Webbed Attachments:Psychedelic Lessons from the Multiverse

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Abstract: *This essay explores how the fundamental qualities of the psychedelic experience—including heightened affective inten- sity, the disorganization of the ego, and a sense of cosmic inter-connectedness with the universe—offers a hopeful alternative to contemporary left-wing identitarianism. This is a widely popular political logic that associates the pursuit of social justice with the passionate defense of seemingly coherent, bounded marginalized subjectivities that are depressively defined by their perpetual subordination to rigid hierarchies of power. Building on Wendy Brown's classic formulation of "wounded attachment," I argue that in a painful paradox, the obsessive attachment to cultural identity as the vehicle for articulating marginalized subjects' bids for political freedom, often masks the underlying desire to com- mune freely across our differences. Against this logic, I turn to the distinctly psychedelic animated films, Spider-Man: Into (2018) and Across the Spider-Verse (2023), which use the titular superhero's sig-nature "webbing" as a visual theory of attachment and affiliation across infinite phenotypical, temperamental, and stylistic differ-ences, or radically distinct forms of life. By visually and conceptu-ally fracturing Spider-Man's seemingly coherent ego across time and space, the film presents the fictional concept of the multiverse as a distinctly psychedelic figure for conceiving differences as an endless web of relations forged between multiple dimensions rather than rigidly formed identities.*

Keywords *Identity politics, diversity, wounded attachment, psychedelics, Wendy Brown, Spider-Man*

The world men are born into contains many things all of which have in common that they appear and hence are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled by sentient creatures able to acknowledge, recognize, and react to what is not merely there but appears to them and is meant for their perception Nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; every- thing that is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind (1977)

A PSYCHEDELIC PORTAL YAWNS OPEN, sucking [Peter B.Parker] TOWARD IT he is falling towards a STRANGE KALEIDOSCOPE OF SPIDERMEN.—Scene description, Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse screenplay (2018)Near the conclusion of the Academy Award-winning animated film Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018), the neophyte, web-slinging, teenage superhero Miles Morales (voiced by Shameik Moore) leaps off a Brooklyn skyscraper. This icon has the potential to conjure a multitude of contemporary and historical horrors: the hoodie-wearing brown youth so often the target of murderous violence; the visual archive of Black bodies in the aftermath of a lynching; the picture of human silhouettes falling from the twin towers on 9/11; even perhaps the infamous, yet apocryphal cautionary tale of the bad LSD trip that ends with a hysterical flight out of a window. Astoundingly, even as it indexes such tragedies, the sequence is not about any of them. Though in the context of this scene Miles is literally falling, on-screen and in the film’s poster art he is pictured inverted while suspended in mid-air, thus majestically appearing to rise against the New York City skyline (figures 1–2). As he soars, a kaleidoscopic series of extra-di- egetic sounds and visual cut-scenes give viewers insight into the mani- fold influences that have shaped this moment: a voiceover of Miles’s parents reminding their son of his infinite potential; Miles’s mentor Peter B. Parker (voiced by Jake Johnson) underscoring that becoming Spider-Man follows no rule book but instead demands a “leap of faith”; and his deceased predecessor’s aunt, May Parker (voiced by Lily Tomlin), paying forward her nephew’s legacy by handing Miles the web-shooters that grant Spider-Man the ability to fly. As an Afro- Puerto Rican Brooklynite, Miles carries the cultural markers of his social identity—his hoodie, Air Jordan sneakers, and graffitied Spider-Man costume registering the impact of African American popular culture and art on his self-expression; but his flight is the utterly contingent outcome of countless events and encounters with bodies, perspec- tives, even alternate dimensions vastly unlike his own. At the knife’s edge of catastrophe, Miles thinks and acts, releasing an extraordi- narily long web that sticks to the top of the building, transforming his chaotic dive into an epic swing across Brooklyn. It is a moment of surrender, which disorganizes every logic of his presumed identity, followed by an act of judgment, which allows Miles to reconstitute as something else entirely: a literal and symbolic Spider-Man, a figure of webbed or networked personhood. The scene is psychedelic, not only in its sensory intensity and hallucinatory visuals, but in its depic- tion of groundlessness as the condition for transformation, including a profound shifting of our frame of reference that allows us to see the event of falling as an experience of ascension; the vulnerable Black and brown boy judged by a racist society as the willful practitioner of judg- ment; and the seemingly fixed cultural

specificity of any identity as a shapeshifting outcome of the infinitely intricate weave of relationships that mark and make the body and consciousness of any of one us.

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

I begin with this breathtaking image of free fall as a symbolic figure of freedom—understood as the capacity to become something else in concert with others—because it captures the affective stakes of this essay, which explores how the ecstatic intensity of psychedelic states can offer a rousing model for affinity and communion outside the rubric of injured identity. In what follows, I argue that the central features of psychedelic experience—including the disorganization and expansion of the ego or sense of self, the dramatic intensification of affective expe- rience, and a cosmic sense of interconnection with the universe—offer critical tools for better apprehending and negotiating human plurality in an increasingly xenophobic world. Today, the problem of diver- sity, understood as the fundamental fact of differences and how we respond to them in a democratic society, is frequently circumscribed by three dominant logics: 1) a resurgent right-wing xenophobia ruth- lessly seeking to maintain unequal social hierarchy (captured by the soaring political successes of Trumpism and white supremacy, and virulent societal misogyny and transphobia); 2) a well-studied neolib- eral project of co-opting social and cultural identities to transform them into de-politicized commodities (captured by the institutionalization of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and the mass media scramble for Black, Asian American and LGBTQ+ streaming content); and 3) an ethically motivated but often moralizing left-wing social justice discourse informed by anti-racist, queer, and feminist frameworks, which centralizes protecting marginalized subjects from cultural theft and state violence (captured in the recent projects for Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and campus student protest). Though divergent in their aims, all three logics significantly diminish our visceral sense of genuine heterogeneity, by reducing categories of difference to, in Eve Sedgwick's words, "a tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization" (neatly summed up in the shorthand: "race, nation- ality, class, gender, sexuality and ability"), and respectively presenting those distinctions as biologically essential, easily tracked by insti- tutional, economic or digital metrics, or else culturally "owned" by distinct social groups.[1] And, perhaps most importantly, all three logics literally and symbolically cut off the human body, as an exceptionally sophisticated sensory organ, from its rich and variegated physiological capacities for registering and mutually engaging with other lifeforms. Consider that xenophobia outright rejects the potential value of affini- ties, solidarities, or attachments across difference either for the ethical plift of society or even the basic biological survival of the species. Neoliberalism alienates the cultural richness of phenotypical and social differences from the actual messy lives we each inhabit through the endless proliferation of generic consumer types meant to produce profit rather than add meaning and nuance to human distinction. And progressive social justice projects fiercely guard marginalized subjects from potentially threatening interactions with people from other social, political, or cultural groups, actively diminishing their capacity to commune freely in the name of protecting the vulnerable from further anticipated social harm. These limiting and often self-de- structive frames for apprehending and dealing with the fact of human diversity beg the question of what kinds of visceral experiences might get

us back in touch with our adaptative receptivity to other organ- isms and our heterogenous shared world. After all, this innate percep- tual intelligence—in political philosopher Hannah Arendt's terms the simple ability to hear, touch, taste, smell, feel and sense the "appear- ances" of others—is a biological birthright of the human species but also the phenomenological basis for both democratic political life and individual mental wellbeing.

In dramatic contrast to the affectively deadening logics of xeno- phobia, diversity management, and a protectionist social justice discourse, both scientists and lay practitioners of psychoactive substances consistently describe the experience of taking psyche- delics like LSD (or "acid"), psilocybin (or "magic mushrooms"), and MDMA (or "ecstasy"), as occasioning an extreme amplification of a user's perceptual awareness toward themselves and their environ- mental surround. This intensification of consciousness can, under certain circumstances, induce a vertiginous feeling of psychic free fall or expansion, not unlike Miles's epic skydive, that attunes one to the world's astonishing multiplicity, particularity, unpredictability and interconnectedness. As the cognitive philosopher Chris Letheby explains, "It seems that the temporary absence of the ordinary auto- biographical self-concept [experienced under psychedelics] allows subjects to appreciate its contingency and mutability Subjects described a newfound or regained connection to their senses, to the world around them. to other people, and to a 'spiritual principle' of some kind."[2] In this frame, psychedelic experience may allow a person to become unmoored from rigid self-conceptions, which by extension has the potential to catalyze a visceral recognition of their deeply inter- woven relationship to countless other, similarly contingent, mutable, yet distinct beings that share a common world but see and inhabit it from radically different points of view. This felt sense of provisional unity-in-diversity occasioned by psychedelic experience might be understood as one particularly potent way, among others, of viscerally apprehending or encountering genuine plurality, which Arendt claims "is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live."[3]

In the narrative of Into the Spider-Verse, the radioactive spider-bite that grants Miles his superhuman abilities is visually rendered as an injection of a hallucinogenic substance into his bloodstream, vividly heightening Miles's sensory capabilities, scrambling his sense of self, and ultimately reorienting his world toward a burgeoning network of relational entanglements with a nigh-infinite number of other similarly transformed superhumans and mutant misfits in a vast, interdimensional "Spider-Verse." What appears initially as a kind of wounding becomes a portal into another way of being, one of highly refined sensitivity to the plurality of superhuman existence. In fact, Miles's newfound "Spidey-sense"—a heightened mental and physical awareness of one's surroundings that warns every Spider-person of surprise or danger—is formally depicted as a series of wavy energy lines emanating from his head, indicating his immediate perceptual alertness to the presence of other Spider-people as they enter his envi- ronment. Consequently, when Miles takes a "leap of faith" off the top of a Brooklyn

skyscraper, his auto-biographical self-concept is both literally and figuratively shattered: his plummeting body multiplied in a series of comic book panels that rapidly unfold across the screen, while his sense of "who" he is—a loving but often insecure teenage son, student, and friend—is subsumed by the extraordinary potential of what he can become when in touch with the full range of his powers. The psychedelic conceptual effect of his transformation is to upend every contemporary framework for diversity, from the most conservative forms of xenophobia to the most progressive theories of intersection- ality, presenting the subject as a multi-dimensional, re-combinatory, hallucinatory assemblage in continual flux, much like the psychedelic user who discovers and grows to "appreciate [their autobiographical self's] contingency and mutability."[4]

As a result of these surprising salubrious effects, a new psyche- delic renaissance is capturing the scientific and public imagination as a potential field for responding to the wide-spread mental health crisis occasioned by compounding global catastrophes like de-democratiza- tion, institutional sexism, racism, trans- and homophobia, and extreme economic inequality.[5] Studies have recurrently shown that the poten- tial positive outcomes of psychedelic therapy—which involves taking psychoactive medicines in structured sessions with one or more clinical psychologists or therapeutic guides—lies in the process of integration following a "medicinal journey," whereby the tripping subject engages in sustained dialogue about the experience with their guide and/or other users. Precisely because the therapeutic benefits of psychedelics are located in the process of integration, or the user's meaning-making practices in the wake of a highly charged affective transport, I argue that the insights of a distinctly queer-feminist cultural studies—histor- ically concerned as it is with the potential of extravagant or exuberant feeling states and modes of being to destabilize normative desires— can play a crucial role in interpreting the contemporary psychedelic renaissance itself as a phenomenon that articulates a widely shared yearning to commune freely across our differences. By placing the field of psychedelic studies in conversation with the critical thought of queer-feminist cultural analysis, I aim to radically reframe the broader project of the so-called psychedelic renaissance. The recent explosion of scientific interest in psychoactive medicines has been predominantly understood as a biomedical attempt to ameliorate, even permanently cure, large-scale experiences of alienation, self-loathing, and long-term mental distress, a project delimited (and ultimately undermined) by the medical model's intense focus on treating individual symptoms of mass immiseration rather than their structural causes. Against this view, I conceive the growing cultural, spiritual, and scientific interest in psychedelic experience as part of a broader societal endeavor to produce a healthier, more dynamic and cosmopolitan paradigm for grasping the problem of diversity under late capitalism, one that can acknowledge our real and imagined passionate attachments to people far beyond the bounds of our perceived social identities.

