Self/Other, Other/Self: Conocimiento as Pedagogical Praxis

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Introduction

In Gloria E. Anzaldúa's world, *conocimiento* ensues inside historical, psychocultural, and spiritual processes whereby the self, in interaction with others, begins the necessary transformation toward self-healing. These processes necessarily take place inside the personal and cultural worlds we navigate. In the accounts of her growing up experiences, and her own coming to conocimiento, Anzaldúa provides analyses of racism, sexism, and classism inside historical and mythical perspectives, incorporating narratives and counternarratives of colonization and conquest as she recovers the cultural, spiritual, and political significance of her mestiza identity—an identity that merges ancestral roots linking her to the conquest, exposing ties that bind her roots to coloniality and resistance. In "now let us shift…the path of *conocimiento*…inner work, public acts," Anzaldúa introduces this coming to terms with self, illness, and mortality beginning with an examination of feelings of vulnerability which, when looking inwardly and externalizing trauma pain, serves as a stimulus for the creation of "spiritual/political communities" (574).

Anzaldúa posits that pain is the most powerful agent of transformation and wounds are the openings for digging into and launching that pain into the world, thus shedding potential for victimhood (Vallone 571-72) and opening spaces for conocimiento. Its opposite is *desconocimiento* which also co-exists in the inner spaces and places. Failure to acknowledge past harms and hurts sabotages growth

and liberation, precluding our ability to change ourselves so we can change the world.

As the Self comes to awareness and moves to conocimiento, relationships with Self and Others improve, and identity formation emerges within the various phases or stages of growth and healing; these are not finite, nor do they signify an end, as Self-identity is fluid and does not move into consciousness until awareness opens spaces to accomplish and re-accomplish processes of becoming. Hurtado, in her case study, rooted in Anzaldúan thought, posits that in the seven stages of conocimiento "individuals reconsider and readjust their ideas, motivations, and beliefs, all in the service of moving forward in their lives . . . and continue evolving in a process that is fluid, continues, and never-ending" (1).

The seven spaces may begin at any time. However, Anzaldúa begins with el *arrebato* which takes us from what we see as the familiar and safe, to the liminal and transitional space of *nepantla*—the second stage and the one in which the self exists to engage the other stages. It is in nepantla that you can be in the past and present simultaneously, and enter a space of possibilities to consider options in the creation of knowledge, formation of identity, and perceptions of reality through individual and collective knowledge. Coatlicue is the third stage where *desconocimiento* engages despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness empowering the "no" and "not able to" to paralyze us into inaction. It is where the other stages come in and out and engage their pain and disappointments to make meaning of pain and one's live experiences, thus gaining a rebirth and a new sense of self. *The call* or *el compromiso* is the fourth phase and it calls us to break free of habits that allow us to escape from realities we must confront, to reconnect with spirit, and undergo change. The fifth phase prompts one to track ongoing circumstances of life, to sift, sort, and symbolize lived experiences to put them into a pattern and story that speaks to our realities—to create new narratives that articulate our own personal realities. We scrutinize and question dominant and ethnic ideologies. Putting all these pieces together, we re-envision the map of the known world, creating a new description of reality and scripting a new story.

In the *blow-up* or sixth space you take your story out into the world, testing it. When we or the world fail to live up to our ideals, our edifice collapses like a house of cards, casting us into conflict with self and others in a war between realities. Disappointed with self and others, angry and then terrified at the depth

of our anger, we swallow our emotions, hold them in, until ready to engage in *spiritual activism* as a way of changing ourself and the world. The seventh stage is the critical point of transformation whereby we engage with ourselves and the world in all our realities to change the world as we change ourselves.

