TEACHING IN/BETWEEN

CURATING EDUCATIONAL SPACES WITH AUTOHISTORIA-TEORÍA AND CONOCIMIENTO

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Curating and Interpreting Culture

VERNON PRESS

www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200
Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

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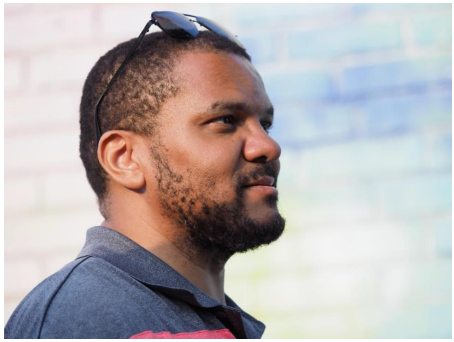
Library of Congress Control Number: 2021947189

ISBN: 978-1-64889-122-9

Cover designed by Antonio Howard.



Antonio M. Howard, Community Muralist

Bio

Antonio Howard (Peggy's son) is an autodidactic artist. At the young age of 15, he was incarcerated and sentenced to life in prison, where he served 26 ½ years. While in prison, he educated himself on the concepts and processes of visual art-making through instructional books. He writes, "Although I often dreamed of being an escape artist, as a visual artist, my paintings broke free of [prison] long before I did."

Released in 2018 and now living as a civilian here in Erie, he is committed to serving Erie and documenting his life through his paintings. Antonio is the 2019 recipient of Erie Arts and Culture's Emerging Artist Fellowship. He is a Teaching Artist through Erie Arts and Culture / Pa Arts Counsel, and since 2020 has participated in the creation of several murals throughout Erie including, the Whole Foods Co-Op mural; the Manus Sunoco Mural honoring 93-year-old veteran, educator, and Gannon alumni Luther Manus; The MHA Tree of Life mural; two City of Erie bandwagons; and a Purple Martin mural recently completed on behalf of Bayfront Eastside Taskforce. Antonio is also the author of three books: When A Child Is Worth More Than the Worst Mistake He Ever Made; A Black Man and A Spear(e); and Love Is When You Want The Best (For Someone Else). He sits on the board of directors for the Mental Health Association of Northwestern Pennsylvania, is a member of the steering committee for the Pardon Project of Erie County, and is an American Bar Endowment Pardon Fellow. He is also a core member of Erie's Participatory Defense, an Erie community organization that offers support to individuals and their loved ones navigating the criminal legal system. He is also past president of the CHROMA Guild, whose mission advances opportunities and access to resources for creative and cultural professionals of color in Northwestern Pennsylvania. The regional network builds both individual and organizational capacity by expanding equity and inclusion within the area's cultural and creative sector. In his day job, Antonio works as a paralegal with the Federal Public Defender.

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Abstract

This decolonial feminist teacher inquiry documents and analyzes my experiences teaching the undergraduate course *Latina Feminisms, Latinas in the US: Gender, Culture and Society.* The premise for this study was my initial research for my dissertation work. I interpret the seven recursive stages of Gloria Anzaldúa's conocimiento theory as transformative acts to guide my research design and teaching approach. I apply Anzaldúa's theories of autohistoria-teoría and conocimiento to curate educational spaces that decolonize White hegemonic academic canons and empower underrepresented learners who may experience a deep sense of not belonging in academia. I situate myself in the study as curator, and my practice of curator, as an agent of self-knowledge production and theorizing to create self-empowering learning environments. Teaching and learning from a feminist testimonio writing practice of theorizing experiences (i.e., autohistoria-teoría) is important to this work. I situate my testimonio in the introduction as an example of autohistoria-teoría. In my approach and experience from curating the *Latina Feminisms* curriculum, I witnessed transformational learning from the following: awakening, vulnerability, belonging, healing, and interconnectedness.

Dedicated to my children and grandchildren.
We are the past, the present and the future.

Acknowledgements

To my children: Christina Anne, Sterling Lance, Miles Avery, and Sophia Ana and my granddaughters: Carmen Alexandria and Camila Avayah, who are the greatest joys of my life.

I am deeply grateful to my ancestors, who paved the way for me today. May we remember we each have the power to create new stories for ourselves. With great love and affection, my hope and work are towards a greater, more loving, empowering and transformative today and tomorrow, for all people.