By commune freely, I mean not simply the capacity to forge political solidarities, assemble in public, or engage in mutual aid—all of which are utterly

necessary, and profoundly under duress, in a moment wracked by global economic, political, and social catastrophe. But in a more quotidian register, to shape a public world that supports and encourages our ability to voluntarily explore friendship, play, inti- macy, eroticism, collaboration, and dialogue with people radically unlike us (even those whose worldviews we might initially abhor or whose lived experience seem completely foreign to our own) free of the threat of violence, group shunning, or abuse. In Arendt's political philosophy, the unconstrained exploration of such potential bonds models the power of "natality," the perpetual and unpredictable birth of new associations that have the potential to change the world.[6] Such spontaneous bonds are also a necessary prerequisite for what she calls "the space of appearance," the collective presence of political equals in public life that is the bedrock of democratic action, and that "comes into being whenever men are together in the manner of speech and action but disappears with the dispersals of men [and] with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves."[7] Without the simple capacity to negotiate our differences in more local, everyday scenes of communion—in friendship, play, productive conflict, and non-violent respect for distinction—we lose the fundamental cogni- tive training necessary to conceive of and perform acting in concert in the public realm. Communing freely is often the unspoken aspirational ideal of radical social justice projects for the dismantling of systemic oppression, a concept that resonates with cosmopolitanism in its commitment to mutually transformative encounters between people, groups, and cultures with dramatically dissimilar worldviews.[8] Yet paradoxically, both the social justice focus on individual and group harm, violation, and oppression—which often saturates the political field with the affective life of suffering to galvanize support for struc- tural change—and the conservative right's flagrant, often murderous, thoughtlessness toward the very immiseration brought to light by its perceived political opponents, both lead to the same result: the banish- ment of communion from our collective political imagination. This is the perhaps naïve but indispensable democratic wish to be produc- tively changed—rather than annihilated, demoralized, zealously guarded against or rigidly reaffirmed—by our encounters with others. In States of Injury (1995), her searing critique of the neoliberal razing of the foundations of the democratic spirit, feminist political theorist Wendy Brown argued that the greatest threat to the future of democratic life was not simply the institutional dismantling of collec- tive modes of governance—including access to voting rights and the protection of civil liberties—but the increasing loss of the desire for freedom itself among citizenry, the perpetual, painstaking, yet eman- cipatory project of taking collective responsibility for the shape of our shared future.[9] The waning of the collective aspiration to freedom that Brown so presciently described nearly three decades ago is today compounded by an arguably even more existential peril: the erosion of the commonplace desire to commune with others at all. In count- less sociological studies, podcasts, self-help books, popular polls, and reams of anecdotal evidence on social media, we are reminded that a national mental health crisis is both the result of, and further exacerbated by: the decaying of

meaningful friendships; the growing avoidance of interpersonal and political conflict; the decline of real- world sex in favor of virtual intimacies; the reduction of in-person collaboration, teaching, working, or political association prompted by the Covid pandemic; the replacement of deep social bonds with vast, yet shallow digital networks; the narrowing of people's atten- tion spans for sustained discourse; extreme political polarization; and a the visible increase in the exercise of violence to manage encoun- ters with difference.[10] The decline in community and civic association that sociologist Robert Putnam famously identified in his bestselling book Bowling Alone (2000) at the turn of the millennium, has trans-muted into the growing inclination to minimize human contacts alto- gether[11]; this is a highly defensive stance against the impingement upon one's limited sphere of experience shared by people across the political spectrum, from conservative Floridians who wish to legislate drag performers out of public existence to progressive demands for the institution of trigger warnings to protect college students' psychic wellbeing from encounters with disturbing, painful, or emotionally unpredictable course content. This reality has not only damaged the foundations of a shared democratic political habitus—which requires the sustained face-to-face negotiation of competing perspectives on the common good—but also corroded the quotidian psychological capacity to cope with practically every form of difference in others and within ourselves—whether phenotypical, temperamental, political, generational, or spiritual. Is it any surprise then, that in the midst of this seemingly intractable communal enervation, millions are turning to the therapeutic potential of psychoactive drugs, which hold out the possibility of revivifying one's relationship to the world's plurality of appearances, including an escape from recalcitrant forms of political thought, right, left and center?

Taking contemporary psychedelic science seriously, while also rejecting its tendency to see psychoactive drugs as a magic-bullet for mass immiseration, this essay seeks to integrate the insights of the psychedelic experience into a radical democratic politics committed to creating the conditions of genuine communion.[12] This would be a project that understands diversity as a problem of relating across differ- ence beyond the concept of shared oppression or marginalization; faces the reality of the vast and seemingly unrelenting experience of atrocity, violence, and abuse of our era without reducing the raison d'etre of poli- tics to the mere accounting for collective suffering; seeks to dismantle systemic oppression but does not preemptively interpret every scale of experience, from collective practices to interpersonal acts, as a mere epiphenomenon of interlocking systems of domination; is willing to risk the possibility of misappropriation, misunderstanding, even a tolerable degree of psychic harm or distress, to test the possibilities of bridging significant divides of political perspective, lived experi- ence, identitarian belonging, and spiritual belief; and that aims to elicit meaningful transformation in political thought not by demanding conformity to a single vision of collective liberation, but by granting people access to a multitude of them, in other words, recognizing and cultivating the Spider-Man in each of us. Such a politics would not dismiss the frank discussion

of, and direct confrontation with, real systemic and interpersonal oppression and its multitudinous harms, but perhaps loosen our grip on them, in the same way that psychedelic experience productively loosens a user's grip on the "chain of normal categorical ordering, leading to an intensified interest in self and world and also to a range of responses moving from extremes of anxiety to extremes of pleasure."[13]

Toward this end, in this essay, I explore the wildly popular imag- inative concept of the multiverse—originally a comic book conceit that there exist infinitely branching universes alongside our own—as a distinctly psychedelic metaphor for apprehending and contending with the world's inherent plurality.[14] I begin by showing how the scien- tific description of psychedelic states as causing a productive neuro- chemical disorganization of entrenched patterns of thought, uncan- nily parallels the political and intellectual history of left-wing social justice projects for gender, sexual, and racial freedom, and their intel- lectual corollaries, since the 1960s. I suggest that both contemporary progressive identity-based social movements and psychedelic science share a necessary commitment to notions of individual and collective consciousness-expansion, including the importance of accounting for a "multiverse" of political perspectives, while being hampered by their mutual attachment to narratives of wounded identity: on the one hand, the figure of the multiply marked Other ceaselessly battered by the violences of structural inequality, on the other the depressed, anxious, and addicted modern subject whose brain chemistry has become woefully rigid, requiring therapeutic intervention to catalyze states of productive "plasticity." To unmoor, or at least relax, the logic of injury that grounds their claims to social change, in the second half of the essay, I turn to an unlikely source: a pair of animated comic book movies about the interdimensional travels of an Afro-Latinx teenage superhero from another world, Sony Pictures' Spider-Man: Into (2018) and Across the Spider-Verse (2023). By visually and conceptually frac- turing the titular superheroes' ego across time and space, the films present a psychedelic view of cultural identity itself, where the multi- verse emerges as a hallucinatory figure for building meaningful bonds between radically divergent subjects that coalesce out of infinitely expanding webbed attachments rather than the pain and ressentiment of wounded ones.

FROM WOUNDED TO WEBBED ATTACHMENTS

Psychoactives are a class of drugs that create mind-altering and consciousness-expanding effects located less in the chemical compo- sition of the drugs than in the qualitative experience they catalyze in a user. The signal feature of psychedelics is their ability to stimulate an extreme tuning up of the sensorium, which is experienced as a hallu- cinogenic state but lived differently by each person, based on their distinct psychological make-up (or "set") and the physical context in which they take the drug (or "setting"). As historian of science Ido Hartogsohn explains, "The one uniting principle of psychedelic expe- rience is [that it] induces a remarkable intensity of experience. It is hinted at in several

words that repeat themselves in the discourse around the effects of psychedelics: amplification, magnification, augmen- tation, manifestation, revealing, and suggestibility."[15]

Among the many insights of contemporary psychedelic science, perhaps the most profound and controversial is that this qualita- tive intensification of experience is catalyzed by a disruption of brain activity focused on putting forward a coherent sense of self.[16] According to the dominant model of cognition, predictive coding, our brain functions on a hierarchical model, sifting and winnowing the vast amount of sensory data we encounter in the world to ensure we aren't overwhelmed by conflicting perceptual and linguistic informa- tion. As we age, our awareness of the world narrows, increasingly relying on what cognitive scientists call "high level priors," predic- tive assumptions about the world that have been given a significantly greater order of priority in the brain because they help maintain our feeling of control over reality.[17] These predictive assumptions operate on nearly every level of cognition, from the general expectation that a glass will shatter if dropped on the floor (because you've witnessed the consequences of accidentally doing so in the past) to the anticipation of a racist microaggression in the workplace (because you've repeatedly been confronted with bias from managers and co-workers).

These extremely refined predictions help us navigate a contin- gent world, but they also delimit our view of its diverse material and affective landscape, highlighting only the data that seems to confirm the most established assumptions we already hold about our envi- ronment based on prior experiences. This narrowing of awareness frequently leads to "low entropy states," neurochemically stagnant mindsets where certain thought processes become highly rigidified through constant repetition. These are states we associate with depres- sion, anxiety, PTSD, obsessive compulsive disorder, or addiction.[18] Psychoactive drugs have a distinct molecular composition that inter- acts with certain mood receptors in the brain to create significantly increased entropy or unpredictability in the brain's neurochemistry, consequently disrupting a number of functions focused on cognitively confirming our self-perception or identity, including the top-down winnowing of data at higher levels of cognition. Neuroscientists Robin Carhart-Harris and Karl Friston explain "Under psychedelics [global brain function experiences a] relaxation of the precision weighting on priors. By implication [this] would liberate suppressed inforamation, enabling it to travel up through the hierarchy, impressing on higher levels as it does."[19] Thus, psychedelic experience can encourage "bottom up" information, the range of worldly data each of us typi- cally might discount or overlook, to enter our awareness at an acute degree of heightened sensitivity, moving up the chain of our thought process and potentially reorganizing the basis upon which we make sense of who we are and our relationship to the world.

