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## **[2023 Honorable Mention] What Does the Absence of My History Do to My Identity & Pride?: Utilizing Autohistoría-Teoría Methodology to Trace Educational Experience**

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What Does the Absence of My History Do to My Identity & Pride? Utilizing Autohistoria-Teoría  
Methodology to Trace Educational Experience

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### **Abstract**

Utilizing Gloria Anzaldúa's autohistoria-teoría methodology, this humanistic study explores embodied experiences in the education system, guided by the question: What does the absence of my history do to my identity and pride? Theorizing across historical and personal contexts, I weave together personal archival materials, including school test scores, magical thinking, storytelling, and historical legacies of colonialism and American education. Inspired by Anzaldúa's method of inquiry, I explore the relationship between identity and education by theorizing the reverberations between history and personal/collective experience.

### **Gloria Anzaldúa and Autohistoría-Teoría**

Gloria Anzaldúa was a Chicana scholar of Chicana culture, feminist theory, and queer theory. She drew from her lived experiences to form her own lens to inform her understanding of the world. Anzaldúa developed the practice of writing-the-self through, by which she developed important theoretical tools to understand self-ignorance, self-knowledge, and understanding others. Informing her epistemological standpoint, autohistoria-teoría is a method of explaining the relationship between using embodied experiences with social realities as a way of illuminating knowledge and is a symbiotic relationship between self, spirit, and world (Arfuso 604). Autohistoria is the creative process of storytelling and art making to reflect on self (i.e. “your self story”), while autohistoria-teoría is theorizing from experience, theorizing that emerges from narrating the self (Gonzales et al. 102).

Traditionally, as research scholars we are asked to completely remove ourselves as a participant in knowledge production in an effort to keep the research unbiased. But this rejection of self does not block bias, but removes bias from the critical analysis. Instead of rejecting the notion of self or centering the self, Gloria Anzaldúa offers an approach to research and knowledge production (Arfuso 604). In addition, “Theory developed by Anzaldúa to describe a relational form of autobiographical writing that includes both life story and self-reflection on this storytelling process...Personal experiences—revised and in other ways redrawn—become a lens with which to reread and rewrite existing cultural stories” (Arfuso 606) .

Through this lens, Anzaldúa and other autohistoria-teoristas expose the limitations in the existing paradigms and create new stories of healing, self-growth, cultural critique, and individual and collective transformation” (Anzaldúa 241–242). Gloria Anzaldúa’s work has been used to “deeply engage with recesses of oppression dark effects in private and public conversations with others and ourselves”(Keating 346). This work hopes to connect larger events seeking to find

inspiration for critical resistance and justice beyond the physical realm (Keating and Bhattacharya 347). Autohistoria-teoría utilizes magical thinking which is inhibited by creativity, imagination, inspiration (Keating and Bhattacharya 347). This form of thinking is awakened by imagining oneself connecting with an ancestor, a muse, or higher being that one may draw knowledge, understanding, and a sense of radical interconnectivity by expanding on what is understood as reality (Keating and Bhattacharya 347). Gloria Anzaldúa's autohistoria-teoría evokes material and spirit-based approaches to self-thought and imagination enacting a decolonial turn (Keating and Bhattacharya 347).

Using this approach, Anzaldúa encourages us to decolonize conventional definitions of reality by focusing on what we can bring to our awareness (Keating and Bhattacharya 347). Through Anzaldúa's work, I expand my thinking outside of the physical realm, by asking questions that evoke and expand thinking outside of what we can see and answer the questions of: What else is going on? What more do I need to know? What should I feel? What has happened before that is significant to me? That evokes us to think beyond what we might be familiar with.

### **Vignettes and Connections to Eurocentric History**

The feeling of shame and exclusion slowly became familiar ~~to me~~ when my 2nd grade teacher would hear me speak my native language in the classroom. She would make a disturbed face when she would hear me speak or converse with my peers. Yo, morenita de ojitos cafes, y cabello oscuro que mi madre me peinaba en trenzitas at seven years old noticed that my teacher's face would only change when I spoke Spanish. Her eyebrows pulled down and narrow eyes. My innocence thought it was the way my mom braided my hair, the alpaca and sun embroidered hand woven sweater that I would always wear, or maybe the strong JAFRA baby perfume my

mom would still put on me every morning before school. Nothing inside me believed that I was getting these pitying-dark expressions from my teacher because of the language I was speaking.