This book is but a marker in my journey, made possible by my hard work and the endless guidance, support and mentorship of phenomenal human beings in my life. These pages hold the imprint of those who have traversed my life in a myriad of ways and impacted my life profoundly. I thank my parents, Angel L.Sotomayor and Leidis (Leslie) Fayad Puente, for my life and for sharing the best of themselves with me. I am grateful to my mentor, Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd, for the endless investment of her time into my work, who saw in me what I couldn't see in myself years ago. I am forever and continuously thankful to all of the humans in my life who have sat with me, listened, resisted, challenged, and been present with me on this journey of life; I am here because of you. I am grateful to Dr. Clemente Abrokwaa, Dr. Eric Ian Farmer, Dr. Christen García, Dr. Stevie Berberick, Jessica Namais, BJ Weaver, Dr. Ilayda Altuntas, Dr. Stephanie Cardona, Ana Fernandez, Bonnie Collura, Martha Jensen, Julie Porterfield, Dr. Anne Whitney, Dr. Eduardo Navas, Dr. Wanda B. Knight, and Dr. AnaLouise Keating.

Foreword by Dr. Christen Sperry García

No Representation is Representation: Teaching Nepantla through Art Practice

1. Make art like a White man so that it can have value in the art world.
2. White artists are called "artists." Artists of color are called *Black artists, Latinx artists, Native American artists, Asian artists*, etc.
3. When asked to name five artists, many undergraduate art students will name five White male artists.
4. When asked to name five Latina/x artists, many undergraduates are unable to identify artists other than Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera (there is, after all, a movie about them).
5. Art is not taken seriously if it has to do with cuteness, motherhood, feminist issues, or identity.
6. There are art history courses dedicated to *women* artists, but none to male artists because they are overrepresented in virtually every art history time period.

No Representation *is* Representation in Art Education

The above statements are among common themes pervasive in art school and the art world at-large. Artists of color are presently and historically unrepresented in the visual arts. As a result, there is a lack of scholarship written by and on art practitioners of color. This includes the art curriculum. In her *Studies in Art Education* article, Leslie Sotomayor argues:

> No representation *is* representation, meaning that when we (marginalized people) do not see parts of ourselves, our histories, and contributions reflected in the society, the institutions, and the canons of knowledge in which we live, our realization of not being represented generates a silent loudness or a gaping hole. (2019, p. 134)

The gaping hole that Sotomayor refers to is highly relevant in the field of art and education. Firstly, many higher education institutions do not require ethnic studies in their core curriculum. As a result, many students leave with an undergraduate degree centered on colonized knowledge. Students are offered limited perspectives on underrepresented groups, which is a disservice to White students and students of color, who do not see themselves in the

curriculum. And if they do, the scholarship, in many cases, is written by White academics. This void or gaping hole is further exposed in examining arts education through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. The *Palgrave Handbook of Race and Arts in Education* (Kraehe et al., 2018) applies CRT to arts education and examines the arts as property. More specifically, the authors argue that the arts are *White property*: White superiority appropriates art institutions, including schools, museums, and galleries. *What* (curriculum) is taught is a part of the art institution and, therefore, can also be argued as White property. However, while extremely relevant in the field of arts education in relation to race and representation, this handbook does not focus on Latina/x issues.

Moving from theory to practice, there are few curricular resources for arts educators on race and identity. For example, the *Art Education in Practice Series,* produced by the publisher Davis, is used to teach artists how to teach art. Addressing art education history, curriculum design, assessment, visual culture, and community art, they offer little representation of communities of color beyond issues of diversity and multiculturalism. This series offers little to no insight on borderlands or Latina/x perspectives, art histories, or curriculum development from Latino/a perspectives. In addition, some National Art Education Association's (NAEA) publications cover diversity and multiculturalism (Brown, 2011; Manifold et al., 2016), but do not discuss how systemic racism relates to art education. In teaching art education in higher education, one must look to other fields to address issues of race and identity: Women's Studies, Art History, and Latina/x and Chicana/x Studies.

