

CFAR's *Papers on Power* is a series of commissioned essays for which artists, writers, activists, and cultural producers have been asked to respond to the question "What is power?" in whatever form best relates to their work and thinking.

# LANGUAGE GAME

## #1

### CONSCIOUSNESS, ENTHEOGENY, AND COLONIZATION

#### MANUEL ARTURO ABREU

I unyoke the issue of real and fake from the artificial, post-Enlightenment European context of 'art' to look at the prehistory, which is theological and entheogenic in nature. I first discuss Sylvia Wynter's notion of auto-institutionality with respect to mind; I then discuss Abrahamic literalism; finally, I situate the ancients' respect for visionary-driven consciousness within the larger frame of governance of such consciousness. That is, even though the moderns lost knowledge of the mysteries, the ancients aren't so different from us, different societies simply control access to consciousness altering goods in different ways. Why are these resources so tightly controlled?

#### auto-institutionality

Sylvia Wynter argues humans are auto-institutional. We institute ourselves, fabricate legacies, correlate ourselves to ancient and far-off places, lineages, and myths. This may involve Kantian a priori limitations of the brain: we are rule-governed in terms of perception, driven by categorization, pattern recognition (or invention, as in apophenia), narrative, grammaticality (the cognitive sensation of utterances being "correct" or "incorrect"). Wynter argues that we "inscript and auto-institute ourselves as human through symbolic, representational processes that have, hitherto, included those mechanisms of occultation by means of which we have been able to make opaque to ourselves the fact that we so do." <sup>1</sup> However real these types of sensations or cognitive processes are, they're useful, and it's arguably just how brains work. <sup>2</sup> Naturally, these processes are fundamentally aesthetic. Thus, there have always been real fake artists, though in their given social contexts their chosen or imposed aesthetic activity may not have been seen as art (rather as duty, worship, etc).

This isn't about salvation, of course; and the notion of 'functionless, autonomous aesthetic activity' is fundamentally false— again, a concealment of the secret colonial function of western modernist aesthetics, rendering African and Asian aesthetic activity as non-artistic raw material for European exploits. In the face of colonial and 'post-colonial' antiblackness, African and Afrodiasporic alignment can look like assimilation, equivocation, or revolution. The call to functionalism not only means attention to mundane, socially-embedded and socially- or spiritually-functional activity. It also means attention to revolutionary forms of abstraction, such as the African-Catholic syncretism at the heart of the Haitian Revolution, experiments (of varying degrees of success) in liberated sociality like maroon colonies, the political dimension of Afro-modernist movements like Negritude and what lies beyond Negritude (to invoke Suzanne Césaire, Jane and Paulette Nardal), etc. These post-encounter forms don't necessarily profess full access to the meaning of the aesthetic and political forms of African antiquity; neither does the functionalist commitment come solely from necessity (e.g. in struggle). We intuitively know that art should be doing stuff, accessible to the culture and nourishing it somehow. How this intuition expresses itself looks different in everyone.

To return to the objet d'art, the question of a horizon of functionless autonomy applies beautifully to a more general context, such as that of language, or other rule-driven processes of consciousness production. Past recognizing, for example, that much of linguistic communication derives from the non-linguistic (body gesture, pheromones and scent, other biochemical factors, social contextual factors not wholly determined by language, etc), we can also see that language contains within it, as part of its engine, its complete negation (e.g., non-sense). There is no 'bottom' or 'ground' to sense (meaning), because the link between sound and sense is historically arbitrary, no matter how strong the consciousness-altering effects of the social phenomenon of language— indeed, so strong that it creates a sense of interiority. <sup>3</sup>

So, this too is auto-institutional: meaning is felt as something other than consciousness alteration caused by the brain's own work as a reduction filter (as Albert Hoffman described it). Creating a cogent experience of sense (both perception and meaning) requires the brain to filter out a lot of information. To a large extent, the transformative component of institutions across deep time has to do with the tight management of mystery, that is to say, control over who has access to certain kinds of consciousness alteration, as well as when and how. Tying it all back together: auto-institutionality does have to do with knowing what's real and fake, to such a strong degree that Wynter argues most 'knowledge' or 'truth' production in societies is really just production of what she calls 'adaptive truths-for,' which strengthens rather than weakens the society and individual's sense of self. <sup>4</sup>

#### abrahamism

I've been thinking a lot about rule-driven consciousness. Hoffman (who synthesized LSD by accident) argued that the brain was a kind of reduction filter, working mostly to keep things out rather than bring them in. The productivity of this reduction is clear when we look at language, which is an arbitrary, recursive, socially-inherited mapping of sound and meaning. Sense experience is reduced to sense as in meaning (the sense of an expression, accounting, etc. The answer to this is not to mourn what is 'lost' in the reduction since (a) it didn't necessarily go anywhere and (b) we may not necessarily have had access to it in the first place. The answer rather is to look deeper at the properties of rule-driven consciousness production. Why does the mind have to work that way, trapped in dualities and experiencing the world as inherently-mediated?

