# *HILOS ROJOS*: Threading Together an Autohistoria-teoría of Art and Conocimiento

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***Abstract:*** In 2017, I created, curated, and traveled with the art installation *Hilos Rojos* for a gallery exhibition in Havana, Cuba. In this autohistoria-teoría, I document and theorize my art process for creating *Hilos Rojos*, drawing on the seven transformative acts of conocimiento as both a guide for my creative process and as inspiration for my artwork. I treated each element of *Hilos Rojos* as demonstrative, visual representation of each phase of conocimiento. The introspection that produced this autohistoria-teoría also helped hone my identity as a nepantlera artist—that is, an artist who pursues the temporal in-between space of nepantla for transformation, healing, and as a muse. Anzaldúa's (2015) theory of nepantla aptly describes the feeling of being in-between 'worlds' or realms. Art making by a nepantlera artist becomes a vehicle for this world traveling (Lugones 1987) that can help re-imagine and refashion worlds by depicting the emotions and images we carry in our bodies, minds, and spirits during those transformative moments.

In 2015, I secured the Servando Moreno Cabrera Galería space in Havana, Cuba for a solo art exhibition of my work for the summer of 2017. At the time, I had no idea what art work I would create for the space, as my only plan was to create a site-specific installation for the gallery space that drew from my various personal connections to Cuba. I also wanted my process and final product to speak to the larger narrative of border crossing in order to illuminate the tensions and contradictions I was exploring as a Cuban/Puerto Rican-American woman. Over the subsequent two years, both a tumultuous relationship and critical reflections about the various intersections of my identity shaped the focus and purpose of what I would ultimately create for this exhibition. As I navigated these trying times, I turned to Anzaldúa's healing words about conocimiento, creativity, and reflexivity for guidance. Now detailing this experience retrospectively, I again draw on Anzaldúa's

teachings, offering this autohistoria-teoría to document the process of creating my artwork, journeying to Cuba, and curating a solo art exhibition titled *Hilos Rojos*. With autohistoria-teoría as my method, I narrate how my experiences as a hybrid Latina, mestiza,[1] and nepantlera informed my art installation, as well as how the seven-stages of conocimiento scaffolded this work.[2]

*Hilos Rojos* began in my studio as a way for me to re-construct myself, my identity, my heritage, and my trauma through an authentic, reflective process. *Hilos Rojos* is a cathartic theorizing from the bodymindspirit (Lara 2002) which disrupts traditional templates. Indeed, the process of sharing my autohistoria-teoría is a double-layered embodied experience, as I recreate my studio art process on paper. Little did I know back in 2015 when I secured the gallery space that this project would evolve into a spiritual journey of myself through Anzaldúa's conocimiento framework. Every moment in my studio creating and engaging in introspection was difficult. Laying myself bare repeatedly was excruciating at some points. However, I felt that I needed to expel all the parts of my past that were pained, traumatized. Art making, curating, and the conocimiento process was intimate and vulnerable, yet allowed me to heal. Each piece in *Hilos Rojos* represents the recursive transformative stages of conocimiento of my lived experiences.

I have organized this autohistoria-teoría into two sections. The first half contextualizes the events of my life that informed the creation of *Hilos Rojos*. It also situates this reflection within Anzaldúa's conceptualization of autohistoria-teoría and my artistic endeavor within Anzaldúa's theory of conocimiento. The second part describes the process and resulting artifacts for the seven elements of my installation, correlating them with one of the seven transformative acts of the conocimiento process. I offer a concluding section that is my reflection of the culmination of the art exhibit and how my identity and art process is informed by being a nepantlera artist.

**Part I: Anzaldúan Methodology and Theory**

At the time I booked the gallery exhibition in 2015, I was in love with a Cuban man whom I had met a few years prior in Havana. My frequent trips between the United States and Cuba prior to that year revolved largely around my relationship with him, but also were motivated by multiple transitions in my life, including transitioning from a stay-at-home wife and reinventing myself as a scholar and artist, and learning about my Cuban heritage. In 2013, he and I decided that we wanted a life together in the United States. By February of 2014, our fiancé visa interview at the United States Interest office in Havana, Cuba was successful, and within a month, my new fiancé arrived in the United States. In another month's time, we were married in a tiny little courthouse in the middle of Pennsylvania.

It didn't take too long before the turmoil of our relationship became apparent, but I excused the discord as a result of my new husband adjusting to a new country, learning a new language and way of living, and being alienated from his family and culture. My optimism was really denial. By early 2017, close to our three-year marriage anniversary mark, the illusion that was our marriage was exposed. A series of serendipitous events and his own confession made it clear that my ex-husband was nothing more than a desperate man who used me to pursue a better life in the United States—one that was never meant to include me.

In the midst of this personal tragedy, I was working on dual doctorate degrees and creating art in my studio. I had been preparing my solo art exhibition for the Servando Moreno Cabrera Galería in Cuba for later in 2017, an occasion for which we had planned to travel to Cuba together. However, instead of celebrating a third-year anniversary, I was filing for divorce and devasted by the heartache, shame, embarrassment, and abandonment I felt. My desire to travel to my beloved Cuba plummeted. I was depressed and considered cancelling the solo art exhibition altogether. I let my art sit on the back burner,

too lethargic to make any significant decisions. I needed time to process and reflect on the tumultuous experience. I went into my studio and tore down everything I had been working on. I pulled archives out from storage that documented every detail of my relationship with my husband: government forms, photographs, air flight stubs, journals, etc. I used all these materials to intuitively create through my pain. I wept as I cut up photographs, wrote prose, read journal entries, and saw six years of a relationship in cut-up pieces on my studio floor.

