

CHAPTER SIX: THIS BRIDGE CALLED OUR STORIES¹⁰: REWRITING REALITY THROUGH NEPANTLERA TEXTS

We are all wounded but we can connect through the wound that's alienated us from others. When the wound forms a citracize, the scar can become a bridge linking people split apart. (Anzaldúa, 2005, p. 102)

In this blended portrait, I explore how various traumas and stressors lock students and myself into dehumanizing beliefs—that we are alone, unworthy, unloved, and incomplete. We carry these wounds in our stories, which are upheld in our body's memories, emotions, logic, and ways we relate to others in the classroom and beyond. Through a unit of intimate inquiry, I examine how we gently confront these narratives, unpack the perceptions inside of them, and say thank you for what they were able to protect us from. The unit is grounded in Anzaldúa's (2002; 2005) *paths of conocimiento*, where students utilize this holistic framework to analyze and re-script narratives of pain, healing, and transformation. Their stories become a bridge to move from outdated perceptions to more liberating ones, from isolation to unity, from a split bodymindspirit to a reclaimed wholeness.

I begin with an explanation of the personal narrative unit, discussing how Anzaldúa's framework sets the stage for embodied analysis and storytelling. I also explain how I structure literacy practices to center openness, autonomy, and connection as ways to understand and shift away from perceptions of shame, powerlessness, and detachment that students carry from their lived experiences. Next, I look at a moment of collective analysis during the unit where Anzaldúa's *paths of conocimiento* invite vulnerability from the class, particularly from a student named Samar. I hone in on Samar's needs as they emerge from our class discussions and

¹⁰ This chapter specifically, and this entire dissertation generally, is inspired by the trailblazing radical women of color feminist anthologies, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), and *This Bridge We Call Home* (2002).

personal conversations. Afterwards, I reflect on the tensions inherent to such intimate storytelling in an English classroom and how I negotiated boundaries and re-centered throughout. I examine Samar's narrative, where she is able to rewrite a moment of internalized and interpersonal violence into one of affirmation and love. Throughout the blended portrait, I emphasize stories—from Anzaldúa's words, other multimedia texts, students, and myself—as taking on the important role of *nepantlera texts*, which serve as literary bridges for students to reclaim agency for themselves and solidarity with each other. Last, I conclude by sharing next steps for Samar and her classmates to deepen their intersectional analysis and healing, explaining how this curriculum transitions into our final unit of the semester.

Intimate Inquiry Unit Design: Our Paths of Conocimiento

As an English teacher, one of my favorite times of the academic year is teaching the requisite personal narrative unit. It has always been an opportunity to get a snapshot of students' lives and build authentic community. With my research and pedagogical intentions, I do not want to approach storytelling from a limited cognitive and apolitical lens; instead, I design the unit to frame storytelling as an embodied act of resistance. From past professional development as an English teacher and throughout my graduate academic training, I have little experiences of embodied storytelling to pull from. Developing pedagogies of healing requires me to draw from outside of my disciplines, specifically from an embodied leadership training I participated in with an organization called Generative Somatics (GS).¹¹

One of the training's assignments is called the Emotional Political Autobiography, where participants share pivotal moments in their life, reflecting on the emotions and desires that surface through these memories, and how they became politicized in the process. Participants

¹¹ My training with GS inspires much of the centering and re-anchoring strategies I share in this dissertation. For more info on GS, go to <http://www.generativesomatics.org/>

write out their narratives, share their stories in a small circle of listeners, and receive loving feedback. Facilitators encouraged participants to speak and receive from our whole selves and not shy away from emerging feelings. Through a combination of bodily awareness and intentional connection with people around me, I was able to experience an abundant kind of listening that I had not felt in classrooms before. As the training facilitators reminded me to stay present in my body as I spoke, I learned to repair harms I experienced as a woman and mother of color, and rewrite a deep shame that has gotten in the way of seeing my wholeness. I articulated my need to be seen, heard, and understood in those moments. This was not about proving my worth by telling a perfectly crafted story; I knew that what I shared, how I shared it, and what I embodied as I told my story was enough. I was able to be present in my bodymindspirit as I connected pain from my past to the resilience I carry with me in the present and future.

With the same intentions towards deep listening, embodied storytelling, and a rewriting of harm, I design a personal narrative unit called “Healing Self: Our Paths of Conocimiento” to lead into the following summative assessment, objectives, and academic standards in Figure 5 below.

WRITING PROMPT

Choose a difficult and/or painful moment in your life that helped you learn something about yourself. Describe that moment in detail: What led up to that moment? What happened? How did it make you feel? How did it impact you?

Use one or more of Gloria Anzaldua's "paths of *conocimiento*" to analyze how this moment led to healing, new understandings, and new connections.