As is widely documented, the first psychedelic renaissance in the US took place between the mid-to-late 1950s and late-1970s, coinciding with the radical political revolutions inaugurated by the struggle for Black Civil Rights. In this

period psychedelic drugs, which had for decades been restricted to psychological laboratory testing or top-se- cret government programs, became publicly disseminated. The cultural history of US-American psychedelia has traditionally focused on the ecstatic drug explorations of the Beat Generation in the late 1950s, a cadre of writers who experimented with a variety of mind-al- tering substances—including marijuana, methamphetamines, and LSD—to buck the social norms and literary conventions of mid-cen- tury American culture; the hippie counterculture's embrace of psyche- delic drugs to facilitate sexual exploration and reject domestic confor- mity; and the rise to fame of the Harvard psychedelic group, most notably Timothy Leary and Ram Dass (born Richard Alpert), former Ivy League professors who became international psychedelic prose- lytizers.[20] Less documented but equally important was the centrality of psychoactives to the gay liberation movement, spectacularly on display in the "acid drag" theatre of the queer performance troupe The Cockettes, who turned to psychedelic experiences as a way to unseat deeply held beliefs about the immutability of gender and sexuality; the dramatic rise in the number of women undergoing psychedelic therapy throughout the 1960s, many of whom reported extraordinary experi- ences of liberation from patriarchal expectations following their expe- riences with LSD and mushrooms; and the absorption of psychedelic aesthetic styles in Black radical music and art—including the sonic and visual stylings of the band Earth, Wind and Fire, and the intergalactic cosmology of jazz musician Sun Ra (who presented himself as an alien Egyptian god or messiah)—which often creatively reframed Blackness not as a denigrated social identity but as a boundless energy, vibra- tion, wavelength or feeling state open to expansive and unpredictable re-signification.[21]

As historian Chris Elcock has shown, while the psychedelic coun- terculture's philosophy of eschewing political engagement in favor of dropping out of what it perceived to be a morally bankrupt US society often ran counter to the radical left's commitment to the active disman- tling of unjust structures of power, "the unique pharmacology of LSD," including its ability to "challenge the users' relation with reality at such a basic ontological level," often helped facilitate the mindset required to even begin imagining what a thoroughly reinvented social and political landscape might look like.[22] It is telling, for instance, that radical feminist journalist Vivian Gornick, would use psychedel- ically inflected imagery to describe feminist consciousness-raising—a practice of group dialogue intended to expose patriarchal structures constraining women's lives—as producing "an extraordinary sense of multiple identification" akin to "shaking a kaleidoscope and watching all the same pieces rearrange themselves into an altogether other picture, one that suddenly makes the color and shape of each piece appear startlingly new and alive, and full of unexpected meaning."[23]

In this period, emergent bodies of thought as diverse as Black feminist identity politics, gay liberation, mestiza consciousness, and the social model of disability, argued that identities (both cultural and embodied) were the product of elaborate social constructions; conse- quently, they rendered seemingly naturalized categories like gender, sexuality, race, and ability as politically

salient “objects in awareness,” much like psychedelic states render ordinary self-hood phenome- nally opaque, allowing people to, in Letheby’s words, “discover the contingency, mutability, and simulatory nature of their own sense of identity.”[24] In doing so, they multiplied the perspectives that could participate in democratic civic life by leveling the political playing field and creating opportunities for unexpected solidarities across multiply marginalized groups, much as psychedelic states destabilize hierarchical brain functioning, which allow new neural pathways to form between previously disconnected or siloed parts of the brain. The intellectual and cultural outcomes of this societal “hot state”[25]— the neuroscientific term for the potent period of disruption to ordinary brain activity during a psychedelic trip—quite literally expanded the worldly reality that late-twentieth century US-Americans could access and perceive, subverting their collective “predicative priors” about everything from identity formation, knowledge production, and polit- ical life, to concepts like freedom, beauty, desire, power, and belonging. By the late 1980s, however, in the face of a ferocious post-Civil Rights conservative backlash, the rapid expansion of neoliberal economic policies, and the assimilation of identity knowledges into university curricula, Wendy Brown would argue that identity poli- tics—originally intended as a consciousness-expanding practice of accounting for “multiple identity standpoints”[26]—had increasingly become defined by “wounded attachment” to subordinated subjec- tivity. This was a phenomenon in which the potential freedom entailed through marginalized group solidarity was increasingly narrowed to an unwavering dedication to one’s own systemic suffering.[27] She explains, “Developing a righteous critique of power from the perspec- tive of the injured, [wounded attachment] . . . fixes the identities of the injured and the injuring as social positions, and codifies as well the meanings of their actions against all possibilities of indetermi- nacy, ambiguity, and struggle for resignification or repositioning.”[28] Considered retrospectively, the affective formation Brown sought to critique might more accurately be described as the historical mutation of identity politics into identitarianism, where identity came to func- tion less as a partial perspective among others through which to view a complex world, but a rigidly protected self-definition guarded by the force of left-wing political orthodoxy. In Brown’s reference to the “fixing” of identity that followed the initial radical disorganization of social subjectivity brought about by 1960s identity politics, we find a prescient description of the re-congealing of the autobiographical self that follows the temporary “hot state” of psychedelic experience. Left unintegrated into the body politic, the very characteristics of the demo- cratic social movement politics of the 1960s and 1970s that once lit up the figurative neural network of US-cultural life in order to undermine the national self-concept, had now become calcified into a depressive attachment to the subordinated self.

Far from heeding Brown’s warning about the political unfreedom of wounded attachment, it would not be an understatement to suggest that, with some important exceptions—such as abolition and restor- ative justice

movements—contemporary social justice politics and the intellectual frameworks that work alongside them have doubled down on injury as the defining logic of subordinated identity. Queer- feminist theorists Avgi Saketopoulou, Tim Dean, Oliver Davis, and Joseph Fischel, have each explored how the feminist project of #MeToo requires potential participants to explicitly identify them- selves as victims of sexual assault as the very basis for enunciating solidarity with the movement.[29] Sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, and feminist cultural studies scholar Jennifer Doyle, have shown how university campus activism frequently figures the college student as always already a traumatized subject who paradox- ically desires the university institutions that cause harm to also be the purveyors of healing, accountability, and justice.[30] And transgender theorists Paisley Currah and Lucas Crawford illuminate how the trans* rights movement's hyper-focus on the psychological and physical harms born from denying freedom of gender expression, often under- mines the movements' ability to effectively mobilize people across-gen- ders against the universally shared oppression of cisheteropatriarchy.[31] Simultaneously, the cluster of intellectual fields we call the inter- disciplines (queer, feminist, trans*, critical race and ethnic studies to name a few) have, over the last two decades, valorized negative affect. Consider alone a handful of titles from the most celebrated books in these fields published since the millennium: No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (2004), Ugly Feelings (2005), Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of History (2007), Gay Shame (2009), The Queer Art of Failure (2011), Cruel Optimism (2011), Depression (2012), Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation (2019), Afropessimism (2020), Complaint! (2021), Side Effects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad (2022), The Terrible We: Thinking With Trans Maladjustment (2022). These texts variously recover the value of so-called bad or ugly feelings as legitimate responses to the recalci- trance of structural inequality, while figuring medically pathologized states like depression and anxiety as wellsprings of potential radical or anarchic "anti-sociality"; locate the sources of historical trauma and dehumanization in colonial rule, indigenous genocide, and the Atlantic slave trade as originary sites of collective rupture that we live "in the wake" of [32]; and, as Robyn Wiegman has argued, frequently equate the study of social injustice and institutional violence with the active amelioration of the material suffering they cause.[33] By compar- ison, affectively weak and largely unheeded popular calls to cultivate queer optimism, tap into "Black joy," or practice "pleasure activism" are frequently the exceptions that prove the rule, emerging as a neces- sary but ultimately reactive dialectical response to the deeply seduc- tive lure of injury.

While this intellectual trend has many roots, we can potentially trace its origins first, to a distinctly 1970s feminist project of conscious- ness-raising, which sought to take women's embodied feelings about patriarchy seriously as meaningful data that registered the psychic weight of heteropatriarchy; and second, to radical queer activism in the 1980s, which repurposed traditionally negative emotions like rage and grief as foundations for energizing collective

direct-action against the AIDS crisis.[34] But where these previous projects were intended to cata- lyze states of altered consciousness based on interrogating and mobi- lizing one's feelings for the ultimate purpose of structural change, the more recent turn to recuperate states of disaffection as politically mean- ingful in and of themselves, frequently transmutes so-called bad feel- ings into vast ontological categories of abjection, subjectively inescap- able and politically insurmountable. In sum, the potential to commune freely promised by an identitarian social justice politics is undermined by a focus on the freedom of self-expression, the right to recognition, and the protection from harm, while the potential intellectual freedom of thought, and diversity of affective experience promised by the inter-disciplines is narrowed to a seemingly never-ending "tarrying with the negative," where the stylized posture of highly intellectualized ugly feelings becomes its own identity politics (even in its most seem- ingly anti-identitarian varieties). "Thus," Brown laments "politicized identity that presents itself as a self-affirmation now appears as the opposite, as predicated on and requiring its sustained rejection by a 'hostile external world."[35] And we might add, a cure-focused psyche- delic medicine steps in to solve this problem by treating the ever-pro- liferating anxious and depressive symptoms of the world's real and perceived hostility.[36]

INTEGRATING UNCERTAINTY

Against this dire and frankly depressing conjunction, I suggest that meaningfully integrating psychedelic experience into a transformative politics of webbed rather than wounded attachment—both in our most rigorous cultural theories and effective political practices—requires three shifts in perspective: first, it is imperative that we theorize psychedelic experience not merely as an effective medical intervention into various forms of mass immiseration, but as a robust framework for thought, or working model for apprehending and becoming more curiously responsive to the complexity, variety, and unpredictability of our shared universe. At a moment when we are succumbing fast to the impulse to obliterate our planet rather than respond realistically and generously to its awe-inspiring diversity, psychedelic experience reminds us of the many traditions, both ancient and modern, that humans have created for cultivating the inner capacity to live with and productively respond to the world's bewildering impermanence: this includes ancient philosophies like Buddhism, which trains the mind to withstand, and thrive, amid the erratic flow of our inner emotions and the inevitable change and decay of the outer world; contempo- rary psychological frameworks such as the Internal Family Systems model, which claims that the human psyche is composed of multiple, distinct, and sometimes conflicting parts that must be recognized and embraced as integral components of an interdependent whole rather than aberrations of the personality to be banished or compartmental- ized; and cultural theories like queer, feminist, and trans* thought, which view the mutability and profusion of gender and sexual expres- sion as benign forms of variation to be imaginatively explored instead of contained or

eliminated.

Psychedelic experience's transformative power lies in its ability to offer a continually mutable, viscerally felt experience of multi- plicity that vivifies and gives material expression to a host of already existing approaches for conceiving human diversity athwart the frame- work of proprietary identity or in-born group belonging: from Gloria Anzaldúa's multidimensional "mestiza consciousness," to Robin Wall Kimmerer's inter-species reciprocity in the indigenous gift economy; from Linda Zerilli's conception of a feminist "radical imagination," which encourage the projection of categories like "gender," "woman," or "queer" into new and unexpected contexts, to Kevin Quashie's theory of the "black world [as] an assemblage, an open collective of dynamism" that illuminates, rather than masks, intraracial heteroge- neity.[37] These can be understood as distinctly psychedelic theories of plurality because they account for manifold forms of difference beyond culturally proscribed identities (including temperament, personality, age, sensory capacities, creative talent, spiritual worldview, intel- lectual skill and more); view subjectivity not merely as the product of intersecting identities, but as a wildly contingent assemblages of factors shaped both by structural realities but also the unpredictable "whirl of an organism" as it interacts with a rich and ever-changing external world; and work to actively cultivate our ability to deal with, and meaningfully respond to radical difference, including taking the full measure of what it feels like to be challenged to one's core by the world's multiplicity and unpredictability, while refusing to attempt control of it. Analogously, by loosening the grip of the ego on an indi- vidual's cognition, psychedelic experience has the potential to make identitarian categories like race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability differently weighted in the production of self, consequently opening out surprising lines of flight for unpredictable affiliations across bodies and worldviews. Psychedelic thinking offers one viscerally intensified experience that is less about empathy, identification, or cosmic unity, as some psychedelic practitioners proselytize, but rather a highly sensi- tive attunement to, and increased resilience before the discomfort that attends encounters with other beings.

