

Co-Creating with a Messy Kitchen Floor

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ABSTRACT

An arts-based exploration framed as an Anzaldúan autohistoria-teoría, explores material and social constructs of the author's dirty kitchen floor. Focusing on materiality and the remnants of white colonial norms as aspects of her everyday lived experience, the author engages in collaborative art making with her messy kitchen to reimagine a dysfunctional relationship that is bound up in maintaining social norms. The autohistoria-teoría functions as a ritual practice that makes space for both sociocultural and materialist considerations of domestic space. The project serves as a model for how art educators might engage theory-making via ritual making practice.

KEYWORDS: Autohistoria-teoría, ritual ecology, materiality, race and gender, arts-based research

Gloria Anzaldúa's (2015) concept of autohistoria-teoría is an interdisciplinary arts-based mode of inquiry that makes considerations for both sociocultural and material aspects of lived experience. In this article, I utilize autohistoria-teoría as a research practice that functions as creative ritual. Through material-focused ritual making, I reimagine myself and the materials in my messy kitchen while simultaneously considering sociocultural colonialist constructs that inform my identity and my interpretation of the space in which I live.

Sociocultural Considerations of a Messy Kitchen Floor

When I first began working on this research project, there was a disconnect between my relationship to the interior space of my home and my interest in material interconnectivity and material ecologies. Even though I was part of the ecology of my home, I saw myself as something different from it—it was this static, yet powerful thing and I had the privilege of moving in and out, joining other ecologies as I pleased. It was a mess, particularly my kitchen floor, and I felt the mess was something I should hide, something I should be ashamed of, something that brought my worth as a human, as a mother, and as a professional into question.

My disconnect, and the shame I felt as I observed my messy kitchen floor, was related to my social location as a white woman. This sense of shame can be traced to colonial practices, for example the cult of domesticity, where homemaking and mothering became key factors

of identity for white women of the middle class (Keister & Southgate, 2012). Cleanliness, order, and nurturing within the private space of the home were important markers of nineteenth century white women's social status. Notions of cleanliness were also used to construct racialized others, for example Black women who were enslaved were not seen as women at all, but rather treated as non-human and something unrelated to the white gender binary of "male" and "female" (Lugones, 2007; Mendez, 2015). Women and gender studies scholar, Xhercis Mendez (2015) utilizes Maria Lugones's (2007) framework that categorizes the entanglement of race and gender through a history of colonialist thought, recognizing gender as having both "light" and "dark" sides. Lugones writes, "The 'light side' is comprised of 'white' bourgeois heterosexual males and females, where white bourgeois heterosexual males (a.k.a. 'Man') represent the body and being that matters and has the greatest amount of authority and power within this system" (p. 44). In this system, white women have held a subordinated place of privilege, where, for example, they were defined as valuable and worthy of protection, but only in relation to the superiority of white males. White women maintained that privilege via systems of colonization, enslavement, and other forms of oppression. Through this system, white women are complicit in maintaining their own oppression in exchange for a higher social standing, while simultaneously oppressing the "dark side," those who are colonized and enslaved. The binaries of light/dark and clean/dirty were systematically taken up to define a white supremacist hierarchy.

There are cultural remnants of the cult of domesticity, colonialism, and practices of chattel slavery that I carry in the material of my body. For example, my domestic space can serve as a material signifier of my worthiness as a human being. My ability to "keep" the space marks my being and my material space as belonging to a normalized white middle class identity where the space is kept clean and organized. Thus, domestic spaces and domestic labor are signifiers of the entanglements of gender, race, and class, both historically and in this contemporary moment.

With this in mind, I take up a decolonial feminist methodology to "identify the colonial relations of power and modes of relating that serve to undergird contemporary capitalism and draw [me] into a multiplicity of oppressive relations" (Mendez, 2015, p. 50). An artistic engagement with my messy kitchen floor is one pathway for exploring this inquiry. To do this, I engaged with the following questions through this project in alignment with the above aim: (1) How might ritualized making produce new knowledge of domestic space, which has been the historical context for rigid and oppressive systems of gender, race, and class? (2) How might ritualized making assist in redefining the ways in which I name my identity and the ways in which I relate to materials within my domestic space?

