



Keeping the Path of Conocimiento Real and Grounded

Shirley Tang

University of Massachusetts Boston

shirley.tang@umb.edu

Abstract: When I prepared for my Fourth Year Review at UMass Boston about a year ago, I was reminded of all the inevitable changes in my role and responsibilities that had come with my transformation to be a teacher-scholar at an urban, public and research-intensive university. I wanted to emphasize in my own personal statement that nepantla had been (and still is) the only space where change happened(s). I drew heavily on Gloria Anzaldúa's work in writing my personal statement because it was Gloria's revolutionary language and far-sighted vision that had inspired and enabled me to think through the very contradictory context of academic politics. I did not know at the time that the organizers of the Social Theory Forum had in mind Gloria Anzaldúa for their conference. So when the STF announced its CFP several months later I was both surprised and excited, to the point that I took it as a mission to convince other members of the Diversity Subcommittee to engage with Anzaldúa's last published thoughts. It meant a lot to me, as I went through Fourth Year Review this past year, to know that there *is* a place for Anzaldúa at our university. On those nights when I sat awake with my eyes wide open, stressing over a review process that we were constantly told we had no control of, Anzaldúa's powerful words and arguments had given me the inner strength I needed to go on, to carry the bridge on my back, and to hold on to my center.

As I reflect on my program of research, teaching and service in the last three years at UMass Boston, I realize that there is more than one way of facilitating through "the path of *conocimiento*." Having listened very carefully to others on the Diversity Committee discuss their journeys to *conocimiento*, I also became aware that it is, indeed, the very

diversity of our work in knowledge production, given all our disciplinary strengths and combinations, that contribute to furthering the "urban mission" of our university. I have always felt that the most intellectually stimulating and challenging place to carry out my publicly-engaged work is not at the center of the dominant academic and public

Shirley Tang is Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies and American Studies at UMass Boston. Her teaching/research interests are: comparative race/ethnicity/culture; Asian immigrant/refugee community studies; urban cultural history; youth activist art; and HIV/AIDS risks in immigrant communities. Her recent publications include: "Learning to Build a Healthy Community: Youth Development for Street-Involved Cambodian American Women in Revere, Massachusetts;" "Community Development as Public Health/Public Health as Community Development: A Report on the HIV/AIDS Needs assessment in Lowell, Massachusetts;" and "An Assessment of Khmer American Community Needs in Lynn, Massachusetts." She has co-written the first national report on HIV/AIDS risks among Asian and Pacific Islander women, and is currently completing a book manuscript on the development of the Cambodian American community in Revere, Massachusetts, focusing on the role of and relationship between urban community development efforts, cultural practices and historical memory.

discourses but where the in-between space of nepantla and constant transformation is. For many of us who are always crossing disciplinary boundaries and connecting academia and wider publics, we know that nepantla is that bridge, the always-in-transition space, the place where different sides and multiple perspectives can be simultaneously seen and heard. There are concrete accomplishments and real promises in this place of transformation, and often, when we dwell in nepantla so much of the time it has almost become a bridge that we may call “home.”

It has been a very powerful and rewarding experience to be able to position myself in this nepantla space—in my program of historical research on race, (im)migration and community development located at the intersection of American Studies, ethnic studies, critical development studies and urban public history; in my teaching that emphasizes the integration of theory and practice; and through an unprecedented joint appointment in American Studies and Asian American Studies. But bridges, as Gloria Anzaldúa has cautioned, is also “the most unsafe of all spaces.” “You don’t build bridges to safe and familiar territories, you have to risk making mundo nuevo, have to risk the uncertainty of change,” she adds. During the years I worked at UMass Boston, I have mentored many undergraduate and graduate students and recruited five students from Revere and Dorchester where I previously worked as a community practitioner, while I have also watched even more people “drop out” of UMass Boston, or continue to struggle against overwhelmingly challenging and often unpredictable obstacles in their lives. At the end of the day, I couldn’t help but ask myself, What is a good teacher? During this same period, I devoted much of my energy conducting scholarly research, publishing commissioned reports and academic articles and participating in professional conferences, but my active scholarly engagement has also meant that I

was giving relatively much less time listening to the daily lived experience of people whom I have counted on most for productive dialogue about my research. I found myself often wondering about a second question that is also central to the unique story of UMass Boston, What is a good scholar?

