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Pandemic Pivoting within Academia and Activism: An Exploration of New Forms of Classroom Pedagogies and Latinx/Chicanx Scholarship

Margaret Cantú-Sánchez, Ph.D.

The years of 2020-2022 are rife with significant changes, including a pandemic, social unrest, increased political divisions, and renewed interest in anti-racism scholarship and activism. Given that NACCS will be celebrating 50 years of activist scholarship it is important to note the significant changes many Chicane/Latine scholars, like myself, have endured in relation to our scholarship, activism, and classroom pedagogies. One of the major changes I found myself encountering was the almost desperate desire to balance my “usual” teaching themes, like those focusing on social justice, alongside the need to be flexible and compassionate during this trying time. At the same time, my scholarship and academic work seemed to steadily increase and become more important as mainstream society noticed some of the societal issues, such as systemic racism, structural inequality (CRT), and mental health, which many of us have long explored in our own research. With this paper I seek to examine the ways in which I, as a Chicane scholar and professor, sought to and continue to alter my classroom pedagogies and scholarship to reflect the significant changes facing society. Most notably, pivoting to an online platform allowed for many freedoms like attending and participating in more conferences, symposiums, and webinars. At the same time, I had to develop new strategies like employing the use of applications like Padlet to help my students stay connected all while trying to encourage civic engagement. I argue that Chicane scholar Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the path of *conocimiento* and current anti-racism theories like those of Ibram X. Kendi offer an important guide to navigating the numerous *arrebato*s

presented in our lives as Chicanx/Latinx scholars and activists living through a worldwide pandemic, while helping engage in consciousness-raising and spiritual activism.

In Gloria Anzaldúa’s seminal essay, “now let us shift...the path of *conocimiento*...inner work, public acts” she chronicles a pivotal moment in self-reflection and awareness through what she describes as *the path of conocimiento*: el arrebató, nepantla, the Coatlicue state, the crossing, putting Coyolxauhqui together (question and re-envision), revealing your story to the world, and transformation. Anzaldúa explains that sometimes in our lives we may be confronted with life experiences which call on us to reflect on our life experiences and positionality in our world. With the rise of a global pandemic, Anzaldúa’s words regarding *conocimiento* are more important than ever, she explains “[w]e stand at a major threshold in the extension of consciousness, caught in the remolinos (vortices) of systemic change across all fields of knowledge” (“now...” 541).

While Anzaldúa’s essay discusses the notion of the path of *conocimiento* in relation to her own subjective experiences with health issues, discrimination, sexism, and racism, in *Light in the Dark: Luz en lo Oscuro*, she expands her theory by applying it to the global arrebató we were thrust into during 9/11. It is this expansion of, and application of, the *path of conocimiento*, that is most useful in understanding the pandemic in terms of its devastating impact on us globally. Anzaldúa describes 9/11 as

un arrebatamiento con la fuerza de una hacha. Carlos Castaneda’s Don Juan would call such times the day the world stopped, but the world doesn’t so much stop as it cracks. What cracked is our perception of the world, how we relate to it, how we engage with it. Afterward we view reality differently—we see through its rendijas (holes) to the illusion of consensual reality. The world as we know it ‘ends.’ We experience a radical shift in perception, otra forma de ver. (Keating 16)

Much like 9/11, the COVID pandemic can also be referred to as “un arrebatamiento,” a significant event that cracked our perception of the world. Because of this cracking of our world, and all we knew prior to the pandemic, we were and are forced to contend with the reality revealed in the “holes” left behind by such an atrocity. When the pandemic first began, this global arrebató forced the world to shift into the perpetual unknown, thereby thrusting us into this new

stage of humanity similar to the stage of *conocimiento* Anzaldúa calls *nepantla*. In this phase, one is transferred into an in between space after experiencing a traumatizing event; a person is no longer who they were prior to the trauma. Anzaldúa describes *nepantla* as “...the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (“now...” 549). With the rise of the pandemic, many of us were forced into a space where we had no choice but to contemplate new perspectives of life, this is true for those of us in academia. Not only were we forced to consider how we might pivot our pedagogical strategies to an online platform, but we also began to question the ways in which we might continue to resist the social injustices plaguing our society, all while thinking about how our identities have changed since the pandemic.

