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G. Sue Kasun

*Georgia State University*, [skasun@gsu.edu](mailto:skasun@gsu.edu)

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## Teacher Education Nepantlera Work: Connecting Cracks-Between-Worlds with Mormon University Students

G. Sue Kasun  
Utah State University  
U. S. A.

**ABSTRACT:** Teacher educators work with students of various backgrounds, often distinct from their own. This paper explores how one teacher educator examines her positionality in relation to Mormon students and how, despite not sharing their faith, she is able to work the “cracks-between-worlds” of difference and commonality toward understanding and learning. Through Anzaldúa’s concept of autohistoria-teoria, theorizing through one’s biography, the author explores and theorizes her experiences. She encourages educators to consider how they engage students, learn from other nepantleras (bridge-builders), and create more opportunities toward shared understanding while also complicating and letting go of a dogged sense of teaching students what is “right.”

**KEYWORDS:** Nepantla, teacher education, English as a Second Language (ESL), Mormons, autohistoria-teoria

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My undergraduate student Lauren (a pseudonym) and I drove through Sardine Canyon on a late summer day in 2014, among the dramatic mountains of Northern Utah, toward her hometown of Ogden. We chatted about what Latter-day Saints—commonly referred to as Mormons—believe, how she met her husband, and her hopes for her work as a future elementary school teacher. Lauren, a return missionary who had participated in my study abroad program that same summer in Mexico, agreed to give me a tour with my toddler and baby in tow, children she had lovingly babysat after returning from Mexico where she initially bonded with them. This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for me, a non-Mormon. Having lived in a predominantly Mormon community for only a year, I was about to step inside and tour the entirety of a Latter-day Saints, or LDS, temple as it had just been renovated and was open for a couple months to the public during an open house. Alabaster facades with art deco-inspired flourishes of alien-looking creatures, a sweeping, heaven-bound tower, and most importantly, the interior spaces so revered by LDS church members attracted

me. The building gleamed in every way, from high-polished wooden doorframes imported from Kenya to white marble staircases and thousands of crystals which formed multiple chandeliers. The baptismal font perched atop 12 bulls, the plush, white-carpeted rooms where “sealings” such as marriage are performed, the crowning jewel of the Celestial Room meant to inspire a sense of the divine, all awaited. As a minority who at times “passes” for LDS, the dominant culture in Northern Utah, I approached this as an opportunity to understand my students better. For example, I pass, when strangers assume the Spanish I speak with my two children was learned while I was on “mission,” presumably among Spanish speakers for at least 18 months, though I am quick to clarify otherwise. This visit made sense in my attempts to do research to be “culturally relevant” in my instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2009) at a predominantly Mormon university.

The visit was rich, complicating my own sense of spirituality and my emerging knowledge about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I observed the joy and pride with which LDS folks appreciated their space of worship and reflection. At the same time, I felt like an imposter, an onlooker, a woman raised Catholic, who couldn’t shake knowing this space was only open to me on loan. The space had been somehow cleansed so the unbelieving wouldn’t sully it and would be sealed again once we, the unbelieving, would leave. I could barely bring to consciousness these thoughts between my genuine gratitude for Lauren’s eagerness to share something she loves so passionately, her faith, and this space of worship--while juggling my children who I was certain were the least reverent among the thousands who were visiting the Temple that day. I also wrestled with feeling as if the interior of the Temple felt like a funeral parlor. Or was it that I brought the funeral parlor with me? Some of my most early-childhood memories are seared into my brain from the funeral parlor where my father was viewed when I was seven, where I viewed him. The fresh, immaculately arranged flowers in the Temple smelled like the same kind of sickening sweetness of my dad’s flower arrangements. This collision of questions of after-life, memories, gratitude, appreciation, chasing after my children is emblematic of the everyday for me in Logan, Utah, the main campus of Utah State, the town where I live.