Theory

Autohistoria-teoría

The work I present in this article can be identified as arts-based research. However, because I use Anzaldúa (2015) theory in conjunction with new materialist theory, I frame it as a work of material autohistoria-teoría (Hood, 2018), with the aim of interjecting Anzaldúa's work into discourses of arts-based research (Acuff & López, 2021; Bhattacharya & Payne, 2016; Wilson, 2020). Anzaldúa was doing creative scholarship that I identify as a form of arts-based research in her groundbreaking book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). One of her most well-known works, the book uses autobiography, history, revisionist mythmaking, code-switching, and poetry to develop theory from the author's everyday life. Anzaldúa (2015) investigates the body and domestic contexts as sites of knowledge production, among other things. Autohistoria-teoría is simultaneously a reflection, healing, and reimagining of the self, situated within a relational or social context. It is a narrative self-story, employing various artistic forms woven together, that grapples with deeply personal knowledge, exposing that which has remained hidden to investigate wounds and imagine new narratives that might re-imagine worlds. An autohistoria-teoría starts with the self, but in considering one's own story, an ecology of material bodies emerges. Through reflection and the crafting of the narrative, theory comes into being. The investigation and transformation of inner worlds effects change in outer worlds.

Following Bhattacharya and Keating (2017), I utilize autohistoria-teoría as a form of spiritual activism that calls the activist to blend personal and public worlds for personal and collective "transformation-without-final-resolution" (p. 8). Thus, healing, restoration, and justice are ongoing projects that invite transformation, but not in the sense that a utopia is attainable. The tale I tell here is not a claim of radical collective social transformation, but instead it is a mundane shift of the everyday sort hidden behind the walls of my home. Nevertheless, it is a forward movement, a tiptoe towards a world I hope to see one day—a world where material bodies are not trapped by colonialist social constructions of race and gender. And where things once deemed as "problems" or "dirty" might come to be known as catalysts for engagement, and invitations to relate to messes in unexpected ways.

An autohistoria-teoría involves shadow work, meaning it requires deep vulnerability, honesty, leaning into parts of my lived experience that I might prefer to ignore or hide (Anzaldúa, 2009; Bhattacharya & Payne, 2016). As Anzaldúa (2015) describes:

In shadow work, the problem is part of the cure--you do not heal the wound; the wound heals you. First, you must recognize and acknowledge la herida. Second, you must 'intend' to heal. Then you must fall headlong into that wound--attending

to what the body is feeling, be its dismemberment and disintegration. Rupture and psychic fragmentation lead to dialogue with the wound. This dialogue, in turn, opens imaginings, and images awaken and awareness of something greater than our individual wounds, enabling us to imagine ways of going through Nepantla's¹ disorientations to achieve wholeness and interconnect to others on the planet. (pp. 89-90)

In Anzaldúan theory, the wound, the problem, has agency. Wounds can be emotional, psychological, and physiological. A wound might be an inner conflict or false beliefs about one's self or self-worth. In the case of my messy kitchen, which I will discuss in further detail later, I was at odds with the space. It was as though the dirty kitchen floor was an enemy that was impossible to overcome. I was deeply affected by the material appearance of the kitchen. The problem seemed to be emanating from materials outside my body, but the problem was inside of me, too. I had to move toward the wound, toward that which I found repulsive and shameful, so that I could learn from it. The potential that autohistoria-teoría offers is bound up in the sharing of the story. One must do the shadow work and share the process of the struggle, even if it involves shame and acknowledgment of ways that fall outside of societal norms. Non-normative narratives hold the potential to open up collective consciousness to new ways of knowing and being. Thus, an individual wound becomes a catalyst for the healing of other individual and collective wounds. In the case of autohistoria-teoría, the development of a private pedagogy is the first step to building a transformative public pedagogy (Carpenter, 2010).

