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## *I Live in Nepantla; I Live in the Borderlands*

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## **I Live in Nepantla; I Live in the Borderlands**

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This autobiographical research draws from testimonio inquiry exploring my lived experiences as an emerging scholar and curriculum administrator of students who live in historically marginalized areas. Nepantla is *la tierra de la transformación*. Nepantla is the place where immigrants travel from past to present and realize that with time, the oppressive conditions remain the same.

My framework is based on Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of Nepantla. I am looking to create *Conocimiento* which liberates and unites the oppressed to create social and educational change. *Conocimiento* is the awareness gained by experience of a fact or a situation. My framework creates the critical awareness of the educational injustices that borderland educators and students experience. This work may lead to critically transforming the oppressed and the oppressor. *Conocimiento* and testimonio create solidarity and change when the oppressed and oppressor become aware of the injustices or inequalities that still exist in education. As an immigrant student and educator of the borderlands, I have the experience of living in Nepantla. Narrating this experience in Nepantla in my testimonio seeks to transform immigrant teachers and students in their teaching and learning. Nepantla is a liminal space where the oppressed becomes aware of the existing conditions in the socio-political and educational domain and question the status quo that still exists in this cosmological world. In this liminal space, awareness, responsiveness and transformation happens then one seeks to improve the existing conditions that immigrants live.

### **Overview and purpose of my study**

When I arrived at Nepantla, I became a *nepantlera*. The nepantlera of the borderlands lives in the middle of two different realities and unveils the struggles of the immigrants everywhere, but also in classrooms. The nepantlera is the person who lives “opposing realities” (Anzaldúa, 2013, p. 548) and creates identity in between two cosmologies, North and South. I live in the middle of two spaces, and I have struggled to find my identity. In Nepantla, I acquired consciousness of the injustices that the immigrants of the borderlands live.

As a nepantlera, I provide my testimonio of struggles that immigrant teachers and students face in education. By my testimonios, I create safe spaces where Chicana educators like me can have critical dialogues that may lead to transformation in education. Testimonios create multiple voices that unite oppressors and oppressed to work together toward a common goal. More specifically, I use testimonios as a method of inquiry to critically explore my work to transform a curriculum designed from a White supremacist perspective into a more relevant curriculum that will support students' academic achievement.

### **Key terms and positionality**

Here I scaffold some key terms to support the readers' experience, and I provide a brief positionality statement to situate myself within the work. Some key terms in this essay include Nepantla, Testimonio, and *la pedagogía del burro*. *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl word that means in-between the space, *en el lugar de en medio*. It specifically refers to living in the middle of two cultures and two languages. Immigrants are divided into two and in Nepantla, they live the process of weaving into one. They

find their identity. *Testimonio* is a first-person narration where the witnessing voices describe significant experiences that marked a historical situated subject. Testimonios are first or third-person narrative that embody historical-social lived identity experiences. Testimonios inform and create *Conocimiento*. Testimonio is a voice that generates social-political and educational change. The *pedagogía del burro* is a derogatory term that relates to the Mexican term *burro*, which is used in public schools in the treatment of Mexican students who struggle to learn and who are not at the “appropriate academic level.” In this case, this term is used to reconceptualize deficit notions of and about the immigrant students’ intelligence.

My name is Gricelda Eufracio, and I was born in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, México. I am an immigrant and the first person in my family with a university degree. I have a Bachelor of Arts, and two Master's degrees. The first Master's degree is in Educational Leadership, and the second Master's degree is in Curriculum and Instruction. I am currently in my third year in the doctoral program in Curriculum and Instruction. I have twenty-three years of experience in education as a teacher, administrator, and assistant professor at the university. I am a teacher of future teachers, and I want to train them to be agents of socio-political and educational change. I am helping them cross the bridge to Nepantla so they can find all the educational injustices that exist in the present time. My areas of research are bilingualism, Mexican-American culture, feminism, Nepantla, the process of *Conocimiento*, and Chicana academic success.

### **An Anzaldúa Framework: Nepantla and Conocimiento**

As a borderland feminist with multiple intersectional identities, I draw my theoretical framework on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. I draw my framework specifically on the notions of *Conocimiento* and Nepantla. *Conocimiento* is the path to Nepantla which is *la tierra de la transformación*. Transformation starts when immigrants start questioning the status quo that they experience in education. Nepantla is a concept that Chicanas or Latinx use to describe or create an imaginary space that encompasses historical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life.

#### **Nepantla**

Nepantla is “the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question your basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 127). When one lives in Nepantla, one has the courage to take action and make educational changes. “[*El camino [del] Conocimiento*]” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 540) takes one to Nepantla which is “a secure space to plan strategies not only for survival and resistance but also for agency in order to create new and alternative ways of inter/connecting with ourselves and with others” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 19).