While at the temple, did anyone know I wasn’t LDS? Lauren had tipped me off to wear a long skirt if I didn’t want to stand out. Did I look like the 40-year-old grandmother to my own children helping with their mother, who the observing might imagine was Lauren? Lauren was, after all, of a more typical child-bearing age by LDS standards than I. These are among the ambiguities I face as I teach in the Teacher Education and Leadership Department at Utah State University, a public university whose student body is approximately 80% LDS. This article addresses the following questions: How do I navigate a predominantly Latter-Day Saints public university with the objective of helping achieve social justice through my work in education as a faculty member in ESOL and bilingual education? What are the implications for considering my outsider status in this particular context? I contextualize the implications for educators who work with students who may be different, especially in terms of uneven outsider/insiderness.

## Theoretical Background/Conceptual Framework

I consider these questions through the lens of working to be a nepantlera, or one who engages the discomforts and liminal senses of the in-between in bridge-building work (Anzaldúa, 2002; Kasun, 2014). Anzaldúa (1999) describes *Nepantla* as:

a Nahuatl word for . . . the space between two worlds. It is a limited space, a space where you are not this or that but where you are changing. You haven't got into the new identity yet and haven't left the old identity behind either—you are in a kind of transition. (p. 237)

Anzaldúa (2002) explains that a nepantlera, or one who engages from Nepantla, shares “historias, ideas” and “forge[s] bonds across race, gender, and other lines, thus creating a new tribalism” (p. 574). This new tribalism is, in part, the project of creating a dynamic space where *all* belong. This space is oriented in understanding and recognizing realms beyond the merely rational and the thinking which occurs in the mind: “By developing and maintaining spiritual beliefs and values la nepantlera gives the group hope, purpose, identity” (p. 573). This spiritually-grounded hope allows the nepantlera to persist even when conditions are difficult. A nepantlera is skilled at finding connections even when they appear untenable. Keating (2011) explains:

*Nepantleras do not pick sides.* Instead, they witness to all sides. In epistemological terms, nepantleras use their views from these cracks-between-worlds to develop holistic, ‘connectionist’ approaches, enabling us to reconceive and perhaps transform the various worlds in which we exist. (p. 144)

The cracks-between-worlds to which Keating (2011) refers in this passage are borne out of the positioning the nepantlera takes on. She learns to view and apprehend situations from spaces unique to her experience and also from those with whom she is engaging, allowing her to peer from those points-of-view and new ones emerging from these cracks. For over a decade, I have been drawn to Anzaldúa’s (1999, 2002) work and those heavily influenced by her. I have been reading it closely, as I saw a connection between my life between-worlds as a bilingual Spanish speaker from a working class background (among so many other identities) engaging reality as a working professional. I also came to this literature because I have worked closely with Latino populations for two decades. In this liminal positioning in which I found myself among my students in Utah, I took comfort and a sense of hopeful agency in the role I might take on as a nepantlera in the way Anzaldúa and others have described it. At the same time, I recognize my reading of Anzaldúa’s work is always colored—if not also limited--by my whiteness, and that her work has different resonances among women of color, for instance.

There is a recently emerging trend in education literature for both K-12

teachers and college faculty about the role of the instructor as *nepantlera* (Aguilar-Valdez, et al., 2013; Fránquiz, Avila, & Ayala Lewis, 2013; Gutierrez, 2012; Reza-López, Huerta Charles, & Reyes, 2014). For instance, Reza-López, Huerta Charles, and Reyes (2014) explain about their own positioning in an article exploring *nepantlera* pedagogy, “We were cognizant of being different, of not belonging, of being regarded as the ‘other’—unfit.” (p. 109). This recognition of their unique positioning allowed them to create a new framing of pedagogy, one that is connectionist in terms of understanding the experiences of students along the Mexico-U.S. border in U.S. education, specifically. Fránquiz, et al. (2013) describe how they center a concern for being “advocates for social justice” as part of their “teacher and researcher identities as *nepantleras*” (p. 143). Similarly, Aguilar-Váldez et al. (2013) describe the specific role of science teachers with their world-straddling students: “A *nepantler@* science teacher is not interested in students as parts to be divided, problems to be fixed, or commodities towards some other ends, but as deeply multifaceted wholes with real struggles as they negotiate between many worlds” (p. 855). Their empirical work shows how teachers engaged in a liminal space of understanding by working with students’ backgrounds in meaningful ways. The teachers also engaged their students as already-knowers toward increasing their students’ scientific knowledge and through newly created knowledges and understandings of *nepantlera* instructors. This stands in contrast to delivering a banking method (Freire, 2008) curriculum *at* or *on* students and imagining the students as devoid of what is commonly referred to as “prior knowledge” in education.

