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Coyolxauhqui: Challenging Patriarchy by Re-imagining her birth story

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She has this fear that she has no names
That she has many names that she doesn't know her names
She has this fear that she's an image
That comes and goes clearing and
darkening
the fear that she's the dreamwork indeed somebody else's work inside someone
else's skull" Gloria Anzaldúa (65)

I had this fear that if I gave birth to my son while completing my doctoral studies, I wouldn't succeed. I had this fear that if I stopped showing up, I would be "just another Chicana, getting pregnant" (Tellez, 2005). It wasn't supposed to be like this, I wasn't supposed to be "the pregnant" Chicana, the one who got pregnant while in university completing a PhD. I wasn't supposed to return to school with a stroller and a baby attached to my bosom, diapers and wipes in tow. My youngest sister reminded me once, pregnant women drop out, that's the narrative we heard all our lives, from our parents, aunts, godmothers, and society. I had remained childfree all of this time and, as a doctoral student, I made a choice to move forward with having a child. During my pregnancy, I battled stereotypes about my "inability" and academic commitment to my studies. In insurance policies, pregnant bodies are considered 'disabled' bodies. Yes, pregnant bodies become less able to do certain everyday tasks like bend down to tie shoes, sleep in certain positions, or run fast enough to catch the bus. Our bodies are pre-occupied creating and forming new life. These assumptions are multilayered, when academic performance is restricted to producing scholarship. Many of my PhD friends who are also mothers shared similar experiences, questioned about their academic commitments. Silence around pregnancy is prominent historically. I have seen this especially in the story of an ancient Aztec symbol, Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess/deity/metaphor representing feminine.

Scholar-activist Irene Lara reminds us about how difficult and limiting the process of graduate school can be, as it required of her to only be a thinker, and not feel through her production of reasoning. She states, "I slowly began to heal my fragmented self and move toward wholeness and balance. I think and feel at once. Unlearning the western mind/body split and learning to listen to the wisdom of my whole self, my bodymindspirit is a perpetual process" (Lara, pg. 435). The location of fragmentation, as explained by Lara, exemplify the acts of violence we experience in graduate studies. The attempt to centralize the bodymindspirit into our academic work is often not recommended. That silencing as an act of violence, as figuratively experienced by Coyolxauhqui, is the attack on the feminine body, knowledge production, and storytelling. As such, the pregnancy experiences of Chicana Mother PhDs remain silenced in graduate studies, as has been the pregnancy story of Coyolxauhqui; which has received minimal attention in history, as well as in archeological and anthropological spaces (Nicholson, 1985; Boskovic,

1992). Because Coyolxauhqui remains an important symbol to many women, it is our pregnancy stories that re-birth her counter-story of child and knowledge production. By telling our birth stories, we assist in piecing together Coyolxauhqui which, in turn, can help us understand how patriarchy informs the severing of women's knowledge production. However, through resistance and the unearthing of untold stories, we birth ourselves and the significance of our survival.

Coyolxauhqui as a Theoretical Body

The following is the *cuento* (story) as it has been retold and referred to by many Chicana and *Indígena* PhD mothers and non-mothers in the academic community. Many of us have heard and read the story through the work of poets, literary texts, Chicana and *Indígena* *teoristas*, anthropologists, archeologists, in *danza*¹ and activist circles. Coatlicue, the mother of Coyolxauhqui found eagle down feathers as she swept. Keeping them safe, Coatlicue tucked them inside her breast and later became pregnant (Moraga, 1993). When Coyolxauhqui learned of her mother's "illegitimate" pregnancy, she became furious. Coatlicue would later give birth to Huitzilopochtli, the god of civil unrest and war. Fearing this unrest, Coyolxauhqui plotted to kill her mother and brother to prevent chaos in the world. From the womb of Coatlicue, Huitzilopochtli emerged and decapitated and dismembered Coyolxauhqui, throwing her body off the mountain and heaving her head towards the heavens. Coyolxauhqui's story is the first historical femicide on record (Gaspar de Alba, 2014; Wright, 1996; Gonzalez, 1979; Rodriguez, 1988). It captures the conception of patriarchy and marginalization as experienced by women (Lara, 2003) across the world. Coyolxauhqui's story reminds us of the fragmentation we experience through misogyny wherein physical, spiritual, and intellectual identities represent the severing of the everyday experiences of Chicana and Latina PhD mothers. Physically, women's bodies are policed to not have children during their academic careers. Spiritually, women's emotional and creative pathways for creating knowledge are not validated. And intellectually, their academic knowledge is "required" to produce "good" knowledge, negligent of emotion, creativity, and feeling. Why is this image important in considering the experiences of PhD mothers? Because it allows us to compose the stories best fit for women to make sense of their positionality, and provides a location where oppressed women can theorize and build on "creation" stories that privilege their survival in the Ivory Tower.

