

Menstruating in *Nepantla*: Decolonizing my Autohistoria through Gloria Anzaldúa's "path of conocimiento"

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Abstract

In this research paper, I pour my body, and specifically my menstrual experience, into the text. I take readers on a journey through the seven spaces of the "path of conocimiento" proposed and described by Gloria E. Anzaldúa in one of her last essays published in *This Bridge We Call Home* (2002), and I relate these spaces to my own experience as a menstruating woman and as a menstrual dissident. Menstruation, just as many other bodily experiences constructed as "female," is not solely a natural phenomenon; it is also sociocultural and profoundly political. The experience of menstruation is deeply personal but, at the same time, it echoes in the collective space of [please specify]. The idea that our personal experiences can relate to wider contexts is central to Anzaldúa's "autohistoria." My menstrual experience is mine, deeply personal, but I am aiming to create my menstrual *autohistoria* to create a bridge between my own experience and the collective space, thus striving to create knowledge and transform social realities. "Nepantla" is the word Anzaldúa chose to designate the place where "different worlds coalesce." It can also be the place where different narratives clash. What does it mean to menstruate in *nepantla*? It can be compared to menstruating consciously, aware of the codes that mediate our experiences and narratives. It can also mean to be in contradiction to be knowing things and to being aware of them but at the same time to be experiencing others that differ, and that, in binary thinking, cannot coexist. Menstruating in *nepantla* also opens the door for healing and for the possibility for transformation.

Keywords

menstruation, menstrual experience, menstrual narratives, Gloria Anzaldúa, autoethnography, autohistoria.

Introduction: Writing from My Body

Me gusta mucho la mar, Mama Cocha, Yemayá:
cuando sangro siento que somos una,
porque a ella también la mueve
la luna.¹

Writing from my body and from my personal experience is something I often do in notebooks, at the margins of books I read, or in random notes I accumulate in my phone. I often do this for myself, or to share with close friends. The essay at hand, however, is the first time that I write from here, from my experience and body, pour my body and specifically my menstrual experience into an academic context.² I take the readers on a journey with me through the seven spaces of the "path of *conocimiento*," the spaces that we can navigate in order to gain wisdom, awareness, and a deeper consciousness. I weave and relate these spaces to my own experience as a menstruating woman, identifying as what I call a menstrual dissident.³ Being a menstrual dissident means to be aware of hegemonic narratives and oppressions that pierce through menstrual experiences and flow out from

¹ This is one of the first poems I wrote about menstruation. This is my English translation:
I really like the sea, Mama Cocha, Yemayá:
when I bleed I feel that we are one
because she is also moved
by the moon

² I originally prepared this paper in English for a class I was auditing from October 2021 to February 2022 in the context of my studies in the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies (GEMMA), at the University of Lodz titled "La Frontera and the New Mestiza Consciousness: Race, Ethnicity and Gender at the US-Mexican Border," (advisor: Prof. Grażyna Zygałło). I revised it and translated it to Spanish for a book I have been editing since 2020. In essence, both this version and the Spanish version of the text aim to explore my menstrual autohistoria. My mother tongue is Spanish, so the article, was first imagined and crafted in my notebook and margin notes on the readings I was doing of Anzaldúa in this language. Playing with language and coming and going from Spanish to English and from English to Spanish has been a most informative journey since I have found myself with some limitations to present concepts and ideas that Anzaldúa herself proposed using a mixture of English and Spanish. The English version of the text has gone through many changes aiming to incorporate suggestions as I received feedback from the editors.

³ This is a concept I am starting to explore to create a category that does not limit but exceeds its boundaries, for those of us menstruating women and people who menstruate (PWM), who question the hegemonic narratives of menstruation as something dirty, something to be ashamed of, and something to be hidden from public debate, spaces and conversations.

them. Menstrual dissidents aim to create new narratives, conditions, and systems that bring justice, dignity, and autonomy to our cyclic bodies.

Anzaldúa developed the concept of “the path of *conocimiento*” in the essay “Now Let Us Shift [...] The Path of *Conocimiento* [...] Inner Work, Public Acts” (2002), which was first published in the anthology *This Bridge we Call Home*, and then republished in her last book *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (2013).⁴ The phrase “the path of *conocimiento*” mixes English and Spanish in a way characteristic for the concepts and categories Anzaldúa developed. A translation aiming to capture some of the fullness of meaning this phrase connotes might be “path of wisdom or knowledge.” Yet, *conocimiento* is also the Spanish word Anzaldúa chooses to differentiate both wisdom and knowledge from something deeper still, something that arises from non-traditional ways of creating knowledge such as visions, dreams, magic, and intuition. In creating this concept, Anzaldúa deploys elements from diverse cultural, cosmogonical, and epistemological sources; she uses elements from the Nahuatl, Spanish, and English languages; the symbols she uses range from different origins, such as Jungian psychology, numerology, astrology (western as well as Mesoamerican), and tarot. In her inquiry into Anzaldúa’s ritual of *conocimiento*, Sara Ohmer draws attention to how Anzaldúa plays with diverse sources that cohabit her text (as well as her/my life). In this sense, Ohmer suggests, Anzaldúa does not refer to a single source but rather to a multiplicity of guiding energies of numerous religions, cultures, and superstitions (Ohmer 150). This also allows my imagination to flourish, as there is no single interpretation possible for the elements she uses. Reading and interpreting her work is an adventure, highly subjective and emotional, as this text is for me (and maybe for you).