To be clear, *nepantlera* work is not easy or without risks (Anzaldúa, 2002; Kasun, 2014). The direct instruction of a prescribed curriculum would be the safer route for a teacher who imagines her work to be apolitical and/or perhaps without personal impact on the heart of the learner. While the *nepantlera* always recognizes how deeply personal and relational the act of teaching is, she is aware of how she can not do this work while clinging to one positioning. Keating (2006) explains of *nepantleras*, “Their inability or refusal to remain within a single group or worldview makes them vulnerable to rejection, ostracism, and other forms of isolation” (p. 9). There will be those who will critique the work of the bridge-builder; her purposeful engagement is a threat to the business-as-usual work of education which supports and upholds those in the highest positions of power.

I am continually attempting to do bridge-building between the Whiteman, particularly those who work in education, and the subaltern, or the historically under-served in education. The subaltern’s liminal positioning offers much for all of us to learn with and from. I locate my lived experience as a working-class, White West Virginian as peripheral and even colonial within the U.S. (Kasun, 2013). This marginal positioning has helped me yearn for deeper understandings of both social justice and healing. By learning Spanish, living in Mexico for five years, working with English language learners, and immersing myself in formal and informal understandings of subaltern peoples, I have begun to develop new—while partial—lenses of understanding in attempts to do *nepantlera* work. I believe most people—even those who identify among the

White, middle class groups whom U.S. schooling is intended to benefit—are under-served. The U.S. educational system, like so many others, has been well critiqued as one that mostly molds students toward their lives as workers, even if it be for white collar positions (Spring, 2010, 2011). All the while, we live on a planet headed toward environmental catastrophe (Chomsky, 2013; Kahn, 2008), if not also political and economic devastation, wherein as Aihwa Ong (2007) explains, the vast majorities of people are headed toward “bare life” while an elite few with transnational, flexible citizenship are positioned to enjoy the security of gated communities. The education those in the economically powerful countries have received has not served us to avoid the trajectory in which we find ourselves, where 147 companies control the majority of the world’s wealth (Vitali, Glattfelder, & Battiston, 2011). The challenge is—how can we do nepantlera work toward facing these realities? For me, concretely, the question is how I can do this work among predominantly LDS students at Utah State University. I find myself in a unique outsider White minority among a group which at times has been historically marginalized yet currently exercises a great deal of privilege while reckoning with their shifting positionings. I attempt to answer this challenge based on my work, starting in summer 2013 through fall of 2014.

### Methodology/Context

This article is an exploration of my *autohistoria-teoria*, or what Anzaldúa (2002) describes as “a personal essay that theorizes” (p. 578) and can be performative while drawing others into the performance through a connected form of knowing. In this sense, I hope my process of *autohistoria-teoria* draws the reader into her own processes of reflection toward, as Anzaldúa would hope, creating better worlds (Sandoval, 2005). Anzaldúa has done this *autohistoria-teoria* expertly in *La Frontera/Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (1987), a text which has inspired an entire generation of Latina/Chicana women and others to engage their personal lives as valid texts to engage reality and theory construction. In this article, I examine and theorize my experiences through over a year’s work among LDS students at Utah State University, a public university in the United States. I teach two courses per semester and, specifically, I have been teaching groups of approximately 25 students in an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) strategies course for each of these semesters. I have also coordinated and led an annual four-week, social justice-oriented summer study abroad in Mexico. Following, I theorize through the lens of a nepantlera.

