

# Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Autohistoria-teoría* as an Epistemology of Self-Knowledge/Ignorance

ANDREA J. PITTS

*In this article, I examine the relationship between self-knowledge practices among women of color and structural patterns of ignorance by offering an analysis of Gloria E. Anzaldúa's discussions of self-writing. I propose that by writing about her own experiences in a manner that hails others to critically interrogate their own identities, Anzaldúa develops important theoretical resources for understanding self-knowledge, self-ignorance, and practices of knowing others. In particular, I claim that in her later writings, Anzaldúa offers a rich epistemological account of these themes through her notion of autohistoria-teoría. The notion of autohistoria-teoría demonstrates that self-knowledge practices, like all knowledge practices, are social and relational. Moreover, such self-knowledge practices require contestation and affirmation as well, including, resistance and productive friction.*

---

The writings of Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1942–2004) have long been revered by her readers for their critical and intimate portrayal of the practice of self-writing. The now-classic 1981 collection *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Anzaldúa, was a groundbreaking text for women of color feminisms in many ways, but perhaps most especially because of its emphasis on the political nature of the act of writing by women of color. The volume, along with Anzaldúa's own writings, highlights the importance of considering women of color as competent and credible speakers about their own experiences of oppression, resistance, and their everyday lives. This point was and is crucial not only to build solidarity among women of color, but also to disrupt and critically interrogate the work of white feminist scholars who write on the conditions of oppression women face. Many white feminists' writings have mistakenly assumed a set of experiences that all women share, but feminists of color, as well as

womanist (Walker 1983) and *mujerista* (Isasi-Díaz 1993) theorists have offered important interventions against such homogenizing trends in feminist theory.

Responding to such trends, in recent decades feminist epistemologists and critical race theorists have been exploring patterns of ignorance due to structural racism, classism, and ethnocentrism. Although this work in epistemology has begun to explore how structural patterns of ignorance affect the self-knowledge practices of white people (for example, Mills 2007; Sullivan 2007), this emphasis does not attempt to account for how structural patterns of ignorance affect self-knowledge practices among people of color. Accordingly and with important recognition of differences among practices of knowing for women of color, understanding how women of color theorize forms of self-knowledge and self-ignorance is an area of study that remains underexplored within contemporary mainstream epistemological literature.

With this in mind, in this article I examine the relationship between self-knowledge practices of women of color and structural patterns of ignorance by offering an analysis of Anzaldúa's discussions of self-writing. I propose that by writing about her own experiences in a manner that hails others to critically interrogate their own identities, Anzaldúa develops important theoretical resources for understanding self-knowledge, self-ignorance, and practices of knowing others. In particular, I claim that in her later writings, Anzaldúa offers a rich epistemological account of these themes through her notion of *autohistoria-teoría*, which demonstrates that self-knowledge practices, like all knowledge practices, are social and relational. Moreover, such self-knowledge practices require contestation and affirmation as well, including, resistance and productive friction. However, the forms through which such contestations and affirmations ought to take place, I claim, depend on an analysis of how groups and individuals are situated as knowers with respect to credibility assessments and the availability of hermeneutical resources.

To defend these claims, in the first two sections I outline some relevant literature on self-knowledge and ignorance within feminist epistemology and critical philosophy of race to situate my analysis of practices of self-knowing among women of color. Then, in the third and fourth sections, I turn directly to Anzaldúa's writings to demonstrate how her work develops an account of self-knowledge/ignorance. There, I highlight several important features of *autohistoria-teoría* and provide points of theoretical convergence with her work and contemporary feminist epistemology. Finally, I conclude by showing how her writings shed light on normative dimensions of self-knowledge practices more generally.

## I. PRACTICES OF SELF-KNOWING AMONG WOMEN OF COLOR

Historically, the question of how patterns of ignorance affect women and people of color has been explored by numerous authors, ranging, for example, from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in seventeenth-century New Spain to W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon in the twentieth century, to critical race and feminist theorists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such work has been crucial for theorizing how an individual's

own subjectivity or conception(s) of self (selves) may be affected by structural patterns of ignorance. Within the contemporary philosophical literature on Latina/o racial identities in particular, issues pertaining to relational identities, forms of self-alienation, and critical self-knowledge practices have been explored by theorists such as Ofelia Schutte (2000), Jorge J. E. Gracia (2000), Paula Moya (2002), María Lugones (2003), Linda Martín Alcoff (2006), and José Medina (2012). Much of this work highlights the often conflicted positions of Latinas/os in the US with respect to their own racial, sexual, and cultural identities. Yet the perspectives of these theorists are quite distinct. Specifically, a crucial facet within any conception of self-knowledge is the view's underlying conception of the self/selves. When examined via this category of analysis, the writings of Latina theorists such as Lugones, Alcoff, Anzaldúa, and others diverge significantly.

For example, Lugones argues that knowers are comprised of a plurality of selves, but she also proposes that each self must bear a relational memory to other selves in order for a coherent epistemic and ethical perspective to emerge (Lugones 2003, 59). Alcoff's work appears distinct from this perspective by endorsing the inevitability of multiple, inconsistent, and fractured selves, communities, and hermeneutical horizons (Alcoff 2006, 124). In addition, as I elaborate below, Anzaldúa's writings shed light on such distinct conceptions of selfhood as well. That is, her work presents the striving of selves toward coherence and unity that surfaces in Lugones's conceptions of self-knowledge and self-alienation, but her writings also suggest the continual work of discontinuous selves that may never find resolution or a fully articulated existence, as we see in Alcoff's work.

