Those of us born and raised within western cultures have been deeply trained in binary (either/or) frameworks that structure and guide our movement through the world. Reality is divided into two distinct spheres, and so we think and act (or should I say react?) in either/or terms that divide the world into two distinct categories which, too often, we presume to be entirely separate: day and night, up and down, in and out, right and wrong, winners and losers, me and you, us and them, etc. The binary lists continue relentlessly, severing reality into two. These dichotomous frameworks illustrate what I call status-quo stories: our basic, most deeply hidden beliefs—worldviews and assumptions that have become so normalized as to be considered the truth about reality; status-quo stories are so naturalized that we cannot presume the possibility of change. Or, as my Texas neighbors say, “It is what it is. Why rock the boat? Things are just that way.” As I explain in Transformation Now! Toward a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change (2012), status-quo stories do not simply describe reality; they also create it. However, because they’re so deeply embedded in our upbringing and social structures, we’re typically unaware of their shaping power. Status-quo stories have become so naturalized that we rarely, if ever, question their accuracy; instead, we unthinkingly assume them to be the truth about reality. While our lives are filled with status-quo stories, in what follows, I focus specifically on those status-quo stories that normalize oppositionality—the us-against-them framework that divides the world into embattled dichotomous categories with clear-cut winners and losers. I offer a brief discussion of the limitations in oppositionality, propose an alternative—what I call post-oppositional politics—and, drawing on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, offer a brief meditation on what a post-oppositional approach to identity formation and post-oppositional tactics might look like.

From oppositionality to post-oppositionality

Not surprisingly, given their deeply naturalized existence, binary oppositional frameworks have seeped into the scholarship and activism of many progressive thinkers (myself included!). We have inadvertently adopted an oppositional approach as we work to effect intellectual and social change in the service of creating a more equitable future. We employ either/or modes of thinking that limit our options to two extremes: Either I’m right, I win, and you must agree entirely with me. Or you’re right, you win, and I must concede entirely to you. In this binary
framework, we use the language of sameness and difference as dichotomous oppositions and thus erase any possibility of creating complex commonalities that contain both similarities and divergence: Either our views are entirely the same, or they’re entirely different. In this narrow framework, one of us is completely Right and the other is completely Wrong. (My capitalization here is intentional and used to underscore the rigidity of these oppositional perspectives.)

While this oppositional approach has enabled us to make important, progressive changes, it also limits our ability to devise radically innovative ways of thinking and living: We remain trapped within the systems we’re trying to transform.

Dichotomous oppositional frameworks limit us in many ways: They prevent us from embracing contradictions, building new truths, or acknowledging the possibility of developing complex nuanced commonalities. In short, adopting oppositional frameworks inhibits our imaginations and limits our ability to form alliances. We remain imprisoned within our already-existing views, which we cling to with fierce determination; however, in so doing, we further reinforce and strengthen this stifling status quo. When we remain locked in opposition, we cannot think in visionary ways or design innovative tactics to address the specific issues we want to change; instead, our reactions are shaped by the very systems that we aspire to transform. When we fight back (as we typically do), we inadvertently employ tactics very similar to those we deplore. And, in so doing, we become even more deeply entrenched in the oppositional status quo. Moreover, all too often, we take these oppositional reactions with us into other areas of our life, including our coalitions and alliances with other progressive social-justice activists. As Chela Sandoval (2000) persuasively discusses in her analysis of feminist and other social-justice groups, often oppositional groups fragment from within as they turn their oppositional energies against each other; this internal fragmentation and argument makes it impossible to create broad-based movements for social change or envision radical alternatives for more equitable futures. In short, we remain entirely within the status-quo stories that imprisoned us in the first place.

Post-oppositionality defined and enacted

However, critiques leave us where they found us, reacting against that with which we disagree. My point here is not simply to expose the limitations in our status-quo stories of opposition, division, and fragmentation. Instead, I acknowledge oppositionality’s value yet strive to move through and (perhaps eventually) beyond it. I take what we’ve learned from our oppositional politics and offer an alternative approach, what I call post-oppositional politics for transformation. As I define the term, “post-oppositional” represents a deeply relational worldview and ethics that can assist us in transforming either/or categories and options into a range of alternative possibilities. I use the term “post-oppositional” (rather than, say, “non-oppositional”) both to acknowledge my debt to oppositional thought and to avoid inadvertently replicating the oppositionality that I seek to transform. As this brief definition suggests, post-oppositionality neither entirely rejects nor actively negates oppositionality. Indeed, to do so would, ironically, reactivate the dichotomous, oppositional energies that I seek to transform. Post-oppositionality embraces, without replicating, oppositional consciousness. In other words, post-oppositionality learns from and works with oppositionality yet does not become trapped in its binary dynamics. We move with and through oppositional consciousness, using our movement to develop alternative approaches for progressive social change and other forms of healing. In short (and like the word “post-oppositional” itself), post-oppositionality includes oppositional consciousness. It contains and works to transform this contradiction.

