Shifting Toward A Spiritualized Feminist Pedagogy: Gloria E. Anzaldúa And Thich Nhat Hanh in Dialogue

DISSERTATION

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By

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Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism shares significant similarities with the work of influential engaged Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. However, neither feminist scholars who engage with theories of spirituality nor engaged Buddhist scholars are drawing connections between their work. While disciplinary categories have prevented us, scholar-activists, from placing these theories of social transformation in conversation with one another until now, I insist that feminist scholars, as well as engaged Buddhist scholars can no longer ignore this crucial relationship. Placing Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism in dialogue with Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism provides alternative ways to read and understand these philosophies and, at the same time, offer scholars and activists a more global and radical political context to ground both their theoretical framework and activist practice. Furthermore, I argue that exploring these theories side-by-side provides an entryway for engaged Buddhism to enter feminist dialogue, and at the same time helps scholar-activists to see engaged Buddhism as a feminist epistemology with implications for practice. In this project, I explore pedagogy, specifically, as one site in which to apply this dialogue and in so doing, develop a new theory and practice I term “spiritualized feminist pedagogy.”
Dedication

This project is dedicated to the students in WGSS 320: Feminist/Womanist Theories of Social Transformation: Spiritual Activism and Engaged Buddhism, Spring 2012.
Acknowledgments

“A flower cannot be by herself
To be means to interbe
The flower has to interbe with everything else”
--Thich Nhat Hanh “Together We Are One” September 8, 2011

I begin my acknowledgements with a Thich Nhat Hanh gatha on the theory of interbeing, in an effort to draw attention to our interconnectedness. I cannot be without you. You and I interbe. Therefore, my achievements are not the consequences of my own hard work, but the work of a community of people who have worked together, nourishing me, literally and figuratively, throughout the course of my life, bringing me to this point.

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Vita

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Chapter 1: An Introduction

With awe and wonder you look around, recognizing the preciousness of the earth, the sanctity of every human being on the planet, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings—somos todos un país. Love swells in your chest and shoots out of your heart chakra, linking you to everyone/everything—the aboriginals in Australia, the crows in the forest, the vast Pacific Ocean. You share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label. This conocimiento motivates you to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean—to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing. Te entregas a tu promesa to help your various cultures create new paradigms, new narratives. (Gloria E. Anzaldúa “now let us shift” 558)

Of course we should practice counting the breath, meditation, and sutra study, but what is the purpose of doing these things? It is to be aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world. What is going on in the world is also going on within ourselves, and vice versa. Once we see this clearly, we will not refuse to take a position or to act…To practice Buddhism, it is said, is to see into one’s own nature and become a Buddha. If we cannot see what is going on around us, how can we see into our own nature? There is a relationship between the nature of the self and the nature of suffering, injustice, and war. (Thich Nhat Hanh Interbeing 31)

In the first epigraph above, Gloria E. Anzaldúa describes her theory of conocimiento or spiritual activism, a spiritually and politically motivated practice that encourages us to see ourselves in relation to others and to use that connectedness as the basis for political praxis. For Anzaldúa, spiritual activism functions in a number of ways. Spiritual activism can be understood as an epistemology rooted in the body and every day experiences, an epistemology that offers a different way of knowing than the dominant culture who uses logic, reason, and exclusion, a way of knowing that is relational,
inclusive, and promotes nonbinary modes of thinking (Torres 202-203). Spiritual activism also functions as a tool for consciousness-raising, one that encourages self-reflexivity, meditation, breathing deeply, bridging across difference to discover commonality, listening to others, expressing empathy, and imagining oneself in another’s situation or space (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 572). And, spiritual activism acts as a kind of practice that compels us to do something to change our situation (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 571). In this way, spiritual activism requires us to turn inward, reflect, meditate (“inner work”) and act out or implement an idea or vision (a “public act”) (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 540).

In the second epigraph, Thich Nhat Hanh tells us that we must engage in meditative or mindfulness practice as a way to come back to or get in touch with ourselves, and in turn get in touch with the world. He reminds us that we cannot separate what is going on inside our minds, our thoughts and feelings, from what is happening in society. In other words, our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions affect and are affected by what is going on in the world and what is going in the world affects our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. This concept is referred to as “the unity of mind and world” and is central to engaged Buddhist philosophy and practice (Nhat Hanh, Interbeing 4).

Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism shares significant similarities with the work of influential engaged Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. However, neither feminist scholars who engage with theories of spirituality nor engaged Buddhist scholars are drawing connections between their work. While disciplinary categories have prevented us, scholar-activists, from placing these theories of social transformation in
conversation with one another until now, I insist that feminist scholars, as well as engaged Buddhist scholars can no longer ignore this crucial relationship. Placing Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism in dialogue with Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism provides alternative ways to read and understand these philosophies and, at the same time, offer scholar-activists a more holistic and radical political context to ground both their theoretical framework and activist practice. Furthermore, I argue that exploring these theories side-by-side provides an entryway for engaged Buddhism to enter feminist dialogue, and at the same time helps scholar-activists to see engaged Buddhism as a feminist epistemology with implications for practice. In this project, I explore pedagogy, specifically, as one site in which to apply these theories of social transformation, though they could also be applied to other practices such as parenting, psychotherapy or political organizing, for example. By placing Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh in dialogue with one another, I develop a new theory and practice I term “spiritualized feminist pedagogy.”

The work of Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Thich Nhat Hanh intersect in meaningful ways, as demonstrated by the epigraphs above. This project is dedicated and committed to the ways these philosophies intersect around issues of epistemology, pedagogy, and activist practice. Both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh promote ways of knowing that are relational, inclusive, and rooted in the body and personal experience. It is this sense of interconnectedness or “universal responsibility” that moves spiritual activists and engaged Buddhists to work for social justice at the individual, institutional, and societal levels (Kraft, “Engaged Buddhism” 65). In this way, Anzaldúa’s and Nhat Hanh’s
relational epistemologies inform their activist practice, which is understood broadly to include peaceful protests, creative expression through art, literature, and writing, public speaking, meditating, mindful eating, teaching, acting with compassion and humility, or ‘being peace.’

Both Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism and Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism assert that making change begins with the self and then extends outward, both acknowledge the interdependent nature of all living things, both theorists push their readers to move beyond dualistic or ‘us vs. them’ thinking and encourage us to move toward a relational epistemology. Both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh see pain and suffering as potentially transformative, understand the necessity of grounding the work of radical social transformation in the self and the everyday, and both philosophies acknowledge the importance of coalition building or bridging across difference to discover our commonalities. While I apply a number of these intersections to the practice of pedagogy in greater detail in chapter four, I briefly discuss the two similarities I believe are most significant to this project here.

“inner work/public acts:” by taking care of myself, i take care of others

At the heart of spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism lies the work of personal growth and individual transformation. Referred to as the ‘inner work’ of social change by Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, meditation and mindfulness practice, often misunderstood or critiqued as escapist or self-indulgent, act as “spiritual tools to deal with political and personal problems” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 57; Nhat Hanh, Being Peace 56-57). For spiritual activists and engaged Buddhists, meditation and mindfulness practice not
only reveal the tremendous pain and suffering that exists within our own lives and throughout society, but also help us to cultivate the kind of compassionate awareness necessary for radically transforming both our lives and the lives of others. In other words, radical social transformation begins with the self (“inner work”), but must move outward (“public acts”).

The engaged Buddhist concept, “unity of mind and world,” as noted above, is especially useful here in helping us to understand the interdependent relationship between the inner and the outer or “the world of mind and the world outside” (Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing* 4). According to Nhat Hanh “…these worlds are not separate. . . .The ideas of inside and outside are helpful in everyday life, but they can become an obstacle that prevents us from experiencing ultimate reality. If we look deeply into our mind, we see the world deeply at the same time” (*Interbeing* 4). In other words, the pain and suffering we experience at an individual level is so deeply connected as to be inseparable from the pain and suffering we experience at the societal level, as a result of unjust social structures and oppression. Both spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism call on individuals to first, self-reflect, turn inward, and meditate and then, using the wisdom gained through this exercise of ‘inner work,’ turn outward into the public sphere to “expose, challenge, and work to transform unjust social structures” (“public acts”) (Keating, “I’m a citizen” 57).

**we interare: i am because you are**

Intimately connected to the idea that change begins with the self and then extends outward is a belief in our interconnectedness or interdependence. Awareness of one’s
interdependent relationship with all living things is a crucial component for spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism and helps foster a sense of collective responsibility. For spiritual activists and engaged Buddhists alike, understanding our relationships with all living things as interconnected helps us to remember that we are not responsible for ourselves alone. In the foreword to This Bridge Called My Back, Anzaldúa says “We have come to realize that we are not alone in our struggles nor separate nor autonomous but that we...are connected and interdependent. We are each accountable for what is happening down the street, south of the border or across the sea (np).” Here, Anzaldúa not only reminds us that our actions and our thoughts affect others, people we know and people whom we may never meet, at the same time that it pushes us toward compassion and empathy, toward an understanding of “universal responsibility” (Dalia Lama). In Being Peace, Nhat Hanh makes a similar point when he says “My well-being, my happiness depends very much on you, and your well-being, your happiness, depends upon me. I am responsible for you, and you are responsible for me. Anything I do wrong, you will suffer, and anything you do wrong, I have to suffer. Therefore, in order to take care of you, I have to take care of myself” (35). Not only does Nhat Hanh acknowledge our interconnectedness or the ways we affect one another, but he also recognizes the importance of and relationship between taking care of oneself and taking care of others, as discussed above.

In “Risking the Personal,” the introduction to Interviews/Entrevistas, AnaLouise Keating says “By incorporating her life into her work, Anzaldúa transforms herself into a bridge and creates potential identifications with readers from diverse backgrounds. She
models a process of self-disclosure that invites (and sometimes compels) us to take new risks as we reflect on our own experiences, penetrate the privacy of our own lives” (2). Anzaldúa’s use of the self is what initially drew me to her work. She seemed to rebel against much of what I had been taught about academic writing and theorizing like objectivity, detachment, logic, and rationality and she made no apologies. Like Keating says above, I feel compelled by Anzaldúa’s writing to reflect on my own experiences and assert myself in this project.

It is in the spirit of Anzaldúa that I have decided to “risk the personal” and engage in what she calls autohistoria-teoría, a kind of life writing that includes both the telling of personal stories and self-reflection on the storytelling process “employed in the service of social justice work” (Keating, “Appendix 1. Glossary” 319; Keating “Introduction: shifting worlds” 6). What follows is a selective genealogy of particular moments in my life that highlight the ways in which my personal journey is deeply connected to my intellectual journey, and more specifically this project.

spiritual influences and religious tension

My interest in the spiritual began when I was a child, maybe 7 or 8, though I didn’t share these thoughts with anyone. I thought spirituality was something private or personal, something that was too embarrassing to talk about and placed it right alongside puberty on my list of taboo topics not to be discussed with adults under any circumstances - ever! In some ways, I still struggle to talk about spirituality with others, even as I write this I feel vulnerable, uncomfortable, even a little embarrassed (I will write more about this, my continued struggled and discomfort, in chapter 4). Early on in
my childhood I had a pretty clear understanding that religion and spirituality were distinct from one another. I knew my family was not “religious,” since we did not attend church, mosque, temple, or synagogue, nor did we subscribe to a particular set of religious beliefs. But spirituality, the spirit, intuition, the afterlife, the supernatural, and tarot card readings, those were ideas I heard my mother talk about with other adults, and ideas that I spent time exploring on my own.

As a young child, my understanding of spirituality was elementary and largely connected to ideas about death and ghosts or spirits. The idea that ghosts of loved ones who had passed might be walking among us or guiding us through life was fascinating to me. In fact, after my great grandmother Dorothy (we called her ‘Goose’) died, I was especially intrigued by the possibility that her soul or spirit-energy walked among us. Occasionally, I would smell her perfume in the years shortly after her death and I remember thinking “Grandma Goose must be with me right now.” Sometimes I would say “hi Goose” out loud and sometimes I would only acknowledge her in my head. I never shared this with anyone. And sometimes still, I smell her perfume and wonder if she is near.

“Epistemology” was not in my vocabulary at the time, but it’s clear to me now that my interest in the spiritual, intuition or our sixth sense, and my intrigue with the dead were connected to ideas about knowledge construction, what counts as knowledge, where knowledge comes from, and who is capable of creating knowledge. More specifically, I believed that spirits or ghosts or whatever energy I felt as a child made itself available to me to teach me something, to guide me in some way, as long as I was open to it, as long
as I made myself vulnerable to it. Years later in a course titled Feminist Epistemologies taught by AnaLouise Keating at Texas Woman’s University I explored these ideas for the first time in a final paper where I was asked to reflect on my personal epistemology.

I grew up in a supportive environment with a feminist mother who pushed me to think critically, to ask questions, to act out against any injustice I saw whether that was on the playground, in the classroom, or out in the world. My mother is an attorney and one of those natural born leader types. When she talks, people listen. As a parent, she made little effort to shelter any of her children from conversations or information that some may have deemed inappropriate and she encouraged free expression. When I began this project, I asked her to share with me stories from her childhood and coming of age in the late 60s and early 70s. I wanted to know why she left the Catholic Church and how her identity as a feminist influenced her experiences with religion and spirituality. Sure, I had heard these stories before, but I wanted her to tell them again. I wanted to listen to her stories while putting into practice the kind of deep listening employed by spiritual activists and engaged Buddhists. We spent some time talking about her experiences at Oberlin College where she was an undergraduate student from 1972-1976 double majoring in American Government and American History with a specialization in Women’s History. Because Oberlin did not require students to take specific courses, but rather fulfill a specific number of credit hours, my mother was free to take courses she was interested in which often included those in religious studies, like “The New Testament as political theory” and “The Old Testament as political theory.” She said she has always been more interested in religion as an intellectual exercise than as a pursuit of
morality or faith. Though she ultimately decided to attend law school after graduating from Oberlin in 1976, she really wanted to attend graduate school and teach Women’s History at the University-level.

“Religious conflict appears to be a central theme in my life,” my mother wrote in a journal she began keeping in 1998 that includes stories and reflections from her childhood, her intellectual autobiography, news clippings, and notes from scholarly texts she was reading at the time.\(^1\) For most of her childhood, my mother attended the Methodist Church and often without the accompaniment of her parents. At 14, she was forced to leave public school and thrust into a strict Catholic high school with her younger brother in an attempt by my grandparents to curb his behavioral problems. “I found myself in my first religious dilemma at age 14,” she writes.\(^2\) She continues,

“I attended St. Thomas Aquinas High School from 1968-1972. These were wonderful, free-thinking, exciting times. The status quo was open to challenge and everything was fair game—peace marches, war protests, radical feminism, anti-establishment rhetoric…men landed on the moon. Anything was possible—everything was possible. We thought we could change the world. In my strict Catholic high school, the more they tried to control our thinking about religion and morality, the more uncontrollable we became. In a way the attempted repression set us free to think just the opposite—to rebel.”

Shortly after my youngest brother was born, my mother began openly talking about and exploring Pagan beliefs and rituals. She created alters in her bedroom and began making friends with other Pagan and New Age spiritualists. I remember listening to her talk about Paganism and Wicca in the car on my way to dance class around age 11 in much greater detail than she did at home. And, the more I learned about Paganism from my mother, the more I understood her interest in Paganism in relation to her identity as a feminist.
I attended a conservative public school where a majority of the students and faculty identified as Baptist or born-again Christians and who often used their religious beliefs to justify their exclusionary politics. This posed a particular challenge for me as more and more of my friends and subsequently, their parents, found out about my mother’s growing interest in Paganism. It was not long before I was told by a number of my peers that they were not allowed to come over to my house or that they were not allowed to be friends with me because my mother “worshipped the devil.” My mother’s response was simple. She said, “That’s silly. We don’t worship the devil. We don’t even believe the devil exists. Tell them that!” And so I did, on several occasions throughout middle and high school.

Though I was interested in the kind of spirituality my mother talked about and practiced, a kind of spirituality that didn’t appear to be bound by religious dogma or exclusionary politics, and more specifically a kind of spirituality that seemed to empower her, my personal (and at the time, still very private) interest could not withstand the force of the religious dogma that ruled my conservative community. And eventually, spirituality and religion became not only one and the same for me, but that one and the same was bad, apolitical, exclusionary, anti-intellectual, and discriminatory. By the time I entered high school I saw a clear distinction between church and state or religion and politics and I even began to view my mother’s spirituality as “silly” or a “joke.” I maintained these ideas about religion, spirituality, and politics throughout my undergraduate career.
In 2003, I moved to Texas to attend Texas Woman’s University (TWU) for a Master’s degree in Women’s Studies, an experience that transformed me, both personally and intellectually. It was at TWU that I was introduced to theories and texts by women of color for the first time, including the work of Anzaldúa, as well as the possibility of a spiritualized feminism or a politics of spirituality. The theories, the course work, and AnaLouise Keating, in particular, challenged me to expand my thinking beyond what was comfortable and familiar, to sit in that discomfort, and encouraged me to (re)think my understanding of activism, spirituality, women’s studies as a discipline, and experientially-based epistemologies. And so resurfaced this idea of the spiritual, uniquely situated in relation to politics, as a tool for creating radical social transformation, a tool for understanding our relationships with other sentient beings and the world.

Still, I wasn’t ready to embrace the possibility of either a spiritualized feminism or a politics of spirituality. Though the work of Anzaldúa continued to challenge me, especially her unapologetic use of the spirit to talk about politics, sexuality, and identity, for the first eight to ten weeks of the semester, I clung desperately to the idea that spirituality and religion were not only interchangeable, but that neither had a place in the academy, especially not the field of women’s studies. I assumed I could easily embrace Anzaldúa’s ‘other work,’ you know, that which did not privilege spirituality and simply ignore the rest. Perhaps not surprisingly, this strategy was difficult to maintain and eventually, during one particular class session of U.S. Women of Colors, while discussing a number of essays from *this bridge we call home*, I spoke up and said
something to the effect of (exasperatedly, I’m sure), “spirituality does not belong in the academy! Spirituality doesn’t mean the same thing to all people and it turns people off. It turns me off.” Professor AnaLouise Keating didn’t respond to me directly. Instead, she smiled and then turned to the rest of the class and asked “What do the rest of you think?”

Though I cringe just thinking about that day in class, it was a turning point for me. In hindsight, this experience in the classroom, this ideological crisis, was inevitable. But, the truth was that underneath all the discomfort and resistance existed a similar curiosity I felt as a child regarding spirituality. Perhaps this is most clearly illustrated in a journal entry I wrote for U.S. Women of Colors due the very week I spoke out in class. Written eight years ago on November 23, 2003, this journal entry documents the personal and intellectual struggle I was engaged in, and so I quote myself at length.

Ok, so I’ll be the first to say that I don’t understand how spirituality fits in the academy or social justice. And, I’m not comfortable talking about my spirituality (am I spiritual? I don’t think I even know what that feels like!). I think this has a lot to do with the community I grew up in and the public school I attended. Though I can’t wrap my mind around this spirituality stuff, I like what Anzaldúa is doing in the essays we read. I feel like she is speaking to the ways ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ are misused or used interchangeably or the ways ‘religion’ has hurt people.

I am having such a difficult time understanding the relationship between spirituality and social justice work and women’s studies. To me, spirituality has the potential to turn people off or push people away... or maybe I think that because of the way spirituality and religion have been used interchangeably in ways that are discriminatory and harmful. I don’t know. I think it’s risky unless we make it clear that ‘spirituality’ is distinctly different from ‘religion’ which can be divisive and dogmatic. But even still, I’m not comfortable with either.

I have no real sense of ‘spirituality’ myself. I feel weird even talking about it. I mean, what does it really even mean to have or practice spirituality?! Is it something one is or has or is it something one does?! When I read essays like “In the Presence of Spirit(s): A Meditation on the Politics of Solidarity and Transformation” by Ines Hernandez-Avila, I DO recognize just how connected we all are, and regardless of how hesitant or
resistant I am to believe in some of this spirituality stuff, this essay really forces me to think about our relationality or interconnectedness. But, is having awareness of our ‘connectedness’ a spiritual awareness? Am I spiritual simply because I acknowledge that our actions affect one another?! I don’t know!

Maybe these readings and our class discussions on spirituality are really opening me up to something that I feel so uncomfortable with...allowing me to feel and recognize something I’ve had such a difficult time accepting. I don’t know. I guess these essays (Hernandez-Avila, Keating, Anzaldúa) are helping me to understand how spirituality and political identity are connected. I mean, if I understand that we are connected to all living things (which I do!), then I guess this helps me to understand eco-feminism differently and the way vegetarianism and veganism is connected to social justice politics... But (!), beyond political issues related to the environment, how are spirituality and social justice issues like racism, classism, and homophobia connected?!

At some level, I knew that the interest I once had as a child regarding spirituality had never really disappeared. Rather, my curiosity had been squashed or pushed under the rug by things I was learning in the academy like professional detachment, logic, rational thought, science, and objectivity, even feminist critiques of religion as sexist and patriarchal kept me from considering the role of spirituality, distinct from religion, in feminist activist politics.

Over the next two years, I immersed myself in all things Anzaldúa. I was drawn to her work because her writing was so raw, because she exposed herself through her writing, often taking risks and sharing personal experiences or thoughts that many would never even entertain in the privacy of their own minds. Anzaldúa’s style of writing pulls the reader in, it pulled me in, and forced me to acknowledge my own privilege and participation in a system that fragments and divides. Her words pushed me to act; they disrupted my comfort, my complacency, and propelled me head first into Nepantla, this liminal or in-between space between multiple worlds and realities, “two people, split
between before and after” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 544). Forced to reconsider my understanding of the relationship between spirituality and activism, I asked myself the following questions: Does activism ‘count’ if it is embedded in everyday interactions with family, a partner, children, colleagues, students, strangers? Leela Fernandes calls this “the dailiness of practice” in Transforming Feminist Practice. Is this what Anzaldúa means when she talks about ‘inner work/public acts?’ Can we create social change by first turning inward, meditating, reflecting, engaging the spirit, and then turning outward to engage in mindful acts of transformation? Nhat Hanh says “We must practice in a way that removes the barrier between practice and non-practice….we have to bring Buddhism into our daily lives” (Being Peace 53).

It wasn’t until I began teaching at The University of Akron (UA) in 2005 that I began to understand teaching and interacting with students, as not only a kind of activism, but as an opportunity for me to put into practice spiritual activism as I had come to understand it through the work of Anzaldúa. During the two years that I taught at UA, while simultaneously earning a Master’s degree in Social Work, I was invested in teaching, in creating a space in the classroom that was open and supportive, a space where students felt like they could explore challenging ideas, talk openly about the relationship between course themes and their very real material lives, a space where they could play with new ideas, politics, and identities. This was especially challenging in one particular class where a number of students felt empowered by their Christian identity and used terms like “right,” “left,” “liberal,” “conservative,” etc. to categorize groups of
people together, ultimately creating the kinds of divisive ‘us vs. them’ binaries I was working so hard to dismantle in the classroom.

As an instructor at UA, I worked diligently to frame class discussions around compassion, empathy, and our shared humanity, encouraging students to say “us” and “we” instead of “us” and “them,” as the “them” students were referring to included people of color, people living in poverty, and members of the LGBTQ community who were often at the center of our inquiry. I reminded my students that “identity-based politics rely on and reinforce an us-against-them worldview” and “close us off from those whom we assume to be different” (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 247). I also assigned my student’s two essays by Anzaldúa, “Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, and Island,” and “now let us shift,” to talk about bridging across difference or recognizing our shared interests and commonalities, as well as to get them thinking about concepts such as spirituality and activism more broadly. Students were especially receptive to “Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, and Island.” While students often noted Anzaldúa’s tone difficult to read, they used her discussion of the roles or identities we inhabit (as a bridge, drawbridge, sandbar, or island) as a way to make sense of the many identities and responsibilities they occupied as first generation college students or activists or Jewish or feminist, and so on.