In contemplating our various reactions to the pandemic, I must also note that though many people believe it is over, and try continue their lives as if nothing has changed, the pandemic changed our communities, globally. I recently attended an event at my institution, one of the first with a room full of people half-masked, half-not, focusing on the issue of transforming Hispanic Serving Institutions. The event speaker, Dr. Gina Garcia was phenomenal, enthusiastic, unapologetic, and clearly devoted to institutional change. The discussion which ensued was timely since we continue to be immersed in this *nepantla* stage—between thinking about who we once were as academics and people and who we want to be. Garcia urged us to consider the ways we might better serve our populations, and for me this struck a chord because of my experiences in these last two semesters. Though we have returned to “normal” academic business, we are all back on campus, still masked, the ramifications of the pandemic continue to reverberate on my campus.

We do, indeed, have a “new normal.” St. Mary’s University is a small HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution) with half the population composed of commuters and the other half “traditional” residents. Though we have returned to campus, students are clearly struggling. Current research from the CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) indicates that Hispanic communities are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, “[m]ore than a year into the pandemic, Latinos in the United States say COVID-19 has harmed them and their loved ones in many ways. About half say a family member or close friend has been hospitalized or died from the coronavirus, and a similar share that they or

someone in their household has lost a job or taken a pay cut during the pandemic” (Noe-Bustamante, “For U.S. Latinos”). This is clearly the case for many our students at St. Mary’s, both in the midst of the pandemic and as part of the aftermath. Numerous students have shared their traumatic stories of parents and grandparents dying or becoming seriously ill because of COVID or their experiences of maintaining attendance and good grades while holding down two part time jobs to help with family expenses.

To better understand the “post-pandemic” world we are currently in we must look back to the lockdown. When the pandemic emerged and surged in March of 2020, the world stopped; this included higher education. The ramifications were dire, hospitals were overwhelmed, parents now had double duty of caring for and instructing their children as well as maintaining their own careers, and people from vulnerable and traditionally marginalized communities were devastated with both job loss, and a lack of safe spaces.

For a moment, educators seemed stuck, until we pieced together a “plan” to “go remote.” From April 2020 to May 2021 classes and life in general shifted to online communication. Initially, the reaction was one of relief because we desired a sense of normalcy. Students were delighted to communicate in some way with others, at least some were. Others were still struggling financially or medically, sometimes navigating class while working, others caring for children while attempting to listen to their classmates, and still others had difficulty in shifting to an online platform. Despite the seeming “solution” of offering online education alternatives, this also presented problems for both students and professors,

[d]efficiencies in teacher training become apparent under COVID-19. Although a select few educators are familiar with and comfortable with digital delivery (and are able to provide rich classrooms experiences in a purely virtual platform), the vast majority of educators confronted the prospect of converting their classrooms from fully in-person to virtual environments stumbled badly.” (Shrier 67)

I was one of the lucky few who had taught online courses prior to the pandemic and had even been introduced to Zoom long before the software became widely available. Despite this familiarity with online platforms, converting entire courses which were traditionally instructed in-person was challenging. At times many of us were simply in “survival mode.”

But something deeper was also occurring; we were at a point when we felt worldwide despair and hopelessness. This moment is similar to what Anzaldúa explains as a new shift in the path of *conocimiento* “[w]hen overwhelmed by the chaos caused by living between stories you break down, descend into the third space, the Coatlicue depths of despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness” (“now...” 544). Though we were going about our daily activities, we did so in a daze. Somehow, we had to find ways to ask our students to remain connected in our classes, all while balancing the effects of the pandemic on our lives. In this moment, the only thing to do was to acknowledge and embrace the Coatlicue state and the depression that comes with it, to deny it would only increase our descent into hopelessness. As Anzaldúa notes it is important to

...name, acknowledge, mourn, and grieve your losses and violations instead of trying to retain what you’ve lost through a nostalgic attempt at preservation, you learn not just to survive but to imbue that survival with new meaning. Through activist and creative work you help heal yourself and others. (Keating 88)

While in this Coatlicue state we often took time in class acknowledge the ongoing suffering, discussed ways we could help each other by getting vaccinated, wearing masks, and social distancing. As a class and as individuals we used our discussions of books like Américo Paredes’ *George Washington Gómez*, Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, and others that called our attention to social injustice in our world and in our histories. In our research projects we made central the need to improve our world, all the while acknowledging the call to action to do more for ourselves and humanity.

