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Reviewer as Activist: Understanding Academic Review through Conocimiento

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that academic manuscript review is a site for activism, using Anzaldúa’s theory of *conocimiento* as a framework to contextualize the reviewer’s role in this process. It demonstrates that *conocimiento* provides a structure for engaging in the manuscript-review process in a way that mediates among potentially conflicting worldviews. *Conocimiento* informs more justice-oriented reviewing and positions the anonymous reviewer as activist. This article explores each stage of *conocimiento* and anonymous review through multifaceted methods: storytelling, theory, and a synthesis of the two. It ends by presenting concrete, action-based takeaways for reviewers who want to approach reviewing justly and equitably.

Motivated by the need to understand, you crave to be what and who you are. A spiritual hunger rumbles deep in your belly, the yearning to live up to your potential.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa 540

Gloria Anzaldúa’s seven stages of *conocimiento* are described in “now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts” (554).¹ In the seven stages of *conocimiento*, Anzaldúa describes the internal process an individual undergoes following a significant disruption that makes them recognize, question, and reconsider their worldview in light of this disruption. We propose that these stages offer a framework with particular relevance to the social justice turn in writing studies and their call to action in recognizing, revealing, rejecting, and replacing injustice, even when such action is unsanctioned or outside of institutional permissions (Walton et al. 102; Colton and Holmes 2018, 21). Explicitly drawing from her Queer-Chicanx feminist perspective, Anzaldúa’s seven stages of *conocimiento* do not straightforwardly posit a framework for social justice action. Rather, she plunges us into the spiritual inner world of activists struggling to navigate day-to-day tasks and experiences that are as mundane as they are disruptive and disorienting. We recognize in this world—these seven stages of *conocimiento*—a thought-provoking and productive framework for our own day-to-day tasks, such as reviewing journal manuscripts.

In this piece, we extend the work of Leon and Pigg who present Anzaldúa’s stages of *conocimiento* as relevant to a wide range of “rhetorical practices and bodies” (272). Building on their argument, we demonstrate the relevance of *conocimiento* to one such rhetorical practice: reviewing journal manuscripts. This piece also extends the work of Itchuaqiyaq, who argues that inclusive practices need to be informed by worldviews relevant to and

reflective of marginalized stakeholders. Making a similar argument, this article demonstrates that the stages of *conocimiento* provide a structure for engaging in the manuscript-review process in a way that mediates among potentially conflicting worldviews, including views of review-relevant topics such as what constitutes good research and how to scope the boundaries of the field.

We argue that anonymous reviewing is a rich site for activism, using Anzaldúa's theory as a framework to contextualize the reviewer's role in the review process. That sensemaking, we hope, can inform more justice-oriented reviewing and position the anonymous reviewer as activist.

Chávez argues that it is through radical interactionality, or confronting the roots of oppression in no uncertain terms, that real change can occur, even if it produces discomfort for the intended audience (51). She argues for the value of bold, "concrete" terms, rather than non-emotional or hedging language, when talking about oppression because constrained, "professional" communication ultimately protects the status quo and offers the opportunity to reinterpret demands and grievances in softer, ignorable ways (23). (Chávez 2013), much like Anzaldúa argues in her seven stages of *conocimiento*, encourages scholars to embrace the value of conflict and feelings of disquiet in their scholarly activism because sitting with such feelings can reveal internal and external attitudes. Young also embraces the importance of conflict as a tactic for revealing differences and radically demanding needed change. She points to oppressive tactics, such as unofficial but upheld requirements that an article's tone seem "reasonable" and "objective" rather than angry, used to silence individuals attempting to air grievances. Young states:

The primary cause of such conflict, however, is not group difference per se, but rather the relations of domination and oppression between groups that produce resentment, hostility, and resistance among the oppressed. Placing a normative value on homogeneity only exacerbates division and conflict, because it gives members of the dominant groups reason to adopt a stance of self-righteous intractability. (179)

Young cautions that homogenous methods of "reasonable" communication uphold oppressive normative practices of "professionalism" while engaging difficult and disruptive topics.

Academic structures hinge promotion and tenure upon publication success, and studies have shown that academic publication is not yet a site of equity (Chang 2009, 33; Chakravartty et al. 2018, 260; "The Imperial Scholar" 563–64; "The Imperial Scholar Revisited" 1984, 1358). We review for publications and conferences, and part of the academic culture is the normalized practice of an academic (like using IMRAD organizational structures for research articles or other genre norms). These structures represent the discipline of the discipline. As Anzaldúa might put it, we are disciplined by the "consensus reality" of academia (547). We aim to unravel this consensus reality by addressing the complex internal experiences, sometimes framed as ethical dilemmas, that activist-scholars may undergo when approaching anonymous or behind-the-scenes professional tasks, such as reviewing a journal manuscript. Our article opens the curtain veiling these destabilizing-yet-productive experiences using the stages of *conocimiento* as a framework that not only *describes* internal complexities but also *prescribes* a way forward for social justice action.