In this autohistorical essay, I challenge the idea of what a research paper is or can be. This text, after all, is born and situated in a liminal space between academic and personal writing, in a *nepantla*. I draw on categories and analyses from Anzaldúa’s work; and I interweave them not merely with other academic sources but rather *into* my own menstrual *autohistoria*, my dreams and the pathways I have chosen to bring me healing, shifts, and transformation. My menstruating body has made me understand that existence outside lineality is possible, that the cycles it reflects are bigger than myself. I embody change. As a snake, I often shed my skin (we humans

⁴ Other authors who have published their explorations on the “path of *conocimiento*” include Mirella Vallone (2014); Mariana Ortega (2016); Imayna Caceres (2018); Jesica S. Fernández (2018); and, Jessica Heredia (2021).

literally change the cells in our skin approximately every two weeks). Matter is on our side when shifting, as is our body.

Menstrual *Autohistoria*. Narratives and Bodily Experiences

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa,
ancestor,
brown woman,
Nahuala, lesbian, mestiza.
Incubator of other-worldly loves.
Thank you for your legacy,
for your texts and bridges.
I invoke you to make yourself present in this text-world,
in this text-seed.
Let the fire dislocate borders.
May the snake always remind us of the beauty of transformation,
of cycles.
Let the magic of words enter.
Thank you, elder Gloria,
Nepantlera,
for inviting us to speak in tongues,
to meet in the cracks
and shift.

Becoming acquainted with Gloria Anzaldúa's work has been as much personal for me as it has been academic. I first came across Anzaldúa through a fanzine I bought with an independent project based in Guatemala named *La Sospecha* (The Suspicion). As I started reading the fanzine I started to invite Anzaldúa into my reflections, started to converse with her through her texts. I was not sure who she was or why I had the feeling that I had previously heard her name, but I bought the fanzine regardless. It stood on my nightstand for almost a month and then, during one night of insomnia, I started reading. I immediately fell in love with her writing: it was so raw, but at the same time warm, welcoming and intimate that I did not become sleepy (as I intended when I started reading). Instead, I finished the fanzine before sunrise of the next day. I felt especially connected with the text "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers," so much that I almost thought it could be my grandmother writing a letter to me, encouraging me to write.

Months passed and then, when I started my Master's Program at the University of Lodz, Poland, I met Prof. Grażyna Zygałło. When she introduced herself in one of the courses, I was taken: she shared that her main topic of research was the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. A bell rang and I was very curious about Gloria, as I have come to refer to her. The professor shared with the group that she taught a course that was not included in the regular course load for first year students, a course called "La Frontera and the New Mestiza Consciousness: Race, Ethnicity and Gender at the U.S.-Mexican Border." I was intrigued, so I emailed her right after the class finished to inquire about the possibility of auditing the class. She said yes and a journey to connect more deeply with Gloria, her life and work began for me.

Anzaldúa opened many cracks in this world and in different systems of oppression for many of us, women and other persons⁵ working with and from feminisms and aiming to transform the systems of oppression that mediate our embodied experiences. She politicized spirituality as a form of resistance but also as a form of thriving and creating new worlds. As Zygałło emphasizes, when Anzaldúa mixed diverse ideologies, symbols and meanings, she created her own syncretism, a syncretism that helped women and dissidents "to overcome destructive myths about our sexuality" (32), and for them to create new narratives and bodily experiences. In her essay "La Prieta" (2002), Anzaldúa opens up about her menstrual experience, one pierced with a neglected pain and the feeling that it was the menstrual blood that robbed her of her childhood: "Full flowing periods accompanied cramps, tonsillitis and 105°F fevers. Every month a trip to the doctors. 'It's all in your head,' they would say" (222). Menstruation, just as many other bodily experiences of women and persons with uteruses, is not solely a natural phenomenon, but it is also sociocultural and profoundly political (Aguilar 2021); and this experience has been fictionally constructed as private and deeply personal but at the same time it has echoes in the collective space, in the communities we inhabit. I was not born knowing this, it took me many moons and pathways to understand.

