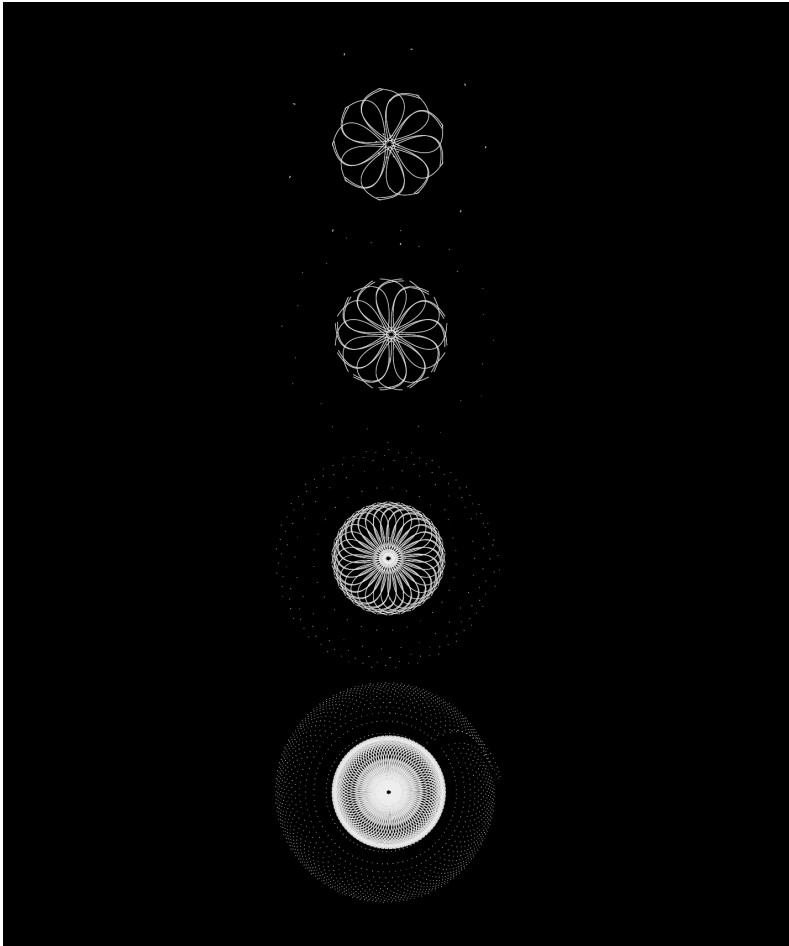


# SHAPESHIFTING: How to Validate Your Own Reality



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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I explain the utility of shapeshifting through the figure of the sage and the nepantlera according to the *Zhuangzi* and “the path of conocimiento... inner work, public acts,” respectively. These two figures could serve as guidelines to protecting subjective truth in a tumultuous and egoistic time, and aid in defense against mental assimilation into normative cultures. A distinction between the two will be made, with emphasis on how the contextual development of the figures applies to different social situations, and a synthesis of the utility of their application in present day will follow. The process of shapeshifting, of not clinging to social custom and normative identity categories as a means to protect ourselves from mental harm and assimilation, may serve to be of some use to us all.



This essay will parallel the work of modern contemporary Chicana feminist, Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942–2004) to the ancient Chinese philosophy of Zhuang Zhou, the assumed author of the *Zhuangzi*, of the later fourth century BC. The purpose of this comparison is to provide a tool that we may call upon when our subjective truths and opinions are challenged by dominant, normative views of our time, and how we may better serve ourselves and others when we are able to free ourselves of a personal identification with social norms that do not adequately accommodate our lived experience.

Both Anzaldúa's concept of the nepantlera and the figure of "the sage" in *Zhuangzi* present shapeshifting as a tool for maintaining the validity of subjective reality without gratifying social expectations to culturally assimilate. Beginning with the work of Anzaldúa and the contention between her sense of self and her cultural upbringing, the insufficiency of modern identity constructs will be made apparent, as they demand our sense of self to be unchanging and permanent. The *Zhuangzi* will follow to show how we need not resolutely uphold socially constructed morals, as they skew our worldview in an unequal and disillusioned way by gratifying inequality founded in moral superiority. To defend against rigid and arbitrary cultural beliefs, "shape-shifting," through Anzaldúa's concept of the nepantlera and the conceptual "sage" figure in *Zhuangzi*, will show how scrutinizing, reinterpreting, and maintaining many perspectives at once, or shapeshifting, validates subjective points of view without internalizing destructive social norms.

