



## *Nepantlera-Activism in the Transnational Moment* In Dialogue with Gloria Anzaldúa's Theorizing of Nepantla

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**Abstract:** Through this article I wish to stress the criticality of transnational encounters. I use the word "criticality" to underscore the pivotal role transnational experiences play in a globalized world, for they can frame and challenge international politics. When in transnational encounters the (mis)interpretations and (mis)understandings of "others" are not addressed, positive social transformation is pretty much negated. Most often, such limited encounters perpetuate the negative or positive stereotypes projected by the dominant western, Eurocentric ideology and thus help to maintain systems of power and privilege, i.e., an unjust status quo. In a search for solutions in what I see as a critical moment in transnational theorizing, I engage with the work of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, who offers a different approach to activism that can be effectively applied to transnational spaces.

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*Anecdote: An instructor once asked the international students in our class to talk about our earliest memories of gender-based discrimination. An unsettling proposition, no doubt! Despite feeling cornered and wanting to protest, when my turn came I talked about not feeling discriminated against within my family and how my parents were proud that they had daughters and no sons. (Note how my reply was anticipating and refuting what I thought my audience wanted to hear: the assumption that some "other" cultures have a strong "son preference.") After speaking I looked around the room. My head hurt because I had actually tried hard to find something so bizarre from my childhood that I could share with those present. But I couldn't come up with anything! Was I*

*trying not to disappoint my classmates? How locked-in was I by the stereotypes that persist about "other" cultures (nonwestern cultures) in the U.S. American classroom? Moreover, if cultural stereotypes and borders have been restrictive to me all my life, why would I want to draw on them?*

The US-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the third world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. (Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*)

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The epigraph is intended to emphasize the pain experienced within transnational<sup>1</sup> encounters or border crossings, which are common occurrences in a globalized world. Take, for example, the simplistic cross-cultural comparisons and insinuations that are attempted within transnational spaces, as in the case of the classroom that I have just described. The classroom, in this instance, represents a transnational space traversed by some of us while having to negotiate life in a multicultural society, i.e., the U.S. Coming from a third world context—a previously colonized country—and having to interact within a transnational milieu, I am surprised at the number of times I have been called to speak on behalf of the culture that I supposedly represent. In the ensuing interaction, being critically aware of my experiences as a “third world” person within the context of colonialism/post-colonialism, I walk the fine line between defending the cultures I grew up in against scrutiny in a transnational space or proceeding to represent them (based on my subjective experience and understanding of them), revealing their flaws and complexities. Despite being well-rehearsed with a response to stereotypical notions/questions about my “othered” cultures, this interaction is limiting, for it is framed by the dominant Euro-American worldview, which is both the starting point of the conversation and its context. Additionally, homogenous notions and misinterpretations of culture override this interaction from start to finish.

Through this article I wish to stress the criticality of transnational encounters. I use the word “criticality” to underscore the pivotal role transnational experiences play in a globalized world, for they can frame

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I use the word “transnational” to denote not only the overlapping or in-between spaces between nations but also the cross-cultural, border spaces between identities of race/ethnicity, class, gender, ability, and/or sexuality, inhabited by those who might have multiple affiliations.

and challenge international politics. When in transnational encounters the (mis)interpretations and (mis)understandings of “others” are not addressed, positive social transformation is pretty much negated. Most often, such limited encounters perpetuate the negative or positive stereotypes projected by the dominant western, Eurocentric ideology and thus help to maintain systems of power and privilege, i.e., an unjust status quo. In a search for solutions in what I see as a critical moment in transnational theorizing, I engage with the work of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, who offers a different approach to activism that can be effectively applied to transnational spaces.

Not only do the words from Anzaldúa in the epigraph graphically describe the trauma and conflict within border crossings, but they emphasize the tumultuous birth of a third culture—the border culture (a transnational space) which becomes a critical place for cross-cultural negotiation and engagement. Part of theorizing about transnational experiences has to do with the urgency to build community. Within the inclusionary theorizing of Anzaldúa, one that straddles many worlds, I have found home. How does a theorist like her situated in the U.S context, writing specifically in the Texas-Mexico borderlands, have such a wide audience? As depicted in the epigraph, Anzaldúa in her writing, without essentializing has the power to give us something, almost universally applicable and tangible.

In pinpointing how some misrepresentations of those seen as “other” occur in cross-cultural spaces, I do not intend to reiterate or reinforce traditional binaries as western/nonwestern, first world/third world, us/them, and self/other, where the left of the slash occupies a central position and the right, a marginal one. Instead, enacting a non-binary approach to resolving cross-cultural misunderstandings is an option I wish to explore. A non-binary stance encompasses what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls

“not one [perspective], not two” (22) either, but allows for many ways of seeing, of acting, and of knowing to simultaneously exist and complicate traditional binaries such as us/them, white/non-white, first world/third world, self/other, so that the rigid either/or position becomes transformed into a both/and<sup>2</sup> one. In this discussion, a non-binary approach would entail not only calling to question the dominant western ideologies that in their ethnocentrism misrepresent other worldviews, but also recognizing that some researchers from both western and nonwestern backgrounds are guilty of misrepresenting cultures. A non-binary approach is a relational approach that gives me as a writer the space to occupy liminality, to listen intently to all arguments, and to liberate myself from a typical binary approach that involves reacting to or launching a counter-attack based on my “third world” identity and experience. Instead, by taking a non-binary stand here, I am reminded to self-reflect, to recognize my interconnectedness with all “others,” and to accept the complicity of my many positions before assessing the conflicts that arise within transnational encounters.