Advanced Credit: Use your intersectional lens to explain how parts of your identity were impacted by different kinds of power and how this lens shaped your view of the world and the strength you carry in the face of difficulties.

Objectives

- To write, edit, and publish a detailed and thoughtful analysis of a personal experience
- To courageously speak your own truth into a sense of empowerment, healing, and solidarity
- To collaborate with peers and Mrs. Cariaga to create and publish a class magazine

Common Core Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3: Analyze a complex set of ideas or explain how ideas and events interact over the course of [multiple] texts
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3: Narrative to develop real experiences through effective style
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2: Explanatory text to examine ideas through analysis

Figure 5. Our Paths of Conocimiento Writing Prompt.

Instead of focusing just on narrative writing, I draw from the political aspect of the Emotional Political Autobiography assignment from GS and invite students to analyze how their story fits into a collective narrative of pain, healing and transformation. The unit begins with introducing students to the concept of an “intersectional lens,” where they unpack how their different identities are impacted by systems of power and the assets they carry in their respective communities. I choose Anzaldua’s (2002) essay, “Now Let Us Shift: The Path of Conocimiento . . . Inner Work, Public Acts,” as a theoretical framework because it articulates the connection between personal healing and collective empowerment and models the kinds of embodied writing I want students to demonstrate. As a class, we carefully sift through Anzaldua’s seven *paths of conocimiento*¹² as a process of multiple paths that intersect, interrupt, and ultimately

¹² It should be noted that Anzaldua only names one “path” of *conocimiento* in her 2002 essay, and discusses seven “stages” that lead to new consciousness. For the purposes of this

work together to create a new personal and cultural consciousness (see Figure 6 for an explanation of the paths).

Anzaldúa's (2002, 2015) "Paths of Conocimiento"	
Path	Description
Arrebato	A sudden rupture, fragmentation, ending, and/or beginning
Nepantla	Torn between ways, ideologies, people, places, emotions, etc.
Coatlicue	A third space of despair, hopelessness, and isolation
Call to action	Breaking free from habitual coping strategies
Putting Coyolxauhqui back together	Re-integration after being split apart
Blow up	Desire to share story but world fails to live up to ideals
Spiritual activism	Holistic alliance by connecting through wounds
"In all seven spaces you struggle with the shadow, the unwanted aspects of the self . . . All seven are present within each stage, and they occur concurrently, chronologically or not." (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 542)	

Figure 6. Anzaldúa's "Paths of Conocimiento."

Before students write their own narratives, we practice applying the paths to several *nepantlera texts* through graphic organizers, small group discussion and individual reflection. English teachers use what is often called "mentor texts" as models to demonstrate the writing process. Developing pedagogies of healing requires these mentor texts to move beyond modeling cognitive processes to also capture the emotional labor it takes to produce an intimate piece of writing. Anzaldúa (2005) discusses how "nepantleras . . . help us mediate these transitions, help us make the crossings, and guide us through the transformation process" (p. 99). I intentionally structure in *nepantlera texts* throughout the unit: I tell my own stories of pain and loss and talk about the strength it takes to share with others; I invite guest speakers to tell their own stories and apply the paths to their healing process; and I have students read excerpts from authors of color who incorporate emotions and an intersectional analysis into their

curriculum, I use the word "paths" instead of "stages" to help students understand that these various entry points into healing and understanding are not linear and intersect with one another.

autobiographical writing. We also analyze the “Thanksgiving” episode from the comedy *Master of None*, as a *nepantlera text* to humorously lighten up the subject matter, which is discussed more in the next section. After writing multiple drafts, peer editing, and individual conferences with me, students publish their narratives in a class magazine (see Figure 7 for student-designed cover). Next, I describe how students engage in a collective analysis of the “paths of *conocimiento*,” where multiple stories, including Samar’s, emerge as a *nepantlera text* to inspire others to reflect on their own pain and healing.

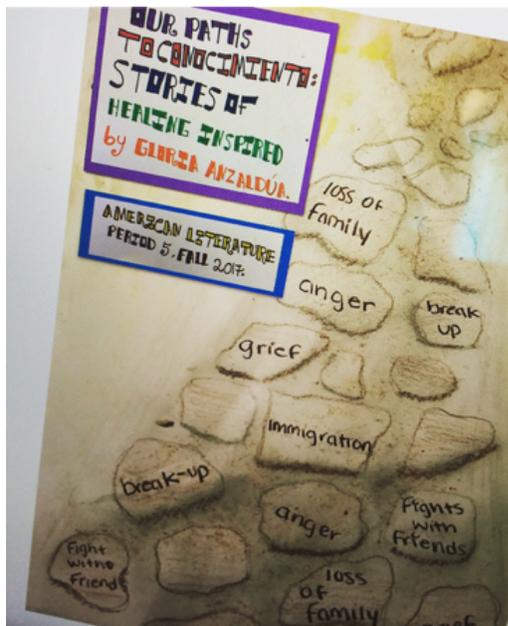


Figure 7. Our Paths to Conocimiento Student Magazine Cover.

