Tu Autohistoría is not carved in stone but drawn on sand and subject to shifting winds. Forced to rework your story, you invent new notions of yourself and reality—increasingly multidimensional versions where body, mind, and spirit interpenetrate in more complex ways—Gloria Anzaldúa "now let us shift"

Introduction

For writing teachers, the question looming over preceding chapters is: How do we translate conocimiento, nepantla, autohistoria, and the other key concepts of mestiza rhetoric into meaningful transgressive pedagogical practices? This chapter begins to answer this question by focusing on 'personal experience.' In a recent Introduction to Academic Discourse course for first-generation to college seniors preparing for graduate study I began by asking my students to write an autobiography of themselves as writers. Borrowing from Peter Elbow and Pat Benaloff (2000), I asked my students to reflect on who they are as writers and their relationship to writing. Because of the composition of the class, all students of color, first in their family to attend college with varying degrees of academic writing skills and confidence about their writing, I adjusted Elbow and Benaloff's autobiographical essay prompt to allow students space to also write an autobiography of themselves as nonwriters and reflect on what impedes them from seeing themselves as writers and more specifically, as intellectuals capable of making meaningful contributions through their writing (an important exercise, I thought, since they were all in this class because they are in the process of applying to Ph.D. programs). I begin with my student responses to this assignment. I will then very briefly discuss how Composition Studies as a field is grappling with the role and status of 'personal experience': What is the role of experience in the writing class? What are the advantages and disadvantages of asking or allowing our students to write from 'personal experience'? What do we do when unsolicited personal experience creeps into the class in response to our assignment prompt disrupting the work of our carefully planned assignment sequence? As for the 'personal experience' of the teacher: What role does our personal life, do our personal experiences play in our teaching? Is there a place for our personal experience in our teaching? Is there a place for it in our scholarly essays? If so, what kind of place is it? In the third and last part of this
chapter I discuss how Anzaldúa's notion of *autohistoria* intervenes in this conversation and provide an example of a writing course grounded on her theory of writing autobiography as practicing transgression.

**Student Autobiography of Yourself as a Writer Essays**

Through writing you become your own expert and teacher—Marisol, June 2009

I assigned the Autobiography of Yourself as a Writer essay at the beginning of the class and also asked them to write their own theory of writing reflection piece six months later because I wanted my students to understand that reflecting on their writing, their processes, and the work we would do was central to their improvement as writers. Self-reflection is an important part of the process of developing a critical consciousness where each student comes to see themselves as writers, as intellectuals able to communicate their ideas through writing. As I return to their essays over a year later, I am struck by the depth of their reflections, for in narrating their experiences with writing they are also narrating a way of being in the University.

Marisol is in her junior year at a major UC campus and has joined our program because she is thinking about pursuing a Masters or PhD in education. She was accepted into the university through the *Bridge* special admission program. When she came, she was three month's pregnant. With help from her family, her child's father, and friends, she has made it through the first three years of college with her son and has recently started working on a research project in math education. She wants to someday write books exploring how to teach math to Latina/o students. She is in this class because she knows she needs to strengthen her writing skills. In "My Experience With Writing" she recounts the transition from her under-resourced school into the University: "It wasn't until I began school here that I realized that although I felt comfortable with my writing the preparation that was given to me had not been to the level the university required...Knowing that expectations were set below for students at my school made me feel unstable. I had believed that my writing had gotten better, and now I am back where I started." She ends her reflection piece by concluding that she needs to continue improving in
order to become a strong academic writer. Six month later, at the end of the program Marisol writes that," Writing today to me is my form of expression...It is my voice coming out alive...It is the light that is shining out through me, it is what gives me strength."

