



## Article

# Epistemological Weaving: Writing and Sense Making in Qualitative Research with Gloria Anzaldúa

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**Abstract:** How is writing a part of creatively understanding ourselves, research questions, data, and theory? Writing is a critical form of connecting concepts, exploring data, and weaving knowledge in qualitative research. In other words, writing is integral to theorizing. However, writing is not an individualistic process. Writing is a relational and creative epistemological weaving of thoughts and embodiments constructed by researchers and their interactions with mentors and instructors, participants, and theoretical proponents. In this paper we discuss this creative process by paying attention to each co-creator of knowledge and the ways in which the weaving of knowledge was constructed through our shared and different journeys as doctoral student and instructor. Grounded in Gloria Anzaldúa's borderland and *nepantla* work, we will present our positionalities, interactions, and suggestions for fellow qualitative writers struggling to make sense of their writing and theorizing. Our hope is that doctoral students and veteran academics alike can benefit from this exploration.

**Keywords:** epistemology; theory; Chicana feminism; critical feminism; Latinas; pedagogy; teaching qualitative methods; creative writing



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## 1. Introduction

Writing is like pulling miles of entrails through your mouth. Why the resistance? Because you're scared that you won't do it justice. Because it'll take time, and there's no guarantee that you'll be able to pull it off. Because it is stressful and exhausting. [...] Writing also involves envisioning and conceptualizing the work and dreaming the story into a virtual reality. The different stages in embodying the story are not clearly demarcated, sequential, or linear; they overlap, shift back and forth, take place simultaneously. (Anzaldúa 2015, p. 102)

Writing is an often-overlooked aspect of the doctoral journey, an act that does not often cross the mind of students as they apply for and enter doctoral programs. Writing is understood and turned to as just the output, the necessary vehicle for communicating the interesting, provocative, and world-changing research that is the 'actual point' of doctoral work. This is reinforced by the fact that often what we see in terms of finished writing products is only a small part of the larger writing process (Cannon and Cross 2020). Yet, many doctoral students and their mentors focus only on the outcome. This is the case even as writing is a critical part of the doctoral journey. Throughout that journey, as part of the constant cycle of thinking and scholarly work, doctoral students receive feedback, advice, and notes on their writing. Some of this feedback is explicit: notes in the margins and comments via tracked changes, suggestions from peers, faculty, or advisors. Other writing feedback is more subtle: reading a scholarly work that plays with form or says something in a poetic way and realizing, "oh, I can do that." Reading a theorist and being inspired by an idea; taking a prompt from an assignment and following it down a rabbit hole; creating a completely unexpected and yet beautiful piece of writing

and thinking—these are all additional ways a writer works with feedback. Through writing, researchers become engaged with discussions, debates, and scholarly circles in their discipline. Writing—far from a peripheral task—is an integral part of being and becoming an academic (Sword 2017). Writing is a critical form of connecting concepts, understanding data, and weaving knowledge (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005). Writing is a part of the creative process of inquiry, how we come to know ourselves in the world (Colyar 2009). This process is cyclical, iterative, and far from linear. The output does not reflect the many steps and materials used. We see a beautiful tapestry, but we do not see the selection of the thread, the hands of the weaver, the redrafting of patterns, the conversations had over the weaving process, let alone the grass grazed on by the sheep that grew the wool that was sheared, then carded and spun for yarn. Writing, like a tapestry, is a multilayered and creative process that brings together diverse inspirations, sources, and influences.

Others in qualitative inquiry have explored the possibilities of writing and inquiry. Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) writing as inquiry has been echoed by Colyar (2009). Others have explored the creative potential of writing (Helin 2019; Ulmer 2018; Ulmer et al. 2017) and writing nonlinearly with theoretical concepts (Bright 2017; Hein 2019; St. Pierre 1997; Zapata et al. 2018), along with those who have written on writing as an embodied practice (Evans-Winters 2019; Foster 2010; The Latina Feminist Group 2001). There is a significant stream of research on collaborative writing practices (Alexander and Wyatt 2018; Gale and Jonathan 2017; Mazzei and Jackson 2013; McKnight et al. 2017). Still others have explored writing and the doctoral journey from the experiences of doctoral students (Cisneros 2018; Moore 2017) and from the collaborative perspective of advisor and student navigating the doctoral journey (Mazzei and Smithers 2020; Tierney and Hallett 2010). This scholarship on writing in the field of qualitative inquiry emphasizes the creative and generative potential of writing for thinking theoretically and conceptually.