While determining what a non-binary stance entails I turn to Anzaldúa who through her life and work has critically and strategically located herself between worlds: Between Mexicano culture, Anglo culture, and the spaces shared by people-of-all-colors; between Chicana feminism, women-of-color alliances, and dominant “white” feminism; between queer and straight; between the margins and center, acknowledging and deconstructing multiple identities all at once. Building on her definitions of liminality and the example she embodies as a “supreme border crosser” (or what she calls a “nepantlera”), I will proceed to attempt a new application of

Anzaldúa’s theories toward developing ideas for activism in the transnational moment.

### NEPANTLERA-ACTIVISM IN TRANSNATIONAL SPACES

Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s theories of nepantla and nepantlera offer a different approach to effectively occupying the transnational spaces that come into existence when borders are crossed, identities transgressed, and multiple realities experienced. Nepantla is a Nahuatl word claimed by Anzaldúa to represent places of “ambiguity, of change [,] liminal, in-between spaces” (*Interviews* 168), also referred to by her as the transition between worlds, and between differences of class, race, sexuality, and/or other identities. Her theorizing of nepantla is not limited to the confusion and the ambiguity that it denotes. Instead she sets it up as a pivotal place of agency and activism. In her words again, the experience of nepantla “also involve[s] creating your own meaning or *conocimientos*”<sup>3</sup> (*Interviews* 267). Thus, intrinsic to Anzaldúa’s definition of nepantla, is an activism that nepantleras—the writers, activists, and other agents of social change—might partake in while critically occupying this space. She defines nepantleras as,

The supreme border crossers [who] act as intermediaries between cultures and their various versions of reality and like the ancient chamanas, move between the worlds. They serve as agents of awakening, inspire and challenge others to deeper awareness, greater *conocimiento*, serve as reminders of each other’s search for wholeness

<sup>2</sup> Both/and thinking is a concept I borrow from Patricia Hill Collins who first coined the term. See Collins *Black Feminist Thought* for a clearer understanding of this concept.

<sup>3</sup> *Conocimiento* signifies an evolving/ changing consciousness. See Anzaldúa’s “now let us shift” for an in-depth analysis of the seven stages of *conocimientos*.

of being. ("Speaking Across the Divide" 78)

In advocating for new forms of activism in transnational spaces, I acknowledge Anzaldúa's unique contribution to cross-cultural theorizing, when she defines an "extensive level of agency" in nepantla and inspires us, the nepantleras, to take action from within the complexity of our varied positions and multiple contexts.

In the following pages I develop a nepantlera-activism in transnational spaces for those nepantleras who, through claiming agency and acknowledging constantly shifting identities, might purposefully situate themselves in the transnational, in-between spaces and work toward transforming transnational, cross-cultural politics. It is an activism for those of us who do not have only one "stand point" but many, who occupy multiple spaces, and choose to inhabit these spaces critically. A nepantlera-activism requires that we ground ourselves in nepantla and—by claiming it as our reality—position ourselves to initiate transnational dialogue. Our purpose is to find commonalities with like-minded others within this space, and by discovering a sense of relationality that is otherwise lacking in global politics, build alliances. Consequently, nepantla becomes transformed into a space/state wherein a new theorizing of difference and meaningful cross-cultural dialogue can begin.

Drawing on Anzaldúa's theory of nepantla I explore the immense possibilities for transforming transnational spaces and the unique contribution nepantleras have and continue to make. By suggesting some acts that a nepantlera-activism might encompass, I claim a new theorizing of activism in transnational spaces. In this article, I envision a nepantlera-activism through four specific nepantlera-acts that I propose can lead to more ethical and sincere transnational interactions. They are: 1) seeing through the eyes of the "other;" 2)

(re)claiming new "guiding myths" for our times; 3) risking the personal, political, and spiritual; and 4) making alliances.