### Institution

Utah State University is a land-grant, public research university that serves students throughout the state in various capacities. About 80% of the nearly 28,000 students are LDS; just over half of these students are based on the Logan campus where I teach. The overwhelming majority of students are White, like me. The "About USU" page prominently features information about the graduate school of education, including its national ranking and the College of Education's research dollars ("About USU," 2014). Generally speaking, education majors are respected on campus, and the students are understood to be of high caliber. The quality of my colleagues and students was an important attracting factor, but, as so many of my friends cautioned, I wondered about the students. Would I find ways to connect? Would the students view me forever as outsider, and in so-being, thus unable to co-construct knowledge, about which I am so passionate, toward the pursuit of social justice in education?

### **Latter-day Saints**

Latter-day Saints, commonly referred to as Mormons, are perhaps one of the most misunderstood religious groups in the United States, if not in the world. There are about 6.4 million LDS in the United States or two percent of the US population; there are over 15 million LDS worldwide ("Facts and Statistics," 2014). Joseph Smith is the religion's first prophet, having established The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830 in the United States. Since Smith, there have been 14 direct successors to Smith whose headquarters are now in Salt Lake City, Utah. LDS church members are well aware of the many historic trials and persecutions suffered by their church as they struggled to have their religion be recognized in the United States. LDS are taught to take their beliefs quite seriously, even to the point of a sense of need to share their perspective throughout the world through 18 month- or two-year-long missions to wherever they are sent. LDS believe that humans existed prior to our coming to earth to live and that life on earth is set up for people to make choices toward the good to become "more like Heavenly Father" ("God's Plan of Salvation," 2012). LDS are expected to follow God's "teachings for the rest of [their lives]."

The intent of this paper is not to offer a lengthy analysis of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but it bears mentioning some of the religion's controversial issues. For instance, it is commonly known that LDS men were allowed to have more than one wife at a time. This is no longer the case today. Similarly, African American men were not allowed to become priests (as nearly all LDS men otherwise could be) until the 1970s. Like other organized religions, LDS members recognize these issues as ones that have been corrected through divine inspiration, perhaps like the Catholic Church's recognition of the Inquisition as a historic period which has soiled the church's reputation. Since the Inquisition is so far back in human historic memory, it is seldom mentioned. Considering that the Mormon religion is relatively young, any historic tainting is still incredibly fresh for those who wish to critique it.

## Results: Journeys among LDS Students

There are many commonalities and traits I identify and consequently use to attempt to co-construct bridges among LDS students. When I begin a new semester, I explain to my students that I see them through the lens of what Buber (1958) refers to as “I and Thou,” or a theological positioning of my necessity of having the other in my life as someone with whom I build community, even though, as Buber explains, these moments are difficult to construct. I contrast this understanding against what Buber calls “I and It,” where the other person engages for and through transactional relations, where the other’s *use-value* is the focus of connection, rather than connection being the end in itself. Morgan and Guilherme (2012) explain of Buber’s concept of *I and Thou* in this way:

[I]t is inclusion (i.e., the experiencing of the other’s experience) that makes a relation mutual, and it is only through mutuality that we place ourselves and the other within the moral sphere, it is only through mutuality that we ascribe the other with rights and duties and vice versa. (p. 986)

I seek to convey my interest in mutuality as dialog through my best attempts to understand the positioning from where my students come. To achieve this dialog, I attempt to “reach out una mano con corazon [a hand with heart]” (Anzaldúa as cited in Lara, 2005, p. 44) in order to reach the depths of understanding my students. I sense resonances among the students when I discuss this, first, for recognizing that there may be a spiritual component of our being as part of my instruction. I use this frame because it articulates with my own cultural and religious heritage in its Judeo-Christian roots the way it does for most of my students. While I have embraced Anzaldúa’s (1999, 2002) work, I also draw from many sources in creating the ways I consider how I engage and care for people around me, an idea she embraces and explores in her work as well.