The image provided (figure 1.) represents a graph of the unearthed Coyolxauhqui stone found February 21, 1978 in Tenochtitlan, México. Although many scholars center their work around theorizing Coyolxauhqui's fragmented

¹ *Danza* refers to Aztec Dance, a traditional, ancient and symbolic ceremony of dance honoring the elements of the world, including energies of the universe.

story, I focus on theorizing her pregnancy story. Coyolxauhqui's body, as read by anthropologists and arts historians (Nicholson, 1985; Boskovic, 1992; Wright, 1996) tell us that her stretched breasts and stomach indicate she has carried life, given birth, and produced milk. Nicholson states, "[t]he large, pendulous breasts are boldly displayed on the bare upper body, as well as two (post-partum?) creases in the belly area just above" (78). Like Nicholson, scholars argue that not much attention has been granted to focus on the pregnancy story of Coyolxauhqui. Why has her pregnancy and birth story been silent in the history of her unearthed body? How can we recount the theory of her pregnancy as being parallel to the stories of mothers in academia? Birth stories such as Coyolxauhqui's give us permission, as Chicanas and *Indigena* mothers to theorize and contribute to knowledge production, from our everyday lived epistemologies, as a way to fill in the "blank spots" that Chicana *teoristas* such as Gloria Anzaldúa have left open for many of us to fill-in. Doing so unsettles dominant narratives that often leave out the raw and real stories of pregnancy, birth, and post-partum experiences of Chicanas, women, and self-identified parents in academia.

By employing Chicana Feminist Theory (CFT) as a critical tool to unsettle dominant inquiry of western education, we foreground the lived experiences of Chicana and Latina women in the U.S. This act also decentralizes patriarchy, whose research methods, theory, and methodology exclude the feminine and women's narratives. Often, western education favors categories of knowledge production that exclude the corporeal and spiritual from the intellectual formation of individuals (Lara, 2002), designating western patriarchal narratives as more appropriate. CFT serves as a stronghold for the feminine voice in bringing stories from the margins to the center (bell hooks, 1984; 2000). Indeed, CFT serves as a bridge for Chicanas and Latinas to produce and contribute as practitioners of inquiry. Likewise, CFT debunks stereotypes and assumptions about Chicana and Latina women, which are often negative, deficient, and sexist, and stem from racism, and sexism.

Chicana Feminist Epistemologies (CFE) builds upon what Gloria Anzaldúa has called "blank spots", locations that serve to create new knowledges (1987) and where we can build on research, theory and epistemology (Saveedra & Nymark, 2008; Anzaldúa, 2005; Keating, 2008). Ana Louise Keating states, "it is my hope that we will also investigate and write about Anzaldúa's pre- and post Borderlands ideas, especially a variety of interlinked theories she was working on at the time of her death—including, but not limited to: "new tribalism;" "geography of selves;" "el mundo zurdo;" "spiritual activism;" "la naguala, or watcher;" "the Coyolxauhqui imperative;" " " (pg. 5, 2006). CFE "privileges the life experiences and knowledges of Chicanas" (Delgado Bernal, pg. 15). It is with this urgency that I desire to theorize about Coyolxauhqui as her story relates to my own. Because of this exclusion of women's narratives from intellectual arenas, I have chosen to use

CFE because it resists and disrupts traditional notions of Eurocentric knowledge, and offers alternative approaches to educational research, story telling, theorizing, and methodology (Calderón, Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, and Vélez, 2012; Anzaldúa, 1987; Delgado Bernal, 1998).

A Revolución: El Parto de Vida

Being a Chicana with a pregnant body on campus made me feel hyper visible, yet invisible, it is a phenomenon experienced by many other Mothers of Color who are graduate students at different universities. Chicana mothers in academia have shared their painful stories about how they have maneuvered racial and gendered microaggressions regarding pregnancy and motherhood as students and faculty. Some women shared that it was clear that our bodies were perceived as taking up too much space, but also that they represented a form of resistance to white dominant patriarchal culture's expectations for knowledge production, and the multiple ways in which a woman can/may choose to be producers of lives, of self, and knowledge.

On November 20 2013², I gave birth to *a revolución* rooted in my womb. My son joined my partner and I on a rainy Thursday evening colored with ceremonial songs, sage, massages, and affirmations to ease a long, laborious birth. This ceremony allowed me to feel and honor my transformation as a mother, a giver of life, a producer of knowledge and stories. I fell into a gentle slumber in moments of rest, but was brought back to awareness by the contracting pain. The twenty-hour labor, accompanied by the medicine³, songs, intense prayer and the ongoing shift between pregnancy and birth, has forever changed the meaning of my life as a Chicana Mother in Academia (CMA). More importantly, it allows me to analyze the ways in which I describe, understand, and respect birth stories and theory within my own scholarship. As noted by Chicana scholar-activist, Dolores Delgado Bernal, our lived experiences often inform and shape our own scholarship (2006).

Borrowing theoretical scholarship from Chicana *teoristas* such as the late Gloria Anzaldúa reminds me of the importance of applying indigenous knowledge to lived experiences. Her work helps me track the genealogies of identity through my birth story, and the indigenous knowledges that can be applied to scholarship as tools to help us make sense of our existence, our processes, and transformations. This, in part, also aids in re-creating a Coyolxauhqui's birth story.