### **ACT 1: SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF THE "OTHER"**

*Reflection: While revisiting the story I started out with and analyzing it, I detect the existence of clear boundaries and barriers within that particular classroom situation, between those singled out (the international students) and the audience (U.S American students). Lines had been drawn between those who "must have" experienced some form of gender-based discrimination in their lives (and cultures) and those whose unique experiences were subsumed under "U.S American culture." Two harmful universals, with many discrepancies and assumptions. A binary had been reinforced.*

One has to leave the permanent boundaries of a fixed self, literally "leave" oneself and see oneself through the eyes of the Other. (Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "En rapport, In Opposition")

"Seeing through the eyes of the other," according to Anzaldúa, means using a different lens—a political act/choice that challenges one to "see" (analyze) through multiple/"other" lenses/perspectives. Those nepantleras who critically ground themselves in the nepantla/transnational moment are conscious of the need to break down the barriers between self and other created by conventional identity politics. Conventional identity politics typically operate on the premise that identity markers such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, ability, and so forth are the most common roots of all alliances. Consequently, these alliances themselves are formed in opposition to those outside the identity group. The political act of "seeing through the eyes of the other" therefore becomes

critical in transforming identity politics. Intertwined with this act is the concept of relationality. While defining relationality in the context of multicultural feminism Ella Shohat says that,

[A] relational feminist approach demands moving beyond nation-bound and discipline-bound teaching, curating, and organizing. *In relation* [does not mean that] positionings are harmoniously identical, [but] envision[s] ways in which diverse histories and cultures parallel, intersect, and allegorize one another. (1, 7, her emphasis)

As Shohat suggests, a quest for relationality across difference requires the openness and willingness to transgress boundaries and to be able to allow for varying moments of difference and commonality, within the complexity of the in-between. AnaLouise Keating correlates “seeing through the eyes of the other” with a “transformational identity politics, or the construction of differentially situated subjectivities that, deployed tactically, deconstruct self/other dichotomies from within” (“Transformational Identity Politics” 62). In other words, through a transformational identity politics one may be able to deconstruct a binary sense of existence, by conscious and deliberate acts of making visible multiple realities and simultaneous, contradictory standpoints, that can complicate simplistic notions of difference, and the apparent exclusivity of “self” from “other.” Therefore the act of “seeing through the eyes of the other” culminates in a non-binary definition of self derived from multiple affiliations, allowing for ambiguity, and developed in relationship with “other.”

This nepantlera-act entails complicating conventional identity politics by “assuming complex speaking positions” (Keating, “Transforming Identity Politics” 64). Unlike conventional identity politics

where one might speak from a single position and one’s loyalties are hinged on a fixed group identity, this nepantlera-act can help us recognize our many, often selectively ignored and less-prioritized locations. Chandra Mohanty performs this act by simultaneously speaking as a woman of South-Asian origin, a woman of color in the US, and through her “cross-race” and “cross-class” activism, as a person connected to struggles all over the world. With regard to her many shifting locations she declares, “I no longer simply live *under the gaze of Western eyes*. I also live inside it and negotiate it everyday”<sup>4</sup> (*Feminism Without Borders* 251, my emphasis). With this emphatic statement she takes on a non-binary position and dismisses all predictions of where her loyalties might lie. Instead of passively reacting to existing political agendas, Mohanty chooses to create a new political stance. At the same time, she is aware of and negotiates the multiple contradictory spaces in her own life, even her own implicatedness in the status quo. Keating proposes that if we are to create bonds across differences we need to “go beyond self/other dichotomies and develop flexible forms of intersubjective dialogue enabling people of all genders, colors, classes, and sexual experiences to speak with—rather than for—each other” (“Transformational Identity Politics” 61). She points out that from the way in which Anzaldúa makes “tactical shifts” between the many worlds she inhabits, and by being a “non-binary subject,” Anzaldúa as a nepantlera offers a way to challenge and transform identity politics.

Repositioning the self to “see through

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<sup>4</sup> This quote from Mohanty revisits the title of her classic essay “Under Western Eyes” from the late 1980s, wherein she critically analyzes some western scholarship’s myopic view of women in “other” (nonwestern) cultures. I wish to point out the open stance that Mohanty takes here, making a critical shift away from the western/nonwestern binary that “Under Western Eyes” addresses.

the eyes of the other” requires a redefinition of the us/them binary (what Anzaldúa refers to as “nos/otras”). In-between nos/otras or us/them is nepantla, the transnational, and the liminal space from which the act of “seeing through the eyes of the other” can be enacted. It must be noted that the “other” in conventional identity politics not only represents difference but also often translates into inferiority—“lesser than self.” As a result, in identity politics difference as a marker used to symbolize “lesser than” serves to cement the self/other binary by constructing an isolated, insular “self” and supporting all moves towards “self” aggrandizement. Keating cautions us that when we assume that identities such as gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are “permanent unchanging attributes[, we are affirming a] conception of autonomous, self-contained identities” (“Transformational Identity Politics” 62) that in reality do not exist. Instead, as nepantleras it becomes critical that we acknowledge the reality of our interconnected lives. By so doing we begin to see through the apparent exclusiveness of categories such as race/ethnicity, gender, sex, or class, policed by the state or the groups themselves, and made to appear as static, monolithic, homogenous, and unchanging.

