Weaponising Speculation

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Sweet Dreams Are Made of This: Speculation

Ridvan Askin

Exit light
Enter night
Take my hand
We’re off to never never-land
– Metallica, “Enter Sandman”

THE aim of this paper is to bring together literary narration and philosophical speculation in an attempt to show how these seemingly divergent fields in fact mutually inform one another[1]. In order to do so, I will use Ana Castillo’s 1986 novel The Mixquiahuala Letters as my tutor text [2].

The Mixquiahuala Letters recounts its protagonists Teresa and Alicia’s travels to and adventures in Mexico and is usually read in terms of a quest for Chicana identity and independence [3]. Against this established consensus view I hold that identity is merely the starting point of the narrative which in fact embarks on a journey of disintegration, differentiation and dissolution both in terms of content and form. This disintegration and dissolution constitutes the novel’s speculative exploration of its very own constitution as narrative. This exploration is most prominently expressed in the novel’s monologic epistolarity (it consists of 40 letters), its hypertextual form (it presents three distinct possibilities

1. I would like to thank Philipp Schweighauser for his very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
of actualisation of its story matter) and in the structural and thematic importance of sleeping and dreaming. For the present essay, I will confine myself to this third characteristic and show how the novel casts dreams as acts of speculation while simultaneously presenting itself precisely as such an act of speculative dreaming [4]. Since it does this by means of narrative this leads me to postulate the correlation of speculation and narration.

In *The Mixquiahuala Letters* sleeping and dreaming are presented from within the framework of Chicana esotericism with dreaming assuming a role akin to that of *brujeria* – that is, sorcery or witchcraft. In her volume of essays *Massacre of the Dreamers* Castillo says this about Chicana esoteric spiritualism or *espiritismo*: ‘[E]spiritismo [...] is an acknowledgement of the energy that exists throughout the universe subatomically generating itself and interconnecting, fusing, and changing’[5]. While the novel does reference *brujos* and *curanderas*, staple figures of Chicana literature, I take its treatment of dreaming and of falling asleep as a means of accessing the realm of dreams to be its most salient feature of *espiritismo*. In the novel, sleeping and dreaming function precisely as the means to tap spiritual subatomic cosmic energy. In what follows, I will recast this esotericism in properly philosophical terms trying to translate what could be termed folk metaphysical intuitions into metaphysics proper.

**Metaphysical Dreams**

In his recent non-phenomenology of sleep in *The Fall of Sleep* Jean-Luc Nancy bluntly states that ‘I fall asleep and at the same time I vanish as “I”‘ while unmistakably making clear that this vanishing of the ‘I’ amounts to the unearthing of one’s essential being: ‘It is in the self the sleeper is, as in self as the Kantian thing can

4. I discuss both the novel’s hypertextuality and its epistolary form in detail in the much expanded treatment of Castillo’s novel in my forthcoming *Narrative and Becoming: Differential Narratology*.
be, that is the being-there, posited, the very position independent of all appearance and all appearing’ [6]. Falling asleep thus constitutes both the attainment of my innermost self and the dissolution of a distinct ‘I’:

*I fall to where I am no longer separated from the world by a demarcation that still belongs to me all through my waking state and that I myself am, just as I am my skin and all my sense organs. I pass that line of distinction, I slip entire into the innermost and outermost part of myself, erasing the division between these two putative regions. [7]*

