CONOCIMIENTOS DE UNA MAESTRA: A Teacher's Path to Healing

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Abstract: This essay is an autohistoria using Anzaldúa's (2002) theoretical construct of the seven stages of conocimiento to document a teacher's difficult journey from a high school classroom, to community activism, to a doctoral program. This Chicana feminist methodology and theoretical model of transformation provides a way to critically examine the author's lived experiences, including professional and personal arrebatos that ultimately lead to new ways of knowing. The author's use of self-reflexivity aids in her conceptualization of the process of conocimiento as she unpacks her professional and personal pain in attempting to redefine herself in her current identity as an emerging scholar.

The first arrebato, or earthquake (Anzaldúa 2015), in my professional career occurred the day I walked out on my teaching job in the middle of a contracted school year. I sat in the teacher's parking lot wiping away my tears and trying to avoid passing out from shock as the principal stood outside of the school building doors waiting for me to drive away from the school grounds. After nearly twenty years of teaching experience at the secondary level, I found myself—a second-generation educator—being escorted out of the building like some sort of criminal. Not even the antidepressants prescribed to me during the school year could help calm my fears, frustration, and anxiety at that moment. My sense of reality, identity, and ways of knowing were destroyed; yet at the same time, leaving the institution of public education felt like the only sane option for me. I did not understand that at that moment, I was undergoing a shift of consciousness, beginning a journey along "un camino de conocimiento" (Anzaldúa 2002, 540) which would lead me to walk away from a profession that at one point in my life was fulfilling.

The task of healing myself, of "creating a new description of reality" (Anzaldúa 2002, 545) has been one which includes frequent forays into what Anzaldúa describes as the path to "conocimiento." Conocimiento can be translated into the term "knowledge," and Anzaldúa describes conocimiento as a nonlinear journey towards spiritual healing comprised of seven stages (2002; 2015). Conocimiento is an intense restorative process that is relational and enables those who undergo it to gain insight from painful events, experiences, and realities (2002; 2015). It is a process of transformation, and I document in this autohistoria how it included professional (classroom) and personal (home) arrebatos, a whirlwind of job transitions, a first marriage, the loss of a parent, a second child, and activism. I am in constant transition, learning to live fluidly in the ambiguous space of nepantla (Anzaldúa 2015). I employ Anzaldúa's (2002) stages of conocimiento to share my journey of reflection and transformation from classroom teacher to doctoral student. Autohistoria has been used by scholars of color to intervene and transform "traditional western autobiographical forms" (Anzaldúa 2015, 243). It is a methodology informed by personal reflexivity within the service of social justice work (Anzaldúa 2015). This autohistoria draws on Anzaldúa's theory of conocimiento and Chicana feminist epistemology to understand the arrebatos I experienced over the past several years. Anzaldúa's groundbreaking text *Borderlands/La frontera* (1987) helped me realize the ways in which my epistemologies as a Chicana were pivotal in understanding the power of my inner self, "the entity that is the sum total of my reincarnations" (72). Through my autohistoria, I reflect on and make sense of the hardships I've endured and the activist work I currently engage in with family, friends, community, and the larger academic world as an emerging scholar. In narrating and theorizing my journey, I have been able to find ways to put the pieces of myself together and engage in acts of spiritual activism to heal myself and others (Anzaldúa 2015).

Conocimiento

In addition to meaning "knowledge," conocimiento can also refer to consciousness. Anzaldúa conceptualizes conocimiento as a difficult and recursive trek towards a type of consciousness rooted in a social justice praxis she calls spiritual activism (2015). She fleshed out seven stages of conocimiento (2015), which can occur independently or simultaneously, within a single moment, or over time. These are arrebatos, nepantla, Coatlicue state, crossing or compromise, Coyolxauhqui, chaos, and spiritual activism. These phases are not linear or finite, but each interval she demarcated has allowed me to articulate my journey from second-generation teacher to doctoral student, to map out how I learned to unpack and reflect on my experiences for the purpose of self-growth and personal healing. This autohistoria details this undertaking.