One of the main ways I sought to help us bridge our worlds and selves in this challenging time was to consider Anzaldúa’s fourth space of the “path of *conocimiento*” where a call to action, to embrace a crossing is embraced. In this space, we accept our in-between state, but also ask questions so that we might move forward. To cross over, we must “recognize and come to terms with the manipulative, vindictive, secretive shadow-beast within” (“now...” 557). That is exactly what we pursued in our classes. Though we were online, we acknowledged the elephant in the room: the pandemic. We talked about its toll on our daily lives, we continued to focus on the literature at hand, and I found ways to connect what we were learning about to what was happening in our world around us. It did us no good to avoid or ignore the current events outside our

homes. Students responded well via Padlets (online software) which helped them discuss/answer comments/questions in real-time using “posts,” images, video clips, and find new ways to interact with one another. Often our conversations focused on major themes of the class including how to balance one’s cultural identity with Americanization and assimilation, while also addressing the impact we have on each other based on the decisions we make in our own lives. Students enjoyed finding appropriate gifs and images highlighting their identities and sense of humor allowing them opportunities to connect, albeit remotely.

It was also necessary to acknowledge the heightened social unrest related to politics, activism, and antiracism efforts. While we were still online, we continued to use Padlet, Canvas, Zoom, and webinars to share our thoughts on Black Lives Matter, the implications of COVID on minority groups, and ways we might engage in activism and civic awareness. Though we were not physically meeting, I chose to implement some activities including supplementary resources and guides identifying social justice issues like antiracism, systemic racism, and sexism. Students were also asked to produce an action plan to consider ways they might actively participate in responding to such social injustices, including volunteering at organizations like RAICES, Interfaith Welcome Coalition, American Gateways, and taking part in online and in-person protests. Though we often had difficult conversations, students were prepared for these discussions because they were directly impacted. I also made sure to begin each course with a community agreement in which students dictated how we would treat one another in class as we had these difficult conversations. This was created using a Padlet posting, which allowed students to return to the agreement whenever they felt the need to.

While my students engaged in this crossing and questioning stage in our new classroom space, I also experienced a major shift in my work and activism. While people were attending rallies in person in response to the atrocities perpetuated against George Floyd and others, I took my activist work online to address the social injustice of racism in the hopes of engaging in spiritual activism and healing. Anzaldúa defines healing “...as taking back the scattered energy and soul loss wrought by woundings. Healing means using the life force and strength that comes with *el ánimo* to act positively on one’s own and on others’ behalf.’ Often a wound provokes an urgent yearning for wholeness and provides the ground to achieve it” (Keating 89). One such gathering I organized was a virtual Black Lives Matter reading and rally sponsored by our English department. The

St. Mary's community was invited to engage in readings, poetry, and discussions about systemic racism and Black Lives Matter. I felt called on to do something more than my typical teachings and sought healing beyond my own anger with racism and racists, thus I asked our community to confront the wounds of racism and use that consciousness to grow and call on each other to act.

My approach to navigating our Coatlicue state was multipronged. In addition to my work with the reading and rally, I participated in webinars on systemic racism, and worked with others to see the implementation of an Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at our institution. We formed various committees to address the arduous work of considering how we might specifically address the serving-ness aspect of our Hispanic Serving Institution. And I continued my work with my Mexican American Studies Symposium by focusing on the theme of Antiracism and Latinx Cultures and Communities—all done online. The community and students responded with eagerness and interest in tackling how we might implement more antiracism efforts in our institutions and daily lives. Presentations ran the gambit focusing on domestic violence, discrimination against women of color in STEM, gaps in historical narratives, and discrimination faced by people of color in medicine. The presentations and conversations served to directly confront racial inequality as both Anzaldúa and Ibram X. Kendi call on us to do.

Two years later, the work that began in the midst of the pandemic continues. In the classroom, I continue to find ways to adjust and be flexible, while focusing on ways to combat social injustice in my own activism and academic work. Both my students and I have found daily life to be a struggle as we continue on this path of *conocimiento*, shifting between the various stages of *nepantla*, *Coatlicue*, the crossing, and questioning/re-envisioning. Despite the acknowledgement that working on ourselves and our positionality in an ever-changing world is necessary, we continue to struggle. Recent research indicates that we are not alone at St. Mary's University. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* devoted numerous discussions to the disconnect university students are often feeling, “[s]tudents seem to have lost their sense of connection with the university and university community, and their sense of purpose in attending” (McMurtie, “A ‘Stunning’ Level...”). Those students who are able to show up find themselves experiencing anxiety, depression, and burnout leading to the question of how can we continue to engage our students especially regarding heavy topics like racism, consciousness-raising, and social justice? Further questions remain regarding how

we can reach transformation via spiritual activism and antiracism when we are still locked in a battle to fully engage with one another.

