



“Take This Class If You Like to Be Brainwashed”

Walking the Knife’s Edge Between Education and Indoctrination

Chris Bobel

University of Massachusetts Boston

chris.bobel@umb.edu

Abstract: This article presents a case study or, perhaps more accurately, a pedagogical memoir that interrogates life inside my classroom as yet another site of transformation, a place where inner works become public acts. This story illustrates Anzaldúa’s seven stages of *conocimiento* collapsed into four moments. Through an examination of “data” derived from my students’ (anonymous) reflections on interacting with course material during the 15 -week term of my introductory Women’s Studies class, I demonstrate the process of *conocimiento*, the complex series of awakenings, reckonings and integrations that build the foundation of social justice. I end by noting that what Anzaldúa calls Spiritual Activism suspends the learner in a constant state of *nepantla* brought to a borderland where realities live in constant tension. Indoctrination, as a disengagement from the self, as a surrender of thought and a denial of one’s truth is antithetical to this work, to this state of being. As educators, we must affirm our commitment to welcoming the ruptures and exploring the depths of our shared transformations.

This article presents a case study or, perhaps more accurately, a pedagogical memoir that interrogates life inside my classroom as yet another site of transformation, a place where inner works become public acts. This story illustrates Anzaldúa’s seven stages of *conocimiento* collapsed into four moments. Through an examination of “data” derived from my students’ (anonymous) reflections on interacting with course material during the 15 -week term of my introductory Women’s Studies class, I demonstrate the process of *conocimiento*, the complex series of awak-

enings, reckonings and integrations that build the foundation of social justice. But first, I will describe my own rupture that set this inquiry in motion.

Recently, a student suggested, almost tauntingly:

You should check out RateMyProfessors.Com, Chris. I know it’s kind of a shady website, but a lot of students had a lot to say about you.

I respond coolly, brushing it off. But she’s got me.

Chris Bobel is Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston, interested in woman-led social movements enacted in the context of the personal and the intimate. She is the author of *The Paradox of Natural Mothering* (2002; Temple University Press) which examined alternative/activist mothers. She is currently at work on a new book which explores menstrual health and social change.

Later that night, with one eye pinched shut, I furtively type in the URL feeling like I am enroute to a porn site. The site is actually *worse* than I expected. Students are given the opportunity to assess instructors using a five-point scale. The categories are limited to four: easiness, helpfulness, clarity and *hotness* (for which a chili pepper appears next to the names of professors so deemed). While students are nameless, they do state the course name and term listed next to their assessment of the professor. I direct my gaze to the narrative comments regarding my own teaching. One student writes:

This class changed my life. Chris really knows how to help people think critically and look at the world with eyes wide open. I know now that I must work to better the world.

Feeling relief and a flash of pride, I decide to read on, scanning the next several comments. This exercise in flattery is brusquely interrupted when my eyes fall on the following statement:

Take her class if you want to be brainwashed. If you think racism and sexism are everywhere, you will love this class. If you don't you, stay away.

I read the comment again. And again. Brainwashed? I am amused, then hurt, then angry, then self righteous. I finally settle on self doubt. Well, racism and sexism *are* everywhere, I reason. But brainwashed? The latter claim haunts me and initiates a constant replay loop in my head, recounting each event throughout the term. Was I brainwashing? Had I abused my professorial authority and used the classroom to indoctrinate?

My dilemma is not mine alone. I see increasing evidence that a pedagogical phi-

losophy and practice of engagement, of "teaching to transgress" as bell hooks (2004) famously put it, is under attack. While we work to promote social justice, we are accused of silencing dissent and constructing the "new" disenfranchised, those on the right who claim the academy has "gone too far."

But I must ask: how much of the concern about *going too far* is a product of the academy on the run from conservative critics such as David Horowitz? The right wing critique of the engaged classroom — most recently Horowitz's book *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (2006), Campus Watch, an organization which claims to "monitor Middle East Studies" (n.d.) and increasing numbers of student chapters of Students for Academic Freedom (including a chapter at my own institution)—has led many of us to self doubt, even panic.

Recently, I took a closer look at the website of Students for Academic Freedom. Their central goal is to:

End the political abuse of the university and to restore integrity to the academic mission as a disinterested pursuit of knowledge, (n.d)

Disinterested? I pondered this word, consulting Merriam Webster online.