Los Arrebatos

Classroom arrebatos. In the first stage of conocimiento, a person is unsettled by a jolt or rupture, what Anzaldúa calls arrebatos (Anzaldúa 2002; 2015). My experiences as a teacher of color within the context of high-stakes testing in Texas resulted in an arrebato of the classroom. To explain how I came to suffer from this arrebato, I will briefly overview how I came to be a high school English teacher.

My educational trajectory began as a Spanish-speaking Brown student in Texas public schools. As a product of Texas public high schools, I was exposed to curriculum centered on colonial ideologies and experienced the whitewashing of history, beginning with a kindergarten English-only language immersion program at five years old (Memmi 2013; Valenzuela 1999). I spent most of my years in Texas as a Brown student who internalized whiteness all through her K-20 years, including in the teacher certification program (DiAngelo 2018).

My teaching career as a second-generation educator began in 1999 in San Antonio, Texas at an urban school called Fox Tech High School, the very same campus that my father was pushed out from before he enlisted in the Army and was sent to fight in Vietnam in the 1960s (Valenzuela 1999). I was a teacher of color teaching English to mostly Latina/o/x, Black, and migrant students. When I first started teaching, my naiveté had me believing I would be sharing my love of literature with students. To my surprise, I quickly learned the impact of high-stakes testing in Texas public schools, and even though I despised the state assessments (Valenzuela 1999), I excelled at teaching to them. I became complicit in the myth of an accountability system where I focused on the basics, emphasized rote learning, taught to the test, and promoted an English-only curriculum (Flores and Riojas Clark 2003). I confess it here and now: I took the beautiful narratives by Isabel Allende and Gabriel García Márquez and turned them into multiple choice items and short-answer questions to mimic the tested items found on the state assessments. I do not think there is anything sadder than taking a poem by Maya Angelou and creating multiple choice test questions about it, but the pressure of high stakes testing forced me to format our engagement of literature to mirror the configured test structure. I spent countless hours finding diverse and engaging authors and creating thematic unified lessons, complete with standardized exam questions, to use in my classroom. I could probably package them all now and sell them for a profit.

Because we equate strong teachers with high test scores in schools, teachers with the highest scores are often assigned the grade levels that are tested year after year. That is what happened to me. For seventeen years, I taught students in tested-grade levels, which are either high school sophomores or juniors. Testing and accountability ratings are paramount in Texas public schools, and I beheld the end of TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) only to feel the pressures of the new STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness)

exams, relying on classroom pedagogies that ultimately harmed students of color (McNeil and Valenzuela 2000). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy, along with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and for-profit testing companies, have led to educational reforms in which school accountability is measured through students' performances on state assessments. Unfortunately, these policies lend themselves to unequitable practices at the expense of Brown and Black students (McNeil and Valenzuela 2000). Over my teaching career, I witnessed the beginnings of the privatization of public education. Administrators put a tremendous burden on teachers to get students to pass these exams, and as a result, both teachers and students are faltering in these high-stakes testing environments (Valencia and Villarreal 2003). Policymakers, educators, and administrators know that higher socioeconomic populations will always outperform lower socioeconomic communities on these state assessments. Tests do not measure much except for the socioeconomic status (SES) of your school. As much as I could, I tried to incorporate the texts and authors that I knew would work best for my students, believing that "reading and writing books that show Chicanos in a positive way becomes part of decolonizing, disindoctrinating ourselves from the oppressive messages we've been given" (Anzaldúa 2000, 245). However, as a tested-grade level teacher in a core subject, it proved difficult to escape the shadow of the score results at the end of year. A teacher's reputation is measured by how well students perform on the standardized tests.