Second, those of us on the political and academic left must recognize that our long-running investment in wounded identity as a primary framework through which to articulate the concept of social justice for oppressed populations, may also inadvertently compound systemic domination's negative psychological impact on the very marginalized groups we think we are serving.[38] Psychedelic experience is funda- mentally shaped by a complex attentional economy, demanding that practitioners carefully shape the environment in which they take a psychoactive drug (or the setting in which a psychedelic experience takes place), while also intentionally preparing themselves psycho- logically to live through a dramatic opening up of their emotional landscape (or shaping the appropriate mindset toward the upcoming experience). Despite the social justice and academic left's proclaimed commitment to notions of collective care, mutual aid, and restorative justice, the political and intellectual environments we create are often permeated with negativity—from the philosophical amplification of

notions of necropolitics and Black, queer, and trans abjection, to the snide celebration of perpetually disaffected figures of radical rebel- lion like the “feminist killjoy” or the transgender malcontent—so that the pursuit of even basic aspirational political goals like combatting xenophobia, gaining greater access to healthcare and education, and strengthening free association becomes lived in the body as a perma- nent state of irritability, resentment, and alienation from the world. The attentional economy of psychoactive drugs parallels how we organize or focus our awareness politically and interpersonally: if politically we only or primarily focus on the vast and seemingly never-ending night- mare outcomes of systemic oppression at every level of our visceral experience of the world, we cannot see or concretely describe what the freedom to commune outside of such systems (and beyond our imme- diate sphere of political affiliation) might look and feel like. If socially we only or primarily focus on identifying and mitigating harm, namely the ways that systemic oppression expresses itself in seemingly never- ending waves of microaggressions and assaults on our dignity, we permanently orient our mindsets toward the most painful aspects of our interpersonal interactions, potentially making it impossible to register feeling states that fall outside the rubric of violation.[39]

Third and finally, we urgently need to study and learn from contemporary popular culture’s dazzlingly imaginative and formally innovative appropriation of the psychedelic renaissance, which offers one of the most spectacular public enactments of psychedelic thought outside the actual drug-taking experience. Today’s media landscape explodes with infinitely branching multiverses, animated dreams- capes, hyper-saturated hallucinations, and epic fantasy worlds that materialize the various dimension of the psychedelic experience in imaginative form. This includes the kaleidoscopic visual depiction of the “multiverse” in fantasy films like Spider-Man: Into (2018) and Across the Spider-Verse (2023) and Everything, Everywhere, All at Once (2022), where biracial and non-binary superheroes, Chinese American mothers, and queer immigrant daughters forge bonds with multiple versions of themselves across infinite dimensions; the narrative description of a phantasmagoric alien presence that radically trans- forms and cross-pollinates the biology of every life-form it touches in Jeff VanderMeer’s visionary science fiction trilogy Area X: The Southern Reach (2014); and the hallucinatory animation of a rebellious mestiza’s time-traveling adventures in modern-day San Antonio as she reckons with the traumas of her multi-ethnic past in the television series Undone (2019–2022). All of these texts give shape to psychedelic expe- riences that facilitate the initial disorder and reconstitution of more adaptable gendered, sexual and racial identities and identifications; but, more critically, they use psychedelic aesthetic forms to induce hallucinatory disorienting effects in readers and viewers, in the hope of leveraging open their cognition to new ways of perceiving differ- ence as a site of unrestrained invention. If the practitioners of interdis- ciplinary study believe in the basic idea that human beings can change their minds—about racism, sexism, trans- and homophobia, the dogged commitment to neoliberal values, or the destructive pursuit of domination and self-aggrandizement—we must charge

ourselves not simply to explore the vast architecture of loss and iniquity but equally to identify and analyze political histories of ideological transforma- tion, sites of the successful emergence and enactment of democratic power, and ingenious cultural projects that reframe human difference outside of hierarchical thinking. This is not simply the by now cliché call for imagining "otherwise worlds," which frequently substitutes the myriad ways we evolve our political views alongside others with a vague longing for something, anything to be different about reality, but a grounded inquiry into the invention of new frames of reference for confronting actually-existing plurality. With its relentless, exuberant displays of characters and worlds undergoing profound transformations that adhere to no single ideological orthodoxy or affective logic, contemporary psychedelic popular culture provides a picture in time of how we are already changing together, and perhaps outgrowing the recriminatory politics of the present. To see just how, let us now return to Miles's web-slinging adventures across the Spider-Verse.

"A STRANGE KALEIDOSCOPE OF SPIDER-MEN"CONFRONTING PLURALITY IN THE SPIDER-VERSE

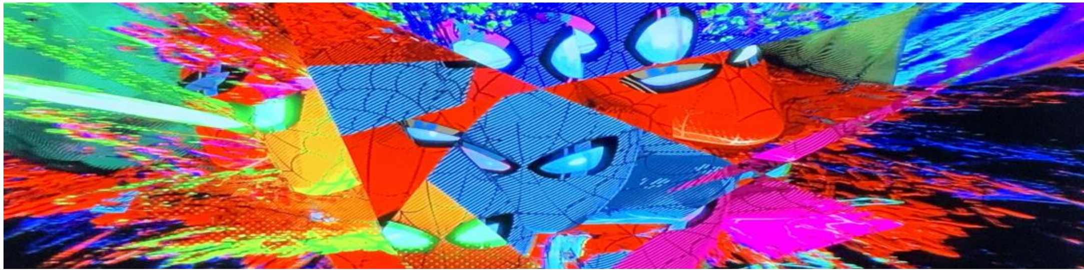
As contemporary psychedelic cultural products about the struggle of a biracial, New York City superhero to find his place in a bewildering multiverse, Spider-Man into and Across the Spider-Verse dramatize and offer astoundingly imaginative solutions to the political and intellectual prison-house of injured identity. Taken together, the two Spider- Verse films narrate a year in the life of Miles Morales, a teenage savant accidentally bitten by a radioactive spider from another dimension, granting him superhuman powers of strength, speed, agility, and heightened sensory perception. In the first film, Miles witnesses the death of his universe's supposedly "one and only" Spider-Man, whom we quickly learn is but a single iteration of our universe's beloved comic-book superhero, the nerdy genius Peter Parker, whose mantra "With Great Power, Comes Great Responsibility," became the ethical foundation of post-WWII superhero comics. Miles's Spider-Man is killed attempting to stop the notorious crime lord The Kingpin (voiced by Liev Schreiber) from activating an atomic super-collider that can open a portal between worlds. That portal inadvertently brings multiple versions of the web-slinging superhero Spider-Man to Miles's universe—of many gender-expressions, ethno-racial and religious backgrounds, even animated genres—who ultimately band together to battle Kingpin and prevent Miles's earth from collapsing into a black hole before returning to their "proper" homes. In the sequel, viewers discover that a mad scientist disfigured from the destruction of the super-collider in Into the Spider-Verse has gained the ability to create wormholes between dimensions, deploying them to tear the fabric of time and space. A future hi-tech version of Spider-Man, Miguel O'Hara (voiced by Oscar Isaac), has amassed an "elite strike force" of Spider- People from thousands of alternate universes both to seal these unpre- dictable tears between worlds, but also to contain an anomaly in the Spider-Verse, Miles himself. Desperate for community and belonging, Miles is initially thrilled to discover an entire Spider-

society. Yet, he soon realizes that this band of superheroic mutants have been brain- washed to believe Miguel's theory that every Spider-person in existence shares certain canonical features, archetypal life-experiences without which their identity would be null and void. Having been bitten by a radio-active spider from a dimension not his own, and having not yet experienced the death of his father as a formative trauma (suppos- edly a core aspect of all Spider-Persons), Miles is labeled a dangerous glitch or "mistake" in the proper order of the Spider-Verse, what Miguel contemptuously calls "the original anomaly." Devastated by the revelation that his friends have allied themselves with O'Hara on the basis of his rigid interpretation of the Spider-Verse, Miles is forced to accept that no fixed sense of shared identity, "Spider" or otherwise, can provide the foundation for universal belonging.

We might start by asking: what exactly is psychedelic about the films? Both movies shock the nervous system of any viewer with their sheer sensory intensity: they are visually kaleidoscopic, soni- cally explosive, ballistic in their narrative speed, and synesthetic in quality, frequently translating the experience of distinct geographical locations, personality types, and feeling-states into hyper-saturated color palettes and cacophonic soundscapes. The film's formal experi-mentation continually pushes at the limits of viewers' sense of reality, combining multiple animated genres at a dizzying pace (like Japanese anime and Warner Brothers' Looney Tunes alongside collage, comics art, and computer animation) and using a panoply of discordant voice-overs to give us the impression that we are inside different char- acters' psyches, thus constantly disorganizing aspects of self. In fact, the radioactive spider bite that gives Miles his superpowers is visu-ally depicted as a psychoactive agent or potent hit of acid (the script even indicates this moment should be rendered with "psychedelic 2D animation"). Shortly after, he begins to hallucinate in vivid color, perceiving the thoughts of other people in his head and meta-cogni- tively narrating his phenomenological experience in comic book form (figures 3–4). As Carhart-Harris and Friston explain, in the psychedelic experience, "being more excitable is the physiologic mechanism that destroys sharp minima and underwrites a weakening of prior expecta- tions."[40] The sensory intensity of the film is precisely intended to create a state of excitability in the viewer that can make them more attuned to and receptive toward the world's limitless heterogeneity.

Figure 3 & 4

Figure 5.



What we commonly understand as "representational diversity" is everywhere in the films as an organic part of life. Throughout, viewers witness Jamaican grocery store owners, differently-abled basketball players, Black police officers, and Muslim, wheelchair-bound, and pregnant Spider-women among others. Similarly, the lived markers of structural inequality are ever-represent, from gentrification, to homophobia and colonialism. Yet, these facts are simply weighted differently in the larger swirl of inter-dimensional existence, presented as phenomenological realities rather than iron-clad evidence of top-down power, that exist alongside the universe's seemingly incal- culable anomalies, including the surprising affinities forged between people from different social, cultural, political and aesthetic worlds.

The psychedelic logic at the heart of the Spider-Verse works by shifting our frame of reference in three distinct ways: 1) by redefining the problem of representational lack as a project of accounting for pleni- tude or plurality; 2) cultivating formal techniques to render and deeply inhabit the affective lifeworlds of others; and 3) replacing isolated identity categories with the figure of infinitely webbed singularities.

In both movies, the figure of the multiverse reframes representa- tional diversity as a problem of apprehending the plenitude and multi- plicity of "beingness," to borrow Kevin Quashie's formulation, rather than redressing the lack or underrepresentation of particular racial, gender, and sexual subjects. According to the films, if the multiverse does exist, then every human being who has ever lived (potentially even every life-form) has been or will be Spider-Man in one dimension or another. A logic of wounded attachment might argue that the "orig- inal" Spider-Man of our Earth, a fictional, 1960s comic book character invented by the Jewish-American writer Stan Lee and artist Steve Ditko, represents an instance of creative exclusion, being nominally white, straight, and male; that exclusion then must be redressed through the creation of a Black / female / queer Spider-Man, who is intended to both shed light on the ideological failures of the original represen- tation while clearing space for the recognition of putatively Black / female / queer superheroic power. The multiverse instead sees "our" Spider-Man as a moment of invention, or what queer theorist Darieck Scott has called a "fantasy-act," inaugurating an infinite sequence of creative possibilities by the sheer fact of his imaginative appearance.[41] In this schema, "our" Spider-Man's white maleness is neither a limit nor a rule, and his seemingly normative identity is further complicated by Peter Parker being a nerdy, unpopular teenager, thus expanding the audience's imaginative capacity to conceive

of heroism, power, and the idea of collective responsibility as the legitimate province of outcasts, nerds, mutants, and freaks (the queers among us).