Amidst this sorrow, I looked to the writings of feminist scholars with whom I was familiar for respite and support. I read and reread Anzaldúa's formative books, *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza Consciousness* (1999) and *Light In The Dark/Luz en lo oscurro* (2015). I was particularly drawn to her theory of conocimiento and wrote the names of the seven stages of conocimiento on my studio walls to guide my art making. Inspired, I worked simultaneously through all seven stages attempting to process my feelings through the manipulation of the various materials that symbolized my state of mind as I moved through each stage of conocimiento. This art making process was transformational. I attempted to embody my overlapping and fluid identities as artist, researcher, scholar, educator, student, mother, daughter, and lover, as all form my identity. What resulted was *Hilos Rojos*.

Art processes or creative acts like this[3] offer the possibility to re-imagine and re-construct the stories and images, the symbols and narratives that shape a person's consciousness, as female artists have noted. Desirée Martín (2017) explains that creating through pain and contradictions marks agency and self-honoring. Artist Liliana Wilson (2011) describes her artworks as images surfacing as she has imagined and experienced them, representing ancestry, gender, immigration, disappearances, socioeconomic, and even at times, hopelessness. Her work is one of naming the invisible, calling out for social

justice, a form of testimonio. Wilson (2011) explains her artwork as narratives of atrocities that she has witnessed throughout her life, an illustration of the interconnectedness of oppressions. For example, her pencil on paper artwork *Denial* (1997) illustrates a woman covering her eyes in order not to see the atrocities being committed in front of her. She writes,

> I feel that there is so much denial because of the socioeconomic systems that are in place in the world today: the way women disappear, or are abused by their spouses; the poverty; the contamination of the planet; and so many more atrocities committed against us because of gender and poverty. (11)

Anzaldúa herself lauded the arts, or creative acts, as part of the healing process. She writes, "I believe in the transformative power and medicine of art" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, xxxii). I concur that creative acts instigate a process towards healing. *Hilos Rojos*—a site-specific traveling installation in Havana and Santiago de Cuba, Cuba—similarly chronicles the challenges I was grappling with at the time I created it. As an artist, curator, and scholar, my art process aimed to critically self-reflect and heal through my wounds as I processed and expelled my pain, my doubt, and my anger through my art. I now document this experience by employing Gloria Anzaldúa's writing process of autohistoria-teoría.

Anzaldúa utilized autohistoria-teoría to describe interventions by women of color to transform traditional Western autobiographical forms (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015). Individuals who have a strong sense of not belonging and feelings of in-between-ness can bridge their experiences through autohistoria-teoría as a path to creating and theorizing personal meaning of lived experiences, historical contexts, and their own performances such as

writing, art, curating, and educating (Anzaldúa 2009). Autohistoria-teoría is the bridging of historical contexts, myths/religion, and re-imagining through critical reflection, creativity, and spirituality making, often in order to rewrite oneself. Anzaldúa explains that by connecting and theorizing personal experiences with social realities and "by making certain personal experiences the subject of this study, [she] also blur[s] the private/public borders" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 6). Thus, through the process of connecting and theorizing personal experiences, autohistoria-teoría facilitates a re-construction of oneself through agency. Together with Anzaldúa's theory of conocimiento, both the art creation process and this essay have allowed me to learn from and persevere through the difficult moments and anguished emotions that spurred the creation of *Hilos Rojos*.

Anzaldúa engages the concept of conocimiento to disrupt traditional modes of knowing. Conocimiento is the Spanish term for knowledge or reflective consciousness. She uses it to theorize how mestizas can untangled inner thoughts and outer experiences in a profound desire for self-knowledge and critical reflection (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015). Anzaldúa refers to conocimiento as her lived practice of spiritual inquiry: "Spirituality is a symbology system … Through spirituality we seek balance and harmony with our environment" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 38-39). She goes on to state that conocimiento, as spiritual inquiry, is "driven by the desire to understand, know, y saber [and know] how human and other beings know. Beneath your desire for knowledge writhes the hunger to understand and love yourself" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 121).

Conocimiento has seven transformational acts:[4] rupture/arrebato, nepantla, Coalticue, call to action, putting Coyolxauhqhi back together, taking your new story out into the world, and the vision, or spiritual activism. It is important to note

that the seven transformational recursive stages as theorized by Anzaldúa are not static or lineal, but rather fluid and "all seven are present within each stage, they occur concurrently, chronologically or not." (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 124). The transformational recursive process zigzags you through the stages, crossing in-between these phases or moving you through more than one at the same time.

The holistic experience through the path of conocimiento emerges "from opening all your senses, consciously inhabiting your body and decoding its symptoms…" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 120). The unquenchable thirst for knowing one's true, whole self is fundamental, and creative expression is an inherent characteristic of conocimiento. Anzaldúa asserts that "through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 119). In addition, via this a holistic practice, Anzaldúa positions all aspects of one's life in relationship to each other and to other people.

Part of Anzaldúa's vision for peace and love for self and others comes through a pursuit of balance through spiritual practice. Anzaldúa writes, "Through spirituality we seek balance and harmony with our environment" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 38-39). Because of this desire to understand oneself, circumstances in our life will occur which unveil aspects of who we are and what we thought our realities were. The inside and outside, private and public realities and contradictions seek balance within ourselves. This is often a painful experience but it is a catalyst for transformation. Anzaldúa's unique inclusion of spirituality with theory is a crucial component. She writes, "Although contemporary theories of identity leave out our innermost spiritual core identity, I'm interested in the connective membrane between the interiority and the exteriority of subjectivity" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 36).