A little later Nancy clarifies that sleep’s erasure of division between inside and outside with respect to one’s essential being constitutes simultaneity per se as true simultaneity only exists ‘in the realm of sleep. It is the great present, the co-presence of all compossibilities, even incompatible ones’ [8]. Nancy locates the essential self in the fusion of distinctions in an eternal presence. In other words, the in-itself of one’s self turns out to be the eternal dissolution in an undifferentiated *apeiron* attainable only through sleep. Nancy’s sleep thus epitomises Hegel’s dictum of the ‘night in which every cow is black’ [9]. It constitutes a realm that concepts (distinctions) cannot reach. All one can do is cautiously circle the event horizon of this black hole – hence Nancy’s poetic non-phenomenology surfing its outer brinks. While Nancy thus articulates the necessary link between dissolution and essence of one’s self, he, due to his phenomenological commitments, cannot say much about this dark essence itself. It needs a metaphysician to probe this darkness. In contrast to Nancy, Gilles Deleuze self-identifies as a ‘pure metaphysician,’ and it is not too difficult to see that Deleuze’s conceptualisation of the virtual-actual fold is apt to provide the detailed metaphysical account that Nancy cannot offer [10]. More importantly, Deleuze’s topological folding of inside and outside immanentises Nancy’s black hole of the in-itself and plants the seeds of conceptual distinction into the obscurity of this darkness. Deleuze’s virtual qua realm of the in-itself qua realm of implicit multiplicities or Ideas is precisely not an undifferentiated *apeiron* – it is the incessant differentiation of difference. Accordingly, falling asleep does not amount to a fall beyond the event horizon into oblivious indistinction, but to a plunge into obscurity where obscurity is conceived as the very germ of the distinct: difference itself. This plunge is precisely what Castillo’s esoterico-poetic figuration of sleeping and dreaming in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* constitutes: while falling asleep gives access to this realm, dreaming provides the images closest to it. In the novel, dreaming thus never figures as a mere personal experience but always indexes the impersonal as expounded in Deleuze’s conceptualisation of the virtual and Castillo’s own esotericism of subatomic cosmic energies. In short, in Castillo’s novel dreaming constitutes a veritable visionary act.

With fabulation, a term they hijack from Henri Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari provide the corresponding visionary faculty to these acts [11]. Fabulation qua visionary faculty is the proper faculty of speculation, that which makes it possible to go beyond experience in experience. In *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, fabulation’s work

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6. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 11, 13, original emphasis. For this reason, Nancy states that there cannot be a “phenomenology of sleep, for it shows itself only its disappearance, its burying and its concealment.” Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, 13. What follows directly from these two statements is that there can only be a metaphysics of sleep. Working from within the tradition of phenomenology, Nancy himself never embarks on such a metaphysical project. To him, sleep profoundly remains a state of “indistinctness,” an “effacement of my own distinction” which cannot be adequately conceptualized. Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, 7. Since Nancy still wants to make positive statements about sleep, however, the only alternative he has left is a kind of phenomenology that allows for speculation but is not metaphysical, hence my term non-phenomenology to capture this endeavor.


8. Ibid 7.


comes in the guise of ‘mystical dreams’[12]. Teresa’s dream in letter 27 constitutes the end point of this fabulatory journey. In this letter, Teresa presents Alicia and the reader with a story of origin which could easily be detected as an invocation of mythical Aztlan were it not for a number of details that do not fit this picture. In fact, the images this micro-narrative evokes produce a counter-Aztlan that sets originary, virtual repetition over against the repetition of mythical origins. The dream is set in a ‘provincial town’ from sometime ‘between the sixteenth century and the present,’ its people of mixed blood[13]. That the dream is a narrative of origin becomes evident when the town’s existence is traced to the beginnings of time in the dream’s invocation of God’s creation of the first human. This originary creation is cast as successful only after two failed attempts that produce people too dark and too fair-skinned, respectively. God is finally satisfied with his ‘brown, firm and strong’ creation, which posits mestizaje as originary rather than derivative[14]. That the dream is about origins that exceed filiation and familial ties and thus go beyond psychoanalysis’ ‘familialism’ is further substantiated in a scene where Teresa enters a house ‘with a sense of familiarity’ but is ‘surprised’ when the old woman she meets turns out ‘not [to be her] mother’ but ‘still of [her] people’[15]. The dream thus presents a vision of the origin of Teresa’s people and simultaneously casts this origin as universal: all people are essentially brown, all people’s origin lies in mestizaje. While this claim to universality is already at odds with the Aztlan myth’s claim as being foundational for a particular ethnic identity, the Chicano appeal to this originary myth is further eroded in the subsequent scene where Teresa passes ‘a group of young people caught up in rhetorical debate’ who ‘fight and defend theirs with words and ideologies’[16]. This is a thinly disguised attack on the Chicano movement’s leading figures and strategies, which becomes more evident a couple of lines further on, when she confronts the group a second time: now they are explicitly referred to as ‘intellectuals’ and it seems safe to assume that the group consists of men only as Teresa furiously tears open her shirt and yells, “i am a woman […] but i am first human”[17]. This proclamation again casts feminism as a universalist endeavor in opposition to male particularism[18]. Accordingly, Teresa calls them ‘fools’ knowing that ‘they, too, were scornful of [her] and [her] methods,’ the narrative thus clearly marking the methodological difference[19]. This difference can be encapsulated thus: empirical and verificationist vs. transcendental and speculative. The verificationists are ‘word dealers’ and thus rely on logic (logos) as their primary method[20]. The dream reveals this to be an utterly ineffective method for facing real and not just formal problems: the word is by no means mightier than the sword when it has to face the ‘thundering sound of marching troops’ which announce the town’s looming downfall[21]. Only fabulatory speculation is adequate to cope with these real problems. Instead of logicians, we need dreamers, witches, sorcerers: this is the quintessence to be drawn from the dream’s and the novel’s climax where the method of fabulation (speculation), ontology (becoming of being) and politics (transformative action) meet and merge in one visionary dream-image: Teresa pointing her weapon[22]. Let me unpack this image. The climax is reached when Teresa, in the face of the marching troops, races to retrieve her gun:

