

common ground and interwoven kinship among all things and people. This faculty, one of less-structured thoughts, less-rigid categorizations, and thinner boundaries, allows us to picture—via reverie, dreaming, and artistic creativity—similarities instead of solid divisions. In gatherings where people luxuriate in their power to prevent change instead of using it to cause transformation, where they spew verbal abuse in a war of words and do not leave space for others to save face, where feelings are easily bruised or too intense to be controlled by will alone—*la nepantlera* proposes individual and group rituals to contain volatile feelings and channel them into acts of *conocimiento*.

In gatherings where people feel powerless *la nepantlera* offers rituals to say good-bye to old ways of relating; prayers to thank life for making us face loss, anger, guilt, fear, and separation; *rezos* to acknowledge our individual wounds; and commitments to not give up on others just because they hurt us. In gatherings where we've forgotten that the aim of conflict is peace, *la nepantlera* proposes spiritual techniques (mindfulness, openness, receptivity) along with activist tactics. Where before we saw only separateness, differences, and polarities, our connectionist sense of spirit recognizes nurturance and reciprocity and encourages alliances among groups working to transform communities. In gatherings where we feel our dreams have been sucked out of us, *la nepantlera* leads us in celebrating *la comunidad soñada*, reminding us that spirit connects the irreconcilable warring parts *para que todo el mundo se haga un país*, so that the whole world may become *un pueblo*.

7. shifting realities . . . acting out the vision or spiritual activism

The bridge will hold me up.

—*Gabrielle in Xena, Warrior Princess*

You're three years old and standing by the kitchen table staring at the bright orange globe. You can almost taste its tart sweetness. You'll die if you don't have it. You reach for it but your arms are too short. Body quivering, you stretch again, willing yourself to reach the fruit. Your arms elongate until your small hands clasp the orange. You sense you're more than one body—each superimposed on the others like sheaths of corn. Years later after a few more experiences of bilocation, you describe it as a yoga of the body.¹⁹ The ability to recognize and endow meaning to daily experience (spirituality) furthers the ability to shift and transform.

When and how does transformation happen? When a change occurs your consciousness (awareness of your sense of self and your response to

self, others, and surroundings) becomes cognizant that it has a point of view and the ability to act from choice. This knowing/knower is always with you, but is displaced by the ego and its perspective. This knower has several functions. You call the function that arouses the awareness that beneath individual separateness lies a deeper interrelatedness “la naguala.”

When you shift attention from your customary point of view (the ego) to that of la naguala, and from there move your awareness to an inner-held representation of an experience, person, thing, or world, la naguala and the object observed merge. When you include the complexity of feeling two or more ways about a person/issue, when you empathize and try to see her circumstances from her position, you accommodate the other’s perspective, achieving un conocimiento that allows you to shift toward a less defensive, more inclusive identity. When you relate to others, not as parts, problems, or useful commodities, but from a connectionist view compassion triggers transformation. This shift occurs when you give up investment in your point of view²⁰ and recognize the real situation free of projections—not filtered through your habitual defensive preoccupations. Moving back and forth from the situation to la naguala’s view, you glean a new description of the world (reality)—a Toltec interpretation. When you’re in the place between worldviews (nepantla) you’re able to slip between realities to a neutral perception. A decision made in the in-between place becomes a turning point initiating psychological and spiritual transformations, making other kinds of experiences possible.

Core beliefs command the focus of your senses. By changing some of these convictions you change the mental/emotional channel (the reality). In the Coatlicue state, an intensely negative channel, you’re caged in a private hell; you feel angry, fearful, hopeless, and depressed, blaming yourself as inadequate. In the more optimistic space cultivated by las nepantleras, you feel love, peace, happiness, and the desire to grow. Forgiving yourself and others, you connect with more aspects of yourself and others.