Embodied Analysis: Nepantlera Texts as Bridges

“Ooh! Look at you, David!” Kaira hollers, as we watch a student-produced video of David with his head down looking defeated. Then in dramatic slow motion, he walks through a doorway, raises his head in pride, circles his arms above him, and beams with a smile of triumph. The whole class bursts into laughter, knowing that David is not one to be the center of

attention. He sits in the back of the classroom quietly, shaking his head in slight embarrassment, but also smiling in proud amusement. This is one of the videos student groups have prepared to demonstrate their understanding of Anzaldúa's "paths of conocimiento," which we finished reading the day before.

"Who can guess which path this video relates to?" I ask the class.

Five different students enthusiastically raise their hands, and Kaira answers, "call to action!" She explains that David's body language represents a call to action because of the way he seems "locked up in a cage" like Anzaldúa says, but then breaks free when he busts through the door. She connects the call to action to a time her mother made her feel unloved and how she wanted to escape her home.

Next, another group shares their video. We see Christopher standing in the hallway, then shake his entire body as if an earthquake has suddenly erupted and he falls to the floor. We laugh again, and students correctly guess that Christopher represents the path called "arrebato." I call on Rianna to define arrebato. She speaks so quietly that the entire class must inch in to hear her. As an English language learner, Rianna often struggles with asserting her voice in class discussions. Eventually, Melissa speaks up for Rianna and reads her writing for her: "the arrebato is about having to be strong and overcoming things that can destroy you." Christopher, who tends to explain things for Rianna even though she is capable of speaking for herself, offers an example of an arrebato: "We feel like this sometimes when you have to present in front of people, because a lot of us get shy but we still have to share." Trying to embody patience and affirm Rianna, I respond, "Yes, the arrebato is about forcing you to get out of your comfort zone. For those of us who speak different languages, it sometimes takes an arrebato to develop your confidence." Rianna looks at me knowingly, as we both smile at each other.

Now, it's Alberto's turn to show a picture that his group created. Since I previewed all of the group's videos and pictures beforehand, I give a content warning to students: "This next picture is about something pretty serious that affects many young people, maybe even some of you in this class. I know we're having fun guessing the paths, but I want to remind you to be respectful of people and their different experiences." The class waits curiously, as Alberto shows a picture of a forearm that has red lines drawn on it with a marker (see Figure 8). Students look through their quotes on the paths of *conocimiento* and guess that the picture represents *Coatlicue*, a *nahuatl* word that symbolizes depression, self-hate, and acknowledging deep pain.

Samar, who has been light-hearted throughout most of class, chimes in matter-of-factly: "An example of this is when my dad left Mexico to go to the States when I was six years old. It didn't affect me at first, but when I was in sixth grade I felt really lonely without him. I started cutting myself. But then I started getting into sports, and stopped."



Figure 8. Depression.

With Samar's sudden vulnerability, I can feel myself reaching towards different places at once: I want to comfort Samar and her sixth grade self for what she had to endure; I want to

check in with other students whose shifts in body language could signify they've had similar struggles; I need to remind students about mandatory reporting when it comes to comments about self-harm, but also don't want to alienate Samar in the middle of her brave offering to our class. Then I breathe. I give myself a chance to re-center in the middle of my stirrings and the reflective lull in our discussion.

Slowly, I respond to Samar, "Thank you for sharing. So for our graphic organizer, can I write . . . When there's hardship in your family, it can make you feel . . . Does the word depressed sound okay?"

Simultaneously, Samar nods and David, who has been quiet up until now, yells out, "Yes!"

I continue to add, as I type into our graphic organizer for everyone to see. "But when you confront that hardship, you become stronger. Does that work, Samar?"

Samar nods yes again. Now, I see her looking off at the distance, her foot tapping on the floor. I wonder what she is thinking, now that she has revealed a part of herself to us. I take a moment to observe Samar's body language to see where the discussion should go.

*I invite students to turn back to the paths of *conocimiento* to frame our conversation: "Anzaldúa says here that you can use energy like this to heal, that depression can challenge your tendency to withdraw and remind you to take action." I don't want to spend too much class time on Samar's comment but also want to recognize her experiences, so I continue, "Just so we don't leave Samar hanging after sharing, can you raise your hand if you know someone who has done the same thing, or has been overwhelmed by depression?"*

Rafael and David slowly raise their hands, as Samar looks around, her mouth pursed in acknowledgement. “Again, Samar thank you for sharing and being courageous. Is there anything anyone else wants to say to Samar?”

There is a few-second pause before Melissa says, “Thank you for sharing.”