Alongside this literature from Latina theorists, many Black theorists have proposed epistemological accounts that elaborate how knowledge practices stemming from marginalized and oppressed groups often require specific skills and forms of self-knowledge that enable the continued existence of Black communities. W. E. B. Du Bois's conception of double-consciousness as articulated in *Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois 1903) is one classic example. However, so too contemporary theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Lewis Gordon (2000), and George Yancy (2008) have offered distinct analyses of forms of self-knowing and self-consciousness that structure the lived experiences of many Black women and men living under conditions of structural white supremacy and gender oppression.

For example, Collins's citation of Audre Lorde prefaces her own analysis of the political act of self-definition and the normative requirement of knowing others that often shape Black feminist epistemologies:

"In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers," asserts Black feminist poet Audre Lorde. This "watching" generates a dual consciousness in African-American women, one in which Black women "become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection," while hiding a self-defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups. (Collins 2000, 97)

Collins's work reflects on various forms of "inner resistance" that many Black women have enacted to ensure continued survival. Such forms of knowing, she proposes, may not be obvious to whites and, as such, are thereby not publicly available for white consumption and appropriation.<sup>1</sup> Among these epistemological positionings, we can distinguish specific practices of self-knowing that often exist for many women of color. First, a more general point is that all knowledge is situated and relational. This means, for example, as Lorraine Code proposed for all forms of knowledge, to know an "objective" world—whereby we come into contact with objects and facts in the world—requires knowing others, that is, subjective knowledge. Code described this as "taking subjectivity into account" and her view entails that knowing other people can both promote and inhibit one's access to her/his/their<sup>2</sup> material environment (Code 1995, 45).

Moreover, and perhaps more important for women of color, the requirement to acknowledge and situate oneself within one's material environment is not evenly distributed across racial, class, and cultural differences. White privilege and class privilege often afford knowers the ability to remain ignorant of the social relations and interdependencies that facilitate their own self-knowledge practices, including white middle-class women's ignorance of the social advantages that are afforded them via racial and class privilege. In this critical vein, Norma Alarcón has argued that within gender-focused standpoint theory, racial oppression, class oppression, and other forms of oppression are "tacked on" as additional concerns to a primary focus on gender. Put more concretely, Alarcón lists the following tendencies among gender-focused standpoint theorists:

- 1) [they] treat race and class as secondary features in social organization (as well as representation) with primacy given to female subordination; 2) acknowledge that inequalities of race, class and gender generate different experiences and then set race and class inequalities aside on the grounds that information was lacking to allow incorporation into an analysis; 3) focus on descriptive aspects of the ways of life, values, customs and problems of women in subordinate race and class categories with little attempt to explain their source or their broader meaning. (Alarcón 1994, 144-45)

These tendencies to locate feminist knowledge practices around gender as an organizing theme thereby discounts the lived realities of multiple axes of oppression that often affect, socially locate, and, in addition, give rise to specific self-knowledge practices for women of color. Accordingly, it is important to give theoretical attention to self-knowledge practices for women of color in particular, and it is toward this aim that I provide my analysis of Anzaldúa's critical epistemological insights in the sections below.

## II. CLARIFYING SELF-KNOWLEDGE/IGNORANCE

Before turning to Anzaldúa's writings, I would like to note three qualifications about the relationship between ignorance and self-knowledge. First, as Charles Mills and

many others have stated about epistemologies of ignorance, the epistemic gaps and insensitivities produced by structural forms of injustice are not simply cognitive lacks or arbitrarily absent sets of belief. Rather, ignorance, in the manner that interests me, is understood as *productive* and *supportive* of structural injustices. In a recent essay on the topic of epistemologies of ignorance, Alcoff states that while mainstream epistemology has taken note of ignorance itself, that is, as a failure of epistemic practices, contemporary analyses of epistemologies of ignorance shed light on the substantive and constitutive effects of ignorance (Alcoff 2007, 39–40). Willful ignorance and socially accepted epistemic practices that ignore, distort, or reject certain forms of knowledge serve to justify and disseminate particular beliefs within a society while neglecting or misrepresenting others. Alcoff claims that epistemologies of ignorance create certain beliefs and ignore others for the purposes of benefiting some subpopulation, and such patterns of ignorance serve to subjugate or segregate other subpopulations. For example, along these lines, Mills argues that the failure of European colonizers to recognize African and indigenous persons as equal persons was a form of self-deception and evasion that eventually became a socially accepted epistemic norm (Mills 1997, 97). Given this relationship between knowledge-production and the production of ignorance, I choose to refer in this article to practices of “self-knowledge/ignorance.”<sup>3</sup> Just as knowledge about the world is accompanied by and may produce ignorance, so too self-knowledge is accompanied by and may produce ignorance.