Orienting yourself to the environment and your relationship to it enables you to read and garner insight from whatever situation you find yourself in. This conocimiento gives you the flexibility to swing from your intense feelings to those of the other without being hijacked by either. When confronted with the other’s fear, you note her emotional arousal, allow her feelings/words to enter your body, then you shift to the neutral place of la naguala. You detach so those feelings won’t inhabit your body for long. You listen with respect,²¹ attend to the other as a whole being, not an object, even when she opposes you. To avoid miscommunication you frequently check your understanding of the other’s meaning, responding with, “Yes, I hear you. Let me repeat your words to make sure

I'm reading you right." When an experience evokes similar feelings in both, you feel momentarily in sync. Like consciousness, *conocimiento* is about relatedness—to self, others, world.

When you're troubled, *conocimiento* prompts you to take a deep breath, shift your attention away from what's causing pain and fear, and call upon a power deeper and freer than that of your ego, such as *la naguala y los espíritus*, for guidance. Direction may also come from an inner impression, dream, meditation, I Ching, Tarot cards. You use these spiritual tools to deal with political and personal problems. Power comes from being in touch with your body, soul, and spirit, and letting their wisdom lead you.

By moving from a militarized zone to a roundtable, *nepantleras* acknowledge an unmapped common ground: the humanity of the other. We are the other, the other is us—a concept AnaLouise Keating calls "re(con)ceiving the other" (*Women*, 75–81). Honoring people's otherness, *las nepantleras* advocate a "nos/otras" position—an alliance between "us" and "others." In *nos/otras*, the "us" is divided in two, the slash in the middle representing the bridge—the best mutuality we can hope for at the moment. *Las nepantleras* envision a time when the bridge will no longer be needed—we'll have shifted to a seamless *nosotras*. This move requires a different way of thinking and relating to others; it requires that we act on our interconnectivity, a mode of connecting similar to hypertexts' multiple links—it includes diverse others and does not depend on traditional categories or sameness. It enacts a retribalization by recognizing that some members of a racial or ethnic group do not necessarily stay with the consciousness and conditioning of the group they're born into, but shift momentarily or permanently. For example, some whites embody a woman-of-color consciousness, and some people of color, a "white" consciousness.

Conocimiento of our interconnectivity encourages white women to examine and deconstruct racism and "whiteness." But perhaps, as Keating suggests, "white" women who are totally invested in this privileged identity can't be *nepantleras*: "I really think that 'whiteness' is a state of mind—dualistic, supremacist, separatist, hierarchical . . . all the things we're working to transform; I'm still not sure how this concept of 'whiteness' as an oppressive/oppressing mindset corresponds to lightskinned bodies, but I do believe the two are not synonymous."²²

This move to a roundtable—generated by such concepts as *nos/otras* and retribalization—incites women of color to speak out and eventually refuse the role of victim. Though most identify with their *mestizaje* you wonder how much of a *mestiza* a person must become before racial categories dissolve and new ones develop, before committing to social concerns that move beyond personal group or nation, before an inclusive

community forms. You wonder when others will, like las nepantleras, hand themselves to a larger vision, a less-defended identity.

This is your new vision, a story of how *conocimiento* manifests, but one with a flaw: it doesn't work with things that are insurmountable, or with all people at all times (we haven't evolved to that stage yet), and it doesn't always bring about immediate change. But it works with las nepantleras, boundary-crossers, thresholders who initiate others in rites of passage, activists who, from a listening, receptive, spiritual stance, rise to their own visions and shift into acting them out, *haciendo mundo nuevo* (introducing change). Las nepantleras walk through fire on many bridges (not just the conference one) by turning the flames into a radiance of awareness that orients, guides, and supports those who cannot cross over on their own. Inhabiting the liminal spaces where change occurs, las nepantleras encourage others to ground themselves to their own bodies and connect to their own internal resources, thus empowering themselves. Empowerment is the bodily feeling of being able to connect with inner voices/resources (images, symbols, beliefs, memories) during periods of stillness, silence, and deep listening or with kindred others in collective actions. This alchemy of connection provides the knowledge, strength, and energy to persist and be resilient in pursuing goals. *Éste modo de capacitar* comes from accepting your own authority to direct rather than letting others run you.