Then Kaira jumps in more emphatically, “Thank you for sharing!”

Samar, whose attention started to drift off earlier, is now looking at Melissa and Kaira with a bright smile, and others laugh at Kaira’s enthusiasm. David is laughing too, this time audibly sniffing, as if he was crying. We all laugh with David too, as Samar’s vulnerability has brought us closer in this tender moment.

In this fruitful class discussion, both Anzaldúa’s words and students’ examples serve as *nepantlera texts* to help us investigate painful experiences from a place of openness and embodied reflection. When we read Anzaldúa’s (2002) unflinching description of her struggles with depression and illness, we too are able to “confront our desconocimientos, our sombras, the unacceptable attributes and unconscious forces that a person must wrestle with to achieve integration” (p. 98). These *nepantlera texts* “function disruptively” (p. 84), as students are given permission to un-compartmentalize the identities and experiences they have been taught to tuck away, and the paths of *conocimiento* give them a language of the *bodymindspirit* to name their pain and longings. The students’ videos and photos, as well as Samar’s own tenacious body language, demonstrate how the body, too, speaks stories that can collectively produce alternative ways of knowing. The body adds both a complexity and a familiarity to our analysis, where students make deep meaning out of their lived experiences and connect easily to the visceral images, feelings, and sensations that arise. In their excitement, laughter, and compassion with

each other, they subvert an “apartheid of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal & Villapando, 2002) by using their embodied stories to reclaim knowledge and connection.

Samar, in particular, takes on a powerful role of *nepantlera* by sharing an experience she never publicly told before. Samar is a relatively new student to the school, having attended only four weeks at Chavez High, so I later ask her what makes her comfortable sharing personal stories with the class. “I feel like every time I would come into the room, you would make me feel safe as a new student and always be there to help me,” Samar says. “It felt good to tell my story and listen to others too.” For Samar and other students, a pedagogy of healing requires an intentional process of nurturing safe and brave spaces (as discussed in the previous chapter), attuning to students’ bodymindspirits to assess appropriate next steps for engagement, and explicitly teaching skills like empathy so that students feel fully heard and seen. It is important to not treat narratives simply as an opportunity for individual catharsis. Instead, Samar teaches us that “by redeeming [her] most painful experiences [she transforms] them into something valuable, algo para compartir, so [other students] too may be empowered” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 540).

In our collective analysis, an embodied reading process also becomes important in nurturing a pedagogy of healing. The “Thanksgiving” episode (Matsoukas, 2017) of *Master of None* becomes another *nepantlera text* that helps Samar continue to engage in intimate inquiry. In the episode, a Black character named Denise explores coming out to her mother in different stages of her young life. Conversations ensue around the difficulty of coming out and being safe in a Black queer body, which helps students find ways to talk about their own intersecting identities in relationship to pain and healing. As we watch the episode, I ask students to look at the actors’ body language, explore how they feel as they watch the episode and how the scenes

relate to the paths of conocimiento. Below is an excerpt from Samar's analysis of Denise's story:

Table 2.

Samar’s Analysis of “Thanksgiving” Episode from *Master of None*.

Samar’s Analysis of “Thanksgiving” Episode from <i>Master of None</i>			
	Description of scene	My feelings	Path of conocimiento
Scene 1	Denise’s mom told her to put on a dress, but Denise decides to dress herself in more masculine clothes.	This scene made me feel good because she’s brave to wear what she wants.	Call to action—Denise is breaking free from what her mother and society expects of her.
Scene 2	Denise comes out to her best friend Dev and tells him she has a crush on Ericka. She doesn’t want to tell her mom because she thinks her mom will be ashamed of her.	This scene makes me feel understood, because I’m going through the same thing. I’m bisexual but don’t want to tell my mom.	Spiritual activism—Denise and Dev are connecting through Denise coming out.
Scene 3	Denise’s mother starts crying when Denise comes out to her. Her mom says it’s already hard being a Black woman. Her mom doesn’t want life to be hard for her.	This scene made me feel surprised because her mom cried.	Arrebato—Denise’s mom is forced to change because Denise refuses to be anything but herself.

This embodied reading process allows students to practice connecting the behavior, emotions, and needs of characters before doing the same deep meaning-making for their own final narrative. Again, Samar shares a part of herself she hadn’t before—that she is afraid to tell her mother about her sexuality. Before engaging in this collective analysis, Samar assumed that coming out to her mother would automatically result in shame and disappointment. Denise’s story in *Master of None*, which is based on writer and actress Lena Waithe’s real story growing up in South Side Chicago, helps Samar see the possibilities of owning her sexuality, to feel loved

in it, and empathize with other perspectives like that of Denise's mother. As a nepantlera text, this episode helps:

. . . reveal how our cultures see reality and the world . . . model the transitions our cultures will go through, carry visions for our cultures, preparing them for solutions to conflicts and the healing of wounds. (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 83)

Denise's story acts as a mirror to Samar's realities as a young person wanting to be seen in her wholeness, and paves the path for Samar to envision a journey towards healing in her own body and with her family. While Samar eventually chooses to write about a different experience for her "Path to Conocimiento" essay, her narrative parallels a similar trajectory towards re-writing shame into pride and unconditional love.