Among my students, I have experienced a genuine form of care and connectedness for me and my family which to me feels qualitatively different than in other institutions in the United States where I have taught. Take, for instance, the village it takes to raise a child. My nine study abroad students in Mexico of summer 2014, seven of them LDS, lovingly passed my children back and forth on many bus rides toward our next destination. I remember how my 3-year-old daughter was draped across program participant Shelly’s (a pseudonym, as are all names of students) legs for two bumpy hours, asleep after giggling her way through several kid-friendly apps on Shelly’s phone and having her hair braided. The students were thrilled to see my baby boy every time I took him to the language institute where they studied—this happened every day during my month-long study abroad in the summer of 2014. Similarly, in the fall of 2013 when I was pregnant with my son, my students commented frequently about the gift of a new life and were kindly attentive to my well-being because of my

pregnancy. These are the very things my own family with whom I grew up is unable and/or unwilling to do with my own children as their uncles or grandmother. The it-takes-a-village ethos becomes concrete through the manifestations of love among so many LDS students. My willingness—perhaps necessity—to be vulnerable through this experience has disarmed me in a way that has allowed me to be cared for by my students, in a way that helps establish the “new tribalism” about which Anzaldúa (1999, 2002) and others have theorized, a way in which “we/you/they can witness how we are all in each other” (Saavedra & Nymarck, 2008, p. 268). In this new tribalism, we were dependent upon each other in this new village we co-constructed, and I had to step down from my role of “authority” to lean into the support I sometimes have needed from the students.

To do the dialogic work Anzaldúa (2002) advocated with “others,” I position myself as a nepantlera explorer in the understandings of my students by engaging. This attempt at harmony is not one that tries to believe the same thing. This would be inauthentic, and indeed the nepantlera does not “pick sides,” (Keating, 2011) though she remains invested in transformation of society toward one that is inclusive and invested in working toward healing (Keating, 2013). Instead of picking sides, I find points of entry through the cracks. One of them is the deeply-seated notion of “Choose the right,” an exhortation instructed to LDS church members by both a hymn and a common inscription in a ring worn by LDS members. This sense of “right” is one where I find ethics—these deeply seated principles of being in the world—a place of ambiguity and emerging coherences from which to work *with* my students.

Every semester, I teach about the kinds of programs available for both ESOL and bilingual instruction in my ESOL strategies course. When teaching specifically about forms of ESOL, bilingual, and dual immersion programs, my students have little trouble seeing the lack of *right* in how Utah’s dual immersion programs have been structured to benefit primarily White, monolingual students, unlike programs which are designed to be of benefit to both heritage speakers of other languages and native English speakers. During the third semester I taught the course at Utah State, Abigail said, “It’s disgusting. Why do we do this only for the benefit of White kids?” (To be clear, no child is denied access to dual immersion programs, but they are one-way in many locations throughout the state where two-way programs could readily be established due to immigrant populations.) This was a point of departure to discuss political action and advocacy for and with English language learners in our schools. The political advocacy piece is not one that is often the first option for students who are socialized to obey authority as part of their Church beliefs. Yet when it comes as the fruit of the not right occurring, it is a welcomed and rich discussion. A student who was linked into my class via Internet connection explained recently that many of her ELL high school students had entire “blanks” in their schedules in which they were not receiving instruction. She began working to disrupt these blanks so that ELLs had as much access to quality education as the non-ELLs as a result of my class, she said. She was doing nepantlera work toward social transformation.

In the same way, I am able to tap into a sense of maturity among my students because they have often been socialized into major responsibilities at early ages, from their attempts to convert people in far-flung lands to helping raise either siblings or their own children. This maturity lends itself to understanding the seriousness of what is happening with the very lives of their future and current students—as opposed to imagined beings who exist in the student’s minds as mere abstractions with whom they may work one distant day in the future. Aside from sensing the need to know what to do concretely in terms of instructional strategy, students are also open to understanding me as a messenger who has more to share with them than what they imagine to be important when they step into my classroom. I believe part of their openness is due to the dialogic caring we establish.