In reality, separatism only allows us to find a false sense of safety by clinging to categories, creating new barriers between self and “other.” A separatist ideology merely helps postpone any recognition of our global connectedness. In the globalized world of the present, as Anzaldúa explains it, “we live in each other’s pockets[,] depend on exchange of goods, ideas, and information. We can never completely isolate each group from other groups” (*Interviews* 186). But Anzaldúa also admits that a “nosotras” (which in Spanish means “us”), without the slash, has not come into existence as yet. Nevertheless, she disrupts the us/them binary by asserting that “we are mutually complicitous [and therefore] si-

multaneously insider/outsider” (*Interviews* 254). In other words, by the act of “seeing through the eyes of the other” she is calling us to subvert nos/otras and challenge assumptions of “purity” when categories are presented as homogenous or mutually exclusive.

The idea of “seeing through the eyes of the other” is powerful when it implies that the other is in me. In other words, identifying that the concept of “other” and act of “othering” originate from within the self becomes critical. Definitions of an individualized self, separate and unique can lead to strong beliefs of what is “not self” or “not I,” which then can be used to define “other.” Here we foreclose the possibility of being transformed by another’s experience and perception of reality. Hence locating the other within the self is a step toward conducting cross-cultural research with self-reflexivity, which includes self-reflection and a critical assessment of one’s positionality, experiences, and perceptions, vis-à-vis those of others. The emphasis needs to be on seeing identity as relational rather than as separate or exclusive.

Issues of positionality or different epistemological positions in transnational mediations can be reconciled with the idea that by “seeing through the eyes of the other” we are speaking simultaneously from different positions or locations that influence what we see, based on what we know. But what we know is not static because the mediation of many positions and the openness to “other” perspectives reflects an evolving epistemology and a growing consciousness. Lata Mani makes us aware of “how moving between different configurations of meaning and power can prompt different modes of knowing” (367). Hence she asserts that theorizing within the transnational space needs to go beyond traditionally dualistic conceptions of agency as either “consent” or “coercion” (367). In other words, agency need not be theorized through a binary vision that defines it as

agreement or disagreement/resistance or force, but instead needs to be understood within the context of a complex historical legacy and the contradictory perspectives that the transnational space allows for. I find it especially important when Mani writes that “theory is a *when* not a *what*, [and] we should also add the notion of a *where*” (377) to it.

To this notion that positionality/subjectivity is crucial while theorizing in the transnational space, I make an addition based on my understanding of nepantla. I propose that there will be many *wheres* or multiple locations when nepantleras take on non-binary positions. As Keating explains it, “[When] we see (ourselves) through the eyes of the other, we recognize the others in ourselves and ourselves in the others. We, too, enter threshold spaces where transcultural identifications can occur” (“Transformational Identity Politics” 92).

## **ACT 2: (RE)CLAIMING NEW “GUIDING MYTHS” FOR OUR TIMES**

*Reflection: My experience in the classroom makes me ask, “Who has the power to name or qualify my experiences?” In wanting to clarify my position, I wish that I had said to my peers, “Allow me to reclaim my story, complicate the details, and share it with you when I’m ready.” However, while reclaiming the power to narrate my experiences, I need to be conscious of my internalization of the dominant paradigm and the dominant myths about my “otherness.” Besides, a rewritten or retold story is still tainted by the reality of unjust power relations in the status quo. Is there room for ambiguity?*

Imagination, a function of the soul, has the capacity to extend us beyond the confines of our skin, situation, and condition so we can choose our responses. It enables us to reimagine our lives, rewrite the

self, and create guiding myths for our times. (Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces”)

The making and (re)claiming of myths can function as a powerful means toward challenging the theories about the “other” that dominate transnational/nepantla spaces. Nepantleras need to recognize the harmfulness of stories/narratives/myths that define and circumscribe the dominant version of history, reality, and blueprints for the future. Take for example the damaging story that justifies the genocide perpetrated by European colonizers on Native American populations, euphemistically known as the “discovery” of America. In its telling, this story exonerates the colonizer (the teller) of the indiscriminate killing of native populations. This tale of “discovery” serves as the dominant myth created from a Eurocentric perspective, to perpetuate the idea that Native American culture did not have the ability to withstand the onslaught of a “more civilized” one. It supports the idea that colonization was inevitable. With so many narratives of this nature, it is evident that theorizing in nepantla requires a simultaneous learning/unlearning/deconstructing/constructing that can lead us toward a new theorizing in the present, a creation of new myths, a reclaiming of suppressed oral histories and indigenous narratives. When we retell the past we reclaim our present and future. In other words, through myth-making we reclaim, reshape, and validate our histories, cultures, worldviews, and realities by historicizing and contextualizing old and new theory.

By claiming new myths and retelling our herstories and histories as nepantleras, we reject some western, Euro-American scholarship that functions today from within a Eurocentric frame of reference. As suggested in the introduction to this article, some Eurocentric scholarship in its con-

struction of third world realities—what Anzaldúa calls “writing the other”—through an ethnocentric lens, (mis)interprets and (mis)represents cultural practices. Wary of some western-led scholarship’s imperialism nepantleras through their writing replace the dominant narratives by documenting the oral histories that were lost during colonial invasions. They replace the single monolithic story of the “winners” with counter narratives of the “losers” and patriarchal myths with pre-colonization women’s myths.