Identifying Samar's Needs

I now turn to Samar's needs underneath the experiences and perceptions she shares with me and students throughout the semester. I learn to check in with Samar at the beginning of class when I can, since her daily mood often wavers between bubbly joy and distant fatigue. At times she will burst into class with an "Oh my god, miss, I'm having a great day!" as she waves "Hi!" to the camera I use to record classroom interaction for my research. On these days, I spend time gently reeling her focus in, reminding her how much time is left and what she needs to complete. Other times, she shows up looking preoccupied, resisting interaction. "I'm not feeling it today," she tells me. I give her options, saying "You can take a few minutes to transition into class on your own by writing in your journal or putting your head down. But eventually, I need to see work." Some days are easier for Samar to become present again, while other days she struggles throughout the period.

From writing, classroom discussions and my check in conversations with her, I learn that Samar's struggles often stem from her family. Her parents are from Mexico and she lives with

her mother. Like she shared earlier, Samar's father left when she was little. She and her father are undocumented, which prevents her father from seeing her because he lives in Mexico. "The world can be challenging because people tell me that my family doesn't belong here. Or they tell my mom to speak English because she's in America." Proud of surviving different struggles, she carries a tenacious pride that helps other students affirm their own identities. I ask her where she gets her confidence from and she replies at length:

People think that my confidence is always up. I've been through a lot, so I just don't care about what other people say. Because are they the ones buying my shoes? Paying my bills? Buying my clothes? No! Then why should I give a fuck? But then, other things I actually care about. Like when people say, oh, you don't have a dad because of this and that. I get offended because that was part of my life and it was really hard for me. But when it's about me, I don't care. Fuck what they say!

As she speaks, she carries an exuberant dignity about her, smiling, swerving her head side to side to emphasize her words, and whipping her hair to emphasize how much she doesn't care about her "haters." We laugh together, celebrating the openness that translates from her body into her words. Her honesty is complex in its ability to express both a hard exterior of protection against criticism and a soft interior that is still wounded from her father's absence.

Samar's transparency reveals an underlying desire to be heard and helped. I ask Samar to stay afterschool the day she talked about cutting herself, and carefully ask her if she is interested in seeing a social worker at school. "Yeah, I would like that," Samar immediately responds, "because I feel like if I told my mom, she would just judge me." I break down what the process will look like: I will walk her down to the counselor's office and see who she can speak with, the social worker will likely end up telling her mother what happened to make sure she is safe at home, and that I will be in touch with the social worker as we all figure out how to best support her. A week later, I notice that Samar is especially distant in class so I check in with her again. She requests to talk to the social worker, Ms. Jones, during class, so I write her a note. I later

learn that Ms. Jones talked to Samar's mother about what transpired in sixth grade. I ask Samar how this felt and she replies, "It was scary at first, but it wasn't that bad. It feels like I don't have to hide things anymore. I feel lighter." She smiles and yawns, telling me that she hasn't been able to sleep much lately. I often feel tense in these conversations with Samar, because throughout my years of teaching, mandatory reporting has always felt rife with uncertainty. By the end of the semester, however, Samar says, "One of the things I will appreciate most is you taking the time to find help for me. I will never forget that."

Cultivating a pedagogy of healing with Samar and students like her often feels like this: constantly moving between refreshing honesty and protecting privacy, not knowing if I'm making the right decisions with students as they open up their lives to me and receiving validation that I am doing okay as their teacher. It takes a measured amount of self and collective care strategies to keep me grounded throughout this intimate inquiry with Samar and her classmates, which I now turn to in the following section.

Re-Anchoring: Setting Boundaries, Seeking Support

Along with Anzaldúa's theory of *conocimiento*, our supplemental texts, and students' experiences, I take on the role of *nepantlera* as I share various personal stories and learn to model healthy boundaries to balance the vulnerability I share throughout the unit. Going into this semester of teaching English again, I know I wanted to avoid my default tendencies to over-extend and burnout. Despite my intentions, those tendencies still show up throughout this unit. In the journal entry below, I sift through the weight of everything I am carrying—from teaching, personal life, and engaging with the world at large—and ways to manage it all from a place of self-compassion and wholeness.

I feel over-saturated with stories—my own which I'm trying to share openly in class, students' stories about death, depression, separation, violence, and the stories about

sexual assault inundating my social media feed from the #metoo campaign. It doesn't help that the story I'm planning to share with students is about being physically and emotionally violated by a doctor after giving birth to my son.