To viewers' surprise, however, the first Spider-Man introduced in the Spider-Verse movies isn't their own. In fact, he is initially presented as an even more ideal blonde, all-American version of the character (voiced by Chris Pine). Immediately then, audiences are reminded that there is no singular white Spider-Man but many, and that even a puta- tively white, male, heterosexual Spider-Man can proliferate surprising Others, with differences in bodily morphology and age (Peter B. Parker is a middle-age divorcé with a paunch), heroic philosophies, even styles of web-swinging. This is dazzlingly captured in an early psychedelic image of Spider-Man's face shoved into the collider. While attempting to shut down Kingpin's plan, Spider-Man inadvertently finds himself forced head-first into the epicenter of an interdimensional rift (figure 5). As his silhouette is figuratively liquified and then shattered in the void, we hear a cacophony of voices combined with Figure 5.

Figure 5.

split-second series of images of other Spider-people across five distinct dimensions. The event literally fractures and multiplies Spider-Man's very being into "a strange kaleidoscope of Spider-Men," so that a white male Spider-Man's DNA unexpectedly draws forth numerous others who, as we soon find out, are nothing like him in terms of phenotype, gender expression, cultural identity, or even animated genre (for instance, Penny Parker [voiced by Kimiko Glenn] appears as a Japanese anime cyborg superhero, while Spider-Man Noir [voiced by Nicolas Cage] comes from a universe rendered in two-dimensional, black and white, charcoal drawing).

If on the one hand, the film visually depicts Spider-Man as a figure of multiplicity, it also offers viewers a vision of cultural iden- tity itself as potentially a void, or open category available for new and unexpected inhabitation, signification, or articulation. When Miles's uncle Aaron (voiced by Mahershala Ali) takes him to practice his graffiti skills in an abandoned subway tunnel, Miles renders a vivid polychromatic tableaux with the words "No Expectations" in the background (an intentional play on Charles Dicken's Victorian novel Great Expectations). In the center he paints his silhouette, a black void outlined in white paint (figure 6). One

interpretation could argue that this is the paradigmatic image of the Black or brown boy contained, delimited, or defined by whiteness (where the outline is the allegorical cage of white supremacy); yet, the film psychedelically abstracts these very categories so that Blackness becomes a generative “blank” (as the script calls it) free of normative social expectations, thus capable of containing a “world of heterogeneity whose only cohering value is the rightness of black being, the possibility of black becoming.”[42] Miles is bitten by a radioactive spider the split second after he takes a photo of this striking image, becoming superhuman upon literally picturing or identifying himself with a version of Blackness as open- ended creative possibility (figure 6).

Figure 6.

One of those “possibles” of course is the very existence of an Afro-Latinx superhero; another is the simple fact of intraracial heterogeneity, including the acknowledgment that Blackness includes biracial experience; yet another is Miles performing a gentle “babygirl” version of Black masculinity that diverges from the stereotypical macho maleness of his police father and outlaw uncle. In the psychedelic imaginary of the Spider-Verse films then, white- ness is depicted as wildly pluripotent rather than monolithic while “real” Black and brownness, as historically experienced racial forma- tions, are purposefully evacuated of their “weighted priors,” so they can similarly become anything. Even as it offers a psychedelic meta- phor for the resignification of Blackness beyond cultural identity, the film wards against the mere fungibility or emptying out of racialized identity by recurrently locating its imaginative flights in the lives of specific, culturally situated figures: Miles’s version of the black void is the product of a particular familial relationship between a Black uncle and his mixed race nephew, rendered in the distinct style of graffiti art (harkening to the historically recognizable aesthetics of the Black- queer artist Basquiat and the gay graffiti savant Keith Haring), and located in the subterranean tunnels of the New York City subway, a fixture of Miles’s hometown. This is not just any void but one inten- tionally created by Miles in his proverbial back yard as a portal for his wild imaginings, which the film shares with viewers in the hopes

that they will craft their own.

Just when spectators think the film might conclude with the simple addition of commonly recognized marginalized or underrepresented identities—like introducing viewers to a biracial Spider-Man and a female Spider-Gwen—it continues to propagate difference to a vertig- inous degree with the depiction of characters who are of vastly diver- gent animated and narrative genres, vocal styles, personalities and temperaments, religious backgrounds (Malala Windsor, the Muslim Spider-Girl), even species (Spider-Rex and Spider-Cat), textures (the collaged body of Hobie Brown, the Spider-Punk), and objects (Lego Spider-Man). The vectors of difference along which the ever-expanding pool of Spider-people can be measured become so multiplicitous as to make intersectionality inadequate as an analytic. Rather the category of genre, or "style," comes closest to understanding the film's theory of difference. Queer theorist Taylor Black explains that style is "a rudi- mentary source of differentiation" or "process by which the immeasur- able force of personality . . . or feeling comes into and ultimately moves through discrete social containers."[43] For Black, style is always in some sense queer, because it stems from the ceaseless drive to diverge from normativity and homogeneity, including from "culturally constructed categories like identity."[44] As the two films unfold, viewers' imagina- tive capacity to cognize the range of possible Spider-people, and their distinctly queer styles—like Spider-Gwen's increasingly non-binary femme expression of Spider-hood—is continually enlarged. If one of the key elements of psychedelic experience is to relax the weight of "high level priors," such as the idea that "walls don't breathe," we are now in the realm of believing that toys can talk, animals can become superheroes, and most importantly, superheroes can forge friendships not only across seemingly discrete cultural identities or wholly orig- inal styles of being, but also infinite dimensions.[45]

It is fitting then, that the villains of the two films formally and conceptually invert the generative aspects of the Spider-Verse into their shadow other, transmuting Spider-Man's inherent multiplicity, contingency, and drive toward connectivity, into monolithic icons of toxic masculinity. Against the seemingly limitless shapeshifting potential of the Spider-Men, in the first movie, the crime boss The Kingpin visually appears as a massive wall, or edifice, that imperi- ously consumes the entire space of the screen in his black business suite (think Donald Trump as an Al Hirschfeld caricature on steroids). In the sequel, the Spot, the fame-seeking megalomaniacal scientist hellbent on destroying Miles' life, is depicted as a white void filled with black interdimensional holes. And Miguel O'Hara, the high-tech Spider-Man obsessed with maintaining the stability of the multiverse, appears as a literal vampire whose face becomes shrouded in dark- ness when his fangs burst forth during bouts of uncontrollable rage. These figures respectively function as allegories for the totalizing force of white supremacy; the material manifestation of neoliberal market values (Spot transforms his "holes" into opportunities to accumu- late power by exploiting the rich diversity of the multiverse, at one point exclaiming: "Look at that, another one. I love how many vari- ations of you guys there are"); and the social justice warrior turned fascist, literally sucking the life out of political projects for freedom by controlling his followers with psychological manipulation and the threat of violence. All three are seething with the ressentiment of wounded

attachment and each blames some version of Spider-Man for their woes: Kingpin and O'Hara for the deaths of their respective nuclear families, and Spot at the loss of access to his normal, domestic life (at one point he diabolically tells Miles: "I'm gonna take every- thing from you, like you took everything from me"). Though the three figures inhabit different cultural, ethnic, and class identities—a wealthy Italian-American crime boss; a low-level scientist and criminal lackey; and a mixed-race, middle-class superhero-turned-technocrat—they all share the same worldview: each is desperately attached to the desire to secure a future free of uncertainty, primarily as an outcome of the loss of their heterosexual family life, a wound from which none ever recover. Thus, the true antagonist of the story is no single villainous character but rather that the desire for control over an unpredictable world, which is commonly held by people across identities and social posi- tions.

To any ordinary viewer of the two films, the ecstatic profusion of Spider-people on-screen produces a thrilling form of visual enchant- ment; yet to Miguel O'Hara, the vampiric interdimensional super-po- liceman of "Neuva York" in the year 2099, it is a living nightmare of unpredictability and chaos. According to O'Hara, the initial tearing of the fabric of the multiverse that brought Miles in contact with his newfound friends is a grave problem that must be corrected, for it undermines what he calls "the canon." Upon their first meeting, O'Hara uses a holographic projection to visualize the Spider-Verse for Miles and his friends, an elaborate, crystalline structure composed of fractal webs of interwoven timelines (figure 8). Miles asks: "And these nodes where the lines converge?" O'Hara replies: "They are the canon. Chapters that are a part of every spider's story every time.

Figure 7.

Some good. Some bad . . . some, very bad. This one, Event ASM 90? A Police Captain close to Spider-Man dies saving a kid from falling rubble during battle with an arch-nemesis. Canon Events are the connections that bind our lives together. And those connections can be broken. That's why Anomalies are so dangerous." Realizing the potential impact of O'Hara's speech on his own life, Miles plaintively intones "My dad is about to be Captain." Though canon events supposedly include some "good," they are predictively weighted toward the bad and very bad. They are wounded attachment understood as an infinite regress throughout time and space, where the very interdimensional bonds that knit Spider-People together are ones of shared suffering: "It happened to you too?" Miles asks the members of O'Hara's strike force following this conversation, as they see images of their respec- tive moments of loss holographically projected before them (figure 9). O'Hara then, comes to allegorically

stand in for the “low entropy” states that psychedelic therapy clinically targets, because he aggres- sively clings to a single-minded narrative of injury born from his own ill-fated travel to another dimension where he miraculously found, and tragically lost, the nuclear family of his dreams. By contrast, Miles represents a psychedelic trip, a mind-expanding anomaly injected into “normal” consciousness of the Spider-Verse, which potentially reframes the network not as a closed society woven together by “canon” but as a pluripotent engine of transformational identity.

Against the inflexible character of Miguel O’Hara, the film intro- duces viewers to Hobie Brown (voiced by Daniel Kaluuya), the anar- chist Spider-Punk, who is both politically and formally a psychedelic head trip against O’Hara’s maniacal power trip. On the one hand, Hobie is a Black British man inhabiting a traditionally white, often politically regressive punk style, but drawing upon its most rebellious dimensions (think mohawked Basquiat meets Banksy).

Figure 8.

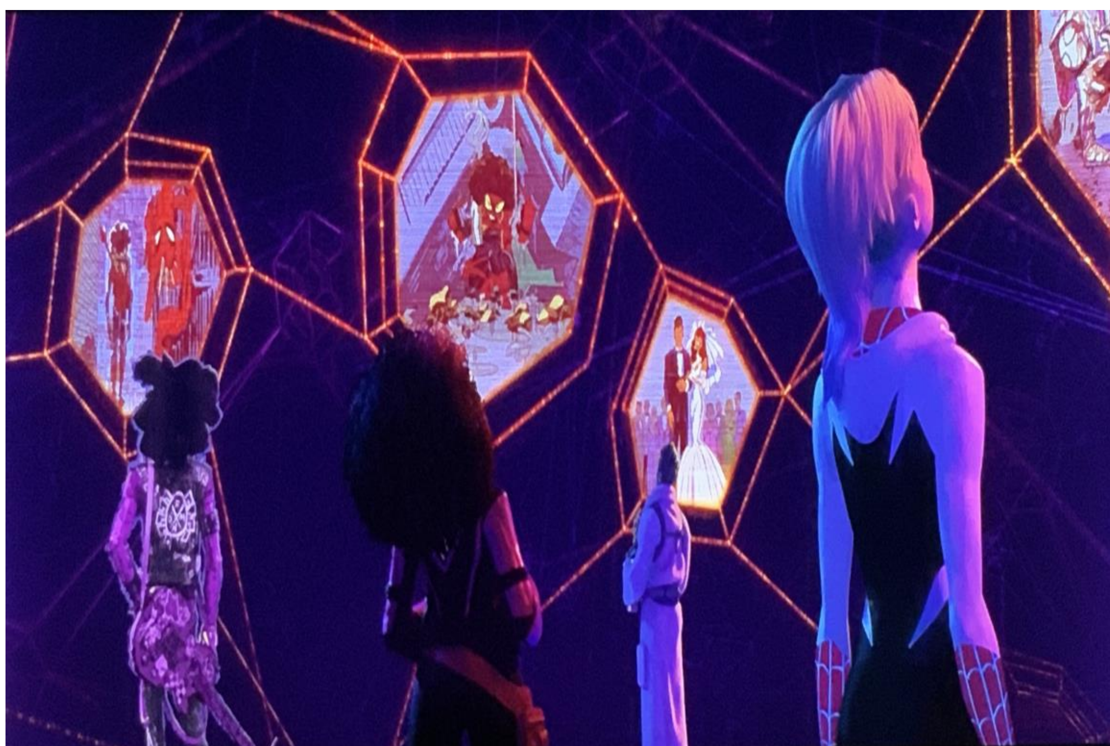


Figure 9.