My experiences crossing back and forth between Cuba and the United States and attempts to forge a family bridging those two worlds ultimately awakened my spiritual self and intuitive nature that was intensified through my art-making practice. As I critically self-reflect about this time period, I am confronted with my struggles (shadow beasts) and my relationships—in this case, to Cuba. I apply Anzaldúa's holistic theory of conocimiento because it merges theory, lived daily experiences, and spirituality as a way to seek balance in ourselves and in relation to each other by revealing who we think we are and our many perceived realities. Conocimiento is the tool I used to fashion an art installation about an ill-fated relationship layered with the intersecting aspects of my identity and connections to Cuba.

In the next section, I begin my autohistoria-teoría. I walk through each of the seven recursive acts of conocimiento with accompanying descriptions of my installation and my reflections regarding their creation and my process for curating them in a gallery space.

**Part II: Autohistoria-teoría: Homage to Self**

"Don't see Cuba through a rose-colored lens," an acquaintance from Cuban cautioned me upon my arrival to do field research work in 2012.1 I was mindful of my position in Cuba as a hyphenated American, a mestiza with privileges. My trips to Cuba, my mother's homeland, began in 2011 to trace my maternal Arab ancestry. And quickly, I recognized my entangled identity switching upon arriving in Cuba. Landing in Cuba, I am an American citizen, complete with a blue passport in hand to prove it. After I securely slip into the country, I become Cubana-*ish*. I am perceived as very white by Cuban standards since I can come and go into Cuba as desired because of my American identity. In fact, it allows me to broker visa transactions, meet with government elites, exchange goods or information, and gain access to cultural

or archival spaces. Yet, I drew on my Spanish-speaking skills to gain entry to other sites. I presented as Cubana when I conversed, exchanged experiences, and developed more intimate relationships. Interestingly, if asked how I know Spanish, I responded that it is due to my Puerto Rican father. I intentionally left my mother out of conversation. She left Cuba before 1970 by choice and is considered a derogatory guzana, a dissident. This information could have negatively affected my entering and exiting Cuba. I didn't want to risk it. It was a constant border crossing in many ways. I navigated the gate keeping that determined where I had access to or where it could have been denied. On one hand, I have privilege in Cuba as an American citizen with my blue passport, allowing for my crossing back and forth at my discretion. On the other hand, I am in between the United States and Cuba, two countries seemingly at odds politically, and neither within which I fully fit; I am a foreigner in both places, despite my citizenship status in one. In my multiple travels, I have had the privilege of witnessing Cuban culture from the outside, as one who is on the margins connected by friends and family but always able to leave.

In 2014, I began to seek out opportunities in Havana, Cuba to fulfill my dream of exhibiting my artwork in my mother's homeland. With much help from Cuban friends, I secured a solo art exhibition at the Servando Cabrera Moreno Galería in Havana for the summer of 2017. This is no easy feat, nor inexpensive. Art galleries in Cuba are managed and maintained by the Cuban state. However, not all galleries are maintained at the same level, and most suffer from lack of funding (Moore and Moore 2006). Because of the lack of funding and support for most galleries in Cuba, an underground economic system exists to help support the visual arts in the country, as is the case with most goods and services, which helps Cuban citizens to survive (Elliott and Neirotti 2008). For example, I donated monies to the gallery to help with the funding needed to repaint the gallery space, purchase

needed tools and equipment, and help with staffing the gallery. This was part of an understanding between the director of the space and me, and it is an example of how business is often done based on my experience and observations. In other words, most connections, favors, and opportunities that I have experienced in Cuba have been through backdoor economies with Cuban citizens (Fernandez 1999).

After the dissolution of my marriage, I fully committed to finalizing the art installation and prepared each piece by repurposing the remnants of that relationship and the archives that symbolized my travels to and from Cuba. This included various re-used materials: fabric, tarp, my mother's bedspread, bedsheets, plastic, and burlap. They have been painted with acrylic stains, some with coffee, and others with melted plastic and old cut-up photographs. Red threads (hilos rojos) unite the pieces. Juxtaposing, overlapping, and arranging all these elements required careful thought in terms of each piece's positionality and relationship to one another in the gallery space. I planned this out in my studio and then had to pack up all the pieces into my two suitcases. Unexpectedly, doing so felt like a grieving process. I had no idea when I packed two suitcases filled with my art pieces and crossed to Cuba with them in my luggage how disconcerted and unsettled I would still feel. I did not fully anticipate that this aspect of the conocimiento process would be such a vulnerable and crude crossing for me.

Once I had arrived at the gallery and began the installation, I took piece by piece out of the suitcases, laying them out on the gallery floor. Seeing them scattered about, I felt exposed. The white walls around me waited for my truth; it was as if old and new friends waited in silence for my directions. I became overwhelmed in that moment—one that I had dreamt of for years: to be in Cuba, my mother's birth land with my art.

**First El *Susto*, El Arrebato: Peligroso**

*Peligroso* (Dangerous) is the first element of *Hilos Rojos*. It visually represents the first stage of conocimiento. It is the rupturing, exposure, wounding, confusion, conflicted—a struggle to balance, a susto (fear). *Peligroso* has several components: a sea-green stained large fabric piece with the Arabic word *heb* meaning "love" painted in white. I introduced Arabic in my art piece because of my maternal tracing of my Lebanese lineage that began a few years prior in Cuba. There are also two transparent plastic pieces with cut up photos from my first trip to Cuba in 2011 melted into the plastic. The plastic has been written on and stained with acrylic paints. One of the plastic panels hangs from the ceiling creating a shadow on the wall. On it is a photo I took of a sign in Cuba during my first trip to Cuba in 2011 that warns, "peligro" as if foreshadowing something for me. I did not know when I took the photo of the danger sign how powerful and meaningful it would become in hindsight.

