Epistemologies of the Wound: Anzaldúan Theories and Sociological Research on Incest in Mexican Society

Gloria González-López

University of Texas at Austin, gloria386@mail.la.utexas.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture

Part of the Race and Ethnicity Commons, Religion Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol4/iss3/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.
Epistemologies of the Wound
Anzaldúan Theories and Sociological Research on Incest in Mexican Society

Gloria González-López

University of Texas at Austin

Abstract: In this article, I revisit my marginalized and silent intellectual relationship with Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s work, my personal experiences as a Mexican immigrant woman in academia, and my incorporation and discussion of Anzaldúa theorizing in my qualitative research on incest in Mexican society. I examine the ways in which Anzaldúa theories and concepts inform the early stages of my sociological study of adults’ histories of intra-familial sexual experiences (mainly coercive and abusive) during childhood and adolescence. Some of these concepts include nepantla, conocimiento, spiritual activism, la facultad, and Coyolxauhqui. “Epistemologies of the wound” is a concept I use to identify the multidimensional state of consciousness I have discovered and explored at the core of the mutually interconnected intellectual, emotional, and spiritual processes I have experienced while conducting my in-depth individual interviews with my informants. My sample includes a total of 60 adult women and men with histories of coercive sexual experiences within the context of the family, and who live in four urbanized locations in Mexico (Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Monterrey). I offer my early reflections on the theoretical and methodological implications of Anzaldúa epistemologies for the sociological research of sensitive topics.

The healing of our wounds results in transformation and transformation results in the healing of our wounds.
—Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound,” 2002

I am a sociologist, and also a couple and family therapist by training who used to conduct clinical work with Latin American immigrant families and women with histories of all forms of violence and abuse. As an academic, I specialize in sexuality and gender studies with populations of Mexican origin. The honest voices of Mexicans surviving on the edges of marginality and inequality in the city of Los Angeles have offered me generous amounts of ethnographic data that I have used to write a book, articles, book chapters, and encyclo-
pedia entries about gender, Mexican immigrants, and their sex lives. As I have immersed myself in this demanding academic journey, Gloria Anzaldúa’s work has always been by my side but never included. I developed a relationship with her work but always in silence.

Anzaldúa’s writings were briefly incorporated in my academic training and when I discovered her work, it became my cup of tea, my “don’t-read-after-you’re-done-with-your-truly-academic” reading. Her intellectual contributions gave so much joy to my heart. Her ideas organized and explained my life as a human being, an immigrant, and a graduate student. Her words became the work that I would read for pleasure, not as an obligation like those books by Durkheim, Weber, Habermas, or Lacan.

As a highly motivated graduate student, I became an active listener in class. I always had many ideas in my mind, but I also felt intimidated and lonely. I was afraid of my Mexican-accented and mispronounced English; I had to engage in exhausting emotional and intellectual labor in my mind before I opened my mouth in class discussions. I was fearful of my immigrant tongue, I was afraid it would betray me. I became a wounded observer of academic conversations and institutions. Many times, I just wanted to quit. Alone in my small apartment in Los Angeles, I would grab La Frontera and hold it close to my heart, but I would put it back in the borderlands of my own bookshelves.

I learned to survive but I was not alone. From my few mentors and other students-in-struggle, I gradually learned to explore ways to decipher and challenge mainstream academia. And while back in my own marginality, I developed insight and strength. I was subversively happy in my own silence; in my loneliness, I enjoyed thinking about how to resist. Anzaldúa’s words best capture my experience, “Aquí en la soledad prospera su rebeldía. En la soledad Ella prospera. (Here in solitude her rebellion grows. In solitude She prospers (or grows)).”