Once I arrived at Nepantla, I started my “transformative journey” (Tuana & Scott, 2020, p 114); the journey of knowledge or *Conocimiento*. Nepantla is a spiritual journey where immigrants travel from past to present and vice versa. It is in Nepantla where educators of the borderlands learn how to be agents of change and how to challenge the educational system. In Nepantla, educators of the borderland can start their journey of liberation. The nepantlera is the person who creates identity in between two countries and cultures. Nepantleras are the ones that unite two cultures but at the same time, they struggle with their realities. “Nepantleras are not constrained by one culture or world but experience multiple realities” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 82). These multiple realities provide nepantleras with multiple lived experiences that produce testimonios which are the start point to connect and

unite with others. The Nepantleras are agents that produce *Conocimiento* and “are spiritual activists engaged in the struggles for social, economic, and political justice, while working on the spiritual transformation of selfhood” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 83).

The nepantlera is conscious of the injustices that immigrants live through and create safe spaces for them. The nepantleras can give testimonios of struggles that immigrant students faced and create voices that united can generate transformation. A nepantlera can act as the voice of the “oppressed” (Freire, 2020, p. 48) in education. She is the agent of transformation “who work[s] toward a more democratic and socially just world” (Reza-López et al., 2014, p. 111). In this study, I placed myself as a nepantlera because I am able to analyze and recognize the status quo that we, students and educators of the borderlands, live in. As the nepantlera, I actively observed and interact with both sides of Nepantla’s bridge to get “deep awareness (*Conocimiento*) of political and spiritual situations and the unconscious mechanisms that abet hate, intolerance, and discord” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 17-19). Then I “envision a time when the bridge [is] no longer . . . needed” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 570). I envision a time where there is no border and the oppressed are no longer oppressed and they have shifted “to a seamless nosotros” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 570). The nepantlera positionality works to liberate the oppressed by preparing them to learn from freedom. The nepantlera follows Duncan-Andrade’s (2002) claim that “Learning from freedom is when the study is dedicated to an intellectual discipline that challenges the prevailing logic of injustice” (p.167).

The nepantlera helps others to find *el camino del Conocimiento* (the path of knowledge) which liberates the oppressed to unite their voices and challenge those in power. “Espinoza et al. (2020) explain that through personal experience, cultural and academic knowledge, educational research, and dialectical conversations, we, educators, can come to understand the borderlands in multiple ways” (p. 15). In order to create transformation in education, educators need to understand “the multiple worlds [they] inhabit and the various identities we have developed” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 16). They need to reflect about their multiple identities and create new stories of oppression.

The nepantlera use testimonios to create *Conocimiento* among others. In order to create transformation in education, educators need to have a strong *Conocimiento* of the different pedagogies that can help them in the creation of culturally relevant and sustainable curricula (Ladson Billings, 2014, p. 75). For example, in the classroom, and in their pedagogical practices, we, educators of the borderlands, “must also furnish our students with the necessary readings, dialogues, experiences and language that bring up and discuss the difficulties and contradictions of being borderlands dwellers” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 19). Nepantlera is the one that helps others to cross the bridge to Nepantla through *Conocimiento*. The borderland teachers need to teach, provide their students with *Conocimiento*, and offer their students the opportunity to write their testimonios. They envision a place with no borderlands; a place where everybody is on the same side. *La* “nepantlera lead 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 whole world may become *un pueblo*” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 568).

I, the nepantlera, express my living experiences as an immigrant student and educator of the borderlands to provide the reader with the *Conocimiento* of the injustices and struggles that immigrant teachers and students face in education. *Conocimiento* is a form of healing immigrants’ wounds caused by the injuries resulting from colonialism. This “*Conocimiento* allows us to understand how we respond and heal from those oppressive experiences” (Huber & Cueva, 2012, p. 396). Thus, the nepantlera is a *conocedora* (knowledgeable) of the seven interconnected stages developed by Anzaldúa (2002), which:

Invoke our ancestral wisdom, lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and resilience in a process that allows us to heal from the effects of race-based trauma and other forms of oppression as we strategically navigate within and outside of hostile educational environments. (Huber & Cueva, 2012, p. 396)

According to Gloria Anzaldúa (2013) *Conocimiento* is a process of seven stages that “[cause] internal shifts and external changes [and] all seven stages are present within each stage, and they occur concurrently, chronological or not” (p. 545). These seven stages represent a higher level of *facultad* or consciousness. In these seven stages, the immigrants process the knowledge they acquired. In these stages, the immigrants think out of the box. “The seven stages symbolize *los siete ‘ojos de Luz’*” (seven eyes of light) (Anzaldúa, 2013, p. 545) where nepantleras find alternatives ways of knowing and feeling and find their spirit body. The nepantlera is in the center of “the seven planes of reality” and in all seven spaces, the nepantlera “struggles with the shadow, the unwanted aspects of the self” (Anzaldúa, 2013, p. 545). In these spaces, nepantleras zigzag from ignorance (*desconocimiento*) to awareness (*Conocimiento*).

