

Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge

Volume 4

Issue 3 *Re-Membering Anzaldúa. Human Rights, Borderlands, and the Poetics of Applied Social Theory: Engaging with Gloria Anzaldúa in Self and Global Transformations*

Article 14

1-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Disch, Estelle (2006) "Nurturing the Nepantlera Within: Working in the Borderlands of Our Prejudices," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 14.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol4/iss3/14>

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Nurturing the Nepantlera Within

Working in the Borderlands of Our Prejudices

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Abstract: Using Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts of borderlands, *conocimiento*, and *nepantla/nepantlera*, I describe my use of a "differences journal" in an upper-level social service internship course. The goal of the assignment is to encourage students to explore borderlands, develop more consciousness/*conocimiento*, and decide whether they want to become *nepantleras*. This assignment is part of a broader pedagogical approach, based on Gordon Allport's ideas, designed to reduce prejudice.

In the early 1980s, I hired a team of diversity trainers to help the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Boston State College work on racial tensions within the department. I had recently participated in a series of racism-awareness workshops for white women and hoped that a racism-awareness workshop would help the department. As part of the diversity work, Dr. Jean Griffin¹ and the late Dr. Clara Mayo² gave us a homework assignment: We were to keep a journal documenting our first, unedited reactions to people of races/colors different from ourselves. That assignment proved very effective in helping me identify and own my semi-conscious reactions and I decided to use a ver-

sion of it in courses, focusing on a broad range of differences. At the time that I began using it as a pedagogical tool I didn't have a conceptual rationale for the assignment; I simply knew that it had helped me and I hoped that it would help students. Indeed, the vast majority of students find the exercise very useful.

I regularly use this exercise, which I have come to call the "differences journal," in a senior internship course that focuses on social services, multicultural issues, and trauma. (See Appendix for a description of the assignment.) Students work 10 hours per week in a social service agency and spend 3 hours per week in class. Most plan careers in social services. My pedagogical approach is based on the contact hypothesis of prejudice reduction developed by Gordon Allport (1954). This approach argues that prejudice is likely to diminish

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when 4 conditions are present: (1) equal status between the parties involved (i.e., students have generally equal status and are hopefully treated equally by the teacher); (2) cooperative activity among group members focused on common goals (i.e., there is a task to be done; go for it); (3) opportunity to get to know each other (i.e., enough “down” time to chat informally); and (4) Support for contact among diverse individuals by legitimate authority (i.e., the teacher expects diverse teams of students to work together productively).

To Allport’s approach I add a component of self-awareness in the form of the differences journal, which is where Anzaldúa’s ideas apply. Although I did not have Anzaldúa in mind when I started to use this exercise, I find it to be an excellent fit with the concepts of borderlands, *conocimiento*, and *nepantla/nepantlera*. Anzaldúa asks us to deepen our awareness of what we know about both ourselves and others by exploring the borderlands within ourselves, between people, and between groups. The exploration of this space leads to greater awareness: *conocimiento*. This knowledge can then be used constructively by those who want to help bridge the rifts between people and groups by becoming *nepantleras*—those who work toward understanding and healing in this tough border space.

In applying some of Anzaldúa’s ideas in classroom practice, I make a few assumptions. *First*, I agree with Anzaldúa that most white people have choices about whether and when to address racism and I assume that many will choose to avoid addressing it unless supported to do so:

The refusal to think about race (itself a form of racism) is a “white” privilege...Though many understand the racism perpetrated by white individuals, most do not understand the racism inherent in their identities, in their cultures’

stories. They can’t see that racism harms them as well as people of color, itself a racially superior attitude. Those who see don’t feel prepared to deal with race, though they do “feel bad” about it, suffering the monkey on their backs—survivor guilt, the guilt of privilege that, unacknowledged, breeds greater guilt. (2002: 564)

The differences journal eliminates the option to refuse to think about race/color since that is a required category of difference that needs to be addressed to successfully complete the assignment. Assuming that the option to avoid dealing with difference might apply to any sort of empowered status (e.g. able bodied people avoiding ableism; men avoiding sexism), the assignment asks students to address other kinds of differences as well. *Second*, I assume that everyone has prejudices of one sort or another, so the journal exercise can address issues in all sorts of borderlands. *Third*, much prejudice is unconscious or semiconscious and in order to own it, we need to be able to notice what our attitudes are. I believe that, with practice, this is learnable for anyone interested in paying closer attention to their reactions. *Fourth*, the fact that our unconscious reactions are often at odds with who we think we are or want to be leads us to attempt to bury any attitudes that do not fit—that are not politically correct in our contexts—whatever those might be. *Fifth*, most students I encounter want to treat people in non-prejudicial ways but have not been helped to work on these issues at a personal and interpersonal level. The fact that most of them plan careers in social services probably contributes to their openness related to diminishing their prejudices.