When I began going to Cuba, it was a hard and frightful decision in many ways. My mother did not support my travel as she felt betrayed that I would want to go to the country that caused her separation from her family and mistreated her in so many ways. She couldn't understand why I, an American would have any interest in *that* place. I, on the other hand, wanted to see Cuba—my desire had been in me from as early as I can remember. I wanted to see her land; meet her family she spoke about with such sweetness. But I knew it would be hard—the bitter taste of Cuban politics and regime stained my American mind. I had created a story in my head with my mother's words. Nevertheless, I made the decision to go on my first trip.

I fell in love with Cuba immediately. I was coming out of one relationship and quickly fell into a new one, triggering a major life change. This marked the first stage of conocimiento, el arrebato. El arrebato is a rupturing

Figure 1. *Peligroso*.

violent wound and tearing that signifies both an end and a beginning. For example, the back and forth traveling from the United States into Cuba that began with my first-time trip in 2011 signified for me, a temporary leaving behind (in the U.S.) the hurt parts of myself and creating a new, different beginning for myself in Cuba. It was as if the Caribbean Sea functioned as an in-between border, with each crossing jolting me between lives. In essence, the back and forth attempts to restart myself in a new relationship was the arrebato that catalyzed the tumultuous unearthing that was to come when the foundation in my life faltered and forced me to reanalyze my career and romantic relationships.

My travels to Cuba were first for my research, art, and family. With time, my crossings between the United States and Cuba began to feel increasingly complex, as I was straddling two worlds. On the one hand Cuba represented a

vibrant, freeing, independent and connected culture that I felt very comfortable in, and on the other the U.S. felt drab and gray; a place of confinement. However, once my new marriage fell apart, these trips were intermingled with feelings of personal and cultural betrayal, leaving me disillusioned. I had my Havana art exhibition scheduled years in advance of our subsequent divorce, but after so much work, I had little desire to actually go, feeling emotionally broken because of the end of yet another marriage. I gave myself two months to decide whether I would go or cancel the exhibition.

**Nepantla: *The Tear***

My infatuation with Cuba consumed me, obscuring my vision, catapulting me into nepantla, losing all my footing. Nepantla is a Nahuatl word from the native southern Mexican people meaning the "space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 237). Anzaldúa theorizes the meaning of nepantla at length when discussing the transformational recursive stages of conocimiento. Nepantla is a tumultuous place that is in transition. Nepantla, the second stage in the conocimiento process, occurs after a shock, a susto, (fear) shakes you down to your core: "Éste arrebato, the earthquake, jerks you from the familiar and safe terrain and catapults you into nepantla, the second stage" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 122). When a person is in the process of crossing from one physical, geographical, emotional, or spiritual location into another, the crossing creates an in-between space, a gap. In the in-between space of nepantla, many things may be experienced: healing, awakening of the consciousness, acceptance of self, negotiations, and contradictions. In nepantla, individuals may choose to become nepantlera, spiritual activists whom Anzaldúa describes as "agents of awakening" who "inspire and challenge others to deeper awareness, greater conocimiento; they serve as reminders of each other's search for wholeness of being" (Anzaldúa 1990, 293).

Figure 2. *The Tear.*

*The Tear* represents this second transformation. It represents the in-between space where consciousness is awakened after fragmentation. It is the place for transformation, because it is survival. Everything I thought I knew had been broken, turned upside down. To craft this juncture, I lined up buckets of watered-down acrylic paints along one side of the concrete walls of my large studio space. Next to them on the concrete floor, I placed large brushes, rags, sticks, sewing needles, threads, and rope. I began with four sheets of translucent plastics. Each plastic layer represented fragments of my life. The plastic layers transformed as I worked the translucent pliable material in various ways. I stained them with paint, made markings, and wrote text on them. I melted other materials into them. By this process, each layer was affected by the other. Each plastic sheet worked both individually

and collectively. My process was a clashing of forces, as a connection and separation occurring simultaneously. My body moved between them, among them as I poured paint, moved the plastic around with my arms, wrote into them, stitched in and out, tearing, and smudging. Because the sheets overlapped each other, it caused a blurred visibility of each layer. I enmeshed, embedded myself into the materials in order to create. I simulated the back and forth of various crossings in and out of this space; the in-between the plastic sheets activated, depicting nepantla and transformation.

A new knowledge emerged in this transformation. The off-white material, a skin, used for *The Tear* is sturdy and strong, but once ripped and torn, it frays. Red stitches try to keep it together but fail. The vivid colors painted, stained, and ironed onto the fabric symbolize the rawness of experiences, being slapped with reality. The present was a ruthless tearing, as the relationship I thought I had with my ex-husband was torn to pieces, ripping me apart at my seams, causing heartbreak and betrayal.

In nepantla, I developed a language to name my experiences and I awakened to the oppression and weight I had been surviving under. It was both a fast and a slow process. As I sifted through the fragmented pieces of my life, nepantla emerged as another dimension. More plastic and materials were needed so I could signify my fluctuating and concurrent emotions (love, grace, compassion, anger, pain), as well as more overlays as I wanted to convey time—past, present, and future dreams—and aspirations—plans and disruptions. All of these layers built with each passing day. Some layers fell out of the pile, some were removed, others reworked. I not only seized these theories and applied them to my life, but I illuminated their utility and transformative properties through art.