The idea that our personal experiences can relate to wider contexts is central to Anzaldúa's *autohistoria*. For her, "*conectando experiencias personales con realidades sociales*" results in *autohistoria*, and theorizing

⁵ This may or may not include sexual dissidents, trans and non-binary persons as well. I do not intend to universalize but rather be explicit about the notion of being feminist (as diverse as this can be). I am talking about my personal experience when I say that encountering with the work and legacy of Gloria was (and still is) a breaking point in my feminist and mestiza subjectivation process.

about this interrelation results in *autohistoria-teoría*. The author further describes *autohistoria* as “a way of inventing and making knowledge, meaning and identity through self-inscriptions. By making certain personal experiences the subject of this study, I also blur the private/public borders” (“Now Let Us Shift” 6). Nowadays, maybe what Anzaldúa proposed back then as *autohistoria* opened a path for what we now have come to name as autoethnography. These concepts are connected, and in some ways, they are the same; but in some ways, they are also different. Kakali Bhattacharya and AnaLouise Keating in their article “Expanding Beyond Public and Private Realities: Evoking Anzaldúan Autohistoria-teoría in Two Voices” (2018) refer to *autohistoria* as the way that Gloria frames autoethnography, thus bridging the two concepts. They refer to *autohistoria* as a practice and theory in the making that represents “hybridized creativity and bridge building that uses life stories to generate innovative insights and theories” that serves as a pathway to open the possibilities of realms to be explored in scholarship through autoethnography.

For many feminist scholars, autoethnography is an ideal method to study “the feminist I,” as it is referred to in the book “Autoethnography as Feminist Method. Sensitising the feminist ‘I,’” written by Elizabeth Etorre (2017). Etorre places autoethnography within the “tradition of feminist narrative writing and the literary turn within ethnography” (1). She goes further to explain how certain level of disenchantment from the dominant Cartesian paradigm of rationality led many scholars, many of whom were creating knowledge from the margins, to narrative at a way to resist the idea of universal truths since narrative “emphasizes plurality of truths” (1). For Etorre, narrative methods contribute to creating situated knowledge about “individuals, collective agency and the interior language of emotional vulnerability” (1). In this sense, autoethnography and *autohistoria* intersect because they have the power to create narratives.

For me, both *autohistoria* and autoethnography are part of a continuum⁶: even though I acknowledge the difference, both concepts are interwoven and interconnected: both are radical methods of resistance within patriarchal

⁶ An important part on how I weave *autohistoria* and autoethnography has to do with the notion of (auto)ethnography as a method that does not (traditionally) include magical and intuitive sources of data and knowledge, as *autohistoria* does, but rather relates to ethnography as an anthropological method with which scientific knowledge is created. This positionality is connected to my political decision of rejecting binarisms within my sentient-thinking that is constructed from a diversity of sources, some regarded as objective and other embedded in a more magical-mystical realm.

academic contexts. These disrupt a masculinist and Western discourse of understanding and producing impersonal, non-situated and traditionally objective knowledge. This is then especially important for a topic such as menstruation.

I aim to create my menstrual *autohistoria* as a bridge between my own experience and the collective space, with the ambition to create knowledge and transform social realities. My menstrual experience is grounded in my “personal realm,” my subjectivity as a mestiza young woman from Guatemala.⁷ This experience has been situated in my body for most of my life, I also understand it as a territory: a material realm and place that constitutes my being-in-the-world and mediates my relationality. Bodies as disputed territories are a motto that echoes deeply among diverse feminists in Latin America. This positionality reminds us that bodies can also be colonized, fenced in, (re)conquered, as have been the territories in America (the continent). This idea of body as territory is shared by Lorena Kab'nal and other territorial community feminists in Central and South America as well as in Mexico.⁸ To look at bodies as living historical territories entails a particular political and cosmological perspective. This enables us to see our bodies as the vessels of our wounds, memories, wisdom, desires, dreams and experiences (Cruz Hernández 44). For Anzaldúa,

writing is a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, a working from the inside out," and her "feminism is grounded not on incorporeal abstraction but on corporeal realities. The material body is center, and central. The body is the ground of thought. The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it's about being in your body" ("Now Let Us Shift" 5).

And being in my body and developing a sentient-thinking approach to my experiences brought me to write this essay on my menstrual experience. The homecoming of this text is positioned within a non-coincidental embodied experience that mediates my reflections: the first day I started to structure it I was menstruating, cramping from time to time. Words and blood flowed from my body. I knew, in that very moment, I was not menstruating alone [...] Gloria, and many ancestors, were also present.