Here, I present a *materially focused* experimentation of autohistoria-teoría. However, in its original iteration, this theory/method focused specifically on sociocultural phenomena in the context of women of colors' lived experiences (Anzaldúa, 2009; Bhattacharya & Keating, 2017; Keating, 2015). Anzaldúa's project shifted thematically over time, autohistoria-teoría and a focus on transforming inner worlds to transform outer worlds was a constant theme throughout. In her later work, there was a shift from focusing on established identity categories, to a more queer space with a focus on moving beyond social binaries such as race and gender (Keating, 2009). I see materials as a participant in the co-creation of the social and the cultural, and additional layer of storytelling that is not separate from the work of social transformation but rather intimately entangled. My sociocultural standpoint is, as pointed out previously, that of a white cisgender, middle-class female. I am highly privileged by these categories but also privileged via access to education and employment within academia. In choosing to engage

1 Nepantla is a Nahuatl word meaning "in the middle of" or "middle." Anzaldúa (2015) utilized this term extensively to describe and theorize the conflicts and inner struggles she experienced as an artist related to her identity, sociocultural constructs, and social injustice.

Anzaldúa theory, I take on what Wilson calls “desirable difficulties” (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 119). I have to grapple with race and racism because they are part of my daily life. Choosing to use theory written by a woman of color, a self-identified Chicana, does not overshadow my white woman’s standpoint, and does not absolve me of internalized racism or the maintenance work that I unknowingly do to sustain white supremacy. At the same time, I take seriously the call to shadow work as a self-transformation method for the sake of collective socio-cultural and material transformation. Thus, I follow Anzaldúa’s (2015) lead and focus on my daily lived experiences, sinking into my materiality and looking within to expose feelings, thoughts, and orientations that manifest out of colonial ideology.

New Materialist Considerations

New materialist concepts are useful for fleshing out my definition of material autohistoria-teoría. Material vibrancy (Bennett, 2010) is a political invitation to consider how non-human objects participate, often in ways undetected by humans, in the creation of social and cultural worlds. My perception of the world shifts when I begin to think of all material bodies, not just the human, sentient, or animate (Chen, 2012), as participants or contributors to the development of what I perceive as my reality. Bennett discusses material vibrancy, as an innate quality of things, a call, a power that is detectable by human senses but not fully understood. It is a hidden world within a world almost always in plain sight but not easily accessible via traditional empirical inquiry.

Along with vibrancy, materials always appear along with other things. For example, in my daily life, I, as a thing, am not floating in a vacuum. There are always other materials with me, some I can perceive, some I cannot. For example, at this moment I type on a computer that is connected to the Internet while cool air blows from a floor vent and wafts off the blades of the ceiling fan. As Bennett (2010) puts it, things appear in assemblages. These assemblages are not static but always in flux, transforming with and among each other. As such, notions of agency can resituate from residing in an individual body to something far more complex that also moves in and among assemblages. Bennett (2010) calls this phenomenon “distributive agency” (p. ix). Her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* is a focused impersonal look at the beingness of non-human matter. She is not interested in human materiality. My project diverges from Bennett’s in favor of personalized materiality, or relational materiality that attempts to consider all beings, as evidenced in Anzaldúa’s (2015) work:

Las napanteras know that each of us is linked with everyone and everything in the universe and fight actively in both the material world and the spiritual realm. Las napanteras are spiritual activists engaged in the struggle for social, economic,

and political justice, while working on spiritual transformations of selfhoods. (p. 83)

Ultimately, I mobilize new materialist theory as a call to intimate relationality with all material beings in the world. Materiality is common among us; we are material; we sense and interact with materiality as a constant. I do not point this out to erase differences among material bodies, but rather to open the possibility for a deeper awareness of the inherent interconnectivity of all bodies. The concepts of materials-as-assemblages and distributive agency identify the physical world as a network of power. Things, material beings, are interconnected and interdependent. Anzaldúa (2015) suggests that the transformation of my inner world (which is intimately interconnected with my external world) is the first step in transforming the material world at the social level. From a Womanist perspective, Maparyan (2012) suggests one must, “Recognize your own sacredness, Recognize the sacredness of everyone, Recognize the sacredness of all created things. And act accordingly—inwardly and outwardly” (p. 8). Thus, in the case of this material autohistoria-teoría project, I focus on an artistic process in which I engage with materials in our shared domestic space to reimagine the agency and sacredness of that space.

