

ISSUES IN INTEGRATIVE STUDIES
No. 25, pp. 156-168 (2007)

THE INTEGRATED SELF CROSSES BORDERS DAILY: Inviting the Mystical Realism of the Integrated Scholar

Adapted from Comments made in the Keynote Address to the
2007 Conference of the Association for Integrative Studies
September 29, 2007
Tempe, Arizona

by

Sarah “Amira” De la Garza

Arizona State University

Abstract: This “call to self reflection” arising out of the keynote presentation invites readers to encounter and participate in the practice of the integrated scholar—a path across borders and boundaries often considered “outside” of formal learning. Propelled by a traumatic head injury that challenged cognitive abilities, this author’s journey across physical, geographic, and cognitive borders has resonance for the study of integrative learning and practice—a dynamic process characterized by constant interaction and negotiation, recognition and surprise, and response to invited and uninvited callings from unexpected sources. At its core is mystical realism, an engagement with one’s experience that involves suspending reliance on the surface boundaries for validation of what is possible and wise.

For those of us who walk this path of the integrated scholar, we know all too well; it is a *path* of the integrated scholar, not a being, not a place. I am not an integrated scholar as one who has arrived, but as one committed to the journey of integration. And I am humbled. Not because I stand before giants, but because we are all so little, and the world so large—

and truly, all the wisdom we need is everywhere around us at all times. I am humbled, hoping that as I come to resemble the earth in my humility, perhaps its voice will find its way through me, and tell us all a bit about where we get our courage—the courage to cross the borders and boundaries so belligerently upheld in the name of all things institutional to keep us rigorously fragmented, clinically and pristinely separate, and deadly stiff in our rigorous scholarship.

It is an honor to share something of what it has been to me to be an integrated scholar, one who seeks to integrate not only the works of other scholars, but the works of nature and the Divine, of our historical DNA, our bodies, and intuitive wisdoms. I will share here with you some of this journey, but it would not feel right—or should I say, “integrated”—for me to simply speak to you of this journey without somehow embracing you by sharing an experience of how it feels to be in my place.

My students know that to come to one of my classes is to enter a space where I will undoubtedly ask them to do things they never thought they’d be doing in a classroom. Often we leave the classroom, sit on the earth, draw on university concrete walkways with chalk, sit in darkness and light candles (in violation of university codes), burn sage and other forms of incense that have summoned marijuana-sniffing officers and paranoid colleagues into the hallways. What does this have to do with learning, some ask? For me, it is everything. The body is the master of integration. Each and every day, we take in air and water and matter, unconsciously for the most part, and it is all integrated masterfully in the wonder of biology and chemistry, physics and psycho-spiritual ontology that makes us all human beings. To be an integrated scholar, and one who readily integrates what she is learning, I have found that the body must be summoned. For it is our greatest ally; it is our earthly servant on this journey; it is the miracle worker we can call upon and so often forget. I invite you now, to join me in summoning these wise vessels for our souls.

I invite you to find a glass stone such as you can find at any craft store or florist’s shop. Take some time to look at this piece of glass. I’d like you to consider how very much you are alike. For, you see, this glass “stone” is a representation crafted from the sands and minerals of the earth. Like you and me, it’s been weathered and worn, collected and gathered. And it’s been heated and burned, melted and shaped. It now appears to be a stone, in the form desired by the artisan, marketed, and purchased, distributed and in your hands. As in each of us, these processes can leave us feeling empty, used, artificial, or clichéd. But also, as with each of us, we have the

capacity and power to transform our object-nature into the wonder of all that we are. We have to learn to see the integral in what appears to be solid and muted.

Take a moment to breathe deeply as you hold this stone, and become aware of where you are. Not just in this room, but in your very body. What are you feeling? Can you smell anything? What do your clothes feel like? Are you cold? Warm? What does the chair feel like under your seat? Can you feel your last meal inside of you? Can you still taste it? Are you thirsty? Sleepy?

Where has your body been? Think of the last two days, and your journey to arrive here. What was it like to pack, to move, to prepare? Did you sleep well? Not enough? Loosen your fingers, and think of all that you have touched and held, gripped and caressed these last days. Loosen the tightness in your feet, and think of the shoes you have worn, the places you have stepped and walked, the feeling of warm water in the shower, or a towel rubbing your feet dry.

What have you heard these last days? Who were the voices speaking? What did you hear yourself saying? What uplifted you? When did you choose anger or unhappiness?