### ***Conocimiento***

This *Conocimiento* helps the oppressed and the oppressor to understand “the psychological and physiological effects of the race-based trauma we experience as a result of systemic oppression” (Huber & Cueva, 2012, p. 396). *Conocimiento* “provokes un aja” (eureka) (Anzaldúa, 2013, p. 540) and “construct[s] knowledge, identity, and explore[s] how some of your/others’ construction violate other people’s way of knowing and living” (Anzaldúa, 2013, p.544). *Por ignorancia, yo misma he contribuido a la opresión de los míos y me entra ese coraje y “rebeldía que tenemos en la sangre nosotros los mexicanos”* (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 37). *Yo también soy una hija de la chingada; hija de Malintzín, la malinche; I forgot que también yo soy una india mestiza* (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 44) *y he traicionado a mi raza* because I let others wound them. “*Cada arrebato is an awakening that causes [me] to question who [I am and] what the world is about*” (Anzaldúa, 2013, p. 547). *Conocimiento* gives us the “urgency to know what [we are] experiencing [and it] awakens *la facultad* (Anzaldúa, 2013, p. 547). The *Conocimiento* is the cause of my metamorphosis. The objective of this work is to create *Conocimiento* which is the more difficult path but leads to awaking, insights, and understanding. In order for the readers to understand how one is deconstructed and reconstructed, they need to learn about the journey of *Conocimiento*.

Anzaldúa refers to *Conocimiento* as a process that moves through seven stages.

#### ***1. El arrebato... rupture, fragmentation... an end, a beginning***

El arrebato is a sudden, unexpected, and generally, the abrupt impulse to do a certain thing or a sudden rush of a feeling or a state of mind. In this stage, human beings take unexpected decisions and do things with passion. In the *arrebato*, the individual gets angry and takes action. *Con el arrebato nos entra esa “rebeldía que tenemos en la sangre nosotros los mexicanos”* (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 37) make us take action after we learn about the injustices. After immigrants experience emotions similar to an earthquake, they travel from arrebato to Nepantla. It is on the journey from arrebato to Nepantla that immigrants start questioning “who [they] are [and] what the world is about” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 547).

## **2. Nepantla... torn between ways**

The concept of Nepantla is essential to frame my work because it is in this space where one acquires a critical awareness about the reality that immigrants live in the borderlands. In this space, the individuals constantly feel the pain that causes the *Conocimiento* of lived injustices; *Conocimiento* also offers possibilities for transformation. According to Anzaldúa (2015), “In Nepantla, we hang out between shifts, trying to make rational sense of this crisis, seeking solace, support, appeasement, or some kind of intimate connection” (p. 17). *Conocimiento* is the bridge that helps individuals cross to Nepantla and lead them to be agents of socio-political and educational change. The concept of Nepantla and *Conocimiento* are the start point of testimonio.

Nepantla is a spiritual journey where individuals can travel from past to present and where they continuously feel the pain of the wounds that have not healed. According to Godoy (2021), Nepantla is a transitional stage where we can explore physical and mental boundaries. “This stage is painful and can occur more than once in a journey or lifetime” (p. 9). In Nepantla, immigrants realized that they are two in one and that they live in the middle of two cultures and languages. “Nepantla is the in-between space where border identities are questioned, broken down, and rebuilt” (De Los Santos, 2019, p. 136). In Nepantla, change occurs, and it “is never comfortable, easy or neat” or as Anzaldúa (2013) says “*Conocimiento* hurts but not as much as *desconocimiento*” (p. 557). It is in Nepantla where I struggle in finding my identity, my culture, and my language and feel like an outsider in my own country; an outsider in the borderlands. It is in Nepantla that I do not belong to this side or the other side of the borderlands. I am in the middle of two cultures; I am reclaiming my identity on both sides of the borderlands. I want to become one instead of two in one.

## **3. The Coatlicue state... *desconocimiento* and the cost of knowing**

In the Coatlicue stage, the individuals learn about who they are and reconnect with their roots. According to Kaneria et al. (2020), in the stage of Coatlicue individuals pass through the process of gaining knowledge, and they get frustrated and sad. In this stage, the individuals are confronted with shadows and darkness and then they question their identity. According to Anzaldúa (2015), in the Coatlicue stage, the individuals realize that they get “separated from their tribes, *estas en el exilio en un destierro*, forced to confront your own *desconocimiento*” (p. 129). After this awakening, the individuals want to reconnect with Coatlicue and let her teach them about their culture, heritage, and language. When the individuals reconnect with their roots, then “they [shift] into the fourth stage of *Conocimiento*” (p. 15). After individuals travel from *desconocimiento* to *Conocimiento*, they realize that they have the opportunity to help others cross the bridge and became nepantleros.

## **4. The call... *el compromiso*... the crossing and conversion**

In this stage, the individuals acquired *Conocimiento*, and it is “the bridge (the boundary between the world you’ve just left and the one ahead) is both a barrier and a point of transformation” (Anzaldúa, 2013, p. 557). At this point, individuals start social and political change and *se comprometen* to denounce the injustices. In this stage, the individual becomes the bridge that helps others cross to Nepantla. “This struggle to become a vessel of change requires that you continually shed outdated beliefs for new, knowing that these new beliefs might also be shed in the future. Nothing is fixed; integrity is a practice” (Itchuaqiyay & Walton, 2021, p. 385).