As a mother and caregiver of five young children, the materiality of my world can be altogether overwhelming. I was commuting, working as a high school art teacher, finishing my doctoral work, mothering, and caring for my partner. These are all choices that I have made, and I felt the social pressure to play each of these roles perfectly. My desire for perfection caused division. I forgot about the sacredness of materiality. I built up an intense resentment towards my home, the mess that met me every day in my exhausted state. The dishes, laundry, toys, and messes, in the context of my home, become a kind of assemblage that overwhelms. In this space, materiality and human-driven social constructs collide to create the perfect storm of personal depression and inadequacy. The mess and its visual chaos close in on me, which is another indication of the power of materiality (Hood, 2018). The shame of a messy home haunts me, calls me to hide my reality from the outside world, inducing fear, and a feeling of separation from the friends and neighbors I desire to be a part of this space. There is immediate social shame involved with this, and there is also failure to adhere to the tradition of the cult of domesticity. The norms developed for white middle class women in the colonial era run deep in the social fabric of which I am part. Perhaps I will not be able to maintain my social standing as a “good white woman.” And while being identified as a “good white woman” is not my objective, this cultural norm is so deeply embedded in my world, I still struggle to get away from it. The power of social norms becomes evident through this work, specifically for women, and the nuances that race and class bring to the topic of domestic labor become strikingly evident through this material exploration.

Ritual Ecology (Methodology) of Mess

In academia, domestic space is not usually acknowledged as a site of knowledge production. Anzaldúan and new materialist theories claim otherwise. The shadow work I present here is a sharing of knowledge that emerged from what I understand to be a generatively dysfunctional domestic assemblage. Autohistoria-teoría embraces paradox. It allows me to think about the complex nature of lived experiences which includes but is not limited to materials, gender, and race. Everyday problems and familiar spaces become sites for deep thinking and dynamic making through this mode of scholarly work.

I consider autohistori-teoría to be both theory and methodology, and also ritualistic in practice. The creative practice I engaged with prioritizes the mess and includes dwelling in the space, photographing, and viewing the photographs to see what might emerge through the mediation of the non-human materiality of my iPhone camera. To confront the problem of my messy kitchen floor, I chose to approach it from a completely different angle than I had up to that point. I sought to abandon the sociocultural demands of my white womanhood, to deconstruct my identity as homemaker and instead embrace a ritual ecology of the space. I looked to the vibrancy of the materials in the space, to see what they were doing that perhaps my social and cultural conditioning as a good white woman caused me to miss. I looked directly at the dirt on the kitchen floor, and then mediated my gaze through the camera of my cell phone. All these materials were part of the standard rituals I assigned to this space via my identity as a mother and keeper of the home. To attend to new possibilities for my own identity and subjectivity and those of the space as well, I took up a different ritual, one that was process-oriented, rather than outcome-oriented. Through this ritual ecology (methodology) of mess, the following material autohistoria-teoría emerged. The next section is a multimodal work of art that is my material autohistoria-teoría.

Material Autohistoria-Teoría: The Story of My Messy Kitchen Floor

I was keenly aware of the power of the assemblage of things, or mess, in my home to overwhelm my being. I felt it inside my flesh. The sensation sits on the surface of my skin but also vibrates through my interior.

Scratching deep within
That moves through tissues bones
Debilitating
Breakdown
An attack from
within
Incited by external bodies

A multitude
A cloud
Appearing to be static
And moving with energy
Into myself
Their energy envelopes me
I am overcome
In the opposition to
Runaway from
mess



Figure 1: Kitchen Floor No. 1, 2018, digital photograph

But there's another mess. The mess that my white womanhood upholds, through maintaining a mirage of perfection. The mess of maintaining the lie that domestic work is women's work. It maintains the lie that middle class interiority is dependent on the color of your skin and a cleanly appearance.