And so, I do not know exactly when in my career I finally compromised my beliefs and made a deal with the state assessment devil. I justified my decisions by telling myself my role as a classroom teacher in a tested-grade subject was to get my students to graduate from high school so they could continue on the path of higher education. Higher education helped me to gain my independence, and I shared that fact regularly with my students. I taught students who were in gangs, whose family members were in and out of prison, and who were from low-socioeconomic

backgrounds—they all wanted to be a part of the American dream we sell them. At the end of the day, I reasoned that I had to focus on the tests if I were to give my students a fighting chance in an already broken system. I felt obligated to ensure they pass those tests in order to graduate. So, I began to teach to the test and I excelled at this. You could say the hours I put in were worth the high score test results at the end of the year, but the spirit knows when it is being cheated and my spirit was not fulfilled. Even worse, I knew I was cheating my students' spirit.

Arrebatos of the home. The gut wrenching arrebato of my personal life was losing my father—a first-generation educator—to colon cancer in the winter of 2006. I had immense admiration for my father. It was because of him that I became a teacher. My father was pushed out of school as a teenager in San Antonio in the 1960s. He was told by a teacher, "You'll never amount to anything," and he was tracked into vocational classes with teachers that neither cared about or nor valued the experiences of Brown kids and their communities (Valenzuela 1999). It made sense for him to leave this negative environment and enlist in the army. He served and came back from Vietnam with only a month and a half left of his enlistment requirements because his grandmother passed away in her mid-90s. To this day, my family believes my great grandmother's passing saved my father from the violence in Vietnam. When he came back, he used his G.I. Bill to earn his GED and then his bachelor's degree to become a certified teacher in the school district in which he grew up. My dad retired from teaching only to be diagnosed with stage four cancer a mere month later, never even earning a modest $50,000 teacher's salary. He passed over to the spirit world three short years later.

I numbed myself with Vicodin to get through the funeral of my father, and I found myself overwhelmed with my grief. It was precisely as Anzaldúa describes it:

> Cada arrebatada (snatching) turns your world upside down and cracks the walls of your reality, resulting in a great sense of loss, grief,

> and emptiness, leaving behind dreams, hopes, and goals. You are no longer who you used to be. As you move from past presuppositions and frames of reference, letting go of former positions you feel like an orphan, abandoned, by all that's familiar. Exposed, naked, disoriented, wounded, uncertain, confused, and conflicted, you're forced to live en la orilla—a razor sharp edge that fragments you. (Anzaldúa 2015, 125)

Living in la orilla made it difficult to be there emotionally for my first-born son and high school students. I remember spending many nights sobbing and struggling with an overwhelming sense of loss and despair throughout the day. The anger inside me was immeasurable. My father spent his life working in the fields of South Texas, picking cotton alongside mis abuelitos. He was insulted and dehumanized as a Mexican American youth in Texas schools, only to return to be a teacher of color in his community—a role model for Brown students, someone from the barrio who overcame adversity with the support of la familia. He worked long hours as a teacher. I remember him telling us that at the beginning of his teaching career, he taught summer school in buildings with no air conditioning. When I urged him to transfer to a higher paying school district as he reached retirement so that his pension would be based on a higher paying salary, he would silently shake his head and say, "This is who I am and where I come from." For him to be diagnosed with cancer only a month after retirement and then die shortly after filled me with so much rage. It was unfair. I was angry and confused. I began to question everything.

Nepantla

According to Anzaldúa, the second phase of conocimiento is nepantla, the place where we come into conflict with different perspectives after experiencing arrebatos; it is where you begin to question the ideas and beliefs

you have adopted and accepted from family members, teachers, the media, and dominant cultures (2002). Arrebatos shake a person from the safe and familiar to this stage of nepantla—a space of transition where a person is more accepting of new ways of thinking (Anzaldúa 2002; 2015). This space fosters both critical reflexivity and ambiguity, and if you allow yourself to linger in this space, a new identity will emerge (Anzaldúa 2002; 2015). What I did not realize then—but understand now—was that the grief of losing my father, and my frustrations with my teaching career were critical moments of my transition, part of my walk as a nepantlera. Anzaldúa (2015) states:

