

Healing in the Flights of Uncertainty

"To be healed we must be dismembered, pulled apart. The healing occurs in disintegration, in the demotion of the ego as the self's only authority." — Gloria Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark (2015)

By Erika G. Abad

On giving my class assignments at my new job, I decided to teach *Light in the Dark*, because in returning to the West Coast, Xicana feminist thought felt necessary. It was also, as I told students, a selfish way to share my love for Anzaldúa. Within months of teaching it, my supervisor invites me to El Mundo Zurdo Conference. I agree on a whim, excited about the possibility to learn more from other scholars who appreciate what Anzaldúa contributes to critical consciousness. Deciding to go, somehow, feels like coming full circle from the years of dismembering to heal that had taken place not only in the years I spent on the periphery of the ivory tower and the culture of academic teaching and research. The process of buying the ticket, of relying on university colleagues to share resources with me to be able to afford the trip, contrasts to the uncertainty and wounded pride/integrity with which I grappled in 2008.

The fall of 2008, as a result of the economic crisis, forced many into the in-between spaces Anzaldúa calls *nepantla*,¹ whether intentional or not, to find healing in what was being dismembered in professional and creative possibilities in higher education. Then, I was a graduate student completing my coursework, watching the increase of anxiety in Ethnic and Gender Studies because of how university capitalist culture was growing increasingly reluctant to support the discipline not just on my campus but across public universities. Then, I also began coming out, further isolating myself, disillusioned with essentialist student activism as divisive as physical violence and institutional repression we sought to combat. It has taken eight years to recover the price I paid that academic year, gainfully employed as Faculty-in Residence at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Attending El Mundo Zurdo's Conference reconnects me with scholars I have met throughout the years as well as artists, students and activists whose work addresses the conference's theme *Nepantla: Theories and Practices*. During panels, presentations and community events, they each show the various ways they reconfigure their individual struggles, collective marginalization, and the greater Latinx, Xicanx oppression into tools of resistance and sites of healing. In this way, they remind me what of the dismemberment, the disintegration can make way for healing. To talk of writing, research against the work of artists, healers, curanderos, poets, performers as healing requires a turn to conference presenter and colleague Eddy Alvarez Jr's work on "sequins in the rubble." Talking to him about wanting to write about this paper, he sends me his forthcoming article, of the same name.

In "Finding Sequins in the Rubble," Eddy Alvarez explains that finding sequins is about storytelling, archival practices and "queer world-making" (619). He uses Los Angeles-based *jot@s* oral histories he had conducted to ground his theoretical claim, as their use of fashion is one of many forms of resistance in response to the violence their communities face. Alvarez's theoretical framework can also be applied to those of us who work in the ivory tower, in higher education. Participating in the El Mundo Zurdo Conference provides scholars an opportunity of aesthetic as resistance through discourse, reflection and relation beyond the limitations and boundaries of traditional academic communities. There, we engage with practitioners, healers, artists and performers as well as other scholars. Two of the first conversations I have on arriving on site embody that as they reflect and relate the disintegration and the potential of building Gender and/or Ethnic Studies on different campuses.

I walk in at the close of lunch a former professor invites me to take one of the unclaimed plates of food. She catches me up on the continued dissolution of the department. Where they will go is the question looming among faculty. When I arrived a decade ago, ethnic and gender studies were separate, excited with their potential for growth. When I left the campus after completing coursework in 2009, the economic crisis promised to merge them into one collective unit. The news echoes the reality of various campuses shrinking as a result of funding, faculty and prestige loss. Despite the political ethical need of such departments in retaining marginalized students, not all regions are in the place for growth. My own department an example of merger in recovery from post-2008 economic crisis.

As attendees head out of the lunch, another late arriver joins me, taking the remaining unclaimed food. After we exchange cards, she begins talking to me about how her college is in a position of growth. She talks about the potential to build a Xicanx, African-American and or Ethnic Studies Program. She asks my perspective on what is more strategic. I explain what I had learned from what happened in my doctoral program as well as from more recent conversations with other similar departments and programs. I am optimistic for what her campus's opportunity to grow would mean for a student body that reflects the need for the diversification of material being taught. She is optimistic for what it would mean for pedagogical creative potential. Our conversation concludes on our shared excitement and gratitude for working with raza students among other students of color on our respective campuses.

