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Concluding Reflections—A Dialogue: This Bridge We Are Building: “Inner Work, Public Acts”

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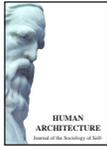
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Concluding Reflections—A Dialogue: **This Bridge We Are Building: “Inner Work, Public Acts”**

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Abstract: “I suppose it is still a risky business for those of us in academia to expose and express too much of our inner, authentic selves, right? But why should it be like this?? What does it do to us? I’m glad that we had a chance to explore a little about our true selves with each other and out in the public at the conference! Gloria Anzaldúa was always ahead of her time. She has given us a powerful language to reflect on our experiences, and once again, it is Gloria who has made this intimate space possible for all of us!” (**Shirley Tang**). “Thanks again to Shirley and Tim for organizing this. It adds another layer of *conocimiento* about who we all are, don’t you think?” (**Ann Torke**). “But there was/is something different about the work I did for this panel. I didn’t simply use a personal insight or struggle to frame my talk or to draw the reader/listener in, I *stayed* with myself and my experience throughout. I didn’t rely on the scholarly literature to lend my insights legitimacy (thanks to Karen who encouraged me to close the damn books) and that led me to feel like a boat lost at sea (how we academics bolster our self confidence with the work of others—and what a false sense of security this creates!). The talk, that is, was itself a rupture—a movement toward *conocimiento*.” (**Chris Bobel**). “I’ve been thinking about our presentation and what it has meant to me. I think one of the most illuminating learnings I am taking from this experience is that being in “Nepantla” isn’t a stage one goes through, it is in some ways the goal—being able to live and breathe and move and connect to others from within the borderland and having that space take on a different meaning of possibilities, rather than of limitations” (**Karen Suyemoto**). “I can’t help wanting to think and write about why it seems so unusual, fresh, and even liberating to tell the truth about our own human practice as academics. As you all have suggested, this terrain is usually off limits in academic discourse, and I think Karen gives some good reasons for why academia fosters divided, sometimes inauthentic, and dissatisfying selves in our professional lives. Gloria’s framework for addressing *conocimiento*, however, I believe is what saved us in this case, since it insists on the integration of the spiritual, intellectual, political, and personal dimensions, as well as situating all these within historical and biographical process” (**Tim Sieber**).

Chris Bobel (Women’s Studies), Tim Sieber (Anthropology), Karen Suyemoto (Psychology Department and Asian American Studies Program), Shirley Tang (American Studies and Asian American Studies), and Ann Torke (Art) are faculty members at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Please see the individual articles in the symposium for further information about each author.

Shirley Tang:

Thank you so much, Tim, Ann, Karen, and Chris, for your excellent presentations at the Social Theory Forum (and thanks, Jorge, for organizing the conference)!! I'm sorry I didn't get to make it a more collective effort—and more choreographed event—this time. Timing is everything...(Soon I'm going to reflect on what stages of *conocimiento* I've experienced this year!) But I talked to many of our colleagues after the panel, including the conference organizers, as well as two invited guest speakers for the Forum (AnaLouise [Keating] and Gloria [González-López]), and they all expressed their appreciation for what we did, especially what many of them referred to as our “honesty” and “boldness” in sharing our “inner works...public acts.” I suppose it is still a risky business for those of us in academia to expose and express too much of our inner, authentic selves, right? But why should it be like this?? What does it do to us? I'm glad that we had a chance to explore a little about our true selves with each other and out in the public at the conference! Gloria Anzaldúa was always ahead of her time. She has given us a powerful language to reflect on our experiences, and once again, it is Gloria who has made this intimate space possible for all of us! Now let us shift... Thanks again, everyone!

Ann Torke:

Thanks again to Shirley and Tim for organizing this. It adds another layer of *conocimiento* about who we all are, don't you think?

Chris Bobel:

Thanks, Shirley...for writing and I second it all—It was a wonderful and provocative panel. One colleague described it *beautiful and rich* and I really think we added something unique to the conference (I am so proud that we, as a committee, with a largely bureaucratic charge, did this!)

What a pleasure it was to be part of our joint effort—a sort of collective statement we made for sanity, truth, and humor in the middle of the terminal pettiness of this place, especially the bureaucratic side that we have to contend with in our committee work! I appreciate what Shirley said so well about the value of our forging this personal, more intimate, space among ourselves.

Tim Sieber:

For me the secret ingredient for us was in the choice of that piece by Anzaldúa on *conocimiento*, as a touchstone for the session. Thank you to those of you who were already familiar with this part of Anzaldúa's work and who understood what it had to offer. (I never went past *La Frontera/Borderlands* myself.) Her framework is so holistic and powerful, which you led me to understand, that it actually inspired me to write things about my way of teaching, and myself, that I had never put into words before. Thank you!