> You can't stand living according to the old terms—yesterday's mode of consciousness pinches like an outgrown shoe. Craving change, you yearn to open yourself and honor the space/time between transitions. Coyolxauhqui's light in the night ignites your longing to engage with the world beyond the horizon you've grown accustomed to. (128)

I experienced the remolinos, the whirlwinds (Anzaldúa 2002): ones that overwhelmed me with new perceptions of myself as a teacher; ones that had me questioning the traditional models of education; ones that had me figuring out how to exist in this world as a fatherless daughter. At the time, I felt out of place, lost, and restless. What I did not understand was that I was at the threshold of evolving. I now know nepantla is the space in which I spend most of my time; the feeling of the unknown is where I struggle to accept as a point of indubitable transition and uncertainty. I remind myself that this interstice is often where I need to be, and I strive to trust I will eventually be rooted again.

The Coatlicue State

The chaos of nepantla shifts into the third stage, or Coatlicue state. In this place, one is troubled by new ideas and perspective and, therefore, resists this

new information and knowledge (Anzaldúa 2002; 2015). In the Coatlicue state, a person finds themselves in a state of anguish that leaves them depressed and paralyzed by inaction (Anzaldúa 2002; 2015). This happened to me when I ignored sage advice and intuition about using writing as a way to heal.

In the spring of 2007, inspired by an author's talk at an English teachers' conference, I organized an author visit at my high school campus. My students had read Victor Villaseñor's *Walking Stars* (1994) in my classroom, and the book had become especially significant for me because I shared a passage from the book with my sick father one afternoon as we sat outside his backyard a few months before his death. In the particular scene we read together, two men discuss the differing perspectives of death between Americans and Mexicanos:

> "You know," I told him once, "in the United States people are afraid of getting old and dying. How come you aren't?" I'll never forget, he took off his hat and wiped the inside of his brim with the handkerchief that I'd given him. "They must be fools," he said, "because dying is returning to God. Don't you know that once, a long, long time ago, we were all part of God, and we were at peace, but then there was a big explosion of love and we went flying off into little pieces, each of us becoming our own tiny star, and when we die, we return to God, and that's when we wake up … and really live." (Villaseñor 1994, 37-38)

Reading this passage with my dying father was elucidating. Both my father and I knew he would be leaving the earthly realm soon, and to share this literature together was a way of connecting. I reached out to Villaseñor shortly after my father's passing about visiting my students, and the administration allocated funds for his visit. The event was a success for our school and our students, and it was by far one of my proudest moments as a teacher.

As his host, I was able to spend some one-on-one time with him during his stay. One evening, Villaseñor and I sat in his hotel room and drank tequila while we talked about writing. He showed me his handwritten draft of his upcoming memoir *Crazy Loco Love* (2008). We talked about writing as an act of spirituality, of living and of healing. Somewhere in that sacred space, I opened up to him about losing my father. Here I was, in a hotel room with an acclaimed published author, exposing my vulnerability and my grief. In between sobs, I remember expressing my desire to write about my father and the difficulties I had in putting pen to paper. I said through tears, "I should write about my dad. I know it will somehow heal me. But I don't even know where to start. I'm in so much pain."

Villaseñor stared at me for what seemed like a long pause, then clapped slowly and loudly. He nodded his head silently in agreement. He took a few deep breaths, in and out, and asked me to do the same. Then he told me to rest for a minute before I went home. I laid on the bed for a few minutes, while he went to his desk and wrote his manuscript. I felt peace and calmness, drifting asleep to the sound of his pen whispering across the paper. I drove home that evening feeling a strong connection between my father, Villaseñor, the gnawing desire of writing to heal, and my ancestors.