My weapon. It was my own and I had used it before, fit into my hand like that of a faithful lover.
i made certain that it was fully loaded and loaded another that had been left by someone else. There was no time! [23]

In terms of politics, the contrast to the ever-debating ‘word dealers’ could not be starker. To remain with the image evoked above, swords trump words when it comes to action. Not because one cannot do things with words, but

12. Castillo, The Mixquiahuala Letters, 27. Deleuze himself, rather than discussing dreams, prefers to revert to the more obscure examples of sorcery and witchcraft in his writings. No doubt this is partly due to psychoanalysis’ claim on the dream as its legitimate object of study, and partly due to the fact that dreams are still too close to us. They are very much a part of our experiential world while the same can hardly be said of sorcery or witchcraft. Christian Kerslake, Deleuze and the Unconscious, (London: Continuum, 2007) is the book to go on these issues, particularly on the ambiguous status of the dream in Deleuze’s writings. The most sustained discussion of sorcery and witchcraft in Deleuze’s work can be found in the plateau on becoming in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi, (London: Continuum, 2007), 264-278. It is thus important that dreams in The Mixquiahuala Letters figure as visionary rather than ordinary dreams, dreams akin to sorcery and witchcraft.


17. Ibid, 103.

18. This is congruent with recent re-evaluations of feminism. See for example Claire Colebrook, “Feminist Extinction,” in Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice, ed. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni
because they are utterly ineffective and simply the wrong tool when it comes to dealing with real problems. Reality is not linguistically structured. This is not to say that Teresa will defeat a whole army, but it is to say that her method harbors the potential to change the course of events whereas the group of young intellectuals' does not. The gun thus becomes the vivid figure of her speculative methodology.

In terms of ontology, in the framework of the Deleuzian differential metaphysics espoused here, the dream image, akin to the sorcerer’s and witch’s incantations and visions, is as close as we can get to the non-appearing, the non-phenomenological, in short, the in-itself. It is the image closest to the virtual. The principle which grounds, or rather ungrounds, the virtual is the Deleuzian third synthesis of time, the unfolding of time itself, repetitious difference and differential repetition: becoming. As such, becoming does not emerge and happen in time, but is the emergence and happening of time. And this is indeed what Teresa’s dream imagines – in the sense of putting into image – in its positing of originary and universal mestizaje as synthetic ground the principle (God) of which is precisely that of difference (two different skin colors inhere) and repetition (two other beginnings persist). That God is a name for becoming, the unfolding of time, is revealed when the dream narrative asserts that this story of synthetic origin marks the ‘beginning of time’ inaugurated by God ‘one eon of a day’ [24]. The dream draws a difference between eon and time here, with time denoting the time of succession, that is chronology, which only comes into existence with the human, and eon, the time of God, that grounds and generates chronology. This of course is also the distinction that Deleuze makes when he differentiates between Aion and Chronos in his Logic of Sense [25]. What is crucial to Deleuze’s account, however, is that Aion is not split from Chronos. It is not another, prior and transcendent temporal dimension but folded into Chronos. Teresa’s dream narrative embraces this temporal topology in its climactic final moments. The exclamation ‘[t]here was no time!’ which is italicised and thus emphasised, not only transports a sense of urgency, but more importantly marks the fact that this dream-image fabulates an origin literally out of time [26]. There is no Chronos in this nowhere and ‘never never-land.’ Accordingly, when the sentence following the negation of chronology exclaims that ‘[t]he moment had come,’ this is precisely not the coming of yet another moment in the sequence of moments, moment after moment, but the advent of Aion, an eruption within Chronos, the moment that harbors ‘the history of the world and [...] its future, [...] all that had lived and died and had been born again’; it is the moment Teresa ‘approaches an opaque window and points [her] weapon’ [27]. This is the ultimate speculative moment in the novel, this image of Teresa pointing her weapon at an opaque window. This image encapsulates virtual co- and pre-existence, the zero point of chronology (‘history and future of the world’), the rebirth of the new (‘born again’), originary repetition: becoming. By the same token, it makes clear that the only way to reach becoming is by means of fabulatory speculation. This dream image redoubles on itself – the opaque window – and exclaims: speculation is the weapon! This is The Mixquiahuala Letters’ revolutionary politics, its call to arms: speculate, cast your spells, dream! If one wishes for transformation and regeneration, one has to ceaselessly go beyond the restrictions of empirical life and tap the sources of transcendental becoming.