⁷ Mestiza is an identity that is mixed, I have ancestry in both indigenous worlds and in the colonizers. Mestiza recognizes this mixture, names my roots.

⁸ Territorial community feminisms are created by women, mostly indigenous, who resist the violence and spoils of their body-territories. They insert the notion that the emotional is political. For them, affectation becomes affectivity and political action. They do so by positioning the body as a construct not merely individual but as an inseparable construct from the territory-land and the community frameworks that allow life. Being life what they seek to sustain and care for. A life that is “livable” for all (Cruz Hernández 2020).

Menstruation: An Experience from Gendered and Cyclic Bodies

We menstruate in herds, in community, in relation with others, even though we sometimes are not aware of it. Half of the population of the world menstruates. Menstruation lingers in a space of liminality as it channels material, emotional, spiritual and symbolic realms. These realms are not mutually exclusive, they coexist and have diverse meanings and values depending on cultural as well as material⁹ contexts. Most of the interpretations around menstruation, however, are negative, functioning as a means of oppression and control over female and menstrual bodies (Tum Teleguario 22). Gender, as the set of human experiences defined by sexual difference and the significance that is made of that sexual difference, is based on our historical bodies, as each person in the world exists in a lived body, a historical body, and a sexed and gendered body (Lagarde y De Los Ríos 31). Menstruating bodies, in this sense, are gendered. As Eugenia Tarzibachi suggests, to menstruate is “to do gender” (44), to perform gender. The common narrative (which can be violent) is that we (cis-gender women) menstruate because “we” are women; there is also a powerful narrative that sustains that we are women because we menstruate.¹⁰

Reflecting on gender in this context, I return to Judith Butler, who maintains that gender is performative, in that it is always a doing (84). When addressing “doing,” it is important to recognize that such a doing can both be willed acts as well as acts that are not consciously willed, or something in between. In this sense, menstruation or its performance can be a willed act in several ways. First, the current technological development of forms of hormonal birth control has allowed woman to willingly¹¹ decide if they want to

⁹ When I refer to material contexts I mean corporeality but at the same time I also think about the places, territories, spaces and technologies that mediate our menstrual experiences. Material context include our bodies-territories but also an expanded vision of them: our bathrooms, houses, communities, cities. All of these material contexts include, among other things: technologies that we can access, water, infrastructure, buildings, menstrual blood management devices, information that we have.

¹⁰ Even though the narrative of menstruators=women is very powerful and even violent for some identities or for some women that do not menstruate, we have to remember that it is a fiction and that PWM is a term that recognizes menstrual diversity.

¹¹ Even though this can be addressed as a matter of will and conscious decision making, from experience I am aware that sometimes we are not fully informed about the impacts of hormonal birth control in suppressing the menstrual cycle (we do not ovulate, and thus we do not menstruate). The emulation of menstrual blood present in some pills can trick us into believing that we experience regular cyclicity, but we do not, since most pills suppress ovulation (and without ovulation menstruation is not “real” but rather a fiction of menstruation).

experience the menstrual cycle or not; some technologies suppress any trace of it. Second, the performance of a “menstrual status” can be consciously willed, in the sense that we can choose to hide, for example, menstrual blood. But let us not forget that the vast majority of PWM, including girls, living in poverty do not have access to menstrual management technologies. And, third, there are ways in which our dreams, desires and experiences can (willingly or not) influence the moment¹² in which we menstruate.

Bodily acts, gestures, and the ways we appear in the world, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity they “seek to affirm are inventions manufactured and preserved through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (266). Discourses have power in constructing our realities and identities. However, I also acknowledge the importance of recognizing the agency of matter, as some new materialism perspectives do.¹³ Matter also has power in constructing our realities and identities. Our bodies are matter, but are not only matter. This is not to actively deny discursive construction, but rather to simultaneously recognize that “biology is never separable from the social and discursive” (Jagger 340). In this sense, matter is not neglected, matter is named, seen and invited to the conversation. And in this way, “we,” “women,” fictionally and wrongly constructed historically as the only menstruating subjects in heteropatriarchy, learn that our body should be a certain way, that our body, as women, is confirmed when we menstruate, when our blood “stains” and is kept in secret. Blood then, is signified both as the marker of our womanhood and simultaneously as an agent in its construction. But this can be subverted and resisted through our bodies, experiences, and identities.

Historically, menstrual taboos are linked to an exercise of power. In one of my previous works, “Del secreto a la colectividad: emociones, ciclicidad y

¹² Sometimes I can synchronize my menstruation with the new moon or the full moon willingly because I want to work with some energies. Sometimes I dream I will menstruate and at some point in the next days, it arrives (even though sometimes I was not expecting it until later). For me this can show how both human and non-human agencies become present in our menstrual experiences.