During my 30 minute commute home, I reflected on the day’s lesson and I made it a practice to email my students after every class. In each email, I addressed any number of things from reminders about upcoming due dates to directing their attention to relevant events on campus, but mainly I used these emails to communicate my thoughts and reflections. For example, in each email I made an effort to publicly recognize
something interesting or thought-provoking a student said in class that day, I responded to questions or comments made in class that I needed longer to think about or reflect on, I offered my thoughts about how the class went, and shared ideas or examples that had only surfaced on my drive home. At the time, I had never heard of mindful teaching, but that’s what I was doing, teaching mindfully while simultaneously teaching my students how to be mindful, encouraging them to consider the lives of others, to recognize our interconnectedness, to act with kindness and compassion. Teaching at the University of Akron taught me (yet again!) the importance of sitting in the discomfort, of fully engaging in the struggle. The difference this time around, however, was that I was the teacher and with this title came profound responsibility. The experience also taught me the importance of giving students the space to openly struggle with course material and the time to respond to each other thoughtfully. I also learned how useful it is to pause and take a few deep breaths before responding to a student or a question, to take time to reflect, and not to take student resistance personally.

The lessons I learned and the pedagogical decisions I made while teaching at UA were informed by the work of Anzaldúa, and in particular, her essay “now let us shift…the path of conocimiento…inner work, public acts.” In this essay, she describes a seven-stage process, a journey toward a way of knowing, ‘the path of conocimiento.’ Open, inclusive, and unavoidably painful, this path invites us to shift our perception of how we view ourselves in relation to others and the world we share and encourages us to find “the best instead of the worst in each other, enabling [us] to think of la otra in a compassionate way” (572).
After spending two years at UA teaching and completing a Master’s degree in Social Work, I moved to Columbus, Ohio to attend The Ohio State University (OSU) for a doctoral degree in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) where I intended to research and write about issues related to the politics of birth in the U.S. OSU is the largest university in the nation and I was a nervous first year PhD student. I felt supported by my advisor, a professor of Women’s Studies and Nursing, but had a sense that my interest in birth and midwifery would not see me through my tenure at OSU. I struggled to make connections with faculty both within the department and across the university and as a result felt relatively lost the first few weeks of the quarter. I began to question whether I had made the right decision. Then, without warning, only three weeks into Autumn quarter, my partner of 5 years ended our relationship. I not only felt lost academically, but was overcome by sadness at the loss of my relationship. For the rest of the quarter, I relied on my family and a few close friends for support and made little effort to reach out to faculty.

I made the decision not to disclose any details of my personal life or the loss I was experiencing with members of the faculty. Not only was it important that I maintain appropriate and professional boundaries with the faculty, but I was also hesitant to share that my partner and I had “broken up” out of fear that the loss I was experiencing would not be legitimized or understood in the same way had I been going through a divorce in the context of a heterosexual marriage. In hindsight, I realize my decision to grieve privately had less to do with issues of internalized heterosexism as I once thought, and more to do with the ways the academy, and sometimes women’s studies, tries to
legitimize itself, by embracing ideas of objectivity, detached professionalism, and trivializing personal experience.

Over Winter break, I went home to re-group and spend time with my family. While home, my mother gave me a book titled *The Art of Power* by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. I had never heard of Nhat Hanh before then, nor did I know anything about engaged Buddhism, but I could not put the book down. Nhat Hanh’s poetic style of writing drew me in, in much the same way Anzaldúa’s writing had years before. I felt comforted by Nhat Hanh’s gentle words, his discussion of mindfulness and living in the present moment, ideas that had made little sense to me at other points in my life. He encouraged me to sit in the pain and discomfort, to welcome it, get to know it, and let go of attachment and clinging. At the time, I read this as letting go of my past relationship, letting go of the comfort and familiarity I was so desperately clinging to.

The day I finished *The Art of Power*, I began reading *Peace Is Every Step*, another text written by Nhat Hanh. This is when I first noticed profound similarities between the work of Anzaldúa and the work of Nhat Hanh. Both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh believe that transformation at the societal level begins with the self, both understand spirituality as a tool for creating change, and both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh believe that we, humans, plants, and animals, are interconnected, that our choices and our behaviors affect all of us. Before I had even finished reading *Peace Is Every Step*, I emailed AnaLouise Keating to share these observations. I wanted to know if she had ever read any Nhat Hanh and if she had, did she see the connections I was making between these two theorists. In an email reply, Keating shared that she had read Nhat Hanh before and that
she had even given Anzaldúa *The Sun My Heart* as a gift. She recommended that I read *The Sun My Heart* and encouraged me to continue exploring the relationship I saw between Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh. Reading *The Art of Power* and *Peace Is Every Step* renewed my academic spirit. While I wasn’t sure exactly how or if I could integrate engaged Buddhism into my doctoral work, I was finally excited to read something that engaged my spirit, something that inspired me to make changes in my life in much the same way reading Anzaldúa’s work had years before.

Throughout Winter quarter, I read Nhat Hanh and other engaged Buddhist texts for pleasure and revisited several of Anzaldúa’s essays in my free time. I even audited “Introduction to Buddhism,” an undergraduate course in Comparative Studies. The more I read, the more I felt compelled to explore the relationship between Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh and the more I explored this relationship, the greater potential I saw for bringing their ideas together in my academic and intellectual work as both a teacher and a budding scholar. Though I still had not reached out to anyone specifically at OSU, including my advisor at that time, reading these texts was enough to keep me going.

During Spring quarter of that same year, I met Guisela Latorre, a faculty member in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, who became my dissertation advisor and continues to act as one of my academic mentors. I felt relieved to have found someone at OSU who not only wanted to work with me, but who saw the intellectual merit in my project. Under Guisela’s direction, I completed an independent study that focused on the history of Chicana feminism and a critical genealogy of early Chicana feminist theorizing.
I share these stories as a way of inserting myself into this project, as a way of “risking the personal” and engaging in the practice of autohistoria-teoría. Like Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and others who have gone before me, I tell stories from my childhood, about my mother and my community, stories of pain and conflict, and of growth and transformation to illustrate how deeply connected our personal, spiritual, political, and intellectual journeys are. I share these stories because both spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism encourage the use of self-reflection, storytelling, and writing as ways of theorizing, cultivating new insights, and producing new knowledge.

statement of positionality

This project explores the relationship between Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism and Thich Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism. I situate this project within a larger body of recent scholarship linking spirituality with socio-political change. Though not all of these scholars refer to Anzaldúa or Nhat Hanh specifically, they nevertheless explore the relationship between spirituality and social activism and demonstrate, often through personal narrative or storytelling, the ways in which their life and work are increasingly informed by this relationship.

Because spirituality is deeply personal and difficult to define in any universal or all-comprehensive way, I draw on the works of feminist and womanist scholars such as Anzaldúa, AnaLouise Keating, Irene Lara, Leela Fernandes, and Layli Maparyan in order to develop a working-definition of spirituality as it applies to this project. In this project, spirituality is understood in three ways. First, spirituality is understood as distinct from organized religion, that is, the terms spiritual/spirituality are not and cannot be used
interchangeably with religion. I subscribe to Anzaldúa’s notion of spirituality whereby she states, “spirituality has nothing to do with religion, which recognizes that soul, that spirit, and then puts dogma around it….Religion eliminates all kinds of growth, development, and change” (Interviews/Entrevistas 98). Spirituality is not bound by ideology or dogma, nor does it require membership to any specific religious institution, denomination, or belief system (Fernandes 10). Rather, spirituality calls on us to self-reflect, meditate, and turn inward, to go “deep into the self,” while simultaneously “expanding out into the world” in an effort to stretch and expand our consciousness or awareness (Keating, “Forging El Mundo Zurdo” 522).

Second, spirituality functions as a lens through which to understand our relationship to/with the world–humans, nonhuman animals, plants, and the earth – and as a way of looking at the world that recognizes our interdependence. Spirituality, in this context, refers to having an understanding of our interconnectedness that “moves beyond the knowable, visible material world,” while simultaneously existing within the knowable, visible material world, that is, in the everyday (Phillips 10). In other words, spirituality as a worldview, one that is grounded in an understanding of our interconnectedness, calls on us to recognize the ways in which our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behaviors affect others, those we know and those we may never meet, as well as nonhuman animals and the earth in material ways. Thus, spirituality in this sense reminds us that we are each “necessary parts of a larger whole,” that we are “accountable for what is happening down the street, south of the border or across the sea” (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 245; Anzaldúa, “Foreword” np).
Third, spirituality calls on us to engage in everyday activist practice, that is, practice that is vernacular, nonviolent, and emerges from an awareness of our interconnectedness. This approach to spiritual practice requires that we come to understand qualities such as compassion, nonviolence, and humility as “actual practices,” and not merely feelings or abstract ideas (Fernandes 59). Importantly, spiritual practice, as I am defining it, is embedded in the everyday, in our daily interactions with people, nonhuman animals, and the earth. Thus spiritual practice, as it is theorized within the context of this project, insists that engaging in everyday activities that are grounded in an understanding of our interdependence, such as recycling, soothing a crying child, or consuming a vegan diet all have the potential to shift us toward a more just and fair society (Philips xxx).

In “‘I’m a citizen of the universe’: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change,” AnaLouise Keating confronts the academy’s reluctance and sometimes outright refusal to acknowledge the role of spirituality in academic scholarship. She refers to this reluctance or refusal by the academy as “academic spirit-phobia” and asserts that this kind of fear has the potential to silence and marginalize those invested in using a politics of the spirit (55). Aware of this tension, I was both hesitant and anxious to engage in this kind of work, that is, the kind of work that engages the spirit.

I, like Keating, Anzaldúa, Irene Lara, Leela Fernandes, Layli Maparyan and others, assert that a focus on spirituality is not a means to escape, but rather a tool for creating social change. And while this tool will undoubtedly make us “vulnerable to the
very oppression we are fighting against.” (Anzaldúa, “El Mundo Zurdo” 217) it is necessary “for letting our guard down, relaxing our defenses,” and letting go of the labels we cling to, and necessary for creating radical social transformation (Keating, “Forging El Mundo Zurdo” 529). In this way, spirituality is understood as informing social justice activism, it “enhance[s] and undergird[s] political action,” it is, according to Anzaldúa a “means of protection” for oppressed people (Philips xxvi; Interviews/Entrevistas 98).

I regard my project as an extension of the existing work that explores the relationship between spirituality and social activism. Yet what previous writings have not explored in great detail are the striking similarities between the work of Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh. Not only is this the first project that explores the relationship between these two influential theorists, but it’s also the first study to argue that engaged Buddhism is a feminist epistemology with implications for practice both within and outside of the academy. Placing Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh in dialogue with one another provides scholar-activists with new tools for creating social change. Dialogue, in the context of my project, acts as the site “where both tension and connection can be present simultaneously; it is the site for both struggle and love” (Philips xxvii). Exploring Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism and Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism in relation to one another provides the framework for what I am calling a “spiritualized feminist pedagogy,” a practice that emerges from the kind of dialogue described above, and one that is necessarily grounded in both the spiritual and the contemplative.
This project brings attention to the theoretical and practical contributions Thich Nhat Hanh has made in the areas of social justice activism, peace studies/peace work, and education within a feminist framework, and carves out a space for WGSS scholars to consider the philosophy and practice of engaged Buddhism as a feminist epistemology. This project also encourages WGSS scholars to think seriously about including the work of the Thich Nhat Hanh and other engaged Buddhist scholars in WGSS curriculum, especially around issues of feminist activism, peace work, and pedagogy.

Placing Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh in dialogue with one another also creates an opportunity to extend Anzaldúa’s theoretical contributions outside of WGSS, Chicano/a studies, and ethnic studies. And, I insist that reading Anzaldúa alongside Nhat Hanh, a spiritual leader and philosopher, makes Anzaldúa’s theoretical work closely tied to the politics of the spirit less easy to ignore. Moreover, this project has the potential to introduce the work of Anzaldúa to people outside of the academy, to engaged Buddhist practitioners from a variety of spatio-temporal and cultural locations. In fact, while attending the *Together We Are One* retreat at the Deer Park Monastery in Escondido, California, I had the opportunity to introduce retreatants participating in the ‘White Allies’ discussion group to the work of Anzaldúa by drawing connections between her theory and practice of spiritual activism and Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism. Specifically, I highlighted the similarities between Anzaldúa’s and Nhat Hanh’s understanding of our radical interconnectedness as the foundation for our social justice activism, as well as their understanding of the relationship between personal
change (inner work) and social change (outer work). Thus this project, placing Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh in dialogue, and applying their work to a range of endeavors and interests, extends beyond the academy. While I focus on pedagogy as the site to explore the relationship between spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism, I insist that placing these theories in dialogue with one another will lead to new approaches for creating social change in a number of areas ranging from parenting to psychotherapy to political organizing, environmental justice, and even our interpersonal relationships, among others.

methods

This project engages in qualitative methods drawn from both the humanities and social sciences and includes archival research at the *Gloria Anzaldúa Papers*, textual analysis of primary and secondary texts, textual analysis of written work (i.e., discussion questions and response posts on an online discussion board, in-class free writes, check-ins, “talking notes,” and a final essay) completed by students enrolled in Feminist/Womanist Theories of Social Transformation: Spiritual Activism and Engaged Buddhism (WGSS 320), and a focus group with students who completed WGSS 320. I also engaged in the practice of autohistoria-teoría, a style of writing developed by Anzaldúa that both exposes and brings together the personal history of the writer, as well as the collective, cultural, and racial history of her community (*Anzaldúa, Interviews/Entrevistas* 242).

I conducted archival research at the *Gloria Anzaldúa Papers* and using textual analysis, examined unpublished primary source materials, including audio-visual
materials, looking at documents where Anzaldúa explicitly explored aspects of her spiritual development and teaching practices. Because Anzaldúa was a perfectionist and engaged in a very specific kind of writing process, often spending several years on any one project, meticulously revising, rewriting, and revising again, she left behind a significant amount of unpublished work when she died in May 2004 which she hoped others would develop and make their own (Keating, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* 7, 12).

In addition to examining primary source materials in the archive, I used textual analysis to examine Thich Nhat Hanh’s primary texts, and secondary sources on engaged Buddhism, as well as secondary sources by scholars like AnaLouise Keating, Irene Lara, and Leela Fernandes whose work builds on Anzaldúa’s.

In spring 2012, I taught a special topics course, “Feminist/Womanist Theories of Social Transformation: Spiritual Activism and Engaged Buddhism” to fourteen undergraduate students from across the disciplines. The process of designing and teaching this course provided me with the opportunity to implement my theory and practice of a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* in a way that was both intentional and transparent to the students. In other words, while I have been developing, putting into practice, and redeveloping this *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* for as long as I have been teaching, I have never been so open or transparent with my students about my pedagogical strategies, never seeking their feedback so regularly, nor sharing so explicitly my justifications for the kinds of pedagogical decisions I made.

Using textual analysis, I examined students’ written work and facilitated a focus group with students at the end of the quarter. Facilitating a focus group with students
from WGSS 320 (after grades were submitted to the registrar) provided me with an opportunity to seek feedback and critique regarding the pedagogical strategies I employed throughout the quarter. For example, I asked students to share their experiences of engaging in contemplative practices such as meditation and deep listening in the classroom. The focus group also provided me with insight into students’ experience and understanding of ‘community’ in the classroom. By including the voices and experiences of my students, who at times and throughout the quarter became my teachers, this project embraces the kind of dialogic or relational approach or perspective both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh call for in their work.

The very focus of my project, placing Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh in dialogue with one another, exploring the relationship between spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism, and applying those insights to the practice of pedagogy, requires that I engage in what Anzaldúa refers to as autohistoria-teoría, as both spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism privilege self-reflection and meditation, the use of storytelling and personal experience to gain knowledge and insight, and both understand writing as a powerful tool for creating social change. In *Interviews/Entrevistas*, Anzaldúa says “I use my life to illustrate the theories” (243), while Nhat Hanh asserts that “direct practice-realization, not intellectual research, brings about insight. Our own life is the instrument through which we experiment with truth” (*Interbeing* 8). It is in the spirit of Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh that I intentionally and mindfully ground myself in this project through self-reflection, storytelling, deep listening, and contemplation.

**Chapter Organization**
In Chapter 2, I analyze the life and work of theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa. First, I offer a critical biography that highlights significant events throughout her life and insist that these moments, these experiences of pain and loss, played a significant role in the development of her theory and practice of spiritual activism. Then, I offer an analysis of her theory and practice of spiritual activism, drawing connections between it and the philosophy of engaged Buddhism in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition. Weaving in the voices of feminist and womanist scholars, AnaLouise Keating, Leela Fernandes, and Irene Lara, who have been influenced by the work of Anzaldúa, and whose own work has greatly influenced this project, I demonstrate the accessibility and versatility of Anzaldúa’s theoretical contributions. I end this chapter with a brief discussion of the ways in which Anzaldúa’s theory and practice of spiritual activism, in dialogue with Thich Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism, provides the framework for a “spiritualized feminist pedagogy.”

Similarly, in Chapter 3, I explore the life and work of Vietnamese Buddhist monk and engaged Buddhist scholar Thich Nhat Hanh. In this chapter, I provide a detailed analysis of Nhat Hanh’s life and the development of his philosophy and practice of engaged Buddhism, drawing connections between engaged Buddhism and Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism. As in the previous chapter, I invite the voices of feminist and womanist scholars to make clear the connections between Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism and the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies. I do so in order to support my argument that Nhat Hanh’s scholarship offers new configurations of subjectivity, spirituality, and social activism in the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies. Lastly, I return to
my understanding that Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism, when placed alongside Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism makes a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* possible.

In this project, I assert that bringing together Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism and Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism provides us with a framework for engaging students holistically—mindbodyspirit. In Chapter 4, I introduce a new pedagogical philosophy and practice I am calling a “spiritualized feminist pedagogy.” A *spiritualized feminist pedagogy*, as I theorize it, is made up of four components— a classroomSangha, contemplative practice, sharing/storytelling, and flexibility. Using WGSS 320: “Feminist/Womanist Theories of Social Transformation: Spiritual Activism and Engaged Buddhism,” a course I designed and taught for the explicit purpose of developing new pedagogical tools and theories of empowerment in the classroom, I illustrate how a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* is put into practice. Throughout this chapter, I invite the voices of my students from WGSS 320 to help me demonstrate how to create and nurture a classroomSangha, the role of contemplative practice in feminist classrooms, as well as the importance of sharing/storytelling and flexibility. In telling the story of our class, I discuss the significance of a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* to the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies.
Chapter 2: Transforming the Self, Transforming the Collective: Thinking Through Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s Theory and Practice of Spiritual Activism

When you are going through a lot of emotional pain and don’t have anyone to support or help you, you’re thrown back onto your own resources....I had some horrendous experiences where I was totally isolated and totally alone.....I had to find sustenance somewhere. I needed a connection with something outside myself that could sustain me but I was really fighting it. I didn’t want to accept la diosa, that spiritual help. . . .So when a woman or a group of women or men or a whole race has been oppressed historically, over and over, they have to create some means of support and sustenance in order to survive (Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas* 72-73).

I use the epigraph above to illustrate Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s turn to spirituality, as a way to make sense of trauma, a way to make meaning out of the painful experiences she endured throughout her life from early menstruation and the death of her father at age 15, to experiences of racism, sexism, and homophobia, and a diagnosis of Type 1 diabetes. She turned to spirituality as a source of strength, support, survival, and healing. These particular experiences of pain, illness, and death, rooted in the body, inform Anzaldúa’s theoretical framework and shape her spiritual epistemology. While Anzaldúa’s worldview is sometimes critiqued or misunderstood as otherworldly or even essentialist, I argue that her spiritualized worldview is both visionary and pragmatic, and grounded in her beliefs in social justice (Keating, “Introduction: shifting worlds” 4).

I begin this chapter with an exploration of Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s background not to offer a full biography of her life, but rather to note particular experiences in her life that help us understand the development of her theory and practice of spiritual activism. I
explore Anzaldúa’s theory and practice of spiritual activism and weave in the voices of feminist and womanist scholars who have taken up and built upon her theories. I end this chapter with a brief discussion of the ways in which Anzaldúa’s theory and practice of spiritual activism, in dialogue with Thich Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism, provides the framework for what I am calling a “spiritualized feminist pedagogy.”

critical biography

For Anzaldúa, spirituality is embodied, it “evolves out of the experiences of the body” (Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas* 98). Throughout Anzaldúa’s life and writings, her relationship to her body, and thus her relationship to her spirituality shifted and changed. Drawing on personal experiences of loss, pain, and trauma from her own life, Anzaldúa makes clear the inseparability of the personal and the political, the spiritual and the material, and the inner and the outer, and in so doing demonstrates how to apply her theories of social transformation to our own lives.

One of Anzaldúa’s earliest experiences of pain and trauma, occurred at only three months old when Anzaldúa began menstruating, the result of a rare hormonal condition that also caused her to develop breasts at the age of six (Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas* 79). While her pediatrician said she was “a throwback to the Eskimo,” her mother believed that early menstruation was a sign of sin, her own punishment for engaging in premarital sex, a secret she shared with Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa, “La Prieta” 39). In an interview with Linda Smuckler, Anzaldúa describes feeling “abnormal” and ashamed of her body because of the bleeding. Because her menstrual period caused her incredible physical pain, dangerously high fevers, vomiting, and cramping every month, she learned
to disconnect from her body, dissociate from the pain, and view her body as other (Keating, “Risking the Personal” 9). She says, “I always felt so alien and so strange, because I was bleeding….I survived by cutting my body off, by blocking certain feelings” (Interviews/Entrevistas 91).

Even as she learned to detach from her body because of the bleeding and the pain, she felt very much (inter)connected to other bodies and matter. As a child, Anzaldúa describes feeling “wide open—like a sponge,” absorbing the pain of others, aware of physical and psychic energies (Interviews/Entrevistas 26). “If another person was hurting,” she said “I would hurt. If my mother killed a chicken or a hog or a steer, I would feel that pain” (Anzaldúa, “Creativity and Switching Modes” 104). And as a way of coping with the pain, with feeling wide open, and ‘different,’ Anzaldúa became a storyteller as a means to escape into the realm of the creative and the imaginary.

Anzaldúa listened to the stories her grandmothers shared, told stories to her younger sister, secretly wrote stories at school to keep from being bored, and read late into the night after working on the farm all day (Anzaldúa, Interviews/Entrevistas 22-23). At seven or eight, she received her first twenty-five-cent pocket western from her father, the only member of the family who supported and encouraged her education and love of reading. Shamed for her dark skin, for being a tomboy, for prioritizing education, Anzaldúa “retreated into books and solitude and kept away from others” (“La Prieta” 40). “The act of reading,” she says “forever changed me” (“La Prieta” 40). These stories, the stories she told her sister and those she wrote in her journal, starring horses, coyotes, and a little girl named Prietita (a girl-character fashioned after herself) made their way into
the fiction and poetry she later published (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 27). The practice of writing, of telling stories, became a way for Anzaldúa to make meaning out of her personal experiences, to give voice to her feelings; a medium through which to explore new ideas and fantasies, test new theories, stretch the limits of her reality, and experiment with new identities.

For Anzaldúa, writing was a “political activity,” a kind of activism, “one of making bridges” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 252, 206), a “bodily activity,” both “liberating and emancipatory” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 252, 264) and a “spiritual activity,” an act of healing psychological wounds, “traveling to other realities,” engaging the imagination (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 252, 251). In this way, writing and the practice of storytelling are tools for healing our/the wounds (inner) and effecting material-spiritual change (outer), methods Anzaldúa adopted and engaged in as central to her theory and practice of spiritual activism.

Anzaldúa inherited ideas about race and femininity from both her family and school. In “La Prieta” and throughout *Interviews/Entrevistas*, Anzaldúa shares moments from her childhood, like her grandmother’s disappointment that she was “dark like an Indian,” her mother’s incessant nagging to stay out of the sun and wear a sun bonnet while working in the fields so as to not get any darker, and neglect from school teachers who “ripped” her (Spanish) tongue from her mouth, demanding she speak English, and who later ignored her, to illustrate the racist ideas she learned and internalized while growing up, ideas she spent her adult life unlearning, trying to make sense of. She learned to heal these wounds through writing, theorizing, and other forms of spiritual practice.
(“La Prieta” 38, 49). She says, “And it is only now that the hatred of myself, which I
spent the greater part of my adolescence cultivating, is turning to love” (“La Prieta” 43).
Like an outsider within her own family, Anzaldúa felt like she did not fit. “The whole
time growing up,” she says, “I felt that I was not of this earth. An alien from another
planet—I’d been dropped on my mother’s lap. But for what purpose?” (“La Prieta” 40).
Marked as ‘different’ from a young age because of the bleeding, because she was a
farmworker, because she was a tomboy, assertive, and “wayward,” because she was a
“dumb Mexican’ who was smart,” Anzaldúa always felt like she did not fit, like she was
“on the other side” (Interviews/Entrevistas 170). I argue that she translates these
moments of not belonging, of feeling like an “alien from another planet” into her theory
of El Mundo Zurdo or the left-handed world, a visionary space for community building, a
space where people from a variety of backgrounds and social locations, “the queer
groups, the people that don’t belong anywhere not in the dominant world nor completely
within our own respective cultures,” come together to engage in the work of social
transformation (“La Prieta” 50).