That fabulation as the faculty of speculation is etymologically related to fabula –story – is no coincidence. In Bergson’s coinage, it conceptualises religious myth-making and is indeed translated as myth-making [28]. In Deleuze and Guattari’s use, fabulation is shorn of its theological import and secularised as a faculty that artists, particularly writers, capitalise on [29].

20. Ibid, 103.
21. Ibid, 103.
22. Ibid, 104.
23. Ibid, 103.
27. Ibid, 103 – 104.
It is thus closely allied to the production of art and, specifically, literature. Against Deleuze and Guattari, I wish to suggest that fabulation’s true function is the production of stories in the general sense of narrative rather than in the restricted sense of fiction. Fabulation would thus be the faculty to narrate, with narration amounting to the rendition of visionary knowledge. This knowledge has nothing to do with conceptual knowledge. Rather, it is aesthetic in the sense of Baumgarten’s original coinage of the term as ‘gnoseologia inferior’ [30]. Being less rigorous (and thus inferior) than conceptual knowledge since unable to draw precise distinctions it is adequate to probe obscurity precisely because of this lack – it is still gnoseologia. This characterisation not only ties in very well with aesthetics as being concerned with darkness rather than luminosity, but also with the etymological origin of narration in Latin gnārūs, having knowledge of, being acquainted with a thing. One of the notorious difficulties in narratology is to reconcile this origin with narration in the sense of fiction as fiction stems from fingere – to form. How can something constitute knowledge and creation at the same time? Suffice it to say here that the answer inheres in Teresa’s visionary dream: for when she recounts the myth of the origin of humanity, God’s creative act consists in forming clay. To form out of clay in turn is the specific root of fingere in the general sense, a root that goes back to the Proto-Indo-European word dheighi, which survives in today’s English as dough and means to knead. Fiction as fingere then denotes originary creation in the sense of kneading, shaping into form. ‘To fiction,’ to forge, thus describes the activity of morphogenesis. If narration is an act of knowing and if fiction-making means creating form, then narration, and particularly fictional narration, might well be the adequate means of probing the origins and workings of this making, of acquiring knowledge about morphogenesis. In this sense, narration is by default creative and speculative. It all boils down to this: in order to narrate, one has to make use of fabulation. In order to speculate, one has to tell a story.

**Dream Poetics**

Castillo’s novel substantiates and exemplifies Claire Colebrook’s assertion that ‘[t]here is a voice that is other than speech, a sound or intensity that is not the expression of a self or body and that occurs extra-organically as a rhythm or pulsation from which something like a social body or territory would emerge’ [31]. This extra-linguistic, extra-psychosomatic and extra-organic voice is precisely the voice grounding all voices, what Deleuze quoting Lawrence Ferlinghetti calls ‘“the fourth-person singular”.’ [32]. Fourth, because it marks an additional dimension to the three grammatical persons thus going beyond any grammar of person – it is impersonal; person, because it nevertheless inheres in all of the three forms as their immanent condition; singular, because despite this universality it is only one voice, but a voice devoid of a particularity of its own. It is the transcendental ground of all empirical voices, the universal singularity productive of all its particular expressions. This voice is unconscious, impersonal and non-human and as such persists in all human, personal and conscious voices. While these statements concerning voice are obviously metaphysical and not narratological statements it is my contention that the metaphysics and narratology of voice are profoundly intertwined. In this vein, the fourth-person singular is the voice that grounds every single enunciation, the impersonal voice that produces any personal account without transcending it. The *Mixquiahuala Letters* takes a first-person account, emphasised in its monologic epistolary form, as its starting point to successively uncover its conditioning fourth-person singular. On the surface level, this is already indicated by the novel’s consistent employment of the lower case i whenever Teresa speaks of herself. This can be read as the narrative’s acknowledgement of the ‘larval