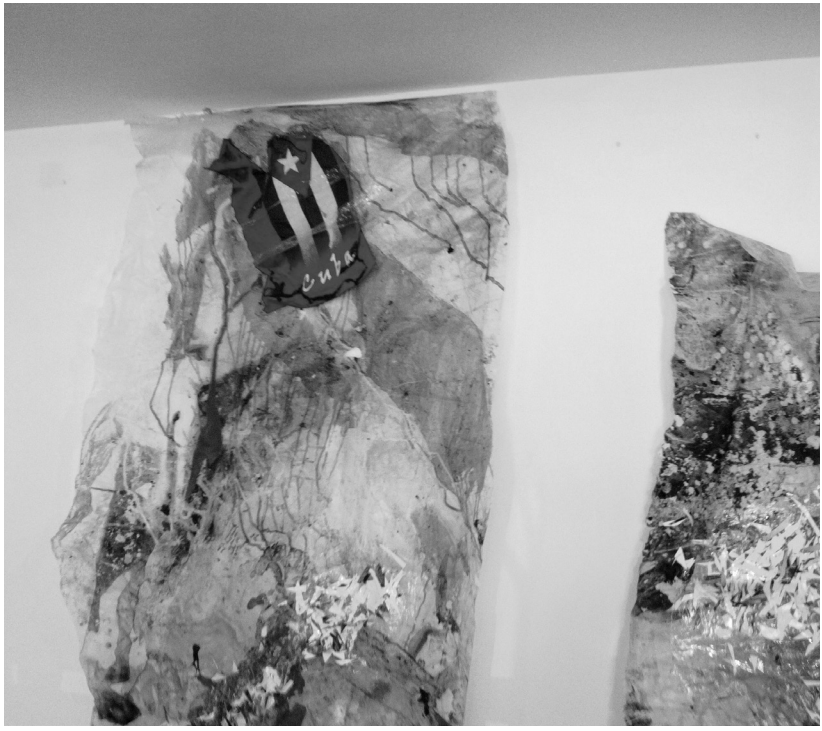


Figure 3. *Mi Cuba.*

**The Coatlicue State: *Mi Cuba***

The third stage of transformation—Coatlicue—is despair and hopelessness. It is a site of sorrow and isolation, when one often needs to cut others out of their life. It is where the creative self seeks time to resolve what they are going through in the process. I sat in my studio cutting my photographs of Cuba into tiny pieces one by one as I cried, reminisced, and accepted the reality of my disillusioned marriage. The hardest part for me to grapple with was what felt like a great veil coming down between my ex-husband and myself. We had barely made it to three years of marriage when many little bits of

information surfaced about another side of his life of which I was unaware. However, once I became aware of his infidelities and double life, I confronted him. He initially denied it. But over the next few days, he admitted that he only saw me as a ticket out of Cuba and never loved me.

To convey this upheaval, I created *Mi Cuba*. In *Mi Cuba* a long piece of burlap runs parallel to the pieces on the wall as a border, a boundary for isolation. The plastic has been written on, broken prose that describe my feelings as I worked the piece and stained it with paint. *Mi Cuba* represents this place of depression for me, where I melted hundreds of cut up photographs documenting my love for Cuba from my previous trips onto the plastic, creating islands that emerge from the plastic sheets. The photographs that once served as markers to fondly preserve memories and prove to the United States government the validity of my relationship to a Cuban now mocked me in betrayal. They were a sham: I was set up.

Anzaldúa created the term "Coatlicue state" to position new knowledge as a form of resistance. The Coatlicue state refers to Coatlicue, whom according to Aztec mythic history is the "earth goddess of life and death and mother of the gods" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 242). She represents duality of life and death. She has no head or hands, and wears a skirt of serpents with a necklace of human hearts and open hands. Anzaldúa explains, "In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated" (Anzaldúa 1999, 69). She further writes that Coatlicue is a prelude to the actual crossing to a new territory. The new territory that Anzaldúa writes about is a form of knowing, of knowledge. She explains, "Knowledge makes me more aware; it makes more conscious. 'Knowing' is painful because after 'it' happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before" (Anzaldúa 1999, 70).

The Coatlicue state is associated with depression, fear, and anxiety and it is the stage where we confront the shadow beasts. When one is in the Coatlicue state, you experience *mictlán*, the underworld. In making the decision to pursue a new relationship, the remolino began again. On one hand I felt I was doing the right thing for myself, but on the other, it cost me everything I had. Many aspects of my life were being poisoned unbeknownst to me. Another trauma, unveiling my shadow beasts and throwing me into susto (fear).

The deeper my sense of not-belonging, the more tumultuous and violent the remolino. While surviving the trauma, susto, and inhabiting the fragmentation of nepantla, sinking into the underworld in the Coatlicue State is depleting. It is a time of denial, of 'shielding myself with ignorance' (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 130) and sinking into depression. After binging on my mourning and grieving the end of the relationship with a man I loved, I was ushered into the Coatlicue state, indulging in isolation.