In a chapter titled "now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts," from her book *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, Anzaldúa struggles to reconcile why her inner truth and understanding of herself and reality is not reflected in the worldviews and identities prescribed to her.<sup>1</sup> Anzaldúa is a queer, Chicana feminist writer of mixed racial heritage with spiritual roots in indigenous traditions, and was born in Texas, less than 100 miles from the U.S. Mexico border, in 1942. As an American, she feels her identity is dependent on the color of her skin, her gender, and her being working-class, each a distinction which arbitrarily rewards or deprives her of worth and value in the eyes of society and herself. The effect of this categorization is limiting, restricting her reality (life as she lives it and how she views herself) to conform to the stiff and sterile aspects of these identity categories to validate or dismiss her emotions and understanding. These identity categories ultimately fail to validate Anzaldúa's lived experience, and thus deprive her of the opportunity to lament their failure, as so

1 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 560.

much of her life, her culture, and understanding cannot neatly fit into the boxes of a prescribed assimilative identity.<sup>2</sup> She feels coerced to internalize white-washed ideals and beliefs regarding education when a professor denies her dissertation proposal because the subject matter, Chicana literature and feminist theory, are not "legitimate" philosophies according to the American education system.<sup>3</sup> It is out of this strife and pain that the nepantlera is born.

Anzaldúa uses *conocimiento*, a Spanish word for knowledge, to describe her seven-stage process of questioning conventional views of how to live, concepts of identity, and popularly held belief systems that define "knowledge."<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, the path of *conocimiento*, the path to knowing, allows people to validate interpretations of self that normative categories of identity cannot accommodate. Anzaldúa's path of *conocimiento* as an enduring process of reinterpretation and evaluation of identity requires her to accept the inadequacy of identity categories, recognize the pain incurred by her assimilation (internalizing what does not satisfy her lived experience), and in turn strive to uphold her own views (her subjective reality) without a familiar cultural foundation to validate them within.<sup>5</sup> This stage in the path, the mental point where conflicting perspectives, "truths," or, as is Anzaldúa's case, two distinct cultural views, are held in equal consideration of one another to form a new understanding, is called *nepantla*.<sup>6</sup> *Nepantla* is a mental space of transition; we see ourselves, both physically and mentally, as constantly changing, with our subjective reality (the story we tell ourselves about life and the world around us) in constant transformation as well.<sup>7</sup> As a way to find meaning and purpose in life, after making peace with the fallibility of customary beliefs, we reorient what we "know" of the world from a point of constant transformation—we begin to live in *nepantla*.<sup>8</sup> We can acknowledge racial, ethnic, and socio-economic divisions in society without internalizing them or defining ourselves according to others resisting assimilation. But to be cognizant of this transitory and fluid mental space is not enough: true embodiment and actualization ought to follow. In recognizing the need to concretely actualize this transitory perspective, we can begin to shape-shift; we can become a nepantlera.

2 Anzaldúa, "now let us shift," 561.

3 Anzaldúa, "now let us shift," 548.

4 Anzaldúa, "now let us shift," 541.

5 Anzaldúa, "now let us shift," 549.

6 Anzaldúa, "now let us shift," 548.

7 Anzaldúa, "now let us shift," 548.

8 Anzaldúa, "now let us shift," 562.



Translated as “the inbetweeners,” the nepantlera grapples with and mediates conflict arising between people from opposing cultural perspectives and the power dynamics at play within popular categories of identity. To act from the neutral point of *nepantla*, or transition, empowers the nepantlera to mediate and facilitate conversation between cultures that may otherwise refuse to accommodate one another, and in turn gives us the opportunity to investigate our own perspectives, our relationship to the world, and cultures we exist within.<sup>9</sup> Nepantlera are divested of any absolute or unwavering identity because they understand that there is nothing inherently true, real, or objective to be found within them.<sup>10</sup> Actualizing the neutrality of the *nepantla* worldview, transcending social norms, and any obfuscation of the transitory reality of all subjective perspective, the nepantlera becomes a vessel of transformation of understanding for people who are stifled under the thumb of assimilative racial constructs.