But I suppressed the desire to write. Writing takes time. It requires discipline. It is a craft that requires emotional stamina. I was a high school teacher and a single mom dealing with the death of my father; desperately lonely and wanting to meet someone to save me. I did not envision myself as a writer. I made so many excuses to avoid doing the work. I would stay up late at night and write in my journals and then just stop, telling myself the act of journal writing was silly. A couple of times, I tried to write poetry and some short stories, but my confidence was shattered. I felt so fragmented, so empty. I remember one afternoon sitting down

to write about the day my father passed over to the spirit world. I sat for hours reliving the memory of my personal arrebato, and it nearly broke me. At the end of this spell, I was on my bedroom floor curled up like a baby, heaving in sobs and pain. I could not go back to the computer for a long time after that.

The pain of unlearning is difficult and raw. Anzaldúa describes it best as lying "in a fetal curl clutching the fragmented pieces and bits of yourself you've disowned" (2015, 130). You find ways to numb yourself to get through the pain. For me, it was popping an extra pill here and there in a vain attempt to dull the pain of my broken heart. Little by little, a glass of wine at dinner became two glasses, then eventually the entire bottle at one sitting. The depression was real and painful. I could not get out of bed somedays, forcing myself to call for a substitute teacher to cover my classes. Other days, I needed my sister or mother to come and help care for my son, who was elementary school-aged at the time. I wandered off the path of conocimiento many times during this Coatlicue state. The agony was part of conocimiento's process, and I needed to feel the physical and emotional torment in order to experience personal growth. This apprehension came later, of course, when I realized the detour was part of the process of conocimiento. Anzaldúa states, "Coyolxauhqui's luz pulls you from the pit of your grief" (2015, 133).

The Call, El Compromiso

The fourth state of conocimiento is the call for action, a catalyst to move away from the Coatlicue state (Anzaldúa 2002). Anzaldúa explains this phase as crossing a bridge from the world one has left to the world that lies ahead, and the crossing is uncomfortable, one that will "… overturn all your relationships, leave behind lover, parent, friend, who, not wanting to disturb the status quo nor lose you, try to keep you from changing" (Anzaldúa 2002, 557). I was questioning what impacts and differences I was making as a classroom teacher in a system designed to marginalize students of color. I was tired of top-down

reform, the never-ending cycle of standardized testing, and just an overall feeling of detachment from the classroom. I lacked autonomy and creativity, and was exasperated by micromanagement styles of leadership that treated teachers as students. Coupled with the pain and depression of losing my father, I could not find my footing. In this distressed state, I accepted a marriage proposal and moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, with my new husband. I kept applying for teaching jobs because, what else was I supposed to do?

In my new teaching position, I butted heads with a principal who helped write the district's curriculum. As such, she expected me to teach the curriculum in strict, sequential detail, much like following a cooking recipe. She even dictated how to design my lesson plan format, giving me a specific fill-in-the blank format to follow. My spirit was suffocating. Teaching is an art, and teachers are artists constantly working at refining their craft. I struggled to follow her directives, and grappled even more at keeping quiet about them. I despised my job so much that I had to visit a doctor about my feelings of depression and anxiety. I was prescribed Cymbalta, and although it helped a little, I did not follow through with talk therapy as recommended. About halfway through the year, after yet another argument with an administrator who waved his finger in my face, I quit. I remember moving in a state of silent shock as I walked back to my classroom and began collecting my things. I felt like a loser, like something was wrong with me. Colleagues came in and out of my room pleading for me not to resign, to stick it out. I felt so out of place as a teacher. What was happening to me? I was caught between the cracks of being the complacent uncritical teacher and sinking further in my detachment. I knew I wasn't the only critical teacher on my campus, but I was one of the few vocal ones. All I wanted was to teach what I knew worked best for my students, but I was exhausted with traditional Western standards governing the way we do schooling. They had made me figuratively and literally sick.

I realized I was ready to cross the bridge and leave the classroom. I had no idea what lay in store for me. But I knew the space behind the teacher's desk was no longer a place where I fit in. I was no longer the same person.