Intrinsic to enacting the nepantlera-act of “(re)claiming new guiding myths” is confronting the dominant ways/thinking that we have internalized—ways and perspectives that we are so unaware of but must, consciously, identify and name. Thus it is critical for those nepantleras who locate themselves in the academy to recognize the limits and boundaries of thinking set by intellectuals who police the borders of research. Understanding that most Eurocentric theory has been used to control “others” and maintain and sustain unequal power relations, nepantleras realize that their adherence to the academy’s rules and regulations can implicate them in the status quo. While taking a counterstance to the dominant mainstream ideology by rewriting the discourse, Anzaldúa reminds nepantleras to be wary of the racism that they have internalized and the images and ideologies that have been “dump[ed]” (“Bridge, Drawbridge...” 226) on them during their schooling in the dominant worldview. While I borrow the word “dump” from Anzaldúa, I recognize the powerful ways in which the ideology of the dominant group after being dumped upon the “other” percolates into their hearts, altering their view of themselves and reality. Anzaldúa reminds nepantleras who are simultaneously deconstructing theories and constructing new ones, that “[w]hen we the objects, become the subjects, and look at and analyze our own experiences, a danger

arises that we may look through the master’s gaze, speak through his tongue, use his methodology” (“Haciendo caras” xxiii). Recognizing our own embeddedness in the “master’s” ways and that our thinking is ingrained with the same ideologies we seek to resist, becomes a move toward extricating ourselves from the quagmire of (mis)information and harmful myths under which we have been buried for too long.

Myth-making is an integral part of this act. Anzaldúa illustrates the myth-making process when she describes it as “going back to the cultural terms such as *conocimiento* and the goddesses like Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, Coatlicue, and others [,] that gives [her] a sense of being a person with pride in [her] culture—not in all of [her] culture but in some of it” (*Interviews* 218). She rewrites the myths that were originally written from patriarchal/racist/imperialist perspectives and in doing so indulges in rewriting her culture. *Borderlands/La Frontera* is an example of how Anzaldúa reclaims parts of her history and her people’s myths that were lost or partially destroyed by colonization by “writing the self.”<sup>5</sup> *Borderlands/La Frontera* represents a simultaneous reclaiming/claiming/creating of the past while deconstructing the dominant hegemonic narrative of history, by combining the imaginal with suppressed/forgotten oral histories. About the process of recovering aspects of “our root cultures,” Anzaldúa writes, “[W]e ‘recover’ our ancient identity, digging it out like dark clay, pressing it to our current identity, molding past and present, inner and outer” (“En rapport” 147). Through this process of recovering the “ethnic self,” Anzaldúa assures us that we can regain our self-respect; through the recovery and the (re)claiming of the past emerge new constructions of the self for the present and future, a combina-

<sup>5</sup> “Writing the self,” what Anzaldúa calls “autohistoria-teora,” according to Sonia Saldívar-Hull “presents history as a serpentine cycle rather than linear narrative” (2).



tion of old and new.

The process of “(re)claiming new guiding myths” requires that we combine different ideologies/belief systems of the past with those of the present and reinterpret and resolve misunderstandings between them. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal make a related point, asserting that “we require affiliative projects based on syncretic methodologies” (361) in order to enact social change. The authors stress that sustaining on-going debates between established ideologies such as the Marxist, poststructuralist and feminist ideologies are critical to elicit the emergence of new ideologies. These projects also need to be global in character in order to respond to transnational conditions (361). Calling for a resolution of misunderstandings between different ideologies, they insist that “we need to pay more attention to complex and linked inequalities and to the emergence of new ideologies and new retrenchments” (361). I believe that ideologies from different schools of thought can be combined or reconciled to frame a new politics that can be effective in the transnational/nepantla/transitional spaces between the old and the new.<sup>6</sup>

### ACT 3: RISKING THE PERSONAL, POLITICAL, AND SPIRITUAL

*Reflection: In the anecdote that this article began with, one wonders what would have*

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<sup>6</sup> By putting the dismembered body of “Coyolxauhqui [back] together,” Anzaldúa invites us to work toward a new theorizing that will combine parts of the old with the new, to create a different (new) whole. The Aztec story of Coyolxauhqui, whose body was mutilated by her brother and then scattered, has been used by Anzaldúa to depict how we too have been split, divided, and therefore disempowered. According to Keating, “[Anzaldúa] is a modern-day Coyolxauhqui, a writer-warrior who employs language to ‘put us back together again,’ [by] seiz[ing] the existing myths...and rewrit[ing] them” (*Risking the Personal* 11-12).