Second, as I suggest above, such patterns of structural ignorance do not affect only those knowers who benefit from the systematic injustices at issue. That is, as Mills states, “the ‘white’ in ‘white ignorance’ does not mean that it has to be confined to white people ... it will often be shared by nonwhites to a greater or lesser extent because of the power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony involved” (Mills 2007, 22). Raising this point, however, is not meant to place blame on people of color or to hold persons who are oppressed individually culpable for being affected by structural patterns of ignorance. As Medina has argued, the *structural* nature of epistemologies of ignorance makes it such that the way to address the issue is not to blame individuals for their particular beliefs or to paternalistically tell them that they ought to believe differently. Rather, socially shared patterns of ignorance require socially shared forms of epistemic responsibility and action. In this sense, a second important claim regarding my study of Anzaldúa is that taking up the question of self-knowledge/ignorance among women of color is not meant to point to the individual culpability of such knowers. Rather, I intend to illustrate just the opposite through Anzaldúa’s work: namely, that forms of self-writing that challenge structural patterns of ignorance/knowledge require an interpretation of shared epistemic responsibility and action.

Third, I emphasize that the account of self-knowledge/ignorance that I propose here is prefaced on a *relational* form of knowing. Medina describes this relational aspect of self-knowledge as becoming aware of who one is and where one comes from in relation to different social groups and social locations (Medina 2012, 53). He writes that practices of self-knowing depend both on the groups that one belongs to, as well as those groups and locations that one has never occupied and perhaps will

never occupy (53). Following Medina's insights, my reading of Anzaldúa's work earnestly adopts the view that all knowledge practices are relational and socially embedded, including practices of self-knowledge. As such, forms of self-knowledge and self-ignorance are always accompanied by knowledge-of-others and ignorance-of-others. Furthermore, although my account of Anzaldúa's notion of *autohistoria-teoría* cannot offer an extensive analysis of the politics/ethics of knowing others, I do endorse the claim that even self-knowledge practices are forms of *social* knowledge.<sup>4</sup> That is, which resources and questions a group or individual has available to give meaning to her/his/their experiences is dependent on the groups and contexts in which one is located.

With these qualifications in mind, in the following two sections, I turn directly to Anzaldúa's writings to examine the epistemic relationship between self-knowledge/ignorance and self-writing.

### III. KEY FEATURES OF AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA

Numerous works in Anzaldúa's oeuvre foreground the act of self-writing; however, for my purposes here, I examine how Anzaldúa's writings develop, via first-personal articulations of the experiences of the author, key epistemological insights through the notion of *autohistoria-teoría*. I propose in this section that *autohistoria-teoría* is characterized by several important features: *autohistoria-teoría* is *collaborative*, *sensuously embodied*, and *productive* of critical self-reflection, which can be both harmful and enabling. Also, regarding the following elaboration of *autohistoria-teoría*, it is important to emphasize that we must also elucidate other key terms in Anzaldúa's corpus to make sense of the richness of her view, including her notions of the *Coyolxauhqui imperative*, *conocimiento*, the *descent to miclán*, and the *shadow self*.

#### AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA AS COLLABORATIVE

First, although Anzaldúa never offered a systematic definition of the concept of *autohistoria-teoría*, she did utilize the notion throughout her writings, interviews, lectures, and teaching (Keating 2008, 5–6). One brief discussion of the concept appears in a footnote in her 2002 essay “now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner works . . . public acts”: “*Autohistoria* is a term I use to describe the genre of writing about one's personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir; and *autohistoria-teoría* is a personal essay that theorizes” (Anzaldúa 2009b, 578).<sup>5</sup> From this brief articulation, Anzaldúa appears to point to the manner in which the act of giving meaning to oneself provides a platform for collaborative forms of meaning-making.

To elaborate, we can find a parallel claim articulated negatively in Alcoff's essay “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” She writes:

[It does not hold] that one can retreat into one's discrete location and make claims entirely and singularly within that location that do not range over others . . . there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one's words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to demarcate decisively a boundary between one's location and all others. (Alcoff 1991–1992, 20)

Alcoff here rejects the view that speaking merely for oneself can prevent making normative claims about others. Such a view, as both Anzaldúa and Alcoff propose, is not possible. Thus, put positively, Anzaldúa proposes *autohistoria-teoría* as a way to refer to the explicit task of developing theoretical resources out of descriptions of oneself and one's experiences. In this sense, speaking for oneself can extend toward others in ways that can be positive and conducive of further actions and forms of meaning-making.

Anzaldúa does not fully articulate the theoretical scope of the concept of *autohistoria-teoría*, but the *practice* of *autohistoria-teoría* is performatively demonstrated throughout her writings. As such, through analytic engagement with her earlier work, we can glean the collaborative, embodied, and productive features of what she names "*autohistoria-teoría*." For instance, in her 1987 essay, "*Tlilli, Tlapalli/The Path of the Red and Black Ink*," Anzaldúa states: "I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become . . . *Con imágenes domo mi miedo, cruzo los abismos que tengo por dentro*" (Anzaldúa 1999a, 93).<sup>6</sup> In this statement, Anzaldúa notes the importance of creating stories that narrate one's life. Yet although other philosophers have examined narrative notions of identity, including, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) and Charles Taylor (1989), Anzaldúa provides an account of how to theorize collaboratively with others via one's articulation of the embodied experiences of one's own life. Because readers imagine or associate their own embodied experiences and vulnerabilities with the narrator's, this serves as a collective form of meaning-making. In this sense, *autohistoria-teoría* enacts one of the lessons from Alcoff's essay, that is, that there "is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one's words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others" (Alcoff 1991–1992, 20). This idea, embraced by Anzaldúa as well, is used to prescriptively develop epistemological resources for understanding how acts of self-writing are productive sites for communication with others.