### **5. Putting Coyolxauhqui together... new personal and collective stories**

In this stage, individuals reconstruct themselves by putting together the information of the old story and the information of the new story. Anzaldúa (2002) invites women to analyze their autobiographies and rewrite their collective and personal stories to pull themselves together. Anzaldúa explained that when women “rework [their] stories, they can invent new notions of [themselves] and reality-increasingly multidimensional versions where body, mind, and spirit interpenetrate in more complex ways” (p. 562). “Coyolxauhqui represents the search for new metaphors to tell you what you need to know, how to connect and use the information gained, and, with intelligence, imagination, and grace, solve your problems and create intercultural communities” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 563). By analyzing and rewriting our old *auto-historias*, we realize that we have yet to denounce some injustice and that we have untold stories that create new knowledge.

### **6. The blow-up... a clash of realities**

Based on Anzaldúa’s concept of *Conocimiento*, I understand that rewriting our stories is like retelling our testimonio and providing a deeper knowledge about the lived injustices; it opens los siete ojos de luz, or the seven stages of *Conocimiento*. It has the power to eradicate mainstream representations, thus our minds are not in the spaces our bodies occupy; we have been dismembered and pulled apart by the trauma of our lives and with testimonios we reconstruct ourselves, and “[t]hrough the act of writing, [we] call the scattered pieces of [our] soul back to [our] body” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 155).

### **7. Shifting realities... acting out the vision or spiritual activism**

In this stage, we find conflict when one is sharing testimonios of pain or injustices. When someone does not agree with your interpretations of reality, there is a clash of realities.

The journey of the seven stages of *Conocimiento* helps individuals to learn and to become active agents of change. It is in Coyolxauhqui that one can go back to the past and rethink the lived experiences. Then *nepantleras* rewrite their testimonios to continue reconstructing ourselves. The “*testimoniadora*” is a producer of testimonios (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 2). By sharing our lived experiences via testimonio one creates knowledge, unity and change. “Testimonio is often seen as a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle, where the [*testimoniadora* or *nepantlera*] bearing witness tells the story to someone else...” (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 13).

I use testimonio to “recount... personal-social experiences, develop political aims, represent... and create... and seek... to sustain moral urgency on the part of the reader” (Jupp et al., 2018, p. 26). Testimonio is a tool that I use to reflect on past lived experiences and the status quo that I live in education. Testimonio is a venue where the educators share their “experiential knowledge [and it] allows [them] to reflect on their unique experiences resting on intention and resistance” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 18); it produces knowledge.

## Methodology: Testimonio Research

Beverley (2008) explains that “Testimonios is a personal narrative that allows a voice, or voices, from the margins to speak up and seek solidarity and understanding from the reader regarding oppositional, unknown, underreported, and misunderstood matters that place the *testimoniante* disenfranchised from their groups, communities, or the larger society” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 17). Testimonio is a voice. While one voice is important, more voices are needed. The oppressed voices have the power to create balance and change in education, that is why it is important to collect multiple voices via testimonio. Moreira (2016) argues that “the ways that stories are told are dependent on power, and thus, there is a need for a balance of stories to achieve a balance of power” (p. 663). Testimonios awake the *facultad* of the oppressed and help them to understand the need of transforming education to support the teaching and learning of immigrant teachers and students in our nation, specifically for the immigrant students who live in the borderlands. Furthermore, “testimonio is a pedagogical tool that lends itself to a form of teaching and learning that brings the mind, body, spirit, and political urgency to the fore” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 367). The oppressed use testimonio as a form of resistance to the injustices they face. “Testimonio is a tool for inscribing struggles and understandings, creating new knowledge, and affirming our epistemologies —testimonio is about writing what we know best” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 83). Testimonios unveil the injustices that the oppressed lived. Throughout testimonio the reader learns about the injustices, feels the emotions of the narrator, and elicit feelings of solidarity with the oppressed. Testimonio is a venue where the narrator teaches and the reader acquires knowledge about the different struggles that individuals in vulnerable groups face. Testimonios both create and produce *Conocimiento* that helps immigrant teachers reflect on their pedagogical praxis. *Conocimiento* makes me understand the need for a change in education from K-12 to the university, specifically in teaching programs. Educators of the borderlands are nepantleras(os) that “help us to mediate these transactions, help us make the crossing, and guide us through the transformation process—a process that I call *Conocimiento*” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 17).

My method of inquiry is testimonio research because the intention of this research is to inform other educators about the academic needs of immigrant students via *Conocimiento* and Nepantla. I use testimonios as a method of inquiry to critically explore my work to transform a curriculum designed from a White supremacist perspective into a more relevant curriculum that will support students’ academic achievement. “Testimonio as a methodology provides modes of analysis that are collaborative and attentive to myriad ways of knowing and learning in our communities” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). I used data from personal writings, journals, and previous class reflections. As an immigrant student and educator, I have the experience of living in Nepantla. The purpose of this research is to translate research into practice and to create consciousness about the need of transforming the traditional curriculum into a more culturally and relevant curriculum.