Writing and theorization often happen collectively. We, the authors, co-construct knowledge in this manuscript similar to how many Latina and Chicana feminists have written papers and books. The Latina Feminist Group (2001), for example, theorized and made meaning of their lives, struggles, and joys by meeting regularly and sharing their "*papelitos guardados*" (writings tucked away) with their thoughts. These notes and conversations led them to feel seen and empowered by the other women in the group—their book *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* is an outcome of these co-constructions. Anzaldúa also wrote in community, co-constructing knowledge with other Chicana feminists like Moraga (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2021). Even after Anzaldúa's death, Keating (Anzaldúa 2015) and Cantú and Hurtado (Anzaldúa 2012) continued to highlight and build on Anzaldúa's books; in each new edition of her texts, they offer new readings, new thinkings with one another and with Anzaldúa. This practice of thinking and writing collectively, co-constructing knowledge, is one that is oriented toward relationality, a shift from the individual to the collective, disrupting traditional conceptions of knowledge production (Alvarez-Hernandez and Bermudez forthcoming).

Building from this scholarship on writing practices, this paper follows the writings of a doctoral student (Luis) as he navigates a series of courses in qualitative inquiry facilitated by an instructor (Maureen). Our epistemological weaving began when Luis, as a doctoral student, was in the process of writing an assignment for a qualitative course taught by Maureen. Luis began to think about the process of creating/finding/producing/co-constructing knowledge. Over the course of several semesters, he began to experiment and play with his style of writing through different assignments, continuing to reconceptualize the relationship(s) between writing, theory, and research. Through these processes, Luis realized that his writing and theorizing were not *only his*. Writing had become an epistemological weaving of thoughts and embodiments constructed by himself, his qualitative instructor Maureen, his participants, and his theoretical proponent Gloria Anzaldúa.

In this manuscript, we discuss this weaving process between learning qualitative inquiry and creative writing through paying attention to each co-constructor of knowledge and the ways in which the weaving of knowledge was constructed. We zigzag between

Luis's reflections and excerpts from assignments, Maureen's feedback and notes on those assignments, our (shared and individual) narratives of the courses, and assignment provocations. As we weave together our reflections and thoughts, we also note that we do not make causal claims—that something Maureen did produced something Luis thought, or something Luis asked produced something Maureen taught. Instead, we offer our entwined writing around doing~teaching~thinking~becoming to explore the creative process of learning and thinking qualitatively and methodologically. As Luis noted in a writing meeting composing this paper, this is a paper he would have liked to have read on his own doctoral journey—a paper that peels back the layers of learning qualitative inquiry to show the reader what the process might look like. Throughout, we center the process and act of writing as one essential to learning and teaching qualitatively, and one that is inherently creative. We explore how writing, and writing feedback, is entangled with the process of grappling with questions of ethics and responsibility in qualitative research. We present a brief introduction to Anzaldúa's work, and our positionalities, interactions, and suggestions for fellow qualitative writers struggling to make sense of their writing. As we present these sections, we weave in some of Anzaldúa's quotes where she ponders on the process of writing as storytelling and embodiment, and as a form of transforming and creating our realities. We add these quotes as a way to frame our epistemological processes. We invite the readers to also ponder on the meaning these quotes may have for their own theorizing and writing processes. Our hope is that doctoral students and veteran academics alike can benefit from this exploration.

## 2. Gloria Anzaldúa's Theorizations

Anzaldúa, a Chicana–lesbian–feminist–writer–theorist–philosopher, discussed the experiences with positionality and identity of Chicanas through her development of *frontera* or borderlands theory and, later, through the concept of *nepantla*. For Anzaldúa (2012), being and becoming was a matter of physical and spiritual embodiment. According to Keating (2015), “[...] for Anzaldúa, epistemology and ontology (knowing and being) are intimately interrelated—two halves of one complex, multidimensional process employed in the service of progressive social change” (p. xxx). Therefore, Anzaldúa saw knowing and being as a process in which the writer feels the tensions between the colonial ways of knowledge development while weaving their multiple identities and experiences into this ever-changing knowledge.

After borderlands theory, Anzaldúa engaged in exploring her identities and experiences from a spiritual standpoint. In this theorization, Anzaldúa (2015) speaks about her body as a source of data and epistemology. She wrote, “My feminism is grounded not on incorporeal abstraction but on corporal realities. The material body is center, and central. The body is the ground of thought. The body is a text” (Anzaldúa 2015, p. 5). For Anzaldúa, the body and the spirit are interconnected.