*Separation based on skin color was prevalent in 1848 when the United States won the Mexican American war, but it was not until the 1940s that most Mexican students attended “Mexican” schools. While there was de facto segregation, there was not a California law that mandated this separation (Roos 2019).*

Mis papás son de un pequeño pueblo en Oaxaca México que le dicen el “rinconcito de dios.” Mitad de sus vidas es en este pueblo, y la otra mitad en los Estados Unidos. Celebrating día de los muertos and building ofrendas with the bright orange cempasuchil flowers, or watching la danza de los diablitos which I once feared because of their long whips and masks they wore while dancing. I was proud of the traditions and customs that my parents shared with me, but I was most proud of speaking and listening to their long-detailed stories of how they crossed the border and the stories they would share with me of all the supposed gold that their pueblo has because of the Spaniards. I loved being from Oaxaca. I did not consider myself American because being from Oaxaca was all I knew, Spanish was all I knew.

*Schools for Mexican American children were designed to “Americanize” them. They did this through teaching hygiene, civics, English, and cooking. In these schools Mexican American children were punished for speaking Spanish and girls were taught home economics because they were expected to work in the homes of whites (Golash-Boza 159).*

These feelings of pride changed as I found myself in a traditional white-washed academic world. I would feel a warmness creeping over me as 8am would approach, this feeling that would take over when I would open the big dark red doors into my classroom. A place where my achievements were not celebrated but frowned upon and where I first learned that my traditions, customs, and native language were not acceptable and where I learned how to code switch into a “whiter me.” This is where I started feeling ashamed of myself because I, a morenita pelo negro, ojos cafes, little girl, went from only experiencing inclusion, acceptance in my underrepresented and low-income neighborhood in Santa Cruz California, to experiencing what the world is actually like for girls like me. I felt this way until my mom would pick me up and I’d switch into the real me, in the safety of my home.

*The exclusion of my history begins with segregation in schools, it begins in boarding schools. Native children had their names changed, A young man named Raining Bird, for example, was renamed Arthur Raining Bird. They were stripped of their culture. Being forbidden to speak their native language and practicing their religions. Those that did not do this were often physically punished if the teacher overheard them. Native language, dress, and hairstyles were forbidden in order to inculcate Native children in the ways of white Americans (Golash-Boza 158).*

My language became a target, I felt that my teachers wanted me to become someone I was not because of ELD. Why? The smirks on their faces when I spoke Spanish told me what they felt towards me. I only went to school because of the scented thick markers that I would love to color with; it took me to a different world. I was able to ignore the teacher's criticism of my English skills when I would smell the cherry scented red marker because it would remind me of my mom

buying me a Slurpee at 7-11. They did not have to say anything. Their faces became louder than their words.

I was so excited when my 7th grade teacher announced that we were going to publish a book as a class. It was focused on 7th graders' beliefs. I wrote my essay on the effects of smoking. Our teacher would edit and give feedback on our writing, but I remember the teacher pulled me aside with a sad, almost pitiful face. She told me that my writing was not good enough. At that moment I felt all the joy and excitement wash away, a wave destroying a sand castle.

Was it my English?

She had given up on me so fast. The little joy I had left for learning and wanting to continue my education drifted away faster than it came to me. She told me my essay would not be published in the class book, that it was not "good enough." I was so devastated, it was the moment I had given up on myself as well. Months later, she gave everyone a copy of the book. I still looked for my name in the table of contents hoping that she did include my writing; as the classroom filled with my peers' excitement over seeing their name in the book, my heart was broken all over again as I saw that "Jissel Antonio" was nowhere to be found. Mad at myself, but also mad at the teacher, I scribbled with red pen all over the yellow cover of the book in bold letters "Fuck you Ms. M." Satisfied, I grabbed the book and stored it in my backpack never speaking about it again, until now.

Why am I excluded from things I cannot control?



The overwhelming feeling of being mad and frustrated led me to blame my parents for putting me in this situation and the feeling crept upon me making me resentful of my Oaxacan traditions. Not understanding until years later that shame lies on the education system and not me.

*Federal Indian policy focused on Indian removal, relocation and the establishment of reservation. Government policy was motivated by the belief that this civilization could only be accomplished through Indian resettlement. As a result, Indian children were forcibly removed from their communities and subjected to harsh punishment (Brown and Calderon 21).*

I still did not understand why I was treated differently by teachers and administrators in high school. Talking to my friends in Spanish was nothing out of the ordinary for me, it was what we felt most comfortable with and it was our form of communication. In my sophomore year, I was talking to my friend in Spanish. She and I were making plans to walk home together and stop by Starbucks in downtown Santa Cruz.