In my silent rebellion, however, I was always afraid of even thinking about incorporating Anzaldúa’s theorizing in my papers and potential publications. I feared the endless questions I would have to decipher and try to answer: “Is Gloria Anzaldúa a sociologist? Is she a theorist? Isn’t that the Chicana lesbian who does poetry? Oh, no, no, that is not truly academic, you don’t want to cite her.” Afraid of being further marginalized, I have kept her academic contributions out of my own intellectual work. I was also trying to decipher my personal and professional future. I was undecided and confused. I did not know if I wanted to become a licensed therapist or an assistant professor surviving new battles.

I had a green card before I migrated from Mexico to this country 20 years ago. However, I was always hiding. And even though my Texas-born and raised mother made my legal status possible back then, in graduate school I always felt like some kind of undocumented “intellectual wannabe” who enjoyed and felt validated by the Anzaldúan knowledge generated in the margins of la academia. But this knowledge was experienced and read inside a safe and warm space. I enjoyed getting lost in my own closet del conocimiento—paradoxically, the closet hiding my own desconocimiento, my ignored knowledge, always mixed with fear and apprehension. Anzaldúa’s poignant and thought provoking contributions could not be used in sociological publications about sexuality, gender, and immigrants because including them would not be sociological, to begin with. Or perhaps, it would be too rebellious or not truly academic. So a sensitive question kept coming to my mind, Am I a vendida? A sell out? I was afraid of giving myself an answer. Maybe only Gloria Anzaldúa could

---

1 Original text in Spanish is in La Frontera, 1987: 23.
give me one. I never thought I was going to have that privilege.

It was the Fall 2002, still hot in Central Texas. Gloria Anzaldúa was coming to the big state to give a workshop in San Antonio. Back then I was a brand new assistant professor at UT Austin, and I felt shy, nervous, confused and intimidated. As I prepared for my 70-mile drive to attend the workshop in San Antonio, I wanted to hide again. The feelings I experienced in graduate school suddenly came back. So I drove by myself to The Esperanza Center to meet for the first time the woman who had caressed my brain with her ideas, the woman who had become an icon of rebelliousness and courage in my heart. I could not believe I was going to have the opportunity to have a personal conversation with her. The precious moment finally arrived.

Talking to her was surreal, the experience unfolded a special feeling of pleasure I could not describe. I asked about her views on the future of gender studies, Latina and Latino studies, life in academia, my challenges while writing a book, and the work she was currently doing. I have relatives who have died of diabetes-related complications, so I ended my conversation by giving her some homemade remedies, hoping they could help her cope with her own health condition. But before I said good-bye, I presented my burning question. I explained my struggle with my work and my sociological writing and the exclusion of her contributions. “So,” I asked her, “do you think I am a vendida?” She replied, “No mujer, you are a burra! You are a Mexican burra who has been trying to survive.” She explained that while White heterosexual men in academia may enjoy the feeling and pride of being the Trojan horses of knowledge and intelligentsia, Latinas who survive academia are burras in pain, female donkeys who go through the cracks of institutions while having to carry a heavy load on their backs. No wonder why my back hurt so much! Maybe this was the reason why I had to see a chiropractor all these years. I did not know I was a burra, I was never a vendida. So with a feeling of deep relief, I finished the book manuscript about Mexican immigrants and sex within the context of social injustice and inequality. Publishing my book in 2005 meant that I had finished my first major research project.

Anzaldúa’s theories and concepts have not (until now) been included in any of my publications, and now I feel comfortable about it. Interestingly, like a strike of lightning in the dark, her epistemologies recently became a revelation to me. Her stimulating theorizing caught me by surprise as I began to conduct the fieldwork phase of my second major research project. Unexpectedly, new forms of academic healing are becoming part of my new and on-going sociological study.