On the other, he is literally a psychedelic being, visually depicted as a kaleidoscopic explosion of energy and color, every portion of his body moving at a different frame-rate (figure 10). Both Hobie's political and formal anarchism express themselves in his recurrent rejection of "high level priors," including commonly shared identity labels, political party affiliations, artistic movements, even the general concept of "consis- tency." In his first explosive on-screen appearance, Hobie appears as though he is literally crashing through the fourth wall of the film screen while playing an electric guitar. As he does so, he ballistically announces: "I'm not a role model.I hate the a.m. I hate the PM [Prime Minister]. I hate labels. I'm not a hero. Because calling your- self a hero makes you a self-mythologizing narcissistic autocrat. I don't believe in teams. I don't believe in consistency. I don't believe in comedyc just kidding." Unlike Hobie, throughout the two films Miles recurrently reacts to the increasing groundlessness of his teenage life and his newfound superpowers as Spider-Man by seeking out iron-clad rules or instructions: on the proper use of his abilities (looking to old Marvel comics issues and other Spider-Men as templates for the successful deployment of superpowers); on how to write a winning college application essay (looking to his counselor who suggests he tell a story about minority struggle to get into Princeton); and on the best way to get into Miguel's strike force (looking to Spider-Gwen to help him impress O'Hara). Yet, every attempt to identify a set of dicta to follow toward success ultimately fail to grant Miles access to the expe- rience of security, belonging, and happiness he so desperately seeks; instead, Miles is always forced to take a "leap of faith" and hew his own path. Perfectly encapsulating this dilemma, at one point Hobie reminds Miles, "Whole point of being Spider-Man is your indepen- dence. Being your own boss. You don't need all this. Just don't enlist until you know what war you're fighting." When Miles retorts, "Then why are you here?" Hobie, referring to Spider-Gwen, replies: "Just looking out for my drummer." Though he may not "believe in teams," Hobie does believe in the power of voluntary association, the ability to choose and "look out for" one's own bandmates. Hobie is the figure of psychedelic political judgment, who critiques rule-following or convention, not in a nihilist way but to open up new lines of affiliation. His attachments are not wounded but webbed, the willful sticking to and by one's friends.

In highlighting the faculty of political judgment as central to navi- gating a plural world, the Spider-Verse movies visually render the negotiation of difference not simply as the act of perceiving pheno- typical variation, or the mere proliferation of different sociological "types" (women, African Americans, trans folks), but the practice of inhabiting entirely distinct perspectives or lifeworlds. Though viewers meet Spider-Gwen (voiced by Hailee Steinfeld) in the first film as a visitor to Miles's universe, and his first true friend, the second movie opens with the audience standing in her point of view: "Let's do things differently this time," she tells us, "So differently." We discover that her dimension is not simply an alternate version of "our" Earth but is literally a distinct aesthetic reality: in Spider-Gwen's realm, being is experienced as an animate, continually unfolding expressionist painting, where the texture and color of everyday life is an evolving visual description of people's feeling-states. This includes the sonic environment, where Gwen's drum playing as a member of an all-girl band alters the shape and color of her surroundings, as well as her superhuman style of movement, which is reminiscent of a gymnast or ballerina (she even wears ribboned

pointe shoes as part of her superhero costume). Though viewers might initially associate Gwen with being a distinctly female Spider-person, once they see the sheer diversity of Spider-femininities in other universes, Gwen increasingly seems non-binary by comparison, her gender expression again more like an emergent style being aesthetically worked out in relation to others, than a coherent identity she claims or seeks to inhabit. Soon, the audience travels with Miles and Gwen to Pavitr Prabhakar's universe, where Mumbattan, an Indian super-metropolis replaces New York City as the epicenter of Spider-Man's exploits. Once again we enter a completely unique urban environment, rendered in another aesthetic style: early twentieth-century Indian print comics. Pavitr's physical movement is acrobatic and lyrical, indexing traditional Indian dance styles and Bollywood musicals, while his worldview is heavily shaped by a playful postcolonial critique of white supremacy ("Don't Eat, Pray, Love me, bro" he jokingly admonishes The Spot when the villain exoticizes Prabhakar's vibrant city) (figures 11–12). Notably, each Spider-Person retains the distinct aesthetic style of their own world whenever they enter someone else's, thereby bringing something novel into whatever universe they visit. Each of these "trips" throw the audience into the hallucinatory swirl of a given character's conscious- ness, rendering any given aspect of their identity (their race, gender, sexuality, bodily morphology etc.) a kind of viscous "slime mold," to use Arun Saldanha's Deleuzian conception of categories like race and gender, accumulating out of everything from "strands of DNA, pheno- typic variation, discursive practices . . . artifacts such as clothes and food, and the distribution of wealth," among countless other variables, but also just as easily dispersing or coming apart when exposed to new contexts.[46]

Figure 10.

Figure 11.

Throughout the two films, one of the “original” Spider-Man’s most well-known abilities, his “Spidey-Sense,” is visually re-presented recurrently depicted as a psychedelic form of surprise, expressed in dynamic, wavy action-lines bursting forth from a given Spider- person’s head when they meet one of their interdimensional comrades (figures 13–14); yet, even when two Spider-people sense each other’s shared superhuman difference (“You’re like me!”), their visual experi- ence of recognition is distinct, so that the brief experience of unity is always, in Quashie’s words, “replete with eccentricity and . . . allergic to the imposition of normativity.”[47] This sense of interconnected cosmic oneness or unitive experience within a broader network of relations is frequently identified as a core element of psychedelic experience by tripping subjects, which happens precisely because one’s own ego first undergoes disorganization. But where a naive psychedelic utopianism frequently imagines this as a universalizing gesture that effaces mean- ingful differences (“we are all one”), the film sees this unity as provi- sional, the brief experience of identification that is rapidly complicated by countless (in fact infinite) differences.

To enter another’s worldview is risky business. The characters violently glitch, and can potentially be annihilated by visiting alter- nate dimensions; however, the risk is necessary to gain any sort of mutual understanding. They must essentially access the waking hallu- cination of another perspective or an unmediated encounter with what philosopher Stanley Cavell evocatively calls the entire “whirl of an organism.” This involves not only accounting for the discursive, linguistic, cultural, and social norms that frame an individual subject, but inhabiting the visceral experience of their form of life in all its rich, messy, affective atmosphere, like “sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor . . . significance and . . . fulfillment.”[48] Without this deep inhabitation, the multitude can lose their capacity to make meaningful judgments and transmute into a mob, which happens to O’Hara’s elite strike force when they zealously follow orders to capture and contain Miles, the so-called anomaly to the Spider-Verse. In the second film, Miles painfully learns that his newfound friends never visited him despite gaining the ability to travel between dimensions because they were told not to intervene in the death of his father, the traumatic Canon Event ASM-90 assumed to be a foundational component of authentic Spider-identity across the multiverse. Upon discovering their plot, he angrily questions the other Spiders, “So we’re just supposed to let people die, because some ALGORITHM. . . says that that’s supposed to happen!?” Miles’s mentor Peter B. Parker unconvincingly tries to claim that the loss each Spider- person has experienced has been a key part of making them heroic. Without that suffering, he sheepishly explains, “All the good that we did, it. . . it wouldn’t have been done.” Such “algorithmic” thinking, in which the definition of a cultural or political identity is always already given in advance by a predetermined set of rules or doxa rather than continually reinvented in different contexts, is precisely the logic that Arendt claimed would lead to “the deadliest, most sterile passivity the world has ever known”—in this case, the willful refusal to inter- vene in the mass deaths of infinite numbers of father figures across the Spider-Verse.[49] This is a paradigmatic description of identity politics when it transforms into identitarianism grounded in wounded attach-ment, where the conditions for social belonging are reduced to the rote political formula of shared

trauma. By inhabiting Miles's life-world, Spider-Gwen witnesses first-hand the positive impact his family has had on his ethical outlook, a benevolent relationship to the world born of his parents' fierce love toward Miles alongside their unconditional support for his intellectual and social aspirations. Reflecting on the ways her own police captain dad taught her bravery, loyalty, and integ- rity, Gwen comes to realize that for Miles, the anomalous Spider-Man of Earth 1610, (and perhaps for countless more), it is precisely the survival of his father and the vibrant network of friendships he creates across the Spider-Verse that has shaped him into the hero we know and love.

Figure 12.

Figure 13.

Finally, alongside the films' reframing of diversity as a problem of accounting for plenitude and their visual rendering of divergent forms of life, the Spider-Verse movies offer up the image of the web as a pluripotent metaphor for affiliation across difference, empha- sizing the labor it takes to construct and maintain a multiplicity of attachments (including their simultaneous strength and fragility). In the natural world, the spiderweb is a silken pattern or structure that spreads between at least three points. Paradoxically, it is both excep- tionally durable but also easily destroyed, often being rebuilt again and again. And so too, the Spider-Verse films repeatedly present Spider- Man's webbing as a connective tissue that can bind various subjects together, even granting them the ability to swing in tandem, producing a

contingent, fleeting rhythm, briefly flying together, then gliding apart to form new patterns.[50] Of course, from Miguel's perspective, rather than an endlessly branching network of deliberately forged relation- ships, the web is a prearranged series of canon formations, the fusion of essentially bound or converging points meant to be discovered and controlled rather than creatively invented. The film then asks viewers to form an opinion and decide whether they wish to keep treading already shared, accepted, or rote patterns of identitarian thinking, speaking, and acting (as when Miles's college counselor directs him: "That's your story [of minority hardship], now just stick to the script."), or if they aspire to craft new ones in concert with others.

As a figure intended to produce new imaginative patterns of thought about contemporary wounded identity, Miles's unique powers to turn invisible and project electricity outward in his "venom bite"—two unprecedented abilities shared by no other Spider-person in the entire multiverse—together form an ingenious visual metaphor for the neural action of psychedelic drugs: the release of electrical energy as a high entropic state that then disorganizes a sense of self by breaking well-trod neural pathways, effectively making it disappear or become invisible. In the second movie, Miles harnesses this skill to electrify and repel constraining forms, bodies, and objects, including short-circuiting the holographic prison cell that O'Hara attempts to entrap him in and even overloading O'Hara's nanotech costume when the rage-filled anti-hero tries to violently restrain Miles. Like the water droplet, feather, or insect that collides with a spiderweb in the natural world, sending shock-waves along the entire arrangement that alert a spider to changes in its silken structure, Miles's rebellious use of his venom bite figuratively ripples through the Spider-Verse's network, ultimately encouraging Spider-Gwen, Peter B. Parker, and countless others of his friends to wholly reassess their limited, and fearful, rela- tionship to O'Hara's canon. This includes imagining and realizing life trajectories where Peter B. Parker mends his broken marriage to Mary Jane Watson and becomes a dad, where Gwen and Miles' save their police captain fathers from untimely deaths, and where Pavitr Prabakhar protects his girlfriend Gaytri from a fatal bus crash, rather than allowing her to meet an unjust fate for the sake of ensuring that canon events unfold properly.