Alex is also in his junior year, he was also accepted as a special admit student and had to adhere to a strict contract during his freshman year in order to be allowed to stay on campus. He is from the central valley, from a town so small and insignificant he says, that it is not even worth mentioning because nobody has ever heard of it. His parents are Oaxacan immigrants who work in the fields. Alex has taken a series of Latina/o studies courses and has become interested in Oaxacan immigration. He was thrilled and surprised he says to discover in one of his classes that scholars are actually studying and writing articles about his community! The idea that this is possible and the sheer joy of seeing his people's reality in print, is pushing him to consider pursuing a PhD in a field where he too can write about Oaxacan immigrants. When the class is asked to share what their research interests are, he jokes that since he is one of them, he may have something interesting to say. In "My Writing, My Voice" Alex tells us that writing in a variety of forms has always been an integral part of his life: "writing served as a gateway to a different reality." His reflection takes us through the different phases or turns his writing has taken, from writing about dinosaurs and firefighters in his very early years, to writing about sceneries and anecdotes as a teenager in high school, to later turning to personal writing to explore existential questions after his father's brush with death. During this phase he wrote, "I want to live eternally. I do not want to leave a silhouette of mere memories, but rather, I want to live behind powerful words, something potent that will live for a very long time; I want to live, spit the words from my pen--let the ink wet the paper." For Alex, the different phases or personas in his writing are all part of the writer in him, they represent how as Sandra Cisneros writes, "each year is present in the next one." He ends his writer's autobiography noting that the different phases in his writing and the realization that years accumulate, "each inside the other," has helped him develop new ways of approaching and using writing.
Unlike Alex, Victoria has not had an easy relationship with her writing. There were always too many errors, "When it comes to writing grammar is my weakness. I believe this is true because English is my second language and not my first." Victoria is majoring in sociology, a major she chose because it challenges her to read and write. She tells us that she enjoys writing yet has a hard time with academic writing "that style of writing is too dry." What she likes is writing where she can voice her own opinion, without using facts and statistics. She tells us that she understands the importance of writing yet "honestly, I don't know what kind of writer I am." She is hoping our class will help her figure it out. At the end of the class, six months later, Victoria writes, "Being a writer is a life-long process because you learn something new every day." She will be graduating soon as is grateful to have been part of the program. She enjoyed writing and thinks the practice of keeping a journal is something she can take with her after graduation. She has stopped trying to decide what kind of writer she is, "You might like to write one way today but tomorrow you might change your style. In the end my writing process has been interesting and I have learned a lot about myself.” For each of these students, reflecting on who they are as writers and their relationship to writing was interconnected to reflecting on who they are as first-generation students in the University, their being as writers and as EOP students finding a place in the University were inseparable.

'Personal Experience' in Composition Studies

We are never who we are when we teach. Nor should we try to be. We are something always verging on the more, the better, the greater than this "I" who is trying to find its place in the picture—Paul Kameen Writing/Teaching

Much of the thinking about the use of 'the personal' and 'personal experience' within Composition Studies falls under the category of expressionistic rhetoric, a subgroup of the process movement. Within this movement is Peter Elbow's call for the uses of free writing and defense of private writing along with Donald Murray's teachings on writing as process. Elbow makes the case for teaching nonacademic discourse and specifically, discourse that renders personal experience in the writing class in his essay "Reflections on Academic Discourse." Elbow points out that while we often
ask students in our writing classes to read and write about texts that render experience, we don't really teach students to write discourse that renders their own experiences. The premise in Elbow's argument is that students should leave the University able to render their personal experiences in writing. By discourse that renders experience Elbow refers to discourse that conveys what you see when you look out the window, what it feels like to walk down the street, discourse that "tells what its like to be me or to live my life" (Elbow 2000, 237). Elbow argues that writing teachers should teach students to render their experiences in writing because when students leave the university unable to write about their experiences, they are impoverished, deprived of one of the great human accomplishments of written language (237). Moreover, we should encourage our students to write from personal experience because, according to Elbow, nonacademic discourse that renders experience is needed in order to help students produce academic discourse.