¹³ I reflect with authors such as Karen Barad and their text “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart” (2014), where she addressed the agency of matter, its capacity to perform, while at the same time worked with Anzaldúa’s ideas and sharings, specially about *nepantla* and the in-betweenness. Another author I recall in this context is Beatriz Revelles-Benavente and her text “Intra-mat-extuality: feminist resilience within contemporary literature,” in which she works with the ideas of Julia Kristeva, Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad, among others, to explore non-human agencies in contemporary literature-objects.

menstruación en la experiencia de mujeres activistas menstruales de la colectiva Guatemala Menstruante y en Abya Yala” (2021)¹⁴ I have stated that there is nothing natural in the menstrual experience of many women and girls. Social narratives relegated menstruation to silence, secrecy, shame, and even guilt. Consequently, the menstrual experience can be historicized and politicized (Aguilar 2021). This means that menstruation has a history, and it is embedded in power relations. In this sense, the idea of menstruation as something disgusting is a cultural and historical construct that we learn to embody. There are, however, many women, feminists, menstruators, activists, dreamers, and girls outflowing from these narratives, creating new ones, or menstruating in *nepantla*.

My Experience Menstruating in *Nepantla*

Nepantla is a Nahuatl word that describes the space between worlds; Anzaldúa chose it to designate the place where “different worlds coalesce” (*Borderlands 2*). It can also be the place where different narratives clash. As she stated: “*nepantla* is the point of contact y *el lugar* between worlds – between imagination and physical existence, between ordinary and nonordinary (spirit) realities” (2). Anzaldúa was conscious about various *nepantlas*, including social, political, historical, and gender, among others. For me, there is a menstrual *nepantla* as well, of narratives but also of cyclical worlds that I experience, narrate and embody: “*Nepantlas* are places of constant tension, where the missing or absent pieces can be summoned back, where transformation and healing may be possible, where wholeness is just out of reach but seems attainable” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands 2*). To menstruate in *nepantla*, then, means to be aware of the cultural and colonial codes that mediate our menstrual experience, and the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives that pierce through it. It means to be in contradiction, a feeling that is experienced directly in our wombs, in our menstrual blood. But menstruating in *nepantla* also opens the door for healing from the patriarchal wound inscribed in our menstruating bodies, it opens the possibility for a transformation of the narrative, one that is not fixed (as in never changing, static, ever-the same) in experience, but rather changes as we do, shifts as we do.

I don't exactly remember the first time I reflected on my menstrual experience. Surely it was in some conversation with one of my friends,

¹⁴ A translation of the title could be: “From the secret to the collective: emotions, cyclicity and menstruation in the experience of women menstrual activists from the Guatemala Menstruante collective and in Abya Yala.”

probably around 2012, which was the year in which we founded some spaces dedicated to menstruation in our country, Guatemala. During 2020 and part of 2021, I systematically analyzed and reflected on menstrual experiences, including my own as part of a research project. Although at that time I was not familiar with *autohistoria*, I consider that this was one of my first approaches to writing from a deeply personal perspective, while simultaneously aiming at processes of collective reflection. The first time I saw my period I felt ashamed; maybe the first *nepantla* I experienced was that between "becoming a woman" and still being a girl. I didn't want to leave my childhood behind; I still wanted to climb trees and play with dolls. Out of nowhere, this red-brownish spot on my underwear meant that I was a *señorita*, that I was no longer a little girl, and that I was also ready to become a mother. This idea that the first menstruation turns girls into women is one of the most violent hegemonic narratives about our bodies. Not only does it strip us from our childhood but it also opens the door for marriage, and in many places, including Guatemala, as soon as a little girl starts menstruating she can get married, even against her will. I was privileged enough to have a family that protected me against childhood marriage, but all around me everything I heard about menstruation was so negative, rooted in misinformation, in fear, but mostly in secrecy and shame. When I first saw my menstrual blood, I decided to escape this narrative: my menarche did not have to mean that I was a fully-grown woman, ready to be married and have children of my own. I decided to keep it a secret only between me and my blood. Somehow, the secrecy of my own menarche kept my childhood safe until I turned 15 and my body was not able to keep the secret any longer. My body exceeded, was "speaking in tongues"¹⁵, manifesting itself. To "speak in tongues" is also to speak in other languages, other meanings, codes, and symbols, not only human, rational, or even vocal. To speak in tongues is to recognize our bodies as agents and bearers of meaning, movement, cycles and transformation. However, one day I plucked up the courage and went into my mom's room, showed her my stained panties and told her that I needed a pad. For some reason, I had learned to be embarrassed about these languages of my cyclical body.

