On Teaching in Nepantla

Ginger Barnhart
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Tanjerine Vei and Audrey Thompson's "Holding Space for Vulnerability: Anzaldúa, Intersectional Inquiry, and Relational Between-Worlds" offers a provocative relational pedagogy for social justice-minded educators to practice in charged spaces.[1] Vei and Thompson invoke Gloria Anzaldúa's key constructs—rupture, the path of conocimiento, nepantla, and spiritual activism—to serve as conceptual anchors of the essay. Drawing on the interpretive work of AnaLouise Keating, Vei and Thompson suggest that Anzaldúa's "spiritual activism" can transform progressive classrooms through holding space for personal vulnerability.[2] This space-holding posture embraces the messiness of human endeavors with a commitment to practices like attentiveness, pauses, stillness, and "listening with raw openness," that stem from "a belief in our interrelatedness … and willingness to seek commonalities."[3] This "nepantlera artistry" privileges relational processes over destinations. Their argument both provides a tangible way forward for those who long to meaningfully enact social justice in their lived contexts and recognizes the inability of modern critical frameworks to "prepare us to rework or transform our relational dynamics." [4]

In dialogue with Vei, Thompson, and Keating, and with Anzaldúa's "nepantla" at the forefront, I present three offerings in reaction to Vei and Thompson's call to uphold the value of vulnerability in our journey toward more equitable and just societies. First, I encourage Vei and Thompson to expand upon the interpretation of Anzaldúa's "path of conocimiento" and situate its seven stages in the context of entangled classroom spaces. Second, I question the aspirations and means assigned to transformation in the essay. Third, I challenge the authors to further embrace Anzaldúa's spiritual knowledge, even if that embracing draws lines of distinction as much as it seeks to blur them.

MAPPING ANZALDÚA'S PATH

The "path of conocimiento" appears to be the central mechanism of transformation in Vei's and Thompson's essay and merits further clarification as

to its function in, and potential for, communal transformation beyond individual enlightenment. The word *path* evokes images of the embodied, situated context of a journey. If an educator desires to take up this path: What does that look like in the "entangled spaces" of a classroom, school, or community? In "now let us shift…the path of conocimiento… inner work, public acts," Anzaldúa describes a predominantly individual seven-stage journey that ultimately expands one's "awareness that beneath individual separateness lies a deeper interrelatedness."[5] Keating elaborates: "Spiritual activism begins within the individual ... [but] combines self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts designed to bring about material change."[6] In a classroom setting, when a teacher-activist takes up the individual path of conocimiento, is there an expectation that students will join them on this path? Teachers can invite students to stay with rupture and discomfort, but the invitation to the spiritual *path* must be taken up.

I wonder what this *path* looks like in communal action. If this is an individual journey that is meant to bring about external, material change: How do we envision members of a collective space engaging in this? Vei and Thompson describe the seven stages of this path in what appears to be a clear, systematic progression, but each individual may be engaged in different stages—if they are on the journey at all. Anzaldúa explains that

> All seven [stages] are present within each stage, and they occur concurrently, chronologically or not…in a days' time you may go through all seven stages, though you may dwell in one for months. You're never only in one space, but partially in one, partially in another, with *nepantla* occurring most often– as its own space and as the transition between each of the others.[7]

How is one educator, on his or her own *path*, to coordinate a room full of individuals traveling on their own? If this path is set before students as an invitation, do we then privilege those who elect to be vulnerable more than those who do not or cannot?

INVITING TRANSFORMATION

If "crisis and rupture are part of change, essential to transformation,"

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.220

as I agree they may be, then what kind of transformation are we inviting and hoping for?[8] Addressing the challenge of incorporating personal ruptures into educational spaces involves a delicate balance between fostering safe environments and acknowledging the transformative potential of confronting difficult experiences. Of course, personal and communal ruptures are inevitable aspects of life, and Vei and Thompson offer refreshing advice on addressing not just the ruptures that occur but also how individuals and communities respond to and heal from them. However, I am puzzled by the notion of these ruptures being invited or imposed. Intentionally introducing such experiences in a controlled educational setting raises ethical concerns, particularly when they stem from violence or trauma.