The spiritual Aztec terms *Coyolxauhqui*, *nepantla*, and *nepantleras* are introduced in Anzaldúa's writing. Through *Coyolxauhqui*, we construct and deconstruct knowledge and experiences (Anzaldúa 2015). In *nepantla*, we inhabit in-between spaces (Anzaldúa 2015). The *nepantleras* are the women who choose to inhabit *nepantla* (Anzaldúa 2015). According to Anzaldúa (2015), the *nepantleras* are “threshold people, those who move within and among multiple worlds and use their movement in the service of transformation” (p. xxxv). It is in these liminal spaces that change and action occur.

## 3. Our Positionalities

We begin by introducing ourselves and our positionalities in the qualitative classroom, an academic world of thinking and doing. Then, we weave through assignments and reflections. These conversations are constructed as three epistemological assignments and are woven with the feedback from the qualitative instructor for each exercise. For the purposes of this paper, we amalgamate provocations from different assignments facilitated by Maureen in her classes and writing by Luis in response to these assignments. We created

these amalgamations to tell the story of our becomings together as student and instructor, rather than offer a linear narrative of participation in a class. We are guided by a narrative ethic, which “is governed by the intentions I have towards my audience and towards those whose lives are entangled in the story” (Yardley 2008, p. 23). In the writing of this paper, as we engaged with past assignments, writing, and memories from our shared time in the classroom, we particularly paid attention to moments of co-construction between student–instructor–research–Anzaldúa. Specifically, we were interested in the relationships, questions, and connections between us as “we imagine the space in-between as a relational space where stories to live by are composed. The ‘in-between’ spaces, [are] spaces where we ask[ed] one another ‘who’ and not ‘what’ we are” (Caine and Steeves 2009, p. 8). Lingering in these in-between spaces, we conclude by providing suggestions that emerged from our work together, provocations for doctoral students and instructors thinking, writing, and researching qualitatively that could be applicable to a variety of educators and researchers.

### 3.1. The Doctoral Student

An image is a bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge; words are the cables that hold up the bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness. (Anzaldúa 2012, p. 91)

I walk into the classroom—a Brown–Queer–doctoral student ready to learn. I bring in with me a multiplicity of experiences as a Spanish-speaker, a clinical social worker, an eager learner, an advocate for recognizing the importance of identity and resistance, and the first person in my family to become a doctoral student. I walk into the classroom ready to put into practice what I know, what I think I know. We are learning how to design qualitative research in this course. I am asked to explain the connection between theory and my interview data. I had interviewed Latina community health workers, *promotoras de salud*, who were part of a community-based participatory project (CBPR). I was curious to know what meanings these Latina immigrants made about their leadership roles in their communities in the southeastern U.S. See (Orpinas et al. 2020, 2021) for more about the work of these *promotoras de salud* and their project.

### 3.2. The Qualitative Instructor

The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman. (Anzaldúa 2012, p. 88, *emphasis in original*)

I walk into the classroom. A white cisgender woman. I am nervous with this new group of students, hoping that together we can do justice to their projects and the questions they want to ask, the answers they seek. As we move through discussing the readings for the semester, the syllabus during that first class, I am aware of my whiteness and my gender. How my identities mirror the history of qualitative research, one that as Denzin (2017) noted, has a “complicity with colonialism and the global politics of White, patriarchal capitalism” (p. 9). I want to teach research and research design in a way that pushes back against the “small set of beliefs” of objectivism, neutrality, extraction, and proceduralism that mark the history and present of qualitative inquiry (Denzin 2017, p. 9; see also Bhattacharya 2021; Kuntz 2015). As an instructor of qualitative inquiry, my role is to facilitate students’ individual development of their study, while also challenging and complicating simplistic ideas of what constitutes research. As they each plan out a ministudy, a series of encounters with places and people and topics, we think together about questions of ethics and power and knowledge and agency and representation. Teaching, like writing, is about dreaming potential into reality. Like writing, teaching often begins with an idea, a spark, and then leads you somewhere unexpected. Sometimes you do not know where teaching will take you. I take a deep breath and introduce the first assignment for the course.