My friends and colleagues attributed my feeling as a result of being "burned out," but my spirit was restless, out of place, evolving. I was beginning to shift. I had acquired a different way of knowing myself as an educator. Anzaldúa explains how identity is fluid, and like a river it is "… always in transition, always in nepantla" (2015, 135). To transform myself as a woman and as a teacher after the arrebatos would require crossing a new bridge, a bridge that "… is both a barrier and point of transformation" (Anzaldúa 2015, 137). So, I listened a little harder to the inner voice, what Anzaldúa describes as the voice that helps you discover the work you were meant to do:

> Your inner voice reveals your core passion, which will point to your sense of purpose, urging you to seek a vision, devise a plan. Your passion motivates you to discover resources within yourself and in the world. It prompts you to take responsibility for consciously creating your life and becoming a fully functioning human being, a contributing member of all your communities, one worthy of self-respect and love. You want to pursue your mission with integrity, to honor yourself and be honored. (2015, 136-137)

In order to pursue my mission, I had to make the leap alone and of my own will, but crossing the bridge alone was not easy, and I had to trust that some inner source would carry me "… across the critical threshold" (Anzaldúa 2015, 137). It was difficult processing all these new ideas because change is hard. However, once you step through the threshold, Anzaldúa assures, "You are not alone; those of the invisible realm walk with you; there are ghosts on every bridge" (2015,

137). For me, the ghosts that walk with me are my antepasados—my father, mis abuelas, the teachers of color before me.

Putting Coyolxauhqui Together

The fifth state of conocimiento is where one searches for order and attempts to map out a new reality for oneself (Delgado Bernal and Elenes 2011). In the previous four stages of conocimiento, one has gone through the process of "dismantling the body/self," and so in this fifth stage, one goes about trying to recompose oneself, but you end up seeing "… through the illusion of permanence—the fantasy that you can pull yourself together once and for all and live happily ever after" (Anzaldúa 2002, 562). Before I left Corpus Christi, I had the opportunity to help with a proposal to add a Mexican American studies course to the high school's course catalogue. Certain that students were hungry for literature that reflected themselves, it was a personal goal of mine to design and teach a Mexican American literature or ethnic studies course. I wanted to create a class where students could move away from the inflexibility of standardized testing and into a space of voices similar to their own. It did not matter whether I taught the course or not; I just knew the class was needed. I worked with a former colleague, who was a novice teacher and a dear friend, and encouraged her to be the teacher of record for the course. Together we completed the necessary paperwork, created an outline for the curriculum, and reached out to parents and students in the community to encourage their support for the course. The process was a reminder of why I had devoted myself to the teaching profession. We designed the very first Mexican American studies course to be offered at that campus, only to have the course cancelled at the start of the academic school year to make room for another English STAAR remediation class. We were both dejected. I found myself again suffering "otro espanto, another dislocation" (Anzaldúa 2002, 562).

Anzaldúa explains how Coyolxauhqui's consciousness, helps us to "… see through the illusion of permanence—the fantasy that you can pull yourself together once and for all and live happily ever after" (2015, 142). In learning that the class would not be made available to students the following school year, I paid close attention to my reactions to this new adversity. This awareness allowed me to create a new narrative of myself. I was no longer a classroom teacher, but a teacher leader. Anzaldúa states, "Connecting the disparate parts of information from a new perspective, you re-member Coyolxauhqui in a new composition, temporarily restoring your balance and wounded psyche" (2015, 143). I was beginning to understand that an emphasis on the end product is not what is most important. Rather, it is the process that is most valuable; the work in putting the class together at that moment was pivotal for the future. The work we engaged in together as mujeres to get the ball rolling for the students on the campus was meaningful, and it was the point of my emerging identity from classroom teacher to something I still was unsure of; for I could not name what was happening at the time.

The Blow-Up . . . A Clash of Realities

In the sixth state of conocimiento, you go out to your community to share and test this new map of reality of yourself and "the contradictions explode in your face" (Anzaldúa 2002, 567). The sixth stage is another clash of realities, where one "must alter their mode of interaction—make it more inclusive, open," (567) ultimately leading to the seventh stage of spiritual activism. I had accepted my decision to leave the teaching profession, and while unsure of my next steps, felt secure that I could no longer be complicit in a system that did not value my expertise as a teacher of color.