Those questions are too deep to really answer, but it's clear that the unequal world we live in and historically come from is the result of the exploitation of rule-driven consciousness production. It's also clear that the 'modern world' is at best an incomplete secularization of Christian values/concepts (this is directly relevant to my project, as much activity now called creative work was once Xtian worship). The best dramatization of exploitation of rule-driven consciousness, in light of modernity, is the Abrahamic monotheistic revolution and the suppression of gnostic perspectives that the Abrahamic god was actually a bad actor, a demiurge that had convinced humans of his primacy. It wasn't until the 1945 discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, stored away by persecuted gnostics, that we could hear them speak for themselves. I'm fascinated by some of these texts, such as the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, which in a sense predict the exploitation of rule-driven consciousness production, perhaps away from an ancestral, visionary-driven consciousness production regime. Depicting the crucifixion in a strange way, "Peter" writes that Christ tells him the following:

"For many will accept our teaching in the beginning. And they will turn from them again by the will of the Father of their error, because they have done what he wanted. And he will reveal them in his judgment, i.e., the servants of the Word. But those who became mingled with these shall become their prisoners, since they are without perception. And the guileless, good, pure one they push to the worker of death, and to the kingdom of those who praise Christ in a restoration. And they praise the men of the propagation of falsehood, those who will come after you. And they will cleave to the name of a dead man, thinking that they will become pure. But they will become greatly defiled and they will fall into a name of error, and into the hand of an evil, cunning man and a manifold dogma, and they will be ruled without law."

Back in Eden, the demiurge's central fear is that Adam and Eve, having eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, would return to the Garden and eat from the tree of life, becoming like gods (rather than, say, in the image of God or tzelem elohim as the scribes wrote in the first Genesis creation story, the 7-day narrative). I believe that the tree of life itself was actually entheogenic in some sense, and we see this in gnostic depictions of the tree of life, such as in the next two images from medieval European contexts. Some scholars <sup>5</sup> feel the Eucharist involved entheogens as well. <sup>6</sup>

#### entheogenic governance

Societies of antiquity were obviously riddled with problems just like us, but one thing they had, which many Europeanized and/or industrial societies seem to have lost, is a deep reference for visionary-driven consciousness, indeed privileged over rule-driven consciousness. Even the Abrahamic monotheistic revolution may have had entheogenic catalysts at some point or points in its development, but clearly the evolution of literalism in the context of the Abrahamic faiths required the suppression of all states of consciousness that were not productive for the goal of domination. Examples from antiquity of the privileging of visionary states of consciousness abound: ancient Egyptian blue lotus, ancient Greek kykeon (used at the Eleusinian mysteries <sup>7</sup>), ancient Vedic soma, etc. And clearly, when we look at the ethnobotanical work in the Amazon— where, for example, ancients developed a sustainable self-replicating biochar (terra preta) to feed the large cities of ancient Amazonia; and paired an entheogen with the vine of souls (ayahuasca), which worked to deactivate the body's own monoamine oxidase inhibitor to allow visionary experience— we see ancient biochemists at work, using rule-driven consciousness in service of visionary-driven consciousness rather than vice versa (as we might see in "modern" societies).

All these substances and others had associated rites, rituals, and mysteries which had enormous importance for the given social order. The reality produced through rule-driven consciousness was understood largely as a veil or illusion, under which (in "sub- or sur-reality" we could say) lay the fundamental machinations of things. The spiritual drive of the human body (which the moderns might re-phrase as the narrative drive, or the drive for meaning, or something like that) was well understood as a given, and the limitations of the body, however incorrectly analyzed in the archaic 'medicine' of the time, were framed as spiritual in nature. This resonates. Arguably it isn't until Fanon clearly articulates the notion of the sociogenic in the 50s that we reach a point where we can understand causality differently from the predominantly materialist causal understanding of post-Enlightenment European and Eurocentric society. Immaterial causes also exist. Ancients knew this deeply, but the mechanization of the world, as Wynter argues, led to the loss of this knowledge; and however secular we feel the 'modern' world may be, what we have is in fact an echo of the Abrahamic literalism (and persecution of all non-literalist Abrahamisms) that drove most of Europe's development for so long. Materialist and "natural causation" is just another development in this literalist tradition. In this context, it resonates heavily with me when Said says 'we are not yet secular.'