When I prepared for my Fourth Year Review about a year ago, I was reminded of all the inevitable changes in my role and responsibilities that had come with my transformation to be a teacher-scholar at an urban, public and research-intensive university. I wanted to emphasize in my own personal statement that nepantla had been (and still is) the only space where change happened(s). I drew heavily on Gloria Anzaldúa’s work in writing my personal statement because it was Gloria’s revolutionary language and far-sighted vision that had inspired and enabled me to think through the very contradictory context of academic politics. I did not know at the time that the organizers of the Social Theory Forum had in mind Gloria Anzaldúa for their conference. So when the STF announced its CFP several months later I was both surprised and excited, to the point that I took it as a mission to convince other members of the Diversity Subcommittee to engage with Anzaldúa’s last published thoughts. It meant a lot to me, as I went through Fourth Year Review this past year, to know that there *is* a place for Anzaldúa at our university. On those nights when I sat awake with my eyes wide open, stressing over a review process that we were constantly told we had no control of, Anzaldúa’s powerful words and arguments had given me the inner strength I needed to go on, to carry the bridge on my back, and to hold on to my center.

Gloria, I can never thank you enough for having so carefully processed what it means to be negotiating many contradictions in life and for giving us a new language to begin a conversation with you and with each other about “inner work...public

acts.” I feel that I have just embarked on a new journey and I haven’t gone far enough to know if I would really call this bridge home, as you had decided to do with yours in your last book, but I have certainly gained clarity, over the past year, about my commitment to nepantla and to the path of conocimiento—for all the spiritual, emotional, political and intellectual depth, as well as the potential for social and cultural transformation, that you have helped me imagine.

The following is excerpted from my Fourth Year Review Personal Statement:

*We are ready for change.
Let us link hands and hearts
together find a path through the dark woods
step through the doorways between worlds
leaving huellas for others to follow,
build bridges, cross them with grace, and claim
these puentes our
'home'
si se puede, que asi sea, so be it, estamos listas,
vámonos.*

Now let us shift...

—Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* (2002)

In *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, published in 2002, writer, cultural activist and American Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award recipient Gloria Anzaldúa wrote, “Bridges are...passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries...Most of us dwell in nepantla so much of the time it’s become a sort of ‘home.’”

Nepantla, the space in-between, is a dynamic place of transformation that American studies and ethnic studies scholars have increasingly positioned themselves in. In his 2001 American Studies Association presidential address, George Sanchez reflected on the nature of this interface, and pointed to what George Lipsitz has referred to as “dangerous crossroads,” or, in Sanchez’ own words, “the crossing of disciplinary boundaries which...creates the intellectual excitement of American Studies.” He went on to emphasize that a significant border to cross in the post-911 era is the one that “separates the academic community from the wider public.” “American studies and ethnic studies have a long history of public engagement which should be celebrated and built upon,” he said. “Even in moments of difficulty, we need to encourage each other to persist in these interventions in public discourse, working closely with local communities to learn from them and transmit alternative ways of looking at the world based on our scholarly research and teaching.”

Sanchez’s call for boundary-crossing into the public discourse resonates well with Anzaldúa’s exploration of epistemologies, which stresses the importance of actively linking one’s “inner reflection and vision” with “social, political action and lived experiences to generate subversive knowledges”—or what she concluded as “the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts.” In translating the word conocimiento, she wrote, “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.”

Inspired by American studies and ethnic studies scholars’ commitment to public engagement, and building on the insights of Gloria Anzaldúa’s powerful metaphors about “knowing” and “acting,” I hope to show that my scholarship/research, teaching and service in the past three years

present a set of direct responses to the critical challenges and directions charted by reputable scholars and critics in my fields. At UMass Boston, my role as a teacher-scholar has taken on even more special meanings and dimensions. Our institutional obligation and responsibility to engage with urban places, people and issues, and their complex local and global connections, have transformed the traditional functions of the university—teaching, research, and service—and pushed for the multifaceted, integrated and innovative work that we do to contribute to furthering the “urban mission.” More than anything else, however, it is UMass Boston’s community of teacher-scholars that points to the progressive direction of this work.

The teacher-scholars at UMass Boston are also what Anzaldúa has called *las Nopantleras*: they move within and between different institutional structures, different disciplines, different cultures, and different publics, and use this movement to “facilitate passage between multiple worlds” and to create more inclusive, culturally responsive, and academically relevant learning communities. Indeed, the boundary-crossing, overlapping nature of this kind of publicly-engaged academic work has been a recurring topic in many major dialogues with my colleagues in the last few years, and is, in fact, clearly stated in the Memorandum of Understanding regarding my joint appointment in the American Studies Program and the Asian American Studies Program. But for me to sustain and make concrete meaning of that “movement” at the various intersections between teaching, research and service, I have mostly turned to the people and the communities to whom the fields of American studies and ethnic studies and my own university have made large and vital promises. I am offering the following example to highlight the interrelated, overlapping contexts underlying my program of research, teaching and service at UMass Boston in the past

three years.