While *Border pedagogy* (Giroux, 1991 & 2005; Kazanjian, 2011) and *borderlands pedagogies* (Leake, 2019) address race, representation, and use in-betweenness as a pedagogical site, they are not informed by Latina Feminism. Border pedagogy (Giroux, 2005) is not an arts-based teaching approach, but it uses the U.S./Mexico border to examine difference and struggle. More specifically, border pedagogy examines geographical, conceptual, and metaphorical borders to cultivate dialogue surrounding underrepresented groups, cultures, histories, and politics (Giroux, 1991; Kazanjian, 2011). In addition, border pedagogy is a call to action in which students conceptually cross borders to understand otherness and re-create their identities through border languages (Giroux, 1991). Lastly, border pedagogy examines underrepresented histories, narratives, and identities as a way to reframe hegemonic canons of knowledge (Giroux, 2005). Borderlands pedagogies, on the other hand, is a studio-based teaching practice wherein students and teachers come together to co-create knowledge through a visual methodology (Leake, 2019). Borderlands pedagogies examine issues of immigration, asylum-seeking, and border living through art and social practice. The results of this approach are visual artifacts, including drawings, photographs, text collages, image and text works. This art/teaching

practice resists an *us versus them* mentality and highlights larger socio-structural systems that perpetuate oppression and racism. Borderlands pedagogies cultivate dialogue and promote listening, critical reflection, and vulnerability.

Sotomayor uses conceptual, geographical, and metaphorical borders, like border pedagogy, to promote dialogue on racial oppression, in-betweenness, and identity, similar to borderlands pedagogies. However, what Sotomayor adds is an autobiographical feminist teaching and art practice informed by the work of *frontizera* (border) queer Chicana, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 2009, 2012).

A Gloria Anzaldúa Informed Art/Teaching Approach

> *...Vivo en este estado liminal entre mundos, entre realidades, entre sistemas de conocimiento, entre sistemas de simbología. Este terreno fronterizo al umbral de la conciencia, o pasaje, esta entretela, es lo que yo llamo nepantla.*
>
> ...I live in this liminal state between worlds, between realities, between systems of knowledge, between symbology systems. This liminal borderland terrain, or passageway, this interface, is what I call *nepantla*. (Anzaldúa as cited in Codex Nepantla, 2020).

For Anzaldúa, *nepantla* is an ideological space that exists living in-between two worlds. Sotomayor uses Anzaldúa's world of liminality that weaves between systems of reality, knowing, and symbolism. Though not a visual artist, Anzaldúa conceptualizes nepantla as a borderlands art practice. In *Luz en lo Oscuro: Light in the Darkness,* Anzaldúa & Keating (2015) outline a feminist conception of a *border artist* as a way to center art practice on living in-between worlds:

> Border artists inhabit the transitional space of nepantla. The border is the locus of resistance, of rupture, and of putting together the fragments. By disrupting the neat separations between cultures, Chicana artists create a new culture mix, una mestizada. (p. 47)

The authors make productive the ambiguity, tension, and contradictions that occur living in-between worlds. Border artist and Chicana artist are synonymous as they are both marginalized groups of artists. Chicana artists mediate an active process of falling apart and coming back together through visual means. This process is a merging of two or more spaces into one.

Through autohistoria-teoría (see Appendix C), Sotomayor focuses on theorizing through creative acts that inhabit an uncomfortable in-between

space of nepantla. While Anzadúa offers theories on border artist practices, Sotomayor puts them into practice through a *decolonial feminist curriculum and teaching approach*. She analyzes and applies *Anzaldúa's* writing on autohistoria-teoría, conocimiento, and nepantla (see Appendix C) to create both an art practice and pedagogical methodology. While there is a text that puts borderlands theories into teaching practice: *Teaching Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Pedagogy and Practice in our Classroom and Communities* (Cantú-Sánchez et al., 2020), it does not cover visual representation. If there were a series on Anzaldúa's teaching practices, Sotomayor's book would be an entire volume covering creative acts in education.

Importantly, Sotomayor's pedagogical approach centers on the experiences of both students of color and White students. Through uncomfortable conversations, journaling, and art-making, Sotomayor guides students through self-reflection. This process is relevant in institutions centered around students of color, such as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) and Primarily White Institutions (PWI).

Fighting Racism in Arts Curriculum

Creating an anti-racist curriculum is about action. In order to do so, inserting writings and art by artists of color is simply not enough. Academia is a colonized space with many who are well-read in racism, decolonial theory, Critical Race Theory, etc. However, words alone do not radicalize people (Yani, 2020). Sotomayor states:

> Moving forward I believe that we each have a responsibility to engage with many of these social issues and conversations with action. Token representations and curriculum is not enough, it never was enough. Adding diverse individuals into curriculum is not enough. Engaging in uncomfortable conversations to impact transformation, healing, and awakening is necessary. (p. 83)

Entering into uncomfortable conversations provide a way to disrupt the White ownership of art and education and reframe art education using *othered* experiences and perspectives. It is through reading, making art, self-reflection, journaling, and more, that Sotomayor suggests is a way to transform oneself. Sotomayor resists the idea of Whitened art education by developing a decolonial feminist curriculum and teaching approach she outlines in this book. In doing so, her goal is to decolonize U.S. White supremacy through reading and art processes as an alternative to white canons of art education.