Anzaldúa explains, "You wallow in the ruins of your life—pobre de ti—until you can't stand the stench that's yourself." (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 130). It is then that I can begin to take in the new landscape in small doses. The evidence of new growth and understanding comes in little pockets pushing through fear and anxiety, forging a new reality. This transformation in Anzaldúa's theory of conocimiento is difficult, "habitual feelings is the hardest thing you've ever attempted" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 131). This new growth is like a snake, la serpiente, as it sheds its skin. The discarding skin coils, and it is unclear where the eaten and eater differ. I was consuming and consumed. I inhabited the old life and shed it when I was done. I confronted my shadows, my negative thoughts. It became crucial for me to return to Cuba in 2017 and go forth with my dream of the art exhibition. I needed Cuba and so, I forged ahead.

**Call to Action: Suturing the Self**

*Suturing the Self* reflects the fourth transformation, a call to action. To depict the fluidity of identity and the chaos of change, I situated a large brown tarp that I painted and sewed with red thread. The needles and threads hang from the piece as if it is punctured. I placed other fabric and burlap pieces on the floor extending into the gallery walk space, signaling various sorts of obstructions. *Suturing the Self* was suspended from the wall and ceiling taking up the whole left side of a corner in the gallery. A window wall allowed for natural sunlight to come in and cast shadows on the wall behind the burlap.

Moving from one state of being or knowing into another can be a perilous and lonely crossing and is, as Anzaldúa writes, "both a barrier and a point of transformation" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 137). But by facing my insecurities, shadow beasts, and traumas, I became empowered. I fused all the parts of myself that I prioritize and love, reconnecting with my community and reframing my life experiences. I named all the fragments that are truth for me, calling them back to myself. Thus, the symbols through the art pieces such as the red threads, the needles (see Figure 5), the folds in the fabrics, all echo the spiral of new perspectives and transformation in my life. The red threads and needles paused within the work as a reminder of the process, the mending of self. The Coyolxauhqui Imperative—the need to reconstruct what has been torn apart— results in the new story; it refers to putting oneself back together, allowing for each individual to mend themselves, or "be the healing of" their own "wounds" (Anzaldúa 2009, 295). Moreover, over the course of days installing *Hilos Rojos*, I felt myself shift; leaving the old narrative behind and reframing my experiences, but this took so much energy, especially since I was still wounded and bleeding. But the anguish was worth it, because "[c]onocimiento hurts, but not as much as desconocimineto"

Figure 4. *Suturing the Self*.

(Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 137). It was also difficult to fully accept that, despite flaws, we are all "worthy of self-respect and love." (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 136).

At the tail end of this phase, Coyolxauhqui's light (moon goddess) pulled me up, out of my grief (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 133). Coyolxauhqui supported and helped free me from my grieving because by this stage, I also realized the depths of depression that I was in and wanted to heal. I wanted transformation, yet I fought the change until I was able to allow it

Figure 5. Detail of suturing, needles and thread.

all to happen. "All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. Complete" (Anzaldúa 1999, 73). I was finally made whole. After arriving in Havana for my gallery exhibit, my trepidation had been slowly replaced by Cuba's warmth, and I knew I was home again. Soaking in the salt air, the sun, and the scenery, I realized that I made the right decision to continue with the exhibit. Every day I spent there helped me reconnect to Cuba, and once again I felt that it was mine, despite the pain I had endured. For the first time since going in 2011, I was able to see Cuba for *Cuba*—without a rose colored lens—and I fell in love with her all over again.

**Build a New Story: *Guantanamo* and *Reconciling the Waters***

The next components of *Hilos Rojos* that convey my renewed story resulting from all my suffering are *Guantanamo* and *Reconciling the Waters*. *Guantanamo* (2013) is the map of the place where my mother was born in Cuba. For *Guantanamo*, I coffee stained one of my mother's old bedspreads, recreating a map of *Guantanamo*, where rich coffee beans are harvested. This location is depicted by the red thread in the bedspread and the matching pillow case sham positioned on the floor next to it.

This art piece conveyed how I regained my agency and was no longer feeling like a victim. I drew strength as I re-built, re-searched myself, and allowed for the fragmented pieces of my life to come together. It was intended to honor the love and vulnerability that continued to rise out of me, despite the wounds. *Guantanamo* represents the outcome of the deconstructing and reconstructing that occurs during the conocimiento process, using my maternal ancestral bloodline as my keystone to my newly reformed self. Over the course of my trips to Cuba, I returned to where my mother came from, her birth place and home. I met my maternal family, touched the earth at my grandparents' farm, Caridad (Charity), in the mountains of Songo. I listened to the family stories sitting around my Tía Olga's living room and looking through old photographs of faces I did not know. Through these moments of homecoming, the yearning and void I felt my whole life began to dam up inside of me. I remembered that I was part of something greater than myself. The long-lost fragments of nostalgia and memory that crossed from my mother to me via the umbilical cord were finally beginning to gestate.

*Reconciling the Waters* primarily depicts this search for my ancestral roots. It is inspired by the crossing of waters that entailed the journey