Ancient societies structured power based on the mysteries, and the age-old tools of consciousness alteration. They tightly controlled who was able to do this and where; in the Ancient Greek context, lucky initiates were able to experience the Eleusinian Mysteries once. Taking part in the ritual outside the sanctioned context was condemned: Alcibiades, for example, was condemned publicly for indulging in 415 BC (Waterfield 2009: 92). As much as it seems like this part of the talk is a paean to the ancients, in reality their governance of entheogeny is no different than the modern context. The 'mysteries' were for high priests, upper-level initiates, a select few. The difference is they had not lost entheogenic knowledge and had great respect for visionary-driven consciousness. However, in specific contexts it's also the case that, float, stuff was going on. For example, Eleusinian-type Hellenic entheogen rituals were going on in Iberia in 500 BC (Muraresku 2020). This was far away enough from the center of the Greek empire that people felt comfortable performing the rites.

This is all relevant because the European colonization of abstraction, and colonization more generally, is not exhaustively explained by a materialist / natural causation / "guns germs and steel" type argument. There were immaterial, e.g. spiritual, causes at play as well. Columbus maintained that his successful navigation to "the Indies" had nothing to do with the maritime science of the day, and everything to do with his faith in Christ. I maintain personally that his Book of Prophecies (1505) is secretly one of the most influential books of the modern Christian 'secular' order. Materialist arguments became necessary because Abrahamic literalism's usefulness as a tool of governance in a general social sense decreased as finities industrialized. Wynter (2003) provides a great analysis of this and served as the final reading of my "Alternative History of Abstraction 101" class. The quantum perspective, I believe, is what will bring us closest to a synthesis of visionary- and rule-driven consciousness, and a proper recalibration of the relationship between the two.

I'm ambivalent about privileging visionary-driven consciousness for its own sake. Rather, I feel grateful to some higher power that has allowed us what Graham Hancock calls "gratuitous graces" or opportunities on this material Earth to depart from the evolutionary and sociogenic rule-driven, reductive consciousness in which we operate on a day to day. These graces are entheogens, music, dance, and what I seek to call "abstraction" or "spirit" or some other such term. As such, to tie back to real fake artistry: aesthetic production in ancient societies was non-autonomous, visionary, high-context or context-full, and most importantly, socially- and spiritually-functional, unlike the western, autonomous, decontextual, functionless objet d'art. The strong argument is that all aesthetics is functional, whether overt or covert; covert functionality happens through occlusive tactics such as European modernism's concealment of its colonization of Black and brown abstraction through the very notion of the objet d'art.

#### chemistry

I want to return to the concept of the digital with a slightly different or 'longer' historical view. The etymology of "chemistry" is the same as a "alchemy," from Arabic "al-kimiya," which came from the name for pre-dynastic Egypt- KMT or Kemet, meaning "Black Land." Medieval European alchemy is also the conduit allowing for the reduction to simple functionality of Bamana deterministic chaos-based divination practices (typical of the various Mandé ethnic groups as well as other West African areas such as the Oyo Kingdom's oracle). Hugo of Santalla, a Spaniard priest, learned divination from Islamic mystics and brought it to Europe in the 12th century, introducing it to the alchemy community as geomancy. It was Leibniz, in discussing geomancy, who proposed in "De Arte Combinatoria" (1666) that Europeans write 1 and 0 instead of the Boolean one-stroke and two-stroke gestures. Boole built on Leibniz's binary to develop Boolean algebra, and John von Neumann took Boolean algebra and built the digital computer (as argued by Ron Eglash). As such, digitality and the speculation of modern informatic capitalism originates from just one tiny, exploited facet of one specific West African divination system. Fractal based pattern, architecture, and social organization are the norm rather than the exception in the African context.

