



Processes of Emergence and Connection **Interrelations of Past, Present, and Future in Journeying for Conocimiento**

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Abstract: In this essay, rather than focusing upon the professional connections to Anzaldúa in my teaching and scholarship, I have chosen a different path to explore connections between inner work and public acts. I have made a conscious choice to speak about the personal: to make, in some ways, a testimonial to Anzaldúa rather than a traditional scholarly connection. That choice itself and the way I have approached it is an example of connecting inner work to public acts, of trying to create a new middle space. In that choice, I am resisting the stigmas that are related to silencing experiences of mental illness, racism, sexism, and homophobia, particularly personal experiences and particularly within the context of academia. And I am resisting the disconnection of the emotional from the intellectual or the academic.

Anzaldúa's work offers so many points of entry, both professional and personal. I was initially drawn to considering my academic work of teaching and scholarship, particularly because my specific interests are related to processes of the social construction of identities in relation to race and culture and negotiating boundaries. In

order to help students negotiate a process of *conocimiento*, I believe that we as professors must experience this process as well. Anzaldúa's work calls on us to have a consciousness of this process within ourselves. Psychologists are well aware of the need to have consciousness of our own developmental experiences and challenges so that we can use these experiences positively in our attempts to help others, rather than impose our own unresolved difficulties in ways that are harmful. And I believe there is clearly a parallel process in teaching.

However, rather than focus upon the professional connections to Anzaldúa in

¹ With thanks to Shirley Tang and Tim Sieber for supporting and organizing us to take this risk together and to Chris Bobel for her help in the preparation of this talk. And with immense gratitude (always) to James Meyer, Jr., for helping me to realize the possibility of *nepantla* and emerge from the Coatlicue depths.

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my teaching and scholarship, I have chosen a different path to explore connections between inner work and public acts. I have made a conscious choice to speak about the personal: to make, in some ways, a testimonial to Anzaldúa rather than a traditional scholarly connection. That choice itself and the way I have approached it is an example of connecting inner work to public acts, of trying to create a new middle space. In that choice, I am resisting the stigmas that are related to silencing experiences of mental illness, racism, sexism, and homophobia, particularly personal experiences and particularly within the context of academia. And I am resisting the disconnection of the emotional from the intellectual or the academic. I am, of course, aware that this is not a traditional academic publication. It has no formal references (other than Anzaldúa), no empirical data, little presentation of abstract concepts or theory. And this too is a conscious choice, a moment where I am resisting the elevation of the “objective” voice and the pressure to disconnect the inner work of the academic from the public act of the academic presentation or publication. It is an example of the conscious integration of the personal and the political, the *conocimiento*, that I attempt to bring to my teaching and my scholarship, even if I usually frame this in more traditional ways.

Anzaldúa (2002) states that the cyclical process of developing *conocimiento* begins with *el arrebato*. She writes: “Every *arrebato*—a violent attack, a rift with a loved one, illness, death in the family, betrayal, systemic racism and marginalization—rips you from your familiar “home” casting you out of your personal Eden” (p. 546). In considering this, I wondered, How have the ruptures I have experienced catalyzed a process of *conocimiento* for me? How has this process shaped who I am, how and what I teach, and my commitment to social justice and academic endeavors as a means to achieve social justice?

As I considered Anzaldúa’s seven spac-

es, I thought particularly about ruptures that actively led to engaging in the cyclical process of developing *conocimiento*, that were *beginnings*, not just fragmentations, and that connected to my education and my choice to be an academic. And though I want to focus upon education and the academic role, I realized that the meaning and impacts of the *arrebatos* I experienced in connection to my education were shaped by many prior ruptures. So I begin with experiences of ruptures and experiencing the conflict of *nepantla* without meeting its possibility, of simply feeling torn between the ways.

My mother’s bipolar illness meant that my childhood was filled with ruptures in my worldview and sense of familiar and safe “home.” These included being moved from house to house and parent to parent almost yearly when her episodes resulted in psychiatric hospitalization. There was also a constant experience of having my own perceptions and knowledges refuted and denied because she denied the basic existence of her illness: Each time she began to become ill she refused to acknowledge the changes that were so clear to me and she actively blamed family members for the difficulties she was having.