**INSIDE SEXUALIZED WOUNDS**

I am currently working on a project that examines the sociology of incest in Mexican society. Even though the meaning of the word may vary, in this qualitative study, incest refers to sexual experiences between individuals (mainly coercive and abusive) within the family context. I am conducting in-depth individual interviews with a total of 60 adult women and men who were coerced into these types of experiences when they were children or adolescent. I am also conducting in-depth explorations of intra-familial sexual experiences that informants may identify as voluntary. At the macro level, I am interested in identifying and examining the social, economic, cultural, and family dynamics and forces that make children and women vulnerable to being sexually abused within the context of the family. And at the micro level, I am exploring the ways in which intra-familial sexual experiences shape the romantic and sex lives of adult women and men with this
type of sex history. In this study, I also interview professionals who work with these populations; I am interviewing therapists, attorneys, and priests.

This study hopes to expand on the neglected knowledge about the social and cultural forces responsible for the underreported incidence of incest in Mexican society—a phenomenon traditionally kept in silence and accepted as a “private and individual problem.” My goal is to examine intra-familial sexually abusive experiences from the perspective of those who have been consistently ignored in the literature yet affected the most by this complex sociological phenomenon. I am interviewing adult women and men from four urbanized locations in Mexico: Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Monterrey. I already collected my data in Ciudad Juárez and I am completing my fieldwork in Monterrey.

My mestiza consciousness as an immigrant who goes back and forth between both sides of the border permeates and sustains my current research project. This research is also a modest attempt to practice more than one form of feminist activism. At this point, I have explored and promoted creative forms of intellectual and activist solidarity with community based agencies on the Mexican side. In Ciudad Juárez and Monterrey, I have offered seminars and workshops on feminist informed research, gender and society, feminist psychotherapies, among other topics including informal dialogues on my preliminary findings. I am always self-critical and open to others’ criticism when my preconceived ideas or training are perhaps too Western and non-representative of their own social realities. In my research, I am also incorporating issues identified as crucial by my informants, as well as by the clinicians and activists working with these populations.

As I have conducted my fieldwork, Anzaldúan theories and concepts have helped me to identify the methodological and epistemological avenues leading to new forms to explore and generate sociological knowledge on sexual violence in Mexican society. Gloria Anzaldúa opened up, immersed herself in, and showed to us a deep social, cultural, and political wound—La Frontera. Similarly, I have become a curious researcher who persistently looks for deep human wounds of sexualized abuse and pain in order to immerse myself in and identify the social complexities and interconnections that produce and reproduce such forms of social injustice and inequality in the country I was born and raised.

For instance, from the collective wound that I discovered in Ciudad Juárez, I have identified a tender and unpredictable standpoint to conduct qualitative research as a feminist sociologist. This intellectual journey has become an emotionally challenging process that has invited me to place myself in a state of consciousness that is multidimensional, always in transition and stressful, always stimulating and gratifying, but always unsafe. As I have conducted my individual interviews, I have found myself in that state of emotional and intellectual discomfort and tension, my curiosity about sexualized forms of human suffering and pain has no end. As a sociologist, I am doing research on sexual violence from an epistemological location I can only identify as “nepantla.” In Anzaldúa’s own words,

Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. Nepanta es tierra desconocida, and living in this liminal zone means a constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling.2
Nepantla as a site of knowledge exploration and production about sexualized pain in Mexico places me in the midst of complex ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions as a researcher. This “tierra entre medio” is a multidimensional state of consciousness of permanent transition, stubbornly unpredictable, and intellectually dangerous in which I immerse myself while I conduct my individual interviews. For example, at the analytical level, I am driven by my endless inquiring about the mechanisms of resilience of the women and men who have become emotionally creative to endure pain and abuse while living in poverty. The vast majority of the adults I have interviewed so far have never received professional attention. For many profound reasons I was unaware of as a therapist, their romantic and sex lives have never been affected by the consequences of the violent sexual offense. In contrast, other participants have received professional attention. However, socially rooted pain seems to be more complex and sophisticated than the clinical skills of therapists who always do their best to help. In my research, I am still exploring and trying to understand these complex processes.