Anzaldúa, ostracized from both the white, American community that has deemed her as “too brown,” and her indigenous Mexicana culture that deems her as “too white-washed,” lands her in a unique position to be the perfect mediator between a group of white feminists and feminists of color at an East Coast feminist philosophy conference. The camp of white feminists contend that they need not accommodate their peers of color any further, while the feminists of color beg their white peers to contend with issues of racism, as they are not to be dealt with by feminists of color alone.<sup>11</sup> Anzaldúa shapeshifts between the two camps, enduring insults, anguish, and fear in the crossfire of hurt pride. But, having removed her consciousness and understanding from her body insofar as she does not see physicality as a limiting factor or meaningful part of who a person is, she can navigate back and forth between these opposing sides, shapeshifting as she sincerely engages with, listens to, and understands each, while also reconfiguring the perspective of what causes this kind of disagreement in the first place. When we remove ourselves from a conventional point of view, or, in Anzaldúa’s view, our ego, and instead allow our thoughts to proceed from a neutral perspective (*nepantla*), we create new ways of viewing the world.<sup>12</sup> In place of unconditional acquiescence to unquestioned cultural norms, we coalesce our past life experiences with the future we desire, trimming the fat of our own oppressive thoughts and rewiring the brain to more accurately reflect our worldviews.

Addressing oppressive worldviews becomes a key function of the conceptual “sage” in *Zhuangzi*. Zhuang wrote during China’s Warring States period (475–221 BCE), an era characterized by efforts to erect a new political dynasty. Moral constructs were developed to maintain social control and order, ensuring the authority of the ruling class, and giving each person a specific role to play. Moral virtues required a particular method or ‘way,’ the initial translation of the Chinese term *dao*. Traditionally, *dao* referred to a method of attaining a known goal or simply the “way” something ought to be done.<sup>13</sup> Additional translations are the “road” or “path,” a guide through life that is not created by the actions of humans and so is not dependent on humans at all. It simply refers to the ways or patterns of nature that convey a rational structure of reality. The most important translation may be the “Guiding Discourse,” conversation and debate in a noncompetitive aspect.<sup>14</sup> These two translations of *dao*, as noncompetitive debate and the structure of reality, will be relied on hereafter to articulate the nature of the sage. The use of *dao*, and the sage as the embodiment of *dao* in *Zhuangzi*, upends the assumption that there is any one right way to live, think, and be, as to affirm the rightness of one is to deny and make unjustified the existence of another. The figure of the sage, in complete opposition to the cultural conflicts of the day, is a provocateur, a passive figure that brings light to the arbitrary nature of popular morals, and in this way is a perfect embodiment of Zhuang’s use of the word “*dao*,” relinquishing power suggested by any construct that tries to limit reality or draw hard lines delineating right and wrong, or any worldview that seeks to delegitimize another.

From the second chapter in Zhuang’s “Inner Chapters,” the following quote elucidates how morality as a social construct is more arbitrary than it is justified by traditional use: “When rights and wrongs waxed bright, / the Course began to wane. What set the Course to waning was exactly what brought the cherishing of one thing over another to its fullness.”<sup>15</sup> Our emotions influence our perceptions of the “rightness” or “wrongness” of how we live. This is to say that *de* (morality) does not offer an ultimate understanding of life and how to best live it, as any assertions based on subjective perspective are incapable of revealing any real, ultimate truths.<sup>16</sup> Acting according to moral conventions, allowing them to “wax bright,” causes “the Course” to “wane” or become unclear.<sup>17</sup> “The Course,” translated from *dao*, is the unseen, unspecified, and actionless cause of all things, whether that be humanity, cultural values,

13 Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi, The Essential Writings: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2009), 214.

14 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 214.

15 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 14–5.

16 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 214.

17 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 14–5.

9 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift,” 567.

10 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift,” 542.

11 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift,” 564.