In this research, I am the *testimoniadora* who shares her lived experiences in the borderland as a student and educator. The intention of sharing my testimonio is to recover other lived experiences via testimonios and gather valid data. “*Testimoniar* is the act of recovering and unfolding past experiences that were silenced or untold and unfolding them into a narrative that conveys personal, political, and social realities” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). Testimonios are narratives that incorporate data or knowledge, literally, embody the narrative data and critical analyses. Testimonios create strong and loud voices when the data is transcribed and analyzed. “The *testimoniante* shares her personal experience under a liberatory process that requires critical analysis and reflection of the situation, oppression or injustices involved” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 17).

Writing and sharing my testimonio provides me with a safe space where I can resist oppressions. Anzaldúa (2009) stated that “writing and speaking act as a safety valve, they are also political acts that spring from the impulse of subvert, resist, educate and make changes” (p. 187). Writing testimonios provides me with a safe space where I can reclaim my identity, and unveil the reality of lived experience in education and a form of resistance. Specifically, I want other educators of the borderlands to learn about the educational needs of immigrant students. “The purpose of collecting data via testimonio is to provide... important pedagogical and identarian resources for teaching and learning across primary, secondary, and tertiary education” (Jupp et al., 2018, p. 23). My testimonio and other educators’ testimonios produce data that creates transformation in education. “[T]estimonio as a methodology provides modes of analysis that are collaborative and attentive to myriad ways of knowing and learning in our communities” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364).

In order to create a solid testimonio, I recollected all the notes and my previous writings. I reread them, reflected, and analyzed them. One of my data sources is my “papelitos guardados” (stored papers), and I “explore them through the method of testimonio” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). These *papelitos* are the foundation to generate my testimonio. Papelitos guardados are notes and thoughts that I wrote on note pads or napkins. “Papelitos guardados evokes the process by which we contemplate thoughts and feelings, often in isolation and through difficult times” (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p.1). Latinas tend to write little notes or Papelitos to hide them from the oppressor’s eyes, often storing them in secret places to use later to write poetry and manuscripts. Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) explained that *testimoniario* (to give testimony) is the act of recovering papelitos guardados—previous experiences otherwise silenced or untold—and unfolding them into a narrative that conveys personal, political, and social realities (p. 364). The manuscripts, papelitos guardados, and works that I created for my classes are the resources that I used to analyze in-depth my data.

Analyzing these documents, I will critically reconstruct and synthesize my lived curriculum as an emerging scholar and curriculum administrator of students who are living in historically marginalized areas on the U.S-Mexico border to inform my ongoing work to decolonize and transform education. “Testimonio would be a... more organic way of collecting and generating knowledge, and a method that would move us toward an understanding of *latinidades*” (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 12). By using testimonio as my method of inquiry, I will “engage... the reader to understand and establish a sense of solidarity as the first step toward social change” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). Testimonio is a means to express and analyze personal stories about systemic violence in the academy and educational spaces (Jupp et al., 2018, p.21). By exploring and sharing my lived experiences, I will create change in education for the oppressed ones, the immigrant students of the borderlands, who have encountered educational injustices when they attend public schools.

### **Testimoniando to Arrive a Nopantla, La Tierra Transformativa**

My lived experience as a student is not very different than the immigrant students’ experiences in the 21st century. Education has not changed since 1985. My family and I settled in the Rio Grande Valley. I received English as a Second Language education where my teacher did not speak my native language. I did not identify with any of the classes. History class made me feel embarrassed about myself and my culture. I felt “culturally crucified” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 80) when I learned that my people were the villains.

In the 1980s, the schools' expectation for immigrants was to finish and graduate from high school and get a job. According to Schissler and Soysal (2005), we were transformed into citizens (p. 1), who can function in our society. Immigrant students were prepared to have technical careers or labor jobs and white or rich students were placed in advanced classes and had the opportunity to pursue a career at prestigious universities. The immigrant students wanted to pursue a career but, most of the time, were discouraged by their counselors. Immigrant students were dehumanized and oppressed. According to Bartolome (1994), the "students are seen as "products," and naturally become dehumanized in the process of schooling uncritically and making invisible the discriminatory practices" (Reyes & Villarreal, 2016, p. 552). For example, back then the students who were undocumented had a special number that was different from the social security number. The teachers did not provide appropriate academic support to undocumented students because, sooner or later, they would go back to México. New immigrants were no different. Immigrant students felt the tension that existed between them and their teachers. "Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (Freire, 2020, p. 44).

The new immigrants lived the "pedagogy of el burro" because they were not considered intelligent and were not challenged to take advanced courses. "Burro in pejorative implies stupidity and obedience" (Jaramillo, 2012, p. 31). The word *burro* is commonly used in Hispanic schools to make the students that are academically behind try harder. In the animal kingdom, it is assumed that the burro (donkey) is not intelligent and is only good for carrying a heavy load on its back. The "pedagogy of el burro" means that educators had the misconception that the immigrant students were not able to learn therefore they received instruction that did not challenge them at their maximum potential. The difference that educators made between the new immigrants and the older American generations was very remarkable. The white students were placed in advanced classes and they took field trips to universities in other cities. They were the students that got accepted into prestigious universities around the country. The immigrant students were prepared to serve in the community stores, mechanical workshops, and construction sites.

