



Introduction

This Bridge We Are Building: “Inner Work, Public Acts”

Chris Bobel • Tim Sieber • Karen L. Suyemoto • Shirley Tang • Ann Torke

University of Massachusetts Boston

chris.bobel@umb.edu • tim.sieber@umb.edu • karen.suyemoto@umb.edu
shirley.tang@umb.edu • ann.torke@umb.edu

Abstract: The symposium for which this is an introduction arose like a flower out of soil usually not known for nourishing vibrant, critical intellectual reflections: routine university governance committee work. All authors have been co-members for two years of the Diversity Committee, of the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Sciences and Mathematics, at the University of Massachusetts Boston. While it is true that most of us share wider intellectual and programmatic collaborations outside this committee, it was genuinely the task of doing our committee work that gave impetus to this panel. For this symposium, we used as an inspiration and foundation Gloria Anzaldúa’s chapter “now let us shift...the path of *conocimiento*...inner work, public acts” in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002). Because our contributions to the symposium are so strongly based within the description of this path offered by Anzaldúa, we outline it in this introduction for those unfamiliar with this particular work. This will be followed by five individual essays written by Karen Suyemoto, Ann Torke, Tim Sieber, Chris Bobel and Shirley Tang, who will each engage with Anzaldúa notion of “the path of *conocimiento*.” The symposium of articles will end with a dialogue among us on some of the questions and issues that emerged from the symposium.

The symposium reported in the following pages arose like a flower out of soil usually not known for nourishing vibrant, critical intellectual reflections: routine university governance committee work. All authors have been co-members for two years of the Diversity Committee, of the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Sciences and Mathematics, at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The Committee’s main charge is to offer consultation, technical support, and review to faculty colleagues

preparing courses for proposed inclusion in the university’s official “Diversity” curriculum. While it is true that most of us share wider intellectual and programmatic collaborations outside this committee, it was genuinely the task of doing our committee work that gave impetus to this panel.

In our ongoing committee work, we naturally posed critical and theoretical questions for ourselves, such as: What is the nature of diversity? What is good teaching about diversity? What do we believe

Chris Bobel (Women’s Studies), Tim Sieber (Anthropology), Karen Suyemoto (Psychology Department and Asian American Studies Program), Shirley Tang (American Studies and Asian American Studies), and Ann Torke (Art) are faculty members at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Please see the individual articles in the symposium for further information about each author.

and do in our own pedagogical practice? What is the relation between our theoretical understandings of diversity, drawn from our respective disciplines and lines of personal research, and our bureaucratic work as committee members? We thus felt the need for more critical clarity as individuals and as a working collective within the university's faculty governance system, and thought that our engagement in public dialogue and intellectual exchange, through the format of an academic panel, would help us achieve this—and of course, help us do better committee work.

We decided to take the bold step of reaching for more coherence between the service, the teaching, and the research dimensions of our own lives as faculty members. All of us thought the conference theme of Gloria Anzaldúa's work offered an appropriate holistic framework for addressing such important, global questions. We were ably led in this direction by our committee's co-chair of Mission and Long Range Planning, Shirley Tang, and by Jorge Capetillo-Ponce, both a committee member and also one of the program co-chairs of the 2006 Social Theory Forum on Gloria Anzaldúa. We think we must be the first faculty governance committee in the 40-year history of our university ever to mount an academic panel at a scholarly conference, and we hope more colleagues will follow this path in the future.

For this article, we used as an inspiration and foundation Gloria Anzaldúa's chapter "now let us shift...the path of *conocimiento*...inner work, public acts" in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002). Because our contributions to this symposium are so strongly based within the description of this path offered by Anzaldúa, we outline it here for those unfamiliar with this particular work. This will be followed by five individual essays written by Karen Suyemoto, Ann Torke, Tim Sieber, Chris Bobel and Shirley Tang, who will each en-

gage with Anzaldúa notion of "the path of *conocimiento*." The symposium of articles will end with a dialogue among us on some of the questions and issues that emerged from the symposium.

"NOW LET US SHIFT...THE PATH OF CONOCIMIENTO...INNER WORK, PUBLIC ACTS"

In her chapter, Anzaldúa describes the "path of *conocimiento*," a connection between the personal and the public that integrates knowledge, emotion, spirituality, and action within awareness of both the personal and the political/sociostructural. Anzaldúa states: "Conocimiento derives from *cognoscera*, a Latin verb meaning 'to know' and is the Spanish word for knowledge and skill. I call *conocimiento* that aspect of consciousness urging you to act on the knowledge gained" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 577). But Anzaldúa makes it clear that *conocimiento* is not just about linking intellectual knowledge/understanding with skills/action. There is a deeply spiritual and emotional aspect to *conocimiento* and a political and transformative consciousness and actions associated with it:

Those carrying *conocimiento* refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge, and instead elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality. A form of spiritual inquiry, *conocimiento* is reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism...Breaking out of your mental and emotional prison and deepening the range of perception enables you to link inner reflection and vision—the mental, emotional, instinctive, spiritual, and subtle bodily awareness—with social, political action

and lived experiences to generate subversive knowledges.” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 541-542).