Miles comes into full expression of his power by engaging in a form of psychedelic integration, first confronting and incorporating his newfound friends' multiple perspectives, which have literally and figuratively altered his brain chemistry, then using what he has learned to produce his own distinct interpretation of what it means to be a Spider-Man: "You all got me into this school because you thought I could do something special," he explains to his parents early on in the film, "and now I think so too. [T]he special thing I wanna do is

this: There are people out there, who can literally teach me the things I wanna learn, but they aren't all in Brooklyn." This relational view of webbed attachment reclaims the best aspects of identity, its shape- shifting receptivity to other forms of life and its attunement to particu- larity, but jettisons its exhaustive struggle to maintain a clear, coherent, or rigidly defended conception of self grounded in universally shared criteria for belonging: whether in the signifiers of Afro-Latinx cultural identity, the proper performance of radical queer gender, or the even the

traits that would distinguish one as a native Brooklynite. Consider that not one figure, metaphor, image, or icon in the films ever func- tions in a singular or monolithic way: the web can be a form of asso- ciational freedom or an iron cage of canon; the black void can be an expansive field of meaning-making or an immovable wall of white supremacist power; the multiverse can be about the plurality of worl- dviews or a tool to further promote our media-induced isolation from one another; one can have a power trip or go on a psychedelic trip; and Miles can be a superhero or a villain. In what is arguably the most masterful plot twist of the series, the sequel ends on a shocking cliff- hanger: when Miles finally visits the dimension his radioactive spider originally came from, he discovers an alternate version of himself who became a supervillain after the death of his father. Thus, no identity, concept, or ideology can ever offer relief from the contingency of the world's countless appearances. The films encourage us instead to care- fully consider the set and setting in which we choose to unleash our competing figures for freedom, always being humbled by the fact that in an infinitely branching multiverse, somewhere, somewhen, every single one of us has been a superhero and a supervillain, the victim and the victimizer, the conservative blowhard and the revolutionary hack, the classic Spider-Man and the anomaly. Our trajectory is deter- mined only by how we choose to integrate our unfolding encounters with the universe's inherent unpredictability.

Underscoring this fact, Across the Spider-Verse ends by offering a double frame of what it means to belong to a group of misfits, outcasts, or marginalized subjects, one based on isolated identitarian categories, the other on affinities forged through shared commitments. On the one hand, O'Hara responds to the groundlessness of not having rules by which to fix a broken multiverse by inventing those rules himself, ironclad canonical doxa meant to contain various Spider-people to their distinct dimensions. When Miles dares to question this orthodox worldview, O'Hara rages: "Everywhere you go you're an anomaly. You're the original anomaly. The spider that gave you your powers wasn't from your dimension. It was never supposed to bite you!. . . You're not supposed to be Spider-Man. You're a mistake!" Against this violently negating logic, Gwen implores the highest-ranking member of Miguel's strike force, the African American Spider-Woman Jessica Drew, to "tell him he's wrong"; to which Drew resignedly responds, "He's not." It is a stunning, and depressing, image seeing a once-in- spiring, representatively diverse group of superpowered women and people of color setting down an identitarian dictum of canon upon Miles and Gwen, while refusing to acknowledge their own will to power. "I am the only one who can save the multiverse," Miguel impe- riously intones at one point. Here, Miguel embodies both the single- minded structure of the ego, which winnows relevant worldly data to the narrow information that reinforces a rigidly bounded self, and the "revolutionary hack" who laments the division of left political unity by cultural and ideological differences.[51]

On the other hand, Spider-Gwen realizes that repairing any component of the multiverse requires the networked perspectives of others, an acceptance that none of us know the answers yet must judge in the absence of canon. In the wake of her compromised asso- ciation with Miguel O'Hara, she returns to her estranged father

and admits, “I don’t know what’s right anymore, but I know I can’t lose any more friends.” Thus, while O’Hara threatens anyone who rebels against his vision with the “Go Home Machine,” a terrifying interdi- mensional teleportation device that returns “foreign” or “anomalous” Spider-people to their original dimensions, Spider-Gwen organizes a rebel army with the help of the Spider-Punk, Hobie Brown, offering an open invitation to anyone invested in helping Miles, including each and every viewer: “Want in?” she asks the audience at the end of the second movie (figure 15). To symbolically join such a misfit crew is to cultivate the capacity to recognize the mutual harms we invariably inflict upon one another—like the initial failure of Miles’s friends to see the value of his anomalous nature—but to also learn how to forgive so we can move forward and forge unexpected solidarities in response to an uncertain world.[52] While all the Spider-people who appear across the two films are depicted catching criminals, preventing alternate dimensions from collapsing into black holes, and at times, defeating seemingly relentless foes, “winning” in both movies is less a matter of successful crime fighting or beating an opponent, than the act of choosing to diverge from rote patterns of expected behavior, predict- able cultural narratives or expected social relations (in other words, breaking or rejecting “Canon”). The practice of divergence grounded in turning toward unpredictable allies thus becomes a social corol- lary to the psychedelic experience, one defined by the sparking of new neural networks in the brain that break apart the most rigidly entrenched patterns of thought.

Figure 14.

Ultimately, the Spider-Verse films vividly dramatize the neuro- chemical action of psychedelic drugs as an entire democratic theory of judgment, one that decenters the “weighted priors” of identitarian belonging to open out to surprising, rhizomatic affiliations across infinite singularities—a very queer sort of web indeed. It models something that both contemporary identity-based social justice proj- ects and their intellectual corollaries have struggled to do: to refuse to recoil from what feminist political theorist Linda Zerilli calls “the abyss of political freedom,” or the reality of identity’s groundlessness, by recurrently falling back on some sort of pre-existing foundation: whether of shared marginalized selfhood, or wounded attachment, or ugly feelings, or left moralism, or progressive ideology.[53] The only viable ground the

film offers is the contingent promises we make to sustain communion across difference (or across the multiverse as it were). Wendy Brown tells us: “The pursuit of political freedom is necessarily ambivalent . . . because it requires that we surrender the conservative pleasures of familiarity, insularity, and routine for investment in a more open horizon of possibility and sustained willingness to risk identity, both collective and individual.”[54] The form of freedom Brown articulates here sounds uncannily like Letheby’s characteriza- tion of psychedelic experience as a phenomenon that “leads to the feel- ings of freedom, spaciousness, and possibility that come from disiden- tifying with the contents of the narrative self, realizing that there are other ways one can be, other ways one can see, and other ways one can parse experience.”[55]

These descriptions of the productive willingness to “risk identity,” recall the numerous moments when, in the face of aggressive attempts by others to fix, contain, or delimit Miles’s selfhood—by disqualifying him as a legitimate superhero, or labeling him with the stigma of being an “anomaly”—he chooses to surrender to the air by taking a leap of faith, off of buildings, against the flow of high-speed trains, and into interdimensional portals, as a dazzling way of “disidentifying with the narrative self [and] crafting other ways to be.” When Miguel violently proclaims Miles “the original anomaly” near the end of Across the Spider-Verse, Miles finally adopts Hobie Brown’s anarchist spirit and declares: “Everyone keeps telling me how my story is supposed to go. Nah. I’m-a do my own thing.” With these words, he electrifies O’Hara’s mechanized Spider-suit, literally ejecting his adversary into the sky before taking an epic dive into the unknown (figure 16). And so too by continually projecting the various components of Miles’s iden- tity into kaleidoscopic multiverse, the films reject our own potential impulse to make canon out of the “first Afro-Latinx” Spider-Man, as a figure that could somehow culturally compensate for our countless “states of injury.” After all, the positive therapeutic consequences of psychedelic medicines lies in their ability to facilitate a consciousness expanding experience that allows for us to see ourselves as some- thing, or someone, we never thought possible—the addict as something other than addicted, the traumatized queer or gender nonconforming person as valuable and beloved, the dissociated victim of physical or sexual abuse as someone secure in their body. If representations keep reaffirming what we know or think we know about our iden- tities, including their presumed universally wounded or traumatic nature, they will contribute to the maintenance of our most painful, rigidly held patterns of thought, rejecting those divergent, rebellious, queer modes of imagination that bring productive uncertainty into our shared universes. Ultimately then, the Spider-Verse films read our historical moment back to us from a psychedelic perspective that demands to be heard in the echo chamber of wounded identity. Never forgetting the value of recognition, but perhaps putting it in its place, the films gift their audiences with an exceptional range of previously unimaginable heroic figures—affirming by presuming the existence of Black, brown, gender queer, disabled, Muslim, and biracial Spider- people—while demonstrating that diversity is not ultimately found in any of these cultural identities alone, but precisely in the countless ways we diverge from them, and thus move closer to one another. A fact

which perpetually teaches us that: great power can only come with cultivating great response-ability.

NOTES

1. Eve Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (University of California Press, 1990), 22.
2. Chris Letheby, Philosophy of Psychedelics. (Oxford University Press, 2021), 53–57.
3. Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (University of Chicago Press 1998 [1958]), 8.
4. Letheby, Philosophy of Psychedelics, 57.
5. See Michael Pollan, What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence (Penguin Books, 2018); Bia Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar, eds., Psychedelic Justice: Toward a Diverse and Equitable Psychedelic Culture (Synergetic Press, 2021); and Rachel Nuwer, I Feel Love: MDMA and the Quest for Connection in a Fractured World (Bloosmbury Publishing, 2023).
6. Arendt, Human Condition, 246–247.
7. Arendt, Human Condition, 199.
8. See David Hollinger, Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity: Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious, and Professional Affiliation in the United States (University of Wisconsin, Press, 2006); and Amanda Anderson, The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory (Princeton University Press, 2005)
9. Wendy Brown, States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity (Princeton University Press, 1995).
10. See for example Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other (Basic Books, 2017); Daniel A. Cox, "The State of American Friendship: Change, Challenges, and Loss, Findings from May 2021 American Perspectives Survey," June 8, 2021: https://www.americansurveycenter.org/ research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/; Anne Case and Angus Deaton, Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism (Princeton University Press, 2021); James Densley and Jillian Peterson, The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic (Abrams Press, 2021); Johann Hari, Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again (Crown Books, 2022); Emily Willingham, "People Have Been Having Less Sex—whether They're Teenagers or 40-Somethings," Scientific American, January 3, 2022: https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/people-have-been-having-less-sex-whether-they-re-teenagers-or-40-somethings/; Sheila Liming, Hanging Out: The Radical Power of Killing Time (Melville House, 2023).
11. Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (Simon & Schuster, 2000).
12. Despite the conclusive evidence that psychedelic therapy can have significant long-term positive mental health outcomes—including the interruption and release of habituated thought patterns that contribute to depression and anxiety, and a

stronger capacity to grapple with mortality—there is no essential link between psychedelic drug use and any single positive political or social consequence. Critics of psychedelic utopianism like Nes¸e Devenot, Brian Pace, Amanda Rose Pratt, and Arun Saldanha rightly remind us that psychedelics are a pluripotent technology, a highly suggestible range of chemicals whose outcomes are as multifarious as the contexts in which they are administered and the mindsets of the people who use them, readily facilitating phenomena as disparate as MDMA assisted PTSD treatment, gay conversion therapy, global rave cultures, feminist trauma-informed therapy, and ayahuasca tourism. Rather than fear this pluripotency or aim to banish its unpredictability, I argue that psychedelic experience's multiplicity of effects is actually its greatest quality because it puts the responsibility for its intelligent, creative, and ethical use not on the drugs themselves but on all of us as potential theorists, guides, and practitioners of the psychedelic experience. Psychedelic expe- rience then, might be understood as one viscerally charged framework for talking about what developing receptiveness for, and critical judgment toward, heteroge- neity, uncertainty, and contingency might look and feel like. See Neşe Devenot and Brian Pace, "Right-Wing Psychedelia: Case Studies in Cultural Plasticity and Political Pluripotency," Frontiers of Psychology v. 12, Article 733185 (December 2021): 1–21; Amanda Rose Pratt, "From Changing the World to Rhetorical Worldbuilding: Toward a Constitutive Theory of Transformative Psychedelic Rhetoric" (unpub- lished dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2023): https://www.proquest.com/openview/0d021cca8a6aa0df98fe1faf17f1a7fe/1?pq-orig site=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y; and Arun Saldanha, Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race (Minnesota University Press, 2007).

