

## TOO NEPANTLERA TO WRITE: BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE TRIBALISM FOR ALL

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### Entering the Confusion...

Twelve hours before the deadline to submit for this issue. Blank page. Blank mind. Hesitation, anxiety, fear, you name a few. I am too scared to type what I am thinking in my mind. Looking through the darkness, I am wondering what I am doing in this space? I am totally an outsider of this call for paper, this issue, this journal.

I am not a Latina. I do not identify myself as female. My home language is not Spanish. I do not know how to code switch between English and my mother tongue. I am *neither/nor*, or *both/and* to fit in the theme of the issue. So, who am I to write?

“Leave! You are not welcomed here!” Am I speaking to myself? Or, will someone reading this paper (im)politely ask me to leave this space? I am a Vietnamese immigrant teacher who came to the United States to continue my dream of teaching. My home language is Vietnamese, and I speak English as a second language (ESL). Will years of experience working with (queer) Latinx youths give me some cultural background to have a dialogue with Latinx readers? Will my advocacy and stance in favor of my transnational adult English language

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learners who come from Spanish-speaking countries qualify me to write? Will my works, grounded and inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana feminist, thinker, and writer, allow me to get closer to the readers and the writers of this special issue? And more importantly, how will my positionality as a Vietnamese, queer, accented writer/outsider of Latinx communities allow me to be *me* and to write in a space where I did not see myself included? I am articulating a series of questions and inquiries about why and how you, the readers of this paper, and I will meet at an intersectionality (Hill Collins and Bilge) to celebrate the complexity and richness of the multi-identities.

Gloria Anzaldúa writes in an edited book with Ana Louise Keating titled *This Bridge We Call Home*, “Twenty-one years ago, we struggled with the recognition of difference within the context of commonality. Today, we grapple with the recognition of commonality within the context of difference” (2). Even though the publication of this book was almost two decades ago, the quote still remains true in the context of multiculturalism, transnationalism, globalization, and diversification at this present moment. I grapple with the concept of “the recognition of commonality within the context of difference” (2) since we are all insiders and outsiders at some point of our lives, whether we agree or not. We speak different languages, inherit different cultures, have different physical appearances, walk different walks of life, etc., but intersect in terms of languages, cultures, perspectives, social positionality at some points, and more interestingly, find similarities within these disparities.

### **... To Find a Reason to Write.**

Coming out of the disparities, I consider myself a *Nepantlera*. According to Anzaldúa, *Nepantlera* is the one who lives in-between spaces and among worlds. *Nepantleras* overcome struggles of disparity, confusions, contradictions to make sense of and understand the worlds through their own lived experiences. “Where others saw borders, these *nepantleras* saw links; where others saw abysses, they saw bridges spanning those abysses” (4). I see myself in this concept. It reflects profoundly and connectedly on my positionality, not only in this paper but also in the world where I am living, in the academic environment I am working. My situation represents those

who live between and among worlds and find nowhere to call *home*. *Home* now is a static definition that, I feel, does not belong to a concrete concept or land; *home*, to me, is where my community is and, of course, the definition of my own community is different from yours. As Anzaldúa posits, “though most people self-define by what they exclude, we define who we are by what we include—what I call the new tribalism” (3). Therefore, I want to clearly state that this piece is written and inspired by the peoples in this *tribalism*. I write for women who are working tirelessly and silently with and for the Latinx communities in the United States. Secondly, I write for the invisible Latinx children, youths, adults in this *land of opportunities*. Lastly, I write to those who do not identify as *Latinx*, which includes those not coming from a Spanish-speaking country or who do not speak Spanish as a second language and do not fall into the gender binary—myself included. The stories shared in this essay could sound familiar to someone, but I hope you will walk with me until the end of this paper so that you will see an intersectional piece that remains in you.

### Story 1: Luna

She is still standing there. She stands still, smiling, laughing, discussing with her friends about an exciting topic we just learned in class. We are discussing about the important role of Latinx students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are discussing if Latina students could code. She seems really excited and forgets about that situation. We just entered the circle of conversation last week when we discussed about how I myself was being treated differently due to my gender identity when I was in Vietnam. In the circle, we drew a picture of how we grew up and how we encountered stereotypes and biases toward us, queer people of color, in the land of opportunities, in the land of heteronormativity.