Karen Suyemoto:

I echo all the things said by others. It was really impressive to see how each of us was approaching *conocimiento* in our scholarship, teaching, and activism. I also *really* enjoyed getting to know each of you through your talks and finding out more about who you are and how we are working towards the same goal.

One of the graduate students from my program (Devin Atallah) came and sent me this email:

I try to be sentient to the intersections of moments and synchronicities and hearing you share elements along your caminos was very meaningful for me, and even just being around others gathering with Gloria Anzaldúa at heart was touching. I love it when I remember and I know why I am here. I am thankful to all of you for reminding me why I love being here.

Special thanks to Shirley for the article that framed it all. And to Chris for her particular encouragement to me to stay true to my own voice and vision. See you all soon.

Chris Bobel:

Reading our initial, first blush comments above is very touching. It is easy to see that we all stretched ourselves creating the panel—stretched first, perhaps, as committee members who see our charge a bit more broadly than others might, and second, as academics who have been steeped in the thinking that the personal doesn't belong in conferences, in academic writing (at least not to the extent we shared our *inner works*...). I say this as someone quite comfortable sharing my self stories in the classroom (oh! my students must endure my stories about my parenting foibles in the land of gender construction and my daily reckonings with my own racism, classism, heterosexism and ableism) and as someone who typically grounds her scholarly writing in her own experience (e.g., *I got interested in this topic because ...*)

But there was/is something different about the work I did for this panel. I didn't simply use a personal insight or struggle to frame my talk or to draw the reader/listener in, I *stayed* with myself and my experience throughout. I didn't rely on the scholarly literature to lend my insights legitimacy (thanks to Karen who encouraged me to close the damn books) and that led me to feel like a boat lost at sea (how we academics bolster our self confidence with the work of others—and what a false sense of security this creates!).

The talk, that is, was itself a rupture—a movement toward *conocimiento*.

Karen Suyemoto:

I've been thinking about our presentation and what it has meant to me. I think one of the most illuminating learnings I am taking from this experience is that being in "Nepantla" isn't a stage one goes through,

it is in some ways the goal—being able to live and breathe and move and connect to others from within the borderland and having that space take on a different meaning of possibilities, rather than of limitations. This is the theme I think that, for me, connected all of our contributions to the symposium, and I was moved by your stories and honored that you shared some aspects of how you each do this.

In her earlier post, Shirley wrote:

I suppose it is still a risky business for those of us in academia to expose and express too much of our inner, authentic selves, right? But why should it be like this?? What does it do to us? I'm glad that we had a chance to explore a little about our true selves with each other and out in the public at the conference! Gloria Anzaldúa was always ahead of her time. She has given us a powerful language to reflect on our experiences, and once again, it is Gloria who has made this intimate space possible for all of us!

I've been thinking a lot about this, because it felt so true to me. It did definitely feel like a risk to "expose" my struggles and story and our early posts (while we were preparing for the symposium) clearly indicate that several of us were uncomfortable with this. And I think also of Ann's surprise in our recent meeting when we all encouraged her to focus most on her own work and also of Shirley's decision to share the more personal reflections and journey in this article, rather than the more academic or research focused aspects. So Shirley's question makes me really think about *why* it might be so that we are fearful and how it shapes us, as people and as teachers, and as academics more generally. I think maybe it feels risky for several reasons:

It is so seldom done—that is, we have

few models for how to integrate our “inner work” with our public acts as academics. And this is, of course, one reason to do it—to become those models. But because we ourselves have so few models, it is hard to know how to find the balance.

I am also reminded of a talk given to Ethnic Studies several years ago, where we discussed the meanings of “epistemology” and what is considered valid knowledge. So I think that another reason that it feels risky is because not only in teaching, but also particularly in scholarship, we in academia aren’t taught/socialized to value the lived experience of an individual as a source of knowledge. This echoes some of Chris’s comments as well, about feeling that we have to rely on the published words of others in order to express our own experiences. In my “Social Construction of Self and Identities” class, we’ve talked this semester about movements between the experiencing I and the observing me (or maybe its the experiencing me and the observing I?)—and, through our reading of some Buddhist articles as well as other things, we’ve been exploring how we are socialized in the U.S. context and education to observe and interpret more than to experience. This connects to our STF symposium for me, because I think feeling that the kind of thing we did is risky is related to pressure to disconnect our intellectual endeavors and “public acts” from our own lived experiences (“inner work”). And yet, it is these experiential aspects that are such an important part of creating the connections and empathy that are necessary for social transformation (as well as for good, student-centered teaching).

