Holding Space for Vulnerability: Anzaldúa, Intersectional Inquiry, and Relational Between-Worlds

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The lazy, laughing South

With blood on its mouth.

—Langston Hughes, *The South*[1]

In art and literature, putting unlike images into controlled yet open-ended tension interrupts the rush to self-evidence. The clash of meanings, deprived of tidy resolution, creates a pause or suspension into which new complexities are invited. The Mesoamerican term *difrasismo* captures this generative dissonance that can open a new "dialectical space," a space in which to reconsider fixities, as Laura Rendón explains.[2] In emergent social justice work, no less than art and literature, such pauses can be vital to the possibility of fresh responses. Even in hesitating, we still may be tempted to reach for new fixities, but the pause makes it possible to hold space for paying attention to ourselves and others less reactively and/or defensively.

In the energy field of polarized relations, pauses also are dangerous. Hostile ideologies, and the actions and conditions they support, can prove catastrophic; on a minute-to-minute basis, they are enraging and exhausting. The continual work of deciding when and how to defuse, resist, or by-pass potentially hostile situations leaves little incentive, even in progressive alliances, for marginalized folks to choose to be more vulnerable than they already find themselves.[3] A zero-tolerance stance towards oppressive and exclusionary positions can be a vital strategy for self- and community-preservation. Yet the result is a risk of spiritual disconnection both from would-be allies and from those who are like-yet-unlike us.

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION | **Amy Shuffelton, editor**

Our focus here is not primarily on tensions involving white people. Much of progressive educational work spotlights pedagogies for the privileged: teaching white, Anglo, and otherwise relatively powerfully positioned learners to recognize and refuse to reinscribe privilege. Yet some of the most wrenching harms we experience are at the hands of those with whom we assumed that we shared cultural and political values.[4] Although our critical frameworks enable us to oppose racism, sexism, heterosexism, or ableism even in like-bodied people, they rarely prepare us to rework or transform our relational dynamics. Instead, we flee from an insufficiently pure organization or draw rigid lines within groups, marginalizing particular members or expelling them from the community.[5] The tools that enable us to analyze oppression at times may jeopardize community-building, reinscribing the very ideological-material conditions we are trying to undo.[6] Unless we are prepared for the likelihood of ruptures in educational community and coalition contexts, and are willing to attend to and repair the rupture(s), we will settle for fractured or at best, more superficially bonded anti-oppressive classrooms and communities.

In what follows, we argue for a consideration of vulnerability in progressive spaces not in spite of the chance that our worlds may fall apart but because they will. Crisis and rupture are part of change, essential to transformation. For classroom and coalition contexts in which queer, Brown, Black, disabled, and other already-vulnerable people may feel over-exposed, deliberate vulnerability is an audacious expectation. As María Lugones tells us, "I keep secrets. Even though I am told over and over by white feminists that we must reveal ourselves, open ourselves, I keep secrets. Disclosing our secrets threatens our survival."[7] We argue here not for a blanket policy of inviting greater vulnerability into sometimes-fraught relations, but for a more complex kind of attentiveness to how we might move differently in relational social justice work—including in predominantly Brown/Black or other spaces in which whites and/or straight men, for example, might not be physically present.

Vulnerability is not solely a question of an imbalance of power. It is also a *source* of power, insight, and connection. In examining the importance of vulnerability in collaborative intersectional inquiry, we draw closely upon Gloria

Anzaldúa's invitation to travel the path of conocimiento. While conocimiento usually refers to knowledge or skill, Anzaldúa intends to invoke a form of spiritual and creative inquiry that is "skeptical of reason" and common sense categories, reorienting attention to a more imaginative, perceptive, expansive, embodied attunement to the world.[8] The journey of inquiry entails a re-embodying process akin to shedding an exoskeleton; travelers do not so much shed their previous layer, however, as reconfigure it as a means of expanding connections. In this way, Anzaldúa states, "You're never only in one space, but partially in one, partially another, with nepantla ["a zone of possibility"] occurring most often — as its own space and as the transition between each of the others."[9]

The wounds that divide us, Anzaldúa argues, are those associated with our conceptions of ourselves as individuals—separated by the colonialist categories of identity and accompanying narratives set in place to justify and maintain oppressive systems. She urges readers to develop attentiveness, instead, to the wounds that bond us together.[10] Although often based in trauma, the latter open us to the possibility of experiencing a spiritual embodiment, connecting us with our broader world(s) and the earth through our vulnerability.