Anzaldúa defines *borderlands*, as spaces where

...two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different

races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (1999:19)

Borders are set up to define places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (1999: 25)

The differences journal asks us to explore borderlands—the space between ourselves and another person who has been defined as other— and notice what is going on. How are we distinguishing *us* from *them*? How, exactly, am I reacting to that person, and why? Where do my attitudes come from? What taboos are broken if I empathize with that person and cross the boundary into what I imagine to be their experience? In short, I ask students to name their responses to difference, to consciously claim those responses, and to explore the sources of their attitudes.

Honest exploration of the borderlands leads to what Anzaldúa calls *conocimiento*—consciousness work.

Tu camino de 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 the traits and habits distorting how you see reality and inhibiting the full use of your facultades." (2002: 540-541)

Anzaldúa speaks of *conocimiento* as

opening and freeing, leading to action:

Conocimiento comes from opening all your senses, consciously inhabiting your body and decoding its symptoms...Breaking out of your mental and emotional prison and deepening the range of perception enables you to link inner reflection and vision—the mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, and subtle bodily awareness—with social, political *action and lived experiences* to generate subversive knowledges. These *conocimientos* challenge official and conventional ways of looking at the world, ways set up by those benefiting from such constructions. (2002: 542) [emphasis added]

Once aware of their attitudes, students can choose (or not) to work on the issues that their new knowledge illuminates, working in the “zone of possibility” that Anzaldúa calls *nepantla*, “where the outer boundaries of the mind’s inner life meet the outer world of reality” (2002: 544). This is a space where plans for action or change can occur, where students can choose to challenge their attitudes on an internal level and begin to treat others differently.

I offer here some representative examples of how students have used this assignment and explore how some of what they say connects to Anzaldúa’s ideas. In preparing this essay, I systematically reread student journals from the past 2 semesters and read scattered examples from earlier semesters. Although there is space here to discuss only a few examples, nearly every journal I read includes something that I could have mentioned here. Thus, the issues raised by the excerpts and summaries that follow are quite typical of what this assignment evokes.

Students are frequently embarrassed by what they find when they look openly at

their reactions and then feel obliged to come to terms with contradictions. Those who have defined themselves as people who are “not prejudiced” or who “do not see color,” need to reassess their self-conceptions. If they don’t like this revised self-conception, they typically begin to explore alternative ways of approaching tough situations. They end up examining what they have been taught and frequently challenge those lessons. For example, in a case of class superiority, a white woman who had already done a lot of work on her racism and other prejudices had to acknowledge that when someone set a fire behind her house, she assumed that the poorer kids in the neighborhood must have done it. Later she learned that her son had set the fire, which led her to question and challenge anew her usual way of looking at the world.

In a student journal that illustrates Anzaldúa’s notions of the opening of senses, decoding symptoms, and breaking out of emotional traps referred to above, a white woman waitress, upon reflection, reported discomfort when waiting on African Americans. She said:

...I found that when I had a table of African American people I felt as though I had to be overly nice and worried that I would do something wrong. This isn’t at all like me, as I am usually very easy going and enjoy talking to people and generally don’t worry that I am going to upset someone. I made a point of being aware of how I was feeling and acting and eventually the more I thought about what I was doing those feelings just stopped.

A white woman who did her internship in juvenile court confronted contradictions between her previous cultural programming about children and families in trouble and the realities of the lives of the people she got to know in that context. In

the process of exploring these contradictions she was able to open her mind and heart to a new reality:

When I first started going into juvenile court...I thought that the families and kids I met would be your stereotypical dysfunctional, poor or working class family with only one parent in the household that probably had some sort of substance abuse problem. I was dead wrong. What I have encountered are situations in which a mother has to raise her four kids on her own and is forced to work 40 or more hours a week so she can’t always be around. Or a father that is heartbroken because his son has become addicted to heroin and he feels that the only hope for him is by getting him involved with the system. They are stories that make your eyes tear up because they are stories of pain, hardship, and hopelessness. I went in thinking I already knew the people I would meet, and I have come out feeling like I have only scratched the surface of the complex families and issues I have encountered.