Conocimiento as a Pedagogical Practice

Conocimiento is an epistemological, methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical approach to learning/teaching and a way to enact relationships with self/other. A process that begins with the retrieval of "family legacies in relation to family origins, language, religion, work, and education, as well as other systemic or structural sites of oppression and domination," conocimiento relies on collaborative, reflexive, and critical spaces in the creation of knowledge (Jaime-Diaz and Méndez-Negrete 2). Below we share pedagogical practices and approaches for using Conocimiento as a foundation for learning and teaching, whereby

- There are no right or wrong answers, focus must be on what you know and have experienced.
- Every person carries knowledge and is not an "empty vessel" to be filled by those who have power or are perceived as the ones carrying the knowledge.
- Our emotions, past historical, personal, and family traumas may facilitate or impede learning as we unearth past hurts and violence to our psychological, spiritual, physical, and emotional selves.
- Through Conocimiento, learners/teachers gain confidence in challenging power structures and their institutional practices.
- Teacher/Learners engage in the creation of knowledge as subjects of the world whose agency creates possibilities for Self and others.
- Oral and family histories are central to the excavation and retrieval of learner/teacher experiential knowledge.
- Through relational reciprocity in the examination of experience, Conocimiento centers and honors dialogical voices embedded in trust.
- Learners/teachers recognize the value of their participation in the creation of knowledge. When and if learners opt out or "pass," they have the option to share their thoughts, feelings, and reflections at another point.

- Information retrieved from Conocimiento packets is utilized to create essays, videos, musical anthologies, artifacts, archives, and other creative projects.
- Conocimiento creates heightened awareness, critical empathy, and compassion.

Teacher Education

The principles of conocimiento provide tools for self-reflection in teacher preparation. Such self-reflection is critical for equiping future teacher educators with critically/culturally responsive pedagogies. This holds sway, particularly in view of changing demographics as we move through the 21st century. It has been projected that by the end of the century the majority population in the U.S. will trace their roots to Latina/o America instead of Europe (Gonzalez XV-XVI). Such change in the demographic of the nation-state will require a call to action in equipping teachers with dialogical tools to better understand the communities in which they serve. This begins with a self-reflexive analysis of deficit views internalized and conditioned as a norm during early socialization, particularly because White middle-class teachers often voice an inability to connect with students, let alone empower them through multicultural curriculum (Miranda Lake and Rice 193). This disjuncture derives from and is influenced by archaic factory models of education and a chain of command approach to maximize production between supervisor and worker intergenerationally transmitted as the norm (Sleeter 112). Schools become sorting centers that normalize social inequality and perpetuate social control to maintain the social order (Fallace and Fantozzi 143). Thus, in the following section, we take to task ideology and the insidious and pervasive nature of social reproduction within the context of social structures such as institutions of higher education.

Social Reproduction

Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) argues that privileges and processes are socially reproduced through social stratification, thus legitimizing exploitation through normalized socio-economic functions and institutions (Federici 56). SRT exposes and helps to address how schools do not promote educational equality, but instead reinforce social structures and cultural orders (Collins 34). Deep seeded ideologies are embedded in the various forms of capital that students bring into their educational experience as their frame of reference. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's *The Logic of Practice*, we highlight, problematize, and reflect upon

five forms of social capital to address social stratification in the schooling of minoritized students—class, gender, sexuality, ability, race, and racialized ethnicity; we also address the function of teacher preparation in relation to this same stratification (112-121). Such assessments must be done with a meticulous approach in assessing how teacher candidates view diverse communities through 1) Economic Capital, or goods properties and resources; 2) Cultural Capital, or a person's, knowledge and skills that provide status; 3) Human Capital, skills experience and education; 4) Social Capital, core groups of networks that benefit from existing social arrangements; and 5) Symbolic Capital, prestige or recognition ascribed and upheld by the recipient within a culture (Arum, Beattie and Ford 3). We discuss the ways in which these are reproduced in predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