The vulnerability we look to in anti-oppressive relations means work: holding space for one another, attending to the spaces between us in ways we perhaps cannot yet fully imagine. It means shifting attention from the "what" and "who" that may seem to define tense relations, to the charged, messy, dynamic spaces of rupture, failure, possibility, expectation, and disappointment. Although such unstraightenings represent partial undoings of the frameworks of intelligibility that the conventional world imposes, their value does not lie solely in their promise of generative change. "Holding open spaces of uncertainty" also represents a fundamental condition of survival, as when "gender non-conforming children and youth" are supported in spaces "where questions of gender and identity can be explored, experimented with, wondered about."[11]

CRISIS AND DISORIENTATION

Coping with a collapsed or shattered world is devastating. Yet the breaking down of an accepted reality, and the failure, loss, or betrayal of cherished

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goods, may be inextricable from the vital unlearning, undoing, and reweaving of imagined goods and possibilities of movement. As Ann Berlak and Sekani Moyenda, Megan Boler, Deborah Kerdeman, María Lugones, and Elizabeth Self and Barbara Stengel variously explore, crises and our willingness to stay with them may precipitate profound change.[12] Ruptures enable and may be a condition of transformation. Our argument is not that failure "opens doors" or "creates an opportunity," in the stock assurances of those who are not themselves failing. It is that brokenness can be a way to see how things are/were made, a way to engage more profoundly with possibility. Yet one still can fail, even at failing.

Crises in educational, relational, and political contexts may erupt of their own accord, but they also may be invited or imposed. In charged spaces of inquiry such as queer, feminist, and anti-racist classrooms and coalitions, norms may be thrown into crisis more or less abruptly, whether in concert with a syllabus or because activists', scholars', teachers', or students' subjectivity has become too marked and they fail to maintain the control and composure expected of a rational subject. They express too many sticky emotions: too much rage about their experiences with racism, too much pain regarding the traumas of heteropatriarchy, too much guilt about benefitting from systems of domination.[13] When an explosion takes place, the default reaction may be recourse to built-in narratives for dismissal or minimization of the excessive forces.[14] Thus, for example, educators may aspire to restore a sense of normalcy and ease to the group, or to prevent such excesses from entering the space in the future. Yet by letting these forces give us pause, we are better positioned to face the unknown. To turn away from relational instabilities, to mark them off, risks maintaining a poverty of language for and experience with these forces. In this section, we sketch some differences between responses to charged relations that perform inversions of power, and an approach enlisting vulnerability as a distinctive power.

For María Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, transformative change in the relations between women of color and white women requires those in dominant positions to relinquish their comfortable expectations of being appreciated as rounded individuals:

> You need to learn to become unintrusive, unimportant, patient to the point of tears, while at the same time open to learning any possible lessons. You will also have to come to terms with the sense of alienation, of not belonging, of having your world thoroughly disrupted, having it criticized and scrutinized from the point of view of those who have been harmed by it, having important concepts central to it dismissed.[15]

In some respects, the asymmetry-reversal model requiring that the more powerful person set aside her own vision, interests, and preferences has a formal counterpart in classical student-centered and liberatory pedagogies. For Noddings, for example, the receptivity called for in the one-caring requires motivational displacement: the implicitly maternal figure is *engrossed* in the other.[16] In such framings, dominant parties who subordinate or suppress their own needs do so on the basis of holding a position of trust (whether or not students actually trust them). By contrast, the expectation that white feminists accept a racial reversal of marginalization in the name of cross-race feminist friendship and solidarity reflects the profound mistrust engendered by systemic oppression.

Despite the crushed affect perhaps conjured up by Lugones and Spelman's recommendation of self-imposed unimportance and irrelevance, the position of not having anything meaningful to contribute in fact may be adopted quite cheerfully by progressive white and/or male scholars, for example, as in: "I always defer to my colleague/teacher/fellow student Dyani about these issues," or "As a white person, I don't think I should take a position here." The challenge posed by such self-abnegation, well intended and also at times necessary though it may be, is that it predicates relationship on self-evacuation. More covertly, it also may be a way of not having to examine or think about issues that are deemed beyond our purview, or a way of posing as a good, blameless white person, the shining exception to the rule of mistrust.

There is power in Lugones and Spelman's radical challenge to privilege organized by arrogance; the liberal belief that we can or should each be fully present in our humanity is an illusion when only some of us have boundless support for our freedom of movement and expression. Intimate, respectful,

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familiar relations may seem to entitle each participant to contribute in a free give-and-take, but the terms of sense-making are already saturated with the terms of dominance. Yet however salutary the reversal of positions of power may be, it does not undo the binary terms of relationship. Paradoxically, the attempt to engineer reliably safe spaces for members of vulnerable groups may scrub those spaces of the possibility for more radical transformation.