Anzaldúa also describes what she would later refer to as *autohistoria-teoría* in her 1990 piece "*To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, escritura y chicana*." She argues that the reader's interpretation within processes of reading and writing plays a central role in the production of knowledge and meaning. She writes:

More and more today the reader is becoming as important if not more important than the author. Making meaning is a collaborative affair . . . . This interaction comes with the realization that writing is a collaborative, communal activity not done in a room of one's own. It is an act informed and supported by the books the author reads, the people s/he interacts with, and the centuries of cultural history that seethe under her skin. (Anzaldúa 2009c, 168)

This account of the centrality of audience uptake presents a rich hermeneutical position on the distributive nature of knowledge-production and meaning-making practices. The epistemic and affective content of written and spoken works is considered “a collaborative affair” that develops in situ. Moreover, by referring to “the centuries of cultural history that seethe under [an author’s] skin,” Anzaldúa describes an interpretive and materially embedded horizon of meaning that constitutes the possibilities of meaning for a given text, performance, speech act, or action in general.<sup>7</sup>

#### AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA AS SENSUOUSLY EMBODIED

We can clarify the sensuous and materially embedded features of Anzaldúa’s conception of *autohistoria-teoría* by looking to her understanding of the term *conocimiento*. A fully satisfactory articulation of this notion requires more space than I have available here, but we can point to several salient features of her account to clarify the relationship between self-knowledge and self-ignorance. *Conocimiento*, more generally a Spanish term for “knowledge” or “consciousness,” is given a technical use in Anzaldúa’s writings. Although the concept is developed from her earlier work on notions such as *mestiza consciousness* and *la facultad*, *conocimiento* becomes, for Anzaldúa, a resistant form of epistemic practice. In “now let us shift,” she states:

Skeptical of reason and rationality, *conocimiento* questions conventional knowledge’s current categories, classifications, and contents . . . . A form of spiritual inquiry, *conocimiento* is reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as a site of creativity). Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself. (Anzaldúa 2009b, 542)

*Conocimiento* is the term used to describe an acquired state of embodied awareness that equips one with a capacity to act and to create.

The connections in the above passage between spirituality and creativity are tightly intertwined. Amala Levine in “Champion of the Spirit: Anzaldúa’s Critique of Rationalist Epistemology,” for example, argues that Anzaldúa locates “spirituality physically in the body” (Levine 2008, 174). Levine claims that Anzaldúa rejects conceptions of spirituality that position divinity, freedom, and goodness against the corporeal. Levine proposes that Anzaldúa’s reclamation of the relationship between creative spontaneity and embodied being resituates the locus of freedom within a materially embedded set of possibilities for meaning and action. Thus, in my account, we can propose that the “centuries of cultural history,” in Anzaldúa’s words, provide the material frames of reference for our meaning-making practices, which guide and shape the possibilities for new forms of self-interpretation and narrative construction. However, such constructions are not constrained by a disembodied form of rationality



or spirituality that seeks its fulfillment outside of corporeal pleasures or forms of human action. Rather, it is our collaborative interactions with others, including their distinct, materially rich histories and enacted practices of meaning-making, that frame and shape our understandings of, and ignorance of, ourselves.

As a demonstration of *autohistoria-teoría*, we also see in “To(o) Queer the Writer” that Anzaldúa’s medium for theoretical articulation is a story about her own situated bodily experiences. For example, her comments about her readership are set in an essay that describes a first-person account of delivering readings in the San Francisco Bay area. She describes different responses from her audiences and the manner in which differing constellations of identities among her audience members also position her own authorial self as a writer. Some audiences passively received her words, often, as she describes, expecting her words to fulfill certain expectations for them about a “Chicana” or “lesbian” author, but other audiences opened discursive and hermeneutical space in novel ways. She writes of specific audiences “‘reading’ her readings,” that is, as maintaining a self-reflective awareness of her positioning as a queer woman of color invited to present her written work to them. She states: “Their faces were not blank nor passive. They saw me as vulnerable, a flesh-and-blood person and not as a symbol of representation, not as a ‘Chicana writer.’ They saw me as I wanted to be seen then—as an embodied symbol” (Anzaldúa 2009c, 169). She remarks that although the majority of the audience were “white and colored hippies, straight beats and non-literary people,” their mutual class backgrounds brought them together as reader-and-audience more than she had experienced with queer audiences and Chicana/o audiences in other readings in San Francisco (168). This is significant because it indicates that epistemic situatedness is more than a cognitive feature of knowers. Rather, it depicts knowledge practices, including self-knowledge practices, as dependent on how we exist in the world as concretely embodied beings.