*happened had I refused to speak in class that day? Instead, had I merely gone with the flow? Or did I partially rock the boat by sharing an experience that didn’t fit the stereotype? Maybe I could have risked more.*

You distend this more inclusive puente 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. (Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “now let us shift”)

Being able to critically occupy the nepantla/transnational moment requires a willingness to take risks. We are precariously poised in nepantla, “exiting the old worldview [but without having] entered or created new ones to replace it” (Keating, “Forging El Mundo Zurdo” 529). The risk here lies in the uncertainty of in-betweenness and the creativity that must transform it. The vulnerability that comes with ambiguity or liminality can be overwhelming. Nepantleras who do not fit into the status quo—one that maintains neat categories and sustains binaries—have to risk the personal, political, and spiritual in order to imagine a different reality. The danger of occupying the in-between space of nepantla lies not only in being seen as a threat to the dominant discourse but also as being seen as a threat to one’s own cultural group. By rejecting and criticizing the hierarchical ways (racist and patriarchal beliefs) that circulate among one’s own, the possibility of being viewed as subversive by family or peers is immanent. As Anzaldúa notes in a discussion of her decision to critique her Mexicano upbringing: “In exposing my family and my culture I’m [seen as] betraying it and them” (*Interviews* 227). Stepping out of social/cultural/gender roles by refusing to fit in and by choosing not to be complacent, nepantleras risk being attacked, wounded, or even killed. As I explain later in more detail, risking the

personal, political, and spiritual implies that we not fragment the self but acknowledge all aspects of it, mind, body, and spirit, so that inner change might inform a public activism.

The realization dawns upon nepantleras who risk subverting the categories that those who resist change might resist them, the nepantleras, as well. By rejecting labels and yet finding non-binary ways of identifying, nepantleras are “threats” to the dominant/accepted ways of existence. Safe spaces become rare while liminality becomes a way of life. What was once considered home too can be unsafe and dangerous. “Home” no longer signifies a comforting word or place of solace. In fact, nepantleras who question the existence of categories/homes rather than taking comfort in them run the risk of being ostracized or driven out. Exposing the falsities and fears within categories can be dangerous, for we jolt others who share/claim this space out of their own complacency. For example, in the transnational space critiquing one’s country or decrying what one’s nation state does in the name of nationalism can be viewed as unpatriotic. Yet as a nepantlera I find myself consciously being disloyal to categories such as “nation” or “culture” in my rejection of the restrictiveness of national borders or cultural norms. Through my activism I have worked with other seemingly “unpatriotic” people to identify and protest against state-sponsored acts of terror and my government’s impingement on people’s human rights. National borders are suffocating to me when they seek to contain and constrict me from making alliances across them. It might be too idealistic to imagine a nation-less world in the present, but like Mohanty says, “our minds must be ready to move as capital is” (*Feminism Without Borders* 251) and risk imagining a different, possibly more integrated world.

The “fear of being different” prevents us from going against the grain (Anzaldúa,

*Interviews* 264) and deters the taking of risks. This fear causes us to fragment the self, revealing what we think might be acceptable to others and keeping the contradictory, subversive side hidden. Anzaldúa in her writing has risked the personal, political, and spiritual by “disclos[ing] intimate details, beliefs, and emotions” (Keating, “Risking the Personal” 2). Despite knowing that she runs the risk of being dismissed, Anzaldúa claims a politics wherein “spiritual realities,” “imaginal realities,” and the “inner subjective life” are all incorporated. She neither fragments the mind-body-spirit connection nor prioritizes one over the other. Unlike most political activists/academics who often fail to acknowledge spirituality or the spiritual commitment/component intrinsic to working for change, Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism supports and sustains her political vision. She does not isolate “the metaphysical components of life” from “politics, sexuality, writing, and daily living” (Keating, “Risking the Personal” 8). Nepantleras, who adopt a spiritual activism in transnational spaces by connecting the spiritual with the personal and the political, cannot separate political-spiritual activism from personal change. Personal and political change are so intertwined that they occur simultaneously (“inner works—public acts”). I rely on Keating’s definition of an unfragmented self, when she describes the simultaneity and synergistic manner in which change on the inside spirals out into the political. She envisions change as “a simultaneous two-way movement, that by changing ourselves (by changing myself), we/I can change the world” (“Forging El Mundo Zurdo” 522).

Fully aware of the betrayal and deadlocks and setbacks, the fractures, the likelihood of finding new “others” in nepantla, it becomes imperative that we view alliance making as a process and the taking of risks as an aspect intrinsic to it. Based on the writings of women-of-color in *This Bridge Called My Back* and *this bridge we call home*,

one realizes that it is a risk to be open to “others” or to confront our own internalized racism and our hesitation to emerge from our “own” groups. Alliance building becomes a risk, for we become vulnerable to the possibility of being hurt again. Connecting with other nepantleras within the transcultural space, as Anzaldúa points out, requires that we risk being allies. She cautions us that, as an ally one runs the risk of facing betrayal: a painful experience which lowers the self esteem of the one betrayed and can be “politically deadening” and “disempowering” (Interviews 207). Therefore I echo Anzaldúa’s warning that while we make alliances “we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy [and] risk being wounded” (“(Un)natural Bridges” 3).