Another major proponent of process writing and encouraging students to write from their 'personal experience' is Donald Murray. In Write to Learn Donald Murray tells students to write about what they most care about: "Our best subjects come from the mysteries in our lives or in the topics we are exploring with language" (61). The theory of writing in Write to Learn is that writing is a craft (not magic) that can be learned and is available to anyone willing to put the time and effort into developing their writing. The book takes the student through a series of steps in the writing process; unlearning what your writing teachers taught you about writing, pre-writing, finding your writing territory, planning, taking your eye off the ball (plan), etc. Everyone can learn to write and everyone has their own writing territories to explore. Students will do their best writing if we encourage them to write about what they care and know about because "Our experiences and our obsessions are rich with writing possibilities" (61). Thus Write to Learn is full of exercises to dislodge students from the "I Don't Have Anything to Say" mode into seeing the possible subjects in their writing territories and finding their own mystery to write about. The advice Murray offers the student who has nothing to say is that "It is
important to try to make the territory your own, to turn any assignment into your own, so you can write with confidence—and to find the abundance of specific information on which you can draw" (Ibid.).

More recently scholars have began to explore how personal experience influences teaching, how it can be used in teaching, and to include 'personal experience' in their scholarly essays. In "Between the Drafts" Nancy Sommers reflects on the personal (versus academic) work of revision during her own and her student's writing process. She traces her reliance on Foucault and other major figures in composition theory and examines what the costs of grounding her authority outside of herself may be, the personal silences this dependency on sources outside herself has produced. She asks, "What does my absence signify?" (1992, 27). Instead of relying on the safe positions, the weighty authority of major figures in the field, she calls for breaking down the dichotomy between "Either I be personal or I be academic" (Ibid., 28). It is possible, she argues, to be both scholarly and reflective, to move out of the safe either/or positions and begin to see the sources of strength and knowledge in the discontinuous moments (Ibid., 29). Sommers wants her students "to bring their life and their writing together," between the drafts, to "claim their stories as primary source material and transform their experiences into evidence" (Ibid., 30). This is in fact the move that her essay enacts. The reasons, Sommers argues, for encouraging her students to base their authority on their 'personal experiences' is to encourage students to move out of the Everystudent writer persona, to be empowered not to serve the academy and accommodate to it, but to write essays that will change the academy. Her call is for students to "claim their stories as primary source material and transform their experiences into evidence" (Ibid.). As teachers we need to provide students with opportunities to work with sources of their own, sources "that can complicate and enrich their primary sources, and allow "new ways to write scholarly essays that are exploratory, thoughtful, and reflective" (Ibid.).

In Writing/Teaching Essays Toward a Rhetoric Pedagogy, Paul Kameen shows how 'personal experience' can be used as a teaching tool enabling him to reflect on his role as a teacher and what he and his students are learning in the class. In Kameen's course firsthand personal experience was
incorporated into his course as a significant body of knowledge in the course, it was part of the syllabus used to figure out and negotiate their learning experiences. Kameen actually combines a series of genres in this book, he takes personal experience, and in particular reflections on how the teaching is changing him and combines that with literary criticism and pedagogy theory to create something he calls ideological autobiography (14). Part of the Kameen's project in this book is renegotiating for himself the role that the personal and personal experience plays in his teaching, to think about the personal we bring into the classroom and its role in our teaching interactions. In terms of the territory Kameen covers, his book is really a tour de force as he questions not only the role and status (or non-status) of the personal in academia but also how little self-reflection about our teaching as individuals and as professionals there is in the academy. While most of the "work" we do in academia, our bread and butter is teaching work, most of us are not systematically trained as teachers, and thinking, writing, and self reflecting about our teaching is devalued in the academy. If you are serious about your teaching and are looking for a place to start thinking about your teaching you should begin by asking yourself "who is this I teaching," "What is my project," "What am I doing here?" (215-57).