12 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift,” 569.



or an ultimate reality.<sup>18</sup> Creating exact judgments of the appropriateness of life causes “the Course” to wear away or “wane” as man forges his own path instead.<sup>19</sup> If the course “wanes,” the changing and fluid condition of life is no longer understood. Relating “the Course” to its translation as “Guiding Discourse,” the flow of conversation between different perspectives on life is destroyed when moral conviction and egoistic superiority are favored over mutual respect for each other’s unique perspectives. There is no right “Course,” as all perspective is contingent upon our ever-fluctuating moods; thus, any viewpoint can at once be affirmed or negated by the perspective of another person. To create fixed moralities of “right and wrong” and to apply these concepts to people, who are also ever-changing and developing new aspects of personality, character, and lifestyles, completely eclipses the essence of life, the Dao, itself. That the earlier uses of *dao* referred to a “Guiding Discourse” illustrates the arbitrary nature of restrictive world views founded on rigid, categorical concepts of moral goodness.

Humans like our boundaries, our rights and wrongs. We love our rules, and we love to assume we know better than others. Consider what engaging in a political conversation today requires of us: an assumption that any political view we hold is one worth destroying a relationship over, and that agreement across the aisle is an impossibility. The sage, however, “has the physical form of a human being, but not the characteristic inclinations of a human being . . . Since he is free of their characteristic inclinations, right and wrong cannot get at him.”<sup>20</sup> Because the sage does not subscribe to any single world view and does not outwardly express esteemed characteristics (moral views according to pop culture such as Responsibility, Virtuosity, etc.), he transcends moral tethers.<sup>21</sup> The relationship between the sage and shapeshifting as a means to protect from assimilation and oppression takes on a more passive and withdrawn nature. A song sung by the “madman Jiyeu” overheard by the character Confucius in chapter four of *Zhuangzi* elucidates the nature of the sage and how he interacts with the Course:

But in the present age, avoiding execution is the best he can do with it . . . Drawing a straight line upon this earth and trying to walk along it—danger, peril! The brambles and thorns . . . they do not impede my steps. My zigzag stride amid them keeps my feet unharmed.<sup>22</sup>

“Avoiding execution,” evading internal destruction by imposed foreign concepts, and “drawing a straight line” of rigid norms of acceptable perspectives and expecting ourselves to follow them exactly, puts us all in “peril,” as we no longer understand one another as changeable, unique individuals, ever blossoming in our understanding. Instead, we tear each other apart, with our “brambles and thorns” giving credence to those perspectives which separate us.<sup>23</sup> The sage, though, shifts about and switches his perspective depending on where the most violent and dangerous brambles of judgment lie. He zig-zags, or shapeshifts, externally abstaining from the demands or wants of the society he lives in without internalizing any of its popular worldviews as his own, remaining “unharmed” and successfully bypassing true assimilation.<sup>24</sup> The sage, as a perfect embodiment of the *dao*, is able to see all things and people from their own points of view and, though some perspectives are seemingly incompatible, they are nonetheless held in equal consideration within the sage’s mind.<sup>25</sup> The sage does not allow “likes and dislikes to damage [them] internally,” but rather encounters each moment as it appears, evaluates it fully and does not attach any feeling to that perspective.<sup>26</sup> The sage, recognizing the limitations of his understanding, never tries to go beyond what he “knows,” and so never attempts to demonstrate to others the truth of his individual perspective, as he knows it is no more true than someone else’s who might completely disagree with his worldview. Remaining cognizant of that which he sincerely does not know, the possibility of attack and strife in conversation with others is eliminated.

In relation to shapeshifting, our ability to halt destructive arguments by acknowledging when we do not understand the perspective of a person we find ourselves arguing with removes us from harm’s way. That which we assert as wisdom and knowledge never connects us, as these are perspectival truths with enduring rivals. Instead, it trumps, thwarts, and celebrates the artificial “short-comings” of others, excusing us from potentially meaningful conversations wherein we are met with perspectives different from our own that encourage us to investigate our convictions and recognize them as fallible. The less of ourselves that we give to others—the opinions we share, beliefs we hold, the future we desire, etc.—the less we might have taken away from us and invalidated. The passive sage loses nothing because he gives nothing, as there is no one perspective he serves to uphold.

18 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 16; 214.

19 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 14.

20 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 38.

21 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 38.

22 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 32.

23 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 38.

24 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 38.

25 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 38.

26 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 38.