Predominately White Institutions

PWI's are institutions with non-diverse, white students, where anti-racist efforts are often met with resistance. Persistent within such environments is the second-class treatment of minoritized students when they enact agency in raising awareness to the social injustices entrenched within the everyday practices of the institution. Furthermore, faculty of color also struggle against a tidal wave of hostilities as a response to confronting and disrupting modern racism, as illustrated by my own experience. Some examples have been documented in the literature and are not limited to the following: 1) Microaggressions, or unintentional stated forms of prejudice against members of marginalized groups—all Mexicans take our scholarships; 2) Macroaggressions, acts of racism towards all members of a particular race—you are Mexican and got an education there is no reason why they all can't; 3) Micro assaults, deliberate or intentional assaults to hurt the victim—you did alright for being Mexican; 4) Microinvalidations, discredit or minimize the experience of a person—for a former gangster/*vato* you did good for yourself (Azadeh, Boske, and Newcomb 5-9). Such aggression must be examined with an assertive stance to such ideologies to render them obsolete through a clarity of consciousness. Efforts to address aggressions in PWIs are complicated by ethnocentrism. Thus, is the next section, building on Healey, Stepnick and O' Brien's *Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Class: The Sociology of Group Conflict and Change* we address backlash, ethnocentrism, and modern racism (96-102).

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is the process of judging another culture from the perspective of one's own group or nationality. When such ideology is used as a frame of reference people compare cultures through religion, behavior, language, customs, norms, and material resources; the comparison is value laden (Healey et al. 121-123). Classrooms at PWIs have demonstrated how students from affluent white middle-class backgrounds judge minoritized students from positions of privilege, and minoritized students have to learn how to defend themselves from being devalued. This creates an intercultural conflict of misunderstanding. Such misunderstanding have significant pedagogical impacts: internalized biases of competency, and assumptions that teachers should raise or lower expectations of students (based on their own cultural assumptions). As such, it becomes vital in teacher preparation to reject such ideologies which many may have internalized.

Examples of internalized biases of competency are evident in language ideologies, especially the acquisition of English language through bilingual education, attitudes and assumptions regarding accents, and the acquisition of an academic language to acquire content. Such biases and ideologies can exist concurrently with anti-immigrant sentiment disdain for the working class, and an ignorance of the contributions that immigrant workers make to U.S. society. Thus, the privilege that comes from obtaining an education, and in relation, a discourse of whiteness, is normalized within social structures as a means for social acceptance; this marginalizes minoritized groups devaluing their lived experiences within U.S. schools (Cushing-Leubner 136).

Selective Perception

Selective perceptions are preconceived expectations that majority educators and learners project onto minority groups of people; these can also be the result of a failure to be mindful of the processes by which educators and learners harbor implicit biases about other groups. Such perceptions tend to reinforce stereotypes based on race, ethnicity gender, class and sexual orientation (Healey et al. 83-84). Yet, addressing selective perceptions brings with it challenges. When such issues are pressed with an assertive stance, white middle class students often raise their defenses. Such students also resist empirical evidence that challenges their views. White students' justification for resisting

derives from folk theories about language acquisition, such as deficit views of minoritized communities, which are usually acquired through deficit/popular media representations. On the flip side of the coin, minoritized students may assume that white middle class students have everything because they have material wealth, and thus face no challenges in their lives. These assumptions create boundaries between students along multiple spaces and places where they segregate into what they know.

Social Distance

Social distance is the degree of intimacy a person is willing to accept with members of other groups. This is highly influenced through socialization and social location within a community: close kinships by marriage, members of a club, friends, neighbors, employment or occupation, common citizenship, or social class (Healey et al. 91-106). In the U.S., legacies of segregation have created and reinforced a lack of understanding or unfamiliarity between groups; this exacerbates degrees of difference and makes acceptance less likely. In the classroom this is experienced with reluctance to socialize, avoidance, or reluctance to meet and work on small group projects with each other. Within this context of constructed and internalized social reproduction within institutions of higher education, *conocimiento* offers a cooperative and collaborative pedagogical approach in the creation of knowledge.