To begin to address these questions we must first recognize the individual and communal problems we are encountering. Anzaldúa explains that a new perspective is required once we have encountered an *arrebato*, she specifically proposes "...a new perspective on imagining and a new relationship to the imagination, to healing, and to shamanic spirituality. Art, reading, and writing are image-making practices that shape and transform what we able to imagine and perceive" (Anzaldúa 44). To gain this new perspective in the literature classroom, I invite students to contemplate how literature and current events have impacted them. In contemplating these connections, like the impact that COVID has had on one's family, and interactions with classmates and professors, students have noted feeling burned out, anxious, and in distress. At the same time, they express a desire to engage in transforming themselves and their world especially in regard to social injustices.

In helping students to contemplate their positionality in the world and how they might help change themselves and their world, students can learn how to recover their agency in the classroom and beyond. As noted by Professor Mallory Bower is discussing his course, "Who Do You Think You Are?" such courses are successful because "...students were encouraged to have serious conversations on complicated topics, like abortion laws, race, or sexuality. It also gave them a sense of agency by, for example, devoting class time to discussing how to write their legislator or register to vote" (McMurtie "A 'Stunning' Level..."). Students in my courses use community action plans to help them decide which organizations and non-profits they would like to work with and are encouraged to engage in both traditional and innovative research, and non-traditional art projects focusing on deconstructing their identity. Each assignment gives students the chance to assert control of their story and share it with the world as both Anzaldúa and Kendi do.

For Kendi, his wife's and his own encounters with cancer propel him to seek a transformational reality, one where he takes his words and story out into the world to engage in meaningful action, hence his founding of the Antiracism Research and Policy Center. Kendi's decision to create the policy center is only the first step to enact real change, the objectives of the Center are at the heart of his spiritual activism. Kendi argues that the Center's purpose is to

Admit racial inequity is a problem of bad policy, not bad people.
Identify racial inequity in all its intersections and manifestations.
Investigate and uncover the racist policies causing racial inequity.
Invent or find antiracist policy that can eliminate racial inequity.
Figure out who or what group has the power to institute antiracist
policy. (232)

With these specific objectives in mind, Kendi realizes his purpose in examining race and racism through his own lived experienced and those of his fellow black community members, signaling an innovative approach to racism. It is this kind of approach that can help move us forward in an era where the definition of racist is no longer discernible and often ignored or denied by racists themselves.

The refusal to recognize racism in society, or to appropriate the language that was developed to fight racism continues to shape our reality. While some hoped that the Covid crisis would ameliorate the backlash of the early twenty-first century, it did not. This is firmly demonstrated in the recent laws targeting minority voters, critical race theory, and the censorship of literature written about and by authors of color and LGBTQ writers. What Kendi demonstrates for us here, through his path of *conocimiento*, is that we too must embark on our own journeys of transformation and spiritual activism. We can do this by acknowledging the difficulties we continue to endure, while placing ourselves firmly in the midst of these ongoing battles. Most recently my own class, *Women of Color, Memoir as Writing and Resistance* course sponsored a discussion highlighting the book banning and censorship in K-12 education in Texas and across the United States. Many of these graduate students are teachers themselves, and they demonstrated ways that they are fighting such censorship and how students themselves have engaged in their own resistance by signing up for *biblioteca* (an online library in San Antonio) so that they may read the books their schools will not allow them to, in this way students seem to be engaging in the kind of spiritual activism and transformation Anzaldúa calls us to embrace.