It is worth questioning the practical merit of applying the methods of shapeshifting through the nepantlera or sage in our everyday lives. If, like the nepantlera, we never steadfastly stand by a particular belief or conception of ourselves, or, like the sage, we do not make our values obvious to others, then what do we have? What kind of person are we when, ostensibly, we stand for nothing? These concerns, though valid, assume that the nepantlera and the sage believe nothing, hold nothing dear, and are empty, idyllic figures which escape pain because they avoid reality—an impossible ideal with which to engage. Shapeshifting is not a means to avoid reality. It is not avoidant in the sense that it does not and should not deny the experiences of living in a neo-liberal, late capitalist society which racializes, excludes, and separates us from one another. The embodiment of the transitory and fluid mental-state of *nepantla* by means of the nepantlera actualizes and thus places in the world a perspective wherein all beliefs and understandings move fluidly through perception, giving credence to the experiences of marginalized people who are devalued by racial, ethnic, and gender categories that they did not elect to take on in the first place. If we are to be a nepantlera, then we must embrace potential hostility, and allow ourselves to set necessary and meaningful boundaries with others, even if that means we deny people the opportunity to have a relationship with us at all. The implications of the sage's neutrality, though, are a bit more alarming: if we appear uncaring, not upholding any morals whatsoever, the potential to allow and excuse exploitative behavior becomes incredibly easy. But to manipulate the nature of the sage to make exploitation and abuse permissible is a perversion of what the sage elucidates in the *Zhuangzi*. Righteousness is not assured; therefore, any moral judgments which condemn or uplift others to validate one person having power over another ought to be met with indifference, taking away the reactive power of these concepts that cause real harm in our lives.

Shapeshifting like the nepantlera and the sage may provide those who feel they cannot exist as they are with a means by which they can superficially acquiesce to or appear ignorant of invasive social customs without internalizing them. That these figures may aid in the avoidance of assimilation is to say that their behavior is so bound to the status quo (because they are constantly aware of it) that neither must acquiesce to a single viewpoint to live authentically. The methods of disengagement are not the same, with the nepantlera consciously extrapolating their own worldview from common thought and endeavoring to resolve conflict through equal consideration of all perspectives, whereas the sage, on the other hand, does not try to do anything at all.<sup>27</sup> While the nepantlera aims to gain mutual respect and understanding from across cultural worldviews, the sage behaves in a childlike manner without adherence to

absolute notions of value, no adherence to predominant logic, no notion of appropriateness beyond its application in a given scenario, and no ultimate purpose for which to toil.<sup>28</sup> The dispositions of the sage and the nepantlera could not contrast one another more, but the end result of their behavior, that no single perspective is considered absolutely valid above all else, helps show how shapeshifting can protect people from social assimilation. The nepantlera actively combats convention and can be seen by others as both understanding and in defiance of traditional ways of thinking. She responds through activism, opening herself up to the possible wounding words of others, but also supporting those who may not be able to speak for themselves in times of conflict.<sup>29</sup> The sage may act, but does so passively as a situation may call for, and does not act with any particular motivation in mind other than to embody the *dao*.<sup>30</sup> The sage does not serve to dismantle social norms but makes no aim to outwardly support and enforce them. Both figures evade internalization of world views which serve to harm and control people more than they ever could help them, allowing them to survive amidst cultural expectations to assimilate for some degree of comfort within society.

Rather than outwardly defying social norms, which often results in being “othered” by society, we may maintain a neutral reaction, appearing almost indifferent for the sake of our own wellbeing, and evading emotional harm and assimilation without forcing our own perspective on anyone else. We question why we hold the beliefs that we do; we maintain an imaginative, but focused, view on the constructs handed to us that we are told we ought to recognize ourselves through; and we shapeshift, seeing through the boundaries of culture to accommodate and make space for ourselves in such a way that we no longer depend on the judgments of predominant worldview to validate our own. We may serve as a bridge like the nepantlera, communicating and mediating conflict between individuals who may otherwise not be able to see the world outside the narrative they have always lived by, or we may become the sage, giving an air of indifference and remaining passive when told we must agree with something or that we must behave a certain way in order to gratify the opinions of others. It is this point of contact, their extreme awareness of and yet disengagement from commonly held beliefs and assumptions, unites the passive sage and the active nepantlera, and what could unite us as well in times of conflict. In light of this, I would say that while it may not always be necessary to shapeshift, we ought not reject the world that seems disagreeable to us, as we live in this world. It will step on our toes, and we cannot deny that, but we should not force our own worldviews onto others just to validate our own.

28 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 32.

29 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift,” 568.

30 Zhuangzi, *Essential Writings*, 38.

27 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift,” 567.





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