We present a guide for navigating the nuance of the review process, following the structure of Anzaldúa's seven stages of *conocimiento*. Admittedly, the path to *conocimiento* that Anzaldúa presents is lateral rather than linear and those on the path may find their

progression through the stages intertwined or complicated by the progression itself. To aid with this complication, for each stage, we provide a piece of an overarching narrative describing the feelings of a fictional reviewer assessing a disruptive piece. We follow each narrative with a summary of Anzaldúa's depiction of the stage and then synthesize the two. We also acknowledge and discuss where Anzaldúa's framework diverges from the typical experience of anonymous review. This article is written for everyone, but we especially encourage readers to pay close attention to how their own experiences and practices are shaped by the following archetypes:

- The jaded or tired reviewer who needs to be reinvigorated
- The new reviewer who is uncertain of themselves and where they fit and are concerned about reinscribing oppression
- The calloused reviewer who just wants to get their reviews done and who resists notions of the non-neutrality of the publication process
- The reviewer who is befuddled by a piece of scholarship who doesn't know how to respond to it but recognizes a kernel of wisdom and value

In this article, we are asking you, reader, colleague, mentor, friend, to remain open-minded and navigate the multiple consciousnesses you may have in your role as reviewer.

Stage 1: The "Attack" (Rupture/rapture)

Reviewer Narrative

You receive an invitation to review a manuscript submitted to a journal in your field. The title and abstract suggest it's in your wheelhouse; you should be able to evaluate this piece, and it's a journal you know. In fact, you were recently published in this journal, so even though you don't really have time to take on the review (who does?), you want to do your part. You read the reviewer guidelines—seems pretty straightforward—so you begin reading the manuscript. The more you read, the more uncertain you feel. Then overwhelmed, knocked off your feet. Yes, the manuscript is in your area of expertise . . . isn't it? But you question yourself. This manuscript is doing some weird shit. You're not sure if it's breaking norms in a good way or a bad way. Passages don't make sense to you, but you also see glimmers of really important work—contributions that you know the field needs. Doesn't it? Or maybe you just don't know what good scholarship is afterall. You feel exposed as the fraud you knew you were but hoped others wouldn't see. It's just a manuscript, you tell yourself. No one but the editor even knows you're reading it. But you're shaken, confidence gone. You set it aside.

Stage 1 Summary

In Stage 1, "*el arrebatado* . . . rupture, fragmentation . . . an ending, a beginning," Anzaldúa describes a worldview shifted through disruption. She states that "the upheaval jars you out of the cultural trance and the spell of the collective mind-set . . . the collective dream . . . consensus reality" (547). This jarring forces a reckoning between "what we thought was" and "what we didn't realize could be" (547). Internal, spiritual shifts and (dis)rupture expose

our own ignorance, make us vulnerable, and present an opportunity for growth. Anzaldúa explains that disruption, and its resulting discomfort and uncertainty, is an “awakening that causes you to question who you are, what the world is about. The urgency to know what you’re experiencing awakens *la facultad*, the ability to shift attention and see through the surface of things and situations” (547). Sudden, unexpected shifts in perception can trigger fight or flight responses by erasing the comfortable collective dream and replacing it with a new unfamiliar reality.

Stage 1 Synthesis

When we approach the mundane tasks of academia, such as reviewing manuscripts, even those of us who identify as (or aspire to be) activist-scholars may find ourselves operating on auto-pilot (that is, in a “cultural trance” and operating according to the “consensus reality,” as Anzaldúa describes it). Academic consensus reality may take the form of hyper-pragmatism: for example, considering only the questions explicitly raised by review prompts and focusing more on form (such as, identifying typos) than function (such as, identifying and questioning assumptions built into research design). Academic consensus reality takes for granted what counts as empirical, valid, or verifiable knowledge—veiling implications of such exclusionary epistemology for the field at large and for the scholars, communities, and other stakeholders whose knowledge doesn’t make the cut.

Stage 1 of *conocimiento* is triggered by an unexpected disruption that causes people to question the widely accepted norms and structures of consensus reality, as well as their own position within those structures, their level of expertise, or even their identity. Being jolted out of the somnambulism of consensus reality can enable scholars to recognize the dangers underlying seemingly safe, mundane tasks like reviewing manuscripts for a conference or journal. Although the review process allows reviewers and editors to serve as mentors, that same process can enable them to block, harm, or tear down vulnerable authors (Hayhoe 165). Reviewing manuscripts can also put reviewers and editors themselves at risk of emotional harm: For example, reading manuscripts that misrepresent, appropriate, twist out of shape, or overlook altogether their areas of expertise, which, especially for marginalized scholars, may directly connect to aspects of their identity.