The above excerpt was written two years ago in my daily journal when I taught a group of Latinx middle-school students. Luna, my 7<sup>th</sup> grade student, gained more self-confidence after that conversation. She overcame her struggles, her silence, her sadness of being viewed as a queer Latinx, or Mexican-American, in her middle school to become

happier in communicating with her peers. In a recent paper where I theorize Gloria Anzaldúa's legacy, I let myself enter Luna's world and perspectives to understand her feeling, her isolation, her deep fear avoiding who she was. I traveled back to the time where Luna had broken down the "Coatlicue State" regime, where the shameful-ness, opposition, and duality occurred as she dealt with her identity and differences. Luna, through my observations, has come out of the closet and now enjoys sharing her life's joy in front of the public (Trinh 2019a) for who she is and will be.

### **Story 2: Nikkia**

Nikkia N., an African-American, critical, kind, and beautiful woman, co-taught with me this class wherein Luna was a student. Her smile, her criticality, her kindness, understanding, and empathy had brought the kids together. We were teaching this class to help Latinx middle-schoolers learn how to code in a class called "computational thinking". We were carefully planning the lesson plans, attempting to expand our *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa and Keating; Kasun), or ways of knowing, to understand this particular group of students. We were attempting to change the concept of the *teacher as an oppressor* (Freire) in the classroom. Nikkia had been learning Spanish; she tried her best to communicate with her students in Spanish to relate to her students' cultural background knowledge in a culturally relevant learning environment (Ladson-Billings). Nikkia is not a Latina woman, but she is working with Latinx youths in the United States of America, and she is advocating for her students' knowledge, independence, and criticality beyond traditional classroom practices.

### **Story 3: Jyoti**

Jyoti K., who self-identifies as a half Asian-Indian, half white, bicultural, Georgian woman, is working tirelessly in a project that helps recruit and train teachers in dual language classrooms in the state of Georgia. In addition, Jyoti, in collaboration with her supervisor and I, conducted research about Latinx college students from Mexico in a study abroad program to find the answers for the interconnection between history, language, and identity. Jyoti is not a Latina woman, but the work she has been doing to bring bilingual (Spanish-English)

teachers into the dual language classrooms has made a far-reaching impact on the Latinx youths and community beyond her personal benefits. Her work should, thus, be recognized and appreciated.

### Story 4: Zuri

Sitting in the room filled with full of soon-to-be ESL teachers/educators, I held my breath to listen to her story. She is a proud Cuban immigrant who came here, struggling through her journey in this country. She mentioned in her writings, as well as in our full-of-laughter conversations, her journey through this system that “alienated and segregated” her and, as result, she felt “unnoticed and invisible”. I was sitting there, empathizing with her in silence, although I really wanted to shout: “yes, I got you, my friend!”. She, of course, did not put an emphasis on the “invisible” part; but that is a part of her life that has imprinted tremendously in her mind; it might be a thought that stays with her until the last day of her life. However, she was proud to retell the story; she was happy to share what she has gone through with other student-teachers during the discussion. The students cheered her up and applauded her after her talk; she did a phenomenal job in painting a real picture from a testimony of a Cuban student in a U.S. classroom.

The above excerpt was written in a journal that I kept while I was an assistant to a professor in a cross-credit course called “Working with multicultural populations” at Georgia State University, in Atlanta, Georgia. The professor invited Zuri E., the Cuban woman in the vignette above, to share her story with student-teachers as we discussed the topics of code-switching and translanguaging. I had a habit of taking notes about what had transpired throughout the day. Zuri’s speech moved me in terms of emotions as an “outsider” of the United States of America, even though she speaks Spanish and strongly identifies with her Cuban culture. I paused myself for a second as she was sharing her story. I know pain and extreme loneliness were two things she had to endure in the school system —without love, justice, equality, or acknowledgement. It saddened me more when I reflected on myself and related so much with her story through my own experiences as an immigrant in this country— enduring loneliness, scarcity of support, and invisibility. There was a time when I *transformed* myself with blue hair that went *noticed* everywhere

I went; but the attention only served to fill my endless sorrow. Zuri and I ran into an intersection where both of us were (and are) viewed as “outsiders” of the U.S. since we come from different cultures and different backgrounds, even though we both use English as a tool of communication.

### **Intersectionality**

Luna represents a group of Latinx youths of color living in the United States, struggling with her gender identity, her code-switching between English and Spanish, and with being bullied at her school. I was wondering how many Lunas out there in this country are still having the same struggles, are still isolating themselves from the crowd, are still locking themselves in their own world so that no one can find them, can talk to them, can empathize with them. I was also wondering if we do not lend our eyes into the *Other*, how can we understand their struggles and barriers to offer a helping hand? Luna is an inspiration for her generation to continue this journey in the U.S., even though she is still at a young age. How inspiring she is!