When I enrolled in the university in my area, I wanted to be a math teacher, but my counselor told me that because of my language barrier, it will be difficult for me to get a Bachelor's degree in Math. He made a degree plan for a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Physical Education. I had no other choice but to succeed with the degree plan that was given to me, especially when, culturally, I could not challenge teachers, counselors, or principals.

At that time, I met the expectation of what hegemonic understandings of progressive pedagogy required. In other words, progressive pedagogy required that the students became thoughtful citizens that function in our society. This approach reinforces hegemonic understandings such as the imposition of using the Western European Curriculum as the standard for teaching and learning. I witnessed the progressiveness of education that was required by the stakeholders in power. This curriculum placed teachers and students in context-free utopia, which is an imaginary place or space where everything is perfect. In this case, the awareness that educators had at that time about the progressive curriculum was perfect or ideal. It developed the students as intellectuals, critical thinkers, and problem-solvers through a student centered curriculum as long as they maintain the status quo. It created a utopic *conciencia* where educators believed that this pedagogy would help students to highly achieve in academics. This hegemonic understandings of progressive pedagogy did not teach the students "the value of taking constructive action when dismantling societal

oppression they are likely not aware of” (Barrera, 2020, p. 56). The teacher created critical thinkers to comprehend the core subject content and pass the state standardized assessment, but they did not teach their students to critically analyze the realities of their lives and challenge those in power.

Once I arrived in Nepantla and reflected on my experience and the experience of other immigrants like me, a wound opened. I have “*una herida abierta*” (an open wound) (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25) *que todavía sangra y duele* (that still bleeds and hurts) because the immigrant students are not taken into consideration in the curriculum. In Nepantla, individuals feel all the pain of the self-lived experiences in the borderlands. In Nepantla, the wounds open and bleed every time that one re/de/constructs the stories of our lives. Nepantla is “the space where one is able to reflect and analyze the contradictions encounters in our daily lives” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p 19). In the stage of Nepantla, one has a deep awareness of the educational inequalities that immigrants have been living for generations, and this “*Conocimiento* hurts” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 557). When it comes to education, I often feel that my relationships with curriculum and myself are “suspended in limbo in that in-between space, nepantla” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 9).

The objective of this work is to create *Conocimiento* which is the more difficult path but leads to awaking, insights, and understanding. Testimonios create *Conocimiento* and multiple voices that can “deconstruct... and reconstruct... new and hybrid ways to know, be and become” (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, pp. 262-263). Testimonios provide the individuals the opportunity to connect with Nepantla. It is a way of healing. Immigrant educators unveil their struggles and denounce the injustices that they live in education via testimonios. It is a way to create consciousness and transformation. “The healing of our wounds results in transformation, and transformation results in the healing of our wounds” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 19). I want to lean on lived experiences, heal, and create a new curriculum that will help immigrant students excel in education. Most importantly, I want to create resistance and be an advocate for those who need a voice. In order to create resistance and “social drama” (Jaramillo, 2012, p. 121) and to challenge those who have the status of power, I need to unite with others and voice our “collective struggles” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018 p. 35) via testimonios. Educators need to function as bridges to transform education and advocate for those in vulnerable groups. “The bridge is a point of transformation” therefore, educators are bridges (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 557); bridges *que ayudan a sus alumnos(as) a cruzar al otro lado* by creating a “space where the students can reclaim their cultural identities” (Steeler & Zavala, 2020, p. 97). Educators can use the *Conocimiento* that they have from both worlds to transform the traditional curriculum into a more culturally relevant one. With my testimonio, I create a deeper awareness of the realities lived in education and I can help others to arrive at *Nepantla* where we can find “the promise and hope for *alivio* and resolution” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p 19).

I started teaching in the year 2000. Since then, I have been a witness to how teachers are dehumanized and are used as objects of reform, which to me is hidden discrimination. Most of the time, teachers have no voice and are “positioned as passive subjects in both their development and teaching” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 9), a different pedagogy of the burro (Jaramillo, 2012). Two years after I started teaching, the principal banned cultural events because they were a “waste of instructional time.” In essence, the principal banned critical pedagogy, which is related to the field of education traditions and the study of culture. At that time, the pedagogical practice was to teach strategies to pass the state standardized exam. During my Spanish classes, I taught the immigrant students strategies to pass the state standardized exam. I had to teach what I was told to teach. I could not teach my students critical literacies in their native language. My colleagues and I learned that “teachers [were] positioned as objects, rather than agents, their professional duties become

about compliance rather than change” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 10). They were forced to teach a curriculum that was not designed to meet the needs of the immigrant students, but they were in compliance with the state. This curriculum was designed to meet the needs of the campuses, district, and state. The truth was that we, educators, “were reduced to the status of passive and dehumanized objects” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 8). The students were also dehumanized; they were data and accountability. While they were trained to pass the exam, they struggled in academics because they were instructed with a curriculum that was imposed on them by those in power in the systems. “In other words, the same people who have the power to make decisions in society at large are the ones who also have the power to design and implement educational systems, and consequently, their ideas and values get accepted and promoted while the values and ideas of others are not given voice” (Akbari, 2008, p. 276-277).