Critical Family Histories/Pedagogical *conocimientos* in Teacher Preparation

In countering socially reproduced ideologies, education pedagogues, such as Christine Sleeter, have argued in support of engaging critical reflection in relation to early socialization (Sleeter "Critical Family History, Identity, and Historical Memory 12, 115). Critical reflection requires students to engage critical family histories to deconstruct and problematize privilege, power, and difference. Chicana feminist scholar Josie Méndez-Negrete has argued that pedagogical *conocimientos* are a self-reflexive methodology that elicits the retrieval of family legacies and holds the power to unearth internalized traumas and implicit prejudices from early socialization (228). This approach has been invaluable in the preparation of teacher candidates, as it serves as a dialogical tool in creating a community of leaners.

Méndez-Negrete proposes a four-prong approach to pedagogical *conocimientos*, which utilizes the retrieval of family legacies in relation to origin, language, work, and education. For example, by exploring their immigration legacy, students come to understand the struggle of immigrant groups within epochs in human history. When language is analyzed, students examine the ways in which monolingual language ideologies and language policies have caused language loss. Exploring legacies of work challenges meritocracy and rugged individualism; students come to understand the sacrifices made by previous generations, which enables them to understand their social class position. This facilitates a shift from awareness to consciousness as members of the working class with the capacity to engage in social change.

When students retrieve education legacies, they learn that individual guilt is neither historically accurate nor pragmatically useful. What is needed is the responsibility to act in the spirit of social justice for the common good. Students come to understand the difficulty of the immigrant experience, especially within a culture that expects them to become generic Americans by losing their language and their culture. In relation, they learn about the difficulty in acquiring a language and struggling against language ideologies. Thus, pedagogical *conocimientos* has the power to instill a clarity of consciousness in bridging relationships by cultivating a critical empathy and compassion, making educational equity a reality as we prepare future teacher educators to be of service to our communities (Jaime-Diaz & Méndez-Negrete 2020 1).

From Student to Teacher/Learner: Conocimiento in a US WOC Classroom

To prepare, I (Gabriella Sanchez) revisited Gloria E. Anzaldúas essay "now let us shift. . . the path of conocimiento. . . inner work, public acts." Almost a decade after I first read the piece, I did not expect memories and emotions from my first reading of her text to resurface. The first time I read "now let us shift" I was an undergraduate student in my first women's studies course, with my first profe who identified as a Chicana feminist. She introduced me to Anzaldúa, Moraga, Pérez, Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective (to name some of many WOC we read that semester); when we read "now let us shift," it was the first time I had been asked to theorize the complexities, contradictions, and possibilities found in the commitment to heal. Later, as a graduate student in Josie Méndez-Negrete's class, conocimiento was employed as a theory, method, and

practice that utilized ancestral legacies, self-reflectiveness, and self-awareness. To disrupt a history of Anglo-conformity and Americanization that dehumanizes people of color, we focused on our relationships with self/other (self and others) as sites of knowledge (Jaime-Diaz and Méndez-Negrete 1).

Equipped with knowledge of ourselves and our historical legacies, and through non-hierarchical and reciprocal learning relationships, conocimiento empowers teacher/learners to grow the critical consciousnesseses necessary to name, examine, and contest colonial, patriarchal, imperial, homophobic, classist, and racist ideologies and systems; in the process conocimiento opens possibilities to recreate a sense of self and identity that exists outside of what has been assigned, imposed, or internalized. Thus, building on Anzaldúa and Méndez-Negrete, below, I discuss the ways I practice as a Chicana feminist educator in my US Women of Color (US WOC) course at Texas Woman's University. I focus on how I engage pedagogical conocimiento with intersectional thought to unpack the following core concepts and structures: patriarchy, settler colonialism, imperialism, and racial and gender ideologies.

Conocimiento: Day 1

Texas Woman's University (TWU) is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in Denton, Texas, a city with a population that is close to eighty percent white. US WOC is a junior level women's studies course that centers histories, theories, cultures, and consciousness of women of color. In a classroom of predominantly Black and Brown women, all course content is authored by Black and Brown women who share alternative ways of knowing and being as well as methods of resistance that they, for generations, they have relied upon.

