS-QUO STORIES

Those of us living in the United States and other western cultures are immersed in oppositional status-quo stories, which take a variety of forms, including:

- “Survival of the fittest”
- Competition always makes us stronger
- Us against them

Typically, oppositionality functions in a winner-takes-all manner, creating either/or frameworks that limit our options to two extremes:



Because oppositional energies encourage us to react immediately to that which we oppose, we remain locked into the existing framework.

Either *I'm* right and I win; or *you're* right and you win. This dichotomous structure prevents us from forging the complex, nuanced commonalities and relational differences that facilitate the creative development of a range of possibilities, such as these:

I'm partially right, and so are you; *and* we're both partially wrong. We're all right, although we need to figure out how to align our perspectives. None of us are right; let's start over! Instead, we have two options: Either our views are entirely the same, or they're completely different. Oppositionality's status-quo story prevents us from embracing the messy contra-

dictions that so often occur as we work to build new (transformational) knowledge and create diverse, inclusive communities.

Although oppositional politics have been crucial for progressive social change, they also limit our possibilities for the future in several ways. First, oppositionality traps us in the very systems we're trying to change. As Flora Bridges notes, the dominating Western worldview is based on a restrictive, dichotomous form of oppositionality:

[W]hat becomes normative, "right," and regulatory within the culture is determined by beating down or stamping out various other alternatives. Norms and values are established by way of domination. In this mental framework the possibility for both/and is destroyed. Both/and thinking is basically determined as irrational, primitive, or illogical. What results is a ravaging, hate-filled dogmatic form of establishing cultural values.

Our oppositional politics have their source in some of the most negative dimensions of western eurocentric thought and are themselves a tool in oppressive social and epistemological structures.

Second, oppositional energies seduce us into adopting a reactionary stance. We're primed to engage in battle. Rather than thoughtfully consider a range of options in order to develop effective strategies that can satisfactorily address the specific situation at hand for *everyone* involved, we automatically fight back, trying to gain the upper hand for ourselves and our allies. Third, and closely related, oppositionality inhibits our ability to create and enact innovative strategies for progressive social change. Because oppositional energies encourage us to react immediately to that which we oppose, we remain locked into the existing framework. Fourth, oppositional thinking can erode our

alliances and communities. As numerous activists have noted, oppositional politics often fragment from within, damaging both individual activists and the group. Oppositional energies become poisonous when we direct them at each other, as we too often do. And fifth, oppositionality can negatively impact our health, leading to increased stress, compromised immune systems, depression, and more.

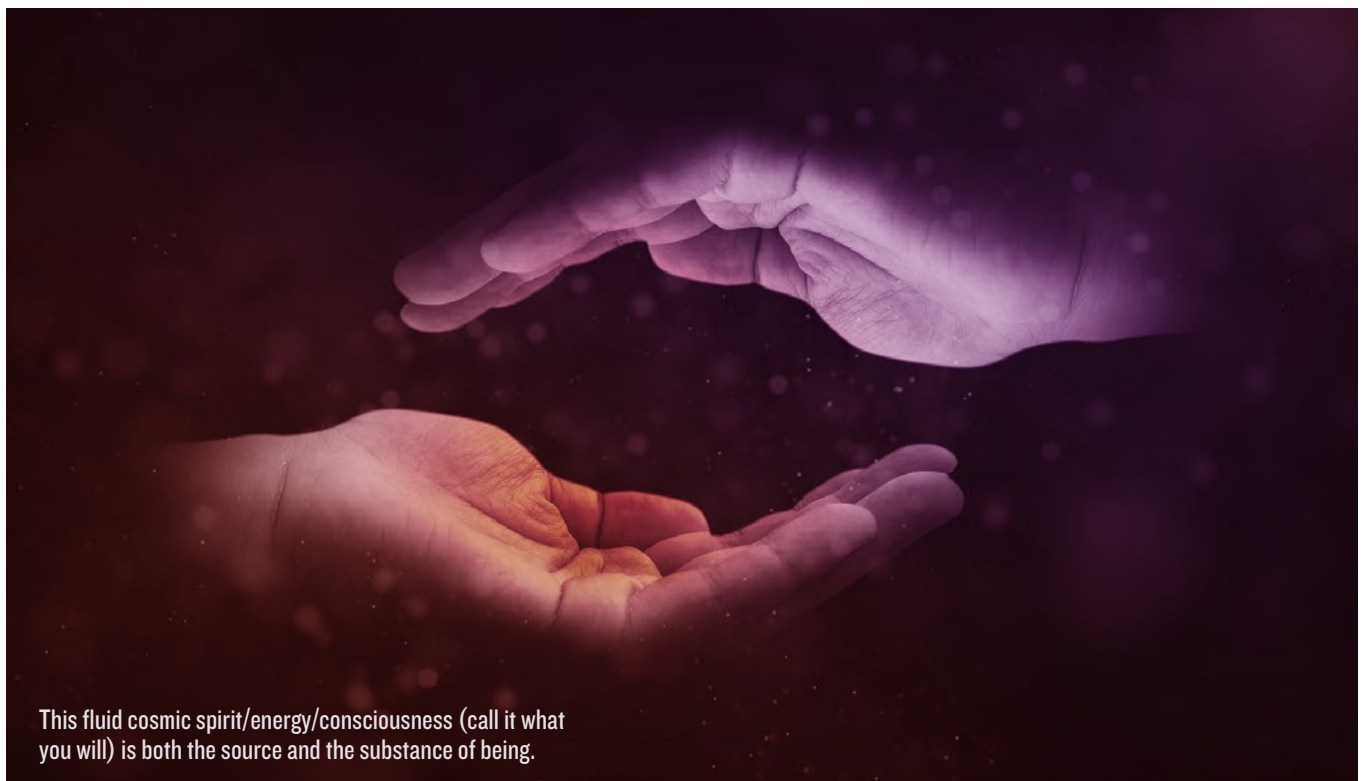
My dissatisfaction with oppositionality's status-quo stories compelled me to search for alternatives, and in my search I was met with the possibility of post-oppositionality.