#### 4. Assignment #1: Emerging Research Interests and Subjectivities Statement

At the beginning of the semester, Maureen encouraged students to conceptualize their research proposal by writing a statement of the problem, purpose of the study, theoretical underpinnings, and subjectivities. Luis's study sought to gain insight into the leadership experiences of the Mexican women he worked with in the CBPR project who were *promotoras de salud*. More specifically, Luis's study sought to describe the process that *promotoras* experienced developing their roles as leaders, list examples of their leadership, and understand the meaning that they make of their leadership roles and experiences. The research questions that guided Luis's work were:

1. What are *promotoras'* perceptions of their role as leaders?
  - a. What meanings do *promotoras* attribute to their roles as leaders?
2. How do the *promotoras* of a CBPR project enact their leadership?
  - a. How do *promotoras* develop their role as leaders?

##### 4.1. The Doctoral Student: Reflections on First Assignment

As I concluded my first exercise, I was struck that after reviewing the leadership literature among Latinas, most of it was based on the experiences of executives and academics, not on community health workers or Latinas engaged in other community-based roles. I found myself in need of theories that went beyond a production-based understanding of leadership. As Latinas leading their communities and navigating their multiple identities, I thought of understanding their experiences through the theoretical lenses of Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa's work seemed to be able to describe the experiences of the *promotoras* from the standpoint of their identities, the context of their experiences, and their process of *becoming* leaders as Latinas.

##### 4.2. The Qualitative Instructor: Feedback on First Assignment

Nice job on this emerging research statement, Luis. Some things to think about as you go forward: First, Chicana feminism is more than just explaining dynamics of oppression—what does this mean for the way that you understand power, agency, representation, voice, etc., in your work? I also wonder what member checking might look like following your epistemological framework, why does this matter? Does your bias matter in the context of the theories you are bringing to the table (or might these relationships strengthen your research?) Keep thinking about how you might communicate what you describe as the “badassness” of the *promotoras* (and your tension with insider/outsiderness) in your writing/representation.

Finally, I would love to see you draw more lines between your identities and the identities of the *promotoras*. What do the similarities and differences do to the research process? What tensions do you notice?

##### 4.3. The Doctoral Student: Weaving Theory and Writing

“We’re going to have to do something about your tongue,” I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. “I’ve never seen anything as strong or as stubborn,” he says. And I think, how do we tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down? (Anzaldúa 2012, p. 75)

What does Chicana feminism mean for the way I understand power, agency, representation, and voice in my work? How can I weave myself, the theory, the data, and my participants? I learned about Anzaldúa during my doctoral studies. I was fascinated by the fact that I had learned about theory by White European men before I was given the opportunity to meet Anzaldúa.

Scholars of color are not always included in research communities, including qualitative research spaces (Evans-Winters and Esposito 2018). Like other Latinx doctoral students (Sánchez and Hernández 2022), reading Anzaldúa's work helped me feel adequate, closer



to my culture, to the philosophers and theorists that spoke my language and embodied Brownness. I was able to see beyond my island of Puerto Rico, where I lived until the age of 21 and where I first encountered college courses. I was becoming part of Latin American thought, walking the roads forged by Anzaldúa—a lesbian, just like I am gay. Becoming a gay–Latinx–researcher is now possible since Anzaldúa showed me how to become one, how to transform myself and my writing while in-between spaces. That undoubtedly led me to becoming a Chicana feminist. Embodying being a man and a social worker, I could label my thoughts on issues of sex, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and coloniality. I could think from the border, I could write from my center. Like performers on a stage, my writing and becoming is political—it pushes against boundaries of identities and embodiment (Muñoz 1999). It was with these thoughts in mind that I turned to the next assignment for the course.

## 5. Assignment #2: Interview Portfolio

Maureen asked students to conduct three interviews as an introduction to qualitative interviewing, data generation, and preliminary data analysis. These interviews built from their emerging research statement and ethnographic fieldwork, and students were encouraged to explore nontraditional methods.

### 5.1. The Doctoral Student: Reflections on the Interview

When I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else. (Anzaldúa 2012, p. 95) (*emphasis in original*)

The three Spanish-speaking *promotoras de salud* who participated in my study were Mexican immigrants, married, and mothers. Their ages ranged between 35 and 44 years, with most living in their communities for over a decade. All of them had been working for one year with the project. I gathered all three interviews in Spanish, and each interview lasted between 33 min and one hour. The interviews were conducted in a coffee shop, a participant's home, and while walking in a local park. This study was approved by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board. The text that follows was part of my reflection after conducting all three of the interviews.