Disinterested:

1) not having the mind or feelings engaged. Not interested.

2) Free from selfish motive or interest: Unbiased

3) Synonym: INDIFFERENT.

I never wanted to be disengaged, not interested or indifferent. Selfish motives? One could argue that as a white, straight, highly educated woman who enjoys a tremendous amount of cultural capital, dis-

mantling systems of race, sexuality and class privilege isn't exactly in my immediate best interest (the greater good notwithstanding, of course).

Unbiased? I reason that I am not the first to argue that teaching is necessarily a political act, whatever your positions. A long string of political decisions shape each course, from topic selection, to texts, to assignments, to the very way each issue is framed. To quote sociologist Judith Wittner, "Those who don't challenge the status quo in their classes appear to be neutral, but that false neutrality obstructs critical thought and supports the notion that the way we live as people is the way we *must* live" (2006, p. 2).

I use Anzaldúa's theorizing of the path to *conocimiento* as a structure to consider key moments in my own classroom—to evaluate how I negotiate the tension between *teaching and telling* and hopefully, to inspire thoughtful reflection on our critical pedagogical practices, interrogate our ethical and political responsibilities as engaged teacher-scholars and consider deeply our own positionalities inside the classroom. The key question driving this inquiry is this: how do we differentiate brainwashing from teaching for transformation? Do we know the difference when we see it?

MOMENT 1: IT BEGINS WITH A RUPTURE

The class is an Introduction to Women's Studies. A wonderfully racially and ethnically diverse group of students populates the class—mostly, though not exclusively, women fill the room. "The Level Playing Field" is an exercise designed to challenge the notion of meritocracy that permeates American culture. Beforehand, the students read Peggy McIntosh's (1989) well-known "The Invisible Knapsack of Privilege." In this exercise all the students begin at the same point forming a straight

line across the room and holding hands. I read a series of statements such "If your parents graduated from college take one step forward" and "If you don't own a computer take one step back." By the end of the exercise, assuming people are honest in their responses to the questions, students are widely dispersed across the "field" with the more privileged students situated nearest the front of the class and the less privileged clustered near the back. In the post exercise debriefing, several white students openly share their surprise at their privileged position on the playing field. They don't see themselves as privileged; they never thought about many of the advantages they enjoy. This is a new way of looking at their lives, their successes, and their reasons for being who they and where they are. Many seem a bit shaken. Some express guilt. Others: defensiveness. As the mostly white, mostly middle class students speak, many of the students of color nod knowingly. They've long understood the unevenness of the playing field. *They* aren't surprised at the outcome of the exercise. In this exercise, the students experience a rupture, as characterized by Anzaldúa—"an event (that) pulls the linchpin that held your reality/story together" (p. 546). But this is a painful transformation, Anzaldúa reminds us. She writes: "Even as you listen to the old consciousness's death rattle, you continue defending its mythology of who you were and what your world looked like" (p. 549).

During the next class period, 48 hours later, I ask the students to do some free writing about the exercise which reflects on what has "stayed with them" and what they think and feel about the experience *today*. I invite volunteers to read their pieces aloud. The first to read is a white woman from an affluent Boston suburb, someone who originally questioned the utility of the exercise finding it little more than a device to divide students.

Today, I am stunned when she reads

aloud her piece:

When we talked in the last class, I kept coming up with all sorts of privileges I lacked, like my own new car. But I realize that I was making excuses because I was hurting. I didn't like seeing my classmates behind me. What's more: I didn't like thinking that I got to the front just because I was lucky. I work hard. But I guess I realize that others do too and that it takes more than hard work to get ahead in this world.

This student, boldly enters what Anzaldúa calls *NEPANTLA*: the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education and your different cultures.

MOMENT 2: THE CROSSING

Weeks later, I read student journals. With particular eagerness, I devour the recent entries of a female student in her 40s, a mother of 3 teenage girls. Because it is the midpoint of the term, she decides to compose a brief reflection of her what she calls "her journey" in class so far. She writes:

I am being radicalized

When we did that unit on the beauty ideal, I felt like something changed in me. I remember going for a run one day and thinking, why am I doing this? Because I enjoy it or for some other reason? I hated to admit that I didn't really like running, but I did it because if I don't run, I can't live with myself. My body hatred really takes over. But I never asked why this was or

even why I hated my body in the first place. I haven't come to any conclusions, mind you, but I am asking these questions now and that feels pretty radical for a soccer mom from the suburbs. Thing is, I feel alone. My husband doesn't understand and my daughters spend more time working out and "self improving" than I do. In some ways, I liked life better when I didn't ask these tough questions.