The kitchen is cluttered with stuff. Books, backpacks, spiral notebooks, mail, pots, and pans, bags of cereal, dishes in the drying rack, knick-knacks, laundry, toys, shoes, books, dog hair, and dirt are some of the things that often sprinkle the kitchen floor. The backyard, leading right to the backdoor that opens into the kitchen, is a dirt or mud pool, depending on the weather. Five little sets of feet and four paws march resolutely in and out through the day. The dirt and mud come in too. Standing in high contrast as it rests on the gridded white tile floor. The grid is like the rigid colonial social structure holding bodies in



Figure 2: *Kitchen Floor No. 2, 2018, digital photograph*

their place, me a white woman bound to keep this place in order, or Prudence the Mexican American woman employed as a domestic laborer in my childhood home. Or maybe it's more like the plane of existence that is beyond human perception, the stuff at the base of life, like an Agnes Martin painting. Maybe I am the mess.

There must be something more I can do. I will make a plan. A schedule. A routine. I will make mopping the floor my religion. Practice scrubbing down on hands and knees every night. Keep it sanitary. Keep it presentable. If the floor is right, I will be right.



Figure 3: *Kitchen Floor No. 3, 2018, digital photograph*

If someone comes in and sees this... it is disgusting. We live like slobs. It makes me less-than, gross, lazy, incompetent. The grid on the floor is calling me. The chunks of dirt smears, and sprinklings, have their aesthetic. The contrast of chaos on the orderly horizontal and vertical lines, the dirt has made something here.



Figure 4: *Kitchen Floor No. 4, 2018, digital photograph*

That one smashed pea, an anomaly. Brave and bold in its difference among the lines, white, dirt.



Figure 5: *Kitchen Floor No. 5, 2018, digital photograph*

The messy cabinet doors join in the making. The old house, hidden foundation, cracks running through, reveal themselves in tiny lines, disruptions in the one-foot by one-foot whiteness. Even if the floor were clean, they would hold their ground.

The light and the shadows dance with the dirt. I can dance on a messy kitchen floor just as I can dance on a clean kitchen floor. I learn from the assemblage.

Even when I find something evocative and beautiful in its chaos and filth, I am still overwhelmed. It will come back. I can clean, and clean, photograph, clean. The dirt wins. So, I sit in sadness. I sit in dirt.

There are kitchen floors made of dirt, and they are not dirty. The floor is not dirty. It is painted with dirt.

The white tile belongs, it gets to
Stay
It is made filthy by this darker matter of
The earth
That has come to symbolize the uncivilized
The inanimate dirt mars
The purity of the white
Tile
But really, it's a life force

The floor is an expanse of ocean. It is the water—a river running through my kitchen. The dirt will be here long after I am gone.

Reflecting on the Co-Creative Artmaking Process

The act of engaging with the assemblage that is my messy kitchen to create art opened new ways of being and knowing with and through materials. My materiality was drawn into a space that I was previously repulsed by, the mere sight of which caused anxiety deep within the tissues of my body. The making was an invitation to reorient myself to the materials there and become curious about that which troubled, disturbed, and repulsed me. The process allowed me to realize my entanglement with lingering colonialist ideology, to identify the shame and failure associated with my messy kitchen as part of a sexist, racist, and classist ideology. Looking through the screen of my iPhone to see the messy kitchen floor from a different perspective opened up space for a new relationship between myself and the messy floor. The nature of our material connectivity shifted and also allowed me, through reading and writing, to consider cultural constructs that influenced my perception of the space. Prior to this project (and even still today) I desire to be accepted as a good white middle class woman, and in order to attain and maintain this status, my kitchen should be spotless, organized, and sanitized. However, this desire limits who and what I can be in the world, and perpetuates the sexist, racist, and classist social constructs I ultimately hope to deconstruct.