#### ACT 4: MAKING ALLIANCES

*Reflection: Re-living the anecdote narrated at the start of the article, one begins to reflect on the impossibility of alliance making when the situation lacks intersubjectivity. How can someone theorize about his/her “othered,” invisible, unrecognizable experiences without slipping into some kind of dualistic mode? These thoughts revert to Act 1: “Seeing through the eyes of the ‘other,’” and the idea of relationality. As a subject, by claiming voice and agency, I can refuse to converse unless on an equal footing with my listeners.*

Alliances are made between people who are different but who have a similar conscience. (Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar or Island”)

Making alliances in transnational spaces rests on an acknowledgement of “relational identities.” The idea of relationality as emphasized in Act 1, is an affirmation of our intertwined lives, our complicity in systems of oppression, and the possible

culmination of a common resistance. In such situations, alliance building becomes inevitable. By declaring that “[t]o be human is to be in relationship” (Interviews 206), Anzaldúa re-iterates that separatism is a myth and definitions of self can only be arrived at in relationship with “others.” She maintains that “our interconnectedness is an unvoiced category of identity” while separatism in any form needs to be recognized as an “illusion” (“Forward 2001” xxxvii). Using relationality as a background, Anzaldúa defines what it means for nepantleras to build alliances and spearhead solidarity movements through a relational approach. According to Keating, with a relational approach, Anzaldúa

acknowledges that inhabitants of El Mundo Zurdo[, a left-handed world,] are not alike; their specific oppressions, solutions, and beliefs are different, yet she insists that these different affinities are not opposed to each other. Joined by their rejection of the status quo and their so-called deviation from the dominant culture, inhabitants of El Mundo Zurdo use their sense of difference to forge new alliances.” (“Forging El Mundo Zurdo” 520)

This vision of El Mundo Zurdo—a space for all queers, for those who do not fit in—can be enacted in transnational/nepantla spaces where like-minded “others” can build, in solidarity with each other, lasting alliances. This visionary place can be created not on the margins or at the center but in the nepantla moments of multiple identities and contradictory standpoints. Like Anzaldúa, other nepantleras can consciously make connections in liminal spaces. In her work she identifies as a mediator (*Borderlands* 107), one who is “tired of borders,” who seeks to “gather the tribe” by being a “channel” and a “connector” (Interviews 119-120).

The “connectionist faculty” that reflects an interconnectedness among all beings can be useful in the process of alliance making. This faculty, defined by Anzaldúa as “the deep common ground and interwoven kinship among all things and people” (“now let us shift” 567-68), is one that she deems critical to alliance making. For this faculty to flourish, Anzaldúa recommends “less-structured thoughts,” “less-rigid categorizations,” and “thinner boundaries” so that “[w]here before we saw separateness, differences, and polarities, our connectionist sense of spirit recognizes nurturance and reciprocity and encourages alliances” (“now let us shift” 568). In other words, the adoption of a connectionist faculty or perspective can transport us to a transformative place of engagement beyond self/other dichotomies: a more relational space. In fact, the “connectionist faculty” as a different mode of perception, circles back to Act 1, “seeing through the eyes of the other.” By honing this faculty nepantleras can work toward more inclusive, open interactions between groups. Therefore by “sitting face-to-face with all parties, [nepantleras] identify common bonds, name reciprocities and connections, and finally draft a mutually agreeable contract” (Anzaldúa “now let us shift” 567). Alliance making is a deliberate act that requires openness that comes with a commitment to make connections, and listening and caring that require patience and hopefulness.

The connectionist faculty helps in making alliances by identifying “common grounds” for interactions in transnational spaces. Coalition building based on finding common ground can be a way of ensuring tangible alliances. Coalitions are time-bound and a convenient way of recognizing and working toward common goals without having to collapse differences or resolve them. Patricia Hill Collins’ idea of building “coalitions around common causes” is feasible, considering the multiplicity of issues and oppressive situations that

need to be addressed within transnational spaces.<sup>7</sup> By “sharing a common cause [and] building effective coalitions,” Collins hopes that we might “struggle to hear one another [by] developing empathy for each other’s points of view” (77). The idea of coalition building also amounts to not being naïvely optimistic about the alliance’s success, but becoming alert to the dangers and vulnerabilities one might be exposed to as a member/initiator of a coalition. With this awareness comes the ability to disassociate from people who have designs to subvert the group for their own personal gain, or those who might be disrespectful and try to dominate others. Nepantleras who make alliances are wary of the appropriation and tokenism that have corrupted notions of sisterhood, particularly in the mainstream women’s movement in the past. Instead they are conscious that sisterhood can not be a given but needs to be forged one relationship at a time.