For many decades, I lived in the first stage of *Conocimiento*, el *arrebato*. The reality of educational injustices for immigrant teachers as well as for the student of the borderlands made me angry. These lived experiences made my spirit hopeless. I stayed quiet and I did not take any action because I was afraid of the oppressor. I stayed in the profession even though it was causing wounds in my soul because I felt for the students. I did not have the courage to confront my fears and fight for justice. Anzaldúa (2015) wrote that “if you do not work through your fear, playing it safe could bury you” (p. 122). I was a voiceless educator and a passive teacher. The system broke me so many times that it dehumanized me. I was only a part of a bureaucratic system. In the *arrebato* stage, I knew that I had to do something to make a change in education; therefore, I extended my education and pursued two master’s degrees. These degrees prepared me only to be an effective administrator in the eyes of the state but not an agent of change. It was not until my doctoral program where I started analyzing and connecting the readings with my lived experiences. The *papelitos guardados* gave me the foundation for my writings. “*Papelitos guardados* are both concrete and abstract notions of self during various points in one’s life. Some are shared openly with others, yet other *papelitos* are written in journals or filed in one’s mind” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). Each writing gave me such a strong shake that it moved me from my familiar and safe space to Nepantla, the second stage.

In this second stage, I counted and recounted, constructed and reconstructed my story. In Nepantla, I shared my lived experience to expose my inner feelings and to construct knowledge. In the *Coatlicue* stage, I shared my knowledge with others and I allowed myself and others to examine and reexamine the realities lived in education to create alliances. Anzaldúa (2015) wrote, “During the Coatlicue phase you thought you’d wandered off the path of *Conocimiento*, but this detour is part of the path. Your body mindsoul in the hermetic vessel where transformation takes place. The shift must be more than intellectual” (p.133); it must create “una *conciencia con compromiso*” (Prieto, 2013, p. 167). In the stage the call...el *compromiso*... the crossing and the conversion, *mis siete ojos de luz están abiertos*. I have a deeper awareness of what is happening in education. I acquired this knowledge through my lived story and others’ lived experiences. In this stage, I have *el compromiso* or the commitment with borderland teachers and students to help them to arrive to Nepantla and “to continue la *lucha*” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 135). By writing my testimonio, I take responsibility to be a contributing member of all my communities and *entregar mi promesa* “to help [my] various cultures create a new paradigm... and new narratives that heal” (Anzaldúa, 2013, p. 558). In the stage of Coyolxauhqui, I use my testimonio to reconstruct myself. In this stage, I re-read and re-write my lived experiences and find untold stories that need to be told. Anzaldúa (2015) stated that one “must provide new narratives” that “must partially come from outside the system of ruling powers” (p. 140). In the stage six, my testimonio can produce a clash of realities. I understand that some readers

might disagree with me because their realities are different. My intension with my testimonio is to eradicate *desconocimiento* and to create a shifting of realities which is the seventh stage of *Conocimiento*. In this stage, I used my testimonio to create empathy between the oppressors and the oppressed so both parties generate change. When “you empathize and try to see [their] circumstances from [their] 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 connectionist view, compassion triggers transformation” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 150). My intention in sharing my testimonio is to create a connectivity with others that recognizes the need to sit down and have critical dialogues to produce a change in education.

While writing my testimonio, I felt disoriented. “In *Nepantla* one is disoriented, but it is also the space where one is able to reflect and analyze the contradictions encountered in our daily lives” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 18). “*Nepantla* is also a secure space to plan strategies not only for survival and resistance but also for an agency in order to create new and alternative ways of inter/connecting with ourselves and with others” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 19). Now that I live in *Nepantla*, I question and challenge the educational systems. It is *Nepantla* that “produces [me] the potential to question and affect the social, cultural and political systems and their power of structures” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 19). In *Nepantla*, “you begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming not who you have been (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 135). “*Nepantlear*” (Solis, 2020, p. 95) gives me the capacity to challenge those in power and to advocate for the oppressed. “Writing [is my form] of healing [and] the reflect[ion of my] journey” as an educator (Solis, 2020, p. 91); it provides me the tools to transform the educational system and to awake the sleeping giant. My writing is a form of creating noise with my loud voice so that I can unite others to the *lucha* of the liberation of the oppressed. It is in *Nepantla* where I reflect on my past, present, and future practice. It is in *Nepantla* where I recover consciousness and think about the benefits of implementing critical professional developments (CPD) that prepare educators to become active agents of change. CPD will provide the teachers with opportunities to acquire collective knowledge by having “critical discussions about critical content, their classroom practice, and their school communities”; they can “more closely reflect the holistic needs of their students and themselves” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 18 and 15).