Another experience of trauma and loss that shaped Anzaldúa’s early life
experiences, and thus her understanding of spirituality, was the death of her father, who
died unexpectedly of a heart attack while driving when she was only fifteen years old.
This tragic loss, occurring just shortly after she entered adolescence, was one of the first
experiences in her young life that pushed her to think critically about death, god, and
religion. She writes of her father’s death, “it irrevocably shattered the myth that there
existed a male figure to look after me. How could my strong, good, beautiful, godlike
father be killed? How stupid and careless of God. What if chance and circumstance and accident ruled? I lost my father, god, and my innocence all in one bloody blow” (“La Prieta” 40). This moment in Anzaldúa’s life, this rupture, ripped her from the familiar, turned her world upside down, and forced her to reinterpret the story she imagined for herself (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 546-547). The sudden loss of her father was perhaps the first experience or sudden trauma in her life that created the kind of “rupture” or “el arrebato” she theorized and expanded on in her theory of conocimiento in her essay “now let us shift.”

“La Prieta” is one of Anzaldúa’s earliest published texts where she experiments with and explores her theory of spiritual activism. Again, she writes of her father’s death: “The bloodshed on the highway had robbed my adolescence from me like the blood on my diaper had robbed my childhood from me. And into my hands unknowingly I took the transformation of my own being” (“La Prieta” 40). In this quote and throughout “La Prieta,” Anzaldúa illustrates her belief that we must not only acknowledge and give voice to our pain and suffering, but that we are also responsible for engaging in the practice of self-work and self-reflection necessary for personal transformation. In later writings, like “now let us shift,” Anzaldúa uses her experience as the victim of two violent muggings to illustrate, again, this kind of “rupture,” moments where her/our “relationship to the world [was/is] irrevocably changed” (“now let us shift” 546), where she has been “cracked open” by the traumatic experience (Anzaldúa, Interviews/Entrevistas 159).

At thirty-eight, Anzaldúa underwent a hysterectomy, an experience she describes as “a type of conversion” (Anzaldúa, Interviews/Entrevistas 102), where her relationship
to her body and to spirituality shifted. For more than thirty years, she viewed her body as other, detached and numb to the pain, a pain she describes as like a “vulture picking my insides” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 93). To cope she “became nothing but reason, head, mind” (Anzaldúa “Spiritual, Sexuality, and the Body” 84). But, during the hysterectomy she had an out-of-body experience and underwent a “conversion” or “initiation” where she discovered that the shame and hatred she felt for her body were not her own, but ideas she had internalized from her mother and grandmother (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 93). She says of this conversion, “When I found myself, it was the beginning of my spirituality, because it was like getting in contact with who I really was, my true self. My body wasn’t dirty” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 93). In this way, it becomes clear that Anzaldúa’s spirituality is embodied, that is, rooted in and expressed through the body (Keating “Risking the Personal” 9).

In 1992, Anzaldúa was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, a diagnosis that left her feeling devastated, hopeless, and betrayed by her own body. She says, “When first diagnosed with diabetes, your response was denial. This couldn’t be happening, hadn’t your body paid its dues? Why now, when you had the time and means to do good work? ….you refused the reality—always your first line of defense to emotional pain. But the reality intruded: your body had betrayed you” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 552). Anzaldúa makes use of this state of despair or depression and names it the Coatlicue state, “the hellish third phase” on the path of conocimiento (Anzaldúa “now let us shift” 551). Through meditation and looking deeply, Anzaldúa worked through her fear, anxiety, and anger, and as her perception shifted she began to accept “the self uncovered
by the trauma” (in this case, the diabetes diagnosis) and engage in the difficult and painful work of personal growth (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 552-553), which is a necessary component in her theory and practice of spiritual activism.

Drawing on her personal experiences of trauma, loss, shame, and oppression, Anzaldúa developed such theories as nos/otras, new tribalism, El Mundo Zurdo, conocimiento, and spiritual activism. In the following section, I explore Anzaldúa’s theory and practice of spiritual activism, a theory and practice that grows out from her relational worldview, that sees the practice of turning inward and caring for the self, of engaging in self-reflection and self-change, as the groundwork for social justice activism (Keating and Gonzalez-Lopez, “Building Bridges” 1).

spiritual activism: i change myself, i change the world

I resisted writing this chapter. Controlled by fear, I put it off, procrastinated, and avoided the writing at all costs because I was afraid of not doing Anzaldúa’s work justice. I was afraid that I was not going to be able to provide the kind of comprehensive discussion I needed to or that Anzaldúa’s work deserves. I took these concerns to AnaLouise Keating. I expressed my fear in short changing myself, but even more than that, short changing Anzaldúa’s ideas and theoretical contributions. I asked AnaLouise, “how could I ever provide an exhaustive analysis of Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism in this one chapter?” She said matter-of-factly, “well you can’t do that. That is a dissertation topic all on its own. Don’t use a cliché, but let your reader know up front that you are barely scratching the surface in this chapter, that Anzaldúa has given us so much
to work with and work through that it would be impossible to offer an exhaustive analysis in the space of a single chapter. “

The term “spiritual activism,” as AnaLouise Keating notes in “Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, and the Politics of Spirit,” can, on the surface, seem like a paradox (243). The spiritual is most often associated with turning inward and self-reflecting, perhaps in an effort to achieve some kind of balance or personal enlightenment, while activism is often understood as looking outward, engaging with the world, and a concern for others (244). However, for Anzaldúa, and other feminist and womanist spiritual activists like AnaLouise Keating, Leela Fernandes, Irene Lara, and Layli Maparyan, the theory and practice of spiritual activism brings these worldviews together. Spiritual activism is both inner and outer, mutually informing and enhancing each other. In other words, spiritual activism means turning inward, engaging in contemplative practices, and caring for the self, in order to effectively and sustainably engage in social activism, expanding outward, enacting social change. Anzaldúa’s says, “You make the inner changes first, and then you make the outer changes. Sometimes you can do both at the same time: work to create your outer change, through political movement, at the time that you’re trying to do meditation and developing yourself” (Interviews/Entrevistas 101). To be sure, whether happening simultaneously or in succession, spiritual activism insists on both inner work and outward engagement. Like spiritual activism, the philosophy and practice of engaged Buddhism (to be discussed in detail in chapter three) calls on the practitioner-activist to engage in the practices of meditation and mindfulness in order to respond to the cries of the world. According to
Thich Nhat Hanh, engaged Buddhists “seek to change themselves in order to change society” (*Interbeing* 9).

This relationship between the inner work and outer work of spiritual activism begins with and is grounded in an understanding of our radical interconnectedness. For Anzaldúa, awareness of our interrelatedness, that is, the ways in which we affect one another (living and nonliving things, including the earth) is central to her understanding of spirituality. As Anzaldúa insists, spirit is in everything – “in whites as well as blacks, rapists as well as victims, it’s in the tree, the swamp, the sea…Everything is my relative. I’m related to everything” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 100). Like Anzaldúa, Nhat Hanh’s theory of interbeing (chapter three), maintains a similar philosophy. He asserts, “we have talked about the many in the one, and the one containing the many. In one sheet of paper, we see everything else, the cloud, the forest, the logger. I am, therefore you are. You are, therefore I am….We interare” (*Being Peace* 87). For both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, this belief that we exist only in relation to everything else fosters an understanding of our collective responsibility, reminding us that our thoughts and our actions affect others, people we know and people we may never meet, as well as nonhuman animals, nonliving elements, and the earth.

Awareness of our interconnectedness also provides us with the perspective we need to begin looking beyond difference to identify our commonalities or “complex points of connection” (Keating, “Forging El Mundo Zurdo” 519). For Anzaldúa, our interconnectedness is itself a commonality we all share, a point of connection. “This interconnectedness,” she asserts, “is an unvoiced category of identity, a common factor in
all life forms” (Interviews/Entrevistas 164). This idea that our interconnectedness provides us with an unmarked category of identity, one that is expansive and radically inclusionary, is, in my opinion, the most profound and transformative aspect of Anzaldúa’s theory and practice of spiritual activism. In Interviews/Entrevistas she asserts, “I’m a citizen of the universe. I think it’s good to claim your ethnic identity and your racial identity. But it’s also the source of all the wars and all the violence, all these borders and walls people erect. I’m tired of borders and I’m tired of walls” (118). At the same time that Anzaldúa insists that clinging to socially constructed identity categories, such as race, class, gender, sex, and sexuality, is limiting and ultimately prevents us from reaching out and establishing relationships with others interested in engaging in the work of social justice, she does not completely ignore the role identity categories play in assisting people, especially marginalized and oppressed groups, with building community around single-issue movements (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 246). Thus, she adopts a “both-and perspective,” where she “simultaneously sees and sees through exclusionary identity classifications” (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives 246). This both-and perspective frames Anzaldúa’s holistic or relational worldview and offers a much broader, more expansive, and inclusionary perspective on identity, that is, “a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label” (“now let us shift” 558).

When we understand ourselves as intimately connected to everything else, when we begin to identify ourselves as ‘citizens of the universe’ and “not in terms of ‘my’ country’ or ‘your’ nation but ‘our’ planet,” “we are compelled to reach out” (“Let us be the healing of the wound” 312). In other words, in recognizing that we are not separate
or distinct from one another, but each significant and necessary parts of the larger whole, we are compelled to act (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 246). We realize that we have a responsibility to ourselves and to each other to engage in action, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, that contributes to the well-being of everyone and everything. To this end, Anzaldúa says, “you’re in this together, no one’s an isolated unit. You dedicate yourself, not to surface level solutions that benefit only one group, but to a more informed service to humanity” (“now let us shift” 573). Similarly, Nhat Hanh asserts, “We need the vision of interbeing—we belong to each; we cannot cut reality into pieces. The well-being of ‘this’ is the well-being of ‘that,’ so we have to do things together. Every side is ‘our side’; there is no evil side” (Peace is Every Step 103). Both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh ground their theory and practice of spiritual activism and engage Buddhism, respectively, in a metaphysics of interconnectedness, an understanding that we are intimately and irrevocably connected to everyone and everything. Such an understanding disrupts the binary between self and other, us and them, and good and evil, pushing us to “look beyond the illusion of separate interests to a shared interest,” to engage in the work of social activism (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 573).

This understanding also encourages us to challenge or disrupt the binary between inner work and outer work or personal transformation and collective transformation. As discussed previously, spiritual activism calls on us, scholar-activists, to engage in both the work of self-reflection and self-change (“inner work”) and social activism (“public acts”) (“now let us shift” 540). To reiterate, the work of self-reflection and self-growth—personal transformation—is not separate from the work of social change—collective
transformation. Rather, they exist in relation to/with one another, in, according to Anzaldúa, “a two-way movement—a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society” (“La Prieta” 49).

The inner work of spiritual activism requires that we turn inward, toward our suffering, in order to develop new insights, and create new forms of knowledge and awareness (conocimientos). In this way, our suffering acts as a conduit or entrance to the sacred, to accessing new ways of knowing and being (“now let us shift” 572). Turning inward also allows us the opportunity to slow down, care for the self, reflect, process, and make meaning out of our experiences through the use of contemplative practices like writing, meditating, and breathing deeply (Borderlands/La Frontera 68). Rather than avoiding, denying, or acting out of anger or pain, the practice of looking deeply at the self through contemplative practices helps us to cultivate new insights and awareness that move us through, “to the other side, where [we] can use [our] energy to heal” our individual wounds (“now let us shift 553). It is through this process of looking deeply and caring for the self that we develop new methods for engaging in reflective and compassionate dialogue, bridging across differences, and connecting through our collective wounds, that is, the awareness, insights, and tools for engaging in the outer work of spiritual activism (Anzaldúa, “let us be the healing of the wound” 313).

In the following section, I turn to theorists whose work is most instrumental to my project and who, like me, have been deeply influenced by Anzaldúa’s scholarship: AnaLouise Keating, Leela Fernandes, and Irene Lara. In so doing, I demonstrate the
accessibility, applicability, and versatility of Anzaldúa’s theory and practice of spiritual activism.

**Anzaldúa’s influence: Keating, Fernandes, and Lara**

In both her written work and interviews, Anzaldúa draws on experiences from her own life as a way of reaching out and creating “potential identifications with readers from diverse backgrounds” (Keating, “Risking the Personal” 2). Anzaldúa’s style of writing, her willingness to share such intimate details of her life, often compels us, her readers, to “risk the personal,” to tell stories from our own lives, to share our pain, to write, and self-reflect as a way to heal our wounds, build community, and create social change (Keating and Gonzalez-Lopez, “Building Bridges” 2). Inspired by Anzaldúa’s “willingness to take risks” and drawing on her theory of spiritual activism, Keating developed a practice of spiritual activism she refers to as “listening with raw openness,” an unavoidably painful kind of listening that exposes and alters each person in the exchange (Keating “Shifting Perspectives” 249). Like Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism, listening with rawness begins with an understanding of our radical interconnectedness and a desire to connect through our commonalities and shared affinities. When engaged in the practice of listening with raw openness, we must acknowledge our shared desire to be heard, to be fully recognized and understood (“Shifting Perspectives” 250).

Additionally, we must remember that we all carry with us complicated histories, experiences that we can never fully describe to someone else nor fully understand about the other. Keating insists that by identifying our commonalities and embracing our “complex personhood,” we are better able to see and hear one another clearly, out from
behind the superficial categories, the stereotypes, and divisive labels, better able to listen “with an open, mindful heart” (“Shifting Perspectives” 250). Engaged Buddhists in the Thich Nhat Hanh Tradition (to be explored further in chapter three) advocate for a similar kind of listening practice called “deep listening,” a form of listening that helps us to understand the other and has the potential to relieve the suffering of the person who is sharing.

A spiritual activist who engages in the practice of listening with raw openness must also accept contradictions, ambivalence, uncertainty, and the inevitable risk of making mistakes (Keating “Shifting Perspectives” 250). This form of activism calls on the listener to engage each of her senses in the dialogue, observing the speaker’s body language, listening for gaps and silences, and allowing the speaker’s “feelings and words to penetrate” (“Shifting Perspectives” 251). This kind of listening is only possible, however, when it is approached through a brief detachment from the self and a nonjudgmental point of view (“Shifting Perspectives” 251). Listening in this way calls on us to “empty” ourselves, empty ourselves of preconceived notions, stereotypes, expectations, and selfishness, so that we can make room for the experiences and feelings of others.

Lastly, those who listen with raw openness must be comfortable with conflict and understand that disagreement or debate can be transformative, can, according to Anzaldúa, “bring an understanding (conocimiento) that will turn things around” (“(Un)natural bridges” 4). Like Keating and Anzaldúa, I, too, try to listen with raw openness throughout each area of my life—acknowledging our complexities and our
interrelatedness, embracing uncertainty and conflict, allowing myself to be changed by every encounter. In chapter four, I describe my experiences and my students’ experiences of engaging in the practice of listening with raw openness in the WGSS 320 classroom.

Like Keating, Leela Fernandes calls attention to and questions the relative absence of the spiritual from feminist theorizing and social activism. In *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice, and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*, Fernandes pushes her readers to imagine the ways in which questions of social justice, that is questions concerned with identity, knowledge, and practice, questions central to feminist discussions, would change if we moved beyond or cracked open the rigid binary that keeps the material/political/social separate from the spiritual (10). Moreover, Fernandes insists that social transformation, if it is to be effective, broad, and sustainable, must engage with the spiritual (10). Specifically, Fernandes calls for a feminist practice that connects social activism with both ethical practice and spiritual practice, that is, practice that does not cause others to suffer *and* recognizes love, humility, compassion, kindness, and care as practices, not merely qualities, necessary for creating lasting transformative social change (51, 59). In chapter four, I share my student’s reflections on the power of love and care as practices of pedagogy in the classroom.

For Fernandes, Anzaldúa, and Thich Nhat Hanh, feminist practice or social justice activism must recognize the relationship between our personal, everyday behaviors and our behaviors in public or political/social organizations (55). Like Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, Fernandes insists that feminist practice or social justice activism must begin with
the self, turning inward self-reflecting, and requires that we engage in the “dailiness of practice,” or engage in both ethical and spiritual practice in our everyday, personal lives. Only then can we turn outward, challenge social inequalities and injustice, and engage in public forms of social activism. In other words, if we are to maintain the feminist mantra that the personal is political, then we must transform and expand our understanding of feminist practice that actually includes personal, everyday ethical and spiritual practice (56). Failing to recognize the relationship between the spiritual and the material, the inner and the outer, our personal lives and our public lives, puts us at risk of, according to Fernandes, reproducing the same inequalities and hierarchies, the very issues we are committed to challenging and eradicating, in both our public and our private lives (55).

Fernandes asks her readers to think critically about what counts as feminist practice. This question of practice, perhaps more than any other, is central to my dialogic interpretation of Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh. Furthermore, the interrogation of which practices are understood as feminist (or womanist) informs significantly the organization and structure of WGSS 320, a point to which I return and elaborate in chapter four.

Building on the theories of Keating and Fernandes, Irene Lara, in her essay “Healing Sueños for Academia,” explores the tension between the expectations of the academy—competition, a highly-praised reliance on reasoning and logic, a deterrence of the body—and a politics of the spirit, one that acknowledges the interlocking relationship between mind, body, and spirit, one that understands prayer as potentially transformative, that sees the relationship between the political and the spiritual as so intertwined as to be inseparable. Using autohistoria-teoría, “a relational form of
autobiographical writing,” a style of writing developed by Anzaldúa, Lara draws from her own experiences in the academy to illustrate and challenge the dangers of a Western system that encourages us to deny parts of our lives, “keep us from ourselves, each other, and our visible and invisible world,” and divide us up into mind, body, and spirit (Keating, “Appendix 1. Glossary” 319; Lara, “Healing Sueños” 436).

Like Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, Lara insists that “western binary oppositions wound us in many ways” (Lara, “Healing Sueños” 434). And, in an attempt to break free from binary perspectives that keep us separated from others –us versus them – and from parts of ourselves –mind, body, spirit– Lara engages in the practice of writing. For Lara, writing is a spiritual tool that belongs to “neither the oppressed nor the oppressor,” but provides a way of moving beyond dualistic thinking. Writing, in this way, moves us beyond the binary, toward “the creation of a third transformative space,” a ‘border space’ as developed by Anzaldúa, or what Thich Nhat Hanh calls the “Middle Way” (Lara, “Healing Sueños” 434; Nhat Hanh, Beyond the Self 7). Lara, like Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, uses writing to make sense of and heal the wounds of oppression and fragmentation. Using both autohistoría-teoría and prayer, Lara not only reimagines and rewrites the existing oppressive cultural stories and ideologies found in dominant culture and the academy, but uses prayer to heal her “fragmented self and move toward wholeness and balance,” to learn to “think and feel at once” (Keating, “Appendix 1. Glossary” 319; Lara, “Healing Sueños” 435).

It was in the spirit of Lara’s exploration of writing as a way of creating a “third transformative space,” that I invited my students in WGSS 320 to engage in the practice
of writing as a way to heal their individual wounds and consequently begin to address our collective suffering. Like Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, Lara’s refusal to separate “bodymindspirit” in the very practice of writing privileges a holistic well-being that is simultaneously personal and political. In chapter four, I outline and discuss the various writing exercises and contemplative practices in which my students engaged in to begin forming a healing “third transformative space.”

Keating, Fernandes, and Lara (among others), like Anzaldúa, risk critique from scholars for engaging with and producing material frequently (mis)understood as depoliticized, otherworldly, and anti-intellectual. By exposing their spiritual identities and practices, and engaging in a radically transformative politics of the spirit, the aforementioned theorists also risk being ostracized by their colleagues with different academic and political investments. However, as I demonstrate in the following section, such “academic spirit phobia” necessarily reinforces false binaries between spirit and politics, as well as inner work and outer practice.

As I discussed in the Introduction, scholars frequently critique Anzaldúa’s use of a spiritual epistemology as essentialist and anti-intellectual, while others just all together avoid her politics of the spirit (Keating, “I’m a citizen” 55). Theories such as nepantla, nos/otras, New Tribalism, and conocimiento, for example, have not received the kind of attention they deserve, due in large part to the fact that these theories come out of and are grounded in a spiritual epistemology. However, the refusal of many scholars to acknowledge Anzaldúa’s spirit-inflected work is not surprising. As Keating notes in “I’m
a citizen of the universe,” “references to spirit, souls, the sacred, and other such spiritually inflected topics are often condemned as essentialist, escapist, naive, or in other ways apolitical and backward thinking” within the walls of the academy (55). But for Anzaldúa, the worlds of the spiritual and the political, the inner and the outer are inseparable. Rather, she “infuses her spiritual worldview into her politics” (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 243). These binary systems established to organize neat hierarchical relationships between the dominant culture, the rational, and the marginalized ‘other,’ the emotional or spiritual, are understood by Anzaldúa as necessary parts of a larger whole (Keating, “I’m a citizen” 54). But because scholars often conflate spirituality with organized religion or New Age movements, Anzaldúa’s insistence on the spiritual is often “dismissed as an apolitical, ahistorical form of escapism that inadvertently reinforces the status quo” (Keating, “Risking the Personal” 8). For example, in his essay “In the Borderlands of Chicano Identity, There are Only Fragments,” Benjamin Alire Sáenz critiques Anzaldúa’s politics of the spirit in *Borderlands/La Frontera* as an appropriation of indigenous spiritualities and a simplistic attempt to rediscover “authentic pre-colonial beliefs” (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 253; Sáenz 87). He argues, “to return to the ‘traditional’ spiritualities that were in place before the arrival of Cortés makes very little sense” and insists further that Anzaldúa’s use of the spiritual as “a tool against oppression and capitalism is to choose the wrong weapon” (Sáenz 86-87). I argue, however, that Sáenz misreads or misunderstands Anzaldúa. I assert that in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa is not writing to “retrieve already-existing beliefs,” but rather, is engaging in the practice of revisionist myth-making
whereby she recreates and retells Nahuatl, Aztec, and other indigenous stories and worldviews in an attempt to challenge unjust social structures in our contemporary times (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 242, 253; Keating, “I’m a citizen” 54).

For Anzaldúa, however, spirituality and religion are distinctly different from one another. She understands religion to be exclusionary and divisive, often imposing rigid and institutionalized ideologies on its followers, whereas spirituality, she insists is highly political and “evolves out of the experiences of the body; it’s not something finished and perfect” (Interviews/Entrevistas 98). To ignore the spiritual aspects of Anzaldúa’s work only reinforces the binary or false split between spirituality and social activism or the spiritual and the political, the very split Anzaldúa worked to bridge throughout her career (Lara, “Daughter of Coatlicue” 47). By ignoring the role of Anzaldúa’s spirituality and the relational worldview that frames her work, scholars are at risk of engaging in “sloppy scholarship,” drawing incomplete conclusions, making “unfair judgments,” and working from a rather limited or narrow perspective (Keating, “Archival Alchemy and Allure” 168).

shifting perspectives, shifting theories

Though best-known for her ground-breaking text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa’s intellectual contributions to the fields of gender and ethnic studies reach far beyond the pages of this one classic text. Throughout her thirty-year-long career, Anzaldúa engaged in intellectually rigorous work developing and redeveloping revolutionary theories such as border theory, mestiza consciousness, nos/otras, New Tribalism, nepantla, El Mundo Zurdo, conocimiento, and spiritual
activism. However, scholars often focus so exclusively on *Borderlands* that they overlook (often intentionally) her post-*Borderlands* work and thus fail to recognize the “crucial ways her theories have developed since the 1987 publication” (Keating, “Introduction: shifting worlds” 4). Anzaldúa’s theories or approaches to social justice not only grew increasingly more complex with every revision, as she rewrote, reimagined, and expanded on each of her ideas, but the boundaries between them shifted and relaxed, “at times blurring into each other” (Keating, “Introduction: shifting worlds” 5).