When writing the interview questions, I thought that the interviewees would struggle with answering the last question: "What does the future look like for you as a leader?" However, I was particularly surprised at how all three interviewees gave me a direct answer to this question. They all said that they see themselves continuing to do their work in the future. Their answers make me think of the interviewees' commitment to their roles as leaders and how not doing what they have been doing is not an option for them.

My interview with Flor, although technically a traditional interview, felt more ethnographic to me since I met her in her house, had breakfast with her and her family, and her husband was in the same room the interview was conducted. I noted on the transcript when her husband made comments during the interview. Outside of the interview recording, the interviewee and her husband talked to me about their breakfast routine when they first moved in together, among other things. These interactions inform how I understand the data in the interview, although they are not audio-recorded. As a social worker who has made many home visits, these dynamics seem common in my work. However, as a researcher, I should note more this interaction on my memos so as to not lose this nonrecorded data.

### 5.2. The Qualitative Instructor: Response to Interview

Great job on these interviews, Luis! I am listening to the audio of your first interview, and I am struck first by how fast she is talking and second, these long blocks of text with

very little input from you. You can hear how excited she is to talk about this topic in her affect (there is one moment where she is talking so fast and then takes a big breath in—as though she was racing to the end of her sentence).

Looking over your transcription, I am stuck by the few pauses throughout here—later, you note a participant’s husband speaking—so interesting! Was he there the whole time? I see where you note him above... and a few spaces below.... How did that affect the interview?

Nice job on your memos—a few things to think about going forward: You place a lot of emphasis on relationship building. How are your theories guiding you? Placing this type of relationship building over the extraction of data (e.g., [Kuntz 2015](#)) matters for the research you are doing. How do you decide what becomes data—is something only data when it is captured by the transcript? Think about reflexivity—who are you in relation to your participants? How does your identity entangle in this, how does the ways that you respond as an interviewer produce the interview? How does your positionality and identity come into play?

### *5.3. The Doctoral Student: Reflection on Feedback*

My instructor asks me to understand the relationship between my participants and the theoretical underpinnings of Anzaldúa. To seemingly weave theoretical concepts with quotes from my participants. “This is easy,” I say to myself. But then it isn’t. I kept thinking about these connections and allowed myself to play with their weaving in the next assignment.

## **6. Assignment #3: Culminating Paper**

Maureen asked students to more fully consider a qualitative study that could be used in their graduate work (i.e., a publishable article, a pilot study for their dissertation, etc.). This assignment again built from each of the previous assignments and attended to feedback provided by peers and the instructor throughout the semester to strengthen their research design. In this paper, students had the opportunity to flesh out more fully an analytic approach explored through the semester, and were welcome to approach this in a variety of manners, including experimenting with creative responses and forms.

### *6.1. The Doctoral Student: Approaching the Culminating Assignment*

Like in the quote from Anzaldúa at the beginning of this manuscript, I was stuck, afraid of misconnecting, misunderstanding, misweaving. Academic writing is daunting and lonesome, so I decided to take on creative writing to have a conversation with theory and my data for this final paper. I have read Anzaldúa’s work, and she makes no excuses for decolonizing academic writing by combining first-person accounts, poems, drawings, incomplete sentences. It is almost as if she is giving me permission to do the same. Perhaps my engagement in creative writing and poetical thinking allowed me to make sense of my theory and my data. I start to get unstuck, make some connections, and weave in theory and data through the use of creative writing and poetic exercises. In what follows, I offer two examples of these exercises.

#### **Exercise One—A Conversation with Anzaldúa**

This piece reflects how I, the doctoral student, put together the final research proposal when designing my qualitative study. During the process of writing my final proposal, I tried to connect theory, research questions, my subjectivity, and research design. I was feeling intimidated by needing to understand [Anzaldúa’s \(2015\)](#) borderland theory. As a clinical social worker and a bilingual person, I thought, “What if I could speak with Anzaldúa and ask her questions? What would she tell me?” Following is what resulted from this creative writing inquiry. I did not edit this piece for the purpose of this paper—it may contain spelling and grammatical errors—to provide a raw example of the exercise.