¹⁵ "Speaking in Tongues" are words that are part of the title of a letter Anzaldúa wrote for Third World women writers in 1980. A letter to encourage us to find our "tongues of fire," to write from our experiences so that our personal realities and the social are evoked not through abstraction or academic learning, but rather through "blood, pus and sweat." She encouraged us to write by sharing that she writes: "to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you" (Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues" 169).

Menstrual shaming is a reality for many, not only in the context of our home but in school as well. Sometimes, we are victims of menstrual harassment, teasing, and other forms of violence and discrimination towards us, as women and/or beings-in-cyclicity. I remember in 2019 reading a news story that broke my heart to pieces: a girl in Kenya had committed suicide after being teased about her period in her classroom (BBC 2019). At school, we sometimes carry the burden of menstruation with us. It literally adds weight to our backpacks, weight and products that we tend to hide, just like the stains. Secrecy, in situations where we may be harassed because of our menstrual status, can work to keep us safe. Paradoxically, it is this very idea of secrecy that has prevented us to speak about menstruation collectively so that we can challenge the menstrual stigma and taboo (Tum Teleguario 43).

In this sense, one of the consequences of the secrecy and the shame that causes menstrual stigma is our permanent state of self-surveillance, especially when it comes to being aware of our menstrual status so that we can hide it (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 6). We cannot inhabit the public space with a stain on our clothes without feeling embarrassed or ashamed. Technologies have thus been invented to emulate a non-menstrual body all the time. Multi-million-dollar companies profit from this shame and from the narrative of menstruation as something to be kept in secret. These technologies are often feminized, exclude the diversity of menstruators, and are portrayed as the only correct way to menstruate.

There are a wide range of gender identities that can experience the menstrual cycle. A study by Chrisler et al. (2016) describes how for “masculine of centre people” and self-identified members of the transgender community, “concerns about how people outside the circle of intimacy react to masculine menstruators” (1248), often leading them to be extra careful to hide their menstrual status. As the authors recall, a number of transgender participants “said that they do not ‘pass easily’ (might be perceived as female), thus using a men’s restroom could result in some danger for them” (1246). Menstruation, then, marks those who menstruate, leaves traces in their lives and social contexts (both experiential as well as bodily ones). Why am I so obsessed with this subject? Why is it so important for me, for my life and for the transformation I seek to bring to this world, collectively?

When I started reflecting about menstruation, I just couldn't ignore the voices and experiences from friends and peers (so similar to my own), nor the freedom I experienced when I got to name the nameless. The dreams, words, voices, and colors started to flow between my legs. I started gaining *conocimiento* (conscious wisdom), the one that “questions conventional

knowledge's current categories, classifications, and contents," the one that questions the colonizing "doctrines claiming to be the only right way to live" (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark* 119; 118). The hegemonic, heteropatriarchal and colonial narratives no longer served me: they no longer made sense to me, nor to the new bodily-menstrual-material narratives and experiences that I was living, experiencing, doing and co-creating. After giving birth to Camila, my daughter, something changed inside me, like the snake, little by little I was shedding my skins-narratives-beliefs and I began to see things differently. I began to talk about a subject that had been so denied to me: my body. My path took me to my womb, to my uterus, to my center, to my blood. I began to "speak in tongues" with myself, with my friends, and the circle grew and exceeded us, we sowed many collective seeds – diverse, but collective.

Moving Through the "Path of *Conocimiento*"

In "Now Let Us Shift," written between 1999 and 2001, Anzaldúa describes the seven spaces of *conocimiento*. She develops this path of *conocimiento* as a ritual process. She shares her *autohistoria* to illustrate how this path can be walked and how she experienced the different spaces along it. Through delving into each step of the path of *conocimiento*, Ohmer explains, we can begin to "appreciate the intricacies of a decolonizing process" (148). Like Anzaldúa, I aim to interweave my own *autohistoria* with the path of others, with her path and her journey, in order to connect my experience to this decolonizing ritual.

Before the journey begins, let me delineate Anzaldúa's stages of *conocimiento*, that is, stages to conscious wisdom. The first four stages are related to the four directions of the world (south, west, north, east). The next stages refer to vertical dimensions: below, above and center.¹⁶ Anzaldúa writes that they symbolize the seven chakras or eyes of light that are related to the physical body but that are more like energies: "Together, the seven stages open the senses and enlarge the breadth and depth of consciousness, causing internal shifts and external changes" ("Now Let Us Shift" 123). The spaces are named as follows:

1. "*el arrebató*¹⁷ [...] rupture, fragmentation [...] an ending, a beginning" (124)
2. "*nepantla* [...] torn between ways" (126)

¹⁶ The fifth stage points toward that which is below (the underworld), the sixth one to that which is above (the realm of the skies); and the seventh to the center between the two.

¹⁷ Can be translated as "the outburst."