This is not to say that my work with LDS students is all simple, uncomplicated. I experience deep ambiguities about my work and moments in which I am perplexed at my role, responses, and lack of understanding. Because my ESOL strategies course spans instruction of ELLs in content areas, we are bound to talk about science. LDS people, like nearly everyone who subscribes to religious beliefs, have a narrative about creation, and some LDS, though by no means all, believe the planet is only about 6,000 years old. In the United States, in fact, 50 percent of people do not believe the story of evolution as presented commonly in U.S. textbooks. On more than one occasion, my students have positioned the strict instruction of scientific evolution as one that is, as Kumashiro (2004) explains, “oppressive.” The first time this happened, I bristled and attempted not to show the dissonance I was feeling, believing (incorrectly) that the students were expressing a doctrinal stance of the LDS Church that the earth is 6,000 years old (this is *not* the church’s position). Following Buber’s (1958) belief in, need for, the “Thou,” I listened, attempting to build the bridges of understanding where I could position myself as an understander (Anzaldúa, 2002), rather than one who is dismissive. I heard, instead, what felt to students like dismissal of their beliefs, a dismissal that largely echoes the years of persecution this young religion has experienced ever since its inception, all the way up to today in the form of a successful Broadway production of a satirical understanding of Mormonism from the views of nonbelievers.

When I listen more closely, I hear the students saying, “Don’t tell us we’re crazy. We want to be able to believe like most of the rest of the world.” I personally struggle. I am not trained as a biologist but aware of the contemporary understandings about evolution in the scientific community. At the same time, I introduce instruction about indigenous understandings of the planet and the universe which also invoke a spiritual understanding. I ask my students to seriously entertain the idea of forests as sacred (Nakashima, Galloway McLean, Thulstrup, Ramos Castillo, & Rubis, 2012), and they do. This is no stranger than believing that the earth is but a few thousand years old. I connect the idea of mountains as sentient beings to the notion that we should consider how/if humans should pollute them, blow their very faces off for metals and carbon extraction, and plunge into them to frack the gas out of them. I align my own

understandings of loving growing up in the most ancient of mountains, West Virginia, and my marginal positioning as a working-class Appalachian, with their hesitations of what mainstream thought delivers and says about *them*, the other, despite their dominant positioning in Utah, especially Northern Utah. In this sense, I am not looking at my students as needing to be “fixed,” but as “deeply multifaceted wholes with real struggles as they negotiate between many worlds” (Aguilar-Valdez et al., 2013, p. 568). This is my attempt at doing the respectful yet unwieldy, at times risky, bridge-building work of the nepantlera.

During a recent class, students worked in groups on an activity where they devised activities surrounding how they might approach teaching either pollution, civil rights, or democracy to English learners. For one group, their applied and culturally relevant activity was how to do water purification in the case of a water emergency, “how to survive,” John explained. Three ideas crowded into my head at cross-purposes, and I experienced them as a nepantlera does, weighing out ideas and ambiguities:

This is culturally relevant for communities who take end-of-the-world preparations seriously and store a year’s worth of foods in their pantries; maybe they are talking more about camping; this relates directly to three very recent municipal water shutdowns in the U.S. within the last year, one I’m painfully aware of in West Virginia, my long-lost home.

Yet, my skills as a nepantlera were limited. Instead of probing the presentation’s possible connection to being LDS or sharing my national water awareness conjecture and my positioning as being from West Virginia, I allowed the next group to present without taking up their points, just passing this possible point of connection, ambiguity, and co-construction of knowledge. Motivated out of fear, I told myself I didn’t know enough; I didn’t know *why* LDS prepared with food storage beyond what I might have conjectured.