The particular form of the disruption triggering stage 1 can vary. For example, a reviewer may encounter a manuscript that disrupts their expectations of genre or epistemology, causing them to question what should count as knowledge or why some genres should be considered more appropriate vehicles for academic messages than others. These questions can disrupt long held notions of the field and one’s place within it. Or perhaps the reviewer actively seeks to center marginalized perspectives, but the manuscript raises concerns about appropriation (for example, shifting or even erasing original meanings coined by marginalized groups). Scholars whose voices are outsized due to privileged aspects of their identity need to be especially careful of appropriation, and these concerns may trigger questions about positionality, not only of the author but also of the reviewer and the field at large. Alternatively, a position of narrow, smug *certainty* within a manuscript may raise red flags for reviewers, causing them to question the source of their concern—“Is this manuscript problematically narrow, or does the author know something I don’t? Am I missing

something obvious here?”—and snowballing into the destabilizing experience of *conocimiento*'s Stage 1. This destabilization is uncomfortable, but this very disruption is what cracks the slippery-smooth surface of consensus reality, suggesting that there could be (and should be) an alternative to the deceptive simplicity of the cultural trance. Discomfited, those on the path of *conocimiento* may move into Stage 2.

Stage 2: What Do I Do?

Reviewer Narrative

You keep thinking about the manuscript. What is presented as “research” is not what you expect, not really what you’ve seen in other scholarship, at least not in your own field. Part of you urges rejection: the author(s) must be ignorant of scholarly research norms. But part of you can see value here. You know things yourself that aren’t based on empirical evidence: You know when students don’t see you as an authority. You know when your colleagues find you a bit bossy in faculty meetings. You know when the bank teller is surprised to see the healthy balance in your account. No, this manuscript isn’t what you expect to read in this journal. But it could be . . . You’re torn.

Stage 2 Summary

In Stage 2, “nepantla . . . torn between ways,” Anzaldúa describes the space created between the two separate (but related!) realities resulting from Stage 1. Nepantla is an in-between space, “un lugar no lugar,” where “you sense more keenly the overlap between the material and spiritual worlds; you’re in both places simultaneously” (577; 549). This stage challenges the spirit to consider forging new identities and new truths. The both/and is a place where your attention can easily be diverted back to what we “know,” our status quo, because of the comfort of that familiar place. However, the victory lies in the struggle to equally value each perspective, even though this new perspective may challenge what we’ve believed in and even advocated for. In nepantla, there exists a double-knowing of “what was” and “what could be,” and this full awareness allows you to create a “what is” that encompasses both/and if you remain open to its possibility.

Stage 2 Synthesis

Peer reviewing takes us out of a space of fulfilling our own needs (our research and teaching) and puts us in a space where we are working for the needs of others (editors, authors, field). Service to the field is difficult because one must act outside of one’s self for the sake of others, causing feelings of imbalance. We may ask ourselves: “Am I doing this right? Am I qualified? Are my opinions ‘correct’?” How much work do I need to put into this to do it right and fairly? How am I going to get this done on top of everything else? This sense of imbalance is just a symptom of all of your selves “being” at once, but it can still be overwhelming and can easily trigger feelings of imposter syndrome and fear.

As we progress in our scholarly careers from students to contingent/junior faculty to tenured faculty, we ALL experience power differentials. As reviewers, we are given the

honor to act as a mediator of knowledge from our colleagues because we were deemed “worthy.” This act of being called to review is also a call to power. Some of us have experienced this type of power for a long time and have grown accustomed to it, perhaps forgetting what that power is actually capable of: we have the power to open and close our field to new ideas/methods/ways. On one hand, we were trained in the “old-timers” beliefs about what our field is. On the other hand, we may see the value that the “young turks” bring to our field, even if it isn’t yet forged with time and obvious practicalities (Staples 159). This perennial question lingers: How do we reconcile these two sides and maintain the integrity of our field and of ourselves?

Being multifaceted can feel like being pulled in many directions at once. In one direction, we may feel like imposters who have somehow tricked the field and are now called upon to act as “experts.” In another direction, we are given great power to act in ways that can change the field. There exists a mantle of responsibility that accompanies power and, we argue, one must ask oneself a series of questions to help temper this responsibility: Who am I in this responsibility as a reviewer? To whom am I accountable to with this review? Who am I acting as when I assume this responsibility: an author, a mentor, an evaluator, a gatekeeper? Am I an expert—in what? Am I merely a human, a member of various identity groups? Am I an activist? A teacher? What do I risk in giving this review? Who, or what, am I protecting? In asking these questions, you are not seeking a resolution of tensions but instead a fullness of occupying all of your roles as a reviewer, scholar, and activist in multifaceted ways.