Nikkia represents African-American female teachers in U.S. schools who are advocating for Latinx students in their classrooms. Nikkia is practicing her “pedagogy of hope [which] creates a dialogue between differences to enrich both [teachers and students]” (hooks 39) so that she can cultivate and build trust while teaching her students of color how to think critically. Nikkia is willing to take risks by learning Spanish, deeply engaging students’ cultures and language to build a bridge of *conocimientos* in a predominantly Latinx students’ classroom. How brave she is!

Jyoti represents critical researchers who both employ decolonizing methodologies in research (Smith) and work closely with Latinx populations to build bridges between Latinx students’ home language and cultures, which were stolen by the colonizers. Research about Latinx populations, especially for Latinas, is still overlooked in academia. More specifically, the topics of heritage seeking from Latinx students to visit their home countries in study abroad programs need the attention of invested research in the future (Chang). Therefore, the work Jyoti is doing will contribute to a deeper unders-

tanding of those who identified as “Latinx” in the context of the United States. How critical she is!

Zuri represents the invisible, silent groups of immigrant women from Spanish-speaking countries. Zuri’s story is special in the way she learns how to speak up over the system; she learns how to find her voice(s) in the struggles of cultural assimilation and acculturation (de Jong); she learns how to be a great model for her young daughter, even though each lesson is a painful experience, but she finds joy and positivity during the process. She takes pride in HERstory; she takes pride in sharing it in public; she takes pride in connecting to the *Other*. At the same time, Zuri teaches us to use our lived experiences to inspire one another and continue this narrative work for people like her, like us, like you and me who live between and among worlds. How beautiful and resilient she is!

Luna, Nikkia, Jyoti, and Zuri are the exemplary representations of Latinx women in the U.S.’s tribalism. Each person in this piece represents their own, individual communities (Mexican-American, African-American, Indian/Asian-American, and Cuban-American) and the empowerment, criticality, kindness, and beauty of women of color in this country. Thus, bridging *tHEiR* stories together becomes an act of drawing a picture of a new home; a new tribalism. Their stories become a representation of border-crossing of liminal spaces, and of going beyond the limits of monocultural perspectives. More importantly, their realities represent the intertwined and mutual way we can help the *Other* understand one another.

“Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without...To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded” (Anzaldúa & Keating 3). Drawing from the theme of this issue that calls for “Diversifying the Representation of Latina Women in the United States: Stories, Identities, Languages, and Culture”, we should not forget the silent, but excellent and critical people who are working tirelessly within and beyond Latinx communities in the United States. Rather, we should acknowledge, value, and appreciate their work because “we are all interconnected” (Anzaldúa & Keating 5) in a global community. As Anzaldúa

reminds us, we need to “grabble with the recognition of commonality within the context of difference” (3).

### **Re-Calling for an Inclusive Tribalism**

As a Nepantlera, I want to build a bridge for diverse voices between and among communities and countries. For Nepantleras, “to bridge is an act of will, an act of love, an attempt toward compassion and reconciliation, and a promise to be present with the pain of others without losing themselves to it” (Anzaldúa & Keating 4). I write to build a foundation of love toward compassion, connections, and bridging for graduate students of color in academia (Trinh 2019b). I write to include queer youths of color (Trinh 2019a). I write to liberate myself, as a queer scholar of color, (and others) from societal norms and from the heteropatriarchy system (Trinh 2019c). I write to inspire my refugee students to redefine “American Dreams” (Kasun, Trinh, & Caldwell). In addition, I write to connect with a scholar of color to contribute to the enlightenment of how LGBTQ scholars negotiate gender, race, language, and identities while navigating academia (Trinh & Pentón Herrera). More meaningfully and personally, I write to create agency for my mom, in particular, and for Vietnamese women and women of color in general, so they have freedom to heal from domestic violence abuse and challenge the patriarchy in our society (Trinh 2018).

In this piece, continuing Gloria Anzaldúa’s legacy, I write toward building a tribalism, a home, a bridge of *conocimiento*, to connect international readers together. I am not sure if I successfully make these wishes happen in this essay. However, I want to make a call to attention for future dialogues and conversations. I call for diversifying the views, the voices, the genders, the languages in future publications. What I mean by “diversifying” here is the inclusivity of the outsiders, of Nepantleras, of in-betweeners. I call for connecting the personal “I-s” to the collective “We-s” to help each other thrive and continue this interconnected work—locally, communally, globally, transnationally—so that we are able “to pass on the torches and rituals” (Anzaldúa & Keating 5) for future Nepantleras and writers



who enthusiastically want to contribute their voices in this critical and loving space.

Let love heal, connect, and bridge our differences together.

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