Rather than focusing on the positions of power themselves and how they might be emptied of threat, we wish to focus on the spaces between positions, the slippery border zones of im/possibility. Like negative spaces, between-spaces tend to be overlooked, yet they are energetic zones filled with movement, push and pull, tension and desire. That liminal arena is Anzaldúa's most characteristic space of work. She is the nepantlera, the traveler on the path of conocimiento who struggles to reconcile the distinct spaces that define a seemingly firm border. Although conocimiento refers to knowledge, much of Anzaldúa's emphasis is on uncertainty, disturbance, unlearning, and *desconocer*: unknowing, ignorance, refusal, repudiation, denial. Embarking on the path of conocimiento:

> Requires that you encounter your shadow side and confront what you've programmed yourself (and have been programmed by your cultures) to avoid (desconocer), to confront traits and habits distorting how you see reality and inhibiting the full use of your facultades.[17]

The path is inherently unstable and disorienting, the ground under us liable to betray us.

In the first stage of the journey, we experience an irrevocable rupture in our world, which Anzaldúa symbolizes as an earthquake that shakes us from our previous state of being. Having been thrust out of our familiar world, we enter the second stage or what Anzaldúa calls nepantla. "In this liminal, transitional space, suspended between shifts, you're two people, split between before and after …. In nepantla you are exposed, open to other perspectives."[18] The trauma of our broken world initiates the development of la facultad, a critical

and creative faculty linked to sharpened alertness and attunement to both danger and possibility. When travelers become overwhelmed by our suspension between worlds, we "descend into the third space, the Coatlicue depths of despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness."[19] The fourth stage is "a call to action" pulling us out of our depression; we "break free from [our] habitual coping strategies of escaping from realities [that we are] reluctant to face, reconnect with spirit, and undergo a conversion."[20] In the fifth stage, we create new narratives for our lives by sifting through fragments of our "inner landscape" so as to "reenvision the map of the known world, creating a new description of reality and scripting a new story."[21]

In the penultimate, sixth stage, we seek to introduce our new narratives into the world but they may find little traction in the collective imaginary. Our resulting frustration and rage may produce paralysis. "Blocked from your own power, you're unable to activate the inner resources that could mobilize you."[22] However, if travelers can reach the "critical turning point of transformation" that is the seventh stage, there we can "shift realities, develop an ethical, compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within self and between others." As we do so, we "find common ground by forming holistic alliances."[23] By incorporating these compassionate practices into our daily lives, we enact spiritual activism—an ongoing process of inner and between-world work that manifests outwardly as public acts.

In her adoption of the term, "spiritual activism," Anzaldúa plays with *difrasismo*. Conventionally, "spirituality" and "activism" suggest countervailing orientations. But Anzaldúa, as AnaLouise Keating explains, "embraces the apparent contradiction," viewing "the spiritual/material, inner/outer, individual/collective dimensions of life" as integral to a more complex sense of self and the collective(s). In Keating's words, spiritual activism is "spirituality that posits a relational worldview and uses this holistic worldview to transform one's self and one's worlds."[24] In adding "queer" to the formulation, Vei honors Anzaldúa's intent while borrowing Sara Ahmed's focus on disorientation.[25] Veering from the straight-and-true orientation, diverging from familiar paths of knowledge-seeking, queer spiritual activism allows us to reframe ourselves and our worlds as

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not-fully-knowable. As individualized manifestations of a broader, constantly shifting, and messy whole, we are created by and simultaneously recreate this broader whole in ways we cannot always readily perceive.[26]

Inevitably, we are entangled in ideological-material conditions. As Butler and Ahmed argue, however, there are opportunities for transformation in the indeterminacy of our entanglement.[27] Although the world is continually being remade to serve dominant interests more effectively, the work required to make hierarchical and exclusionary orderings appear natural itself creates openings for slippage, surprise, and sabotage. As with the many ways we have of mis-doing and not-quite-doing "compulsory heterosexuality," our mis-performances of gender, race, culture, class, age, ability, religion, and region (not to mention familial, professional, and/or educational status) reveal the constructed character of naturalized categories.[28] Failed or excessive embodiments of normalized standards expose the standards as unstable, opening possibilities for putting norms into a "potentially productive crisis."[29]

LISTENING, HOLDING SPACE

In *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, Leanne Simpson offers us a vision of collective world-building. In "Indigenous theoretical frameworks," she tells us, "storytelling, or 'narrative imagination,' is a tool to vision other existences outside of the current ones by critiquing and analyzing the current state of affairs, but also by dreaming and visioning other realities."[30] The Nishnaabeg recreation story of the title opens in the aftermath of imbalance and widespread destruction when a great flood has wiped out the Nishnaabeg world. A few stranded creatures find their way to a log and eventually take turns diving to the ocean floor, searching for new ground; after several futile attempts from the creatures, the lifeless body of the muskrat surfaces with a paw full of dirt. The turtle volunteers to carry this dirt on her back, and the other animals dance and sing around the soil. Their collective movements stir up the wind, causing the earth on the turtle's back to grow into the landmass referred to in the colonialist world(s) as North America. Simpson views this story as instructive for efforts toward Indigenous resurgence in its recognition that the work of world recreation is individual and collective and simultaneously relies on forces (such

as the wind) beyond one person's or group's control. Everyone must reach into murky, unknown depths to find their own handful of dirt in efforts toward world recreation. Then, one must engage in collective and creative acts (here, singing and dancing) to bring this new world into being.