Stage 3: All Is Lost

Reviewer Narrative

You scold yourself: What’s wrong with you? You feel like a fraud. Why can’t you just finish a simple review? You ignore it and numb out, finishing your regular tasks on autopilot. You read administrative e-mails, grade assignments, attend meetings, then go home and collapse with takeout and online gaming. But you keep thinking about the manuscript, even as you dismiss it. On the one hand, you think, “Clearly, the author(s) just aren’t familiar with the research of the field. All I need to do is answer those straightforward reviewer questions.” But you can’t ignore the nagging feeling, the voice that says, “This manuscript’s message needs to be heard.” The manuscript debunks a myth embraced by much of the field, and you suspect this debunking is legit, even if the manuscript is a bit rough and not yet ready for publication . . . You resolve to take up the work. No straightforward review for you. No simple dismissal based on an assumption of ignorance. You’re going to do the work of deeply listening—to the author (the manuscript), to the field (relevant scholarship), to the journal (reviewer guidelines). You’re in.

Stage 3 Summary

In Stage 3, “the Coatlicue state . . . desconocimiento and the cost of knowing,” Anzaldúa describes the inner turmoil caused by the rupture in Stage 1 and Stage 2. This inner turmoil is more than confusion, it is a feeling that nothing is right and that you, especially, are wrong. Anzaldúa states: “In the void of your own nothingness, you lie in a fetal curl

clutching the fragmented pieces and bits of yourself you've disowned" (551). This stage costs you the feeling of security from existing within the comfort of the status quo. However, you must not ignore these triggering feelings, even if you want to, because "the knowledge that exposes your fears can also remove them. Seeing through these cracks makes you uncomfortable because it reveals aspects of yourself (shadow-beasts) you don't want to own" (Anzaldúa 553). These feelings are signals, like bright flashing lights, that you *can* take action to create change both internally and externally.

Stage 3 Synthesis

The manuscript-review process can be discomfiting, and it certainly has material consequences: "publish or perish" means that an author's livelihood may be on the line. Even so, the intensity of Anzaldúa's Stage 3 ("you lie in a fetal curl clutching the fragmented pieces and bits of yourself"), exceeds the experience of academic review. In proposing *conocimiento* as an ethical framework to inform the academic review process, we want to be careful not to misrepresent Anzaldúa's work. Acknowledging that this framework is derived from a marginalized perspective that does not always easily map to Euro-Western academic practice, we strive to remain faithful to the framework's tenets. In applying Stage 3 to academic review, that faithfulness requires an acknowledgment that one cannot shoehorn the intensity of Stage 3 "All is lost" into the more limited experience of reviewing manuscripts. Instead of downplaying this disparity or misrepresenting Anzaldúa's work, we acknowledge this difference. At the same, though, we posit that, at a lower level of intensity, even Stage 3 offers a valuable lens through which to view academic review as activist work.

For example, when necessary feedback isn't straightforward (for example, add more detail about data analysis) but rather calls into question foundational assumptions, that's tricky. It can be destabilizing, threatening to rip away the comfortable norms of status quo reviewing, which include a clear sense of one's own role. In these cases, reviewers may feel stuck and isolated, tempted to "kick the can down the road" by avoiding the difficult work of crafting creative solutions to mentor authors with problematic manuscripts. Especially if those problems stem from what's missing, what's assumed, or what's implied. But side-stepping this work doesn't resolve the pain promised by harmful scholarship or promising-but-incomplete scholarship. It just hands off the problem to others.

Instead, we can choose to "dis-identify with the fear and the isolation . . . , temporarily suspending your usual frames of reference and beliefs while your creative self seeks a solution to your problem by being receptive to new patterns of association" (Anzaldúa 552). This strategy is relevant to reviewing as activism. Reviewing as activism acknowledges that you cannot only tear down; you must also rebuild or create. As a reviewer, you are anonymous, but your labor is apparent in your comments to the editor and author. You have an opportunity to identify and suggest new patterns of association that can open new worlds to the field. We see some similarities here between reviewer-as-activist and the role of ally or accomplice. Being an ally requires recognizing one's privilege and finding ways to amplify and support the work of others without centering yourself. Reviewing similarly requires accepting and acknowledging the inherent power of one's role and using that power to listen well to authors, to refuse to ignore problematic scholarship, to suspend our usual frames of reference (for example, the typical white men theorists), and to seek solutions stemming from new patterns of association.

Stage 4: Fleeting Insight, Initial Movements/awareness, Potential Energy

Reviewer Narrative

On the brink of starting the review, you hesitate, knowing that the position you're about to take up is atypical, that the boundaries you're demarcating for the field don't align with tradition. And once you submit a review, it's done. It's not like you can walk back on what you say, the guidance you provide. But you're drawn to possibilities for a more inclusive field: a notion of "publishable research" that expands past IMRAD formats, past white-collar Western workplaces, past theories developed by, for, and about dominant groups. You know you're not alone in this vision; others have been chipping away at such constraints in their publications and beyond: in their classrooms, their tweets, their conference presentations, their conversations in the hallways and in online forums. You read deeply and widely, plunging into a world of possibility that's chaotic but hopeful. You turn to the manuscript, considering what contribution it could make to the field if unfettered by dominant discourse.