Common negative, oppressive experiences can be a starting place for alliance making but not an end in themselves. Connecting with others based on similar painful experiences requires that we re-live the pain every time we share the experience, and that we re-open the wounds as we enact our collective resistance. This in turn leaves very little room for healing or regeneration. Yet, most alliances rely on what Anzaldúa calls “connecting through the wounds.” In other words, people tend to relate with one another based on the ability to identify with common oppressions or after having experienced similar oppressive trends. Thus she maintains that “besides love, pain might open closed passage[s] when] reaching through the wound to con-

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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of coalition building see Anzaldúa’s “Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, Island.” Also see Mohanty’s “Sisterhood, Coalition, and the Politics of Experience” in *Feminism Without Borders*, and Nira Yuval-Davis’s “Ethnicity, Gender Relations and Multiculturalism.”

nect" (Anzaldúa "now let us shift" 71). That pain can "trigger compassion" and make us "vulnerable" and "available" to others is a real possibility to Anzaldúa. Considering that most nepantleras are catapulted into in-betweenness or nepantla by painful experiences, I too recognize "connecting through the wounds" as a reality. However, excessive grieving or what Anzaldúa calls "excessive dwelling on your wounds" can lead to "desconocimientos" ("now let us shift" 572).<sup>8</sup>

In other words, basing our alliances on a shared victim-hood can prove to be disempowering in the long run.

Another adverse consequence of "connecting through the wounds" is the possibility that our alliance might become exclusive to our pain, where the boundaries of the group may be open only to those who have this same sense of woundedness. Becoming more and more restrictive and limiting, what Shohat calls "common oppression sisterhood" (35), cannot be the only foundation on which alliances are built. Thus, an acknowledgement of just victimhood while denying the strengths of survival and resistance can be detrimental to the project of social change.

Empathy also forms a critical part of the act of making alliances, for it affirms the conscious act of walking in others' shoes or incorporating different perspectives. This idea connects back to the act of "seeing through the eyes of the 'other.'" With empathy comes healing; and in the words of Anzaldúa, "Becoming allies with people is really about helping each other heal" (*Interviews* 199). And yet she warns of a time when no "common ground" might exist and all we have are "shifting plots" ("Bridge, Drawbridge..." 214), of a time when the contradictions and complexity

within coalitions might require that we realign ourselves. Therefore, effective bridging almost goes hand-in-hand with effective strategizing. The act of "making alliances" becomes a pendulous oscillation between, "Knowing when to close ranks to those outside our home, group, community, nation—and when to keep the gates open" (Anzaldúa "(Un)natural bridges" 3), when to become a "bridge," "drawbridge," "sandbar," or "island." Bridging therefore does not mean never retreating, but implies being able to strategically mediate between varying degrees of engagement in coalitions.

The idea of solidarity as an evolving strategy, one that is not fixed but open to the ambiguity and multiplicity of nepantla/transnational spaces, can be the root of meaningful dialoging and alliance-building across difference. According to Anzaldúa, the differentiation between "unity" and "solidarity" is necessary to break down simplistic notions of sisterhood. Unity implies homogeneity and ignores differences by collapsing them (Anzaldúa, *Interviews* 208). Assumptions of unity can therefore be reductive and exclusive. For example, the concept of a universal sisterhood assumes sameness. It can also be an assertion of power by the person/s who call/s for it, who has the power to name the relationship or confer "sister" status upon others. The call for universal sisterhood is often not a product of a mutually engaged, dialogic process; It is often assumed before it is forged. On the other hand, solidarity as explained by Anzaldúa gives room for flexibility and willingness on the part of nepantleras to shift positions, change positions, and reposition the self within individual and collective identities ("Bridge, Drawbridge..." 216). According to Mohanty, "relations of mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests, anchor the idea of feminist solidarity" (*Feminism Without Borders* 242). The idea of solidarity moves away from universal truths of oneness and

<sup>8</sup> "Desconocimientos" according to Anzaldúa is a "shift in consciousness" ("now let us shift" 571), that signifies a downward spiral or a setback that can halt our progress on the path of conocimiento.

essentialisms of sisterhood. Instead, this idea provides nepantleras with the space to explore different modes of alliance making, not necessarily based on identity categories such as race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, or class. Differences and commonalities are expressed simultaneously, not as fixed categories but as changing markers constantly acted on by contemporary politics. Once again with a rejection of unity or singular unifying themes, as nepantleras we affirm multiple positions, complex standpoints, and the possibility of making effective, strategic alliances.

## CONCLUSION

In the globalized world of the present, to be concerned with issues of social justice means working from within our different physical contexts—"first world," "third world," or both—as academics and activists, to bring about social change. Through this article I have sought to take a non-binary stand by "[c]onstantly changing my point of departure or arrival, trac[ing, making] void, retrac[ing] with the desire to baffle rather than bring out contours" (Trinh 48). In other words, by not taking on the task of representing my "otherness" and by not locating myself in any fixed identity categories, I have tried to occupy the liminality of the nepantla/transnational moment by re-defining my affiliations and loyalties. The in-betweenness of the transnational space provides a platform for finding commonalities if we are willing to risk enacting the four nepantlera-acts that I have described here. I envision these four nepantlera-acts as a way of transforming transnational politics. The nepantlera-acts singled out in this article do not necessarily occur in linear progression. Instead, the simultaneity with which they are enacted compounds their effectiveness in transnational spaces. Nepantleras, while having successfully negotiated the transcultural,

shifting ground of nepantla, become examples of how we can further enrich and sustain transnational alliances through more effective cross-cultural exchange and dialoguing: a transformation of transnational theorizing, engagement, and activism.

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