At the spiritual level, I have learned to become completely present, peaceful, non-judgmental, compassionate, and respectful while conducting my interviews. As a researcher, I have learned to develop a state of mind that is alert, calm, and clear. As I patiently listen to their stories, I have become completely mindful while connecting with the core of the humanity of my informants. I use abstract thinking as well as emotional and intuitive processes in my interviews with these women and men. Anzaldúa identifies this approach as “un corazón con razón” (literally, “a heart with reason”), that is, “a mindful heart like what Buddhists advocate about being attentive and aware.” In short, a spiritual approach is one of the methodological avenues I am following to conduct sociological research.

Through this intimate process of spiritual bonding, I have discovered the ways in which these women’s and men’s narratives of pain reveal the human interconnection and alliances between those I have interviewed and those I never will, but who may share similar experiences while living in other places of Mexico or in other cultures and societies. Anzaldúa’s concept of “spiritual activism” identifies this journey of social and emotional interconnectedness among all my informants and the rest of us. As Keating (2002) states in her reflections on Anzaldúa’s theorizing,

...spiritual activism begins with the personal yet moves outward, acknowledging our radical interconnectedness. This is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation. What a contrast: while identity politics requires holding onto specific categories of identity, spiritual activism demands that we let them go.

I have interviewed women and men who have experienced love within the context of heterosexual relationships, and I have also interviewed informants who identify themselves as lesbian or gay. Beyond the terminology that may split these

---


human beings into politicized identities yet static categories, a deep desire to heal deep or subtle pain creates a bond among the stories all of them share. Each one of us knows (and may have deep love for) someone who has been sexually abused. Because of many forms of pain, we are all connected; because of our hope for social evolution, we are all united. “Todas somos nos/otras” as Anzaldúa once said.

My inner feelings of human interconnectedness with my informants—before, during, and after my interviews—are exposing me to new possibilities to generate sociological knowledge with the aim of benefiting others, communities beyond borders in collective struggles for social change. Through alternatively exhausting, peaceful, and stimulating states of consciousness, I am learning an important lesson: The production of sociological knowledge does not come from isolated intellectual processes. Thinking and generating knowledge from an “objective place” is becoming a useless and naive theoretical fiction in this project. By becoming completely awake and aware intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, I have learned to switch back and forth along and between multiple paths leading to new epistemologies guiding sociological research on sensitive topics.

**Final Reflections**

In this project, the wound is becoming an epistemological site of sociological knowledge about sexual violence against children and women within the context of Mexican families. Exploring sexualized human suffering while being immersed in multiple states of consciousness is becoming conocimiento. Anzaldúa describes conocimiento as “an epistemology that tries to encompass all the dimensions of life, both inner—mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, bodily realms—and outer—social, political, lived experiences…”

According to Anzaldúa, conocimiento is a complex process that flows through seven stages that I am still exploring in this project. However, I already learned an epistemological lesson: the conocimiento that I am developing in this study places all aspects of my human condition at the same level; there are no hierarchies with regard to the ways I have access to knowledge. Identifying and processing ideas and concepts, experiencing emotions and feelings, and being connected spiritually with my informants—ALL are equally valuable avenues to learn about sexual violence within the family, ALL of them are interconnected. As a researcher and a sociologist, I am completely open and vulnerable to all ethical and respectful forms of accessing these informants’ sex histories, stories, and narratives.

Nepantla is becoming an epistemological process in my sociological research. Nepantla is providing me with a liberating and humanizing understanding about sexualized pain within contexts of social inequality and injustice in Mexican society. Navigating through my own human complexities informs this project; becoming sensitive to this kind of awareness helps me develop a deeper level of processing ideas, feelings and emotions, and ways of being. This project is both exposing and nurturing a sophisticated way of thinking, feeling, and being that I have always embraced as a human being, and that I was beginning to discover and experience as a researcher, but that I did not explore much in my previous project. This is the process that Anzaldúa identified as la facultad. In *La Frontera*, she explains,