Stage 4 Summary

In Stage 4, “the call . . . el compromiso . . . the crossing and conversion,” Anzaldúa describes the relief from the (somewhat fleeting) awareness wrung out of you in Stage 3. Anzaldúa states that you realize “that *you're not contained by your skin*—you exist outside your body . . . you're not contained by your race, class, gender, or sexual identity, the body must be more than the categories that mark you” (555). This spiritual awareness marks a willingness to answer a call to contribute to change, but it won't be easy: “If el concimiento that body is both spirit and matter intertwined is the solution, it's one difficult to live out, requiring that this knowledge be lived daily in embodied ways” (555). 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.

Stage 4 Synthesis

In the journal review process, you are called to act as an agent who upholds the aims and scopes of the journal. However, in this process you might sense that, beyond these aims and scopes, you're also called to uphold “traditional” academic standards of knowledge production. Perhaps these norms, such as a literature review, have always felt straightforward because they take an expected form due to standards in academic training, modeling, and practice. But how do you reconcile manuscripts that reframe knowledge and context in ways that push back against academic cultural norms of knowledge production and reporting with your role as an agent for the journal's aims and scopes?

As a reviewer, you can act as a gatekeeper or mentor for what is legitimized as valid forms of academic practice and reporting, and this role is important (Hayhoe 165). Not all academic writing is ready or appropriate for academic publication; standards exist for a reason. However, standards can also be unjust or antiquated, and knowledge production outside of academic standards does not necessarily justify its rejection or a requirement that it conform to those standards to make it legitimate. Interacting with a difficult piece jars you enough to consider the field and its practices from a new perspective, trying to understand

academic practice for what it is, what it could be, and what you want it to be. It is a difficult balance to both uphold “traditions” and academic rigor while still remaining flexible and receptive to new methods. For example, you may have never considered what standard section header names, such as “Literature Review,” suggest about what kinds of knowledges our field values. The academic publication process provides one form of vetting that validates knowledge and transforms it into literature, but published literature is not the only valid knowledge out there. Providing relevant knowledge and context to help frame an argument is a norm that is needed, but how that framing is done need not be dictated by norms created for and by dominant cultures.

As a reviewer, you have the opportunity to act behind the scenes as an anonymous activist that questions academic standards as well as upholds them. Anzaldúa suggests that you are not contained by your skin—or your role as reviewer—and that you can contribute meaningfully from within the roles you’re given to make changes. As a reviewer, you are given the power to accept differences in how authors convey and interpret knowledges, and in so doing you contribute to making space for new methods of knowledge production in academia.

Stage 5: Begin Building/acting

Reviewer Narrative

You read generously for what the author is trying to say, looking for valuable contributions the piece could make. And finding them. You consider how to strengthen the piece, seeking problematic gaps and assumptions. And finding them. You reject the perspective that the field must fit within traditional—read: dominant, exclusionary—boundaries to retain its identity. And you refuse the simplistic opposite: a belief that only new theories, new research contexts, new genres hold value. You are committed to the complexities of “both/and” perspectives. You reach out to the journal editor to check your understanding of the venue’s mission and scope; you consider which scholars in the field might extend this piece with their own work and which of your students might find this piece inspiring. You recognize a multitude of places to locate yourself as a scholar within this new, complex, and nuanced perspective of the field, as well as possibilities that such both/and perspectives offer for this manuscript, the unknown author, the journal and its influence in defining the field.

Stage 5 Summary

In Stage 5, “putting Coyolxauhqui together . . . new personal and collective ‘stories,’” Anzaldúa describes the burgeoning resolve that emerges after the shifting of worldview. She states: “Knowing the beliefs and directives your spiritual self generates empowers you to shift perceptions . . . and use these new narratives to intervene in the cultures’ existing dehumanizing stories” (559). This stage is one of action, even if that action is tenuous or uncertain. Anzaldúa suggests that one needs to “submit a sketch of an alternative self,” which suggests a beginning of a process rather than its refinement (559). This work is not easy to do alone because it involves turning “the established narrative on its head, seeing through, resisting, and subverting its assumptions” (560). Collective action provides

support and needed perspective for “bringing new knowledge to share with others in your communities” (563).

Stage 5 Synthesis

Reviewing manuscripts places a scholar in a position of power. Some reviewers bask in that power: relishing the opportunity to display their own expertise, to gatekeep, and to shape the field into a closer reflection of themselves. Some reviewers use their power to benefit others, a burden which can sit uneasily. When we get a clear vision of the dynamics of power in our field—especially the ways in which we may have received some undeserved benefits from the systemic oppression of others—it can make us feel unsure of who we are, what we represent, and what actions we should take. Per Spiderman, with great power comes great responsibility. According to Anzaldúa, understanding—*really* understanding—the depths of the power we have, which stems from our positionality and privilege, comes with a directive to use that power to craft connection and understanding.