My shoulders and upper back feel tight and heavy. I feel like I'm handling a lot right now. I feel like I'm being broken open by learning to assert my needs in the middle of everything. I'm so tired of saying I'm tired. My body is literally slowing down and my mind can't fixate on anything long enough to do the things I need to do: write a draft of my son's birth story to share with class, plan tomorrow's lesson, give students feedback on their writing. How is it that I already feel on the verge of burnout, and it's just the middle of the semester?

Sometimes I keep telling myself, I can just get through this day. This week. But that's not how I want to function. Just getting by. I'm supposed to be teaching students about how to thrive, not just survive.

So what do I need? I need rest. I need to be heard. I need to back off social media because that shit is draining. I need to commit to developing relationships offline that can sustain me in this work I care about. I need to give myself permission to slow down. I need to feel joy. Peace. I need to know that I will be okay. I need to know that I am not alone. I need to know I'm loved and supported.

In this journal entry and throughout this unit, I find myself in one of the paths of *conocimiento* called *nepantla*, a liminal space of contention where I am torn between my tendencies to overwork and my intentions for sustainability. As a woman and teacher of color, navigating systems of oppression and an institution that promotes productivity at the expense of connection and care, I find it painfully challenging to say “no” to the voices constantly telling me that I, alone, must keep doing more for students. But my bodymindspirit becomes a place of resistance where I am “forced to take up the task of self-redefinition . . . leading to a different way of relating to people . . . to the creation of a new world” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 17). Slowing down in the middle of compassion fatigue and on the brink of burnout, I have to learn to listen to my body's way of asserting boundaries when my mind wants to keep going.

Intent on loving myself in the process of lovingly teaching students, I give myself permission to sit with my feelings of inadequacy, meditate, and write what my bodymindspirit is

trying to tell me. I seek support by getting reiki sessions from community wellness practitioners to help me see what I cannot see alone. Although at times it is exhausting to do so much intentional noticing in my bodymindspirit, I slowly recognize an internalized pattern of becoming immersed in the grind of teaching, appeasing everyone else's needs before mine, and becoming resentful of others when I begin to burnout. Part of this pattern comes from a genuine place of care and passion for teaching, while much of it is wrapped up in a cultural and personal narrative that says I am too small to ask for support, there is not enough space for my own needs, and I am alone in this work. In my reiki session with a healer and friend named Angelica, I learn through breathing exercises, visualizations, and literally being held in Angelica's arms, that I can speak back to these voices: I deserve to be and am already supported; the world is expansive enough to hold students *and* my needs; and I am inextricably connected to a loving network of family and community that stretches from my earliest ancestors to my most future students and descendants. By allowing my bodymindspirit to return me to a place of abundance, gratitude, and grace, I can re-fashion my teaching to do the same. Angelica becomes my nepantlera, affirming that "it takes energy and courage to name ourselves and grow beyond cultural and self-imposed boundaries. As agents of awakening, nepantleras remind us of each other's search for wholeness" (Anzaldúa, 2005, p. 93).

Thus, I learn that setting boundaries around my wellness is not just about saying "no" to habits of over-extension, but about re-writing my internalized beliefs that I am pre-destined towards invisibility, so that I can "yes" to unapologetic self and collective care. If I am to teach students to re-imagine a more liberatory world where everyone's needs are fully seen, I must begin by first re-imagining that world for myself. So when Samar is telling me about missing her father in Mexico and I feel my body drifting away from myself because I am immersed in

Samar's sadness, I literally shift my body back in my seat to remind myself that I can understand students' needs while being centered in my own. When I can feel my body sinking from the fatigue of reading students' stories, one after another, I pause, take a break, and let my breathe release whatever pain and emotions that are not my own. When it is time for peer editing drafts of students' narratives, I facilitate a meditation exercise to ease into talking about collective needs before sharing stories with one another. After getting in touch with our breath and current feelings in our bodies, I express the following:

Alright y'all. Before I have you share your stories with each other, I want us to practice sharing feelings and needs with our peer editors. That way, your peer editors know how to work with you as you read your story.

To show you how to do that, I will share my feelings, needs and story with the whole class first. During the meditation, I noticed my eyebrows were scrunched up and my breath was short. I'm feeling a little irritated because many of you were talking or goofing off at the beginning of class. Sometimes that makes me feel invisible or like I'm the only one who cares about this work. I'm assuming you care about these stories you are telling, yes? (Most of the students nod their heads). Then I need some more respect from you as we work on these stories together.

Today, I am going to share my son's birth story, so I feel nervous too. Know that my voice might tremble because I'm nervous reading this for the first time out loud. When I read personal stories like this, young people tend to have a lot of questions right away. When I read it, I am requesting that you just sit and fully listen as I read the entire draft once. Then you can ask questions after. Can we do that?