**Mestiza Rhetoric: Autohistoria**

When and how does transformation happen?—Gloria Anzaldúa, "now let us shift"

Gloria Anzaldúa presented her theory of autobiographical writing and the use of 'personal experience' in writing in her essay "now let us shift...the path of conocimiento." For Anzaldúa *autohistoría* is a genre of writing about one's personal and collective self in the process of reconstructing yourself again and engaging in social transformation. In defining the term Anzaldúa wrote, "Autohistoria is a term I use to describe the genre of writing about one's personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir; an autohistoria-teoria is a personal essay that theorizes" (Ibid., 578). In the *autohistoría* genre personal experience is not set in stone, it is malleable, subject to change, it can be redrawn and provide a lens though which we can reread and rewrite the cultural and other stories into which we are born. Through the *autohistoría* lens,
new stories of self-growth, cultural critique, healing, and individual/collective transformation can be created.

The notion of *autohistoría* is part of Anzaldúa's seven stages of *conocimiento* as presented in "now let us shift..." The broader theme of this essay is a theory of composition which I am calling *mestiza* rhetoric grounded on Anzaldúa's theory that the composition process is interconnected with the process of creating one's identity, consciousness, and reality. The overarching paradigm Anzaldúa uses to capture this interconnectivity is *conocimiento*, defined by Anzaldúa as rhetorical strategies that enables shifting out of victimized/oppressed frameworks toward the construction of knowledge that liberates, transforms and empowers the writing subject. *Conocimiento* then questions reason and rationality, the conventional categories, classifications, and contents while centering spirituality as a legitimate form of knowledge. Anzaldúa charts the path of *conocimiento* in "now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work/public acts." There are seven stages of conocimiento: 1. el arrebato...rupture, fragmentation...an ending, a beginning—one can be put or can catapult into this stage by illness, violent attack, death, depression, betrayal, systematic racism/sexist, natural disaster or any other traumatic event; 2. nepantla...torn between ways—the in-between space, it is a liminal transitional space where you are suspended between realities, ways of knowing, you are two people; 3. the Coatlicue state...desconocimiento and the cost of knowing—this is a dark space, when you are overwhelmed , full of despair, hopeless, when dominant ideologies can do the most violence to you; 4. the call...el compromiso...the crossing, and conversion—you break free from the Coatlicue state and reconnect with spirit, with you life's work, your compromio; 5. putting Coyolxauhqui together...new personal and collective "stories"—you dismantle your old stories and compose a new history and a new self, you rewrite your autohistoria, the story that informs you of who you are; 6. the blow-up ... a clash of realities—you take your new story out in the world to test it, you risk confrontation, disappointment, being misunderstood or not heard at all; 7. shifting realities...acting out the vision of spiritual activism—this is the space of transformation, where "you shift realities, develop an ethical,
compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within self and between others, and find common ground by forming holistic alliances. You include these practices in your daily life, act on your vision—enacting spiritual activism" (Anzaldúa 2002, 545).

Anzaldúa's theory of composition, her mestiza rhetoric, is defined in the way her path of conocimiento essay articulates the relationship between writing, reality, and consciousness. In mestiza rhetoric the path of conocimiento requires shifting consciousness, and in shifting consciousness you are shifting reality; as in "you can recreate reality."¹ Rewriting your autohistoria, the narrative or story that informs who you are and what you need to do is an integral part of Anzaldúa's conocimiento process. In the act of re/writing your story, you are re/writing your reality. The act of writing autohistoria is transgressive because the shift in consciousness and transformation of reality is mediated through language and more specifically through your composition or 'compostura' process (Anzaldúa 2002). In the following section I provide an example of a course based on Anzaldúa's mestiza rhetoric and her concept of autohistoria.

¹ Lundsford interview, 270.
Bibliography

Gloria Anzaldúa, "now let us shift...the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts" in This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions of Transformation. Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Louise Keating eds. New York: Routledge, 2002.
_____.

Unpublished Student Essays from Introduction to Academic Discourse
(Winter-Spring 2009)

Vanessa Cervantes, "History and Description of Yourself as a Writer"
_____ "My Writing"

Angel Garcia, "My Writing, My Voice"

Maricela Maldonado, "My Experience With Writing"
_____ "Final Reflection"