For example, in post-*Borderlands* essays like, “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together” and “Let us be the healing of the wound: the Coyolxauhqui imperative—la sombra y el sueño,” Anzaldúa returns to her theory of the border, first introduced in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and expands on or rewrites it into a theory of nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning ‘in-between’ (Keating, “Reading Gloria Anzaldúa,” 10; Anzaldúa, “(Un)natural bridges” 1). For Anzaldúa, nepantla is a space of possibility, a site for radical transformation and change. In nepantla, one is open and sensitive, using la facultad to tap into alternative forms of knowledge and healing. In a 1991 interview with AnaLouise Keating, Anzaldúa discusses her decision to expand borderlands into a theory of nepantla. She says,

Nepantla is a kind of an elaboration of Borderlands...I find people using metaphors such as “Borderlands” in a more limited sense than I had meant it, so to expand on the psychic and emotional borderlands I’m now using “nepantla.” With nepantla the connection to the spirit world is more pronounced as is the connection to the world after death, to psychic spaces. It has a more spiritual, psychic, supernatural, and indigenous resonance. (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 176)
As the quote above indicates, Anzaldúa recognized the limited ways in which her early theoretical contributions were taken up. Thus nepantla, as an extension and expansion on her ideas of “borderlands,” works to incorporate the spiritual and the psychic into the geographical and regional. However, borderlands was not the only theoretical concept to undergo revision.

We witness another shift in Anzaldúa’s theorizing when she renames the ‘new mestiza,’ someone who inhabits the space of the Borderlands, who “learns to juggle cultures,” and develops a “tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 101), a ‘nepantlera’ in post-*Borderlands* essays like “(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces” and “Speaking across the Divide.” The nepantlera is “a supreme border crosser,” an intermediary, a spiritual activist, one who exists in the liminal space of nepantla, who “inspire[s] and challenge[s] others to a deeper awareness, greater conocimiento” (Keating, “Reading Gloria Anzaldúa” 10; Anzaldúa, “Speaking across the Divide” 293). Like the new mestiza, the nepantlera “move[s] between the worlds…. work[s] from multiple locations” (Anzaldúa, “Speaking across the Divide” 293). The concept of the nepantlera is more inclusive than that of the new mestiza, its borders are more flexible, more permeable. While Anzaldúa developed the new mestiza as a concept or identity that stretches beyond racial or ethnic identity to include all people who find themselves “living on borders and in margins,” juggling identities, and doing the work of radical social justice, many scholars continue to interpret and employ the concept of the new mestiza as an identity or a way of knowing accessible only to Chicanas (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 101). By shifting from the new mestiza to
the nepantlera, Anzaldúa does not reject ties to culture or ethnic identity, but moves us toward a more holistic or relational approach to self-identification and community building. And through this shift, that is, an opening up and expanding on her theory of the new mestiza, Anzaldúa enacts the work of bridging, the work of a “supreme boarder crosser,” in an effort to invite people to cross over from one side to the other, and back again.

As Anzaldúa’s spirituality, that is, both her understanding of spirituality and her spiritual practice, deepened, shifted, and became more complex and sophisticated, her theories also shifted and became more complex. Anzaldúa’s willingness to revisit, reimagine, revise, and rewrite her theories for social transformation speaks to “her intellectual humility and depth of commitment to social justice” (Delgadillo 9). In chapter four, I highlight the significance of Anzaldúa’s willingness to revise, reimagine, and rewrite her theories and insist that this approach, this willingness to embrace fluidity and flexibility, these shifts in thinking, identity, and belief, is an integral component of a spiritualized feminist pedagogy.

**conclusion**

The trajectories of Anzaldúa’s life experiences gave shape to (and were shaped by) her theory and practice of spiritual activism. By making connections between her theorizing and Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism, I noted how their relationality makes it difficult to ignore the role of spirituality in her writing and politics. Importantly, I addressed the criticisms of Anzaldúa’s spirit-inflected work, specifically “academic spirit phobia” and the idea that spirituality is only self-serving and/or inward-looking. And, I
included the voices of other feminist and womanist theorists to demonstrate the accessibility and applicability of Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism. In the next chapter, I turn to Nhat Hanh’s life, theories, and activism in order to shift the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies towards more holistic understandings of subjectivity, spirituality, and social activism.
Chapter 3: Planting Seeds: An Examination of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Philosophy and Practice of Engaged Buddhism

The peace we seek cannot be our personal possession. We need to find an inner peace which makes it possible for us to become one with those who suffer, and to do something to help our brothers and sisters, which is to say, ourselves....This peace is not a barricade which separates you from the world. On the contrary, this kind of peace brings you into the world and empowers you to undertake whatever you want to do to try to help—struggling for social justice, lessening the disparity between the rich and the poor, stopping the arms race, fighting discrimination, and sowing more seeds of understanding, reconciliation, and compassion. (Thich Nhat Hanh, The Sun My Heart 127-128)

I use the epigraph above to illustrate the relationship between inner peace and outer peace, between inner work—the work of self-reflection, meditation, and healing and outer work—the work of social justice activism inherent in engaged Buddhist philosophy and practice. According to Nhat Hanh, the practice of cultivating inner peace in our own lives makes it possible for us to make peace with/for those who suffer and those who cause the suffering. This kind of inner work, or turning inward to care for the self, is not world-rejecting, selfish, or navel-gazing, but the kind of work that helps us get in touch with the world and encourages outward action.

I begin this chapter with an exploration of the life and work of Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, paying special attention to his early accomplishments and active involvement in the struggle for peace during the Vietnam War. I do this not to offer a full biography of his life, but rather to situate his life and the philosophy and practice of engaged Buddhism within a particular socio-political moment. Furthermore,
such a discussion helps us to understand the relationship between Nhat Hanh’s early spiritual and political engagements with the development of his activist work and identity as a spiritual leader.

In this chapter, I share and reflect on my own experience at the “Together We Are One” 5-day mindfulness retreat at Deer Park Monastery where I worked and practiced alongside Thich Nhat Hanh, Sister Chan Khong, members of the monastic community within the Fourfold Sangha, and lay practitioners from around the world. Additionally, I weave in the voices of feminist scholars Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Irene Lara, and womanist scholar AnaLouise Keating in order to demonstrate the similarities between feminist and womanist theories of social activism and engaged Buddhism in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition. I end this chapter with a discussion of the ways in which Thich Nhat Hanh’s theory and practice of engaged Buddhism provides, along with Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism discussed previously, the framework for a “spiritualized feminist pedagogy.”

Born in 1926 in central Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh is recognized as one of the most influential humanitarian leaders of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His work has profoundly impacted the monastic and secular worlds in both the East and West over the last five decades. Little has been written about Thich Nhat Hanh’s childhood and much of what we know about his activist life during young adulthood comes from Sister Chan Khong’s memoir, *Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a Time of War*. However, in the text *Cultivating the Mind of Love*, Nhat Hanh reflects on some of his
earliest childhood memories and shares that his interest in religion, and specifically Buddhism, began around the age of nine when he saw an image in a magazine of the Buddha sitting peacefully in a field (Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* 12). At the age of sixteen, Thich Nhat Hanh joined the Tu Hieu Monastery, and received full ordination in 1949 at age twenty-three after attending the Bao Quoc Buddhist Institute in Hue (Hunt-Perry & Fine 38; Willis xi). The Tu Hieu Monastery belonged to the Lam Te sect of Vietnamese Buddhism. This sect of Buddhism is in the same tradition as Zen Buddhism, with one notable difference: the use of gathas,\(^4\) short meditation verses designed to focus the mind (R. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh* 72). While Nhat Hanh has become known for creating and encouraging the use of gathas for anything from washing dishes to using the Internet, he found the pedagogical methods used to teach traditional or classical Buddhist texts and practices, including Buddhist gathas from *The Little Manual of Practice*, “old-fashioned” (Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys* 24). Eventually, he accepted the fact that if he wanted to learn Zen he had to resign himself to learning through traditional teaching methods like rote memorization. In *Zen Keys*, Nhat Hanh admits “When I was sixteen, I thought *The Little Manual* was for young people and those just beginning the practice of Zen. I thought this method was just for preparation. But today, more than fifty years later, I know that *The Little Manual* is the very essence of Zen Buddhism” (25).

Even as he accepted traditional teaching methods like rote memorization of gathas and sutras,\(^5\) Nhat Hanh was critical of the curriculum provided by the elder monks.
Having already received some Western education, Nhat Hanh believed that Buddhist education and training should include not only classical Buddhist texts and lessons, but also cultural forms like literature and philosophy, in addition to science and foreign languages. He reached out to his elders with these requests, but they refused his suggestions as too radical. Consequently, he and several of his peers left the Institute and took up practice outside of Saigon in a temple Nhat Hanh co-founded, known as An Quang Buddhist Institute. Here they pursued their studies in Western philosophy, science, and foreign language, such as English and French. It was at this time that Nhat Hanh and his peers began reading Buddhist texts from the 1930s that explored the practice of ‘applied Buddhism,’ the philosophy Nhat Hanh later coined ‘engaged Buddhism’ (Hunt-Perry & Fine 38). These young students became a part of the reform movement within Vietnamese Buddhism whose practice centered on bringing Buddhism into everyday life as a way of attracting young people, those living outside the monastery, and families. Nhat Hanh believed that it was not enough to study classical Buddhist texts within the walls of the monastery, but wanted to develop practical ways to bring Buddhism to the people, to everyday life, and insisted that if Buddhism was to remain relevant, it needed to be flexible, willing to shift, and adapt to the changing world and needs of society. In this way, Nhat Hanh’s understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, his insistence that Buddhist practitioners must develop ways to apply Buddhist philosophy to everyday life in order to create social change, is similar to the ongoing debate in feminist circles regarding the theory-praxis divide. Moreover, Nhat Hanh’s willingness to reimagine, reconsider, and rewrite his own practices and teachings throughout his career,
similar to Anzaldúa, demonstrates his humility, reflexivity, and openness to change. This kind of flexibility, as practiced by both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, is significant to my theory and practice of a spiritualized feminist pedagogy.

By 1956, Nhat Hanh became the editor-in-chief of *Vietnamese Buddhism*, a journal that served as an outlet for him to publicly express his radical and developing ideas of engaged Buddhism. This journal also served as a space for Buddhist monks and scholars to speak out against the Diem government (R. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh* 75). Not long after it was launched, the journal was forced to stop production, citing financial reasons as the cause. However, Nhat Hanh and others knew that this had more to do with resistance to his reform efforts and disapproval from the elder conservative monks (R. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh* 76).

In 1957, Nhat Hanh established an experimental monastic community called Phuong Boi (“Fragrant Palm Leaves”). This new community served as a space of healing for Nhat Hanh and his friends, a space to turn inward, care for the self and practice meditation, while continuing to read and write about the new and engaged form of Buddhism taking shape. During this time, Nhat Hanh also traveled to various temples around Saigon talking with young people about engaged Buddhism and social work. During a three-month lecture series at Xa Loi Temple in Saigon, he met Cao Ngoc Phuong, a woman who would later receive the Dharma name Sister Chan Khong or Sister True Emptiness (Chan Khong 24, 239). This meeting marked the beginning of Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong’s friendship.
In 1961, while teaching in Dalat, Nhat Hanh learned that his name had been erased from the An Quang temple records, an act that was “equivalent to expelling him from the temple ‘family’” (Chan Khong 29). This was especially heartbreaking to Nhat Hanh, as he had co-founded the temple and served as one of the first Buddhist teachers at the Institute (29). This erasure or expulsion was rooted in jealousy and resistance from the elders who did not support Nhat Hanh’s attempts to renew Buddhist teachings and practice (29).

Throughout the summer of 1961, Nhat Hanh and a group of young activists and social workers, including Sister Chan Khong, founded a night school for teenagers, poor people, and soldiers who wanted to earn a baccalaureate degree, but could not attend school during the day. These young Buddhist activists and social workers, who referred to themselves as the “thirteen cedars,” lived and worked together as a Sangha, helping others, and supporting the Buddha’s teachings (Chan Khong 29-30).

nonviolent resistance

By now, Nhat Hanh had gained visibility in Vietnam and the United States as a Buddhist scholar and peace activist. In September 1961, Thich Nhat Hanh accepted a fellowship at Princeton University to study Comparative Religion for two years, followed by an invitation to lecture on Buddhism at Columbia University (Chan Khong 30). Little is known about this time in Nhat Hanh’s life, beyond what is published in his book *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, a text composed of some of his academic journals from 1962-1966. While Nhat Hanh studied and taught Buddhism in the United States, Sister Chan
Khong and other members of the “thirteen cedars” continued their activist work in Vietnam, keeping him informed of the socio-political climate (Chan Khong 30).

Thich Nhat Hanh returned to Vietnam in 1963 because of the mounting devastation taking place as a result of the war (Willis ix). Upon his return, he co-founded Van Hanh—a Buddhist University—and established the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), where young people were trained as social workers to relieve the suffering of others caused by war, poverty, and oppression (Chan Khong 70; Hunt-Perry & Fine 38). The young SYSS workers established schools and health clinics, provided legal services and teacher training, and rebuilt villages and communities destroyed by the war (Chan Khong 70).

On February 5, 1966, only one year after founding the SYSS, Thich Nhat Hanh founded the Tiep Hien Order or the Order of Interbeing. He ordained three laymen and three laywomen, who took the bodhisattva vow and received the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. These young Buddhists became the first six members of the Order of Interbeing. They served as Board members to the SYSS, worked tirelessly on issues of social injustice, especially ending the Vietnam War. Having committed their lives to following the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of engaged Buddhism, they served as a bridge or link connecting the lay community with the monastic community (Chan Khong 77; Hunt-Perry & Fine 40). The Order was established during a time when strict gender hierarchies between monks and nuns were the norm; however, Nhat Hanh founded the Order on the principle of gender equality, in “intentional contradistinction to the religious culture of the time” (Maparyan, The Womanist Idea 148). Though Nhat Hanh does not
identify as a feminist, his commitment to dismantling gender hierarchies can be understood as similar to the social and political commitments to feminist and/or womanist theorizing and, by extension, the field of women's, gender, and sexuality studies. For fifteen years, no new members were allowed to join the Order, as the first ordinees committed themselves to practicing and living the trainings with one another. The aim of the Order of Interbeing was and still is “to actualize Buddhism by studying, experimenting with, and applying Buddhism in modern life with a special emphasis on the bodhisattva ideal” (Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing* 105). Today hundreds of thousands of people from around the world are members of the Order of Interbeing and practice the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition (Chan Khong 80).

In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize saying “I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam…He is a scholar of immense intellectual capacity. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity” (Hunt-Perry & Fine 43; Willis xii; Kraft, “Prospects of a Socially Engaged Buddhism” 11). The two men had met several years prior while Nhat Hanh was working at Columbia and their friendship is said to have influenced King’s decision to speak out against the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War in a speech titled “Beyond Vietnam” (Kraft, “Prospects of a Socially Engaged Buddhism” 11).
Throughout the late 60s and early 70s, Thich Nhat Hanh spoke out about the war in public talks and in poems, essays, and books he published, including *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, a text frequently misunderstood by the Saigon authorities as communist propaganda (Chan Khong 72). Then in 1973, the Vietnamese government forced Thich Nhat Hanh into exile. Nhat Hanh and the members of the Order took refuge in Paris, France where they continued to engage in social service work by writing letters, essays, and books, as well as collecting and sending medical supplies for orphans and poor families to sell in Vietnamese markets (Chan Khong 175).

By 1975, Thich Nhat Hanh and his associates settled into Sweet Potato Farm in France, a community-living space where they worked and practiced. Unable to return to Vietnam, Nhat Hanh, Sister Chan Khong, and the other members of the Order continued their work from afar by providing aid and relief to the “boat people,” those escaping Vietnam in the 1970s, as well as families and social service programs in Vietnam. During this time of resettling and establishing their roots in France, Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong began developing and cultivating their understanding of their “multirooted” reality, of finding ‘home,’ and a sense of belonging anywhere they planted their feet (Hunt-Perry & Fine 44).

After several years, the Order outgrew their space at Sweet Potato Farm and in 1982, established Plum Village in Southwestern France where Nhat Hanh, Sister Chan Khong, and other members of the Order, or Four Fold Sangha, continue to live, work, and practice today (Chan Khong 216). Each year thousands of lay practitioners from
around the world visit Plum Village for Days of Mindfulness, festivals, and mindfulness retreats (Chan Khong 216).

The emergence of engaged Buddhism

Thich Nhat Hanh is attributed with inventing the term “engaged Buddhism” in the early 1960s to refer to the kind of Buddhism that combines “social, political, economic, and ecological concerns with traditional Buddhist practice,” a kind of Buddhism that exists as both a philosophy for understanding our relationship with the world and a spiritual practice for engaging with the world (Rothberg, “Responding to the Cries” 267). The idea was to build on traditional Buddhist principles like wisdom and compassion, in order to create radical social change throughout the world. The practice of engaged Buddhism gained increasing popularity in Vietnam during the peace movement of the late 60s and early 70s, largely as a result of the social justice work facilitated by Nhat Hanh and his students during the Vietnam War. However, it is important to note that while Nhat Hanh is attributed with coining the term, “engaged Buddhism,” he asserts that the term ‘engaged Buddhism’ is redundant. Nhat Hanh explains, “Buddhism means to be awake—mindful of what is happening in one’s body, feelings, mind and in the world….If you are awake you cannot do otherwise than act compassionately to help relieve suffering you see around you. So Buddhism must be engaged in the world. If it is not engaged it is not Buddhism” (Nhat Hanh qtd in Jones, The New Social Face 179).

As I discussed previously, this movement to renew Buddhism was not embraced by all practicing Buddhists at the time. Many of the elder monks, especially those
overseeing formal education at monasteries like Tu Hieu where Nhat Hanh was a student, believed that attempts to innovate traditional Buddhist practices and teachings were too radical. Nhat Hanh insisted, however, that if Buddhism was to remain relevant and in touch with everyday people, the practices and teachings should be adapted to meet contemporary challenges and social problems. In *Peace Is Every Breath*, Nhat Hanh says, “The kind of Buddhist teaching and methods we learned at that time …. didn’t directly address the sorts of suffering and difficulties that people in modern society were experiencing. We needed concrete practices that could address the issue of poverty, social injustice, inequality, and national independence” (1).

Elder monks were not the only people suspicious of this new practice of Buddhism. During the war in Vietnam, engaged Buddhism increased in popularity among young monks, nuns, and laypeople working as social workers and activists, as a result of the increased need for food, housing, medical care, and education, due in large part to the death, destruction, and poverty caused by the war. This triggered suspicion among leaders in the Diem government and these young Buddhist activists became subject to harassment and discrimination for their involvement in social activism and blatant opposition to the government. Because Nhat Hanh advocated for the “Third Way” or “Middle Way,” an approach that favors reconciliation, disrupts divisive or binary thinking, and recognizes the dangers in clinging to any single dogma or belief system, he and the SYSS workers—monks, nuns, and laypeople working as social workers and activists—were frequently targeted and became the victims of many violent attacks, including physical and sexual assault, bombings at monasteries, and in some
cases, murder. Still, they provided aid and relief to everyone affected by the destruction of war, regardless of their political or religious identity. And, when asked by government or military officials where he was from or whose side of the war he was on, Nhat Hanh always answered “I am from the center,” siding with the people of Vietnam (Sivaraksa 13; Jones, Social Face of Buddhism 279).

Feminist scholar Irene Lara writes, “Standing in rigid opposition is a strategy for survival, but it has also killed us and will continue to sever our soul and assail our hearts. Western binary oppositions wound us in many ways….feeding the interests of the dominant, these false splits keep us from ourselves, each other, and our visible and invisible world” (“Healing Suenos” 434). Like Nhat Hanh, Lara recognizes that clinging to ideology, to perspectives that position us in opposition to one another and facilitate an ‘us versus them’ mentality creates suffering and prevents us from seeing other ways of being and knowing in the world. Approaching conflict or struggle from the “Middle Way” or “Third Way” reminds us, scholar-activists, that we cannot separate us/ourselves from them/others, that we are interdependent, that inflicting pain and suffering on others means inflicting pain and suffering on ourselves.

While Thich Nhat Hanh is considered a major figure in engaged Buddhism, this spiritual philosophy is not bound by geographic region or culture, but practiced throughout the world, nor is engaged Buddhism bound to a particular sect of Buddhism or religious tradition. While attending the “Together We Are One” retreat at Deer Park Monastery, I met a number of people who practiced engaged Buddhism while simultaneously identifying with other religious traditions. I met people who
identified as Catholic Buddhists, Jewish Buddhists, and atheists who practiced engaged Buddhism. There are a number of prominent engaged Buddhist organizations actively engaged in social justice work around the world, including the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka and the Dhamma Revolution in India. However, in this project, I focus exclusively on engaged Buddhism in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition as it is practiced in the West.

engaged Buddhism in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition

Described as “an innovative extension” of traditional Buddhist thought and practice by scholars like Rothberg, engaged Buddhism brings together both ‘inner work,’ like meditation and mindfulness practice, and ‘outer work,’ or active engagement in eradicating social injustice and suffering at the individual and institutional levels (268). Sallie King describes engaged Buddhism as a “contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet nonviolently with the social, economic, political, and ecological problems of society” (S. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism 1). Thus, engaged Buddhism employs strategies such as peaceful protests, creative expression through art and literature, public speaking, eating mindfully, meditation, and ‘being peace,’ or acting with compassion and humility with the purpose of creating social change.

Within a Western context, traditional Buddhism has been situated within the structure of modernity where the practice of Buddhism was and often still is misunderstood as an “individual quest for realization:” as selfish, inward-looking, other-worldly, and disengaged from society and the suffering of others (Rothberg, The
Engaged Spiritual Life 28; Kraft “Engaged Buddhism” 65). Buddhists do advocate for self-reflection through meditation and mindfulness practice, but the struggle for peace and social justice are so deeply connected as to be inseparable. The theory and practice of engaged Buddhism, by definition, seems to resist or offer a way out of this reductive binary by providing activists with radical ways to disrupt the false divisions between the private and public, spiritual and material, and inner and outer, located at the core of modernity (Rothberg, “Responding to the Cries” 282). Engaged Buddhists cannot separate their spiritual practice from their activist practice or their inner lives from their outer lives. The ability to draw such a line between the two is illusory, as both the inner and the outer, the spiritual and political are deeply connected and inform one another. In Together We Are One, Nhat Hanh says “The spiritual realm and the social realm are not separated. Whatever we can do in the spiritual realm will deeply benefit the social realm” (175).

There are a number of approaches to practicing engaged Buddhism throughout the world, with each approach made unique by the socio-political climate, as well as the history and needs of the people in each country, respectively. There are, however, a number of defining characteristics that each approach has in common. First, engaged Buddhism is grounded in and draws upon traditional Buddhist concepts like compassion, loving-kindness, interdependence, and the practice of meditation and mindfulness (S. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism 11-12). Understood as a ‘revisioning’ of traditional Buddhism, engaged Buddhism does not do away with traditional Buddhist values, ideas, concepts, and practices, but develops new and
innovative ways to apply these traditional concepts and practices to contemporary social problems. In the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition of engaged Buddhism, mindfulness in everyday life is central to making one aware of her/his own suffering and the suffering of others, to developing compassion toward oneself and others, and to cultivating a clear understanding of the interdependent nature of existence. The ‘inner work’ of meditation and mindfulness practice is necessary for engaging in ‘outer work,’ the work of social activism. In *Peace is Every Step* and *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, two of Nhat Hanh’s most widely known texts, he reminds his student-readers of the importance of mindfulness practice in creating social change. In *Peace is Every Step*, for example, Nhat Hanh says, “We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help” (91). Similarly, in *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, he explains, “In mindfulness one is not only restful and happy, but alert and awake. Meditation is not evasion; it is a serene encounter with reality” (60). In each of these quotations, we are reminded that meditation and mindfulness practice are not means for escaping pain and suffering, but tools for teaching us not only how to face such strong emotions and experiences, but what to do in order to transform them.