For students of color, sometimes one’s own group becomes the subject of exploration as they address the internalized oppression that Anzaldúa describes so clearly in one of her essays in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras* (1990). Anzaldúa argues that women of color need to forgive past hurts and unite along spiritual lines. She hopes that infighting will be a stage to be passed through and left behind: “It is time that we broke out of the invisible white frame and stood on the ground of our ethnic being” (1990:148). In an example of seeming to be stuck in a white frame, a Black woman who defined herself as light skinned felt that darker skinned women

disliked her and she therefore distanced herself from them even before she knew anything about them. When finally she was in a situation in which she had to work closely with Black women who were a range of colors, they all got along fine, but without a structure in which she is required to work cooperatively with darker-skinned Black women, her issues linger:

I still do judge black people when I hear of things that were done. I sit back and sometimes say typical. I hate to judge my own kind, because I get so upset when others judge us. It makes me so mad, I lose my mind. But everyday that goes by I judge them and live by my own stereotypes. This is something I have been trying to work on and change but it is very difficult.

Others who have faced various prejudices find themselves upset when they realize that they have done the same thing to others. Thus, an Asian refugee who had faced very tough poverty and terrible treatment because of his poor English skills when he first arrived in the U.S. found himself judging certain others and treating them badly. When he could have served them quickly, he took more time than necessary. He made quick negative judgments:

One day a person came in...I looked at them and thought, in the back of my mind, "another drug addict" without giving the individual the opportunity to present himself/herself about what happened...I felt like just being rude and mean because...I have the power now, and I forget how people treated me when I first came here. ...I know this is bad especially if I want to be a social worker.

I changed after I wrote down the

bad things I have done by using my superior authority and how rude I could be when I deal with people who look poor. I am involved more in helping elders and others now, and when it comes to judging others, I have to think twice to put myself in their situation before I judge them.

When my students confront their prejudices and explore from where they came, they are often confronted with conflict with loved ones. Students who name family members who held such prejudices will need to confront those members if they are to bring any true integrity into those relationships, struggling as nepantleras in tough borderlands between people who hold varied attitudes:

This has been very difficult for me to write. It is hard to admit that my family hasn't always been open and accepting, though they are doing better now, and that I do have my own difficulties with people who are different. But on the other hand I am also proud of myself for not accepting the views of my family and working on how I can change my feelings when I am uncomfortable...Even just writing this I feel terrible for letting someone's religion bother me, I know it is definitely something I am going to try to be more accepting about. [White woman]

The process of writing seems to make denial of semi-conscious attitudes more difficult. Students have to stop, be aware, and then write—either in the moment or later—about what happened in their thought processes. It is difficult to deny what one has written, especially if someone else is going to read it and respond. Thus, writing helps the process of *conocimiento*:

Upon reviewing the things that I wrote in my differences journal it was sort of like a dose of reality. The process left me feeling somewhat disappointed in myself. I felt embarrassed even to read some of the things I wrote down. This is not to say that I was not shamed when the incidents first occurred; however, to see them all together was really humbling. (African American man)

One of the things I most deeply appreciate about Gloria Anzaldúa's life and legacy is her never-ending commitment to both name the tough border spaces and to enter them intentionally, even when some sort of avoidance—an easier path perhaps—might be possible. I appreciate how she compares internal borderlands work to an internal civil war among intimates:

As long as we see the world and our experiences through white eyes—in a dominant/subordinate way—we're trapped in the tar and pitch of the old manipulative and strive-for-power ways. ... Questioning the values of the dominant culture which imposes fundamental difference on those of the "wrong" side of the good/bad dichotomy is the first step. Responding to the *Other* not as irrevocably different is the second step. By highlighting similarities, downplaying divergences, that is, by *rapprochement* between self and *Other* it is possible to build a syncretic relationship. At the basis of such a relationship lies an understanding of the effects of colonization and its resultant pathologies." (1990: 145)

A white able bodied woman struggled with various aspects of wrongness and otherness related to disability when she was

asked by her internship supervisor to help a disabled man learn to use public transportation. Here she is beginning to see the scope of the challenge involved in seeing a man with a disability as a respect-worthy human being and in order to establish some sort of rapprochement:

I didn't realize this man was severely disabled as well as slightly mentally retarded. I don't know why but when I saw him I didn't want to take him any more. He has really bad teeth and that always bothers me. I am sure I could get used to them. Of course I will still take him out. Maybe my negative reaction also had something to do with the fact that I will have to be out for an extended time with this man alone and I have never met him. I would also have to feed him a meal at South Station. I am a little paranoid that I might see someone I know while with him and have to explain what I am doing. I know that I'm being shallow but sometimes I can't help it.