On the first day of class, I begin by recognizing our families/chosen families and each one of us as teacher/learners, reaffirming that we are carriers of knowledge, and invested in and capable of creating knowledge. For many, this is the first time that the intellectual, activist, and spiritual labor of women of color – including their own mothers, grandmothers, aunties, and other matriarchs – is acknowledged. It is also the first-time teacher/learners have a syllabus that mirrors themselves. In a classroom of predominantly Black and Brown women, the course content is authored by Black and Brown women who share alternative ways of

knowing and being as well as methods of resistance that they, for generations, they have relied upon.

After we review the syllabus, everyone, including me, receives a Conocimiento Packet. This packet asks questions about the self and four generations of maternal and paternal ancestral lines. As we answer prompts about ethnicity, race, gender, class (work history), education history, and language, intersectional thinking becomes a method to analyze and understand identity formation. I also use my own Conocimiento Packet to facilitate my introduction. With this approach, I encourage a sense of relationality and provide a preview of how teacher/learners will learn to engage their legacies to create historical narratives. For example, I share that I identify as Chicana and never learned Spanish, explaining that my loss of language is linked to my parents' educational experiences in the 1950s and 1960s: "English Only" was aggressively enforced and if they were caught speaking Spanish, "educators" punished them with physical violence. When I disclose my family's economic status, I discuss my paternal and maternal work history and emphasize that despite patriarchs' earned wages from "official jobs," domestic labor carried out by matriarchs was and continues to be unpaid and unrecognized.

Conocimiento Packets are not graded; however, I ask they be complete (or be as close as possible to complete) before the second week of the course, since we will spend the next three weeks examining patriarchy, settler colonialism, imperialism, and racial and gender ideologies – harmful ways of thinking and being that have been embedded into current systems and structures. Beginning with patriarchy, I explain how conocimiento guides my teaching around these concepts, makes visible the real, physical harm these core concepts sustain, and helps teacher/learners identify the ways their family histories expose injustices imposed by these concepts.

Patriarchy

bell hooks defines patriarchy as a political-social system that inherently endows males with the power to dominate and rule over the weak, especially women, through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence (1). Theorizing from her own experiences in a violent, patriarchal household, hooks reminds us that men, women, and all genders have a role in reproducing

patriarchy. This is the case when we blindly obey patriarchy's rule that promotes emotionlessness: men are rewarded if they do not cry, and everyone is disciplined to maintain control over emotions or risk punishment. All teacher/learners experience patriarchy. Acquisition of theory and language enables learners/teachers to discuss the impact of maintaining patriarchal thinking in how we understand ourselves in relationship to others. Through mapping patriarchy in their lives and in the dominant society, the challenges and rewards that come with communicating feelings, moving through them begins to make sense (hooks 5).

Settler Colonialism

Colonization did not end, and settler colonizers never left what is now known as the United States. As such, we begin the semester by naming settler colonialist structures *upon* which the US and other nations were "founded," and *into* which we are all born (Arvin et. al 9). Through Native feminist lenses, we learn how, as a settler colonial nation-state, the U.S. maintains control through the murder and exploitation of Indigenous, Black, Chicana/o/x, and other communities of color, how heteropatriarchy molds our current understanding of the "traditional" family structure, "proper" sexualities, and gender norms, and the ways we have internalized settler colonial ideologies in our daily lives and relationships (Arvin et. al 12, 14). I ask us to consider how a nation within an Indigenous framework challenges the settler colonialist nation state. Instead of a nation-state that is contingent on exploitation and individualism (capitalism), how could our realities change if we center the wellness of ourselves, families, and communities (Betasamosake Simpson)?

Imperialism

An understanding of settler colonialism facilitates discussions of imperialism and allows an introduction to Tuhiwai Smith's notion of "the imperial imagination." The Imperial imagination enabled European nations to imagine new worlds, new wealth, and new possessions as theirs to "discover" and control. Moreover, imperial nations promoted scientific racism and the importance of economic expansion to justify their actions (Tuhiwai Smith 63). As such, military power driven by capitalism yielded and assembled a system of control under imperialism. This system enforced one way of learning, understanding, and being (Tuhiwai Smith 63-64).