35. I refer to speculation’s “other” root in speculum – mirror, as explained in Michael Inwood’s entry on speculation in his Hegel dictionary:

Spekulation, spekulatorisch and spekulieren (“to speculate”) come from the Latin speculatio (“spying out, reconnoitring; contemplation”) and speculari (“to spy, observe; to look around”), which in turn descends from specere (“to see, look”). (The Latin for a “mirror” is speculum, which gave rise to the German Spiegel, “mirror”). Spekulieren developed other senses: “to count on, rely on; to guess, conjecture”, hence, in the eighteenth century, “to engage in risky commercial ventures”. Speculatio was used by Boethius for the Greek theoria (“contemplation”). Augustine, the scholastics (e.g. Aquinas) and the mystics (e.g. Seuse, Nicholas of Casa)
subjects’ teeming underneath and constituting the fully developed subject that is ‘I’ [33]. This foundational fourth-person singular is made tangible in the novel’s hypertextual epistles and its valuation of visionary dreams. In fact, while the novel’s hypertextuality simulates the intensive process of actualisation, the unconscious process of morphogenesis, its visionary dreams grant access to this unconscious process. Castillo’s novel ultimately suggests that, by dint of displaying its hypertextual form and showcasing the powers of visionary dreaming, it has to be viewed as precisely such a visionary dream itself: it is a delirious dream and a veritable act of brujeria summoning the forces of becoming. The Mixquiahuala Letters pursues a dream poetics that is adequate to the fourth-person singular, that voice, that intensity, that rhythm and pulsation that makes things happen, that is creation itself. This dream poetics thus warrants an adequate method of scrutiny. As has been shown, this method cannot rely on a representational framework as the light of representation cannot enter the ‘night’ of ‘never never-land,’ it merely makes the shadows recede and announces the relentless reign of luminosity (clarity and distinctness). This reign is built on the excision and exorcism of darkness, a darkness on which it nevertheless depends in order to shine, a darkness without which it would be impotent. In order to dream properly, in order to reach ‘never never-land,’ one has to use the sandman’s method and sprinkle some dust on one’s eyes distorting and obscuring one’s vision; one has to immerse oneself in darkness and dream along. This immersion, this dreaming, is what intensive narration qua fabulatory speculation achieves. It is in this vein that Deleuze pits his anamorphic understanding of the dream against psychoanalysis’ insistence on its essentially tropological nature when he says that ‘the dream is not a metaphor but a series of anamorphoses which sketch out a very large circuit’ [34]. Why anamorphosis and not metaphor? Because metaphor emphasises representation.

In metaphors, something stands in for something else, whereas anamorphosis is dynamic and transformative. It captures changes in form. While dreams qua metaphors qua signs facilitate hermeneutic decoding – the default methodology of both psychoanalytic praxis and literary interpretation – anamorphic images, in order to be properly seen, need to be viewed through prisms and mirrors. Thus, the method adequate to anamorphosis is not that of hermeneutics but that of speculation – and the method adequate to the analysis of narratives qua anamorphic dreams that of a speculative narratology [35].

associate it with speculum, and, following St Paul (1 Cor. 13: 12), argue that God cannot be seen or known directly, but only in his works or effects, as in a mirror. Thus speculation goes beyond sensory experience to the divine or supernatural.

Michael Inwood, A Hegel Dictionary (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 271. As has been shown, this reaching for the supernatural and divine is at the heart of Castillo’s esoteric spiritismo while Deleuze’s speculation is not theologically conceived but thisworldly. Sleeping and dreaming as redoubling acts of contemplation, as obscure kinds of seeing, as ‘risky […] ventures’ into the unknown are perfect examples of such a thisworldly speculative act. This act can be summarised thus: closing one’s eyes to see properly.

And this is the formula, the magic spell that both constitutes and is perpetuated by The Mixquiahuala Letters. In this light (or darkness), the title of Castillo’s first manuscript of poems is programmatic for her entire oeuvre: “I Close My Eyes… to See.” Ana Castillo, “I Close My Eyes…to See,” in Ana Castillo Papers: California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives 2, Special Collections (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1975).