Second, engaged Buddhists embrace a belief in interdependence, in an understanding that we affect and are affected by all that exists. The Dalai Lama calls this “universal responsibility” (Kraft, “Engaged Buddhism” 66; Sivaraksa 11), translations of the Dharma call it “dependent origination” (S. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* 13), and Thich Nhat Hanh calls it “interbeing” (*Peace is Every Step* 95). In
Buddhism, there is no isolated self and the idea of a self separate from all else is “the antithesis of interdependence” (Sivaraksa 71).

In many published texts and Dharma talks, Nhat Hanh teaches the concept of interbeing and often uses a flower as the example. He teaches that flowers are made up of only non-flower elements like the sun, the rain, clouds, the minerals in the soil, and even animals and humans who have died and become one with the earth. The flower exists only in relation to the non-flower elements. The flower and the non-flower elements “inter-are” (Peace is Every Step 96). If one of the non-flower elements were removed from the flower, like the rain, for example, the flower would cease to exist (Peace is Every Step 96). Just like the flower, humans are also made up of only non-human elements like the sun and rain, in addition to conditions and relationships (Sivaraksa 71).

Awareness of the interdependent nature of all things provides engaged Buddhists with the understanding that “one’s behavior as an individual is inseparable from one’s behavior as a participant in society” and thus assists in cultivating a sense of universal responsibility that compels them to act (Kraft, “Engaged Buddhism” 66; S. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism 14). If a person looks deeply at the situation of the world, the suffering, exploitation, poverty, and oppression, using meditation and mindfulness practice, then he/she cannot so easily separate him or herself from either those deemed evil or responsible for the suffering of others, nor can he/she separate him or herself from those who are suffering. In Peace is Every Step, Nhat Hanh says, “We need the vision of interbeing—we belong to each other; we cannot cut reality into
pieces. The well-being of ‘this’ is the well-being of ‘that,’ so we have to do things together. Every side is ‘our side;’ there is no evil side’ (103). In this way, Nhat Hanh reminds the student-reader that not only do “we belong to each other,” that we are responsible for each other, but that we cannot engage in dualistic thinking that separates us, “the good guys,” from them, “the bad guys” if we hope to create peace in ourselves and peace in the world.

Womanist scholar, AnaLouise Keating, also identifies a belief in the metaphysics of interconnectedness as central to spiritual activism. Keating, like Nhat Hanh, recognizes the level of responsibility implicit in this belief. She says, “This radical interconnectedness gives us—gives me—a responsibility to meet those I encounter with a sense of openness: my protective boundaries between self and other become permeable, begin to break down” (“Forging El Mundo Zurdo” 522).

Using meditation and mindfulness practice also helps us to become aware of our participation in systems of oppression and discrimination. If we are to take seriously the concept of interbeing, as Nhat Hanh theorizes, then we must acknowledge that we are both the oppressed and the oppressor. Drawing on the social implications of interbeing, Nhat Hanh says,

Let us look at wealth and poverty. The affluent society and the deprived society inter-are. The wealth of one society is made of the poverty of the other. ‘This is like this, because that is like that.’ Wealth is made of non-wealth elements, and poverty is made of non-poverty elements….The truth is that everything contains everything else. We cannot just be, we can only inter-be. We are responsible for everything that happens around us. (Peace is Every Step 98)

Here Nhat Hanh reminds us that the way we live, the way we interact with each other and the world around us, and the way we consume have direct consequences on the lives and
experiences of others. He also reminds us that we cannot sit back and point the finger elsewhere, ‘out there,’ at the very privileged, or those in power, but that we must recognize our participation in a system that contributes to structural and economic inequality, so that we can begin to make the kinds of changes in our own lives that ripple out into the world, positively affecting the lives of others.

Third, engaged Buddhists employ only nonviolent strategies for affecting change. While nonviolence is often misunderstood as an inactive, weak, or passive response to war and oppression, nonviolence in the engaged Buddhist sense requires one to respond to social problems with mindfulness and action. Nonviolence is not simply the absence of violence, but rather deliberate and intentional action (Sivaraksa 3). In fact, according to Nhat Hanh, failing to respond or refusing to respond to social problems like war and oppression contribute to the violence or are acts of violence unto themselves. Acting nonviolently means responding to violence with compassion and skillful means achieved through meditation and mindfulness practice.

In addition to refraining from engaging in violent strategies of resistance, Nhat Hanh teaches that physical violence originates first in our minds, so we must first turn inward, and through the practice of meditation and mindfulness, train our hearts and minds to think and feel in a way that prevents war by actively promoting peace and reconciliation. Nhat Hanh explains,

To prevent war, to prevent the next crisis, we must start right now. When a war or crisis has begun, it is already too late. If we and our children practice ahimsa in our daily lives, if we learn to plant seeds of peace and reconciliation in our hearts and minds, we will begin to establish real peace and, in that way, we may be able to prevent the next war. (Nhat Hanh, “Ahimsa” 159)
Simply refraining from engaging in acts of violence and killing are not enough. Instead, we must “transform our minds” and our thinking in order to “transform our situation” because “the situation is mind, and mind is situation” (Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* 74). In other words, nonviolence cannot be seen as only a method or approach for working through conflict and war, but must be understood as a way of life, as a philosophy or practice that guides our daily interactions with self and other.

Similarly, feminist scholar, Leela Fernandes, asserts that a spiritualized understanding of feminist activism, one that is grounded in “an understanding of the fundamental connection between the material (political, economic, social, cultural) and spiritual realms,” must be nonviolent (62). Like Nhat Hanh, Fernandes defines nonviolence broadly, insisting that we begin recognizing the ways in which we participate in and contribute to violence in our daily interactions through personal animosities, negative self-talk, resentments, and seeking retribution or revenge in personal relationships (68). Both Fernandes and Nhat Hanh maintain that we are at risk of perpetuating violence and anger in our movements for social transformation if we refuse to recognize the relationship between our participation in social movements and our personal everyday actions (68).

Fourth, similar to their nonviolent approach to resolving conflict, engaged Buddhists are also concerned with reconciliation, healing, and compromise, rather than taking sides, defeating an opponent, or winning an argument with regard to conflict resolution. Moving beyond dualistic thinking, the kind of thinking that separates “us” from “them,” is the first step in reconciliation, of understanding both sides (Nhat Hanh,
Being Peace 70). During the Vietnam War, for example, Nhat Hanh and his students sought reconciliation among the warring parties, rather than a victory for one side or the other. They advocated for the “Middle Way” or the “Third Way,” not siding with the North or the South. Concerned with the suffering of all Vietnamese people, they engaged in the practice of deep listening and deep looking. They spoke out against the war, calling for an end to the bombing from both sides, and provided relief and aid to anyone in need, regardless of their political or religious affiliation. In Being Peace, Nhat Hanh explains,

We were able to understand the suffering of both sides, the Communists and the anti-Communists. We tried to be open to both, to understand this side and to understand that side, to be one with them. That is why we did not take a side, even though the whole world took sides. We tried to tell people our perception of the situation: that we wanted to stop the fighting, but the bombs were so loud….We wanted reconciliation, we did not want a victory. (69)

As a result of taking the “Middle Way,” Nhat Hanh and his students were accused of both collaborating with the Americans by the communists and siding with the communists by the American-backed regime (Sivaraksa 13).

For engaged Buddhists, reconciliation is also about creating and maintaining harmony within one’s romantic relationship, family, community, Sangha, organization, and—I would add—classroom. This is accomplished through the practice of deep and compassionate listening and loving speech. According to Nhat Hanh, “When there is good communication regarding ideas and interests, quarrels are not likely to occur” (Nhat Hanh, Interbeing 40). The engaged Buddhist practice of deep listening is necessary for engaging in the work of reconciliation and healing (Nhat Hanh, Together We Are One 169).
Like the engaged Buddhist practice of deep listening, AnaLouise Keating’s listening with raw openness, discussed in the previous chapter, begins with a belief in the metaphysics of interconnectedness and a desire to connect through our shared humanity. In her essay, “Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, and the Politics of Spirit,” Keating describes listening with raw openness as an unavoidably painful kind of listening that exposes and alters each person in the exchange (249). Both listening with raw openness and deep listening call on the listener to be fully present, to mindfully engage in the dialogue, observe the speaker’s body language and facial expressions, and refrain from casting judgment (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 251; S. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* 33). When listening in this way, Anzaldúa says, “you attend to the other as a whole being, not an object, even when she opposes you” (“now let us shift” 569).

Fifth, engaged Buddhists are committed to working for social justice. The theory and practice of engaged Buddhism provides activists with an approach to social justice that does not position the ‘spiritual’ in opposition to the ‘political’ or social involvement, but rather as deeply connected (Nhat Hanh, *Together We Are One* 175). Here again, engaged Buddhists are called on to acknowledge the interdependent nature of all things, as such awareness assists one with cultivating a sense of universal responsibility, where it is understood that “one’s behavior as an individual is inseparable from one’s behavior as a participant in society” (Kraft, “Engaged Buddhism” 66). However, it is not simply enough to recognize one’s interdependent relationship with all sentient and nonsentient things to create social change, nor is it enough to engage only in outwardly-directed
social or political action. Rather, Nhat Hanh insists that only through the practice of meditation and mindfulness can engaged Buddhists fully develop the skills necessary for creating radical social transformation, like empathy and compassion, deep listening, loving speech, and nonviolence. According to Nhat Hanh, “…it is the basic practice of daily mindfulness that will bring about real emancipation. Political action is not enough; social action is not enough. There has to be real, solid mindfulness practice along with it. Political and social change will be possible, will be much easier, when we have that foundation of spiritual practice” (*Together We Are One* 175).

**debates within engaged Buddhism**

In the literature, scholars debate not only what *counts* as engaged Buddhist practice, but establish hierarchies of spiritual practice. Donald Rothberg, for example, explores the practice of engaged Buddhism in his essay, “Responding to the Cries of the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism in North America.” He identifies two possible approaches to practicing engaged Buddhism. *Socially* engaged Buddhism, as Rothberg describes, requires participation in social, political, economic, and environmental issues. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka, the Dhamma Revolution in India, and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in the United States are examples of *socially* engaged Buddhism. The second meaning of the term refers to engaged Buddhism in everyday life within the family, the community, and in interpersonal relationships. Rothberg makes a distinction between these two approaches and asserts that participation in *everyday* engaged Buddhism does not imply activism or involvement in social issues as does *socially* engaged Buddhism (Rothberg,
“Responding to the Cries” 272). However, making these distinctions between everyday Buddhism and socially engaged Buddhism not only reinforces an oppositional or binary perspective, ranking one approach above the other, but it also perpetuates the false divide between the personal and the political, as if the two are not deeply interconnected. Engaged Buddhism is firmly grounded in the idea that all sentient beings are interdependent. While Rothberg may be right in that everyday engaged Buddhism does not imply active or direct involvement in socially engaged Buddhism, I argue, using Nhat Hanh’s concept of interbeing, that participating in everyday engaged Buddhism, such as picking up litter, holding and soothing a crying child, or consuming a vegan diet are all forms of engaged Buddhist activism that affect social, political, economic, and environmental issues. In “Call Me By My True Names,” Thich Nhat Hanh says,

> Our daily lives have the most to do with the situation of the world. If we can change our daily lives, we can change our governments and we can change the world. Our presidents and our governments are us. They reflect our lifestyle and our way of thinking. The way we hold a cup of tea, pick up a newspaper, and even use toilet paper have to do with peace.” (41)

In other words, “the personal is political,” making distinctions between socially engaged Buddhism and everyday engaged Buddhism is futile, and privileging one over the other as more political or more effective at creating change is misguided and does not consider the ways in which our lives cannot be so easily divided or fragmented into “personal” and “political,” “private” and “public.”

In *The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism*, published in 1989, Ken Jones makes a similar distinction between what he refers to as
“soft” Buddhists, or those who practice “mindfulness in everyday life,” and “hard” Buddhists, or those who participate in social activism, influencing public policy and government reform (Jones 129; Queen 8). Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings, in particular, have been criticized by some as too “soft,” as simply teaching practitioners how “to breathe in and out” (Chan Khong 262; Queen 8). However, in his most recent text The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action, published in 2003, Jones reflects on the arguments he made in his earlier text and asserts that “the distinction between personal Buddhist practice and social activism for the benefit of the world is illusory; in fact, there is only one practice to be done” (xv)

Engaged Buddhist scholars like Joanna Macy, Arnold Kotler, and Kenneth Kraft, however, insist that the way we treat each other or our engagement with everyday life is political and does make an impact, socially (Chan Khong 124; Queen 7). These scholars insist that we cannot draw such clear distinctions between these two approaches to practice, because doing so contradicts engaged Buddhist teachings on nonduality or the ways in which our lives in the public sphere and the private sphere are inseparable, interwoven, and interdependent (Nhat Hanh, Interbeing 4).

critiques of Thich Nhat Hanh

Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism is criticized for being “too engaged” with the world, too concerned with Western ideas, and not sufficiently rooted in traditional Buddhist concepts and ideas (Hunt-Perry & Fine 61; S. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism 11). I posit, however, that Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhist philosophy and practices are indeed firmly grounded in traditional Buddhist thought. In an attempt
to keep Buddhism relevant, Nhat Hanh takes traditional Buddhist ideas like dependent origination, loving-kindness, and meditation, and reimagines or rewrites each concept in contemporary language, in order to apply them to current social problems (S. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* 12). For example, Nhat Hanh’s theory of interbeing comes from the traditional Buddhist concept of dependent origination. Nhat Hanh uses the theory of interbeing in his teachings to illustrate not only the interdependent nature of all things—humans, animals, plants, and minerals—but the way our interconnectedness, our interrelatedness, necessarily holds us accountable to our thoughts and actions.

Others who critique Nhat Hanh claim that his teachings do not sufficiently address issues of structural and institutional violence and poverty (Hunt-Perry & Fine 61). While Nhat Hanh does not provide a top-down approach for alleviating issues of structural and economic inequality, he does use his theory of interbeing to remind us that we are not separate from oppressive institutions, but that we are a part of that institution. In *Peace is Every Step*, Nhat Hanh tells the story of a young girl from a poor family in the city of Manila who was coerced into prostitution. Using the concept of interbeing, Nhat Hanh reminds the student-reader of her/his participation in a system that perpetuates violence and maintains systems of economic and institutional inequality (98). Nhat Hanh says,

if she could look deeply at herself and at the whole situation, she would see that she is the way she is because other people are the way they are….No one among us has clean hands. No one of us can claim that it is not our responsibility. The girl in Manila is that way because of the way we are. Looking into the life of that young prostitute, we see the lives of all the ‘non-prostitutes.’ And looking at the non-prostitutes and the way we live our lives, we see the prostitute. Each thing helps to create the other….Only by seeing with the eyes of interbeing can that young girl be freed from her suffering… Looking deeply into ourselves, we see
her, and we will share her pain and the pain of the whole world. Then we can begin to be of real help. (98)

Here Nhat Hanh calls on us to look deeply at our situation and the situation of the prostitute. He calls on us to turn inward and reflect on our participation in a system that allows and even encourages systemic violence and structural inequality so that we can then begin the work of social justice. In this way, it is clear that Nhat Hanh does address institutional violence and structural inequality, but from the level of the individual.

Finally, Nhat Hanh is critiqued for what some understand as a move away from an engaged Buddhist collective action approach to a more individualized or Sangha-based approach to practice. Those who criticize this shift assert that the idea “that individual transformation and even small sanghas….can effect real social transformation is naïve and idealistic” (Hunt-Perry & Fine 61). Critics of Nhat Hanh fear that a focus on establishing monastic practice centers throughout the West means a lessening of support for socially engaged practice at the collective level.

As discussed previously, Nhat Hanh was actively involved in collective Buddhist activism beginning in the 1960s throughout Vietnam, France, and the United States. In some ways, Nhat Hanh’s focus has shifted to a Sangha-based approach to practicing engaged Buddhism, in so much as that he is not actively living and working in the trenches, and personally building schools and practice centers. However, I insist that if we take a careful look at Nhat Hanh’s life, we see that while he was actively engaged in Buddhist collective action early on in his career, founding temples, schools, and practice centers, developing and implementing social service programs throughout Vietnam, and
organizing peaceful protests and demonstrations, he did so within the context of a Sangha.

For example, Nhat Hanh founded Phuong Boi, an experimental practice community, with a few of his monastic brothers. These monks lived together, studied the Dharma, practiced meditation, and produced texts and literature on engaged Buddhism. They lived and worked as a Sangha, as a community of Buddhist practitioners (Hunt-Perry & Fine 54). Four years later, Nhat Hanh and thirteen students and social workers practiced engaged Buddhism through meditation and social justice work like building schools and developing social service programs in Vietnam. These thirteen students, the “thirteen cedars,” lived and worked as a Sangha, practicing engaged Buddhism within the context of community, while affecting social change (Chan Khong 29). In 1966, Nhat Hanh formed the Order of Interbeing, a group of six laypeople who served as Board members for the SYSS and were actively engaged in social justice work throughout Vietnam. These six members lived and worked together as a Sangha in Vietnam and later France, using the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of engaged Buddhism as their guide. More than forty years later, hundreds of thousands of people worldwide have become members of the Order or Four Fold Sangha (Chan Khong 216).

In light of the evidence presented above, I argue that Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism has always been grounded in a Sangha-based approach. Nhat Hanh understands community as a source of strength and support for engaged practice, and sees the Sangha as a necessary component for engaged Buddhist practice (Hunt-Perry & Fine 54). In several published texts and Dharma talks, including a talk that took place at the
Together We Are One retreat I attended in September 2011, Nhat Hanh explains that he believes that the reincarnation of the next Buddha, Maitreya, will come in the form of a community, a Sangha, and not an individual person. In 1994, he wrote

> The Buddha, Shakyamuni, our teacher, predicted that the next Buddha would be Maitreya, the Buddha of love.... It is possible that the next Buddha will not take the form of an individual. The next Buddha may take the form of a community, a community practicing understanding and loving-kindness, a community practicing mindful living. And the practice can be carried out as a group, as a city, as a nation. (“The Next Buddha May be a Sangha” 41)

Thich Nhat Hanh as (my) teacher

Affectionately called “Thay” (‘teacher’ in Vietnamese) by members of the Four Fold Sangha monastic community, as well as by thousands of student-readers and lay practitioners worldwide, Nhat Hanh is one of the best known spiritual leaders and teachers in the twenty-first century. For more than fifty years he has developed mindfulness-based curriculum, published more than a hundred texts, traveled around the world teaching the Dharma at retreat centers, to members of the U.S. Congress, Google employees, military veterans, and in prisons. Additionally, he established a number of schools and academic programs throughout Vietnam and Europe, including most recently the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (eiab) in Waldbröl, Germany in 2008, a secular institution that provides curriculum for applying engaged Buddhism to one’s everyday life, to promote happiness and peace in ourselves and throughout the world, and to relieve individual and collective suffering. Buddhism, as it is practiced at eiab, is not understood as a religion, but rather a philosophy or way of being in the world.

When I first began reading texts by Thich Nhat Hanh, I read them as a practice of healing and self-care. I was working through very difficult emotions of loss and grief at
the time, and found solace and comfort in his words. While I certainly understood Nhat Hanh as a teacher—both in the traditional sense of developing curriculum, lecturing, and guiding a classroom of students through course material, as well as in the sense that his published works teach student-readers from around the world about love, reconciliation, peace work, mindfulness practice, and engaged Buddhism, I had never thought of Nhat Hanh as my teacher, but rather a scholar whose work profoundly influenced not only my teaching, but my relationship with and responsibility to others. Certainly, he “taught” me a great deal through his scholarship, encouraging me to think deeply and critically about the relationship between spirituality and social justice, my relationships with family, my partner, friends, students, and even strangers, the environment, nonhuman animals, and my relationship to the earth. Still, I hadn’t come to understand him as one of my (graduate school) teachers, until I found myself in the front row of the big meditation hall at Deer Park listening to him give a Dharma talk on the insight of interbeing. During this talk (and all of this talks throughout the week), he radiated peace and moved around the front of the hall with mindfulness and intention; he wrote on the white board in English, French, and Vietnamese, while I took copious notes. He drew diagrams to illustrate his concept of ‘store consciousness,’ he used a potted orchid to teach the concept of interbeing, and he told stories about his work in Vietnam. In this moment, it was clear that he was the teacher and we were his attentive and hungry (and some of us awestruck!) students devouring his every word. It was at this point during the retreat that my understanding of Nhat Hanh shifted from that of just scholar to one of my teachers, as well. And, it was clearer now, than ever before, that Nhat Hanh’s theorizing around
understanding, reconciliation, being peace, and mindfulness practice provided, alongside Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of spiritual activism, the framework for a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy*, a practice that engages the whole student, mindbodyspirit.

**conclusion**

Similar to Anzaldúa, Nhat Hanh’s life experiences were central to his development of engaged Buddhism as a philosophy and practice. While, in my opinion, Nhat Hanh’s body of work stands well on its own, I have placed it in conjunction with feminist and womanist theorizing, including Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism, in order to note how reading and understanding his philosophy of engaged Buddhism shifts the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies in terms of its theorizing, activism, and curriculum. In the next chapter, I bring Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh together in dialogue to outline my theory and practice of a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy*.
Chapter 4: Transforming Feminist Pedagogy

In this chapter, I place Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Thich Nhat Hanh in dialogue with one another to develop a new theory and practice I term a “spiritualized feminist pedagogy.” A spiritualized feminist pedagogy is grounded in both the spiritual and the contemplative; it is a practice that approaches teaching the whole student—mind, body, and spirit—while at the same time, understanding the classroom community as a living entity or body in and of itself. Conceptualized as such, each student is a flower in the garden of the classroom to which care for the whole (classroom community) and its respective components (individuals) must be directed. As I envision it, a spiritualized feminist pedagogy is constituted by four components: community-building or creating what I call a classroom Sangha; contemplative practice; sharing/storytelling; and flexibility. In this project, I focus on pedagogy, specifically, as one site to explore the theoretical and practical contributions of Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism and Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism. To be sure, the accessibility and versatility of Anzaldúa’s and Nhat Hanh’s work can be applied to a number of practices including parenting, psychotherapy, political organizing, and even environmental justice. However, I limit my discussion in this chapter to my practice of a spiritualized feminist pedagogy in WGSS 320.

In March 2012, I began teaching a special topics course in the Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at The Ohio State University called “Holistic Theories of Social Transformation: Spiritual Activism & Engaged Buddhism” (WGSS 320).
In this course we explored the relationship between spirituality and social activism, as well as the relationship between personal transformation and social transformation focusing primarily the works of Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh. I structured WGSS 320 around four central questions: 1) What is the relationship between spirituality and social justice? In other words, what role, if any, does spirituality play in the work of social justice activism; 2) What is the relationship between personal transformation and social transformation?; 3) Is there a place for spirituality in the academy, or in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, specifically?; and 4) What counts as feminist and/or womanist activism? Is teaching a form of activism? What about parenting, mindful eating, or gardening?

I organized the course “Holistic Theories of Social Transformation: Spiritual Activism & Engaged Buddhism” into two sections. Throughout the first six weeks of the course, I introduced my students to the work of Gloria E Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism and Thich Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism. During the remaining four weeks of the quarter, we used what we learned in conjunction with other scholarship to explore topics such as pedagogy and the politics of the classroom (from the perspective of both student and teacher); the politics of consumption and food justice, including veganism, fair trade, and the global and environmental effects of the United States’ over-consumption of sugar and coffee; and mindful parenting.

Through the works of Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, we engaged in rich theoretical discussions, exploring such topics as feminist pedagogy, the politics of consumption, food justice, and parenting. We engaged in contemplative practices, including deep
listening or listening with raw openness, tonglen meditation, in and out conscious breathing, walking meditation, intentional silence, mindful eating, and free writing. In a 
spiritualized feminist pedagogy, such contemplative practices are among the first steps for bringing about the kind of social transformation both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh theorize, the kind of social transformation that happens simultaneously in one’s self (inner) and one’s world (outer).