13. Jean Houston and Robert Masters, The Varieties of Psychedelic Experiences: The Classic Guide to the Effects of LSD on the Human Psyche (Park Street Press, 2000 [1966]), 6.
14. The multiverse is a term originally coined by philosopher William James in his 1895 essay "Is Life Worth Living?" He used the term to describe the ways that modernity had ungrounded the notion of universal moral or ethical standards, thus creating a "multiverse" of competing and sometimes incommensurate standards for defining the nature of the good. See William James, A Pluralistic Universe (Harvard University Press, 1977 [1908]); Jodie Nicotra, "William James in the Borderlands: Psychedelic Science and 'Accidental Fences' of the Self," Configurations 16.2 (Spring 2008): 199–213. The multiverse reappears as a popular culture conceit referring to the existence of multiple co-existing dimensions or worlds in the superhero comics of the 1960s, most notably in Gardner Fox (w) and Carmine Infantino (a), "The Flash of Two Worlds!", The Flash #123 (DC Comics, September 1961); and Marv Wolfman (w) and George Perez (a), Crisis on Infinite Earths (DC Comics, 2000 [1985– 1986]). For the cultural history of the term as it functions in theoretical physics, see Paul Halpern, The Allure of the Multiverse: Extra Dimensions, Other Worlds, and Parallel Universes (Basic Books, 2024).
15. Ido Hartogsohn, American Trip: Set, Setting and the Psychedelic Experience in the

Twentieth Century (MIT Press, 2020), 210. In the introduction to their foundational 1966 study The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience, consciousness researchers Robert Masters and Jean Houston listed no less than thirty possible alterations to cogni- tive experience they witnessed in hundreds of psychedelic drug users, including "changes in visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory and kinesthetic percep- tion; . . . body image changes; hallucinations; . . . dual, multiple, and fragmentized consciousness; seeming awareness of internal organs and processes of the body; . . and, in general, apprehension of a world that has slipped the chain of normal categorical ordering, leading to an intensified interest in self and world and also to a range of responses moving from extremes of anxiety to extremes of pleasure," 6.

16. Robin Carhart-Harris, Robert Leech, David Nutt et. al., "The Entropic Brain: A theory of conscious states informed by neuroimaging research with psychedelic drugs," Frontiers in Human Neuroscience, vol. 8, Article 20 (February 2014): 1–22.
17. Citing philosopher Thomas Metzinger, Chris Letheby explains that "the human brain [can be viewed] as a system that [even in ordinary waking states] constantly simulates possible realities. On this view, conscious experience is a 'controlled hallucination' However, the mental models that constitute the furniture of our experiential worlds are transparent, meaning that they cannot easily be recog- nized as models." Letheby, Philosophy of Psychedelics, 111. On the cognitive theory of predictive coding see Carhart-Harris, Leech, and Nutt, "The Entropic Brain"; Letheby, "Chapter 6: Resetting the Brain," in Philosophy of Psychedelics; and Andy Clark, The Experience Machine: How Our Minds Predict and Shape Reality (Pantheon, 2023).
18. See R.L. Carhart-Harris and K.J. Friston, "REBUS and the Anarchic Brain: Toward a Unified Model of the Brain Action of Psychedelics," Pharmacological Reviews 71.3 (Summer 2019): 316-344.
19. Carhart-Harris and Friston, "REBUS and the Anarchic Brain," 320, 322.
20. See, for instance, Andrew Boon, The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs (Harvard University Press, 2005); Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain, Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond (Grove Press, 2007); Don Lattin, The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America (Harper One, 2009); and Chris Elcock, Psychedelic New York: A History of LSD in the City (McGill-Queens University Press, 2023).
21. See Malik Gaines, "Chapter 4: The Cockettes, Sylvester, and Performance as Life," in Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible (New York University Press, 2017); Lana Cook, "Empathetic Reform and the Psychedelic Aesthetic: Women's Accounts of LSD Therapy," Configurations 22.1 (Winter 2014): 79–111; Elcock, "Chapter 4: Building Utopia: Nina Graboi, the East Village, and the Psychedelic Counterculture," in Psychedelic New York; and Emily Lordi, "The Radical Experimentation of Black Psychedelia," The New York Times, February 10, 2022: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/t-magazine/black-psychedelia.html; and Adam Schuster, "Synthesizing Sounds: Vibration, Poetry, and Belonging in

Sun Ra's Space Age." POST-NOW, special issue of The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association 56.2 (Fall 2023): 23-50.

22. Elcock, Psychedelic New York, 108.
23. Vivian Gornick, "Consciousness," in Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader, ed. Barbara A. Crow (NYU Press, 2000 [1971]), 288. Similarly, in her now-canonical work of Chicana feminist theorizing, Borderlands/La Frontera (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa indexed key aspects of psychedelic experience in her description of the mestiza, the mixed-race feminist who "reinterprets history and, using new symbols. . . shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar She becomes a nahual, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. A constant changing of forms" (82, 91). In both Gornick and Anzaldúa's evocative descriptions of coming into feminist consciousness, they articulate the experience as one that profoundly enhances a person's sensitivity to the world's plurality of appearances, often through the act of shedding singular, constraining accounts of the self in favor of multi-dimensional frameworks like cross-identification, shapeshifting, and surrendering to ambiguity and uncertainty. Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera (Aunt Lute Books, 1987).
24. Letheby, Philosophy of Psychedelics, 141, 125.
25. Carhart-Harris and Friston, "REBUS," 326.
26. Rostom Mesli, "In Defense of Identity Politics: A Queer Reclamation of a Radical Concept," PhD diss., University of Michigan, Department of Comparative Literature, 2015: 5.
27. Brown, States of Injury, 74.
28. Brown, States of Injury, 27.
29. See Avgi Saketopoulou, Sexuality Beyond Consent (New York University Press, 2023); Tim Dean and Oliver Davis, Hatred of Sex (Nebraska University Press, 2022); and Joseph Fischel Screw Consent: A Better Politics of Sexual Justice (University of California Press, 2019).
30. See Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars (Palgrave McMillan, 2018); and Jennifer Doyle, Campus Sex, Campus Security (Semiotext(e), 2015).
31. See Paisley Currah, Sex is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity (New York University Press, 2022); Lucas Crawford, Transgender Architechtonics: The Shape of Change in Modernist Space (Routledge, 2020).
32. See for instance, Jodi Byrd, The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism (University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Christina Sharpe, In the Wake: On Blackness and Being (Duke University Press, 2016); and Calvin Warren, Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation (Duke University Press, 2018).
33. See Robyn Wiegman, Object Lessons (Duke University Press, 2012).
34. See Debra Michels, "From Consciousness Expansion to Consciousness Raising:

Feminism and the Countercultural Politics of the Self," in Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, eds. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (Routledge, 2001); and Deborah Gould, Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS (Chicago University Press, 2009).

35. Brown, States of Injury, 44.
36. To be clear: I am not arguing that these critiques are all patently wrong (though I believe some, like Afro pessimism, are wildly overstated and arrogant in their universalizing scope). Neither am I suggesting that actual harms are not being done everywhere to all kinds of people, both more and less marginalized, nor that politics should not concern itself with substantive responses to injury and violation. Rather, I underscore that, like the very low entropy states of consciousness psychedelic therapy attempts to treat, the obsessive political and intellectual focus on our individual and shared injuries provides only a partial and skewed view of reality. It narrows the full range of human affective states to a limited slice of negative feelings and experiences, thus excluding the meaningful presence of emotions like joy, thrill, bewilderment, uncertainty, peace, and curiosity among countless others in our everyday lives. And it paradoxically attempts to ameliorate harm by focusing intently on it, rather than seeing it as part of a constellation of human experiences that might include mutual care, psychological healing, and moments of political triumph as much as defeat.
37. See Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera; Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants (Milkweed Press, 2013); Linda Zerilli, Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom (University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Kevin Quashie, Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being (Duke University Press).
38. Moreover, as the 2024 US presidential election made clear, the intense focus on the harms of marginalized groups frequently activates the perceived unacknowledged or unaddressed pain of others, such as those demographics like white working-class men, who are perceived to be less immediately vulnerable than more historically denigrated groups. This produces a seemingly endless cycle of moral recrimination that places all sides into an intractable political deadlock.
39. Despite the long-standing, and bracing humanist critiques of clinical psychology—most notably queer, feminist, and postcolonial rebuttals to the institution's history of pathologizing oppressed groups and reducing elaborate structural realities impacting patients to individual neuroses—it still remains among the most established intellectual and professional fields dedicated to human mental wellbeing. This may account for why the psychedelic renaissance is dominated by neuroscientists and licensed psychotherapists interested in novel responses to tenacious or difficult-to-treat, chronic mental health concerns. These same scientists and psychol- ogists have been positively impacted by social justice activism in the psychedelic community, which has effectively pushed for greater diversity in the demographic make-up of psychedelic study participants and therapy clients; improved cultural competence on the part of practicing therapists and scientists running clinical trials; the integration of indigenous approaches to spiritual and

community-based uses of psychoactive medicines; and the establishment of safeguards against the sexual or emotional abuse of people undergoing psychedelic therapy. Despite these posi- tive changes, however, psychedelic science remains largely ignorant to the insights and methods of cultural studies, the field responsible for the rich interdisciplinary analysis of human aesthetic production and its impact on public life. This may in part be because it remains unclear how the unique interpretive methods offered by fields like literary and cultural studies—including close reading, deconstruction, formalism, genealogical analysis, cognitive mapping, affect studies, reparative reading, critical race theory, and eco-criticism, to name a few—have any concrete relationship to the psychedelic integration process. Yet it might also be because the affective register in which we have proffered our methods to fields like psychology and neuroscience is often one of recrimination and denunciation toward their reproduction of pernicious ideologies, like the psycho-therapeutic pathologi- zation of queerness or the neurotypical assumptions of cognitive science. While these are legitimate and necessary critiques, they also potentially constraint our ability to speak to the vast interpretive possibilities of the psychedelic integration experience itself, which is fundamentally about crafting new frames of reference for confronting, processing, and ultimately healing from psychic injury, rather than perpetually dwelling in it.

40. Carhart-Harris and Friston, "REBUS," 324.
41. Darieck Scott, Keeping it Unreal: Black Queer Fantasy and Superhero Comics (New York University Press, 2022), 30.
42. Quashie, Black Aliveness, 7.
43. Taylor Black, Style: A Queer Cosmology (New York University Press, 2023), 17.
44. Black, Style: A Queer Cosmology, 17.
45. Carhart-Harris and Friston, "REBUS," 323.
46. Arun Saldanha, "Reontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype,"
47. Environment and Planning D: Space and Society 24.1 (2006): 19.
48. Quashie, Black Aliveness, 12.
49. Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 52.
50. Arendt, Human Condition, 322.
51. This figure offers a lyrical and enchanting visual expression of Arendt's description of the "web of human relationships," a constellation of seemingly intangible bonds that "consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another." Human Condition, 181.
52. Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," boundary 2 26.3 (1999), 20.
53. Arendt, Human Condition, 241, 244.
54. Linda Zerilli, Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom (Chicago University Press, 2005).
55. Brown, States of Injury, 25.
56. Letheby, Philosophy of Psychedelics, 146.