Shaped by each person’s contexts and limited only by what our imaginations can conceive, post-oppositionality can take a variety of forms, applied to a range of social issues, and be
Expressed in many ways. In what follows, I draw on the work of Chicana-tejana queer philosopher and creative writer Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004) to offer a few preliminary suggestions. I focus on Anzaldúa for several reasons. First, Anzaldúa was very familiar with oppositional politics: From the 1960s to the 1980s, she was deeply involved with a variety of social-justice movements and groups, including (but not limited to) the farmworker’s movement, the Chicano Youth Organization (CYO), the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), and various feminist groups including the Feminist Writers Guild. Second, she neither entirely rejected oppositional politics nor fully engaged with them but instead used them selectively to develop innovative alternatives. Third, as I explain below in more detail, she offers a dialogic, relational approach that functions post-oppositionally. And fourth, Anzaldúa was my mentor and teacher. Her bold challenges to status-quo stories have inspired and, in many ways, shaped my career. Including her words here is my attempt to honor her work while building on her vital contributions.

Although Anzaldúa is typically described as a leading Chicana-tejana lesbian author who played a key role in challenging 20th-century monolithic understandings of female identity (as heterosexual and white) and Chicano identity (as male), she defined herself more broadly, in terms that embraced yet exceeded gender, sexuality, ethnicity/race, and other social identity categories. Her understanding of human identity was radically expansive, inclusive, and relational. Look, for instance, at Anzaldúa’s statement in Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality (2015), where she asserts that “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” (p. 140). In this passage, as throughout much of her work, Anzaldúa offers a relational, post-oppositional approach to identity. By insisting that her identity has shared roots that connect her with “all people and other beings,” she redefines herself in terms that exceed western status-quo identity stories. Indeed, her self-definition is so expansive that it exceeds the conventional western division between the human and the nonhuman. (As I’ve argued elsewhere, she replaces western Enlightenment frameworks with ancient animist traditions that incorporate the more-than-human world.) She positions herself within a much larger and more complex, radically diverse community.

This expansive self-definition is, itself, an important post-oppositional tactic. When we define ourselves in terms that exceed conventional categories, we are no longer entirely constrained by them (or by those in the group who demand that we conform to their rules). The boundaries around each discrete identity become porous, and our imaginations expand, enabling us to recognize previously unacknowledged commonalities between ourselves and those we have considered to be our others. Anzaldúa summarizes her own journey toward this expansiveness in the following passage:

Being Chicana (indigenous, Mexican, Basque, Spanish, Berber Arab, Gypsy) is no longer enough; being female, woman of color, patlache (queer) no longer suffices. Your resistance to identity boxes leads you to a different tribe, a different story (of mestizaje), enabling you to rethink yourself in more global-spiritual terms instead of conventional categories of color, class, career. It calls you to retribalize your identity to a more inclusive one, redefining what it means to be una mexicana de este lado, an American in the U.S., a citizen of the world, classifications reflecting an emerging planetary culture. In this narrative, national boundaries dividing us from the “others” (nos/otras) are porous, and the cracks between worlds serve as gateways.

Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 141
Importantly, Anzaldúa does not reject social identity categories. She does not deny her identity as Chicana, female, woman of color, queer, American, and so on. She simply sees them as insufficient to accurately convey her complex personhood, and, therefore, she refuses to be entirely contained within them. She redefines herself more broadly, using several strategies: (1) she unpacks the existing identity labels (e.g., redefining Chicana as “Indigenous, Mexican Basque, Spanish, Berber Arab, Gypsy”); (2) she redefines existing categories (e.g., positioning herself as “una mexicana” in the US); and (3) she invents new “global-spiritual terms” that can convey much broader identities.

Anzaldúa began crafting her post-oppositional, relational identity back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during a time when oppositional politics were vital to social-justice activists. During this era, oppositional politics were instrumental to social change movements, and many of the progressive social-justice activists with whom Anzaldúa engaged expressed an oppositional (“either you’re with us or you’re against us”) mindset. Often (and for a good reason), these groups constellated around identity-related issues and demanded exclusive loyalty to their cause. So, for instance, feminist groups might focus exclusively on sexism and insist on loyalty only to women and gender-related issues; Chicano groups might focus exclusively on racism and insist on exclusive loyalty to Raza-related issues and people; and so on. This narrow focus, while understandable, sometimes led to a reductive mindset in which identity became defined in monolithic ways (so that everyone must share exactly the same values and goals). Anzaldúa had experience with several such groups and chafed under their restrictions. Importantly, however, Anzaldúa did not simply react oppositionally by rejecting these groups’ demands and walking away. Instead, she responded thoughtfully and considered the needs driving the demands; by thus replacing automatic reaction with mindful response, she enacted a post-oppositional approach that critiqued and transformed the status-quo stories which shaped these demands.

Anzaldúa’s (1981) essay, “La Prieta,” beautifully illustrates this post-oppositional process. In a section appropriately titled “Who Are My People,” Anzaldúa explores this question by situating herself in the midst of the many social-justice groups with which she was intimately involved. She begins by offering a metaphoric, expansive self-definition that she uses to position herself within the context of each group’s monolithic demands:

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.

*Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 205* 

Anzaldúa defines herself with metaphors of dynamic movement (a shifting bridge, a swirling crossroads), liminal spaces (she is suspended above multiple abysses), and negotiation (she is facilitator, mediator) as if to underscore her complexity and thus, her reluctance to be locked into any singular category or position. She then acknowledges the various demands for monolithic allegiance placed on her by the oppositional groups to which she belongs without either entirely rejecting or fully conceding to them. Instead, she defines herself more broadly in ways...
Post-oppositional tactics for transformation

that exceed these demands. In part, she does so by expanding her self-definition even further, to openly include aspects that go beyond the socially inscribed conventional social identities of the time, including politics (“the socialist revolution” and “the New Age”), worldviews (“Marxist and mystic leanings”), and vocation (literature and “the world of the artist”).

Anzaldúa presents her complex identity post-oppositionally. That is, she does not reject others’ expectations as wrong; instead, she recognizes (without acquiescing to) these expectations. She responds to these expectations not by rejecting them but by exceeding them: She defines herself in broad, contradictory terms, and she does so relationally. That is, she does not simply insist on her expansive self-definition; rather, she also acknowledges how it might be perceived by those with more conventional identity stories. Indeed, as the passage continues, we see her address this point head on:

You say my name is ambivalence? 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 …. Who, me, confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.

Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 205

Here, Anzaldúa acknowledges that others might criticize her complex, contradictory identity as ambivalent; however, she does not concede to this perspective. Instead, she changes the conversation and moves away from the binary framework that dictates the terms of monolithic allegiance (e.g., loyalty to only one group). She maintains allegiance to all of the groups by shifting the focus from the groups’ demands to the identity-based labels and assumptions that motivate these demands. These labels—based on social identity and ideological categories—were not developed by Anzaldúa; they pre-existed her and are themselves the product of the unjust system that she strives to transform. (They, too, are status-quo stories.) Although the various groups with which she allies herself have adopted these social identity categories, Anzaldúa does not fully adopt them. But nor does she fully reject them. Instead, she enacts a post-oppositional approach: She develops a nuanced relationship with each group so that she can respond rather than oppositionally react. She refuses to be locked into preexisting social inscriptions, but she does not reject the people themselves—even those who have tried to impose their inscriptions on her. She shares their desires to create more equitable communities and their aspirations for social justice even as she refuses to play entirely by their oppositional rules.

While this self-reflective approach can be viewed oppositionally and thus dismissed as disloyal or wishy-washy, Anzaldúa exposes that oppositional perspective as, itself, too limited. Not swayed through guilt or narrow rhetoric, she resists the negative labels imposed on her. She does not allow others’ judgments to sway her but instead maintains her expansive self-definition, though its complex terms exceed the collective definitions of her day.

Post-oppositional lessons

Anzaldúa’s relational, expansive self-definition offers several useful post-oppositional tactics that we can learn from and adopt. First, she defines herself in complex ways that exceed without rejecting conventional identity categories. (She takes a both-–and approach rather than the either–or mechanism organizing conventional social identity.) Second, she does this complex work by locating contradiction and paradox within herself. (She creates a larger
container for her self-definition that exceeds the conventional western binary frameworks we’ve been instructed to adopt.) In fact, she not only locates paradox within herself, but she embraces it. For example, although Marxists typically eschew mystical, magical perspectives, Anzaldúa does not. She adopts Marxist principles and mystical practices; they coexist and harmonize within her. (We especially see this synergistic harmony in her theory of spiritual activism, which she was developing but had not yet named in the early 1980s.) Similarly, although some New Age practitioners avoid political praxis, Anzaldúa does not. It is, in fact, almost the reverse: she claims her progressive politics and uses her mystical New Age beliefs in their service.

This patient willingness to accept paradox and contradiction is crucial to post-oppositionality. By embracing the paradox, Anzaldúa transforms it. More precisely, as she defines herself broadly and includes identities that seemingly contradict each other, she demonstrates that the borders dividing these various identities into supposedly separate camps are arbitrary, created through social rules that can be questioned, reexamined, unpacked, and in other ways altered (and perhaps over-turned). She dissolves the borders that reduced complex identities and ideas into overly simplified binary divisions of us-against-them.

Anzaldúa’s complex, relational self-definition in “La Prieta” reminds us that post-oppositionality occurs through the patient embrace of contradictions. Embracing—rather than rejecting—contradictions enables us to recognize the limitations in our status-quo stories and to begin rewriting them. By insisting on a complex understanding of personal and collective identity—an understanding so ample that it embraces paradox—Anzaldúa dissolves the status-quo story that defines identity in either/or terms. Her dynamic self-definitions teach herself and her readers that the identity boundaries are socially constructed. It is only a paradox to be both Marxist and mystic, to be, simultaneously, pro-feminist, pro-Gay, and pro-Raza because those in power have defined the categories so restrictively as to prevent connections among them. When we patiently embrace contradictions, we acquire the confidence and the tools to resist externally imposed restrictions and, thus, to question status-quo stories. As we sit with the contradictions, we gain new insights. The contradictory elements coexist within our thought and, through this unsettling coexistence, subtly transform each other; they expand our vision, allowing us to recognize the limitations in our previous views and create new communities and tactics for progressive social change.

References

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