In the following sections, I expand on and discuss in detail the four characteristics that constitute a spiritualized feminist pedagogy – a classroomSangha, contemplative practice, sharing/storytelling, and flexibility. With their permission and their encouragement, I rely on the voices of my students, weaving their experiences and reflections throughout this chapter, to tell the story of our class.¹⁴

building community: the classroomSangha

*Our sangha continues to touch my heart* – Renée¹⁵

For both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, living and working within the context of community is a necessary component for social change. For Nhat Hanh, all practice, in order for it to be transformative and sustainable, must happen in the context of the sangha, a community of practitioners, who challenge its members to look deeply at themselves, to look deeply at others. As members of a Sangha, or a “classroomSangha,” a term I coined to refer to a classroom-based Sangha, we provide one another with support and encouragement, while challenging each other to turn inward and self-reflect, to engage in the work of personal transformation. Without a community, without the support of the Sangha, we are, according to Nhat Hanh, like “a tree without roots,”
unable to take in nourishment like love, compassion, understanding, and kindness, practices that help us to engage in and sustain the work of social transformation (“from *Friends on the Path*” 276).

While Anzaldúa wrote in less explicit ways about community, she found friendship and support in her writing communities and in the workshops she organized with other artists16 and writers, as in her earliest writing community she called “El Mundo Surdo” in the late1970s (Keating, “Appendix 2. Timeline” 326). We can also look to Anzaldúa’s theory of El Mundo Zurdo, a visionary space, where people from different backgrounds come together in community to do the work of social transformation. In El Mundo Zurdo, much like the space of the WGSS 320 classroom, people from a variety of diverse backgrounds, with different experiences, ideas, and perspectives come together to engage in the work of social justice.

In developing WGSS 320, I knew that building community within the space of the classroom was central to my theory and practice of a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy*. The way I organized the syllabus, the language I used to describe the course, the classroom policies I developed, and the ways I referred to our relationships with one another, provided the framework for a classroom Sangha to take shape. Even before the quarter began, I made arrangements that I hoped would facilitate community-building within the context of the course. For example, I requested that enrollment for the course be capped at 15 students and reserved the conference room in the WGSS office, a space used primarily for graduate seminars, in order to create a more intimate space for sharing. Sitting around a conference table, rather than in lecture-style rows, more readily allows
for (physically) comfortable face-to-face dialogue to happen, providing students with opportunities to observe one another’s facial expressions and body language, and helping students to get to know one another. One student, Renée, commented on the physical space of the classroom: “Just sitting around [the conference table] and looking at people. Knowing people’s names. I know every person in this class and understand a little bit of their ‘suchness.’ It was just such a different experience.”

On the very first day of class, I referred to us, the members of our class, as a classroomSangha and explained that a Sangha is a term used in Buddhism to refer to a community of people who study and practice together and who provide support and encouragement to one another. I was also open and forthcoming with my students and shared my desire that we would come to understand this space and each other as a community, that I hoped they would accept my invitation to become a part of my community. In addition to referring to our class as a classroomSangha, I made it a practice to greet each student by name as they entered the conference room, recognizing their presence, and welcoming them into our shared space each morning. By acknowledging each student by name and with eye contact as they entered the room, I not only conveyed the message that their presence in class was important, but that they were an essential member of our learning community (Schoeberlein and Sheth 55).

In addition to the physical (that is, environmental) set-up of the classroom space and the language I used to talk about our class, I developed a course policy regarding class absences that lends itself to facilitating community. In this policy, I invited each student to email the entire class in the event that they must miss class (regardless of the
reason). By emailing everyone in the case of an absence (not just the instructor, as is usual protocol), each student finds her/himself more accountable to one another, seeing themselves as part of a larger whole, and recognizing that their presence and their absence are meaningful and impact the collective experience of our class. In *Friends on the Path*, Nhat Hanh says “The Sangha is made out of the work of individuals, so we have the duty to help create the energy of the Sangha. Our presence, when it is a mindful presence, contributes to that energy. When we are absent during the activities of the Sangha, we are not contributing to Sangha energy” and thus unable to contribute to or profit from the nourishment it provides (“from *Friends on the Path*” 290).

Aware of our interconnectedness, the ways we depend on one another, and affect one another, a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy*, as I imagine it, recognizes that as members of a classroom Sangha we impact one another’s experience in the classroom. Our absence, our tardiness, our commitment to completing course readings and written assignments, and even whether or not we slept enough the night before or ate breakfast prior to coming to class all affect the quality of our engagement. Inviting my students to email each other in the case of a class absence served as my first opportunity to show them, on a small scale (i.e. at the level of our classroom community), that we have a responsibility to one another, not only in this class, but as members of society, as, what Anzaldúa calls, ‘citizens of the universe,’ and that our behaviors and actions impact the experiences of others (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 118). It was my intention that this attendance policy (and the way I introduced the policy) would help make clear and tangible Anzaldúa’s and Nhat Hanh’s theories of interconnectedness and interbeing,
respectively, that is, that students recognized their responsible to one another and the course.

In an impromptu class discussion that happened in week four around the concepts of community and collective responsibility, Velouria expressed that she appreciated receiving emails from students informing all of us that she/he would not be in class. She shared,

It gives me a sense of what the class dynamics are going to be that day, and, it provides me with the opportunity to send a quick note back to the student who is missing class due to illness. I also feel a certain kind of accountability to the class and the community. In other classes and in the past I’ve asked myself what I could get away with doing or not doing, reading or not reading, but not in this class. I need to come prepared for this class. I want to come prepared for this class. I feel a responsibility to contribute, to be present physically, and to be present mentally and emotionally.¹⁹

Similarly, Renée shared, “In the past, I’ve had really bad attendance due to all sorts of personal things happening in my life. But, I feel a sense of accountability to this class and to all of you. I feel a real desire to be here, in this space, because of the sense of community I feel.”²⁰

Every student in WGSS 320 observed this classroom policy without resistance or complaint. However, in a final written reflection submitted during finals week, Renée shared her initial reactions to this policy and my concept of the classroom Sangha. She wrote, “I sat around the conference table on the first day of our class and thought, Dude, really? We have to email each other every time we want to flake out? I felt immediately hesitant to commit to this craziness of a ‘classroom community.’ I had never heard of such a thing. I looked around the room….This was about to be awkward and uncomfortable.” Later in that same reflection, she went on to share,
I now shudder to think of who I may have become had I never had the amazing experience of our classroomSangha…. The classroomSangha has been touching, I know not just for me, but for the other women I am getting to know and care for as well in this class. Especially at a university where I consistently have felt like an arbitrary number, our sangha has been a community that is safe, exciting, and comforting. Because of our relationship to one another in this setting, I was inclined to participate more, work more, try more, and care more.21

This sentiment, this idea that seeing oneself as a member of or belonging to the classroomSangha encouraged more holistic engagement with the course and inspired more care and investment, was echoed throughout the quarter.

In only four weeks it became clear that we were beginning to see ourselves as members of a community and beginning to see our class as a classroomSangha when several students asked if we could organize a get-together to share a meal, watch a film, or just spend some time getting to know one another more informally. The following week we met in the conference room, outside of our regularly scheduled class-time. We shared a vegetarian/vegan dinner and planned to watch a film. Instead, we spent several hours that evening around the table, laughing and sharing stories. I left campus that night feeling a buzz of excitement. I was excited to see our classroomSangha coming together and demonstrating such care and interest in each other’s lives. And, I was excited by the feeling of community and belonging that I felt within the context of our classroomSangha. Shortly after arriving home from campus that evening, the class received an email from Meg that said, “All of you continue to inspire me, and spending this evening with you was truly amazing! With peace, Meg.”22 The following morning, Carlee Jo sent an email sharing, “I cannot tell you all how great it was to hang out last night! I was excited for the movie but what was even better was how we were so
involved in our talk that the time flew and we didn't even watch the movie :) very refreshing! Thank you all again!!! Cheers! Carlee Jo.”

A week later, around mid-term, I turned my attention to the seven graduating seniors and asked how they were feeling about their undergraduate careers coming to a close. Velouria spoke up first and said, “I’m not afraid of my undergraduate career ending. I’m afraid of this class ending. On weekends I feel weaker, less supported, than when I am in this class. I find myself longing for the community we've created here. My friends don't understand the changes I'm making in my life through this class.” Meg added, "I feel more put together during the week because of this class, leaving class for the weekend, I feel disconnected. During the week though, when I'm here with all of you, I feel grounded.” Other students agreed with these sentiments, including those students not preparing to graduate. I was also feeling uneasy about our class coming to an end as we all prepared to go our separate ways in the coming weeks. In the spirit of Nhat Hanh and engaged Buddhism, I acknowledged each of my students concerns. I listened deeply and touched their anxiety and sadness with my breath, taking in their fears and sufferings, and sending out peace and comfort. I admitted to feeling similar and suggested that we begin thinking about ways to maintain our Sangha practice when we no longer have structured class-time bringing us together. From that day forward, students expressed in class, in our online discussion forums, and through email their gratitude for the care and support we provided one another, for the space to engage in contemplative practice, and for the sense of belonging our classroomSangha offered each of us.
After our initial group dinner, members of our classroom sangha began spending time together outside of class—re-reading course materials, practicing meditation and mindfulness together, planning for graduate school, and getting to know one another on a more personal and intimate level. One afternoon, I saw Meg on campus and she shared that she and another student from our class had been spending time together on campus talking about applying to graduate school and their experiences in WGSS 320. Lightheartedly she asked, “Who would have guessed that you could form such meaningful friendships with people you met in class?”

These meaningful interactions, in and outside the classroom, provided fruitful alternatives to impersonal and formulaic written assignments.

Rather than submit their final essays electronically, our classroom sangha decided to come together one last time during our University-scheduled exam period. In class the week prior, I asked everyone to respond to the following questions in their free-writing journal: What ideas or practices from this course will you maintain? What ideas or practices from this course will you share with others? And, how will you share them in a way that is accessible and non-threatening, but true to their practice? I opened the floor for sharing, and Meg read from her journal, “Nhat Hanh presents material in a very approachable way. His sayings, simple but profound, stop you in the moment, [force you] to think and redirect your present thoughts and actions. We need to be in contact with these reminders more often. [Let’s] infuse our landscape with them. Artwork and signs!” And, so that is precisely what we did. During our last formal class meeting together, each of us brought in art materials (paint, paint brushes, canvases, pieces of
wood, and stones) and created “artwork and signs.” Following Meg’s suggesting and using Nhat Hanh’s gathas, we created tangible “reminders” on canvas, pieces of wood, and stone to “infuse our landscape.” We carry these tokens with us, as a reminder of the ten weeks we spent together, each of us feeling a sense of community and belonging, and as a reminder to practice mindfulness and to “be peace.”

**contemplative practice**

*Through the practice of meditation in class, I (re)discovered just how breathing with awareness can be very calming and healing in its own right—a simple, but powerful reminder that I am alive.* – Meg

The second characteristic of a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* is contemplative practice. For both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh, contemplative practice or turning inward to care for the self, to access greater awareness and insight, in order to transform our individual and collective sufferings, is a necessary component of social transformation (Nhat Hanh, “from *Love in Action*” 124). In her essay “now let us shift,” Anzaldúa urges us to “engage both inner and outer resources to make changes on multiple fronts: inner/spiritual/personal, social/collective/material” (561). She insists that spiritual or contemplative practices such as meditating, ritual, writing, and breathing deeply provide us with the strength, awareness, and insight to create radical and sustainable social change. She says, “You use these spiritual tools to deal with political and personal problems. Power comes from being in touch with your body, soul, and spirit, and letting their wisdom lead you” (“now let us shift” 570). Similarly, Nhat Hanh teaches that we must take care of ourselves first, if any changes we make at the relational or societal level are to be long lasting and effective. He says, “First, take care of yourself. Reconcile the
conflicting elements within yourself by being mindful and practicing loving kindness.

Then reconcile with your own people by understanding and loving them” (Nhat Hanh, “from Touching Peace” 154). In Together We Are One, Nhat Hanh focuses his attention on social activists, in particular, and says,

Those of us who are activists always want very much to succeed in our attempt to help the world, but if we do not maintain balance between our work and spiritual nutrition, our practice, we will not be able to go very far. This is why the practice of walking meditation, mindful breathing, getting in touch with the refreshing and healing elements in and around us is crucial for our survival. ….if we want to serve the world, we have to have peace within ourselves first. (176, 193)

In this way, it becomes clear that both spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism insist that contemplative practice is not only integral to creating radical and holistic social transformation, but a necessary tool for caring for the self, in order to avoid burn out and exhaustion. Throughout the quarter, our classroom Sangha engaged in contemplative practices like tonglen meditation, walking meditation, in-and-out conscious breathing, listening with raw openness, free-writing, and intentional silence, in order to look deeply at ourselves (look deeply at others), develop loving-kindness toward ourselves (develop loving-kindness toward others), heal ourselves (heal others). When speaking about the use of self-reflection, through contemplative practice, Meg shared, “This course challenges you to step back. You know, it puts you on the spot and asks you to look critically at yourself. We’re taught to look at each critically and to read materials critically, but seldom are we asked to look at ourselves so deeply.”

Similarly, Renée conceded “It takes a certain amount of vulnerability to face yourself. It’s terrifying at first. After the initial terror, then it’s just downright annoying to see yourself for what you are. I look in the mirror and shake my head. I’m learning to smile instead of scowl.”
On the first day of WGSS 320, I shared with my students my own feelings of discomfort and vulnerability in openly engaging in discussions around my spirituality and/or spiritual practice. Not only was I feeling anxious to share my spirituality so openly, in general, but I was feeling particularly uneasy about sharing my spirituality and my spiritual practice, an aspect of my life that feels deeply personal, with my students. As a trained social worker and therapist, I have a particular understanding of professional boundaries. And while I know that my students are not my clients, I have approached teaching and the student/teacher relationship from this perspective, using the National Association of Social Worker’s Code of Ethics (NASW) as my guide. However, given the course theme, course materials, course goals, and the expectations I had of my students—that they would embrace the discomfort, take risks in sharing, and fully engage themselves in the content of the course and contemplative practices—I knew I had to “risk the personal” and do the same (Keating, “Risking the Personal” 2). I had to be willing to share and engage intellectually, personally, and spiritually with my students.

This meant that I had to admit to my own struggle with contemplative practice, with meditation. On the first day of class, I relayed the following thoughts to my students: “To be honest, I am a little uncomfortable with the practice of meditation. Meditation, in a group, feels very intimate. We practiced sitting meditation at Deer Park and I’m not sure I did it right. I mean, I sat in lotus position and followed my breath, but I had a difficult time stopping my thoughts. And I felt acutely aware of my vulnerability, eyes closed, sitting among a thousand other people. But, I will try again with all of you. We will practice together.”
I had to admit to my own struggle with contemplative practice, with living mindfully (or not, as is sometimes the case). In Week Three of the course, I shared: “I try to practice mindfulness throughout the day, I do. But it’s often a real challenge on campus when I feel pulled in multiple directions and overwhelmed by deadlines and due dates. When I do find a free moment to myself, I end up filling that time with texting, social networking, or reading blogs instead of taking time to clear my thoughts, practice in-and-out conscious breathing, and get in touch with myself.”

And while the “sharing” felt risky, trusting my students with the content of what I shared felt like an even greater risk. I had to trust that my sharing would not change their perspective of me, at least not negatively. I had to trust that my students would still take me seriously as an instructor at an institution of higher learning. And ultimately, I had to trust that they would respect me, not because I shared, but in spite of what I shared. For these reasons, I felt like I was coming out of the “spiritual closet,” a term that was first introduced to me in conversations with AnaLouise Keating and Layli Maparyan.

Acutely aware of my discomfort in discussing my spirituality and engaging in spiritual practice with others, I provided my students with an opportunity to consider their own level of comfort in exploring and sharing out loud their relationship to and understanding of spirituality, as well as their comfort with engaging in contemplative and/or spiritual practices through an exercise of free-writing. Specifically, I asked them to respond to the following questions: What is your understanding of spirituality? How do you understand the relationship between spirituality and social justice? How comfortable are you talking about and exploring “spirituality/spiritualities?” How would you rate or
describe your comfort level with regard to engaging in contemplative practices (like meditation, for example) in the classroom? (See Appendix B, “Free Writing Prompts”). While their understanding of spirituality and spiritual practice shifted over the course of the quarter, their initial reflection indicated relative comfort around issues of spirituality, in spite of the fact that very few students had a working definition of the concept. Julie wrote, “hm. All these questions are very loaded and I do not know where to begin. I do not feel like I have a definition or even a remote idea of what spirituality is to me and that’s one of the biggest reasons I am taking this class.”

Similarly, Emma wrote, “I’ve always associated spirituality with religion, probably because I was raised in a religious household. It hasn’t been until recently that I’ve been exploring spirituality more and trying to figure out what it means to me, and at this point I’m not really sure.”

In order to carve out a space where students could begin to explore and understand the role of spirituality in their own lives and in relation to social justice activism, I began each class with contemplative or intentional silence. This silence, described by Jayne, as “thick” and “engaged,” provided each member of our classroom Sangha the opportunity to transition into our formal class period, allowing each of us to center ourselves and focus our attention on the present moment (Schoeberlein and Sheth 44). We also engaged in the practice of contemplative silence throughout our class discussions. The silence we created, transitioning between topics or after especially painful discussions around self-immolation, suicide, and racism, for example, was not oppressive, awkward, or restrictive, nor was it planned or scheduled. Instead, this silence occurred organically and offered each of us the opportunity to turn inward, breathe
mindfully, and refocus our attention. We also used silence as a way to acknowledge one another’s pain and suffering, a way to hold that person’s experience with care, without trying to fix it, avoid it, or deny that it exists. Regarding our use of silence, Meg shared, “Our silence was a kind of care, when someone shared something. We expressed a deep collective sense of care through our silence. It’s like how Nhat Hanh says you hold your feelings like a child. We held our silence with care. You don’t need to rush away from the silence or the feelings that were created out of that sharing.” In this way, I understand our use of silence as an expression of care to be closely tied to the practice of deep listening, of fully attending to the needs of the speaker.

As I discussed in chapter two, I make every effort to engage in the practice of deep listening or listening with raw openness as an expression of both my spirituality and my activist practice. In WGSS 320, I engaged in the practice of listening with raw openness during each class session and encouraged the rest of our classroom Sangha to do the same. By introducing the practice of deep listening or listening with raw openness to my students as both a method of social activism and a spiritual or contemplative practice, I challenged the boundary between social activism and spirituality, bringing my students’ attention to their interrelated relationship. Additionally, I also worked to communicate how deep listening alters the experience of the academy, an idea Meg echoed, “Learning just basic practices like deep listening, for me, they’ve been the missing link from my academic experience. Now I don’t take listening for granted. I listen like my life depends on it. It’s totally changed me in that way.” Similarly, Renée expressed, “This class was all about care, I mean even to care enough to listen. That’s what made our class so
different. We’re never taught to listen to people, we’re taught to argue with others points, to disagree, but not to just sit and reflect on what someone said.”³⁸ Listening with raw openness calls on the listener to approach each dialogue or interaction from a nonjudgmental point of view, letting go of expectations and preconceived ideas in order to create a space for multiple positions, perspectives, and experiences. Listening with raw openness also calls on the listener to observe the speaker’s body language, paying special attention to nonverbal responses and reactions (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 250).

By fully engaging in the practice of listening with raw openness I came to understand my students’ many facial expressions. I learned to decipher between my students’ facial expressions and nonverbal gestures. I sensed when students were thinking, simply thinking, allowing the material to settle in. I sensed when students were trying to work something out in the moment, maybe feeling troubled, frustrated, or challenged. And, I sensed when students were moved or inspired, when something clicked, or they experienced that proverbial light bulb moment. When asked to reflect on my attention to students’ body language, Velouria responded,

I think it helped that you invested in getting to know our facial expressions. It helped to know that you really did that work. To try to figure out when or what we were thinking or whatever, to me that’s where the care came in. It made me feel like you did care. And you caught me a couple of times. But that’s cool cause I did want to say something, I was just still working on it, but it was nice to know that you saw that.³⁹

Getting to know my students through their nonverbal interactions and participation, I was better able to recognize their needs and respond accordingly, for example by slowing down, asking additional questions, encouraging others to contribute to the discussion, or providing clarification and examples. I insist that engaging in the practice of listening
with raw openness, that is listening for the gaps and the silences, for the confusion, discomfort, and excitement, helped me to develop a deeper more holistic connection with my students, a connection where my students felt listened to, cared for, and supported.

In addition to silent contemplation and deep listening, we engaged in meditative practice several times throughout the quarter, including tonglen meditation, sitting meditation (in-and-out conscious breathing), and walking meditation. The first meditative practice we engaged in was tonglen meditation, a contemplative practice that calls on the practitioner to breathe in or inhale the suffering of another, allowing oneself to feel that persona’s suffering, sadness, or pain. Then, on the out breath, one exhales compassion, loving-kindness, understanding, and peace toward that person and their situation. Tonglen meditation is a useful practice for helping us see the relationship between ourselves/the individual and others/the collective. In other words, it disrupts or troubles the belief that meditation is concerned only with individual enlightenment and not the well-being of the collective or the work of social transformation.

When one begins practicing tonglen meditation, it is best to focus our energy on someone we like very much, someone we have a positive and loving relationship with. As one becomes more skilled in the practice of tonglen meditation, we can choose to focus our energy on someone who causes us pain, someone we have conflict with, or even someone we consider to be an enemy. Because this was our first practice of tonglen, I asked the classroom Sangha to choose someone they loved, felt neutral toward, or even someone they had never met in person, but wished to send healing and peaceful energy toward. That week, the parents of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed black teenager from
Florida who had been fatally shot by George Zimmerman, were speaking out publicly for the first time since the tragedy. Because we had spent class time talking about this case, I invited my students to consider practicing tonglen meditation for Trayvon Martin’s parents. Meg shared of her experience with tonglen meditation, “It was like you could visualize this room radiating all this love and healing out of the room, just spreading in all different directions because we were all deeply engaged in this practice of trying to send out this light, this love, this healing. This was the work of the collective.”

Similarly to Meg, Emma discussed the ways in which tonglen meditation addresses collective suffering, thereby bridging the individual and the collective. Though not addressing the Trayvon Martin case specifically, Emma was able to make the connection between her sister’s suffering and her own:

I really liked practicing tonglen meditation in class. I’ve never meditated before, but I found it cleansing. Last night, my younger sister was lamenting to me about things going on in her life and I felt like I was carrying her suffering as my own, so it was nice to feel like I could actually help her even when I can’t be with her. I like to think that it can also help with the collective sadness, the collective shadow beasts Anzaldúa talks about, like we’ve talked about in class, caused by all the suffering and injustice around us.

And furthering blurring the distinction between the individual and the collective, as well as between the spiritual and the political, Tim, a student actively engaged in the labor movement both on campus and off, remarked that his new found practice of meditation would become integral to his more formal or conventional political organizing: “One thing that I plan to do is practice tonglen with the workers with whom I stand in solidarity,” he explained, “whether they are the unionizing workers here in our campus community or the workers in factories abroad.” As these students thoughts illustrate,
tonglen meditation is both an individual and collective practice, transforming our understanding of distance and relationality. In this way, people we know and those we may never meet seem more proximate than they would without the practice of tonglen meditation.