*How did the Méndez children feel as they were told their complexion and last name are the reason they could not attend school? As they were directed to the so-called “Mexican” school Gonzalo Méndez remembers the admission teacher saying “we’ll take those” indicating the Vidaurri girls “but, we won’t take those three” understanding that it was because “We were too dark” (Strum 307).*

We were in a group of four students, my friend and I, and two other students that we didn't know. In the middle of our conversation our math teacher says:

“Jissel, you should not be speaking Spanish your other group mates do not understand.”

I looked at my friend who had a blank yet saddened face. I did not know how to feel, I did not have the vocabulary I have now to understand what was happening. At that moment, I had flashbacks of when my mom and I were in line at the store to pay and a white woman laughed and told us to speak English because we were in America. Asking myself once again, why were we being targeted over the language we spoke? Except this time, I was in the place I was supposed to feel safe by a teacher who would proudly tell us he immigrated from Morocco. He should understand right? How it is to feel excluded when not accepted because of skin complexion or speaking a native language. My assumption was wrong, he in fact did not understand, because he too was intertwined in the world of white academia and having to conform. All the anger that I had in that moment made me break down, I responded to my teacher not knowing what to say. But spoke up and said:

“What about us and understanding English?”

“Why are you being so mean to us?”

I could feel the heavy eyes of my peers all over me, the authority that the teacher held over us, and the humiliation that did not go away. He yelled at me, humiliated me in front of the other students, and made me leave class. I walked out of the classroom, feeling ashamed of who I was,

feeling like the morenita pelo negro, ojos cafes, little girl that was told her English is not good enough just like in elementary school. I realized I was a target.

How is our education system allowing this?

*“...colonial education was based on a set of four tenets about Native Americans that were “not based on natural truths but were culturally constructed and served specific agendas of the colonizing nations” These tenets asserted the following:*

- 1. That Native Americans were savage and had to be civilized*
- 2. That civilization required Christian conversation*
- 3. That civilization required subordination of Native communities, frequently achieved through resettlement efforts*
- 4. And that Native people has mental, moral, physical, or cultural deficiencies that made certain pedagogical methods necessary for their education*

*(Brown and Calderon 25).*

*Mrs. Vidaurri’s husband had a French ancestor that made his daughter last names sound acceptably French to the admission teachers and her two daughters were also visibly light-skinned. Did Mrs. Vidaurri think that her nephews would be allowed into the school along with her daughters because they were related? The Méndez children looked different, they were visibly darker, and to the admission teachers their last name sounded too Mexican. Sylvia Méndez, Gonzalo Méndez and Gerónimo Méndez (Strum 307).*

For a long time, I thought it was just me that felt out of place in the education system. Going into my history classes learning about the founding fathers or Christopher Columbus for weeks at a time and only dedicating a day or two to Cesar Chavez or Martin Luther King. Having the absence of that history led me to believe that forming an identity is not possible, that being proud of where I come from is like a myth because my people do not exist inside the academic world.

### Research Section

My approach to writing autohistoria-teoría was multifaceted. I chose to write about my personal experiences as a way to understand my feelings, experiences, and connection to the academic world. After identifying my embodied experiences within education concerning language, coloniality, and racism, I then identified historical events, such as the *Mendez vs. Westminster* court case and segregation in California schools, that informed my experience and expanded my thinking. This form of theorizing from embodied experience is “Creating work that cannot be assimilated, but is accessible [because] we want new books, new areas of inquiry and new methodologies. We want to study non-English and non-Euro American literature. We want more work by women of color...”(Anzaldúa 211).

When writing about embodied experiences I can understand that our voice matters and representation in academic spaces is as important by learning historical events that are similar to our personal experiences to recognize that our experiences can be seen throughout historical events. Through autohistoria-teoría, I learned about the importance of accessing creativity through rewriting moments that come from a decolonial perspective. I did not understand how to accept and heal from my educational experience before writing this piece, but my experience of

tracing my education has inspired me to want other individuals to endure the process of taking apart themselves to search for pieces of ourselves that are hidden away.

### **Moving Forward**

Theorizing from my own experience and participating in magical thinking, allowing me to understand my embodied experiences in the academic world, has inspired me to move forward into a collective autohistoria that is inspired by a collaborative autoethnography. My next steps will be to create and facilitate a workshop with college students that will allow them to explore the pieces of their identities that are hidden away and experiencing. As a collective, we will be considering the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, while exploring the similarities and differences of autohistoria and autoethnography.



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