The doctoral student and Anzaldúa:

Anzaldúa and I met on one of those days in which the wind comes by so passionately, that it takes you down to the US/México *frontera*, the border. Anzaldúa was sitting on top of the border, dangling her feet on the México side. I sat down next to her after I managed to fix my hair—it was a tumultuous landing. “Are you jumping to the other side?” I asked. Anzaldúa smiled, “I am always *en el otro lado*, on the other side,” she replied. “I understand,” I lied while trying to figure out what she was staring at. “Doña Anzaldúa, what are you looking at?”—I finally asked. She looked at me for the first time—“please don’t call me doña, it makes me feel *vieja*, old.” I felt embarrassed. “I am looking at the landscape. How the earth beneath us can be divided just on the surface, never deep enough,” she said. I understood. She was really talking about herself—how she was *Mexicana, Chicana, Americana, Mestiza*, and *Latinoamericana* all at once, with no apparent divisions. “Yes, I am all and more. I am what I perceive myself to be, and what others perceive of me, my womanhood, my Brownhood, my lesbianhood,” she said as if she had heard my thoughts. I ventured to ask her a question, “Would you consider yourself to be a leader?” She changed position, no longer dangling her feet but now sitting with her legs crossed, facing me. She was staring at me. I felt uncomfortable and intimidated; almost underserving of her attention. “What is a *líder*, a leader, to you?”—she said. I replied almost stuttering “A person who can stand in front of a group and command them.” Anzaldúa started to challenge me, “Where did you hear that? Who are those leaders?” I knew I was in trouble and didn’t dare to answer. She continued, “How we see leadership and leaders tend to be *desde el punto de vista colonizador y patriarcal*, from the colonizing and patriarchal point of view. Leadership is not something that only white men do. That politicians do. That Captain America does. A leader eats rice and beans, raises children, pays bills. Often, a leader is a woman with limitations with the language, who faces oppression, who fights back.” I had to take a moment to process what she had just said. “So how can I find those leaders?”—I asked. Anzaldúa smiled and said, “Here is *mi consejo*, my advice to you. Listen carefully to the stories of others, to their *testimonios*. But also listen carefully to yourself when you hear these *testimonios*. *Testimonios* are co-constructed, and your insight will shape how others hear those *testimonios*.” Oh, I had so many questions! And right when I was about to ask them, Anzaldúa was gone. She became the earth beneath me, the border where I was sitting, the wind that brought me to this place. I shifted the way in which I was sitting, and dangled my feet on the México side, staring at the landscape far away.

## 6.2. The Doctoral Student: Re-Worlding with Anzaldúa

Creative writing and poetical thinking have been linked to the process of qualitative research. Schulz (2006), for example, explored the role of creative writing from a hermeneutic phenomenology perspective. For Schulz, the process of writing involves creating and being. In this process, the writer is actively sense making, assigning meaning, thinking and feeling the experience of writing. Freeman (2016) also explored the process of poetical thinking as an experience of feeling and becoming. Freeman (2016) stated regarding poetical thinking that, “It is *felt* experience; the experience of *being* in the whirlpool of sensuous flow that we *are* as experiencing beings. This is a move away from an epistemological and representational form of knowing to an ontological one” (p. 72, emphasis in original). Likewise, Anzaldúa (2012) conceptualized being, becoming, and liberation as epistemological



and ontological processes. Thinking with Anzaldúa provides me permission to get out of traditional writing practices and sedimented ways of knowing; she urges me to lean into our dreams, our memories, experiment with poetry and language and form. With Anzaldúa, writing is vulnerable, messy. Writing is felt, it is part of being and becoming with the world. This experience of the writing process and the data allowed me to engage in a process of becoming, not without moments of exasperation.

As I was attempting to make connections between my data and the theory, I often felt frustrated and defeated. How could I establish a connection between my participants and Anzaldúa? How could I, a non-Chicano cisgender man, truly understand Anzaldúa's words? How could I connect with the experiences of the *promotoras de salud*? Even more frightening, how could I make Anzaldúa and the *promotoras de salud* speak to each other through my academic writing? I would read Anzaldúa's work and feel inadequate—almost undeserving of understanding her words. We spoke the same languages, yet the words were becoming new and unexplored realities as I read them.

#### Exercise Two—Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro

A year later, when I returned to the data, I utilized Anzaldúa's (2015) book *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* to engage in poetical thinking. I decided to overlap Anzaldúa's concept of the *nepantleras* with segments from my three interviews with the *promotoras*. After becoming familiar with my data and reading Anzaldúa's book, I thought of the connections between the work of the *promotoras* and the ways in which Anzaldúa described the *nepantleras*.