Several times throughout the quarter, I also invited students to engage in the practice of free-writing. Both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh understand the practice of writing, of writing with concentration and awareness, as a practice of meditation, a spiritual activity (Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas* 252). In *Interviews/Entrevistas*, Anzaldúa writes “I’m either in the future or the past and never in the present….Last May I realized that what I do in meditation is no different than washing my face or typing on the typewriter” (38). Similarly Nhat Hanh insists that any activity we engage in from drinking a cup of tea to picking up litter can be a practice of meditation, if done mindfully (*Being Peace* 53; *Interbeing* 6). Therefore writing, if engaged in with full awareness, can produce new insights and/or be experienced as meditative. Following Anzaldúa’s contention that “Writing is about freeing yourself up, about giving yourself the means to be active, to take agency, to make changes,” I structured writing exercises that encouraged students to tap into and sort out ideas around identity, dualistic thinking, and expanding definitions of activism, spirituality, and feminism (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 265). Through meditative writing, I pushed my students to unlearn or let go of the oppositional frameworks their upbringing, their education, and their activism have socialized them to adopt. As such, free-writing exercises and out-of-class “Check-In” assignments also functioned as sites of healing both individual and collective wounds.
(See Appendix C, “Check-In Prompts”). In this way, our use of meditative writing was both a spiritual practice and a political practice, one that allowed us to “articulate ideas and feelings that in the effort to be academic enough might otherwise be lost to the cosmos” (Lara, “Healing Sueños” 437). Inspired by Irene Lara’s conceptualization of writing as prayer in her essay “Healing Sueños for Academia,” Verlouria wrote, “I would like to offer our class a prayer:

May these words heal our ears of hate speech
May these words heal our eyes of violence and
LONG LIVE ZIMMERMAN⁴³ on a brick wall
May these words heal our feet of the hot coals of cold hearts
May these words heal our mouths of the blood of bitten tongues and the taste of our own oppression
May these words heal our hands of taking what we did not need

May these words heal our collective suffering”⁴⁴

This prayer draws on both our individual and collective experiences of pain, self-reflection, and personal growth from throughout the quarter. Using meditative writing, Velouria offered our class a prayer for connecting across difference, recognizing our complacency and the ways we act as accomplices to injustice and oppression, acknowledging our pain and suffering, and touching our freedom through self-healing and transformation (Lara, “Healing Sueños” 437).

sharing/storytelling

When you shared with us it was almost like you were telling us that you trusted us. Our trust formed through the storytelling. –Meg⁴⁵

The third characteristic of a spiritualized feminist pedagogy is sharing/storytelling. Both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh engage in the practice of storytelling as a way to give voice to and make meaning out of their experiences. In this way, the
practice of storytelling provides opportunities to connect or bridge across our shared experiences and heal our individual and collective wounds. Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh also use storytelling as a method of teaching, an instrument through which new and alternative forms of knowledge are created and shared. Storytelling, as a method of teaching and epistemology, presents students with opportunities to imagine new ideas and approaches for creating social transformation.

As I discussed in chapter two, Anzaldúa used the practice of storytelling, of sharing deeply about her life, as a way to make meaning out of her experiences, many of which were quite painful, such as early menstruation, the death of her father, a hysterectomy, and a diabetes diagnosis. Her use of storytelling, her willingness to share so openly and intimately with her readers, sets her apart from other theorists and artists. Scholars AnaLouise Keating, Irene Lara, and Caren Neile, among others, have written about the ways Anzaldúa’s willingness to share, encouraged them to share, to be vulnerable, to take risks in their writing, and write outside the conventions of academia.46

Like Anzaldúa, Nhat Hanh insists that storytelling produces new forms of knowledge and insight. Our own lives, not theoretical research, provide insight and understanding (Interbeing 8). For Nhat Hanh, the practice of storytelling, as a teaching strategy, engages the Buddhist concept of skillful means, that is, a method or approach to teaching that takes seriously the needs of the students, sharing only when it is relevant and helpful to the student (Interbeing 8).

In the previous section, I expressed anxiety around sharing aspects of my life with my students, specifically my understanding and practice of spirituality. Again, having
relied on the NASW *Code of Ethics* to guide my sharing and storytelling practices in the past, I was hesitant to share experiences from my life in WGSS 320 for fear of losing (or not earning) my students’ trust and respect and/or blurring professional boundaries, as discussed in the previous section. However, I knew that if I wanted to create and nurture a community within our classroom space, I *had* to share and Jayne confirmed this, stating, “You had to share, in order to be a member of the group, for us to even be a group. Otherwise, it would just be a class with a teacher instead of a community.”

Certainly, the practice of sharing and storytelling has long been a central component of feminist pedagogy. The act of sharing stories from our life and giving voice to our experiences is necessary for raising awareness/consciousness and creating social change. The feminist mantra, “the personal is political,” undoubtedly speaks to this idea, drawing attention to the relationship between the private and the public. However, in a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy*, the practice of sharing/storytelling plays a number of different roles in the classroom.

First, like Anzaldúa, members of our classroom Sangha shared experiences from their life, specifically stories from their childhood, in order to both make sense of some of their present day behaviors and chart their own growth or personal transformation, Renée stipulated:

> I grew up as an only child, reacting to situations the way my father and mother would. My mother would be consumed in anxiety….my father, filled with rage, and anger. I’ve been known to resort to violence and screaming, and I am known to let my ‘unaddressed feelings’ simmer for a long time until I suddenly snap….I came into this classroom as a mini-version of my father…[but] lately my thoughts and actions have been very different. I’m feeling more compassionate and loving lately. I guess what’s been so hard is the dealing-with-my-shit aspect of the self-transformation process.”

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Throughout the quarter, Renée, more than anyone else in the class, shared deeply her struggle with anger and acting out violently in both her personal life and her activist life. Sharing stories from her childhood and young adulthood with the classroom Sangha provided her the space to work through, make sense of, and draw connections between the violent methods of communication and problem-solving she received from her family and the violence and rage she was using to fuel her activist practice.

Second, members of our classroom Sangha shared stories of trauma and loss in order to be able to read and explore the course material “with an open, mindful heart” (“Shifting Perspectives” 250). For example, Jayne, who shared with us her experience of being raped, did so in an effort to communicate her struggle or discomfort with an aspect of Nhat Hanh’s theory of interbeing. Specifically Nhat Hanh says, "But according to the teachings of the Buddha, your body is not yours. Your body belongs to your ancestors, your parents, and future generations. It belongs to society and to all other living beings" (“Diet for a Mindful Planet” 19). In response to this quote and our in-class discussion, Jayne commented,

Initially when I read this I stopped at "your body is not yours" and read it over and over again just trying to make sense of that first sentence. As a victim of sexual violence I know that my body is mine and I have a right to control it, just as I have a responsibility to protect it. I can understand this idea of interbeing and I am confident that Nhat Hanh would in no way condone sexual abuse or any other kind of violence. It's the wording itself that I have a problem with. That very sentence carries a specific meaning for me that I cannot let go of at this point in my healing process. The idea is a beautiful one, but it is the language he used that stepped on my toes. I'm glad that it was brought up though. I'm also glad that I can share these things with our classroom Sangha because texts we read and the work we do in our classroom realistically applies to the suffering I am currently working through. If anything, this class has sped up my healing process because it
I quote Jayne’s reaction to this particular passage and our class discussion at length because it so clearly demonstrates the tension she felt between her own experience and Nhat Hanh’s discussion of the body. Moreover, Jayne’s reflection also illustrates the relationship between course themes and concepts and our material lives, as well as captures the sense of trust and safety we nurtured within our community, the significance of sharing our stories in the context of community, and the healing power of the classroom Sangha. “These healing narratives serve not just self-nurturing ‘therapy,’ but actually change reality,” they change our perception of the experience and our reaction to it (Anzaldúa, “Let us be the healing of the wound” 313). Throughout the quarter, students referred back to Jayne’s willingness to share both her story of sexual assault and her struggle with the concept of interbeing, as it was articulated in Nhat Hanh’s quotation above. In reflecting on the role of sharing in WGSS 320, Velouria focused on Jayne’s decision to share, and stated, “Jayne’s sharing wasn’t just to share or get therapy from us. She couldn’t experience the material without working through the idea of her body being hers or not being hers. It was critical for her. I don’t think she could read past that so it was like she had to share. Her experience was deeply rooted in what we were talking about.”

Third, our classroom Sangha engaged in the practice of sharing our “shadow-beasts,” Anzaldúa’s concept referring to “aspects of yourself…you don’t want to own” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 553). Like Renée from above who expressed feeling like a “huge, explosive ball of rage,” Velouria who admitted, “I have a big problem with road
rage,” and Emma who shared that she is “quick to anger,” each of us engaged in the practice of sharing our “darker aspects,” admitting to embarrassing and even shameful behaviors or ways thinking (553). This practice of sharing, of looking deeply at ourselves and our own suffering, can, according to Nhat Hanh, “have a therapeutic power,” one that pushes us to seek out the roots of our suffering, “to find out what is going on within us,” so that we will not create suffering in others (Interbeing 30). In this way, our practice of sharing was “not just for ourselves, but for others and the whole of society,” it was at once inner and outer—a method for engaging in self-reflection and self-change and a means through which to connect with others, alleviating or preventing further suffering, and healing our individual and collective wounds.

Lastly, as the instructor, the practice of sharing also took the role of my full participation in all aspects of the course. This meant that I re-read each of the course texts along with my students each week, highlighting, underlining, and re-writing my notes with my students in mind. This also meant that I engaged in each of the contemplative practices, including the free-writing exercises, sometimes sharing out loud what I had written. Additionally, I participated in our online discussions that took place outside of class, and wrote and submitted (to the classroom Sangha) writing assignment “Check-In #4,” where I reflected on my experiences constructing and teaching the course, highlighting the most significant moments and most challenging moments of the quarter. Of my engagement in the course, Velouria remarked, “You really were sharing the experience with us, as in doing the reading with us and then sharing your new perspectives, you know, after having gone back again, and re-reading it with all of us in
mind. That to me was really part of your sharing.” Engaging with the course materials alongside my students not only allowed me to more fully share in the classroom experience, but also contributed to the sense of community we nurtured throughout the quarter.

flexibility, fluidity, shifts

*While the course material guides us, we are not constrained by it as a class. The class seems to operate with a flexibility & freedom that allows us to drift from course material in a productive way.*

Certainly, flexibility in the classroom is an important pedagogical practice—to be open, to be prepared for anything, to expect the unexpected. However, in a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy*, the practice of flexibility is more than just being open and adaptable. Flexibility in a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* is a willingness to be challenged by the course material and members of the classroom Sangha; it is a willingness to reimagine, reconsider, and rewrite ideas or beliefs you hold, as well as course policies and assignments to fit the changing needs of the students; and it is a willingness to shift between roles, that is, between the role of teacher and student.

Both Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh allow for flexibility, fluidity, and shifts in their theorizing and their practice. Throughout her career, Anzaldúa demonstrated this flexibility, this willingness to reevaluate, reimagine, and rewrite her theories for social transformation, as her own understandings of identity and spirituality shifted. Over her thirty-year long career, we read along as borderlands shifted into nepantla, the new mestiza shifted to the nepantlera, and spiritual mestizaje was reimagined as the seven stages of conocimiento (Delgadillo 9). In her text *Spiritual Mestizaje*, Theresa Delgadillo

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saying of Anzaldúa “That [she] would willingly engage in this revision of her ideas speaks
to her intellectual humility and depth of commitment to social justice” and thus her
flexibility (9). Moreover, Anzaldúa invited others/us to take up her work, build on it,
reimagine it, and apply it to new ideas or perspectives (Reuman 5).

Like Anzaldúa, Nhat Hanh engages in the practice of revising, reinventing, and
rewriting his philosophy and practice of engaged Buddhism as his own perspectives
change, as well as the needs and perspectives of a changing culture. For example, in
order to teach or guide students on their path toward enlightenment and peace, Nhat Hanh
uses the practice of skillful means (mentioned above), creative and innovative ways to
meet students where they are. Changing his approach, crafting new and/or alternative
pedagogies, and practicing nonattachment to views and beliefs, he demonstrates “a
willingness to be open and to change” (Interbeing 9). Moreover, in the last forty years,
Nhat Hanh has revised and rewritten the Five Mindfulness Trainings and the Fourteen
Mindfulness Trainings (discussed in chapter three), stating “we have to keep our
meditation practices up to date and respond to the real situation in the world” in order to
meet the needs of an ever changing society (Peace is Every Step 31; Being Peace 88;
Interbeing 7).

As I discussed in the previous section, I engaged with the course materials and
participated in course writing assignments alongside my students in WGSS 320 in an
attempt to share the full experience of the class. My decision to engage in the course as a
full participant required that I approach the class with an attitude of flexibility,
nonattachment, and a willingness to shift between teacher and ‘student.’

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not stated anywhere in the syllabus that students may handwrite their assignments (in fact, it explicitly states that assignments should be typed), a few students felt they could express their ideas and/or work through the course materials more openly and honestly through the experience of writing by hand. Speaking to this flexibility in course policies, Velouria expressed, “To know that I could handwrite my stuff. It better suited what I felt at the time. Handwriting it just seemed more real to me. I didn’t even hesitate to do it and then I thought ‘dang I should’ve asked her’ and I never even considered that you wouldn’t really be cool with that. But you didn’t care. And I didn’t work any less hard on it”57 The flexibility that I practiced in the classroom also extended to the often rigid teacher/student roles observed in educational settings.

In his “Foreword” to Learning True Love, Nhat Hanh says, “My students are also my teachers” (ix). In WGSS 320, my students were also my teachers – drawing new and different connections between course materials (theorists and topics), sharing fresh and alternative insights and perspectives, and introducing me to new forms of contemplative practice. By engaging in this practice of flexibility, I challenged the hierarchy or division between teacher and student, where the teacher only teaches and the student only learns. According to Nhat Hanh, “To inflexibly embrace a view and regard it as truth is to end the vital process of inquiry and awakening” (Interbeing 25). To be sure, had I clung to my role as teacher, unaware of or denying the experiences, insights, and perspectives my students had to offer, I would have cheated myself (and potentially my students) of the vitality of inquiry and awakening. A few days after the quarter ended, Meg sent me an email that included a post-script, drawing connections between our class and her own
experience teaching mindfulness, she writes, “p.s. I was teaching mindfulness and transformation of feelings to my 3rd grade friend the other day, and it was so much fun! She was so receptive to it! (And as we practiced together I became both teacher and student--and felt like you!)”

conclusion

I am more motivated to care because I know I’m cared about by all of you.”—Renée

A spiritualized feminist pedagogy, built on the spiritual and the contemplative, teaches the whole student—mind, body, spirit. Each of the four characteristics that constitute a spiritualized feminist pedagogy—building a classroom Sangha, contemplative practice, sharing/storytelling, and flexibility—creates an academic environment where each member of the classroom Sangha, the students and the instructor, not only feel listened to, supported, cared for, and respected, but then use their experience of being part of such a community to act or engage in the work of social transformation. For instance, Renée shared, “These principles have changed the way I perceive my own personal anger and isolation, my frustration at how I’ve felt along with the world’s problems with little to no agency as an activist.” In this way, a spiritualized feminist pedagogy provides students with the tools to engage in the work of personal transformation, healing our individual wounds (“inner work”), in order to engage in the work of radical social transformation (“public acts”) (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 540).

My experiences developing and teaching this course and witnessing my students’ transformation and healing affirms something I have been thinking about, something that has been underlying this project all along, namely that there is a gap in the curriculum, in
the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies specifically, but in the academy broadly, where the spiritual/spirituality belongs. Within the walls of the academy, the intellectual and the spiritual have been positioned in opposition to one another when such a division does not exist. I insist that the students in WGSS 320 were searching for something to fill this gap in their education when they registered for this course, even if they could not recognize or identify that need, as in the case of Meg who wrote, “I continually reflect on my original decision to take this class—what brought me here, why I chose this class of all others for my last elective—and I have to just sigh and shake my head because I don’t even want to think about what my life would be like now had I not taken this class.”

Jayne offered a similar sentiment:

I think it's amazing that our class can so openly discuss such deep and complicated topics.... Being able to take what I/we have learned from our readings and apply it to my close relationships has made me feel extremely grateful for our class. Women’s Studies & feminism and my desire to work for social change has always been connected to this longing or this spiritual hunger I feel, and finally, this quarter, I am fed. I feel full and powerful when I leave our class and I'm happy that I can share that with the people around me.

What I have encountered in WGSS 320 are comments and reflections on a similar theme: the desire to get more out of one’s educational experience. In the case of my students, they expressed a need to be addressed and taught holistically rather than trained to be productive members of a neoliberal society. A spiritualized feminist pedagogy provides a framework for a kind of holistic education that cultivates skills for surviving multiple and overlapping oppressions; develops a space to act from a place of love and compassion rather than anger and rage; and encourages students to relate across differences in their academic and daily lives. In short, a spiritualized feminist pedagogy
is directed towards the mind/body/spirit selves that constitute the individual student, the classroom collective, and beyond; it does not train students to be workers alone. Instead, a spiritualized feminist pedagogy encourages students to acknowledge their interbeing and to act based on that knowledge.
Epilogue: Future Directions in a Spiritualized Feminist Pedagogy

In this epilogue, I offer reflections and ideas for future research and investigations connected to feminist spiritual activism, engaged Buddhism, and my theory and practice of a spiritualized feminist pedagogy. It is my hope that these reflections will serve as starting points for scholars in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies to further their own explorations into the various frameworks and paradigms discussed in this project.

Throughout this text, I included references to womanist scholar and spiritual activist, Layli Maparyan. Greatly influenced by the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and Thich Nhat Hanh, Maparyan offers what I consider to be a radical revisioning of womanism/womanist theorizing. While I shied away from engaging in/with her scholarship directly in this project, my students in WGSS 320 found Maparyan’s “Introduction” to The Womanist Reader, as well as her latest publication, The Womanist Idea, to be among the most influential texts we explored with regard to the development of their own definition and practice of spiritual activism. Meg, a crop science major, was especially inspired by Maparyan’s work and developed her own theory and practice she called “womanist agriculture,” an approach that combines crop science and womanist spiritual activism. Maparyan’s theory and practice of womanist spiritual activism will play a prominent role in future revisions of this project. Specifically, I intend to incorporate the five characteristics that define womanism, according to Maparyan: 1. antioppressionist; 2. vernacular; 3. nonideological; 4. communitarian; and 5. spiritualized,

The practice of engaging one’s imagination also played a significant role in our classroom experience. In the spirit of honesty, I should note that I had not even realized the role imagination played in our class discussions and contemplative practices. Rather, the students of WGSS 320 made this astute observation. During the focus group, Velouria, Meg, Helena, and Renée addressed the significance of engaging their creativity and imagination in order to envision new and alternative ways of knowing and acting (in the direction of social transformation). Velouria shared, “we used our imagination in this class to envision something better, to envision new ways of being and thinking. Even Nhat Hanh’s theory of interbeing requires that we use our imagination. For me, imagination was just as central to our class as anything else.” In future revisions, I will incorporate the role of imagination, as the fifth component to a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy*.

While theoretical considerations are central to the reflections I offer in this epilogue, considerations of a mostly pragmatic nature are also worthy of mention. Throughout Spring quarter, a number of students enrolled in WGSS 320, specifically those students majoring in science, math, and agriculture, made observations of the differences between our class and classes within their home discipline, sharing such sentiments as: “we would never discuss these things in a crop science class,” “it’s so nice to come to this class and take a break from all the capital ‘T’ truth stuff in science,” and “I can’t imagine engaging in contemplative practices in my math classes.” I was not
surprised by these perspectives. In fact, I have heard similar statements from my peers and colleagues in conversation around my research for this project, and specifically, my theory and practice of a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy*. I have been asked, for example: “How would you incorporate the tenets of a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* in a course outside of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies?” And, “how would you incorporate the tenets of a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* in a large lecture hall, or even in a class with more than 15 students?” Each of these observations and questions are important and deserve more attention than the space available in this epilogue. Never-the-less, at this juncture, I can offer the following approaches for applying a *spiritualized feminist pedagogy* in a classroom outside of the discipline of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies. For the purposes of this exercise, let’s turn our attention to the space of an undergraduate mathematics classroom.

While it may not be appropriate to ask students to engage in contemplative practices like tonglen meditation or walking meditation in a math class, math instructors themselves might consider engaging in meditation or mindfulness practices, such as walking meditation and/or in-and-out conscious breathing, before, during, and after class in an effort to be prepared, focused, and present while teaching. In addition to engaging in contemplative practices outside of the classroom, the instructor might consider using intentional silence at the beginning of each class, similar to the way I suggest in chapter four, as a way to assist her students in transitioning from non-class time to class time. Providing students with a minute of silence to transition into class time helps bring their attention to the present moment, to focus, and center themselves. The instructor might
also engage her students in free-writing exercises at the beginning or end of class. While there may be fewer opportunities to engage students in the practice of free-writing or meditative writing in a math class, a math instructor interested in engaging her students in a more holistic way, that is, in a way that recognizes that each student brings with them unique experiences, strengths and weaknesses, and fears and insecurities, could ask her students to respond to a version of the following writing prompt in class: “I would describe my previous experiences in the math classroom as ________. I am most successful in math classes where the instructor _________. My biggest fear or anxiety in the classroom, or math classroom, specifically, is ________.” Questions such as these allow students the opportunity to reflect on and share their previous academic experiences, preferred learning style, and classroom-based anxieties, while simultaneously providing the instructor with insights that will assist her in engaging her students in the teaching and learning process, as well as help her more effectively respond to her students’ needs. In this way, the practice of free-writing not only provides the students and the instructor with opportunities to get to know themselves and one another through self-reflective writing, but it also creates an opportunity for dialogue between teacher and students, thus bridging the gap and (potentially) deconstructing the (institutionally-imposed) hierarchy between teacher and students.

These more or less pragmatic concerns of extending the applicability of a spiritualized feminist pedagogy to different classroom settings have also led me to consider different conceptualizations around the nature of the classroom space. Drawing on both Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism, specifically her seven-step path of
conocimiento, and Thich Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism, I would like to expand on this current project to explore and theorize the classroom as a space of nepantla, an in-between space, a space of painful transition and growth. Moreover, I will explore the possibility that the classroom teacher can potentially become a nepantlera, or “supreme boarder crosser,” whose responsibility lies in being “present with the pain of others” (“(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces” 3-4). I think of this nepantlera/teacher as someone who could guide students from diverse backgrounds “between and among worlds,” supporting and nurturing community-building, and providing space for students to engage in compassionate dialogue and reconciliation (“(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces” 3-4).

Additionally, rethinking the space of the classroom through the work of Anzaldúa and Nhat Hanh led me to consider expanding and revising AnaLouise Keating’s listening with raw openness. Specifically, I would like to propose a practice I am calling “reading with raw openness.” Reading with raw openness, like listening with raw openness, requires that we temporarily detach from ourselves and our past experiences, moving beyond stereotypes and preconceived ideas, in an effort to approach each text with a willingness to be changed or transformed by what we read (“Shifting Perspectives 250-251).

I first began thinking about this concept four years ago when I started teaching the course “Women and Addiction.” It came to my attention that a number of students enrolled in the course had personal (and oftentimes negative) experiences with addiction, experiences that impeded their ability to approach the material with an open and mindful
heart. Once I realized that students were struggling to fully engage with course texts as a result of their personal experiences, I began thinking seriously about how to encourage open, compassionate, and temporarily detached reading practices. Now, when I teach “Women and Addiction,” I begin each quarter with an introduction to “reading with raw openness” and invite my students to engage in a free-writing exercise where I ask: “What stereotypes, preconceived ideas, myths, past hurts and experiences will I have to (temporarily) let go of in order to fully engage with the course materials?” I have found that combining both the practice of “reading with raw openness” and free-writing early in the quarter helps students to approach the material from a place of empathy and compassion, rather than pain, resentment, and judgment.

I would like to close this epilogue with the words of Nhat Hanh, who speaks directly to the relationship between social activism and spirituality/spiritual practice, insisting, as do I, that if we, scholar-activists, hope to create any kind of effective and sustainable social transformation, whether that is on the ground (in our communities), in our classrooms (with our students), and/or in our homes (with our families), we must begin engaging in the work of the spiritual:

Those of us who are activists always want very much to succeed in our attempt to help the world, but if we do not maintain balance between our work and our spiritual nutrition, our practice, we will not be able to go very far. This is why the practice of walking meditation, mindful breathing, getting in touch with the refreshing and healing elements in and around us is crucial for our survival. It will help us to continue for a long time. (Together We Are One 176)
From Judee L Genetin’s personal journal, September 6, 1998.

For further discussion on the feminist debate around New Age spirituality see Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism by Karlyn Crowley.

A gatha is a short meditation verse that brings “the energy of mindfulness to each act of daily life” (Nhat Hanh, Zen Keys 24). For example, a gatha invented by Thich Nhat Hanh for answering the telephone is “Words can travel thousands of miles. May my words create mutual understanding and love. May they be beautiful as gems, as lovely as flowers” (24-25).

Sutras are canonical scriptures regarded as records of the oral teachings of Gautama Buddha.

“Emptiness” in this sense means “‘empty of a separate,’” it is a “celebration of interconnectedness, of interbeing” (Chan Khong 239).