The students who were talkative earlier shift in their seats, as the entire class nods their heads or agrees verbally that they can meet my needs. I share my story, feeling much more present now that students have heard me out. When students share needs with their peer editors, some explain that they are scared because they have never shared these experiences before; some tell their partners they need help with grammar or an ending; others tell their partners not to laugh because the experience wasn't funny to them at the time. Our bodymindspirits become integrated into the curriculum as a resource to enhance our connections and writing process.

This classroom practice of meditating, reflecting and sharing needs becomes a collective care structure that mutually supports all of us to feel fully supported as we engage in collective intimate inquiry. Practicing shifting my internalized narratives makes me better equipped to support students in shifting their own perceptions, which I discuss in the next section, where Samar uses the paths of *conocimiento* to give voice to a painful and ultimately healing experience from her childhood.

Healing Literacies: Shifting Narratives and Reality

Students choose a wide range of moments to narrate and analyze in their “My Path to *Conocimiento*” essay: reclaiming self-worth from an unjust experience in middle school (as David demonstrated in the previous chapter), unpacking family unity that emerges from mourning the death of relatives, expressing anger at losing a brother to prison, mourning the loss of home, language, and family through migration stories, to name a few. Many of the students’ stories begin with a sense of powerlessness from forces beyond their control, like illness, the prison industrial complex, and drug wars, but through a brave re-telling and re-framing are able to distinguish deep resilience and love amidst the pain. As Anzaldúa (2015) states, they “create an alternative identity story” that can hold the weight of grief, rage, and uncertainty while asserting the power that they hold personally and collectively (p. 6).

When brainstorming moments to write about, Samar lists her father’s absence, her uncle’s death, and a couple crossed out items, but eventually chooses an incident from elementary school. “In third grade,” she explains to me in class, “I started getting bullied because of my weight. It starting to affect me a lot, so I wouldn’t eat at home and would tell my mom I was full from eating at school.” Samar’s mother eventually learns about Samar’s eating

habits after an event in her physical education class. At the beginning of her essay, Samar explains:

We had to run four laps and I decided to run without stopping. After the first lap, I starting feeling sick and dizzy, so I started to slow down, but in one second, I passed out. When I woke up, I was in the hospital. I saw my mom with tears in her eyes like I've never seen before. I felt guilty for putting her through all this. I didn't want to look at her but she got close to me and gave me a big hug. I felt so relieved that she wasn't mad at me. She held my hands and looked straight into my eyes, and said, "Always remember that no matter what you're going through, I'm always going to be right here next to you."

We can see throughout her narrative, that Samar considers other people's emotions—feeling guilty about causing her mother pain, worrying what her classmates think of her body—while disappearing her own needs. At eight years old, Samar displaces the anger that she holds against her peers and projects them inwards, towards her own body. Practicing healing literacies in an English classroom, I am always considering Audre Lorde's (2007) words, where she says, "Anger is loaded with information and energy . . . Focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (p. 127). As I guide Samar to using the paths of *conocimiento* to make meaning from her experiences, I consider: How can Samar be more precise with her anger in order to reclaim a sense of dignity for herself?

In the following discussion during afterschool tutoring, I use a series of mirroring questions to help Samar give witness to the needs underneath her behavior as a third-grade girl.

As Samar responds, she types her words into her essay draft.

Mrs. Cariaga (C): So if you could go back and talk to your third grade self, what would you say to her?

Samar (S): Talk to your mom about it. Talk to adults about it. Talk to teachers about your bulimia.

C: So that what?

S: So that they could stop the people that are bullying you, so you don't have think about starving yourself.

C: Why do you think your third-grade self didn't talk to adults?

S: She was scared. She was scared that her bullies would do something.

C: So she was trying to protect herself?

S: Yes . . . (typing furiously away as she speaks now). This moment in my life showed me that I needed more support from my friends so that I didn't have to keep all my feelings to myself.

C: (giving Samar a moment to finish typing) . . . And what did you learn about your mother's love throughout this? What did it teach you?

S: That she's always going to be there supporting me no matter what, she's always going to be there for me as a best friend or a mom.

C: And without knowing it, you did your concluding sentence for that paragraph!

S: Oh yeah?! (smiling as she finishes typing).

Although it appears that this essay is easy for Samar to write, it is important to note that she struggles with writing in class. With her wavering emotions throughout different classes and her tendency to be distracted by peer conversations, I help Samar recognize that she needs quiet space and more flexible time to complete her work, as she writes much of her essay afterschool sitting beside me. My series of questions supports Samar's writing process in two ways: one, they give her a mirror into her third-grade self so that she can step into that moment with its accompanying feelings and needs; two, they also give her enough distance from her present self, as students can often get emotionally overwhelmed by returning to difficult moments from the past. Samar is able to practice self-empathy and still stay in the present. Balancing narrative writing with emotional literacy, these teaching strategies align with a trauma-informed lens that reminds teachers to be vigilant about re-traumatization. I also made a point to end these kinds of questions on strength and resilience; in this case, Samar, despite her fear and guilt, is able to articulate her mother's unconditional love for her.