While these stories emerge outside of the formal conference panels, they embody a form of nepantla in practice. While the former university's Ethnic and Gender Studies Program is continuing to decline, the latter university has the opportunity considers its potential. Both reflect the uncertainty in healing through the work within the classroom because of the external factors that can hinder or empower our pedagogy. These Xicanas' explanations of where their campuses lie and what it means for their work speak to unrecognized feelings that many within intersectional interdisciplinary disciplines feel. Reflecting on the varied realities of the fields inspires a turn to the erotic, as Audre Lorde defines it: "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (53). Where to go and what to do in times of shift and change is neither clear nor easy to define.

Scholars reflect on this uncertainty in safe, friendly company such as these. More established scholars advise junior scholars on how to think strategically about professional stability in this unstable market. In talking to Eddy Alvarez, he recommends I read M. Jacqui Alexander given that I, as a Boricua, want to compare Caribbean and Xicana feminist thought. As I begin writing this essay, I borrow *This Bridge We Call from Home*, from departmental colleague Anita Revilla to read Alexander's "Remembering *This bridge*, Remembering Ourselves: Yearning, Memory and Desire" (2002).

In it, Alexander writes that the bridge between the spiritual and the political is "formed by the erotic, the sensual, those physical, emotional and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us...the passionate of love in its deepest meaning" (96-7). The 'love' of which Alexander speaks requires distance with the hope of return. El Mundo Zurdo Conference distances scholars from the limits and boundaries of traditional academic institutions and associations. There, we can present our work alongside organic intellectuals who influenced mujerista consciousness in their community-based projects, as well as in their individual literary, performative and visual projects.

Throughout the weekend, theory and practice overlap, create conflict and re-open poorly healed wounds as, together, presenters, performers, curandera/os, harness what is deepest and strongest within each of them as inspired by Anzaldúa's words, writings, life and legacy. Coming together in

Texas at this conference fulfills, if only temporarily. the yearning and desire of which Alexander writes. It is a yearning and desire that calls us to re-member ourselves; to re-member the spirit behind what we produce, why we produce it and the decolonial efforts we each attempt to embody.

Not alone in our loneliness



The panel titled “Narrating the Shape-Shifting Realities of the Thresholds of Nepanta: Decolonizing Anzaldúan Scholarship,” focuses on the *Light in the Dark*’s chapter titled “Flights of the Imagination” (Dahms, Betsy; Ana Louise Keating and Kelli Zartoun, 2016). In “Flights of the Imagination,” Anzaldúa opens the chapter conversing with la Virgen’s tree, explaining that “the tree is teaching [her]perceive...with [her] physical eyes but also with the whole body” (24). The perception of which she speaks is about what can be imagined, not just in the mind, but in the mind-body-spirit. Panel participant Betsy Dahm’s extension of the tree’s lessons, takes me back to the summer of 2008 and what the trees under which I read and wrote taught me. The 2008 summer trees taught me, as I read, wrote and slept, about listening to insights that I often take for granted. Not just from those outside me but from those within me as well as those that emerge in relation, a reminder provided at another panel the following day.

During “Nepantler@ Visionaries: A Discussion of Historical Trauma, Ancestral/Familial Resilience and Border-Crossing Movements in Higher Education,” Angelica Labuguen, Itzel Corona, Richard Giddens, Jr., Susana Ramírez discuss the generational, spiritual and political borders they each had to cross in higher education. One panelist shares how the healing work they do with their higher education is grounded in the ancestral knowledge their parents gave them, often more than their formal degrees. The rising scholars share testimony regarding how writing and or teaching about social justice does not necessarily translate into action when it comes to advocating for students like them—undocumented, queer, survivors of sexual assault and/or femme. They stress that healing with words and with integration is not enough; that to overcome what institutions, grounded in patriarchy and Western Euro-centric knowledge, often expect us to forget, to never want to remember.