Also in “To(o) Queer the Writer,” Anzaldúa comments that “Identity formation is a component in reading and writing whether through empathy and identification or through disidentification” (171). On this latter aspect of reading/writing, she writes, “Even if one notices things that are very different from oneself, that difference is used to form identity by negation—‘I’m not that, I’m different from the character. This is me, that’s you’” (171). Anzaldúa’s description of reading and writing as processes of identity-formation requires that we take into account the situated and embodied locations of audiences and readers. In her essay, this means that the class, sexual, and racial identities of her audiences affect whether and how they will understand and interpret her work. This is not a simple reduction to identity politics or a claim about a determinacy of reader reception. Rather, she argues that certain “sensibilities” allow readers to “fill in gaps” in her work. These gaps are hermeneutical possibilities made through “doors and windows” that a writer creates in her texts (171). This spatial metaphor, in addition to presenting writing as a sensuously embodied act, also supports an embodied account of *reading*, that is, a view that works against the image of a solitary reader who attempts to encounter a text abstractly. Prominent theorists of Spanish-language Latin American literature also defend such a view of reading. For example, both Sylvia Molloy and Doris Sommer have argued in their

respective works that cultural and historical trajectories that bring a reader to a text will shape how a reader encounters the possibilities for meanings in a text (Molloy 1991; Sommer 1999). Although a full account of their work exceeds the scope of this article, put briefly, whether a reader is invited in or kept at a distance through a text will vary depending on the social and historical location of the reader.

#### AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA AS PRODUCTIVE

With respect to the productive nature of *autohistoria-teoría*, in reference to the passage above on her public readings in San Francisco, the phrase “embodied symbol” appears to be an early articulation of what Anzaldúa calls in her later work “the Coyolxauhqui imperative.” The Coyolxauhqui imperative is, for Anzaldúa, a call to “re-member” a self through narration.<sup>8</sup> Drawing from Aztec mythology, she weaves images of the moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui, into her own self-narrations. The legend of Coyolxauhqui is that her body was torn apart by her brother, Huitzilopochtli, and scattered in all directions, including into the sky, where her decapitated head became the moon. We can then read the Coyolxauhqui imperative, which is one of the stages of *conocimiento* and illustrated through practices of *autohistoria*, as a desire for new personal and collective forms of self-knowledge/ignorance.

In a rich demonstration of *autohistoria-teoría*, “now let us shift” outlines the stages of *conocimiento* via a reflection on the author’s personal experiences. The essay includes her reflections on the Loma Prieta earthquake that struck northern California in 1989, on receiving a diagnosis of type I diabetes in 1992, and on the hysterectomy she underwent in 1980 (among other events in her life). Throughout the essay, Anzaldúa writes of a process of dismembering and re-membering herself. She states of this desire for self-re-membering, “As the modern-day Coyolxauhqui, you search for an account that encapsulates your life, and find no ready-made story, you trust her light in the darkness to help you bring forth (from remnants of the old personal/collective autohistoria) a new personal myth” (Anzaldúa 2009b, 559–60). Harkening here to acts of myth-making, Anzaldúa emphasizes the terrifying process of re-membering one’s personal and collective stories. She describes this “nueva historia” as resembling Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein monster at first—“mismatched parts pieced together artificially” (561). However, such a figuration of oneself or others also “inspires” and prompts the narrator to engage “both inner and outer resources to make changes on multiple fronts: inner/spiritual/personal, social/collective/material” (561). Part of this transformational process requires confronting what she calls one’s “shadow self,” which includes one’s own forms of ignorance and potential complicity with values that the striving self might not endorse. This confrontation, she states, offers a seeming paradox: “the knowledge that exposes your fears can also remove them” (Anzaldúa 2009a, 553). In these senses, the Coyolxauhqui imperative marks both the creative and the painful side of *autohistoria-teoría*, a point that I elaborate further in the next section.

IV. CONNECTING *AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA* TO CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Through these features of *autohistoria-teoría*, we can connect Anzaldúa's work to contemporary feminist epistemology. Namely, the kind of confrontation with one's own forms of ignorance and ways of self-knowing that Anzaldúa describes is an important point of convergence with what Medina calls *epistemic resistance*. Epistemic resistance, in Medina's work, echoes Anzaldúa's distinction between "inner works" and "public acts," and her distinction between the "inner/spiritual/personal" and the "social/collective/material" (Anzaldúa 2009b, 561). Medina argues that epistemic resistance appears in two forms: internal and external, with two potential valences: positive and negative. Internal epistemic resistance comes from one's own cognitive resources. It can be positive "insofar as it is critical, unmasks prejudices and biases, reacts to bodies of [one's own] ignorance, and so on" (Medina 2012, 50). Additionally, internal resistance may have a negative valence, wherein one's own "inner work" "involves a reluctance to learn or a refusal to believe" (50). External epistemic resistance is drawn from outside one's own cognitive and affective resources. In its positive valence, Medina calls epistemic resistance "beneficial epistemic friction," which is a form of resistance that forces one "to be self-critical to compare and contrast one's beliefs, to meet justificatory demands, to recognize cognitive gaps, and so on" (50). Beneficial friction would then be epistemic motivations that lead individuals and groups to reassess their own positions or views, to consider viewpoints that they do not hold, to attempt to defend or explain their own position in a way that others would understand better, or to recognize their own epistemic limitations and patterns of ignorance. Detrimental friction, however, can also be negative insofar as it "[censors, silences or inhibits] the formation of beliefs, the articulations of doubts, the formulation of questions and lines of inquiry, and so on" (50).