Experiencing racism as a multiracial Asian American from both outside and within my family created other ruptures. My first memory of explicit awareness of my race is from when I was about 8, when I was chased home from school on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor day by a group of boys yelling “Jap.” This was the first of many explicit and implicit anti-Asian racist experiences, ranging from shouted racial slurs to comments on my exotic looks. And yet, I was simultaneously experiencing exclusion from other Asian Americans because I didn’t look Asian to them. And I experienced the “what are you?” encounter so typical for many multiracial Asian Americans and even had some interactions where the questioner responded to my an-

swer by insisting that I didn't look Japanese American or asserting that I couldn't be what I said I was. Within my family, my father worked to deny being Japanese American, a psychological legacy of the Japanese American concentration camps, and my mother made comments that she was glad to move away from the neighborhood with all those Asians and, when I pointed out that I was Asian, responded "Well, I don't think of you that way."

Thus, I was frequently holding opposite views—crazy or not crazy, White versus Asian, rational and accurately perceiving the world versus being told I was distorting. I was constantly negotiating between contradicting perspectives of multiple others as well as negotiating the contradictions between my own perceptions and others' perceptions that were presented to me as more accurate Truth than my own. By the time I entered college I was, as a result, quite familiar with the negative emotions associated with what Anzaldúa calls "the Coatlicue depths." But as a child and adolescent, it was difficult to see beyond those depths, to grasp the potentials and possibilities of *nepantla*, to access the life-giving aspect of Coatlicue. It was difficult to have the skills and abilities to recreate the middle ground as a living borderland, to create a new perception and self-definition.

But, thankfully, life is not static, so there were additional experiences of *nepantla* and opportunities to move beyond the depths. One was the experience of a Women Studies class in college, which offered new perspectives and language on race as well as gender that planted the first seeds of possible transformation. And while I am not going to detail this experience, I want to emphasize its importance as my first model of how a professor can be a *nepantlera*, helping others to create new stories of themselves and the world.

A major *arrebato* related to education was my experience in graduate school. I en-

tered graduate school with great hopes for an open, intellectually curious and engaged experience. I was active in classes and involved with student initiatives particularly those related to addressing diversity in relation to race, culture, and gender. I did exceptionally well academically my first year and adjunct faculty and professors outside my program praised my work and inquired about whether I would be interested in exploring additional opportunities with them. In spite of this, at the end of my first year of graduate school, my advisor told me that at the evaluation meeting, clinical psychology faculty had expressed concerns about "perceived personality characteristics" that they felt might impact my professional development as a psychologist: They saw me as angry and entitled. When I asked for clarification from my advisor and from the Training Director, part of what I was told was that the faculty thought I was a radical feminist lesbian separatist. Looking back, I think I should have responded by asking "what if I am?" But given my position and their position, that wasn't my response. Instead, I asked for the basis of this perception and was told that it was related to having cut my hair and to my notes in a Mary Daly book that I had lent to a faculty member.

For me, this feedback created a major rupture and echoed my earlier experiences. I found myself again in *nepantla*, struggling to reconcile the views of others that were being conveyed to me as Truth that I was denying, versus my own views of myself and my intentions. I was not only experiencing being torn between truths about my "personality" and responsibility, but I was also negotiating opposite views related to being racialized. I was experiencing a message that as an Asian American woman I should be quiet, passive, feminine, and compliant that was at odds with who I actually *was* as an Asian American woman. This description, of course, is languaging my experience in retrospect. In the mo-

ment, it was primarily an experience of conflict, and a descent into the difficult emotions of the Coatlicue depths.

In many ways, I think it was because this rupture echoed so many earlier ruptures that it was so difficult and perhaps so catalyzing for me. Anzaldúa says “If you hold opposites long enough without taking sides, a new identity emerges” (p. 548). She reflects that if you can face those aspects of yourself that you are reluctant to see, you can emerge from the depths. And, unlike my childhood experiences, I now had awareness and skills, social models and social supports that called me to cross the bridge, commit to transformation of self and society, and re-story my experiences.

And so, with help, I worked to emerge from the depths. I faced the possibility that I was crazy like my mother, that I did distort and blame others, that I was unjustifiably angry, that I should not have cut my hair. I considered what it meant to be Asian American—what this meant to me and what it meant to others. In the ensuing months (and years) I discovered that three other Asian American women who were outspoken and active had received similar kinds of feedback in recent years, not necessarily related to feminism and lesbianism, but related to faculty concerns about “personality characteristics” of these Asian American women. And this knowledge helped me consider the public space, the broader social understandings and misunderstandings: I could consider the possibility that disentangling the “pathology” from my own sense of self was not just denial. As Anzaldúa describes, in first facing and acknowledging what was feared within myself, I could engage in seeing possibilities: “A paradox: the knowledge that exposes your fears can also remove them” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 553).