Approaching manuscript review as activism requires acknowledging this task’s inherently, unavoidably political nature. In other words, what makes a manuscript publishable is a judgment call, and this judgment reflects layers of cultures (academic and otherwise) and respective cultural values. Anzaldúa encourages activists to daily practice reflexive awareness as a strategy for overruling the exclusionary judgments of dominant cultures (559). In the context of reviewing manuscripts, this reflexivity can open one’s perspective to multiple possibilities for what publishable research can be, while also sharpening one’s gaze to identify problematic assumptions you may not have noticed otherwise:

You examine the description handed to you of the world, picking holes in the paradigms currently constructing reality. You doubt that traditional western science is the best knowledge system, the only true, impartial arbiter of reality. You question its definition of progress, whose manifest destiny imperializes other peoples’ energies and snuffs out their realities and hopes of a better life. (Anzaldúa 560)

Stage 5 is an active stage of *conocimiento* in which you are *doing*: taking action reflexively while remaining open to multiple perspectives and considering the possible effects of your actions on relevant stakeholders. Anzaldúa emphasizes that an individual’s authority emerges only when they displace their ego, engage their connection to others, and merge perspectives. For reviewers, this can mean reading a manuscript to *understand* before reading to *evaluate*: trying to identify with the author’s perspective. To be clear, reading to connect—with the author, with the field—is a practice that does not preclude evaluation but rather positions reviewers to more critically and carefully evaluate manuscripts from a place of connection.

Evaluating from a place of connection can take many forms. For example, you push back against exclusionary language. You point out citation gaps that align with the work of multiply marginalized scholars. You recommend for publication a piece that is outside the bounds of white patriarchal heteronormative ableist culture. You recommend rejection of a manuscript that fundamentally works to exclude. As you take these actions, you’re consistently and iteratively trying to perceive from others’ perspectives: the author’s; the overlooked, uncited scholars; the editor’s; and groups of readers such as grad students, old

guard scholars, multiply marginalized scholars, rock star scholars (understanding that these groups overlap like complex venn diagrams). This responsibility for reflection and connection is lightened somewhat by the understanding that the work of *conocimiento* is collective. As a reviewer-activist, you do your part, and that's all you can do. Change requires collective action. In the context of manuscript review, that means authors must listen to reviewer feedback and take it to heart; editors must support; readers must engage. The burden for collective action is distributed. But anonymous work such as reviewing manuscripts can (and must) be activist work.

Stage 6: Coalitional Rupture

Reviewer Narrative

You know the topic; that's why you were selected as a reviewer. You identified with this unknown author, who seemed committed to a more inclusive field, to what you consider important work. But the review is getting rough. You were taken aback at their choice of theoretical framework, then floored at their failure to cite multiply marginalized scholars whose work paved the way for this piece, and, finally, disappointed that the author never mentioned reciprocity with non-academic communities. You feel disappointed, angry, torn. You were rooting for this piece, this author. Now you fear that if this work gets published, it could detract from your own work and from that of scholars you admire. Part of you wants to keep listening generously to this piece, but you feel betrayed. And stuck.

Stage 6 Summary

In Stage 6, “the blow-up . . . a clash of realities,” Anzaldúa describes the tensions that arise from accepting and taking action from a place of connection. These tensions are multifaceted and complex. At times, people who are allies on one front do not fulfill an ally role on other fronts. This inconsistency—hypocrisy? oversight?—is troublesome. Anzaldúa states that “though they may pay lip service to diversity issues, most don't shift from positions of power” (565). You're caught in the middle of this power struggle, a *nepantlera* able to recognize and understand the two conflicting realities, knowing your work “lies in positioning [yourself]—exposed and raw—in the crack between these worlds, and in revealing current categories as unworkable” (567). There seem to be no easy answers; the way forward comes with costs to you and others. But “the aim of conflict is peace,” and you now have the experience and the power to respond to this coalitional rupture by taking multiple realities into account (568).

Stage 6 Synthesis

In journal reviewing, a coalitional rupture may occur when you are reviewing a manuscript about an issue that is particularly important to you. You identify with the goals of this scholarship; you are rooting for the author and for the impact their scholarship could have upon the field. But, as you read, problems with the manuscript compound until they trigger an emotional response: you're concerned, offended, upset. You're no longer reading to understand. You're OUT: disconnected from the author and no longer confident that the

piece contributes to the goals you thought were shared. This rupture is a defining aspect of Stage 6. But Stage 6 only *begins* with coalitional rupture. Our response to it is the heart of Stage 6. Anzaldúa writes that instead of typical responses to conflict—fight, flee, freeze, or submit—Stage 6 involves intentionally tuning into your own feelings and then seeking positions of connection across coalitional divides.