POST-OPPOSITIONALITY

As I define the term, "post-oppositionality" represents relational approaches to identity, social interactions, knowledge production, and transformation that borrow from but do not become restricted to oppositional thought and action. I do not entirely reject oppositionality;

indeed, to do so would, itself, *be* oppositional and thus trap me inside the approach that I want to transform. "Post-oppositional" is not synonymous with "*anti*-oppositional." And so, I use post-oppositionality to move *partially* outside binary frameworks. I underscore the partial nature of this movement. I'm *not* saying that it's possible (or even desirable) to move entirely beyond oppositionality.

Post-oppositionality can take a variety of forms, but these forms share several traits: First, a belief in our profound interrelatedness to *everything* that exists; second, a desire to be entirely (and, at times, paradoxically) inclusive—to seek and create complex commonalities and broad-based alliances for social change; third, an acknowledgment (and, whenever possible, an acceptance) of contradiction; and fourth, intellectual humility, which I define as an open-minded, flexible approach to thinking that acknowledges limitations, uncertainty, and the inevitability of error.



This fluid cosmic spirit/energy/consciousness (call it what you will) is both the source and the substance of being.

Post-oppositionality emerges from a metaphysics of radical interconnectedness. Although Western intellectual traditions typically associate “metaphysics” with abstraction, transcendence, or escape from the material, physical world, I use the term differently, to indicate spirit’s embodied presence—its immanence in materiality. Expressing itself concretely in the dailiness of our lives and our surroundings, a metaphysics of radical interconnectedness situates us in the existing physical-material world and the present moment. In a metaphysics of radical interconnectedness matter/spirit, mind/nature, body/soul, “inner”/“outer” are intertwined layers of a single, complex, interwoven reality—not separate spheres of existence. I describe this interconnectedness as “radical” to underscore the foundational inter-relatedness of everything (visible, invisible, semi-visible; tangible, intangible; physical, nonphysical, etc.) that exists. Or, as Marilou Awiakta puts it, drawing on teachings from her Cherokee Appalachian upbringing and from nuclear physics, “Stars, trees, oceans, creatures, humans, stones: we are all related. One family.”

According to a metaphysics of radical interconnectedness all reality emerges from some type of shared ontological ground that embodies itself throughout—and as—all existence. This fluid cosmic spirit/energy/consciousness (*call it what you will*) is both the source and the substance of being; it’s the framework and creative force underlying, infusing, and shaping all that exists. In a metaphysics of radical interconnectedness, oppositionality is connection by refusal. Although overtly denied, connection still functions because that which we oppose has shaped our opposition.

But perhaps you’re wondering why I’ve named

this approach *post*-oppositional. After all, there are already so many “post-” movements and theories: Post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-secularism, post-humanism, post-feminism, post-colonialism, post-positivism, and the “posts” go on and on and on. Previously, I used the term “non-oppositional;” however, I realized that this word remains trapped in the oppositional logic it attempts to refute: To be non-oppositional is to refuse oppositionality. I don’t entirely reject oppositional thought, and the term “post-oppositional” enables me to develop a nuanced, selective relationship to oppositionality, even as I invite us to move through and (*sometimes*) beyond it. With this term I can acknowledge oppositionality’s limitations, draw from its insights, and (at

“Language has causal power; it (re)shapes reality on multiple levels, including the material.”

least sometimes) avoid its poisonous effects. Post-oppositionality does not entirely *reject* oppositional consciousness but instead moves through it, taking what’s useful and *transforming* (rather than negating or denying) the rest. Post-oppositionality stays in relationship with oppositionality.