Anzaldúa explains that this point of transformation happens [w]hen a change occurs [in] your consciousness (awareness of your sense of self and your response to self, others, and surroundings) becomes cognizant that it has a point of view, and the ability to act from choice. This knowing/knower is always with you but is displaced by the ego and its perspectives. (“now...” 569)

For Anzaldúa spiritual activism begins with *conocimiento* and relates back to the experiences of racism and sexism she encountered growing up and living in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. She likens the idea of coming to consciousness as a necessary one, like taking care of “growing things and the land” (*Borderlands* 113). In the same way, one must take care of themselves to move to the next stage of transformation. Such transformations regarding identity and systemic racism emerge “[w]hen you relate to others, not as parts, problems, or useful commodities ... when you give up investment in your point of view and recognize the real situation free of projections—not filtered through your habitual defensive preoccupations (Anzaldúa, “now...” 569). In the case of systemic racism and the experience of racial discrimination, Anzaldúa notes that one of the first steps to addressing these issues is to seek out empathy, understanding, compassion. To consider another person’s perspective, their opinion, and how their history has impacted why they have formed such opinions and developed such ideologies allows for a better connection to others and room for transformation. In addition to engaging and encouraging activism within the classroom and beyond, students are also inspired through the utilization of Anzaldúa’s path of *conocimiento* and the stage of sharing their stories with the world. Specifically, sharing such stories allows for the opportunity to engage in “bridging.” In discussing Anzaldúa’s notion of bridging” and individual and global transformations, Mohammad Tamdgidi notes that

...bridging is dialogic and assumes the existence and equal value of ‘banks’ of knowledge on two (or more) sides of a conversation. Bridging is about sharing knowledges that are also independently growing. Bridging involves further dialogue arising from inner conversations. How could one truly appreciate the labors of another if one has not already tasted their liberating effects. (Keating and González-López 218)

For students to adopt the bridging strategy they should be encouraged to share their own stories and life experiences. In particular, students in my Memoir class were tasked with creating their own multi-media memoirs where they contemplated and confronted the wounds they had encountered during the pandemic and beyond. They were able to use these memoirs to reflect on themselves, their problems, their fears, and social concerns, including issues of identity, familial legacies, confrontations with family, and other social justice issues, to encourage conversation with classmates and others. In this way, the

assignment provides agency and a space for students to serve as bridges to transformational change in our world as Kendi and Anzaldúa do in their own writings.

Just as Kendi recognizes that sometimes he too adheres to racist assumptions, Anzaldúa too recognizes the fallibility she and all of us in relation to structural inequality because it is embedded in our everyday institutions and reality. This recognition can lead to dialogue and transformational change. Thus, the only way to reject former ways of knowing is to move outside of old narratives, beyond them. Karina Céspedes notes this call to move beyond the boundaries of former ways of knowing our world, requires "...facing up to the real effects such identities produce, the personal privileges one may gain from them alongside the tragic limitations these categories create" (Céspedes 76).

Though Anzaldúa and Kendi offer ways in which to engage in transformational thinking, there is still much work to be done. Students are still struggling with everyday life and we, as educators, must continually adapt and learn to be flexible in a world that is consistently changing. Epidemiologists further believe that many more pandemics will occur in the coming years and

[w]ith the effects of climate change accelerating and becoming more pronounced, we may see widespread environmental disruptions (i.e. superstorms, extreme heat and cold spells) of schooling. Global policymakers should be thinking ahead on how to mandate emergency response planning, including long-term, alternative options for learning. (Shrier 66-67)

With this information in mind it seems both Anzaldúa's and Kendi's approaches to transformational thinking must continue to take center stage if we are to succeed in helping our students achieve consciousness about their own identities and positionality in the world, and in finding ways to enact social changes. Furthermore, our former ways of thinking and doing things in academia are a thing of a past, gone are the days of dismissing student's mental health issues, late work policies, and strict adherence to attendance. These established norms cannot exist in a world where we struggle daily to identify ourselves and place in an ever-changing world. The question remains: Which stage of the path of *conocimiento* are we in now? Globally, we are wavering in this *nepantla* stage, this in-betweenness, poised and ready for transformation, but until we take the

time to consider the effects the pandemic had and continues to have on us, we will remain in this state.

As we continue to face new global arrebatos, it is important to recognize Anzaldúa's path of *conocimiento* and how it might be used in our own personal lives, within the classroom, our activism, and beyond. The path of *conocimiento* is an especially useful tool to utilize within academia because it asks us to contemplate the ways in which we might confront, embrace, and resist the effects of the global pandemic as well as overlapping issues like systemic racism, mental health issues, political division, and social unrest. Especially relevant are the stages of *conocimiento* in which we are called to question our positionality in an ever-changing world, and sharing those experiences with humanity. Critical literature courses are especially useful in asking students to contemplate the experiences of others, while calling on us to share our own stories in an effort to 'bridge' our lives with one another. In the end, 'bridging' may serve as significant factor in reaching positive, transformational change for ourselves and our world.

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