3. "the Coatlicue¹⁸ state [...] *desconocimiento*¹⁹ and the cost of knowing" (128)
4. "the call . . . *el compromiso*²⁰ [...] the crossing and conversion" (134)
5. "putting Coyolxauhqui together [...] new personal and collective 'stories'" (138)
6. "the blow-up [...] a clash of realities" (143)
7. "shifting realities [...] acting out the vision or spiritual activism" (149)

As Anzaldúa recalls, these spaces constitute a meditation on the transitions of life: "from birth to death, and all the daily births and deaths in-between" (124). As we walk the path of *conocimiento*, through inhabiting and transitioning each of the spaces, parts of ourselves dissolve and parts of ourselves are seeded, again. In the next paragraphs I weave each of the paths with my experience, I call upon them and perform some archaeological processes with myself and my *autohistoria* to work with my past and elements from it, including my dreams. My archaeological process goes back to my first menstruation. However, my journey does not follow a chronological order with the seven spaces Anzaldúa described. To me, the path is cyclical, as is my body.

The first space is *el arretrato*, the earthquake, the rupture that "shifts you into the crack between the worlds, shattering the mythology that grounds you" (Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift" 122). First, I doubted everything I was told (and not told) about menstruation. The most remarkable thing in this space for me was realizing my menstrual blood was not dirty. This happened when I started using alternative technologies instead of disposable sanitary pads. The smell I associated with menstrual blood suddenly disappeared when I realized menstrual blood smells not like rotten fish, as I was once told, but like blood, like wet earth. I saw its color: diverse red. And I even touched it, and I did not feel disgusted by it. Instead, I was curious about my body, about the crystallization of my cyclicity in my blood and clots. This curiosity opens a door for shifts, for transitions.

Nepantla is the second space, the liminal and transitional space, the zone of possibility:

You experience reality as fluid, expanding and contracting. In *nepantla* you are exposed, open to other perspectives, more readily able to access knowledge derived from inner feelings, imaginal states, and outer events, and 'see through' them with a mindful holistic awareness. (Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift" 122).

¹⁸ Coatlicue is the proper name of a Mexican goddess; she is connected with dualism, snakes and cycles of birth and death.

¹⁹ Can be translated as "ignorance."

²⁰ Can be translated as "commitment."

I started connecting with my blood from a very animal-like instinctual raw perspective. The infinite possibilities, including ontological ones, that *nepantla* opens led me to many questions: how did PWM and “women” menstruate in ancient times, about 500-1,000 years ago? How did early hominids with a uterus system menstruate 300,000 (or more) years ago? Do other animals menstruate²¹? How do other animals with a uterus menstruate? Many of my questions remain unanswered, but they awakened imaginative processes that allowed me the possibility of weaving bridges, of cutting worlds together-apart. Suddenly I saw through it. The space of *nepantla* sparked the possibility of a different way of experiencing menstruation.

The *Coatlilcue* space is related to hopelessness, to *la desgracia* and *desconocimiento* (disgrace and ignorance). This stage, for me, was painful: “your refusal to move paralyzes you” (123). I was hurting: Why did they tell us this was a curse? Why was there so much teasing and secrecy about our bleeding bodies? I did not linger here for a long time.

The following space, “the call,” is literally a call to action. In this space you “reconnect with spirit, and undergo a conversion” (Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift” 123). Something moved within. The blood that flows from me without violence was magical. It made life possible. Was I ready to face what Gloria named as the “shadow beast guarding the threshold”? All the things internalized somehow also feel safe. The secret also made me feel safe. But there was no turning back. A bridge had to be crossed. Crossing is not easy. Whenever we decide to cross there is something we leave behind, we lose something. As Anzaldúa recalls, “to pass over the bridge to something else, you'll have to give up partial organizations of self, erroneous bits of knowledge, outmoded beliefs of who you are, your comfortable identities (your story of self, *tu autohistoria*)” (“Now Let Us Shift” 137). That bridge could also be crossed for the story of my body, the story of my blood, a story that could be told/lived in a different way.

In the fifth space you aim to put Coyolxauhqui together, create new narratives. This is the space where “you scrutinize and question dominant

²¹ I am aware now that there are only three other animals that have a menstrual cycle similar to *Homo sapiens* in which menstruation occurs after ovulation. Dogs, for example, do not menstruate in strict human terms; rather they bleed as a sign of being ready to get pregnant but their bodies do not develop endometrial tissue (which is basically menstrual blood). according to animal health specialist Juan Pascual in his essay “¿Por qué los animales domésticos no tienen la regla?” (English: “why domestic animals do not have periods?” 2017), the species that do menstruate, as some humans, are: macaques (*Macaca mulatta*); bats (specially *Carollia perspicillata*), and elephant shrew (*Rhynchocyon petersi*).

and ethnic ideologies and the mind-sets their culture induces in others" (Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift" 123). Through this, we begin to put order in our new discoveries, thus re-envisioning the world, "scripting a new story" (123): menstruation can be a source of knowledge, a way to connect with ancestors, a political experience.