When Mothers of Color in Academia are questioned about whether or not their pregnancies were planned, I am reminded of the ways in which pregnancies are seen as planned and unplanned, but also up for intrusive, public discussion,

2 November 20th is the date of the Mexican revolution.

3 Medicine is referred to as Native American and indigenous forms of medicines as tools to facilitate a ceremony. Sage, frankincense, and sweet grass are a few.

when family planning is a private and intimate matter. For me, the question of whether my pregnancy was legitimate or not took me back to a period of my socialization as a teenager where I was often shamed and lectured to not become pregnant, otherwise my worth would be reduced. These traumatic stories remain imprinted on my emotional and spiritual being. The emotional scars are the remnants of patriarchal norms that dictate that Women of Color need to guard and base their personal worth on a virgin/whore dichotomy (Lara, 2010). These indicators suggest that at any point in time, having children has a negative impact on career development. On the other hand, women are also questioned about why they have not had children during their academic trajectory. Tellez describes her experience as a pregnant, recent hire by stating, “This culture of invisible motherhood is entrenched within the academy, and the relationship I had with students was a complicated one. Having a visible, pregnant body put me in a particular spotlight; in some ways, it humanized me and made them curious about my personal life, but their curiosity carried assumptions. Over and over again, I was asked about my nonexistent husband” (85).

In *Putting Coyolxauhqui Together*, Gloria Anzaldúa frames the fifth stage of this process as a transformational one. Experiencing pregnancy, birth, mental, and physical, and emotional traumas may lead us to a state of awakeness, to a new sense of self and awareness after a tumultuous journey. She writes, “you’ve chosen to compose a new history and self – to rewrite your *autohistoria*. You want to be transformed again...[y]our ailing body is no longer a hindrance but an asset, witnessing pain, speaking to you, demanding touch. *Es tu cuerpo que busca conocimiento*; along with dreams your body’s royal road to consciousness” (Pg. 559). Our painful journeys allow us to place ourselves after surviving a fragmented journey. An auto-historia, a retelling of the personal accounts of our trajectories, through pregnancy, birth, and post-partum⁴ shifts our perspective of the world through our new role as mothers.

I learn(ed) from the bundles of medicine of a traditional red road⁵ (Facio & Lara, pg. 12). The elders and medicine people reminded me that the birth of my son was a re-birth of myself. It was a shedding of skin, learning to embrace my new role as a mother, a partner, a student, a healer, and future academic. These aspects of my multi-faceted identity are what Gloria Anzaldúa designates as contradictions (1987). As such, it is with great awareness that I embrace the different identities I embody by merging the different pieces of the self in all its messiness. At eighteen, I stumbled upon the beautiful teachings of indigenous knowledge through *danza*—

⁴When I refer to pre and post-partum, I would like to include the birth story. In tandem, I would like to relate the scientific story of the different stages of the moon (as it has been told by Gaspar de Alba (2014), Anthropologist, and Irene Lara (personal contact, 2015).

⁵ Drawing from spiritual sources as working towards personal and social well-being, and spirituality.

Mexica, purification lodges, and other forms of ceremony. These knowledges felt familiar, particularly the stories of deities and energies as representations of nature. For instance, in Mexican indigenous knowledge, the serpent was a symbol of fertility, the feminine, reproduction, and knowledge. From the animal spirits, we are then introduced to the mythological symbols represented in literary works such as *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

Symbols and representations are critical to understanding human existence, and to holding on to beliefs in current society. Although the fragmented story of Coyolxauhqui allows us to acknowledge the dualities between life and death, feminine and masculine, or even the creation story of the moon and stars, and the phases of the moon, we are offered the opportunity to theorize about Coyolxauhqui as a creator of knowledge, life, and transformation. It is in this way that I hope we can read into the untold, unearthed stories of a powerful female figure for women from the Americas. Whether we produce life by choice, we also produce knowledge, stories, scholarship, art as we simultaneously shift and transform. Chicanas, Latinas and indigenous women are *las hijas de Coyolxauhqui*, the unknown and unclaimed daughters of the fragmented Coyolxauhqui who, by telling their stories, piece together their fragmented mother and make her whole. In doing so, we fill in the “blank spots” that exist in many theoretical areas with our stories, our everyday lives, and experiences. The personal is political, the body is political, the story is resistance. *Tejiendo*⁶ my own positionality as a first generation Chicana researching Chicana *Indigena* mothering in academia, I build on to theory to challenge the way we have come to learn about Coyolxauhqui. This story allows us to challenge patriarchal representations of female bodies, knowledges, and scholarship to contribute to story telling as *creadoras*⁷, goddesses, mothers, parents, sisters, aunties, and all-powerful storytellers.

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⁶ Weaving in, in like sowing in, like a *rebozo*. A *rebozo* is a traditional Mexican shawl used by women to carry babies, and to cover and protect oneself.

⁷ Creators.

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