To connect Medina's theoretical resources to Anzaldúa, we can look at a series of examples of productive tensions illustrated in her *autohistorias*. For example, internal epistemic resistance in its positive valence echoes what Anzaldúa describes as the motivations that she attributes to herself in order to write. She states in "*Tlilli, Tlapalli*" that "To write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images. I have to believe that I can communicate with images and words and that I can do it well" (Anzaldúa 1999a, 95). This form of internal motivation or force acts as a self-critical assessment of one's own capacities as an author. As a form of "inner work," this requires confidence in one's own creative capacities as a writer, which are forms of self-confidence that are often discouraged for women of color. Consider on this point as well Collins's description of Black women's forms of epistemic resistance: "Unlike the controlling images developed for middle-class White women, the controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance. For U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women's survival" (Collins 2000, 100). Thus, positive internal epistemic friction is constituted by self-affirming forms of critical self-reflection, which, for many women

of color, allow them to retain a self-attributed sense of epistemic stability and confidence.

Furthermore, because many women of color are often denied the authority to determine the meanings of their own identities, epistemic friction can also be detrimental. For example, in “To(o) Queer the Writer,” Anzaldúa discusses the way others understand her as an author. She discusses being labeled a “Chicana writer” and “a lesbian writer,” and her own understanding of her identity as a writer, which rejects these two identity ascriptions (Anzaldúa 2009c, 164). She defends her own authority to describe herself as a “Chicana, tejana, working-class, dyke-feminist poet, writer-theorist,” but she rejects the normative impact of being labeled a “Chicana writer” or “lesbian writer” by others. She states that such labels “mark down” her identity. That is, she cannot be a writer, but must be marked as a nonstandard or “inferior” writer via gender and racial stereotypes and stigmas. In some cases, especially for persons who are members of historically oppressed groups, epistemic resistance from others can lead to self-doubt, shame, or political inaction.

In Anzaldúa’s other writings, these themes of detrimental epistemic friction emerge from her discussions of the Borderlands, the Coatlicue state, and *nepantla*. For example, *nepantla*—a Náhuatl word meaning “in-between space”—identifies a “transitional temporal, spatial, psychic and/or intellectual point of crisis,” often signaling moving from self-doubt to conviction and *conocimiento* (Keating 2009, 322). Also present in her earlier and later writings, the Coatlicue state refers to “a prelude to crossing” from *mictlán*—the mythological Aztec underworld—to new forms of consciousness (Anzaldúa 1999a, 70). The “descent into *mictlán*” is brought about by “[our] resistance, [our] refusal to know some truth about [ourselves that] brings on that paralysis, depression, brings on the Coatlicue state” (70). She writes that once in this state of inaction and despair,

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing . . . . Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. “Knowing” is painful because after “it” happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before. (70)

These descriptions of the movement into the Coatlicue state, the descent into *mictlán*, and the path toward new forms of consciousness can be used as theoretical bridges to both her later notion of *conocimiento* in the early 2000s and to the task of theorizing through the notion of *autohistoria-teoría*. The path to *conocimiento* expands the *travesía* that she begins to theorize in *Borderlands/La frontera*, and provides an account that converges with her later claims of theorizing via acts of self-narration. That is, the descent into *mictlán*, the first stage, is brought about by a “refusal to know some truth about [oneself]” (70). In this vein, the source for the self-doubt and the epistemic withdrawal will determine whether the resistance is internal or external. Moreover, the pain that she describes with every step highlights forms of resistance that allow or disallow one from learning about oneself or from learning from others.

Finally, in such painful confrontations with one’s own ignorance, we can also locate her position on shared forms of epistemic responsibility, a theme that emerges

in various forms in feminist philosophy (for example, Young 2006; 2011; Medina 2012). For example, in “Let us be the healing of the wound: The Coyolxauhqui imperative—la sombra y el sueño,” the last piece published by Anzaldúa during her lifetime, the author writes of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001. She states:

The day the towers fell, me sentí como Coyolxauhqui, la luna. Algo me agarró y me sacudió, frightening la sombra (soul) out of my body . . . . Wounded, I fell into shock, cold and clammy . . . suspended in limbo in that in-between space, nepantla, I wandered through my days on autopi-lot, feeling disconnected from the events of my life. (Anzaldúa 2009a, 303)<sup>9</sup>

Here, she harkens back to her descriptions in 1987 of “[un] *susto* [when] the soul [is] frightened out of the body,” and such an event is what she describes as leading to the descent to *mictlán* (Anzaldúa 1999a, 70). Interestingly, following from this form of external, detrimental epistemic friction, we see her defend a notion of shared epistemic responsibility. She writes of her desire to speak out to condemn the United States’ “act of war” and to situate herself against the US. Yet she also writes that “sadly we are all accomplices . . . . As an artist I feel compelled to expose this *shadow side* which the mainstream media and government denies. In order to understand our complicity and responsibility we must look at the *shadow*” (Anzaldúa 2009a, 304; my emphasis). Here, readers can note that Anzaldúa does not excuse herself from responsibility for the United States’ military actions. Rather, in this piece, her last and perhaps most explicitly engaged piece of writing on transnational politics, she proposes a distributed form of epistemic responsibility that demonstrates beneficial epistemic friction for her readers. The events of 9/11 led her to interrogate and to express her own relationship to the actions of the United States government. Such events are indicative for her of “our collective shadow” (311). “Our collective shadow” symbolizes the historical violence and fragmentation that, she claims, we are all now called to confront and to re-member. The Coyolxauhqui imperative is both her symbol for a necessary process of “dismemberment and fragmentation” and for “reconstruction and reframing” (312). However, as she states, “there is never any resolution, just the process of healing” (312). The process of healing that is called forth through practices of *autohistoria* involves creating new personal and collective narratives that can render one’s experiences meaningful and transformational. Developing new forms of *autohistoria* is presented as a difficult task, and one that involves critically interrogating one’s own social position within embedded frameworks of meaning- and knowledge-production. Perhaps more important, as she asserts in “To(o) Queer the Writer,” it also includes searching for communities and hermeneutical resources to make sense of one’s own experiences and responsibilities. The practice of “putting Coyolxauhqui together,” she states, “represents the search for new metaphors to tell you what you need to know, how to connect and use the information gained, and, with intelligence, imagination, and grace, solve your problems and create intercultural communities” (Anzaldúa 2009b, 563). These epistemic practices emerge via the forms of