Her sense of isolation is palpable and I feel some responsibility. Wasn't it *my* class that led her to question such fundamentals? She is looking for support, for allies, and yes, for answers. I know I can only provide the former. I sit uneasily, staring at her journal in my hands. Anzaldúa describes this phase of transformation "the crossing and the conversion, as one of claiming a new self definition, "when you begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming, not who you have been" (p. 556)...and, she adds, "you need the help of those who crossed before you" (p. 557).

MOMENT 3: NEW STORIES, NEW TRUTHS

Three-quarters through the term, we delve briefly into women and the criminal justice system. I show the 1993 film *Defending Our Lives* which features several of the infamous Framingham 8—women who were convicted and incarcerated for murdering the partners who abused them. They speak emotionally and graphically of their abusive histories. The film is powerful, painful. The room is silent when I turn on the lights. I ask the students to each supply their gut reaction, one by one. I hear: "I am horrified." "Thoroughly disgusted." "How can this happen? Where is justice?" The last student to speak asks: "Why do those women get themselves into those sit-

uations in the first place?” As I begin to formulate a sociological response, a student interrupts my thoughts and speaks:

Well. I know what you mean. At first, I was tempted to see these stories as the bad luck stories of a few stupid, weak women who should have left a long time ago. But I am realizing that domestic violence is more than a conflict between two people. It happens because we teach men that violence as a solution to our problems and we teach women that being in a relationship, any relationship, is better than NO relationship. And then our whole society just looks the other way when things get out of hand.

A new account is emerging. It does not resonate for everyone, but it is emerging nonetheless. Convenient, knee-jerk individual-level analysis is slowly eclipsed by a systemic understanding of social processes.

MOMENT 4: COMPLEXITY REVEALED

A few weeks later, we are discussing Cynthia Enloe’s (1995) “The Globetrotting Sneaker,” an exposé and analysis of women in transnational consumer goods production. The general consensus in the classroom seems to be that export processing zones (EPZs) are unequivocal sites of exploitation and Nike™, for one, must be held accountable for the miserable lives of the people who stitch their shoes. I find myself swept up in this damning indictment, even quietly congratulating myself that the students “get it.” Then a hand goes up—it’s the hand of a student who immigrated to the US from Mexico less than 10 years ago. She says:

I’ve never worked in a factory like the one we are talking about, but I

have worked—for years—in fields, picking fruits and vegetables. It was horrible work...But I had no choices, really. I tell you, I would have preferred a job with a roof over my head, out of the sun. And a chair. Maybe the works in those EPZs is bad, but try bending over all day in the hot sun. Or worse, try hunger.

We sit with an insider’s dilemma of measuring one dismal option against another dismal option and feeling caught. And because a brave student dared to speak, I realize that my own positionality, of privileged academic of the global North, had permitted me to adopt a wholly inadequate reductionist good v. evil analysis. The simple dualism is pierced and complicated and I am grateful. Consistent with Anzaldúa’s stages of transformation, we have arrived in another zone of *nepantla*—finding that when we “cast to the world what (we’ve) created and put (our) ideals into action, the contradictions explode in (our) face. (Our) story fails the reality test” (p. 567).

This incident produces another rupture, another moment of reckoning. And so the cycle begins again. The student who refuses to capitulate to oversimplification, refusing to see passivity and hollow victimization, thrusts each of us—students and professor together—into Anzaldúa’s zone of possibility. When we struggle, when we engage authentically, when we experience the deaths and the rebirths of knowledge transformed, we begin what Anzaldúa terms “spiritual activism.” A spiritual activist cannot be brainwashed because as long as one’s inner works and outer acts are aligned and integrated, as long as we are present with our realities and “tied to the truth of our soul” we are not indoctrinated. Rather, we are transformed. Spiritual Activism suspends the learner in a constant state of *nepantla* brought to a borderland

where realities live in constant tension. Indoctrination, as a disengagement from the self, as a surrender of thought and a denial of one's truth is antithetical to this work, to this state of being. As educators, we must affirm our commitment to welcoming the ruptures and exploring the depths of our shared transformations.

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