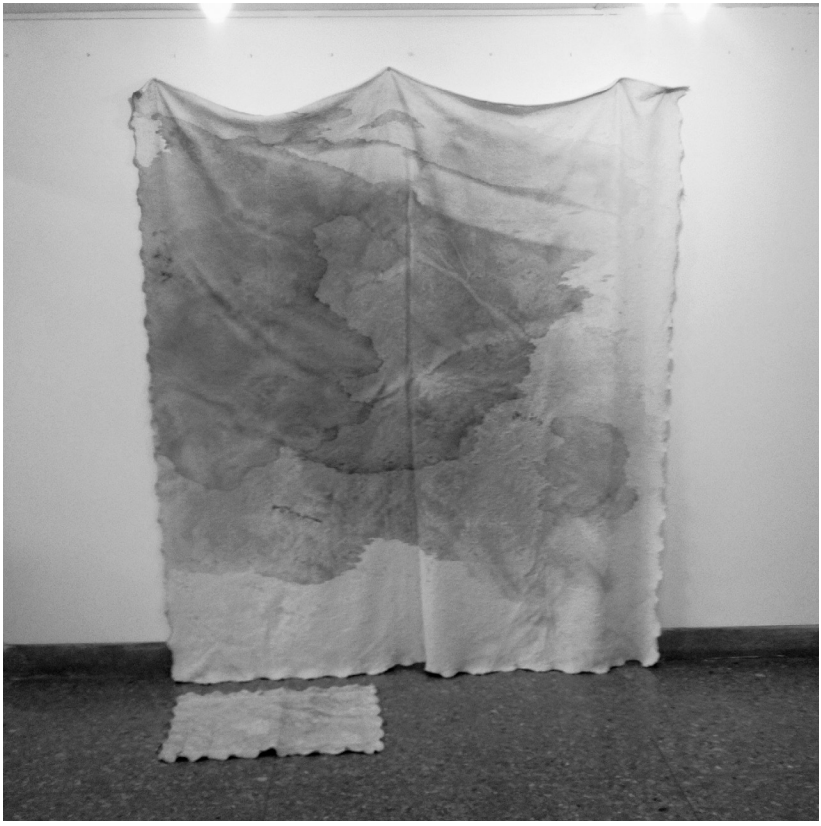

Figure 6. *Guantanamo.*

from Lebanon to Cuba to the United States that I can trace through my maternal lineage. Stains in blue acrylic hues, embedded with my own hair, and stitching in red of my maternal Arab family name (Fayad) all symbolize this personal history. Additionally, it signifies the various crossings entailed during the conocimiento process. *Reconciling the Waters* (2015) accompanies *Guantanamo* to help represent the new story about myself that I am putting out to the world, the sixth stage of conocimiento.

Figure 7. *The Tear* hangs between *Reconciling the Waters* and *Peligroso*.

My new story became the bridge between the earth and waters, a connection point that "one builds … as one walks" (Anzaldúa 2009, 243). This piece was hung diagonally suspended from the ceiling at various points crosswise from *Guantanamo* in order to put these two pieces in conversation, anchoring my journey to and from Cuba.

Taking my story out into the world and sharing it with others was an extremely vulnerable process. My wounds were exposed to the elements. Taking my new, reframed story out into the world required that I reconciled the many vulnerable and injured parts of myself. For instance, in order to grapple with the end of my marriage, I moved through various stages of grief, including victimhood and blame. Those emotions were on display in my art.

However, the more I sat with my pain and discomfort, the more I peeled away layers to confront uncomfortable places deep within me and even more truth. I admitted to myself that I had convinced myself that my marriage was a fairy tale one, when in reality, there were many things that I saw and felt in my relationship with my ex-husband that made me feel uncomfortable. I chose to turn a blind eye or justify these things and fabricate a reality I wanted. And I also had to acknowledge that in the same way that I sought refuge in Cuba and impulsively dived into a new relationship with both feet, my ex-husband also sought refuge to build a new future for himself. I realize how my assumptions about love betrayed me, for they were my own illusions.

**The Vision/Becoming A Nepantlera Artist: *Hilos Rojos***

The seventh stage in the conocimiento process is converting the vision for a better self and world in action, a spiritual activism. The vision was one I had carried for a long time—it was showing an art exhibition in Cuba. I had dreamt it years prior, with a deep yearning to be there, and that vision suspended me during all the flexuous phases of conocimiento As Anzaldúa reminds us, "[n]othing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, page number). I had no idea what the process and journey would look like, but I had envisioned it in abstract ways while longing for Cuba. To realize this vision, I considered the gallery sacred. It was a sanctuary that welcomed me into its pristine walls so I could re-assemble myself. Curating *Hilos Rojos* in the gallery embodied my healing: it allowed me to suture together my wounds, expose any remaining toxicity, and foster a new perspective. As an artist, I chose to create and transform myself through the path of conocimiento so I could let go of what does not serve me and remember what does. It also resulted in a clearer understanding of myself as a nepantlera artist, a revelation that enables me to consider my art process and art work as a form of spiritual activism.

Figure 8. *Hilos Rojos* exhibition in Havana, Cuba.

A nepantlera artist is a spiritual activist, an agent of "awakening" who "inspire[s] and challenge[s] others to deeper awareness, greater conocimiento; they serve as reminders of each other's search for wholeness of being" (Anzaldúa 1990, 293). Becoming a nepantlera artist, or a messenger that sees many perspectives, is a choice. Choosing to be a nepantlera artist means that my artwork intends "to invent holistic, relational theories and tactics" that enable me "to reconcile or in other ways transforms the varied worlds in which they exist" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 245).

Becoming a nepantlera artist means that I intentionally mediate back and forth in the in-between spaces of my multiple positions. It can be an uncomfortable place. Nepantlera artists create art that represents this

ambiguity and middle ground, and challenges notions about the types of artists that are allowed to tell stories, what stories they get to tell, what histories are reproduced, and what audiences this is for (Anzaldúa 2009). The act of being a nepantlera artist transcends representing the self because the resulting artwork also connects the artists' personal stories to larger collective cultural narratives. To do so, they tap into the cenotes[5] Anzaldúa theorizes about, sink holes that are accessed through nepantla as realms for psychic or spiritual happenings through a subconscious or unconscious dream pool. She writes that "via nepantla you tap 'el cenote,' the archetype inner stream of consciousness dream pool or reservoir of unconscious images and feelings stored as iconic imagery" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2015, 98).