*autohistoria* that she describes, and require an interpretive community that can collaboratively render such experiences and forms of knowledge meaningful.

#### V. WRITING SELF, WRITING OTHERS/ESCRIBIENDO NOS/OTRAS

*Autohistoria-teoría* highlights several important features of self-knowledge/ignorance. First, it foregrounds the fundamental interdependency between authors/speakers and readers/audiences that is necessary for any form of self-knowledge/ignorance to emerge. For an epistemologist like Code, this might be interpreted as a description of the kind of nurturing environment that is necessary for an individual to develop a notion of selfhood. Code claims that moral and epistemic agency relies on a “communal basis of moral and mental activity” (Code 1991, 82). This does not mean merely an abstract reference to others as objects of moral or epistemic analysis. Rather, it means that agency itself, that is, the very enabling conditions of our actions and judgments, must be based on the relationships that we have with others.

In addition, forms of cognitive, affective, and embodied transformation, including attempts to re-member one’s own story and self, require taking epistemic risks. This means that knowers/readers should be able to face that they may be mistaken about their beliefs about themselves and about others. Or as Anzaldúa states, they must be able to confront their *desconocimiento* and shadow sides. Accordingly, as many women of color theorists have argued, given different relations of power under conditions of structural injustice, some persons will find themselves confronted with self-doubt and detrimental epistemic friction quite often, while other, more privileged groups and individuals may be afforded ample forms of epistemic security and confidence. An awareness of how a self or others might be vulnerable to structural harms can bear on how a particular re-membering of self may be interpreted.

Elaborating this latter point regarding vulnerability, in “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process,” Anzaldúa discusses the process of writing. She states:

Style brings up the politics of utterance—who says what, how, to whom, and on whose behalf. When you use a particular language register to re-create particular realities, you include certain groups of people and exclude others. (Anzaldúa 1999b, 248)

Anzaldúa suggests here that the process of writing, including writing collective stories through *autohistoria*, effectively hails an audience and potentially dismisses others. *Autohistoria-teoría* then makes this claim explicit via the proposal that writing about oneself provides the theoretical tools for others to critically interrogate their positions and the world. This would also then include the disorienting hails that might compel a reader to critically assess her/his/their own epistemic positionality and responsibility. However, as Sarah Ahmed and others have pointed out, disorientation work “is not always radical . . . the forms of politics that proceed from disorientation can be conservative, depending on the ‘aims’ of their gestures, depending on how they seek to (re)ground themselves” (Ahmed 2006, 158). Thus the forms of epistemic

responsibility and action made possible through Anzaldúa's writings should not be considered a determinate grounding for normative action. Rather, *autohistoria-teoría* is a critical call to interrogate ourselves via the epistemic resistance that her views create. What follows from her account and from my elaboration of her views is that judgments of self-credibility, self-orientation, and self-worth are always subject to resistance and criticism from others. This is because, as Code reminds us, even our capacities to carry out such epistemic activities are premised on the *social* character of knowledge that makes these practices meaningful.

Accordingly, this means that our judgments of others, including credibility assessments, judgments of merit, and so on require that we self-reflectively mirror back to ourselves our own situatedness as judges, that is, we *must read ourselves as readers*, to extend Anzaldúa's phrase. This requires that self-knowledge, like all forms of knowledge, is subject to political and social forms of critique. Privilege, subjugation, and resistance function with respect to our abilities to know ourselves and others. Although such an epistemic position cannot normatively map out the ways in which we ought to act in a given situation, it does prescriptively call us to remain attentive to the groups of *nos/us* and *otras/others* in which we find our own self-understandings made available.<sup>10</sup> What is offered here is a framework for understanding an epistemic and normative process inherent to practices of self-knowledge/ignorance, and to draw from Anzaldúa's words, there may never be a final resolution on this issue; rather, we must attempt ongoing processes of healing.

## NOTES

First, I would like to thank Dr. Mariana Ortega for her comments on previous versions of this essay and her editorial work organizing this cluster for *Hypatia*. Her guidance, humor, and strength have been a wellspring of encouragement for my studies and appreciation of Latina feminism. I would like to thank Dr. José Medina as well for his mentorship and critical engagement with my work. His influence on my thinking about issues in social epistemology and critical philosophy of race has been tremendous. Many thanks are also owed to Elisabeth Paquette for her patience and support of my research. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous referees of *Hypatia* for their helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this manuscript.