For me, it was necessary to first experience repeatedly these middle stages of the compromise and restorying in a very personal way before being able to move at all

to taking my new stories out into the world.

I became quiet and compliant and careful in my interactions with faculty and students. And the following year I was lauded by the faculty and nominated for a fellowship. But I was aware that even as I was being lauded, it wasn't who I was. I had, as Anzaldúa describes, begun to develop a conscious understanding of myself different than what others wanted me to be. I had begun to weigh and resist what was put upon me, not only the content, but also the boundaries themselves—the ideas that things within me (or in the world) were completely defined, were good or bad, healthy or pathological. I had become *consciously* aware of the stories of self imposed upon me, and aware of how much I had accepted these as my own story of who I was as a member of a family affected by mental illness, as a multiracial Asian American woman, and as a psychologist in training. This awareness (the glimpses of possibilities that are part of the fourth space of crossing and conversion) helped me to see a potentially new meaning of being in the borderland, to begin to realize the *possibility* of nepantla.

I entered the fifth space and began the process of creating new personal and collective stories. This process included really integrating within my personal understandings the conceptual and abstract knowledges about systemic oppression to which I had been limitedly exposed (e.g. in Women Studies). And it ultimately included actively seeking multiple perspectives that critically questioned and problematized accepted “truth” or canonical knowledges. Thus, I began the process of developing my new stories, a process that continues cyclically today.

So what does this have to do with teaching and scholarship related to social justice, negotiating contested racial boundaries or connecting borderlands? Anzaldúa writes: “To learn what to transform into

you ask 'How can I contribute?'... Your inner voice reveals your core passion, which will point to your sense of purpose, urging you to seek a vision, devise a plan." And I found that what I most wanted to become was what had led me to psychology in the first place: I most wanted to become a person who could contribute to healing and to empowerment.

But with my new stories and understandings, I saw the meaning of healing and empowerment differently than I had seen it before. My experiences crystallized for me the felt recognition that my own field, which aimed at helping people, might actually be harming them. I recognized the power that academics have, in their teaching and in their scholarship, to create collective stories. I had experienced how faculty could catalyze *nepantla* for others and either push them to stay in the negative emotions of the depths or help them hear the call and develop the tools to create new personal and collective stories. I became passionate about contributing to changing the values and norms within the discipline itself, within society more generally, and within student experiences in order to contribute to social justice and mental health.

So my public acts have been aimed at helping others develop tools to create new stories—but what does this actually mean?

For me, it means explicitly integrating into my teaching and scholarship an analysis of what Anzaldúa calls the "destructive stories of self," recognizing the ways that education and psychology have been used to support oppressive hierarchies. Thus, it means including critical voices and alternative understandings into my curriculum. And it means teaching students critical analysis skills that enable them to become aware of the boundaries and restrictions created within academia and academic disciplines, as well as the power imbalances behind the creation and maintenance of these boundaries. However, Anzaldúa points out that it is not enough to be critical

of oppressive stories, one must also work to create new stories. In my teaching and my scholarship, I want to convey hope, because seeing the oppression can itself contribute to being torn between ways and entering the depths, and the call to emerge must be offered as well.

This desire for hope has meant shaping new narratives that challenge a unified, monolithic view of race, of gender, of sexual orientation, of mental illness. To do this, I believe we must centralize the analysis of power and inequity, rather than asserting that one view is paramount, one -ism the most oppressed. This leads to questioning and problematizing racial unity, because the idea of racial unity can erase the diverse experiences within communities that share racial similarities (e.g. experiences related to gender, sexual orientation, social class, or personal experiences). An overemphasis on racial solidarity may also create boundaries that obscure potential connections between people, for example when Asian "issues" seem isolated from Black "issues" or White "issues," or when racism is isolated from sexism and homophobia. This doesn't mean that I don't simultaneously explore the importance of and the need for racial unity/solidarity, but rather that this is not the end or the only perspective. Emphasizing the interconnections between oppressive experiences and interdependencies between individuals and groups resisting oppression in various ways is part of creating new narratives. Engaging in re-storying also means considering what a just and connected experience would be like, and what experiences would bring us to that, not just creating narratives that are *reactive* to injustices and that reify the idea that we can never know the other. These new narratives, built through an analysis of power, emphasize the importance of creating bridges and borderlands, building alliances rather than creating boundaries.