Cynthia Dillard, in a parallel act of reclamation, takes up insights "from an African feminist spiritual perspective."[31] Her goal is to facilitate processes for Black people to bring together those parts of themselves (which are inseparable from their communities and spiritual knowledges) that have been pulled apart and lost through the violence of colonialism and slavery and their ongoing manifestations. She refers to this process as one of (re)membering the African ascendant self, communities, and wisdom. If teachers adhere to a practice of Ubuntu, she states:

> Then our work as professors and teachers is about becoming the school, enlarging and enlivening our bodies, minds, and spirits such that we become an offering to our students that enriches the very space of community with and within them, that changes the energy in the room.[32]

That is, we do not simply enter and leave educational spaces as if they exist separately from us. As educators— and also as learners—we (co)create these spaces through our words, actions, and dispositions. We need to be responsible, Dillard says, for the energy that we bring to our work and our communities. If as teachers we enter an educational space feeling unprepared or incompetent, those feelings color our presence. The collective energy of the classroom likewise is affected if we or our students are feeling combative, curious, morally superior, or playful. Whether or not consciously, we pick up on one another's energies.

In response to enflamed classroom moments and ruptures, it is tempting to define causes and decide upon fair, timely remedies. As Leigh Patel cautions, however:

> Perhaps one of the most explicit decolonial moves we can make, at this moment, is to sit still long enough to see clearly what we need to reach beyond. This stillness should not be

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> confused with doing nothing. Without pause, it's difficult to ascertain what structures, what inequitable structures, are enlivened by narratives, even and perhaps especially the progressive narratives. Our pauses, actions, and revisiting should be answerable to a constant desire for material transformation, repatriation, and rectification.[33]

By attending to our shared landscapes not as maps of right-and-wrong but as entanglements of hope, woundedness, needs, desires, power, and push-backs, we may have a clearer sense of our responsibilities to these spaces. If someone's performances of privilege pull on us in particular ways, how we move with those performances will also pull on that person in any number of ways (depending on their guiding narratives). The push-and-pull might tug at our views of ourselves as good activists, and how we move with those critiques can sustain old wounds and/or work toward healing them.

The emotional work involved in staying with ruptures and processes of mourning, dialogue, and repair, can deepen our capacities for discomfort and openness. Keating characterizes the practice of "listening with raw openness" as a form of activism that requires a disposition to be exposed to others and to be altered by the encounter. Such listening begins from a belief in our interrelatedness, and the further willingness to "seek commonalities—commonalities defined not as sameness but as possible points of connection."[34] This stance recognizes the ambiguities present in inter/personal and social exchanges. In a conversation with a man who is enacting masculinity in frustrating and stereotypic ways, for example, the interlocutor's ability to identify particular behavior patterns does not mean that they fully grasp the various places from which his energy comes. To presume that they do would be to close themselves off to the person and engage only with their image of him. Embracing the ambiguities in situations opens the way to exploring new possibilities of connection. Keating warns us, however, that "listening with raw openness is difficult, . . . often dangerous work. It requires a willingness to embrace uncertainty, contradiction, and doubts, as well as" to recognize that I may "misunderstand, despite my intense efforts."[35] Like nepantlera artistry more broadly, such listening demands a level

of emotional work that we may feel those who undermine our worlds are not entitled to receive. At times, such vulnerability may feel—and be—more than we can bear. If we can hold space for both their and our vulnerability, however, we may stumble into ways to navigate the forces shaping our relations less agonistically and more generatively.

Although we are always moving with the forces that direct our lives, we need not register them to get where we want to go, particularly when our destinations align with normative trajectories. If we want to change the trajectories of our pedagogies such that we arrive not so much at destinations as at *process*—transformed ways of listening, narrating, inquiring, for example—we need to actively pause to attend to the challenging spaces between us. Even the worlds we share with close co-workers, trusted allies, friends, and family may strain, fold, and buckle. To do activist educational work well, we must risk doing it poorly while striving to continue to learn from the struggle. As Simpson reminds us, transforming our worlds is realized in the process of struggle and falling short. As Langston Hughes reminds us, almost exultantly: "We know we are beautiful. And ugly too."[36]

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4 Sometimes the meanings attached to "we" in this paper will be obvious, at other times less so. Where possible, we have chosen readings that hail multiplicity in the audience.

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