1. There is a rich body of philosophical literature focusing on knowledge practices affecting indigenous and Muslim women, for example, Lawrence 2003; Lewallen 2003; Mihesuah 2003; Fatima 2013; and Sheth 2014. Mohanty 1991 is also a significant resource for understanding how self-writing can serve as a political practice for women of color.

2. I include the personal pronoun "their" in this article to highlight the more frequent usage of the pronoun by transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming persons.

3. This is an adaptation of Sullivan's use of the phrase "knowledge/ignorance" in Sullivan 2007.

4. Medina 2012 is an excellent resource for thinking through the politics/ethics of epistemic responsibility and culpable ignorance.

5. Such a position against the necessity for truth-telling in public discourse would thereby support theorists who defend *testimonio* as a distinct form of political resistance in Latin American geopolitical contexts, for example, Beverley 2004; Bartow 2005.

6. “I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become . . . With images I tame my fear, I cross the abysses I have inside” (Anzaldúa 1999a, 93); original translation.

7. Lugones 2003 offers another significant theorization of the relationship between reader and writer.

8. The phrase “re-member” suggests both the task of calling something to mind and of putting something together.

9. “The day the towers fell, I felt like Coyolxauhqui, the moon. Something grabbed me and shook me, frightening the shadow (soul) out of my body.” (Anzaldúa 2009a, 303).

10. Anzaldúa’s use of the phrase “nos/otras” is important in her later writings as well, although, due to spatial constraints, I cannot expand the notion in this article.

#### REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Alarcón, Norma. 1994. The theoretical subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American feminism. In *The postmodern turn: New perspectives on social theory*, ed. Steven Seidman. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín 1991–1992. The problem of speaking for others. *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter): 5–32.
- . 2006. *Visible identities: Race, gender, and the self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2007. Epistemologies of ignorance: Three types. In *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1999a. *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- . 1999b. Putting Coyolxauhqui together: A creative process. In *How we work*, ed. Mary Aswell Doll, Marla Morris, and William Pinar. New York: Frankfurt Land.
- . 2009a. Let us be the healing of the wound: The Coyolxauhqui imperative—la sombra y el sueño. In *This bridge we call home*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating. New York: Routledge.
- . 2009b. now let us shift . . . the path of conocimiento . . . inner works, public acts. In *The Gloria Anzaldúa reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- . 2009c. To(o) queer the writer—Loca, escritura y chicana. In *The Gloria Anzaldúa reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Bartow, Joanna R. 2005. *Subject to change: The lessons of Latin American women’s testimonio for truth, fiction, and theory*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.



- Beverley, John. 2004. *Testimonio: On the politics of truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Code, Lorraine. 1991. *What can she know? Feminist theory and the construction of knowledge*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- . 1995. *Rhetorical spaces: Essays on gendered locations*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903. *The souls of Black folk*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co.
- Fatima, Saba. 2013. Muslim-American scripts. *Hypatia* 28 (2): 341–59.
- Gordon, Lewis R. 2000. *Existencia Africana: Understanding Africana existential thought*. New York: Routledge.
- Gracia, Jorge J. E. 2000. *Hispanic-Latino identity: A philosophical perspective*. Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Isasi-Díaz, Ada Maria. 1993. *En la lucha/In the struggle: Elaborating a mujerista theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Keating, AnaLouise. 2008. *Entre mundos/Among worlds: New perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2009. *The Gloria Anzaldúa reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Lawrence, Bonita. 2003. Gender, race, and the regulation of native identity in Canada and the United States: An overview. *Hypatia* 18 (2): 3–31.
- Levine, Amala. 2008. Champion of the spirit: Anzaldúa's critique of rationalist epistemology. In *Entre mundos/Among worlds: New perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, ed. AnaLouise Keating. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lewallen, Ann-Elise. 2003. Strategic "indigeneity" and the possibility of a global indigenous women's movement. *Michigan Feminist Studies* 17: 105–39.
- Lugones, María. 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against multiple oppressions*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After virtue*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Medina, José. 2012. *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and the social imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mihesuah, Devon. 2003. *Indigenous American women: Decolonization, empowerment, activism*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Mills, Charles. 1997. *The racial contract*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- . 2007. White ignorance. In *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991. Cartographies of struggle: Third world women and the politics of feminism. In *Third world women and the politics of feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Molloy, Sylvia. 1991. *At face value: Autobiographical writing in Spanish America*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Moya, Paula M. L. 2002. *Learning from experience: Minority identities, multicultural struggles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Schutte, Ofelia. 2000. Negotiating Latina identities. In *Hispanics/Latinos in the United States: Ethnicity, race, and rights*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Pablo De Greiff. New York: Routledge.
- Sheth, Falguni A. 2014. Interstitiality: Making space for migration, diaspora, and racial complexity. *Hypatia* 29 (1): 75–93.
- Sommer, Doris. 1999. *Proceed with caution, when engaged by minority writing in the Americas*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Sullivan, Shannon. 2007. White ignorance and colonial oppression: Or why I know so little about Puerto Rico. In *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the self: The making of modern identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Walker, Alice. 1983. *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. New York: Harcourt Inc.
- Yancy, George. 2008. *Black bodies, white gazes: The continuing significance of race*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Young, Iris Marion. 2006. Responsibility and global justice: A social connection model. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 23 (1): 102–30.
- . 2011. *Responsibility for justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.