How to do this is really the challenge (if this is the goal, what is the process?). And

to answer that how, I found myself returning to the inner work, to my own experiences of nepantla and process of *conocimiento*. For the how is connected to my experience of the destructiveness of imposed views and to the lessons I learned in emerging from the emotional depths.

One very practical aspect of “how” that emerged from my earlier experiences is strongly related to developing the conscious awareness of what stories were and may be imposed upon me (or someone “like” me), what stories are dominant, and how these are linked to sociohistorical/cultural power and privilege. Through being conscious of what others were likely to impose on me if I were seen through the dominant lens *and* of how I was different than that, I began to develop skills in negotiating those differences. By anticipating responses of others and interrogating/exploring these responses before they were fully articulated (and therefore emotionally attached), I found that I could encourage others to explore boundaries and borderlands in relation to their experience of me. And I work to develop the awareness of how others might be seen through the dominant lens, to both challenge my own possible impositions on others and to expand my ability to encourage others to explore boundaries and borderlands in relation to multiple peoples and experiences.

Most importantly, staying connected to those personal experiences means embracing my awareness of the potential destructiveness of asserting that my reality, or the reality of my discipline, is more valid than the personal realities of individual students, clients, or research participants, or the realities of other disciplines. This connection to my inner work is imperative, because in my public acts *I* am now the one that holds the power to impose my view, to judge the student’s “personality,” or to reify the discipline’s oppressive stories. And so I have come to recognize, as part of my process of *conocimiento*, that it is impera-

tive that I recognize my own power and privilege as well as my own oppression, both of my role and of my ascribed statuses.

This is also part of my new and now experiences of the Coatlicue space, facing the things within me that I would rather not face. For example, it is easier to see how I am rejected by Asian Americans because I am multiracial than to see how I may benefit in the dominant context by being relatively “more white.” But if I expect students to engage in *conocimiento* in ways that actually create bridges across privilege, I must be willing to do this myself.

So part of my “how” is a willingness to connect my inner works and public acts not only privately (that is, to develop a “private” or internal awareness of my inner works that then affects my public acts as academic) but also publicly (to experience and share the process in the moment or retrospectively through discussion and reflection like this one). Bringing my story into the world (Anzaldúa’s sixth space) means, in some ways, bringing my *whole* story into the world—the struggles and uncertainties and process, not just the nicely packaged new ideas and ways of thinking that have resulted from these. Because the “how” is really what is most difficult to describe or to teach. Encouraging the process of *conocimiento* in others means being present and, therefore, being vulnerable: living the process.

Thus, it can mean using/sharing my own pain (and fear, and uncertainty, and *emotion*) and through this, inviting students to open their wounds. Acknowledging, naming, relating, and sharing emotion can overcome the fear that is behind resistance to learning and that creates distance between the “learner” and the “teacher” (and the material being taught). This connects to the recognition that the boundaries created within academia—including boundaries that separate the intellect from the emotion and the spirit—can be damaging, and can

actually undermine the goal of education (in a holistic sense related to transformation). Anzaldúa writes:

Although all your cultures reject the idea that you can know the other, you believe that besides love, pain might open this closed passage by reaching through the wound to connect. Wounds cause you to shift consciousness...Like love, pain might trigger compassion—if you're tender with yourself, you can be tender to others. Using wounds as openings to become vulnerable and available (present) to others means staying in your body. Excessive dwelling on your wounds to others means leaving your body to live in your thoughts, where you re-enact your past hurts...(Anzaldúa, 2002, 571-572)

To create borderlands and alliances, my experience *has* been that “the answer to the pain is in the pain” (to quote Roberto Almanzan from the movie *The Color of Fear* [Mun Wah, 1994]). When I am vulnerable, hearing my pain (whether pain from my personal experiences or the pain I feel in empathy), students trust me to be tender with them and take the chance to be tender with others, to try to hear what is not said by the other who is fearful but yearning for connection. In these moments, my own experiences of early spaces (arrebato, nepantla, etc.) are all present, layered in my awareness, offering possibilities of processes of emergence and connection. In these moments, the intellectual, the emotional, and the spiritual connect within me and between me and others. In these moments my past, the present I share with students or with hearers/readers of my words, and the future that is embodied in impacts for students/hearers/readers and for me come together in a shared experience. And through

this sharing, we can together create new stories from the depths. We can see, in Anzaldúa's words, that “home *is* that bridge, the in-between place of nepantla and constant transition, the most unsafe of all spaces” and we can together create a consciousness of transformation.

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