As an ethical framework, the stages of *conocimiento* mark out a path for action that is uncomfortable, but the alternative—working from within consensus reality—is not fulfilling. Consensus reality offers a simpler path but not a better one and—especially for multiply marginalized folk—not even a comfortable one. The simplicity of consensus reality is predicated on exclusion. Consensus reality attempts to lull us into complacency, accepting simplistic positions which serve dominant interests. But Stage 6 calls for persistent, empathetic action that bridges perspectives and releases expectations of certainty:

Accepting doubts and ambiguity, they reframe the conflict and shift the point of view When perpetual conflict erodes a sense of connectedness and wholeness, *la nepantlera* calls on the ‘connectionist’ faculty to show the deep common ground and interwoven kinship among all things and people Where before we saw only separateness, differences, and polarities, our connectionist sense of spirit recognizes nurturance and reciprocity and encourages alliances among groups working to transform communities. (567-68)

Reviewing as activism offers fulfillment and, we assert, optimum contribution to the field. Activist-scholars embrace reviewing as liminal work that is predicated on connection: reviewer to author, editor to field, reviewer to editor, author to reader, and so forth. This acknowledgment of connectedness equips us with the kindness and courage to take difficult stands: For example, to insist upon citation of relevant work by multiply marginalized scholars, to note the appropriation of terms such as “decolonial” and point authors to accurate definitions, to request information about reciprocity and participant perceptions of findings, to ask hard questions and to request unwelcome revisions. And, as described in Stage 6, to do so from a place of connection and integrity, from a commitment to the field and the people who comprise it and who *could* comprise it if we cultivate an inclusive space.

Stage 7: Bridging Others and Accepting My Own Authority

Reviewer Narrative

You step back from the manuscript, thinking about that “both/and-edness” you found so exhilarating before. You begin to recognize the hard work required to live out that perspective in your own practice, but that’s what you’re going to do. You’re not going to abandon the author, even though you have serious concerns about aspects of the manuscript. You know this manuscript could do important work in the field. And while you share traditionalists’ commitment to excellence in scholarship, you’re not letting them off the hook either: the field needs to be more inclusive. You acknowledge that you’ve got a lot to learn, but you’re going to do the work of listening and the work of mediating between different perspectives in the field. You take up the review again, committed to the role you’re forging: reviewer as activist.

Stage 7 Summary

In Stage 7, “shifting realities . . . acting out the vision or spiritual activism,” Anzaldúa describes how the process of shifting away from your customary worldview into something broader has given you the ability to empathize with other perspectives. Anzaldúa states this shift comes “when you relate to others, not as parts, problems, or useful commodities . . . when you give up investment in your point of view and recognize the real situation free of projections—not filtered through your habitual defensive preoccupations” (569). In this stage, the external work has just begun, but the internal work you’ve done has prepared you. You are empowered through “accepting your own authority” and you use your authority to empower others by looking “beyond the illusion of separate interests to a shared interest” (571; 573). This isn’t safe work, this isn’t easy work, but in order to make a new world, you “have to risk the uncertainty of change” (574).

Stage 7 Synthesis

Maybe it isn’t a coincidence that anonymous peer reviewers are often called “referees.” This title suggests an ability to recognize and ethically assess multiple perspectives at once. This title also suggests a position of authority and power. Questions you might have had in Stage 2 remain: How do I use the power I have to uplift others? Can I move toward a greater purpose (making our field more inclusive while still being academically rigorous) and still stay connected to the field as a whole? Can amplification be polarizing? With what stance do I want to be associated? You’ve come to realize that the process of anonymous review is not really neutral. *You* were selected to review *this manuscript* by the editors.

What the process of *conocimiento* has taught you also remains: you are not beholden to the past norms of scholarship and can help others forge new paths and new ways. Your sphere of influence has grown, and it is an opportunity to use your positionality/privilege/power to uplift others. Leon and Pigg state: “This stage involves resisting easy relationships between individual and collective. It emerges from the deep pain of losing what has previously connected oneself to a collective identity while producing the possibility of forging connections in new ways” (269). Activism isn’t easy; it takes people with power to embody risk and help create space for new, and valid, modes of intellectualism and scholarship. Embodiment of risk takes faith and is a spiritual act.

You realize your ability to shift awareness is a tool to facilitate personal and communal transformation. You resolve to overcome the fears you face and to have faith in the process. You may fear that you lack the ability to effectively communicate both the power of the manuscript’s contribution as well as its need for significant revision. But you try. You may fear that others, such as the other reviewer or the editors, will not agree with your assessment of the manuscript or your suggestions and they will seem “out there” in comparison. But you do not waiver. You may fear that the editors, who know your identity and must synthesize the feedback from all reviewers as part of their determination, may form opinions about you and your work (for better or worse) based on your review. But you commit because, ultimately, this work isn’t about you.