Take a deep breath. Take a look around this room. Remember the building we are in. The parking lot outside, the busy streets, the desert air, and blue skies. Long before any of these things were here, thousands of peoples lived here on the desert land and started their days with awareness of the four directions around them. The four directions surround us still. Notice around you where each leads, where it takes you. I now invite you to share the words of an invocation for bringing together embodied wise beings, to honor the integrative experience that brings us here, the integrative experience that is, in fact, who we are.

Invocation

Blessing to the Four Directions

We stand here before ourselves
 Holding firm in our hands a piece of glass...
 a manufactured stone
 processed as much as are we
 to show us things we know not yet
 We stand here
 and call on all that we have always known
 call on what we never learned,

call on what we have learned so well
And all we have well forgotten.
We begin, with a journey around the medicine wheel of our lives.
We turn to face the...

WEST

Spirits of the West...you are the direction of the dark storm
The disruptions in our lives
The lightning bolts that startle and the thunder that chills
An ancient knowing place in our souls
Spirits of the West, we open our selves to receive the wisdom
Of catastrophe and crisis, of conflict and utter darkness of soul
May it pass through our bodies into this stone
As we turn to the

NORTH

Spirits of the North...oh source and direction of tradition and life blood
Of culture and routine, the familiar and habitual
What our ancestors brought to us in energetic form of repetition
It lives in us with the potential for complete transformation and reverence
We have called it the Sacred
In our bodies lies the determinant act or choice of resistance
Spirits of the North, course our bodies and find a place in this stone
As we turn to the

EAST

Spirits of the East...soft winds and morning dew, sunrise and fresh
beginnings
We enter every new beginning with the desire to linger a bit under the
covers
as the Sun entices with awareness of the hunger in our core,
the thirst on our palates
All that has come before is yesterday,
East is calling us to the present, each moment a beginning
We breathe in the fresh air of new beginnings and draw this energy down
into this stone
As we turn to the

SOUTH

Spirits of the South, the hearth of our relationships and emotions
Fires of passion and desolate reflection under starry night skies
We seek comfort as much as feel the intense risk of humanity
In every encounter with another human being.

Spirits of the South, here is the ultimate potential of creativity
 We open our bodies to receive this human, relational potential
 And it travels through our hand, into this stone.

We turn and hold the stone before our solar plexus, our core, our center.
 Reaching our feet's energy deep into the core of the earth, we feel a similar
 pull through the crown of our head, and we are perfectly suspended as
 embodied

beings, here on earth, holding in our core, the potential of all directions, at
 all moments, and all times.

May we remember. With a deep breath, remember, and slowly return to our
 ordinary consciousness, open-eyed.

The Challenge

the world is daring us today
 to find water
 where the springs are drying
 to breathe deeply
 when the air is stifling
 to sleep soundly
 when our waking hours
 are filled already with slumber

the world is daring us today
 to find meaning
 when the clichés are all too ready
 to tell a story
 when we feel we've heard them all
 to hunger for change
 when we long for a spot of rest

It is a difficult task to maintain hope when the circumstances around us
 reek of futility or at the very least, of an interminable struggle for an
 uncertain reward. Yet, this is the reality of human existence throughout
 the ages, and upon seeing it so glaringly, like the searing reflection of the
 sun's light in September, in Phoenix, we can grow weary. It should be
 autumn. We should be harvesting and sheltering ourselves under warm
 blankets in the dark hours of the night. But the cycles are off. Or so we
 might think.

you're addicted to hope
he said
I see them all the time
addicted to hope
like well-trained dogs
waiting for their long-gone masters
addicted to hope
in the habituated patterns
hope that they need not change
unconscious faith in the rules and routines

maintaining the order
keeping alive a hunger for what has been
for the familiar, no matter how toxic—
not recognizing that within our longing
is found the resistance to change
but...

the world is daring us today

The world is daring us today
to remember how to change
daring us today
to move on
to abandon and renew.

What *is* this dare? Are we being called to anything other than what it is to be an integrated human being? Are we really being called to anything new? Or to re-new...to find again that source of the eternal new in us?

we are so filled with what we call new
we have forgotten how to renew
so filled with motion, and commotion
we have forgotten what it is to move
on our own, propelled by the energy of our inner core
so filled with options and distractions
we mistake adaptation and adjustment
for organic change

this is fantasy land
where the borders are our habits
where the limits are our facades
where the dreams are fairy tales gone awry

cross those borders?
 what’s on the other side?
 Do you want to take a journey there with me?