And so, I use the word “post-oppositional” both to avoid the dichotomies I’m trying to transform and to acknowledge the vital work that oppositional consciousness and actions have performed. Moreover, as Indigenous philosophies remind us, the words we use matter and can assist us in bringing about change. Language has causal power; it (re)shapes reality on multiple levels, including the material. Manulani Aluli Meyer explores this transformational power, or what she calls “causality in language,” in her discussion of Hawaiian epistemology: “Words cause something. For Elders and our ancient people we had terms that allowed you to enter a forest or show your good manners beside the ocean. We even had people who



Oppositional thinking shapes the activists' labels, motivates their demands, and restricts their visions of community.

could pray you to death. This teaches me that words had a life, a resonance, and a purpose.” Post-oppositionality—as word, idea, and action—can do real work in the world.

Post-oppositionality includes modes of thought and action that incorporate the lessons of oppositional politics but don’t remain trapped in the status-quo. It transforms either/or thinking into the acceptance of multiplicity, contradic-

tion, and paradox, energized by a search for complex commonalities spacious enough to contain differences.

To illustrate one of the many forms post-oppositionality can take, I offer a quick look at cultural theorist, creative writer, and philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa was deeply involved in feminism and other social movements from the 1970s onward, during a

time when many movements were often, and not surprisingly, immersed in oppositionality. But even during the most hyper-oppositional years, Anzaldúa generally adopted a post-oppositional approach seen even in her self-definition. Look at her early autohistoria, “La Prieta” (first published in 1981, in *This Bridge Called My Back*) where she positions herself as a participant in numerous contradictory social locations and movements:

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator. Gloria, the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. “Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,” say the members of my race. “Your allegiance is to the Third World,” say my Black and Asian friends. “Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,” say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? *A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings*. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label.

These demands conflict and cancel each other out. Each movement followed a status-quo story in which belonging required 100% allegiance solely to their group: You’re either *with* us, or you’re *against* us. When approached from this oppositional stance, the demands are impossible to fulfill because each group requires exclusive loyalty.

Anzaldúa maintains her allegiance to all of these groups while, simultaneously, reframing their demands that she align herself with only one identity and cause. Addressing the various oppositional activists demanding her exclusive allegiance, she redefines herself in expansive terms:

Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and -legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man’s world, the women’s, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web.

Who, me, confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.

I describe this response as post-oppositional. Anzaldúa’s self-definition rewrites the status-quo stories about identity so common at that time: The problem is not her; it’s the oppositional thinking that shapes the activists’ labels, motivates their demands, and restricts their visions of community.

Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism sidesteps this exclusionary logic. As she demonstrates in her preface to *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, although identity typically functions through exclusion (e.g., I’m queer because I’m not heterosexual; I’m a woman of color because I’m not white), she defines identity differently: “Many of us identify with groups and social positions not limited to our ethnic, racial, religious, class, gender, or national classifications. Though most people self-define by what they exclude, we define who we are by what we include—what I call the new tribalism” (“(un)natural bridges” 3). Significantly, Anzaldúa does not discount the importance of gender, ethnicity/race, sexuality, ability, and other such components. However, she maintains that social identity categories are too restrictive to completely define us. Indeed, she suggests that such categories can be used to disempower and oppress us: “the changeability of racial, gender, sexual, and other categories render[s] the conventional labelings obsolete. Though these markings are outworn and inaccurate, those in power con-

tinue using them to single out and negate those who are ‘different’ because of color, language, notions of reality, or other diversity.” When we base our assessments of others primarily on their “markings,” we make biased, inaccurate assumptions about their politics, worldviews, and so forth. And, when we act on these assumptions we close ourselves off from potential allies. Or as Anzaldúa so eloquently asserts, “For the politically correct stance we let color, class, and gender separate us from those who would be kindred spirits. So the walls grow higher, the gulfs between us wider, the silences more profound.”

Positing radical interconnectedness, Anzaldúa dismantles these walls and builds bridges. She enacts a post-oppositional approach and adopts flexible, context-specific perspectives enabling her simultaneously to see and see through exclusionary identity classifications. She does not ignore the importance of color, class, gender, and other identity markers; however, she views these classifications relationally and defines each person as a part of a larger whole—a “cosmic ocean, the soul, or whatever.” She insists on a commonality shared by all human beings, a commonality that spaciously includes and acknowledges the differences among us. For Anzaldúa, this “common factor” goes beyond—*without ignoring*—identities based on gender, ‘race,’ or other systems of difference; it is “wider than any social position or racial label.” Indeed, this identity factor exceeds (and decenters) human beings: “Your identity has roots you share with all people and other beings—spirit, feeling, and body comprise a greater identity category. The body is rooted in the earth, la tierra itself. You meet ensoulment in trees, in woods, in streams.”

Post-oppositional work is not easy. The willingness to witness all sides can lead to accusations of disloyalty, stupidity, and (ironically)

bias. However, if we aspire to be creative, to think more independently, to enact progressive change, to break out of the status quo, we can’t allow ourselves to become further entrenched in binary-oppositional thinking and its “either you’re with us or against us” mentality and activism. When we always limit ourselves to this oppositional approach, we remain trapped in a reactionary stance that’s been shaped by the dominating culture and the existing framework. Post-oppositionality invites us to think more spaciously, to step beyond conventional rules, to liberate ourselves—at least occasionally—from the status quo. The possibilities might be almost endless. ●



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