Anzaldúa (2002) discusses the process of developing and living *conocimiento*, a discussion that reflects her unparalleled ability to integrate and consider simultaneously the personal and the sociostructural/political, the intellectual and the emotional, the bodily and the spiritual, the individual and the group. She describes seven spaces or stages within this process: *el arrebató*, *nepantla*, the Coatlicue depths, the call to action, putting Coyolxauhqui together, the blow up, and shifting realities. Although Anzaldúa uses the language of “stages,” it is clear that this is not a linear model where one passes through each stage sequentially and “achieves” *conocimiento*. It is instead a continuous and iterative process, where the last space of “shifting realities” is in many ways a return to and re-creating (and re-meaning making) of *nepantla* and continuous *arrebatos*.

1. “*el arrebató...rupture, fragmentation...an ending, a beginning*”

[El] *arrebató*...jerks you from the familiar and safe terrain and catapults you into *nepantla*. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 544)

An *arrebató* is a fit of anger or passion, but for Anzaldúa it is much more. It is an unexpected disconnection with multiple possible sources. (Anzaldúa includes possibilities including actual earthquakes, physical attacks, conflicts with loved ones, interpersonal losses or illness, racism, sexism, or other types of marginalization.) It is a catalyst, a deeply emotional and spiritual moment of dissonance and disconnection from one’s established worldview and one’s established self-view: “with each *arrebato*, you

suffer un “*susto*,” a shock that knocks one of your souls out of your body, causing estrangement” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 547). *El arrebató* catalyzes the experience of *nepantla*.

2. “*nepantla—torn between ways*”

In this liminal, transitional space, suspended between shifts, you’re two people, split between before and after. *Nepantla*, where the outer boundaries of the mind’s inner life meet the outer world of reality, is a zone of possibility. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 544)

The word “*nepantla*” comes from the Aztec language and references the space between or in the middle, Anzaldúa’s “borderlands.” In the journey to *conocimiento*, *nepantla* is the space of seeing multiple, frequently contradictory, perspectives, having been torn from a comfortable, single, stable story by *el arrebató*.

3. “*the Coatlicue depths...desconocimiento and the cost of knowing*”

When overwhelmed by the chaos caused by living between stories, you break down, descend into the third space, the Coatlicue depths of despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 545)

In this third space, the exploration of multiple perspectives is imbued not only with conflict about those perspectives, but also with a process of self-awareness that can be deeply disturbing, as one encounters aspects of oneself one does not want to see, acknowledge, or integrate. Depression, fear, anxiety, despair, and anger can be overwhelming and there is temptation to turn away and deny possibilities and new realities, or to descend into the negative emo-

tions:

4. *“the call...el compromiso...the crossing and conversion”*

In the fourth space, a call to action pulls you out of your depression. You break free from your habitual coping strategies of escaping from realities you're reluctant to face, re-connect with spirit, and undergo a conversion. (Anzaldúa, 2002, 545)

In the fourth space, one begins in a process of rebirth. One sees the possibilities of change, of re-creation, of realizing the promise of nepantla, of being not what others want you to be but what you choose to create:

Nothing is fixed. The pulse of existence, the heart of the universe is fluid. Identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition, always in nepantla. Like the river downstream, you're not the same person you were upstream. You begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming, not who you have been. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 556)

5. *The fifth space, Coyolxauhqui*

The fifth space, Coyolxauhqui, is one of active transformation, resistance, re-creation both personal and social. Coyolxauhqui is one of the daughters of Coatlicue, who with her siblings attempted to kill her mother while Coatlicue was pregnant with Huitzilopçtli, the god of war (Anzaldúa, 2002; Wikipedia, 2006). Huitzilopçtli emerged fully formed and killed Coyolxauhqui and her siblings. Huitzilopçtli then threw Coyolxauhqui's head to the heavens, where it became the moon. Thus, like Coatlicue, there is in Coyolxauhqui also an

aspect of rebirth:

Coyolxauhqui is your symbol for both the process of emotional psychological dismemberment, splitting body/mind/spirit/soul, and the creative work of putting all the pieces together in a new form, a partially unconscious work done in the night by the light of the moon, a labor of re-visioning and re-membering. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 546)

The fifth space is a space of analysis where one examines and reflects upon the many “shoulds” and imposed stories that are received. Intellectual, emotional, and spiritual awarenences come together in this reflexive process that critically examines and deconstructs these imposed stories. Awareness and analysis unfold not only from the stance of personal well-being but also from an understanding of the structural and systemic power imbalances that support and maintain these imposed stories. New narratives become possible as one disentangles oneself from these impositions.