In September 2003, as I planned for a vigil and healing ceremony on Revere Beach, I was meeting and working with community leaders and members who had long been sharing their knowledge and resources with me about urban history, and who had also taught me what really matters—on the ground—in “doing” research that focuses on ethnicity, (im)migration, and development. This ceremony brought together different generations of local residents in the Revere-Lynn-East Boston region, including a younger group of Khmer (Cambodian), Latino, black and white residents, as well as teachers, religious leaders, community organizers and activist artists in this multi-ethnic community. The healing ceremony was organized and attended by primarily young adults in the community, including almost two-third of all the Khmer American students attending UMass Boston, to collectively respond to the violence and loss after the shooting that caused the death of a Khmer American young man on Revere Beach. A four-sentence newspaper brief reported the killing and described the motive as gang member rivalries. But the victim was not a gang member, and those who knew him wanted his story to be told more fully and accurately.

Because of my grounding in American studies and ethnic studies, I decided to draw on my own scholarly research and invigorate my teaching to enable several critical actions to quickly follow, including developing a range of semester-long research projects for the classes with relevant content to directly respond to the crisis; convincing the *Boston Globe* to assign a reporter to do a new story; and providing the reporter the socio-historical analysis and different community-based perspectives based on my continuing research in local immigrant/refugee communities. The dominant public and academic discourse on community violence in urban neighborhoods places its emphasis on gangs and juvenile delinquency. But increasingly,

American studies and ethnic studies scholars are generating new evidence and developing new ways of understanding that challenge our pre-conceived notions about urban lives and environments.

The young man who was shot to death was Gift Chea, a Khmer American young man whom I had been recruiting to UMass Boston, and whose struggle and determination to attend and finish college reminds us of the many first-generation, immigrant/refugee, and working students at our urban, public university. Gift's mother is, in fact, a UMass Boston alumnus, and had been a bilingual teacher in Lowell for years until a 2002 statewide ballot initiative financed by California businessman, Ron Unz, successfully eliminated bilingual education in Massachusetts. Gift had just completed his G.E.D. and was planning to meet with me to talk about possible courses he might take in the future. Then suddenly, on a Friday night, he was shot to death by another Asian American man on Revere Beach. The tragic death of Gift brought confusion and guilt to a community consisting of astoundingly large proportions of young people, including some of our UMass Boston students, who asked themselves what they were going to do to "live," and whether the knowledge they were acquiring in educational institutions could lead to progress of any meaningful sense. At the healing vigil, they stood together as a community, trying to make meaning of their realities. Gift's friends told stories of how he had fostered enduring friendships with people from different backgrounds in a neighborhood struggling against lasting legacies of war, trauma, racism, poverty and the daily realities of language and cultural barriers. Others urged the community to recognize the historical connections between inter-ethnic violence and school failure in the 1990s and the violence against Asians associated with arsons, murder, car vandalism and racial harassment during the early years of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement throughout

the 1980s. Still others, the youngest generation of youth who showed up at the vigil with banners filled with protest drawings in hand, honored Gift's active intention to attend college while they expressed their anguish and anxiety over the prison as becoming the latest depot where urban youth of color are now thrown at alarming rates.

I reflect on this example to illustrate how I see my scholarly work and role in advancing and acting upon scholarly areas in ways that are directly and holistically integrated with critical intervention projects in our communities, especially those that are under-served and under-researched. Despite all the efforts to enable the reporter to excavate this wealth of knowledge embedded in the community, the second *Boston Globe* article still failed to capture the multilayered story of Gift's death. Nor did it offer any vision for change. Teacher-scholars, including myself, need to act more upon the primary mission of the academy—the advancement of knowledge—to support communities of struggle in uncovering their grassroots knowledge and in building their research capacity for long-term development. ...

My work aims at accomplishing these by explicitly and consistently linking research and teaching to community-centered initiatives that seek not only to open up systematic understandings of the historical and situated experiences of these groups, but also, perhaps more importantly, to engage directly with the real current struggles in these communities through developing and sustaining intellectual alliances with national and local organizations. In "facilitating passage between multiple worlds," my academic work communicates grassroots knowledge to new audiences, and brings to social struggles needed evidence, conceptual frameworks and analysis. My emphasis on the greater Boston area (especially Revere and Lynn) as a regional focus, moreover, effectively links local and global concerns, advancing the mission of a truly urban, public university.