The possibilities for connection, community building, and coalition formation within educational spheres underscore the potential to develop ethical and compassionate strategies for navigating discomfort with openness. However, the valorization of ruptures and transformations raises critical questions about their inherent value and appropriateness. Anzaldúa claims that rupture "knocks one of the souls out of your body," prompting what we might consider an identity crisis.[9] While rupture-driven transformations can lead to positive change and are sometimes necessary responses to trauma, I acknowledge that not all individuals may benefit from continuous exposure to rupture or the expectation of constant openness to such transformative experiences. Thompson and Vei do not advocate for specific transformational outcomes, but rather the process and posture that invites those transformations. Neither are they urging teachers to assign the path to transformation. However, encouraging students to adopt a posture of vulnerability is not always in their best interest. It is not clear that students have the power to reject these invitations within the authority structures of education and the concern for stability, especially for young people, highlights the potential risks of advocating for a perpetual state of disruption. The challenge for educators lies in balancing the recognition of ruptures as significant and potentially beneficial experiences with a sustainable approach that respects the diverse needs of students, including the importance of frameworks that provide intelligibility and coherence.

A SINGULAR SPIRITUALITY

"Nepantla" is the space for lines to blur, but there is tension between honoring the spiritual commitments of Anzaldúa and maintaining the inclusivity of this approach. I appreciate that Vei and Thompson incorporates the spiritual dimension within activism; Anzaldúa claims her spirituality as central to her work. However, spirituality in this essay is enacted by incorporating a series of "compassionate practices" that stand independent from Anzaldúa's lasting commitment to the deep interwoven kinship amongst all living things and her explicit distancing from "New Age" and "conventional organized religions."[10]

> The 'safe' elements in Borderlands are procreated and used, and the 'unsafe' elements are not talked about…the connection between body, mind, and spirit– anything that has to do with the sacred, anything that has to do with the spirit. As long as it's theoretical… that's fine…but if you start talking about nepantla–this border between the spirit, the psyche, and the mind– they resist.[11]

To their credit, Vei and Thompson *are* engaging these sacred borderlands, but I wonder: Do they fully embrace the radical inclusivity and the deeply interwoven nature of *nepantla*—the spirituality and activism that Anzaldúa advocates for? If elevated to the level of the scientific and logical as she prefers, Anzaldúa's spiritual worldview complicates Vei's and Thompson's argument and draws distinct lines around *spiritual activism*. Throughout her writings, she assumes an interconnectedness that eclipses isolated identities, authority that comes from within the individual, one common human interest, and a moral obligation to dismantle oppressive social structures globally—and *nepantla* is rooted in these beliefs. Will "holding space" ask readers to embrace Anzaldúa's spiritual worldview in order to adopt *spiritual activism*? And if not, what is lost when we embrace the practices without their driving ideology?

CONCLUSION

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.220

Vei's and Thompson's essay offers a creative embodiment of spiritual activism in social-change contexts for educators who believe in the interconnectedness of all life and the transformative power of dissonance. As an educator, my heart is moved by the call for openness, embracing ambiguity, and slowing enough to "listen with raw openness." I am equally refreshed by the reminder that we cannot fight binaries with binaries. I offer this response as an invitation to think together about the practical implications of this vulnerability in charged, entangled educational spaces.

REFERENCES

1 Tangerine Vei and Audrey Thompson, "Holding Space for Vulnerability: Anzaldúa, Intersectional Inquiry, and Relational Between-Worlds," *Philosophy of Education* 82, no. 3 (same issue). https://doi.org/10.47925/80.3.205

2 AnaLouise Keating, "Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, and the Politics of Spirit," in *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Palgrave, 2005): 241–254; AnaLouise Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe': Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," *Feminist Studies* 34, no.½ (Spring–Summer 2008): 53-69. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403977137_24

3 Vei and Thompson, "Holding Space for Vulnerability," 12.

4 Vei and Thompson, "Holding Space for Vulnerability," 2.

5 Gloria Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift …The Path of Conocimiento…Inner Work, Public Acts," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002): 540-78.

6 Keating, "Shifting Perspectives," 244.

7 Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift," 546.

8 Vei and Thompson, "Holding Space for Vulnerability," 2.

9 Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift," 547.

10 Vei and Thompson, "Holding Space for Vulnerability," 9.

11 Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, eds., *Interview/Entrevistas*

(New York: Routledge, 2000), 159.

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.220