Clearly, the emphasis on fractals in various aspects of African design points to entheogeny. <sup>8</sup> Fractal patterns are one of the most common effects of psychedelics, revealing something deep about human perception. We see many examples in African architecture, fabric design, hair design, orthography, polyrhythm in music, social architecture, religion, divination/scrying, etc. It's not simply that the universe and the human are made of the same stuff, and therefore it makes sense to find fractals in nature (e.g. trees), language (e.g. syntax trees), culture (African fractal design); rather, it's that this reality is informatically produced by a set of sub-processes to which the rule-driven mundane mind does not have real access. Social and aesthetic design centered around fractals and infinity serve to remind people to be humble, accepting our own limitations. Privileging a visionary experience of infinity can structure a society as productively as privileging rule-driven consciousness. Access to entheogenic and deterministic chaos-based knowledge production in the African context was tightly controlled by cultic initiations and priestly hierarchies. In the transatlantic context, many displaced and enslaved African people lost the oracle— but in some cases, it made it across the ocean.

#### Notes:

- Wynter, 2003. *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument*. CR: *The New Centennial Review*, 3,3, Fall: 328
- We might have a hard time understanding others, for example, if we didn't have a cognitive sensation, as we use language, that certain utterances are more or less correct, others inadmissible, others pristine, etc.
- Volosinov, Valentin. [1920s] 1973. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Trans. Matejka and Titunik. New York: Seminar Press.
- Wynter 2003: 319.
- E.g. Allegro, Wasson, Ruck, Muraresku

- There is actually cause to take this somewhat seriously with respect to Biblical evidence. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 sees Paul yelling at the followers in Corinth (southern Greece) in 54 AD and correcting 'an abuse of the Lord's supper.' He says in verses 29-30: "For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." He's essentially saying be careful what you drink when you do the Eucharist. The translation makes sense, but there's wiggle room, because forms of the Greek verb, *hoimētai* / κοιμῶνται, translated as "fallen asleep," appears in a few other revealing contexts: in John 11:11, Jesus says "Λάζαρος ὁ φίλος ἡμῶν κεκοιμήται / Lazaros ho philos hēmōn kekoimētai / our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep." Surely, the verb means sleep in a literal sense, as the disciples take him to mean this; but he then clarifies "Lazarus is dead" (11:14). This makes sense; if Lazarus were just asleep, the miracle of reviving him wouldn't be much of a miracle. This allows us to read Paul in two ways: he could mean the Corinthians were dying, or that they were perhaps 'under the influence.'

- Wasson, Gordon, Hoffman, Albert & Ruck, Carl. [1978] 2010. *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Consider, for example, *Tabernaemthe Iboga in Gabor's Bwiti tradition; Nymphaea caerulea (sacred blue water lily) in ancient Egypt; psilocybin in the Ivory Coast; Silene capensis among various Xhosa- and Zulu-speaking tribes; Acacia pycnantha which is rich in DMT and in fact the very same tree we call the Burning Bush of Moses; Kola nuts among the Igbo and other tribes. And many, many thousands of plants and sticks which I cannot list. It should also be noted that Africa, perhaps like India, is at the zenith of non-entheogenic visionary consciousness inducers. Through things like music and dance, many African and Afrodiasporic cultures induce the visionary state without necessarily involving drugs.*

#### Biography:

manuel arturo abreu (b. 1991, Santo Domingo) is a poet and artist from the Bronx. They studied linguistics (BA Reed College 2014). abreu works in text, ephemeral sculpture, and what is at hand in a process of magical thinking with attention to ritual aspects of aesthetics. They are the author of two books of poetry and one book of critical art writing. Their writing has appeared at Rhizome, Art in America, CURA, The New Inquiry, Art Practical, SFMoMA Open Space, AQNB, etc. abreu also composes club-feasible worship music as Tabor Dark, with 13 releases to date. They also co-founded and co-run home school, a free pop-up art school in Portland in its sixth year of curriculum. Recent solo and duo shows: Portland State University, Portland; Yaby, Madrid; the Art Gym, Portland; Open Signal, Portland; Institute for New Connotative Action, Seattle. Recent group shows: Kunstraum Niederösterreich, Vienna; Superposition, LA; Haus NYN, Vienna; Veronica, Seattle; Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna; Critical Path, Sydney; Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC; NCAD Gallery, Dublin; online with Rhizome and the New Museum; Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva. abreu has also curated projects at: Yale Union, Portland; Center for Afrofuturist Studies, Iowa City; SOLL, Seattle; Paragon Gallery, Portland; old Pfizer Factory, Brooklyn; S1, Portland; AA/LA Gallery, LA; MoMA PS1, NYC.