Once we establish a solid understanding of imperial imagination, how it functions to sustain inequality, and how it continues to shape both formal education and our understanding of ourselves, we, as a class, are ready to apply the concept to our lives and learning. Teacher/learners are asked to imagine themselves within an imperial imaginary, premised on systems of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. This allows us to examine processes of how we, as "the other," sustain those in power. New language surrounding settler colonialism, patriarchy, and imperialism allows us to center the intersections of race and gender in our final core concept.

Racial and Gender Ideologies

In "Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder:' Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," Jennifer Morgan mapped and analyzed travel accounts by European "explorers" and how their discourse produced descriptions and images that would later be used to justify the enslavement of and violence toward Black and Native women. Based on observations of "unwomanly behavior," women's breasts, and childbirth, they described Black and Native women as "people of beastly living" with "unnatural reproductive behavior." They claimed that women did not "enjoy" children and, in those instances where the traveler believed the women did not want children, they linked such desire to savagery (183). To travelers, African women's' breasts were "barbaric" and evidence of "copulating with apes," (Atkins qtd. In Morgan 189). Lastly, because children were delivered "with little or no labor," travelers claimed that African and Native women "did not feel pain" (191). Through the publication and circulation of these European/imperial male writings and descriptions, Morgan argues, the way people were taught to view and understand African and Native women – as monstruous, not human, incapable of feeling pain – came to inform ideologies, images, and systems such as the medical system. They continue to inform racial ideologies today (Chakraborty).

Accountability and Action

Conocimiento packets are not tools for collecting data, however they reaffirm increased self/other awareness. They allow learners/teachers to demonstrate a commitment to rejecting patriarchal, settler colonial imperial, and racial and gendered ways of knowing and existing. They also provide participants

with an opportunity to actively engage in anti-patriarchal, decolonial, anti-white supremacist knowledge production. Participation in the course ignites renewed appreciation for knowledge through culturally informed historical narratives that unearth our family and community histories and experiences, providing us a choice to define who we are and who we want to become.

Conclusion

Through conocimiento as an epistemological process, we create spaces whereby learners/teachers critically examine their respective legacies by sharing a living history that provides cultural, social, and political frames of reference for understanding individual and collective experiences. This process unearths family and community knowledge, yielding a space that generates collective analysis, thus allowing learners/teachers to experience the ways in which oppressed racialized ethnic groups engage cultural hegemony in the United States.

Those of us who rely on conocimiento as an epistemological and pedagogical approach to knowledge argue that knowledge is relational, mutualistic, and interactive. We urge learners/ teachers to recognize that their emotions are implicated in the creation of knowledge. As such they must exercise willingness to share how and in what ways the material under examination has decentered or illuminated them. This necessarily calls learners/teachers to rely on their agency to demonstrate respective subjectivities as active learners in the creation of knowledge not as objective processes of meeting certain expectations, but gaining knowledge in all its complexity, particularly acknowledging the emotional labor and cost that knowing and not knowing inside the academy brings to those who have long been excluded from being active and engaged participants. Thus, we must reject the notion that the only way to gain knowledge is based on who has the right to know, what can be known, who opposes antiquated and colonizing systems of knowing. As we engage in the creation of knowledge, we must rely on our senses and use ourselves as conduits of the production of knowledge. Toward that end we argue that conocimiento facilitates:

- An examination of various structures of inequality and domination and the ways in which these maintain or impose hierarchical power relations that keep people of color subordinated.

- Multiple ways to make visible and problematize sociocultural arrangements that keep people of Mexican descent or minoritized people of color oppressed.
- The ongoing creation of historical narratives; historical analyses of prior generation's experiences; and analysis of and articulation of student's educational and employment legacies, and ethnic notions of their experiences.

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