I am here in the year of 2022, things in education have changed but not for the better. Teachers are more oppressed than ever. Today, to be in compliance with the state is to go through all the bureaucratic process of the academies and make sure that the students pass district benchmarks and state standardized exams.

## Implications

The *nepantlera* must be a snake (*la víbora*) to produce knowledge and “rehumanize” (Steeler & Zavala, 2020) teachers and students. “We need *nepantleras* whose strength lies in their ability to mediate and move between identities and positions. *Necesitamos nepantleras* to inspire us to cross over racial and other borders” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 93). As a *nepantlera*, my work is to guide you al

*camino de Conocimiento* which requires that you encounter your shadow side and confront what you’ve programmed yourself (and have been programmed by your cultures to avoid ignorance (*desconocer*), to confront the traits and habits distorting how you see reality and inhibiting the full use of your *facultades*. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 540-541)

The nepantlera “builds bridges al andar” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 241) to help the teachers and students to cross to the other side; to cross from the dark to the light. The nepantlera is a bridge that helps the oppressed a cruzar para el otro lado and creates a “space where they can reclaim their cultural identities” (Steeler & Zavala, 2020, p. 97). The nepantleros, teachers of the borderlands, need to create safe spaces where the students can recreate “the same experiences continuously until the self can comprehend it separately from pain, shame, or guilt” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 19). The educators need to provide students with opportunities to develop their *facultad* (ability) so they can see their surroundings and their stories. “*La facultad* is the capacity to see in the surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 60). When teachers provide a safe space where students learn to analyze their live experiences and learn to question their cultural identity and the status quo that they live in education, the students can engage with Nepantla and begin to explore la tierra desconocida that exist within their experiences (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 19). Las nepantleras *crean la facultad* or knowledge by providing teachers and students with:

The opportunity to connect with Nepantla and engage with testimonio as a classroom strategy encourages [them] to utilize Indigenous methodologies and ways of knowing as liberatory tools for self-actualization while challenging traditional paradigms of knowing, expressing and experiencing the world. (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 19)

*Yo doy mi testimonio de mi* living curriculum to help teachers to analyze the past, present, and future of education so they can shape their pedagogical practices. Testimonios provide educators with “the possibilities of collaborative visions, creation, and production that bridged community and academy” (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 4). I use testimonio as my tool to create knowledge and “challenge... objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 363). Es en *Nepantla* where we can “produce... the potential to question and affect the social, cultural, and political system and their power structures” (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 19).

This research is important because there is a need to transform our traditional curriculum into a more culturally relevant curriculum to help immigrant students who live in the marginalized area of the borderland to become successful citizens who can function in our society and be prepared to be agents of social-political and educational change. The purpose of my testimonio is to provide an experience of learning that informs others in curriculum and to “maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 160). Testimonio creates a moral urgency by providing the stories of the people who are oppressed and immerses the reader into what people experience. Vulnerability comes from “vulnus”, the Latin word for wound. Thus in *Nepantla*, we move away from the oppression of the dominant group and we became conscious creators of our realities as intersectional beings (Espinoza et al., 2020, p. 27).

## Discussion

The reality of the teachers of the borderlands is that they have no voice in what to teach. They are passive intellectuals who work in public school districts that are more concerned with being in “compliance rather than change” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 10). In the borderlands, “teachers are increasingly positioned as passive subjects in both their development and teaching” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 9). Most of the time, teachers attend “antidialogical professional developments” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 9) where they cannot share their experiences of struggles or their successful experiences in the classroom when they use a culturally relevant curriculum. There is a need to prepare future borderland teachers to teach critical literacy to their immigrant students so they can be critical

thinkers that interrogate the status quo they live in education. The borderland students need to learn to challenge the power relationships that exist between authors and readers.

Borderland teachers need to teach critical literacies in their classes because it teaches the students not only to read and write; critical literacies change their minds. Through critical literacies, the teachers can create safe spaces where the students can voice their discontents, and the inequalities and injustices they live with on daily basis.

The borderland teachers need to create spaces where the students feel comfortable using their native language and culture to learn. They need to “resist the school practice of subtracting “students’ culture and language, which is consequential to their achievement and orientations toward school” (Valenzuela, 2005, p. 336). There is a need to give borderland educators freedom to analyze and voice their realities via testimonio in order to create a curriculum that enhances the immigrant students’ learning and they improve their academics. In these safe spaces, educators acquire *Conocimiento* and a “deeper understanding of inequality” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 21) in society and education. With *Conocimiento*, educators of the borderland can stop jeopardizing the immigrant students’ educational success.

In conclusion, “[i]f people are supposed to become empowered and their voices recognized and respected, then the first step needs to be a respect for who they are and the values they represent” (Akbari, 2008, p. 280). To help educators to arrive at Nepantla and help them to be active agents that transform society and education, I propose to provide the teachers with critical professional developments so they can become teachers of critical pedagogies. The praxis of critical pedagogies, help the teachers to create critical thinkers that will challenge the oppressors and that will fight for a more democratic world.

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