Through my Enlightenment heritage, I am encouraged to order my worlds. To categorize, sanitize, define, and dissect, present, and perfect. In my home, I feel the social pressure to impose order, which allows me to be perceived as a good white woman. But doing so maintains and reinforces colonialist ideologies. Ritual making practices often take place in the kitchen, however, the rituals I was attempting to adhere to prior to this project were rigid and reductive—requiring particular outcomes. The material autohistoria-teoría provided a new relational engagement. My focus shifted to collaborative making, inquiry, and curiosity, which offer spaces for imagining new worlds and recognizing the complexity of my materially interconnected state. Order is useful in a home, but it does not define the quality of the rela-

tional practices in that or any other given space. Order and cleanliness hold no bearing over the sacredness of any given material body. This is particularly important for white art educators, as we must constantly work to deconstruct colonialist ideologies that rise in our consciousness through pervasive sociocultural conditioning. Binaries such as light/dark, clean/dirty, white/black, that have been used in the past to categorize human bodies, dehumanizing dark bodies as a method of oppression and enslavement. Even in my own home I have been complacent in maintaining remnants of such colonialist thought.

Material bodies (non-human and human) are as always co-creating. Prior to the photographic process with the dirty kitchen floor, my mind was full of negative narratives about that assemblage and what existed in that space. The potential for transformation in such narratives is bound up in and among materials themselves. The opportunity to play and experiment via the power of materiality gave me the chance to learn to operate outside of the status quo narrative that only perfect, pristine, orderly, clean things are worthy and admirable.

Taking these images, and writing about them allowed me to hook up to this assemblage in a different way. This is a new ritual to enact within this space that deviates from sociocultural norms that define kitchen space as useful in terms of cooking and consuming food. There has been no rational, orderly solution found to the problem of my messy kitchen. It is still messy most days. But I see different kinds of possibility for who I am and what I can do as a part of this ecology. I am reminded that dirt is stuff of which the surface of the planet is made. It is the stuff that sustains my living. It is lively with microbes and potential.

Through co-creating work with my messy kitchen floor, there was a shift in my identity and subjectivity, from an individual to something far more expansive. Through the collaboration, I see the space, the dirt, the cell phone I used to photograph, the cabinets, myself as one: an expanded self. For example, I liken the grid on the floor to an Agnes Martin painting. Her subtle large scale grid paintings are said to reference a kind of formlessness where all things, beings, materials in the world fuse to one existence (Barrett, 2017). Anzaldúa (2015) calls for this kind of reimagining of self to construct new realities where individual human bodies are not defined by physical attributes, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and so on. Through this work, I can deconstruct social norms and expectations for myself. Here, an expanded subjectivity that moves beyond my human perception of individual material bodies is imagined, focusing on the human body as part of a larger interdependent material assemblage. This is a radical reorientation, especially within art education's and education's humanistic lineage (Hood, 2018; Hood & Lewis, 2021; Snaza, Sonu, Truman, & Zaliwska, 2016; Snaza & Weaver, 2015).

This materialist autohistoria-teoría clarifies that engagement in an artistic process focused on the inherently collaborative, or co-creative, materials-centric nature of artmaking holds potential for slight shifts in human perception. This ritual, or similar rituals of making, can be activated in a multitude of spaces where social and cultural constructs are entangled and encoded in the material world. Such inquiries remind artists, teachers, and researchers of the material connections that make up worlds, and invite a curiosity that moves beyond rigid and oppressive social structures. This project reminded me that non-human materials like dirt pre-date human existence and will most likely post-date humanity as well. It implicated me, my perceptions, and my behavior within a historic lineage of oppressive colonialist thought. The process of creating digital photographs, writing, and thinking through materiality and decolonial feminist theory to create the autohistoria-teoría invited to consider my ecological entanglements. Art-making in and of itself can be a messy process, and such messes hold the potential for breaking oppressive social norms. Messy kitchen floors, messy classroom floors, messy street corners, from such ecologies emerge new possibilities for who and what I might be in the world.

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