For a full discussion the Five and Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings see Being Peace by Thich Nhat Hanh

The name, the Four Fold Sangha demonstrates the important role monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen play in engaged Buddhist collective action

Additionally, under the Diem government, Buddhists were subject to harassment for their religious identity, discrimination Nhat Hanh attributes to the influence of President Diem’s brother who was an archbishop in the Catholic Church.


At the “Together We Are One” retreat at Deer Park Monastery in Escondido, California (September 5-11) Nhat Hanh used the flower as the subject for beginning his talk on interbeing. Also see Peace is Every Step.

Ahimsa means nonviolence. See Peace is Every Step.

The names used in this chapter are pseudonyms chosen by the students in WGSS 320.

Email exchange between Renée and author, May 16, 2012.

In the 1990s, Anzaldúa organized a workshop for artists called Entre Americas: El Taller Nepantla. This workshop provided a space for a community of artists to come together and create works based on or in response to Anzaldúa’s theory and concept of nepantla. See Guisela Latorre’s forthcoming chapter, “Mestiza Aesthetics: Anzaldúaian Theories on Visual Art and Creativity” in Women in the Arts: Dialogues on Female Creativity (2012) edited by Diana Almeida y Paula Elyseu Mesquita.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

Similar strategies are described by Schoebelrin and Sheth in Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide for Anyone who Teaches Anything.

In-class conversation, April 18, 2012.

In-class conversation, April 18, 2012.

Student written assignment, “Final Essay,” submitted June 5, 2012

Email exchange between Meg and author, May 10, 2012.

Email exchange between Carlee Jo and author, May 11, 2012.

In-class conversation, May 7, 2012.

In-class conversation, May 7, 2012.

Verbal exchange between Meg and author, May 16, 2012.


Student written assignment, “Check-In #1,” submitted April 11, 2012.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.


Lecture notes, March 26, 2012.


1 From Judee L Genetin’s personal journal, September 6, 1998.
2 From Judee L Genetin’s personal journal, September 6, 1998.
3 For further discussion on the feminist debate around New Age spirituality see Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism by Karlyn Crowley.
4 A gatha is a short meditation verse that brings “the energy of mindfulness to each act of daily life” (Nhat Hanh, Zen Keys 24). For example, a gatha invented by Thich Nhat Hanh for answering the telephone is “Words can travel thousands of miles. May my words create mutual understanding and love. May they be beautiful as gems, as lovely as flowers” (24-25).
5 Sutras are canonical scriptures regarded as records of the oral teachings of Gautama Buddha.
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7 For a full discussion the Five and Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings see Being Peace by Thich Nhat Hanh
8 The name, the Four Fold Sangha demonstrates the important role monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen play in engaged Buddhist collective action
9 Additionally, under the Diem government, Buddhists were subject to harassment for their religious identity, discrimination Nhat Hanh attributes to the influence of President Diem’s brother who was an archbishop in the Catholic Church.
12 At the “Together We Are One” retreat at Deer Park Monastery in Escondido, California (September 5-11) Nhat Hanh used the flower as the subject for beginning his talk on interbeing. Also see Peace is Every Step.
13 Ahimsa means nonviolence. See Peace is Every Step.
14 The names used in this chapter are pseudonyms chosen by the students in WGSS 320.
15 Email exchange between Renée and author, May 16, 2012.
16 In the 1990s, Anzaldúa organized a workshop for artists called Entre Americas: El Taller Nepantla. This workshop provided a space for a community of artists to come together and create works based on or in response to Anzaldúa’s theory and concept of nepantla. See Guisela Latorre’s forthcoming chapter, “Mestiza Aesthetics: Anzaldúaian Theories on Visual Art and Creativity” in Women in the Arts: Dialogues on Female Creativity (2012) edited by Diana Almeida y Paula Elyseu Mesquita.
17 Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.
18 Similar strategies are described by Schoebelrin and Sheth in Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide for Anyone who Teaches Anything.
19 In-class conversation, April 18, 2012.
20 In-class conversation, April 18, 2012.
21 Student written assignment, “Final Essay,” submitted June 5, 2012
22 Email exchange between Meg and author, May 10, 2012.
23 Email exchange between Carlee Jo and author, May 11, 2012.
24 In-class conversation, May 7, 2012.
25 In-class conversation, May 7, 2012.
26 Verbal exchange between Meg and author, May 16, 2012.
28 Student written assignment, “Check-In #1,” submitted April 11, 2012.
29 Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.
31 Lecture notes, March 26, 2012.
Student written assignment, “Free-Write #1,” March 26, 2012.

Student written assignment, “Free-Write #1,” March 26, 2012.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

On April 4, 2012, the words “LONG LIVE ZIMMERMAN” were spray-painted on the side of The Frank W. Hale Jr. Black Cultural Center on the campus of The Ohio State University.

Student written assignment, “Check-In #4,” submitted May 23, 2012.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

For more on these themes see EntreMundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa and this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation.

Student written assignment, “Final Essay,” submitted June 5, 2012


Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

Student written assignment, “Final Essay,” submitted June 5, 2012

Student written assignment, “Check-In #1,” submitted April 11, 2012.

Student written assignment, “Free-Write #3,” April 9, 2012.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

Email exchange between Meg and author, May 16, 2012.

For a discussion on the Buddhist concept of nonattachment to views, see Nhat Hanh’s Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism.

I put the word student in scare quotes to make note that while I participated in the course in a way similar to my students and allowed my students to teach me things, I still held administrative power.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.

Email exchange between Meg and author, June 7, 2012.

In-class conversation, May 7, 2012.


Student written assignment, “Check-In #4,” submitted May 23, 2012.

Email exchange between Jayne and author, April 24, 2012.

Focus group discussion, June 11, 2012.


---. “Foreword to *Cassell’s Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol, and Spirit*.”


286. Print.


Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. “In the Borderlands of Chicano Identity, There Are Only
Fragments.” *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*. Ed. Scott
Michaelsen and David E. Johnson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,


Torres, Monica. “‘Doing Mestizaje’: When Epistemology Becomes Ethics.”
*EntreMundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*. Ed.

Appendix A: Syllabus

The Ohio State University

The Department of Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies

Spring 2012

Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies 320:

Holistic Theories of Social Transformation: Spiritual Activism & Engaged Buddhism

We are well-practiced at educating the mind for critical reasoning, critical writing, and critical speaking as well as scientific and quantitative analysis. But is this sufficient? In a world beset with conflicts, internal as well as external, isn’t it of equal if not greater importance to balance the sharpening of our intellects with the systemic cultivation of our hearts? We must, indeed, learn to love. Educators should join with their students to undertake this most difficult task.

-- Arthur Zajonc

Instructor: Victoria A. Genetin MA, MSW
Office: University Hall 286K
Email: victoriagenetin@hotmail.com
Office Hours: Monday & Wednesday 12:00-1:00pm

Accommodation of students with disabilities
Students who wish to have an accommodation for disability are responsible for contacting the professor and TA as soon as possible. The Office for Disability Services (150 Pomerene Hall; 292-3307; 292-0901 TDD) verifies the need for accommodations and assists in the development of accommodation strategies.
Course Description

This course explores the relationships between spirituality and social activism and personal transformation and social transformation. Using the theories and practices of feminist and/or womanist spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism, we take up the following questions: What is the relationship between spirituality and social justice? What is the relationship between personal transformation and social transformation? Is there a place for spirituality in the academy, or in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, specifically? What counts as feminist/womanist activism? In other words, is teaching a form of activism? What about parenting, mindful eating, or gardening? Using feminist/womanist spiritual activism and engaged Buddhism as our lens, we explore such topics as pedagogy, vegetarianism/veganism, and parenting. Additionally, students in this course will engage in contemplative practices such as deep listening, meditation, mindful eating, and intentional silence, as we explore and consider the practice of feminist/womanist activism and what role, if any, spirituality plays.

Course Goals

Upon successful completion of this course, students will have: 1) an increased understanding of the relationship between personal transformation and social transformation; spirituality and the academy; and spirituality and political activism; 2) a more complicated or nuanced understanding of the following concepts: “activism,” “spiritual/spirituality,” “nonviolence,” and “womanism/womanist theorizing;” 3) increased knowledge of contemplative practices such as meditation, mindful eating, and deep listening and the (potential) benefits of engaging in such practices; and 4) enhanced reading, writing, listening, and critical thinking skills.

Required Texts


Additional course materials will be posted on Carmen.

Course Requirements and Grade Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance &amp; Participation (1 Freebie/~3pts each)</td>
<td>50 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Discussion Questions (5pts each)</td>
<td>40 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Discussion Responses (5pts each)</td>
<td>40 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Book Club” Talking Notes</td>
<td>50 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Check-Ins (5pts each)</td>
<td>20 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Essay</td>
<td>100 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL POINTS** 300 points
Grading Scale:

- A  93-100%   279-300
- A- 90-92%   270-278
- B+ 87-89%   261-269
- B  83-86%   249-260
- B- 80-82%   240-248
- C+ 77-79%   231-239
- C  73-76%   219-230
- C- 70-72%   210-218
- D+ 67-69%   201-209
- D  60-66%   180-200
- E  < 60%   < 180

Course Requirements

1. **Attendance**
   Attendance: You are expected to attend every class session. You will lose 3 points for each class absence. In this course students will not be penalized for arriving late or leaving early; however, I expect you to be on time for class. I hope you come to understand this class and your fellow colleagues as an academic family, community, or what I am calling a “classroom Sangha” and thus respect one another and the space by being on time and present.

   **If you must miss class (due to illness or an unforeseen circumstance) I ask that you email the entire class (rather than just me), as each one of us (and our class discussions) is impacted by class absences. I will talk more about this in class on day one.**

   Participation: Participation is a critical component of the learning experience. In this course, I understanding participation to include: 1. engaging in in-class dialogue; 2. deep listening or “listening with raw openness” (we will explore this concept in class); 3. engaging in discussion online through Carmen; and 4. participating in in-class contemplative practices such as meditation, mindful walking, mindful eating, and contemplative silence. Clearly, if you are not in class, you are unable to engage in class discussions (as the speaker or the listener), nor are you able to participate in our large-group contemplative practices. I expect (as I hope you expect from yourselves, from each other, and from me) that you come to class having completed the assigned readings. Please bring the assigned course readings with you to every class.

2. **Weekly Discussion Quests/Responses**
   Each week you will design 1 discussion question based on the reading for that week and 1 response post to a peer’s discussion question on Carmen (due after class). The discussion questions will guide our class discussion, while the response posts will help facilitate discussion after class is over. All questions must be posted on Carmen by Sunday **OR** Tuesday at 8pm and all responses must be posted on Carmen by Tuesday **OR** Thursday at 8pm.
3. ‘Book Club’ Talking Notes

On the first day of class you will divide up into groups of 3-4 students. This group is your “book club.” Each book club will select a text from the list of options below to read together and present on during Week Seven. Each group will: (a) prepare a 3-4-page handout about your text (“Talking Notes”); (b) post the handout to the discussion board on Carmen; (c) distribute the handout in class; and (d) lead a brief discussion on your selected text during class.

This assignment is different from other group assignments in that it calls on you to engage with the text together, as a community of readers and thinkers. It is my hope that each ‘book club’ meets to talk about their text twice (once when everyone is about half way through the text and once when everyone has completed the text). This is a collaborative activity, an opportunity to work within community, to read along together. We will talk more about this on day one of class.

“Talking Notes” Format: I do not want you to write an essay. Instead, please use bullet points and, where appropriate, short paragraphs. Your handout should be typed, single-spaced, and 3-4 pages in length with the text’s full citation in MLA format at the top of the page. (You may use 11-inch or 12-inch Times New Roman font). Please include the following information and headings in your Talking Notes:

- **Summary**: Summarize the text, focusing on issues related to spiritual activism, social justice, and transformation. Explain why you did or did not find the author’s discussion persuasive and compelling.
- **Outline**: Outline the text structure (including page numbers)
- **Exemplary Quotation(s)**: Select three to five key quotations that seem to best illustrate the text. In two to four sentences (per quotation), explain why/how the quotation illustrates the text.
- **Feminist/Womanist Connections**: What other readings from our course does your text resemble? List two to three other course texts. In three to five sentences (for each related text), explain the resemblances you see. Is this text feminist or womanist? Is this text relevant to feminist and/or womanist discussions/projects?
- **Lessons Learned**: What lessons and insights, if any, did you gain from this text? In what ways, if any, did this text help you to expand or in other ways hone your definition of spirituality, activism, or spiritual activism? How does this article fit with your growing understanding of spiritual activism?

Possible Texts:

2. Thomas, Claude. *At Hell’s Gate: A Soldier’s Journey from War to Peace*

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1 “Talking Notes” assignment borrowed & adapted from Dr. AnaLouise Keating’s course: WS 5853-50 “Spiritual Activism: Social Justice Theories for Holistic Transformation,” Fall 2010

4. Dalai Lama. *My Spiritual Journey*

5. Bedi, Kiran. *It’s Always Possible: One Woman’s Transformation of India’s Prison System*  
   (*Recommended essay: “Turning a Prison into an Ashram: Kiran Bedi and *It’s Always Possible*” from *The Womanist Idea*)

### 4 Check-Ins

Four times throughout the quarter you will be asked to submit a 1-2 page “Check-In.” These are low-stakes, informal writing assignments that provide us an opportunity to “Check-In” with each other throughout the quarter. We will talk about the specific details of each “Check-In” in class the week before they are due.

### 5. Final Paper

Drawing on course texts and class discussions, you will 1) develop your definition and version of spiritual activism (i.e., a social justice theory for holistic transformation). 2) Apply your definition to a person (a theorist, activist, artist, writer, politician, educator, etc.) or an organization (NOW, GLAAD, Amethyst, Inc., BPF, etc.) or a practice (therapy, social work, nursing, etc.) which you believe effectively illustrates and perhaps expands your definition. You must receive topic approval from me, and you may not change your topic without checking with me. This essay must be 7-10 pages in length and double spaced. You must use 5-7 course texts. This final essay functions as a final exam. This means that I expect you to demonstrate a breadth of knowledge that covers material from throughout the entire course. We will talk more about this on day one of class.

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**Academic Integrity**

As defined in University Rule #3353-31-02, plagiarism is “the representation of another’s works or their ideas as one’s own; it includes the unacknowledged word for word use and/or paraphrasing of another person’s work, and/or the inappropriate unacknowledged use of another person’s ideas.” Plagiarism is one of the most serious offenses that can be committed in an academic community; as such, it is the obligation of this department and its instructors to report all cases of suspected plagiarism to the Committee on Academic Misconduct. After the report is filed, a hearing takes place and if the student is found guilty, the possible punishment ranges from failing the class to suspension or expulsion from the university. Although the existence of the Internet makes it relatively easy to plagiarize, it also makes it even easier for instructors to find evidence of plagiarism. It is obvious to most teachers when a student turns in work that is not her or his own; plagiarism search engines makes documenting the offense simple.

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2 “Final Essay” assignment borrowed & adapted from Dr. AnaLouise Keating’s course: WS 5853-50 “Spiritual Activism: Social Justice Theories for Holistic Transformation,” Fall 2010
Always cite your sources (your TA or your professor can help you with this)
Always ask questions before you turn in your assignment if you aren’t sure what constitutes plagiarism
Always see your TA or professor if you are having difficulty with an assignment

To preserve the integrity of OSU as an institution of higher learning, to maintain your own integrity, and to avoid jeopardizing your future, DO NOT PLAGIARIZE!

Schedule of Class Meetings

All readings must be completed by class time on the date listed in the syllabus.
The following is a tentative schedule; I might change readings, due dates, or assignments. It is your responsibility to make sure that you are aware of changes, handouts, and any other issues or information related to this course.

Week One

M March 26: Introduction to the Course
Review Syllabus
In Class: Free Write #1
Discuss Research Project/Review Informed Consent Letters
Choose “Book Club” members

W March 28: Introduction to Theories of Social Transformation
Discuss: 1. Fernandes, “Introduction” Transforming Feminist Practice 7-22
2. Anzaldúa, “(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces” this bridge 1-5
3. Kraft, “Engaged Buddhism” Engaged Buddhist Reader 64-69
5. Nhat Hanh, “Suffering is Not Enough” Engaged Buddhist Reader 7-9

Week Two

M April 2: Introduction to Theories of Social Transformation
In Class: Free Write #2
Discuss: 1. Fernandes, “Practice” Transforming Feminist Practice 47-76
2. Fernandes, “Spirituality” Transforming Feminist Practice 101-118
3. Anzaldúa, “La Prieta” The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader 38-50

In Class: In preparation for next Monday’s class, I will offer background information on Anzaldúa in order to situate her & her work within a particular historical, geographical, and political context. Additionally, you should print off the glossary of Anzaldúan terms and concepts from Carmen.
W April 4: Spiritual Activism: Gloria E. Anzaldúa
Discuss: 1. Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” this bridge 540-578 (read this 2x!)
2. Anzaldúa, “Let us be the healing of the wound” The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader 303-317

Week Three

M April 9: Spiritual Activism: Gloria E. Anzaldúa & Others
In Class: Free Write #3
Discuss: 1. Lara, “Daughter of Coatlicue: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa” EntreMundos/Among Worlds 41-55
2. Keating, “Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, & the Politics of Spirit” EntreMundos/Among Worlds 241-254

W April 11: Womanist Spiritual Activism
DUE: Check-In #1
Discuss: 1. Phillips, “Introduction” Womanist Reader (read this 2x!)

Week Four

M April 16: Engaged Buddhism: Thich Nhat Hanh
Discuss: 1. Nhat Hanh, Peace is Every Step
2. Nhat Hanh, “Interbeing” Being Peace 83-103

In Class: I will offer background information on Nhat Hanh in order to situate him & his work within a particular historical, geographical, and political context.

W April 18: Engaged Buddhism: Thich Nhat Hanh
Discuss: 1. Nhat Hanh, “from Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities” A Lifetime of Peace: Essential Writings by and about Thich Nhat Hanh 273-294
2. Nhat Hanh, “from Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living” A Lifetime of Peace: Essential Writings 145-155
4. Nhat Hanh, “The Bells of Mindfulness” The World We Have 1-5

Week Five

M April 23: Engaged Buddhism: A Feminist or Womanist Epistemology?
In Class: Free Write #4
Discuss: Chan Khong, Learning True Love ix-124
In Class: Come prepared to talk about the possibility of understanding engaged Buddhism as a feminist or womanist epistemology. How might engaged Buddhism enter into feminist or womanist dialogues? Is engaged Buddhism feminist or womanist?

W April 25: Engaged Buddhism: A Feminist or Womanist Epistemology?
Discuss: Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* 126-229

Week Six

M April 30: Engaged Buddhism: A Feminist or Womanist Epistemology?
DUE: Check-In #2
In Class: Free Write #5

W May 2: Theories of Social Transformation: Pedagogy
3. Keating, “‘We are related to all that lives’: Creating ‘New’ Stories for Social Change” *Teaching Transformation* 22-40

Week Seven

M May 7: Theories of Social Transformation: “Academic Spirit Phobia”
Discuss: 1. Lara, “Healing Sueños for Academia” *this bridge* 433-438
2. Keating, “I’m a citizen of the universe’: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change” 53-69
3. Cervenak et. al.: “Imagining Differently: The Politics of Listening in a Feminist Classroom” *this bridge* 341-56

W May 9: **DUE:** “Book Club” Talking Notes

Week Eight

M May 14: Theories of Social Transformation: Veganism & Sustainable Living
DUE: Check-In #3
Discuss: 1. Nhat Hanh, “Diet for a Mindful Planet” *The World We Have* 17-32
3. Loyd-Paige, “Thinking and Eating at the Same Time” *Sistah Vegan* 1-7

**W May 16: Theories of Social Transformation: Veganism & Sustainable Living**

**Discuss:**
1. Nhat Hanh, “Mindful World” *Savor* 217-238
3. Nhat Hanh, “Beyond Environment: Falling Back in Love with Mother Earth”

**Week Nine**

**M May 21: Theories of Social Transformation: Parenting & Family**

**Discuss:**
1. Napthali, “buddhism and motherhood” *Buddhism for Mothers* 1-16
2. Napthali, “parenting mindfully” *Buddhism for Mothers* 17-40

**W May 23: Theories of Social Transformation: Parenting & Family**

**DUE:** Check-In #4

**In Class:** Free Write #6

**Discuss:**
2. Nhat Hanh, “cultivating our own mindfulness” *Planting Seeds* 41-62

**Week Ten**

**M May 28:** No Class! Memorial Day

**W May 30:** Wrap Up

**In Class:** Free Write #7

**Discuss:**
1. Nhat Hanh, “no enemies” *Together We Are One* 79-115
2. Nhat Hanh, “what is your true name?” *Together We Are One* 49-76

**Finals Week**

**T June 5:** University-scheduled Final Examination Period (9:30am-11:18am)

**DUE:** Final Essay
Appendix B: Free-Writing Prompts

1. What is your understanding of spirituality? How do you understand the relationship between spirituality and social justice? How comfortable are you talking about and exploring “spirituality/spiritualities?” How would you rate or describe your comfort level with regard to engaging in contemplative practices (like meditation, for example) in the classroom?

2. What is your understanding of “activism” or “feminist or womanist practice?” What counts as activism? And, what is your understanding of the relationship between spirituality and religion? Are they interchangeable terms/concepts? If not, why not?

3. List (and considering sharing with the class) 2-4 intentions for this week. What are some thoughts, behaviors, habits you would like to engage in this week? Or what are some thoughts, behaviors, patterns you would like stop engaging in this week? This might include not doing violence to yourself through negative self-talk; engaging in 25 minutes of meditation each morning; eating one meal a day mindfully; or engaging mindfully in one activity at a time, or multi-tasking less.

4. At this point, what similarities or connections do you see between engaged Buddhism and feminist and/or womanist spiritual activism? And, which text have been your favorites thus far and why?

5. Now that you’ve finished Sister Chan Khong’s *Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a Time of War*, what is “True Love?” How does Sister Chan Khong understand and practice “True Love?” How do you understand and practice “True Love?” Also, reflecting on your experiences in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies classrooms in the past, how often, if at all, have you talked about “True Love,” a method or tool for creating social change? Is practicing “True Love” a kind of feminist or womanist activism?

6. Return to some of the questions I asked you earlier in the quarter. Now, after 8 weeks of class, what is your understanding of spirituality? What is the relationship between spirituality and social justice? What is your understanding of
“activism” or “feminist or womanist practice?” How have your ideas shifted over time?

7. What ideas or practices from this course will you maintain? What ideas or practices from this course will you share with others? And, how will you share them in a way that is accessible and non-threatening, but true to their practice?
Appendix C: Check-In Prompts

1. -What are your initial thoughts on a topic for your final essay?  
-Share your experience or reactions to practicing tonglen meditation in our last class.  
-List 2-3 broad ideas or themes from our course readings you are considering for your final essay.

2. - Firm up your topic for your final essay.  
-List 3 specific readings you intend to draw from for your final essay.  
-Then in 2-3 sentences (for each reading), tell me how/why those essays/chapters are useful to you for your final essay.

3. -Write 2-3 thesis statement drafts (for your final essay).  
-My theory and practice of a spiritualized feminist pedagogy includes: creating a classroomSangha, contemplative practice, sharing/storytelling, and flexibility.  
Based on your experiences in our class thus far, would you say that this class/(my pedagogy) includes or allows for these 4 characteristics to exist? Would you add anything (any other characteristics) to the concept of a spiritualized feminist pedagogy? Would you take anything away? What would you change (that is, add to or take away), if anything, about the structure of this course?

4. -Based on the feedback I provided from Check-In #3, re-write 1-2 thesis statements for your final essay. Or write a draft of the introduction to your final essay.  
-Respond to any (at least 2) or all of the following questions:  
* What were your best or favorite moments from class? (or readings? Or practices?)  
* What were the most challenging moments from class? (or readings? Or practices?)  
* What did you learn about yourself through our class (through our discussions? Course readings? Or contemplative practices?)  
* What will you take with you from our class?  
* What ideas or practices will (or have you) shared with others outside of our class?  
* What ideas do you have for helping us to maintain our classroomSangha after our course ends?  
* Anything else you want to share or add?