The work in the fifth space is an engagement with nepantla, a rejection of the boundaries and barriers imposed upon the self and between self and others. These boundaries come not only from the dominant culture but also from the “ethnic tribe,” which pushes people to isolate and remain within racial, ethnic, gendered and class boundaries. Engagement with nepantla reflects a rejection of those boundaries: “How can you step outside ethnic and other labels while cleaving to your root identity? Your identity has roots you share with all people and other beings” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 560). Anzaldúa reflects on how these new narratives encompass a wholeness of self and a connectedness of self to others that is not embraced by traditional academic stories with disciplinary boundaries. In this space, the aim is not

necessarily to create a new stable story: “You realize it’s the process that’s valuable and not the end product, not the new you, as that will change often throughout your life” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 562).

6. the blow up... a clash of realities

In the sixth space, you take your story out into the world, testing it. When you or the world fail to live up to your ideals, your edifice collapses like a house of cards, casting you into conflict with self and others in a war between realities. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 545)

In the sixth space, Anzaldúa describes the process of bringing new stories into contexts that have not yet been transformed. In this space, *conocimiento* means being, oneself, the bridge between perspectives that seem to be at odds and that create divisions. The clash of realities is between multiple others (individuals or groups) as well as between one’s new understandings and old realities. In many ways, this process of bringing one’s new stories out into the world embodies all the other spaces all over again, as an *arrebato* is experienced from this clash of realities and the resulting difficult emotions create temptations to withdraw. But again, there is a call to action and a recognition of the possibilities for transformation:

What takes a bashing is not so much you but the idea/picture of who you think you are, an illusion you’re hell-bent on protecting and preserving at all costs. You overlook the fact that your self-image and history (*autohistoria*) are not carved in stone but drawn on sand and subject to the winds. A threat to your identifications and interpretations of reality enrages your shadow-beast, who views the new

knowledge as an attack to your bodily integrity. And it is a death-threat—to the belief that posits the self as local and limited to a physical body, a body perceived as a container separating the self from other people and other forms of knowledge. New *conocimientos* (insights) threaten your sense of what’s “real” when its up against what’s “real” to the other. But it’s precisely this threat that triggers transformation. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 566)

7. Transformation and spiritual activism

In the seventh [space], the critical turning point of transformation, you shift realities, develop an ethical, compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference with self and between others, and find common ground by forming holistic alliances. You include these practices in your daily life, act on your vision—enacting spiritual activism. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 545)

In the seventh space, the path of *conocimiento* brings one to merging the outside and the inside, the other and the self/us, living in a space of connectionism. This space includes embracing the complexity of feeling multiple ways and empathizing with multiple views. And through this embracing and acceptance, and the release of investment in one’s own view as Truth, a balanced, neutral perception becomes possible and transformation unfolds. This is both an internal process as described above and an interpersonal process where one enacts the lessons of the journey in social and structural spaces: “Orienting yourself to the environment and your relationship to it

enables you to read and garner insight from whatever situation you find yourself in. This *conocimiento* gives you the flexibility to swing from your intense feelings to those of the other without being hijacked by either” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 569). In one’s activism, one “honors people’s otherness,” deconstructing barriers from that otherness and opening possibilities for the creation of allies and further connection.

However, Anzaldúa recognizes that not all people in all contexts can be connected, that connections are possible with other “boundary crossers,” “nepantleras,” and activists, but not with all people. And she also recognizes that there are times when one engaging in *conocimiento* may need to protect oneself: “sometimes you need to block the other from your body, mind, and soul. You need to ignore certain voices in order to respect yourself...It’s impossible to be open and respectful to all views and voices” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 573). So part of this seventh space is developing awareness of when to open and when to protect.

Anzaldúa makes it clear that *conocimiento* is a *process*. A process that continues and repeats, where *nepantla* is not only disruption but change itself:

You realize that ‘home’ is that bridge, the in-between place of *nepantla* and constant transition, the most unsafe of all spaces. You remove the old bridge from your back, and though afraid, allow diverse groups to collectively rebuild it, to buttress it with new steel plates, girders, cable bracing, and trusses. You distend this more inclusive *punte* to unknown corners—you don’t build bridges to safe and familiar territories, you have to risk making *mundo nuevo*, have to risk the uncertainty of change. And *nepantla* is the only space where change happens. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 574).

REFERENCES

- Anzaldúa, G. (1999). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Cotterell, A. (1997). “Coatlicue” In *A dictionary of world mythology*. Oxford University Press. [Electronic version: Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. Univ of Mass Boston, retrieved 18 May 2006. <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t73.e319>>]
- Wikipedia (2006). Retrieved 18 May 2006, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coatlicue>.