Not long ago your mother gave you un milagro, a tiny silver hand with a heart in its palm, never knowing that for years this image has resonated with your concept of *el mundo zurdo* amplified here into the model of *conocimiento*; *la mano zurda* with a heart in its palm is for engaging with self, others, world. The hand represents acting out and daily implementing an idea or vision, as opposed to merely theorizing about it. The heart es un corazón con razón, with intelligence, passion, and purpose, a "mindful" heart with ears for listening, eyes for seeing, a mouth with tongue narrowing to a pen tip for speaking/writing. The left hand is not a fist pero una mano abierta raised with others in struggle, celebration, and song. *Conocimiento* es otro modo de conectar across colors and other differences to allies also trying to negotiate racial contradictions, survive the stresses and traumas of daily life, and develop a spiritual-imaginal-political vision together. *Conocimiento* shares a sense of affinity with all things and advocates mobilizing, organizing, sharing information, knowledge, insights, and resources with other groups.

Although all your cultures reject the idea that you can know the other, you believe that besides love, pain might open this closed passage by reaching through the wound to connect. Wounds cause you to shift consciousness—they either open you to the greater reality normally blocked

by your habitual point of view or else shut you down, pushing you out of your body and into desconocimiento. Like love, pain might trigger compassion—if you're tender with yourself, you can be tender to others. Using wounds as openings to become vulnerable and available (present) to others means staying in your body. Excessive dwelling on your wounds means leaving your body to live in your thoughts, where you re-enact your past hurts, a form of desconocimiento that gives energy to the past, where it's held ransom. As victim you don't have to take responsibility for making changes. But the cost of victimhood is that nothing in your life changes, especially not your attitudes, beliefs. Instead, why not use pain as a conduit to recognizing another's suffering, even that of the one who inflicted the pain? In all the great stories, says Jean Houston (105–6), wounding is the entrance to the sacred. Openings to the sacred can also be triggered by joyful experiences—for example meditation, epiphanies, communion with nature, sexual ecstasy, and desire—as in your childhood experience of reaching for the orange. Because most of you are wounded, negative emotions provide easier access to the sacred than do positive emotions.

You reflect on experiences that caused you, at critical points of transformation, to adopt spiritual activism. When you started traveling and doing speaking gigs, the harried, hectic, frenzied pace of the activist stressed you out, subjecting you to a pervasive form of modern violence that Thomas Merton attributes to the rush of continual doing. To deal with personal concerns while also confronting larger issues in the public arena, you began using spiritual tools to cope with racial and gender oppression and other modern maldades—not so much the seven deadly sins, but the small acts of desconocimientos: ignorance, frustrations, tendencies toward self-destructiveness, feelings of betrayal and powerlessness, and poverty of spirit and imagination. The spiritual practice of *conocimiento*: praying, breathing deeply, meditating, writing—dropping down into yourself, through the skin and muscles and tendons, down deep into the bones' marrow, where your soul is ballast—enabled you to defuse the negative energy of putdowns, complaints, excessive talk, verbal attacks, and other killers of the spirit. Spirituality became a port you moor to in all storms.

This work of spiritual activism and the contract of holistic alliances allows conflict to dissolve through reflective dialogue. It permits an expansive awareness that finds the best instead of the worst in the other, enabling you to think of *la otra* in a compassionate way. Accepting the other as an equal in a joint endeavor, you respect and are fully present for her. You form an intimate connection that fosters the empowerment of both (*nos/otras*) to transform conflict into an opportunity to resolve an issue, to change negativities into strengths, and to heal the traumas of

racism and other systemic desconocimientos. You look beyond the illusion of separate interests to a shared interest—you're in this together, no one's an isolated unit. You dedicate yourself, not to surface solutions that benefit only one group, but to a more informed service to humanity.