In the sixth space, "new *conocimientos* (insights) threaten your sense of what's 'real' when it's up against what's 'real' to the other. But it's precisely this threat that triggers transformation" (Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift" 147): I began writing a new menstrual *autohistoria* in my body, a new narrative; as *autohistoria* in general, this new narrative is "not carved in stone but drawn on sand and subject to the winds" (147). And it shifted as I shared it, as I crossed borders.

In the last space, finally, "at the critical turning point of transformation, you shift realities" (Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift" 123), Anzaldúa suggested. In shifting, you

develop an ethical compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within self and between others; and find common ground by forming holistic alliances. You include these practices in your daily life, act on your vision-enacting spiritual activism. (123)

Thus, I began to create spaces to share about menstruation, to create collective texts, and together with a wonderful friend, we started two collective spaces to contribute to bring along changes in the menstrual experiences of more girls, women, and menstruating people in our country.²² We were not talking about "the correct way to menstruate;" rather we were sharing that it was, indeed, possible, to menstruate in our own terms. To do so, however, we needed to see beyond the taboo, see beyond the myths and the patriarchal and misogynistic narratives on menstruation. It is not a complete or linear process. And as Anzaldúa mentioned, all seven spaces are present within each space, and often the most common one is *Nepantla*: the "bridge in-between" borders ("Now Let Us Shift" 156). This is where I menstruate now, in this place of possibilities, the place where I leak outside

²² The mentioned projects are Guatemala Menstruante and Nana Luna, they were both founded in Guatemala City in 2012. Guatemala Menstruante is a feminist collective in which I participated until February 2023 (see <https://linktr.ee/guatemalamenstruante>). Nana Luna is a project specialized in menstrual self-knowledge and self-care that seeks to offer alternatives for menstrual management in Guatemala, accompany the transitions to said alternatives, and carry out menstrual education processes. In 2019 we opened La Tiendita Roja, the first physical store in the Central American region dedicated to menstruation, which is also dedicated to promoting entrepreneurial projects of women and diverse people in the country and the region (see <https://linktr.ee/nanaluna>).

the hegemonic narratives and become a menstrual dissident, where I cross borders and dislocate them.

Flowing Towards Shift: Not-so-Final Reflections

The path of *conocimiento* can be understood as a new paradigm of knowing that comes from different spaces, both from outside and from within ourselves in different ways, differential also in the sense of diversity because we do not know for sure how it will manifest for each one of us, or for us collectively. The new stories and narratives that emerge from this journey can build a decolonizing bridge that “dismantles and resists existing dogmas and ideologies related to continuing politics of violence, and that triggers inner / spiritual / personal / social / collective / material changes” (Ohmer 151).

Through all her work, Gloria Anzaldúa teaches readers a new consciousness and invites them to create knowledge that enables them to experience a different way of life, to cross borders, and to create narratives. As they did for Ohmer, Anzaldúa's “teachings have inspired me to establish a new paradigm of analysis, one that searches the healing function of narratives” (152). In my menstrual *autohistoria*, the creation of new narratives has been central for me to inhabit my cyclic body from a different perspective, rooted in self-knowledge, self-care, and eventually self-love, while simultaneously striving to change the structural and social inequalities and conditions that continue to shape a lot of gendered experiences, such as menstruation. Thus, I break with the neoliberal impulse of self-love and self-care practices, which serves heightened productivity within the system. When I ask myself how I will shift, *nepantla* opens up infinite possibilities; among these infinite possibilities, I hope, I will never lose sight of the collective, of the community, and of the earth that holds us, humanity but not only humanity.

Through my entire journey, in my *autohistoria*, both the one I am still imagining and the one that has already been materializing, *la facultad*²³ has been developing, has been present. For Anzaldúa, “*la facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” and “it is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the

²³ Can be translated as “the faculty”, but it also entails a sense of mysticism as a capacity to access *conocimiento*.

world" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 60). I am alive when I paint with my blood, when I write poems about it, when I smell it free from stigma, when I allow it to flow freely and red, in my dreams and between my legs.

Now let me shift²⁴: I am *cíclica, como la luna*.²⁵

²⁴ "Now let us shift" are the words with which Anzaldúa closed her last essay and the ones that also give it its name. I wanted to recall them and honor all the wisdom they entail and represent for me and my autohistoria menstrual.

²⁵ In English: "cyclic, as the moon."

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