You do the review. You assume this new role of reviewer. You connect to the author, to the editor, to the field, to yourself in a new role. But you do not *just* do the review. You

actively embrace what dominant academic culture frames as mundane service, shaping service into activism, mentorship, and reciprocity. You do the work.

Conclusions and Takeaways

Reviewing certain manuscripts can trigger strong feelings. Stages 1–3 of *conocimiento* are about recognizing those feelings, which signal a need to shift to Stage 4: to emplace yourself in connection with the field and in connection with authors, readers, and editors. This connectedness serves as the foundation for reviewing as activism. If a scholar with less activist experience than Anzaldúa had created the stages of *conocimiento*, we suspect they may have stopped at Stage 5. In Stage 5, you’ve committed to the complexity of reviewing as activism and are moving forward. Ending there would create a tidier framework for action. In Stage 6, though, another rupture occurs, and this time it’s within the coalition. Anzaldúa shows us in Stage 6 that ruptures occur even among people who are working toward a common goal. These ruptures should not end our activism but rather call us to the work of Stage 7: mediating perspectives and forging connections.

Reviewing as activism is not easy work. But the alternative—reviewing from within consensus reality—is not better. In fact, we would assert that pursuing a goal of neutrality or objectivity as a reviewer is not even comfortable; there is no neutral position on what counts as scholarly writing or legitimate knowledge. In other words, reviewers do not choose between an easy-but-bad option (reviewing from consensus reality) and a hard-but-good option (reviewing as activism). This mundane work, which may appear simple at first, is, in reality, complex and difficult. Better to occupy the reviewer role reflectively, embracing the work as collective and networked in nature.

Takeaways for Reviewers

Below we present some takeaways for doing this work:

Be open: Foster attempts at creating new worlds, new ways, new knowledges because—of course!—these new ways will at first seem wrong-minded because they are new-minded. A manuscript represents the labor and ideas of the author, but you may consider yourself a not-so-silent ally in this manuscript. And as ally, you should actively work to help a manuscript make its strongest contribution to the field, even if the manuscript doesn’t match your preferences, voice, or expectations. As a reviewer, your job is to shape manuscripts that you are on the fence about, manuscripts that you love, and manuscripts that you do not love through the feedback you provide.

Be rigorous: At the same time, it’s okay to recommend revision or even rejection. Sometimes a manuscript doesn’t fulfill its promise in making a strong contribution to the field, isn’t a good fit for a particular publication venue, or is built upon a problematic foundation and shouldn’t be published at all. As a reviewer, it is your responsibility to say so. Review feedback should not only suggest what needs to be changed but also to explain why and provide possibilities for revision. Reviewers must listen generously to the author and pose feedback from a place of connection rather than dismissal or haughty authority. A generous spirit and a critical focus are both necessary to support authors in producing their strongest work.

Be kind: Whatever your recommendation, your review feedback should be kind. In recognition of your connection to the author, provide feedback that equips them for their

next step—whether that step is pursuing publication in the current venue, taking the manuscript elsewhere, or even rethinking the premise of the manuscript altogether. Kind reviews advocate for inclusivity, acknowledge a manuscript’s strengths, and provide prompt feedback (Alexander et al. 2019). We find the Specific, Knowledgeable, and Kind (SKK) heuristic to be a useful practical guide for reviewing as activism. Refer to Alexander et al. 2019 for more information about the SKK heuristic.

Now Let Us Shift

One common misconception about power is that it is a finite thing, and that those in power should hold onto it greedily instead of sharing. *Reviewers have power*. We argue that what we do with power reveals core beliefs. Reviewing, though it takes place anonymously, reveals one’s beliefs about what counts as knowledge and how knowledge should be portrayed. These beliefs are connected to your spirit, and they shape your perception of, and even your emotional reaction to, manuscripts. As a reviewer, you are shaping the field from behind the scenes. In this role, your influence can help to repair wounds created from the embedded and internalized racism and other systems of oppression in academe.

Being aware of the spiritual reality of reviewing scholarship is necessary because it is from that same place that you can effectively and purposefully challenge “the old self’s [read: field] orthodoxy” and “submit a sketch of an alternative self” (Anzaldúa 559). You can try to pretend this spiritual connection doesn’t exist and live in the consensus reality, but that doesn’t make it so. The truth is that we’re connected—in this moment, you’re connected to us and we are connected to you. Who you are as a reviewer affects *everything* and *everyone* in our field. Reviewing from a place of *conocimiento* helps you to become a better reviewer and steward of knowledge.

*We are ready for change.
Let us link hands and hearts*

...

Now let us shift.
—Gloria E. Anzaldúa 576

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