As I mentioned, many of my educator friends and acquaintances characterized my decision as a result of being "burned out." I insist, rather, that I left teaching

because I could only impact minimal change at the classroom level; that as a classroom teacher, I was limited in enacting transformational change. I wholeheartedly believe in the power of a teacher. A passionate and experienced teacher is extremely powerful for young students. I know that from experience. Rarely will a student come back to tell you of your impact, but the simple act of exposing a student to a book, story, or author they would normally never read, has the ability to lead a student to question, critique, and search for new paradigms to solve problems. Producing these "light bulb" moments are what I most love about teaching. But I realized I wanted to change the systems and structures that limit these moments. I could no longer be content to squeeze in culturally competent pedagogy and curriculum in order to eke out these small instances of epiphany. And I recognized I had gone into this career not fully realizing the delimitations that would be placed on my desire to reach students like me.

Teaching in any school that serves predominately low-income students is hard work. This is absolute verdad. When beginning teachers now ask me about applying to schools or districts with high percentages of students of color, I ask them pointedly, "Do you want to work in high-income schools or low-income schools? What are your core beliefs about poverty? What are your core beliefs about race?" Most will stand there with blank stares on their faces and mouths open in disbelief of these questions, which reaffirms for me that teacher preparation programs are not talking nor training future teachers about the realities of teaching. We are not preparing our teachers to be critical of a system that continues to marginalize students of color, and these programs gloss over what will be one of the most challenging professions they choose to enter. We then wonder why most teachers leave between their third and fifth years of the profession (Stovall 2016).

Shortly after I left the classroom and gained this clarity about my choice, my family and I moved from Corpus Christi back home to San Antonio. To save

money, we moved in with my mother temporarily, and I found part-time work at a community business research center. Soon, my husband and I learned I was pregnant. I was 41-years old, working a part-time job, unsure of my next career move and was now expecting a baby. I was worried about the financial pressures of adding another family member to our lives and, although I had begun to feel confident about leaving my teaching career, the news of an upcoming baby had me doubting my decision. Anzaldúa describes this process as follows:

> You think you've made progress, gained a new awareness, found a new version of reality, created a workable story, fulfilled an obligation and followed your own conscience. But when you cast to the world what you've created and put your ideals into action, the contradictions explode in your face. Your story fails the reality test. (2015, 147-148)

The news of the baby while in this state of ambiguity only intensified my doubts and anxieties. I found myself questioning myself and my decisions. I put tremendous pressure on myself by engaging in a vicious cyclical dialogue that I was going backwards in my life. A serendipitous moment led me to an advertisement for a community Mexican American studies class for youth. Because of my interest in incorporating these histories and knowledge into the educational trajectories of Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x students, I decided to attend the class and see how I could help.

Spiritual Activism

The seventh state of conocimiento is "… a space for engaging in ethical and compassionate strategies that allow for negotiation of conflict and difference and building alliances with others" (Delgado Bernal and Elenes 2011, 103). Once I was back in San Antonio, the advertisement for a MAS (Mexican

American studies) for the Masses—an alternative educational site for local San Antonio youth that offered Mexican American studies curriculum and pedagogy—led me to become acquainted with its founder, a mujer named Moni Avila. We have since become dear friends. Moni is a mother and full-time college student who is a firm believer in the power of grassroots mobilization. She decided she needed to create space for youth to engage Mexican American studies since it was not part of their K-12 public education in Texas. I enrolled my son in the summer course in 2015, and once she got to know me, Moni asked if I would teach a workshop that summer. I agreed, and over the past five years, we have organized and conducted free, arts-based community workshops centered on the history and knowledge of Mexican Americans, often partnering with school districts or other educational sites to offer Mexican American studies classes outside of the traditional school system to students and their families in the San Antonio area. Most of our participants are K-12 youth, parents, and senior citizens. As a grassroots organization, we have neither a steady funding source or formal building space. We plan everything from our kitchen tables. My commitment to this endeavor is my way of giving back to my community, especially to those who otherwise would never have access to a Mexican American studies or ethnic studies course. I believe the work we do is what Anzaldúa describes as spiritual activism (2002). She explains, "Through activist and creative work you help heal yourself and others" (2015, 88). Working with Moni and MAS for the Masses has allowed me to learn how to use my skills as an educator to engage in community activism.