Years ago, in 1988, I set out for Mexico, destined for my first visit as a Fulbright scholar to the Escuela Libre de Psicología, a faculty of psychology affiliated with the University of Chihuahua. In 1988, I had been living in New Jersey for two years as a new faculty member at Rutgers University. I’d received my PhD in 1986, and after my first year as an assistant professor, I decided to apply for a Fulbright grant to Mexico. I submitted my application materials in August of 1987, and waited for the process to ensue that would tell me sometime in January whether I’d made it as a finalist.

I occupied the ground floor, as a tenant of a late 1800s turn-of-the-century home, while my friend and relational partner lived in the upstairs apartment. The home was only a block or so away from our offices at Rutgers, and we would often walk home for a quick lunch or nap. Life was good! On a Thursday in early December, I had gone home alone for lunch and was returning to campus. The air was damp and cool, clouds moved through the sky, occasionally revealing the sun. I was wearing a gray down jacket, a pair of jeans and a blue sweater, carrying a leather bag and enjoying the fact that I didn’t have to wear gloves or a hat on this spectacularly easygoing day.

As I began the walk across College Avenue to my office, I noticed that a small automobile was turning left towards the crosswalk on which I walked, and the car was failing to stop. I remember that I seemed to calculate the probability that I could get out of its way before it would hit me. I realized in a spot of time that seemed as if it were forever, that it was not going to stop, and I could not move fast enough to get out of its way. Horrified, I let out a scream that came from some place inside me I’d never known (and have since never revisited). I was conscious that I was about to be hit by a car, quite probably being killed I thought, as the car hit my left hip and knee. My body buckled, and twisted with the force, causing the hood of the car to hit my upper left back and shoulder as my body fell slowly before being thrown through the air. My chin and mouth, then the side of my face and head hit the car. The next thing I remember, I was lying on the ground, a distance from the car, my knees bent and refusing to move as I opened my eyes and simultaneously thought incredulously to myself, “I am ALIVE.”

What had I been thinking of when I was walking on that crosswalk prior to seeing the oncoming vehicle? Do you really want to know? It’s amazing, in fact, that I remember that I was ruminating over the implications of our

Dean's discussion to the faculty earlier that week, concerning the serious state of various departments in our School. He'd told us he'd selected a unified direction for the School's scholarship, and that all of us needed to find ways to get our work in synch with this direction. I was a brand new PhD; my work was in ethnography, with an emphasis on health and communication. Not so long before, during my dissertation defense, I'd been asked to defend how my research could hold up against "real" social science, that variable analytic kind, with hypothesis-driven questions. The ethnographic stories I reported looked so much like "mere" journalism to the committee member who posed the question. Days before my accident, in addition to making my work look like traditional social science, I was being asked to shift my interests into the uses of technology for communication.

Lying on the ground with my right cheek on the concrete, waiting for some sort of help to arrive, I recall very little. But there are three things that stand out amongst what I remember. The first is the conclusion I've already shared, and which was reached instantly: I AM ALIVE. At some deep level, my consciousness was first and foremost concerned about my existential survival. Next, I heard the voice of a young woman (whom I later learned was the driver of the car that had hit me) asking me, "Are you all right?" I could not see her, but I recall that from that place deep inside of me where all my awareness seemed to be coming from at that time, I could only muster what I thought to be the most self-evident truth, "WHAT DO YOU THINK?" I asked her. I didn't recall anything for a while; it is likely I was in and out of consciousness for a bit. But in my next independent thought prior to the arrival of the ambulance and EMT workers, I remembered what I'd been worrying about earlier—the Dean's command to adapt our scholarship to the School's new mission. Lying there with what was rapidly becoming the worst headache I would ever have in my life, I committed to myself, "I am not going to spend one minute of my life worrying about what the Dean wants my research to look like, when I can walk across the street and get hit by a car at any moment. It's just not worth it." My sarcasm and wit had evidently survived the accident, and they actually seemed to be the right and left hand protectors of my will to live and to do so with integrity. I would soon find these attributes had other companions working to keep me alive, creative, and working with integrity.

Having been struck by the automobile blessed me with a left hemisphere head injury that severely hampered my communicative abilities and capacities for organizing and sequencing my events. My personality took a turn toward the verbally impulsive, frustrated with the inability to get the words in my

mind to my mouth in time for them to cohere with the conversations in which I wished to participate. Instead, I exploded with rash and quick statements as if time were running out, and I rapidly became known as an angry person. Deeper within my soul was a sense of isolation not only from those around me, but from my very self. I felt distanced from the woman I thought I was. I had memories of my self when my environment was impeccably organized and my ideas systematic and easy to outline. After the accident, a visual collage was a better outline than words in pristine outlines, and anything out of sight in my office or home was soon forgotten. When I tried to write, I'd rapidly lose sense of the flow in the current I thought I'd been following, as if the waters suddenly dried, my raft stuck in shallow puddles without enough water to speak to me of where we'd only moments earlier been traveling together. I had not yet discovered mystical realism.