The next group described their unit on civil rights. They talked about having students challenge authority, read rich texts, and situate the U.S. Civil Rights movement in its proper place in time and argued how some texts can help White people understand their inadvertent racism. This was the script I wanted, and, to be honest, the “right” one in terms of critical pedagogy as I have been teaching it (Giroux, 1988). I used my authority to applaud their efforts when I joked that the next course session would be that group teaching us all about Civil Rights instead of what was on my syllabus. Meanwhile, learning about why LDS prepare a year’s worth of food storage remained part of my homework. In this case, I had missed the chance to delve into the potentially murky waters of the ambiguity of nepantlera work. I learn as I reflect and challenge myself to go into those ambiguous spaces more readily.

There is still so much for me to learn, and I wonder about my status with my students. In my ESOL strategies course, a student made a reference to her father as the bishop and families who lived in her stake. These are common terms among LDS but do not carry their same meanings for people unfamiliar with the LDS community. I did not ask her to clarify for the non-LDS students

about her choice of LDS-specific terms, in the moment imagining that it is the cultural relevance here and inappropriate to ask for clarification. Was I right? Am I comfortable now as faculty, and is that why the student felt it was a fair game to use these terms which are so unfamiliar in most U.S. discourse? Do I look like “safe” faculty? One of my students commented in a spring 2014 course evaluation, “It’s nice to have a faculty member who likes to be in Utah and who appreciates us.” I work to build the bridges so that we may ultimately engage from the “same side of the river” (Elenes, 2001, p. 693). Elenes (2001) shows that engaging on the same side of the river does not mean accepting all ideas and beliefs but finding ways to engage discussion where everyone can dialog at once, as I have attempted to do. Part of that bridging is reaching out to demonstrate the points of connection with my students; it seems on some level they hear this.

### **Discussion**

Many educators work doggedly toward the goal of creating a more socially just world; I have shared illustrative attempts of my work to build bridges as a nepantlera, an outsider who at times briefly passes among my predominantly LDS students at a public university. I have struggled and continue to experience growing pains as I attempt to help shape students at my institution toward being social justice workers themselves. There are a host of deeply personal and deeply scholarly areas in which I have experienced these shifts, these spaces of Nepantla, or the uncomfortable in-between (Anzaldúa, 1999). They range from the personal, where my immediate family members are lovingly engaged with LDS students through the formal work of schooling I do as it relates to directing a study abroad program in Mexico, to the connectionist work I do aside from formal schooling with students outside of class, such as the journey to entrance of an LDS temple with which I started this article. There are the formal moments inside the classroom space where I find students readily making connections to understanding the injustices experienced by English language learners, such as when the state’s dual immersion programs are designed primarily for the benefit of monolingual students when such a large share of the state’s population is not monolingual. Then, there are the dissonant moments where I puzzle through students’ backgrounds to make sense of their contributions and at times respond in ways that may not best engage students’ ideas or, perhaps more importantly, their sense of feeling about what they are sharing in class.

I have not learned about working with LDS students single-handedly. Before deciding to join the faculty at Utah State, I began my own research about the students with whom I might work, a process in which I am still engaged. During my campus visit, I asked colleagues about what I might be able to accomplish from a social justice framework with people from a religion about which I knew, sadly, more from media stereotypes than direct contact or even occasional positive depictions. Dr. Cinthya Saavedra, a colleague in my ESOL

program and nepantlera in her own work (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008), has been instrumental in helping me maintain a softness about my LDS students, providing signposts I can follow, such as ways she successfully engages her students and ways she enjoys what they bring to the classroom. Saavedra has shown me how to get more comfortable in the uncomfortable, such as when I allow several thoughts to stand in suspension about what a student says, rather than rushing to judgment. I am working more on finding points in common, a skill Saavedra has modeled and discussed at length. When I have heard colleagues speak about “those students,” I have taken the information with more than a grain of salt. Isn’t this exactly the deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010) that I so vehemently work against when usually referring to students of color and/or poor students? This same kind of talk is what I have heard discussed publicly in conferences when talking about doing diversity work with rural whites, for instance. Having been reared in rural Appalachia, I have chafed at such deficit-framing talk, wondering if we cannot also engage rural Whites in ways that honor their experiences and oftentimes pain as we frame and reframe notions of social justice?