I first pulled segments from each interview in which the participants answered the questions: (1) How do you define leadership?, and (2) What is a leader to you? Then, I pulled the last sentences of the paragraphs from Anzaldúa's section "Las Nepantleras: Alternative Sense of Self," subsections "Lugares nepantleras—perspectives from the cracks" (pp. 81–83) and "The web of connection" (pp. 83–84). I kept the order of the sentences from Anzaldúa (in bold) and inserted the segments from the *promotoras* as if they were responding to Anzaldúa (in italics). I deleted symbols from the transcript, interruption of utterances, and things like "ums," etc. I decided to leave the segments from the interviews in Spanish in honor of Anzaldúa's way of writing. Underneath each quote is the English translation in brackets. Below is the result of this exercise:

Anzaldúa and the *promotoras de salud*:

**We are forced (or we choose) to live in spaces/categories that defy gender, race, class, sexual, geographic, and spiritual locations.**

*Como fijar metas, por ejemplo en la familia o en las labores de la casa, por ejemplo. Como tener horarios, bueno como yo por ejemplo me dedico a la familia, verdad, a mis hijos, mi trabajo es relacionado en la casa.*

[Like setting goals, for example in the family or in house chores, for example. Like having a schedule, well like me for example I dedicate myself to family, right, to my children, my work is related to the house.]

**Nepantleras are not constrained by one culture or world but experience multiple realities.**

*La comunidad te hace líder.*

[The community makes you a leader.]

**Nepantleras use competing systems of knowledge and rewrite their identities.**

*Pero ahora, después de reconocer yo misma lo que hago, siento que tengo ese liderazgo conmigo.*

*[But now, after recognizing myself what I do, I feel that I have that leadership with me.]*

**Las nepantleras nurture psychological, social, and spiritual metamorphosis.**

*Y siento que es bueno porque haces sentir bien a la gente, la gente confía en ti.*

*[And I feel it is good because you make people feel good, people trust you.]*

*Pues para mí personalmente pues, líder hacia mí misma porque para hacer mejor las cosas.*

*[Well, for me personally, well, leader towards myself because to do things better.]*

**Las nepantleras are spiritual activists engaged in the struggle for social, economic, and political justice, while working on spiritual transformations of selfhoods.**

*Como saber guiar, como aprender para saber guiar, saber entender y analizar los puntos de cada persona sin juzgar ni- ¿judging es juzgar, no, es lo mismo?*

*[Like knowing how to guide, like learning to know how to guide, knowing how to understand and analyze the points of view of each person without judging.]*

**(Identities such as those of neo-Nazis and other hate groups with unethical behavior are not included).**

*Un líder yo supongo que es una persona que debe de saber guiar a un grupo de personas, aún sabiendo que cada persona piensa y analiza diferente.*

*[A leader, I suppose that it is a person that should know how to guide a group of people, even knowing that every person thinks and analyzes differently.]*

### 6.3. The Qualitative Instructor: Sitting with Anzaldúa

As I read Luis's exercises, I take a breath. "This is beautiful," I write in the comments. "I wonder if you might add a few sentences to explain/expand/talk about what engaging with these exercises did. Particularly as this is a paper that you're framing as a "how to guide" so you might do a little more of this work given who you are speaking with." I sit a little longer, I sense the earth beneath me, the wind in my hair, Anzaldúa next to me. Then I write, "You could also resist this and not do it (Anzaldúa might agree with letting the reader dangle as she leaves you to figure it out as well...)." As I write back to Luis, I reflect on my teaching, the unexpected places it can lead. I sit a little longer on the border, grounded and grateful for these unexpected moments and places, murmuring my appreciation. As I return to my day, my week, the classroom, I keep thinking of the ways that refusal and resistance might take shape in other ways. How an artful and creative aesthetic might offer possibilities for resistance and refusal of traditional ways of doing research and imagining science.

### 7. An Afterword: The Doctoral Student and Reflections on Writing with Anzaldúa

In looking at this book that I'm almost finished writing, I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging, a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there. [...] If I can get the bone structure right, then putting flesh on it proceeds without too many hitches. The problem is that the bones often do not exist prior to the flesh, but

are shaped after a vague and broad shadow of its form is discerned or uncovered during beginning, middle and final stages of writing. (Anzaldúa 2012, p. 88)

I strived to connect, understand, and weave Anzaldúa's borderland and *nepantla* theories and my interviews in Spanish with three Mexican *promotoras de salud*, in which they discussed their experiences with leadership. However, I had not stopped to think about the actual process of writing. During the process of engaging in creative and poetic writing, I frequently felt curious, excited, adequate. Like other researchers (Prince 2022; Thomas 2021), creative and poetry writing led me to experience moments of becoming.