In January of 1988, when the Fulbright program, through the office of the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars informed me that I was a finalist for the Fulbright I'd applied for, I never once questioned whether I should notify them of my head injury and hampered cognitive abilities—I simply didn't. As my partner, Dennis, drove me to physical therapy five times a week and to neuropsychiatric treatment and testing every few weeks, I didn't even notice that this head injury had somehow cut me loose from what prior to the accident had been an ever-present awareness of the authoritative parameters around me for institutional and professional success. Now, I found that my agency was not in any way connected to these parameters.

I received the Fulbright. I sought a physician with no knowledge of my accident or injuries and got my medical clearance. I knew they were most concerned about whether I would bring along a communicable disease or contract one. An inability to remember things was not contagious, so there was no place on the health release forms requiring me to tell them! Along with sarcasm, wit, and awe for the persistence of the human life force, I was discovering that there were forms of intentional rebellion seemingly vital for succeeding against institutional norms. I had no communicable diseases, and there was no need to tell them I was operating, not so much in slow motion, but in *CO*-motion, not the commotion that had characterized me beforehand, but a dependent, *co*-motion, an unconscious collaborative motion, seeking its direction from the world around me. This is how I was born into the form of scholarship and existence I would slowly come to embrace as my life and life work. Until now, rugged individualism had served me well—teaching me it was a form of weakness to need others or to be open to power or

knowledge from anywhere other than what I, supposedly “on my own” had learned or gathered.

In August of 1988, I journeyed to Mexico, mind-strengthening exercises in tow, thanks to the neuropsychiatrist from Princeton who had prescribed a regimen of right-brain strengthening work, in hopes that it would support my mind’s gradual move from left-brain dominance to the right brain. The transformation I was inviting was far broader. The biologist Rupert Sheldrake, with whom I had the good fortune to spend time learning in his home and community of Hampstead in London, several years ago, taught me that the mind is so much more than the brain. It is an *extended mind*, interconnected with the minds of all others. As my brain injury released me from reliance on the contained mind I’d so identified with as a scholar throughout my lifetime, I found myself unconsciously opening up to experiences I’d considered “outside” of formal learning. Now, they were all one.

The year I would spend in Mexico would completely transform my life. Seeds were sown that slowly germinated—some sprouting occasionally, but most waiting like desert seeds are aught to do, for the proper and sorely needed storm to tell them the time had come to open up and grow. I began to find that the straight and narrow paths of literature searches and data trails were simple threads in richly woven tapestries of insight, knowledge, and wisdom. I had not seen these as related, with my myopic training focusing on the egoist “I” for seeing. I came to find that no matter where I looked, there was something of relevance to what I was seeking, if I were ready and willing to find it. Michael Talbot calls this the “holographic universe,” Lincoln and Guba refer to this as a fundamental axiom for naturalistic inquiry based on an emergent, rather than predetermined research design.

Many people have spoken of the magical realism that characterizes Latin American literature. I’ve often smiled as I’ve overheard folks commenting on the magical nature of Latin American literature, or for some, its “totally bizarre” nature. Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien Años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Isabel Allende’s *Casa de los Espiritus* (*House of Spirits*), or Laura Esquivel’s *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*) are seen as fanciful representations in exaggerated metaphoric narrative. But for those of us familiar with the life ways of Latin America, of Mexico, or Mexican-American Texas or the Southwest borderlands, this is no literary technique or fancy. That’s the way life really is! My students from Japan, Singapore, China, and India, smile with the same sort of inner knowing. Magical realism is simply realism for those with an openness for what can be seen when the eyes are not the only lenses.

When I tell of the realism that characterizes my experiences in Mexico, however, I do not simply call it magical; I recognize it as mystical. Magical realism implies to me a recognition that not all things are explicable, and that the unexpected may occur at any moment in often unexplainable ways. Magic is about wonders observed, that leave the observer baffled or enchanted. For me, *mystical realism* is about an engagement with one’s experience that involves a suspension of reliance on the surface boundaries for the validation of what is possible. It is mystical, because when such an experience of paradoxical suspension-engagement is allowed into one’s life, rather than simply experiencing wonder, one is aware of having experienced the interconnectedness of all experience. Mystical realism is a way of walking through our lives inviting a sense of Oneness in what seems so harshly divided and random. The mystical experience is inherently an integrated experience...but one where we haven’t worked so hard at making it happen. Instead, if there’s been any hard work, it’s been the hard work of letting go of the idea that we are in control of what we see. I have come to think we are more in control of what we fail to see. Perhaps that is why there is so little peace in our world right now.