The nepantlera artist lives under bridges, with no fixed connection to any one side. They are inside and outside the system simultaneously and create work to illustrate what this in-between experience is like. Nepantla serves as a muse for a nepantlera artist. Art making by a nepantlera artist then becomes a vehicle for a world traveling (Lugones 1987) that can help re-imagine and refashion worlds by depicting the emotions and images we carry in our bodies, minds, and sprits during those transformative moments. The displacement and dislocation that is often felt as a nepantlera artist is integral in coming to producing art that conveys the uncomfortable and nomadic nature of being in nepantla. It is what I hope my art, my artistic process and my role in the art world continues to represent.

**PART III: Conclusion**

Employing Anzaldúa's theory of conocimiento to theorize my artwork and process follows the tradition of many Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x artists who look to their lived experiences to visually represent crossings and contradictions; polymorphous identities; and stolen and reclaimed languages, histories, and cultural practices. They articulate the feelings of marginalization, transformation and resiliency for

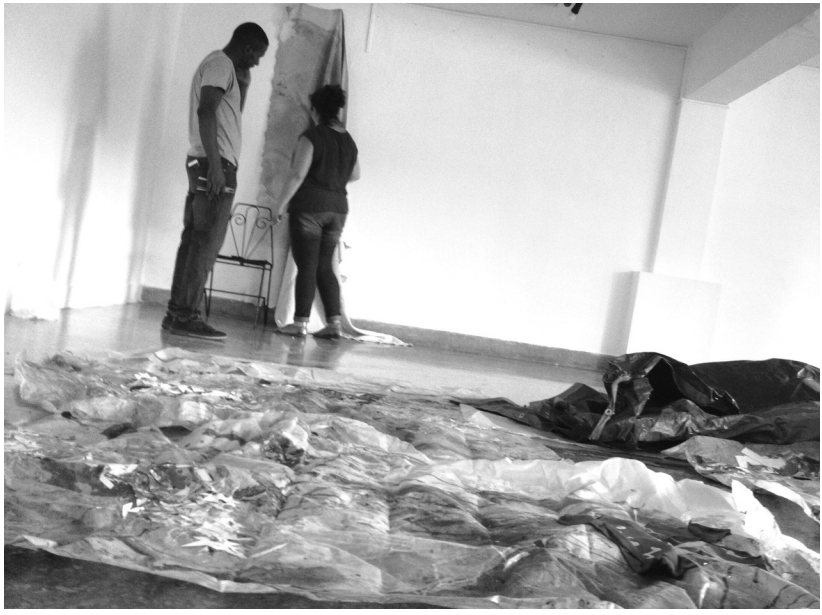

Figure 9. Artwork in suitcases in the gallery space in Havana, Cuba.

those using brushes and canvases to document their truth, as well as for those writing with pen and paper. Consequently, our studios are a revered space in which our sentiments and realities are formalized and concretized through the visual/creative arts; theorizing is indeed part of this sense-making process.

This resulting autohistoria-teoría also points to a larger genealogy within the field of Chicana/Latina studies resisting the silo-ing that often occurs within the disciplines of scholarly work (López 2012). By validating the embodied experience that informs my autohistoria-teoría, Chicana/o/x scholars embrace these forms of knowledge production as a type of "critical witnessing" where lived experiences "forge a path toward change" (López 2012, 30).

Curating my art exhibition in Havana—the city that was a new chapter for my research, art, and relationships—felt like a closing act after many years. I soaked in the sun every day I was in Havana installing *Hilos Rojos*. The ocean and salt air greeted me every morning and tucked me in every night. I breathed her in, wrote with her, and meditated on all she had for me. Once my art exhibition was up, I just stood in the midst of it, content because all the work, hardship, and energy I invested into it was sincerely and candidly on display. *Hilos Rojos* was received excitedly in Havana, prompting for it to also travel to Santiago de Cuba, Cuba. In each of these exhibitions, the viewer becomes part of the art while experiencing it. They transform as they witness the disjuncture, the wounds, the bruising, the healing, and the coming back together that represents the process of conocimiento while walking through the art installation.

*Hilos Rojos* will not return to the United States; I left it in Cuba. I left it as an offering to my ancestors, to my motherland, my maternal lineage. As a nepantlera artist, I will continue crossing and returning to Cuba and my artwork will continue to travel the island finding temporal homes. It is a betwixt part of me that will always stay on the island.

**Notes**

[1] Mestiza/mestizaje is defined by Anzaldúa (1999) as the mixture of inheritance, cultures, ethnicity, languages, and social positionality among other components of our identities.

[2] I do not italicize non-English words to maintain the decolonizing move performed by Gloria Anzaldúa to not make that which is non-English appear as Other, as awry, as needing a different type of treatment (Johnson and Christensen 2008). This move also aligns with *Chicana/Latina Studies*'s own policy.

[3] I define creative acts as deep, meaningful, embodied experiences that are woven into our mind, body, soul, and spirit manifesting through a creative vessel. For example, painting, music, writing, and dance, I consider as forms of creative acts.

[4] I use the descriptor transformative acts as a phrase to describe the seven non-linear conocimiento stages.

[5] Sink holes, or cenotes in Mexico, Cuba, and many other parts of the world in the natural definition are underground places where rain water filters through bedrock and accumulates into a clear pure water, often creating a whole other 'world,' or caves underground.

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