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the

---

meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant “sensing,” a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world.6

Finally, this project is informed by Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of “The Coyolxauhqui Imperative.” Coyolxauhqui, represents the Moon goddess in Aztec culture; she was the daughter of Coatlicue, the earth goddess. One of the most important icons in Anzaldúa theorizing, Coyolxauhqui is a female mythical representation, a woman who is decapitated and whose body parts are split and scattered in all directions. She is represented in a huge monolith found in the Templo Mayor in Mexico City (see the image above).7

On one hand, I am conducting this project with the purpose of facilitating the healing of our collective wounds represented by the image of Coyolxauhqui. At the same time, Coyolxauhqui’s dismember-


7 The Aztec mythology legend I am familiar with explains that Coyolxauhqui led her sisters and brothers to attack her mother (Coatlicue) after she became pregnant in a morally shameful way (a ball of feathers coming from the sky impregnated her). Coatlicue’s fetus (who later on became Huitzilopochtli) came out of her womb, and in a violent way killed Coyolxauhqui and her siblings. After Coyolxauhqui died, she became the moon, which comforts her mother Coatlicue from the sky every night.
ment represents the inner splitting of some of my informants and myself. Study participants who have been deeply hurt, like a contemporary Coyolxauhqui, have become creative enough to use the emotional resources that have remained intact in their personal lives. In that way, they have kept their existence together, in that way, they have cope with pain. But as I have listened to their tears and heartfelt stories, we have exchanged places.

Many times I have become Coyolxauhqui. I have struggled to identify the parts involved in my own inner splitting as I have immersed in this project. As an immigrant who has to go back and forth between and among nations, regions, cities, communities, languages, pronunciations and accents, I struggle to keep the Coyolxauhqui in me all together. The emotional, intellectual, and physical fatigue, along with the many methodological challenges involved in this project have reminded me of this deep split. But from the wounds that Coyolxauhqui reflects onto me, I have also perceived balance.

Before and after my interviews, I use meditation as a technique to replenish and take care of my intellectual and emotional stability. My supportive “thera-friends” who specialize in sexual abuse are always available to me for cathartic purposes; a good cry, exercise, and restful sleep always help in the process. As long as I immerse in a project that may promote social change, alternative yet deeply interconnected splitting and healing are taking me beyond the multiple expressions of ambiguity, fear, and anxiety. While immersing myself in Anzaldúa’s quintessential nepantla or embracing Coyolxauhqui, I am becoming extremely vulnerable as a human being, but also more whole and mature as a sociologist and a researcher.

La maestra nepantlera is no longer with us, but when I am in nepantla, she is always with me. If I had the opportunity to have another after-workshop conversation with her, I am sure she would say that from that fearful state of mind, a critical point of transformation always emerge. “La Mexicana, la burra, la nepantlera sociologist carrying the heaving load on her back,” perhaps she would say, “is in process of changing herself, she now knows she can change her world.”

My professional development is experiencing unexpected transitions. My own self in process of intellectual growth is becoming part of a larger process of social transformation. Investigar sobre el incesto en México me duele—doing research on incest in Mexico hurts—but the very same process is profoundly healing. My inner work is creating bridges with larger processes of social change; my inner effort is becoming my platform for sociological research and social action. My qualitative research project is becoming a political act; this study is also an emotional and spiritual journey. The experience is helping me to continue writing my own story, from a small and painful efficiency apartment in Los Angeles to a spacious and healing space in Austin.

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa’s inspirational theorizing is organizing my fieldwork and the early stages of my sociological research on incest in Mexican society. My inner struggle is worth the pain, as long as I do work that is urgent and highly needed, as long as I do work that matters.

I dedicate this essay to her beloved memory.

**Note**

I want to express my gratitude and cariño to my colleagues and friends Professors AnaLouise Keating and Christine L. Williams for their support and reflections as I worked on this essay.