When we commit to live a life of mystical realism, we are setting the stage to see characters whose parts and lines are not written in a script we determine. Rather, the script “comes to us.” Talk to any composer or creative writer about those mystical moments of “flow” when somehow the poetry just comes, the songs are somehow “in the mind”...the breeze touching our cheek awakens an awareness of something we didn’t realize we knew, but are now driven to create and share. For those of us with rigid religiously or scientifically influenced cultural frames of reference, it is easier to place this sort of experience within the fanciful, using a term like “magic” within a cultural history that casts such things as entertainment or an untouchable evil or nonsense. But for the mystic, it is the very fabric of everyday existence, speaking of the potential in every moment of our lives for insight and delight. For the mystic scholar, the Oneness is undeniable, and we run with excitement, gathering the pieces we wish to integrate in our work, or which have integrated our own understanding. But it is not easy.

The instant we become aware of the power of integrated knowing, we also become glaringly aware of the persistent, and *insistent* borders telling us that all things are not unified, but rather must be kept bounded and separate, for proper sensibility. Many of these borders are identifiable “outside our selves” as in the voices of society, nation states, and our neighbor’s

fences and walls. But truly, the reality of these borders finds its strength within each and every one of us. We hold these borders sacred. And the call of integrated knowing and learning challenges this. Committing to integrated learning becomes rapidly a process of integrating our *selves*. It is a conscious process of choices for how one lives one's life and represents what that life means.

Integration is the foundation of all living systems in relationship to their environment. Integrated learning begins to shift the way we interact with the world around us and alters our ethics. It is a dynamic process, and we soon recognize that it is a bit dizzying, and that sometimes those rigid boundaries and borders do offer a sort of solid stability that can be tantalizing. But rigor is a symptom of a dead body. The integrated scholar rejects the rigor mortis of a static canon in favor of the vital and integral. Integration is not always pretty; it is not "new age"; it is not for the weak-kneed or inflexible. Integration is a state of constant interaction and negotiation, of recognition and surprise, of response to invited and uninvited callings. Just when we think we've arrived, we realize our next ride has begun.

And the ride is so commonly to oft-forbidden and/or forgotten places. We travel beyond the boundaries of what we have been told is possible, and we do so, not as a form of acting out, as in childish rebellion, but with a sense of conscious revolt. Julia Kristeva (2002) situates this form of revolt, or revolution, not in the form of social movements or coalitions, but within the individual. She states, "one cannot revolt against systems.... the only possibility that remains [is] individual interrogation.... placing a greater demand on oneself, and treating others with more generosity" (p.113).

For in fact, it is the interrogation of the self that de-calcifies the internal borders of mind and heart. And when the heart is freed of the artery-clogging bad habits of mind we are so addicted to, it begins to pump the life blood of courage, enabling the natural state of life to persist: integration.

We are surrounded at every moment of every day and night by the four directions and of all that they remind us. It is our choice to remember the simple turns of daily revolution that can bring us to our grounded core, to face the borders that limit our knowing, to know when to cross them, when to destroy them, and when to take a brief rest and appreciate the amazing potential that has created them.

Biographical Note: Sarah "Amira" De la Garza (PhD, University of Texas at Austin) is Associate Professor and Southwest Borderlands Scholar at the Hugh Downs School of Communication at Arizona State University, Tempe, where she also serves

as Acting Director of the North American Center for Transborder Studies. Among her publications are *Maria Speaks: Journeys into the Mysteries of the Mother in My Life as a Chicana* and *Death Was a Baby Bird*, contributions to the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, the *American Communication Journal*, the *International and Intercultural Communication Quarterly*, and the *Management Communication Quarterly*, and numerous edited volumes, as well as scholarly and creative presentations and performances exploring issues of performance ethnography, intercultural and borderlands culture, and well-being through the lens of the “integrated scholar.”

References

- Allende, I. (1995). *Casa de los espíritus*. NY: Harper Perennial.
- Esquivel, L. (2001). *Como agua para chocolate*. NY: Anchor.
- Kristeva, J. (2002). *Revolt, she said*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- García Márquez, G. (2006). *Cien años de soledad*. Madrid: Catedra.
- Sheldrake, R. (2003). *The sense of being stared at*. New York: Three Rivers.
- Talbot, M. (1992). *The holographic universe*. New York: Harper Perennial.