Besides practicing self-empathy, Samar utilizes Anzaldúa's path of *conocimiento* to deepen her analysis. Below is the rest of her essay that adeptly utilizes the paths to make sense of her experiences. By the end, it is clear why Samar chooses to title her essay, "Warrior":

Throughout my experience, I felt what Anzaldúa describes as the path of Coatlicue, which is a kind of anger that forces you to acknowledge your pain. According to Anzaldúa, this path is marked by a deep sense of darkness. Behind the pain, there's a desire for happiness and respect. When those kids bullied me I felt connected to Coatlicue because I felt irritated that I couldn't have a moment of peace. When I decided to starve myself, I thought I could gain respect from other people. When I woke up in the hospital and saw my mom crying, I hated myself because I felt that I was putting her through pain. This path taught me to not hide my pain or keep my feelings to myself. I was able to become closer to my mom and gain the support I needed.

I also experienced the path of Call to Action, which forces you to make a change and break free. Anzaldúa (2002) says, "You begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming, not who you have been" (p. 560). I found myself in this stage when I realized that I shouldn't care what those bullies had to say about me. At times, I wanted to use violence against them so that they could stay away. Behind those feelings, what I needed was to break free from their violent words thrown at me. I yearned for support from my friends and my mom. If I never went to the hospital, my family wouldn't have known I got bullied. This journey led me to reconnect with my mom because she taught me that no matter what I'm going through I'll always have her support. This painful moment taught me to defend myself instead of keeping things in. I learned that instead of causing harm to myself, I know that I can ask for help. Although painful experiences like these are difficult to endure, I am grateful for what this moment has taught me because if none of this had happened I would have never become the bad bitch I am now.

I thought I could heal by starving myself but I realized that healing is about not just being healthy but feeling good about myself. My healing has been about speaking back to the voices that say I'm fat and that I'm breakable. To those voices I say, I am unbreakable, I am beautiful. Those words are more about those bullies who make themselves look bad and make me look really strong. I survived trying to kill myself. I am no longer silent. I write this story because many of people are bullied. I especially write to young women who are often silent when they're being attacked just because of their accent, color, or for just being themselves.

Grounded in Anzaldúa's theory of *conocimiento*, Samar is able to transform a difficult moment into a place of possibility and transformation. The "My Path of *Conocimiento*" assignment allows Samar and other students to navigate multiple texts: the written text of Anzaldúa's framework to anchor her analysis, her lived experiences as text to critique socially constructions

of body image, and her emotions as text to deepen understandings about underlying needs and assets. Traditional English teachers may scoff at Samar's line, "I would never have become the bad bitch I am now." But hooks (1994) reminds us of the restorative value of words, where "there, in that location, we make English do what we want it to do . . . We make our words a counter-hegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language" (pp. 174). Through autonomous language, Samar tells her narrative on her own terms, "creating a new description of reality and scripting a new story" (p. 123) that shifts shame to unabashed pride and individual pain to collective healing.

Ongoing Healing: Collaborative Healing and a Deeper Collective Analysis

Samar's experiences outside and inside our classroom demonstrate the urgency for pedagogies of wholeness that honor her need for autonomy, space, connection, and a flexible pace. In our last interview, Samar tells me, "I really thank you for your help, Mrs. C, because without it I wouldn't have asked to see a therapist and she helped me a lot too." Her words clarify that I cannot do this work alone as a teacher in one classroom. Healing pedagogies require a collaborative system of support where for instance, Samar is able to see the school social worker to process various family hardships, while still engaging in healing literacy practices in our class. Teaching Samar and students with parallel traumas and stressors, I realize it is not enough to refer young people for mental health support; an ongoing conversation with administrators, grade-level teachers, counselors, social workers, and extra-curricular educators is necessary to fully seeing and supporting students' needs, which often change day to day. Pedagogies of wholeness must therefore stretch beyond the classroom and become systematized into the entire school culture to truly honor the complex needs and assets students bring with them.

While Samar is able to conclude her essay by connecting her personal story to that of other young women of color, she also perceives bullying as an individual phenomenon instead of behavior that often stems from a collective history of unhealed harm. This takes us to our next and final unit, where students move from healing themselves to offering healing support to others in their community. Although the focus is on helping other people of color, my hope is that through more intimate inquiry, they can strengthen their analysis of intersectional struggle, while continuing to unpack emotions that have emerged from their stories and recognize their bodymindspirits as resources for personal and collective healing.