I try to convince students that if we do not work to become aware of what is going on within ourselves, it is very difficult to "shrink" (Anzaldúa 1999:19) the space between two individuals who are different from each other in ways that society has taught one or the other or both to despise. The process of naming our responses to difference is an essential start. Following that, we can consider whether to try to change or at least monitor those responses. Here is what two of my students concluded about this exercise:

It's interesting to explore the ebb and flow of your own prejudices. One minute you may feel as though you are the most open-minded, accepting person, and the

next minute you succumb to stereotypical assumptions about people you have never met...Perhaps, if you periodically make yourself analyze your responses to other people, as this assignment has done, you can keep your prejudices in check and be more effective in carrying out the mission of helping people. (White woman)

I never really thought about my assumptions of people that are different than me until I started doing these journals...I found out that I have many assumptions of how people should be, and these assumptions are not necessarily correct. I guess you don't really stop and think about these things, you just let yourself go unconsciously to think things that are unfair sometimes. (Central American immigrant woman)

Writing this essay has led me to reflect upon Anzaldúa's ideas in relation to the differences journal. As a result, I have decided to add an additional component to it the next time I teach it. I will ask students to put themselves in the shoes of the other person or people involved in order to try to understand what it is going on for them. This, I believe, will help students to step more deeply into the border space in which both parties are involved. I want to conclude by saying that I continue to do the differences journal myself, most often in my head, and especially in response to my students, so that I can keep a clear channel of communication open between me and them and attempt to play a nepantlera role in my own life. Focusing on Anzaldúa has provided me with helpful conceptual tools that I can pass along to students next time I teach this course.

APPENDIX

Differences Journal Assignment—Directions to Students

Keep a journal in which you write your honest, unedited responses to people different from you. Discuss especially: your assumptions about the person or people; situations in which you feel awkward, superior, inferior, afraid, angry, or guilty; situations in which you feel compelled to be overly nice, etc. Write down your responses and *also write a brief analysis of where you think your attitudes about that issue/kind of person came from*. Consider these differences: race, age, social class, gender, ethnic/cultural/religious background, language, sexual orientation, disabilities (physical, learning, emotional, etc.), physical difference (height, weight, appearance), illnesses (AIDS, herpes, cancer, addictions, emotional troubles), etc., etc. Feel free to note your first impressions, first thoughts, first responses to anyone, including people with whom you speak briefly, as well as those you see in the street, on the T, people you meet in the elevator, see on TV, etc.

I assume that none of us was born racist, anti-Semitic, ethnocentric, heterosexist, homophobic, ableist, elitist, sexist, ageist, etc. We were taught a wide range of prejudices in a social order over which we had no control as children and over which we have little control as adults. I do believe that as individuals we can work to understand our own attitudes and work on ourselves so as to be more understanding, respectful and appreciative of different people. People working in human services *must* be open to all sorts of people, or we will be ineffective with those clients whom we stereotype and/or fail to respect, understand or appreciate. The point of this assignment is to provide a place for you to look at and own your (sometimes-embarrassing) thoughts, in order to hopefully be-

come more conscious of how you are reacting to others who are different from yourself. Once you are conscious, you can try to figure out how to work on what you want to change about yourself. If you find yourself feeling badly about your attitudes, ask yourself where they came from. Who taught you to think/feel that way? Most people are embarrassed by parts of the differences journal, so if you feel that way you are not alone. I will read your journal and make comments.

I am available to discuss the differences journal with you on an individual basis or in class, especially if you have questions about it, feel stuck, upset, etc.

As you think about what to address in this journal, *please include at least one incident about "race"/color/culture* and explore where your attitudes might have come from. Discuss 2 or 3 incidents. Then let me know how doing this assignment affected you.

LENGTH: 2-3 typed double-spaced pages. Graded Pass/Fail. If you are able to watch your thought processes, to explore where/how you learned your attitudes, and to reflect upon what it was like to do this assignment, you will pass, no matter what your attitudes are.

Alternative Directions

In order to make this exercise more complex in future semesters, I plan to add wording like the following:

Try to put yourself in the shoes of the person with whom you are/were having a difficult or judgmental reaction. What do you think is/was going on for them? Does putting yourself in their shoes change how you see/experience the situation? If so, how?

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