It is in remembering and re-membering, Anzaldúa’s *Light in the Dark* explains, that I re-member the mind-body-spirit, my experiences in graduate school almost broke. It has taken eight years to recover because I needed to stop caring about the imposed borders and create in-between spaces in which my work could embody the healing I needed it to embody. It also required distance from the aftereffects of the economic crisis as well as the social-professional backlash of coming out while recovering from my mind-body-spirit’s response to the conflicting anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication I had been taking through 2009. I achieved recovery by walking away from the culture of academia twice. First, by working in a suburban Chicago nonprofit, facilitating youth leadership. Then, on finishing my dissertation, another four years in which I attempted to apply what I had

learned in various community-based projects, which healed the remaining wounds that could not be addressed in that earlier year of working with immigrant youth and their families. As I do both the work that is expected by the dominant culture of higher education and the work that aims to repair the injuries that emerge through the process, conferences like El Mundo Zurdo Conference put me back together.

There, I had the opportunity to engage with practitioners 'outside' the university/ivory tower. The scholars with whom I spoke, writers with whom I engaged, performers and healers I observed "balance [multiple] worldview[s]; [they] move between them to a space that simultaneously exists and does not exist, "embodying varied forms of 'nepantla' "(29). Our ability to relate to each other is that space that does and does not exist, given what continues to change within and around us. Our relation to the potential of what the erotic can produce gets reinvigorated. Here, the loneliness in disrupting the gatekeeping, whitewashing of our indigenous knowledge that takes place in the ivory tower is not alone. Here, we meet, catch up and otherwise interact with fellow practitioners that remind us we are not alone in what we dare to imagine or in how we dare to hope.

References

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Light in the Dark Luz en lo Oscuro Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, edited by Ana Louise Keating. Duke University Press, 2015.

Angelica Labuguen, Itzel Corona, Richard Giddens, Jr., Susana Ramírez. "Nepantler@ Visionaries: A Discussion of Historical Trauma, Ancestral/Familial Resilience and Border-Crossing Movements in Higher Education," El Mundo Zurdo Conference Nepantla: Theories and Practices. University of Texas, San Antonio, TX, November 5, 2016.

Celeste De Luna, Liliana Wilson, Verónica Castillo, Lourdes Pérez, and Anel Flores. "Artistic Expressions which Contest, Decolonize, Liberate, and Heal." El Mundo Zurdo Conference Nepantla: Theories and Practices. University of Texas, San Antonio, TX, November 4, 2016.

Dahms, Betsy; Ana Louise Keating and Kelli Zaytoun. "Narrating the Shape-Shifting Realities of the Thresholds of Nepanta: Decolonizing Anzaldúan Scholarship." El Mundo Zurdo Conference Nepantla: Theories and Practices, University of Texas, San Antonio, TX, November 4, 2016.

Alvarez Jr, Eddy Francisco; Richard Giddens Jr; Roberto Perez-Gutierrez. "Auto-ethnographic Nepantler@s: (Re)mapping and (Re)membering Jotería Spaces through Autohistoria, Disidentification, and Testimonio." El Mundo Zurdo Conference Nepantla: Theories and Practices University of Texas, San Antonio, TX, November 5, 2016.

Alvarez Jr, Eddy Francisco. "Finding Sequins in the Rubble." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Volume 3, Numbers 3-4, 2016, pp 618-627.

Alexander, M. Jaqui. "Remembering *This Bridge*, Remembering Ourselves: Yearning, Memory, and Desire." *This Bridge We Call Home Radical Visions for Transformation* edited by Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating. Routledge, New York and London, 2002, pp 81-103.

Endnotes

¹ "Nepantla is the threshold of transformation...nepantla is that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving into one place from another; when traveling from the present identity into a new identity."

(Anzaldúa, "Border Arte, el lugar de la frontera," *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*: 56)

Erika G Abad is an Assistant Professor in Residence at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Department of Interdisciplinary, Gender and Ethnic Studies.

This entry was posted in [Chicana and Chicano Studies](#), [Professionalization](#) and tagged [borderlands](#), [El Mundo Zurdo](#), [Erika G. Abad](#) on [February 7, 2017](#) by [mujerestalk](#).