Relating to others by recognizing commonalities does not always serve you. The person/group with conflicting desires may continuously attack you no matter how understanding you are. Can you assume that all of us, Ku Klux Klan and holistic alliance members, are in it together just because we're all human? If consciousness is as fundamental to the universe as matter and energy, if consciousness is not local, not contained in separate vessels/bodies, but is like air and water, energy and matter, then we *are* all in it together.²³ When one person steps into *conocimiento*, the whole of humanity witnesses that step and eventually steps into consciousness. It's like Rupert Sheldrake's concept of morphic resonance: when rats in a laboratory maze learn the way out, as time goes on rats in other mazes all over the world do it more and more quickly because of morphic resonance from previous members that have learned the hard way (311). Before holistic alliances can happen, many people must yearn for a solution to our shared problems.

But sometimes you need to block the other from your body, mind, and soul. You need to ignore certain voices in order to respect yourself—as when in an abusive relationship. It's impossible to be open and respectful to all views and voices. Though *las nepantleras* witness as impartially as they can in order to prevent being imprisoned by the other's point of view, they acknowledge the need for psychological armor (*picture un nopal*) to protect their open vulnerable selves from negative forces while engaging in the world. For attempting the best possible outcome not just for her own group, but for the other—the enemy—*la nepantlera* runs the risk of being stoned for this heresy—a case of killing the messenger. She realizes that to make changes in society and transform the system, she must make time for her needs—the activist must survive burn-out. When the self is part of the vision a strong sense of personal meaning helps in identity and culture construction. By developing and maintaining spiritual beliefs and values *la nepantlera* gives the group hope, purpose, identity.

You hear *la Llorona/Cihuacóatl* wailing. Your picture of her coiled serpent body with the head of a woman, shedding its skin, regenerating itself reminds you of the snake story in Genesis. A hunger to know and to build on your knowledge sweeps over you. You recommit to a regime of meditation, reflection, exercise. These everyday acts contain the sacred, lending meaning to your daily life.

Through the act of writing you call, like the ancient *chamana*, the scattered pieces of your soul back to your body. You commence the ardu-

ous task of rebuilding yourself, composing a story that more accurately expresses your new identity. You seek out allies and, together, begin building spiritual/political communities that struggle for personal growth and social justice. By *compartiendo historias*, ideas, *las nepantleras* forge bonds across race, gender, and other lines, thus creating a new tribalism. *Éste quehacer*—internal work coupled with commitment to struggle for social transformation—changes your relationship to your body, and, in turn, to other bodies and to the world. And when that happens, you change the world.

For you writing is an archetypal journey home to the self, *un proceso de crear puentes* (bridges) to the next phase, next place, next culture, next reality. The thrust toward spiritual realization, health, freedom, and justice propels you to help rebuild the bridge to the world when you return “home.” You realize that “home” is that bridge, the in-between place of *nepantla* and constant transition, the most unsafe of all spaces. You remove the old bridge from your back, and though afraid, allow diverse groups to collectively rebuild it, to buttress it with new steel plates, girders, cable bracing, and trusses. You distend this more inclusive *punte* to unknown corners—you don’t build bridges to safe and familiar territories, you have to risk making *mundo nuevo*, have to risk the uncertainty of change. And *nepantla* is the only space where change happens. Change requires more than words on a page—it takes perseverance, creative ingenuity, and acts of love. In gratitude and in the spirit of your *Mamagrande Ramona y Mamagrande Locha*, *despachas éstas palabras y imágenes* as giveaways to the cosmos.

ritual . . . prayer . . . blessing . . . for transformation

Every day you visit the sea, walk along *Yemaya’s* glistening shores. You want her to know you, to sense your presence as you sense hers. You know deep down that she’s not independent of humans, not indifferent, not set apart. At the *lips del mar* you begin your ritual/prayer: with the heel of your left foot you draw a circle in the sand, then walk its circumference, stand at the center, and voice your intention: to increase awareness of Spirit, recognize our interrelatedness, and work for transformation.

Then with feather, bone, incense, and water you attend the spirits’ presence:

Spirit embodying yourself as rock, tree, bird, human, past, present, and future,

you of many names, *diosas antiguas*, ancestors,
we embrace you as we would a lover.