In hindsight, I can also now appreciate why I was drawn to designing the Mexican American literature course for my former school in Corpus Christi. It, too, was a form of spiritual activism my self needed to feel whole and healed. My former colleague informed me that a year after I left, she successfully got

the class back in the course catalogue. It is an elective literature course titled "Literary Genres: Cultures and Traditions" which focuses on authors of color. The class includes literature, film, and music from diverse artists. She currently teaches the course and has shared her students' excitement in reading and studying texts that reflect their lived experiences as minoritized youth. My friend has also shared with me how the class validates her as a teacher of color.

Undoubtedly, the process of creating the Mexican American literature course and engaging in the MAS for the Masses community work was a way of putting back together the pieces of me. Anzaldúa defines healing "… as taking back the scattered energy and soul loss wrought by woundings" (2015, 89). She explains that "the problem is part of the cure" and that "you don't heal the wound; the wound heals you" (89). The ruptures and tears we experience allow us opportunities to "dialogue with the wound" (89) and this dialogue then enables us "… to imagine ways of going through nepantla's disorientations to achieve wholeness and interconnect to others on the planet" (89). She talks about the frustration when healing does not happen quickly and of the fear that holds us back because healing often necessitates change—change that requires us to let go of old ways of knowing. Additionally, Anzaldúa claims that "[a]ctivism is engaging in healing work" as it uses "the life force and strength that comes with el ánimo to act positively on one's own and on others' behalf" (89-90). Moreover, in finding a way to use my training and passion as an educator in a community-based educational space, I found the clarity I needed for my next steps in my educational and professional career. After seventeen years as a classroom teacher, I made the decision to pursue a doctoral degree.

When I considered applying to the doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Texas at San Antonio, I was also reluctant because of my responsibilities in caring for my second child during my 40s while

attempting doctoral coursework. But a greater hesitation was because of the institutional violence I faced as a teacher. My voice as teacher did not matter in the K-12 school system, and it would matter even less as a woman of color in the academy. I knew that choosing to enter higher education would be re-entering the wound. However, I also knew the work Moni and I were doing helped me evolve and heal from the arrebatos that shook me as a teacher and woman. The opportunity to conduct research on myself and with women and students of color held great promise. I had renewed faith that my ancestors and the universe would guide me when I submitted both my application for the doctoral program and my application for funding. When I received the letters of acceptance for both, I knew I was embarking on another crossing, one that would lead me to experience conocimiento again and again.

Conclusion

My autohistoria conveys how the transformation process of conocimiento led me to this point of my adult life. I fully grasp how the various cycles of our lives end so that another cycle may commence (Anzaldúa 2000). My journey from teacher to community organizer, and from community organizer to academia has helped me to understand myself as a nepantlera experiencing the seven stages of conocimiento through the tail end of my teaching years in the K-12 system, ultimately guiding me to this moment in my life as a doctoral candidate. As a nepantlera traveling on this earthly realm, conocimiento is the process of rewriting my story. It is the way I come to know myself and the process of healing. My autohistoria is not fixed; rather, it is always shifting. It is my hope that I can take my experiences as a Chicana, teacher, mother, community activist, and future scholar to document the work that we as women of color do for our communities. The ways of knowing for this maestra has helped me to understand myself and the work I am currently involved in, as well as prepare me for the work that lies ahead.

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