A point related to distance from experience that I’ve also been considering is how uncomfortable we are in academia with emotion and passion. And I think, for me, this was part of the risk and part of what was so real and valuable about our symposium. It feels to me that there is little room in the standards of scholarship and teaching

for deep emotion, unless it is highly intellectualized and abstractly languaged. And yet Anzaldúa’s work is full of emotion and passion—difficult emotions without easy resolutions. I deeply believe that for education to be transformative, it must reach students’ emotions and engage their beings fully, not just abstractly and intellectually. But what does it mean to be trying to do this in an environment that so rarely values it?

For me, this really underlines the importance of Shirley’s question: *What does this do to us?* I’d love to hear your thoughts on this. I’ve thought more about how to negotiate these issues in relation to teaching, but I think that teaching is just part of what we do as academics. So I’ve been thinking also about how I/we are socialized as academics in these ways that distance us from the path of *conocimiento*.

An associated question is *What does this do to academia?* Four years ago, I was on the verge of leaving academia. And looking back, I think that I had made this decision because I felt so alienated from myself and from relationships that supported that whole self. Because several of you and other colleagues really reached out to me, I ended up staying in academia (and getting tenure, of all things!). But for me, I had to make a conscious decision that I wasn’t going to “play the game”: I wasn’t going to be quiet and careful and publish only the “right” things (non emotional, non political, empirical things). And so, with lots of support, it worked for me. But it so easily could have not worked and I wonder what this means for what students receive in classes and what scholarship is disseminated and how academics are or are not encouraged/supported to contribute to social justice and transformation through their “public acts.”

Tim Sieber:

Like Karen, I can’t help wanting to think and write about why it seems so unusual, fresh, and even liberating to tell the

truth about our own human practice as academics. As you all have suggested, this terrain is usually off limits in academic discourse, and I think Karen gives some good reasons for why academia fosters divided, sometimes inauthentic, and dissatisfying selves in our professional lives. Gloria's framework for addressing *conocimiento*, however, I believe is what saved us in this case, since it insists on the integration of the spiritual, intellectual, political, and personal dimensions, as well as situating all these within historical and biographical process. This produces a holistic view of teachers, writers, and students as full human beings, historicized and contingent—something conventional academic culture conspires continually to conceal or exclude.

What is usually privileged in academic discourse is the disembodied, universal "I," the detached bourgeois individual who creates objectified ideas that spring directly from the operation of rational intellect, and emerge as a kind of individual possession, even commodity, that can then be used as a token to validate and advance one's scholarly career. There's little place for the operation of collaboration, love, and social connection in this paradigm. Within universities, of course, these tendencies are strongest in the most elite knowledge preserve of all, our own Liberal Arts.

Even to write about teaching and institutional service, as anthropologist Josiah Heyman argued, is extremely rare in academia, despite the fact that these seemingly "invisible" activities are the main areas for what he calls "moral practice" by most professors (Josiah Heyman, *Finding a Moral Heart for U.S. Immigration Practice*, American Ethnological Society 1998, page 12), not to speak of the fact they are the activities that we typically spend most of our hours on! Ironically, this is also the ground where we can forge some consistency between our values and knowledge, on the one hand, and our life practice, including professional commitments, on the other, and where we

can be and act as whole human beings. As we all have realized, we also are not used to doing this, or typically welcomed to do it, at academic panels and symposia either.

What does this tell us about universities? Their traditional reward systems—even more obviously so at engaged, public universities like ours—typically produce artificial, truncated, and distorted representations of actual academic practice, and measure only a small part of what most of us do in our careers, or care about in terms of professional commitments. All that goes into our teaching, mentoring and supporting students and colleagues alike, as well as our belongingness to communities and constituencies on the outside, and even into our own research and writing, and into professional collegial networks that extend locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally, rests on practices of support, collaboration, and caring. Most of us are both givers and takers in this, of necessity.

It is academic convention, however, to give short shrift to the benefits we receive from others, as well as to the active contributions we ourselves make to these exchanges. Our investments in collaboration, in fact, can open up suspicions about whether we have proved our merit as individuals, or have instead somehow cheated. Fortunately, many of us transgress these myopic conventions, as we must. We build many communities of like-minded colleagues, usually informal but still very strong, who understand and value what the official academy often does not. We transgress in order to make our lives and professional communities livable, to give ourselves the needed opportunity to engage in regular, deeper, more critical reflection on our practice, to explore more fully the moral, ethical and political implications of our work, and to seek fulfillment as complete human beings who happen to be academics.