Sotomayor's curricular approach does not exclude non-artists, teachers, and students in higher education. Importantly, her *curadora* (see Appendix A)

curriculum process is accessible to students regardless of background or discipline. This approach does not require specific art skills to engage, only an openness to self-reflection. Her work is interdisciplinary. It resides on the borders of art practice, Chicana/x and Latina/x studies, feminism, and education. In merging these boundaries, a way to reframe and represent arts education from a Latina nepantla perspective arises.

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Introduction

Autohistoria-teoría, a decolonial feminist writing practice of testimonio[1] conceptualized by Gloria Anzaldúa, is a way to create self-knowledge, belonging, and to bridge collaborative spaces through self-empowerment. Anzaldúa offers a proto-definition of autohistoria as a term 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 & Keating, 2009, p. 578). Autohistoria-teoría is decolonial theorizing of one's own experiences, historical contexts, knowledge, and performances in creative acts (e.g., writing, artmaking, curating, educating, among other acts). What follows are examples of my decolonial feminist writing of my autohistoria-teoría testimonio to introduce why I teach in/between educational spaces.

You were born in this country.
You are an American citizen. Remember that.

I began college for the first time when I graduated high school a year early, at the age of 17. I remember walking onto the university campus for the first time feeling disconnected. It reminded me of when I was a young girl moving from a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in New Jersey to a predominantly non-Hispanic neighborhood in Pennsylvania. Walking around the college campus, I again felt like I was on another planet and didn't quite belong. I only lasted there barely a year, failing out and deciding it would be better for me to marry my teenage sweetheart at 18. I remember my father taking me with him to the dean's office to discuss my situation. I have no recollection of what was said as I sat in his office, but I remember feeling invisible, not belonging anywhere.

I can hear the shattering of what I thought was reality, a deep desire for something more had been building up in me.

After more than a decade from that day, a deteriorating marriage that I needed to leave, and three children later, at age 31, I walked onto a new

[1] Testimonio: a public testament of a lived or witnessed experience.

predominantly White campus, again, feeling like I didn't belong. During my first year as an adult learner pursuing my bachelor's degree, I needed to take an elective. One of the only classes that would fit my tight schedule hyphenated with motherhood was an Introduction to Women's Studies course. I had no idea what the class was or that there was even a field with this name.

I grew up in a traditional home, where my father worked outside of the home, and my mother stopped working outside of the home once she gave birth to me, her first child. I was shocked the first day of my Introduction to Women's Studies undergraduate course, as a Latina woman walked into my class and introduced herself as the professor for the course. This event radically changed my life. For the first time, I was witnessing what a Latina could be other than a mother, and I began to learn about my history as a Latina in the United States. From that day forward, I have aimed to curate my life through learning about my heritage, ancestry, U.S. context, and understanding why I have lived with a strong sense of not belonging. It was in the Introduction to Women's Studies class that I first heard the name of the Chicana feminist writer, Gloria Anzaldúa, among others. Many of the testimonies I read in *This Bridge Called My Back* (2002) resonated with me. Anzaldúa, through her writings, urged and inspired me to prioritize goals and practice the life I wanted as an artist; and to honor my story, which initiated a journey of self-empowerment and a sense of belonging to myself.

Spanish is my private language; I cross the threshold into English.

However, I quickly realized that this Introduction to Women's Studies class was unique. I sought to take every class from the small pool of Latina/o Studies classes available. In doing so, the stark reality became apparent, again—I felt I didn't belong in most of my other classes because the curriculum taught excluded experiences and voices of people of color from education, art, and curating. I became aware of what I did not possess; knowledge of myself, my history, art training, or a language and vocabulary to articulate myself through. English is, after all, my second language.

When I was five in public school kindergarten, one day, my mother was furious. I remember fragments as she angrily pulled me out of a meeting with teachers at the end of the school year. I remember her saying; "Mi hija nacío aquí, ella es Americana!!" (my daughter was born here; she is an American!!) and I never returned the following year. Instead, she registered me to begin in a private all-English speaking and teaching Catholic School. Later, I would understand what happened. My mother was offended that the public school I was attending was beginning to introduce the concept of Bilingual English as a

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