Another nepantlera with whom I have gained depth of understanding is Dr. Emma Maughan, whose work is broad and inclusive (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009); she is a colleague at Utah State who is also devoutly LDS. She has shared how the LDS students are used to the experience of “derision” from their predominantly non-LDS faculty members and how it would be refreshing for them to experience appreciation instead. Wouldn’t they, in fact, be far more open to a message of social justice, if I were able to “forge bonds” through the building of Anzaldúa’s (2002) new tribalism, one where many worlds fit? Can I recognize the many facets of spirituality as they manifest themselves among my students in multiple forms and to multiple degrees as part of the “spirituality” of emerging nepantleras, in fact, among my students? This is what I attempt to do, for instance, as I rethink science instruction for English language learners, with the notion that indigenous frameworks of science are valid and where not “picking sides” about evolution, for instance, allows for a greater engagement of social justice in our work. For educators, finding the “space-between-cracks” in the spiritual realm may help “forge bonds” where communication occurs more readily among students and teachers.

Something in me remains somewhat irritated: I *should* make sure any of my students who will do science instruction should all teach evolution and it is because I believe it’s *right*. I am writing from the social sciences, after all, where I have submitted myself to the notion that there are methods for inquiry and much of my work employs methods to demonstrate empirical findings. On the other hand, I recognize this sense of teaching students what is “right” is the residue of my own oftentimes oppressive education. That is not to say there’s never a guide to the ethics of our work. For now, though, embracing some of the ambiguity about what and how I am teaching is no different than believing—erroneously—that I have delivered a curriculum the students fully understand in the ways I might have deigned they would consume it. This is a task educators might take on: examining how much their possessive investment in what is “right”

might be eclipsing their abilities to engage their students toward learning, bearing in mind both how the educator and the students might define this.

### Concluding Thoughts

Nepantlera work is not easy (Anzaldúa, 2002). For our work in universities as instructors, especially with future and in-service teachers who will impact thousands of lives, we must continue to work toward meeting our students “on the same side of the river,” (Elenes, 2001) a side of mutual understanding. This takes a lot of work while risking alienation through vulnerability. I struggle in Utah, wondering about how I may be perceived as a much older-than traditional mother, for instance, but I cannot allow my senses of doubt to eclipse my far greater sense of urgency about working toward social justice. This article also engages a shift in intersections, and complications of identity differences are not so easily identified differences among “others.” Specifically, in order for my messages to be comprehensible *and* dialogic despite and alongside my points of difference with my students as I stand with my “mano con el corazon [hand with my heart],” I have work to do in order to engage my students. For all of us interested in attempting to do nepantlera work with students, we should continue to look from the cracks-between-worlds (Keating, 2011) as spaces of possibility. It is in this way that light and dark are cast in ways we can for once apprehend and recast toward new forms of knowing and creating a new tribalism. I am unlikely ever to convert to the LDS church, but this does not mean I can dismiss a group who often passionately believe. Their beliefs, like all religious beliefs, can be held to scrutiny and reflection. At the same time, the points of commonality and dialog are the spaces where I want to go, where I must go, if I want to work with the students in this space toward social justice. On a more personal level, these commonalities are what allow the deeply shared humanity to be visible and present, while a student holds my baby, while I listen to a student share her family and professional hopes with me. There I go, not as a strict ally of all things LDS nor any other group. I do not “remain within a single group or worldview,” (Keating, 2006), though I continue to strive to build the bridge toward social justice through our “cracks-between-worlds,” (Keating, 2011) and, perhaps more importantly, toward the loving space I have shared with my students.

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### **Author Contact**

G. Sue Kasun: [sue.kasun@usu.edu](mailto:sue.kasun@usu.edu)

Teacher Education and Leadership, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84322,  
USA