English is my second language, and academic jargon often seems like its own language at times. Hence, academic writing was a tedious and often cumbersome process. While engaging in nonacademic writing to understand my data and the theory, I felt a sense of becoming a writer. I was inhabiting a more familiar place—a place where the rules are not as rigid, and Spanish could be peppered into my analysis. This, in turn, made me feel a sense of accomplishment as I became a qualitative researcher—able to see lived experiences and follow the path to connections. These becomings, as a writer and a qualitative researcher, made me feel, somehow, like I was becoming more myself.

### 8. The Doctoral Student and Qualitative Instructor: Dear Reader

Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflict, engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sort of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen. (Anzaldúa 2012, p. 94)

The academic writing process can be daunting, especially for those of us who struggle to cement our thoughts in sterile style and composition. In Luis's experience, thinking with Anzaldúa, his theoretical proponent, offered an entry point to reimagine, interrogate, decolonize, and queer qualitative research design and data analysis. Writing with Anzaldúa offered a way to express a sense of authenticity and become in multiplicity. Telling a story through creative writing and poetic processes allows for vibrant epistemological and ontological spaces and opportunities. Theories are to be used to understand our experiences, not to make our experiences fit their molds. Qualitative data represent the constructed realities in which we live. Through using creative writing and poems to connect/understand/weave theory and data, Luis was able to feel more comfortable with the academic writing process. He allowed himself to feel and explore the process of becoming. Through this process, he encountered many worlds: the self, the cultural, the queer, the academic. At times, it seemed as if these worlds collided, creating a picture of bits and pieces of the self. Creative writing allowed him to weave in the pieces into a world of insight, belonging, resistance, and possibilities.

We both walked into the same classroom a few years ago. Today, from two different parts of the country, we enter and re-enter Zoom meetings to continue weaving our thoughts and experiences. Our worlds have changed, not only from the physical room to the virtual space, but from the point of view of our relationship. We re-examine our interactions in the past while continuing to weave what seems like a never-ending tapestry. We continue to learn from each other's worlds, sharing experiences in the classroom, with colleagues, with life. The boundaries of instructor and student have blurred through this re-worlding; we teach one another (we were always teaching one another, we see now). Our journey continues to ripple into critical connectedness.

To follow are some ideas for qualitative researchers, particularly doctoral students and those new to qualitative inquiry, to engage in as they sit with themselves, their theories, and their data. We offer these provocations as amplifications of the insights and contributions that emerged from our analysis and thinking together. We invite our readers to view these questions as further entry points to grapple with our discussions of refusal and resistance in writing and academic life. Thoughts from Luis are justified to the left, those from Maureen

are justified are to the right, and provocations from us both are justified center. We conclude with a quote from Anzaldúa, bringing us and the reader full circle in our co-constructions.

Take time to understand your positionality as a person–researcher and engage in creative and critical reflexivity—Who am I? What do I bring to this study/participants/process? How do I show up in the data analysis process? What have I become? Who am I becoming? How is this study and writing personal to me? How is my voice showing up in my writing? (Harris 2016; Rodricks 2022)

Ask a lot of questions. Wonder, why this research topic and me?

Humanize theory—Who are the main theorists? What was the life of the theorists like, and what motivated them to develop this theory? How do the theorists show up in their own theory? How did the theory become theory?

Imagine your theorists at the kitchen table with you, looking over your shoulder as you write. How would they chime in? Where would they disagree? How would they interact with your participants?

Think of your methodology as a facilitator of a conversation—How can I have a conversation with my data and theory that would help me answer my research questions? What can I do to become an active listener–participant in the conversation?

Why this site and not another? Why this method and not another? (Marshall and Rossman 2015)

Have conversations with your data—What is not being said by my data? Where are the silences? What sticks out for me? What do I wish I could have said or asked of my participants, documents, or observations? What is my data becoming?

What does your data want? (Koro-Ljungberg 2015)

Have your data and theorist have a conversation with each other—What would the theorist tell me about my data? What would my data tell me about my theory? What would the theorist and data tell each other?

Ask: Who are we becoming as we engage in these conversations?

Sit on your border or join us in ours. Let's fearlessly dangle our feet together as we write, experience, and become.

For me, writing begins with the impulse to push boundaries, to shape ideas, images, and words that travel through the body and echo in the mind into something that has never existed. The writing process is the same mysterious process that we use to make the world. (Anzaldúa 2015, p. 5)

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