

reimagining feminist futures through geographies of selves: a letter to the poetics of being and becoming

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Fabiane Ramos

a letter to self

Our bodies are geographies of selves made up of diverse, bordering, and overlapping ‘countries.’ We’re each composed of information, billions of bits of cultural knowledge superimposing many different categories of experience. Like a map with colored web lines of rivers, highways, lakes, towns, and other landscape features *en donde pasan y cruzan las cosas*, we are ‘marked’.

(Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 69)

Dear Fabi,

The concept ‘geographies of selves’ has been twirling in your mind-heart-body for a while, so I’m writing this letter to encourage you to engage with this idea with an open heart. You’ve been pondering how ‘geographies of selves’ might apply to your own sense of selfhood, as you inhabit a body that has migrated across the world from Brazil to Australia and is constantly contemplating the meanings of being and becoming. You also wonder what inquiring into your own geographies might mean to the task of reimagining feminist futures that are centred on care and healing of collective wounds. What collective creative-nourishing-healing gifts may be unearthed by contemplating ‘geographies of selves’ on a personal level?

In ‘Geographies of selves: reimagining identities’ (2015a),¹ Gloria Anzaldúa gifts us an expansive methodology of identity formation where an ethic of relationality is placed at the centre while challenging narrow visions of nationalisms, cultural assimilation and separatism. ‘Geographies of selves’ is about identities that are in a constant process of becoming and are deeply shaped by our relationships with our environments, nature and all living beings (beyond the *Anthropos*). Anzaldúa’s conceptualisation is

¹ A chapter from *Light in the Dark / Luz en el Oscuro* (2015b), edited by Ana Louise Keating after Anzaldúa’s passing.

based on a vision of multiplicity within the self, with no one single aspect defining the totality of our wholeness. This multiplicity extends to being in relation to the diverse groups, ideologies and belief systems that are part of our geographies, rather than being limited by rigid memberships. In this way, she moves beyond the weaponised version of identity politics, resonating with the term's original connotations of collective struggles for existence and dignity, grounded in solidarity across differences.² Anzaldúa stresses that embracing multiplicity and a more fluid way of relating creates space for the emergence of an ability to approach issues from multiple perspectives and potentially bridge the fissures between people. She also highlights that in reimagining identities, a process of self-inquiry is fundamental. It is important to dig deep into our own geographies and, in the process, we may start to recreate boundaries and question hierarchical, dichotomous divisions, with the view of expanding senses of self and communities rather than restricting them. Yet, it is important to remember that to reimagine is not to start from zero; it is about keeping what is useful and discarding what is no longer helpful in the creation of something new. This process is complex and can be painful, as Anzaldúa explains:

We must choose to see through the holes in reality, choose to perceive something from multiple angles. The act of seeing the holes in our cultural conditioning can help us to separate out from overidentifying with personal and cultural identities transmitted by both our own groups and the dominant culture, to shed their toxic values and ways of life. It takes energy and courage, to name our selves and grow beyond cultural and self-imposed boundaries. (*ibid.*, p. 93)

your geographies of selves

How do you grow beyond your self-imposed boundaries? What do 'geographies of selves' mean to you?

Origin—land—place—home?

Creating place, making space for the self that grows and transforms, always in the process of becoming?

You are made by places you have been as you search for your place in the world. As you search, you move through space and create new places.

Culture is with you, in you, it's you

It makes you, you make it

It shapes-constricts-nourishes

It holds you, it spits you out

It grounds you

It holds you tight, gives you colour, it erases you.

²See Táíwò (2022) for an analysis of how 'identity politics' morphed from its original radical meanings proposed by the Combahee River Collective and Black feminists to its current weaponised mainstream version. In this form, its political and emancipatory significance is often reduced by elites for their own individualistic interests. To engage with the origins of identity politics, see Combahee River Collective (2014). Anzaldúa (2009, p. 2) agrees that identities can serve as entry points to a reading of the complex intersectional realities we live in through lived experiences, yet warns that it is vital to 'change notions of identity, viewing it as part of a more complex system covering a larger terrain, and demonstrating that the politics of exclusion based on traditional categories diminishes our humanness'.

Culture is defined by the past, it is remade in the present, moving slowly like a tortoise.
It changes ever so slightly, but it is moving, don't forget that!

You moved far away
To a different place
Here you create yourself anew, reinvent your
geographies.
New rivers, mountains, trees, crossroads
You added new features, new features were added to you
New scars mark your skin.

Your eyes start to see through alternative focal points. Your vision has shifted and no matter how much you wash or rub your eyes, you cannot see the same way as before. You bought new glasses, but they are useless. You had to accept that your vision had shifted permanently (and will probably keep shifting). Sometimes you don't quite remember how everything looked from a single focal point. The vision is now multiple and often blurred.

At times it's like you're looking at realities from the outside; you can see holes and neuroses in all places. You can also see beauty and wonder. You notice how people get so caught up from the inside that they cannot see. You can distance yourself from places and this helps you to create perspective. Yet, you often struggle to distance yourself from your own internal illusions and it all gets mashed and tangled. You can normally see what is happening around you with some level of clarity, but the mapping of your own self is a rather confusing affair.

What happens when one cuts off roots and floats around space without a sense of ground?
Is that damaging or liberating?
Does a fluid sense of home mean freedom or self-inflicted homelessness?
When one is everywhere but nowhere.
Nowhere and everywhere.

You're cosmopolitan, a creature of the world, not bound by national loyalties. This is what you have strived for. To see beyond the shackles of monoculturalism, of us versus them mentality. You're still attracted to this notion but as you engineer your becoming: expansive, open, growth-orientated, you fail to realise that you are creating separation, opposition, disdain to anyone who disagrees. You look down on people who hold tight to their roots and refuse to 'grow'. You define growth and freedom from your own privileged frame of reference. A reference that seeks to emancipate but that operates under the same old logic of if I'm this I cannot be that—a logic of either/or instead of and/both.

Dear Fabi, what might this new realisation do as you seek to free yourself from mental slavery (as Bob Marley said)?

Please remember my friend,
When you left

The place of origin did not leave you
It's still part of you
Despite your attempts to create something new.
You are new
But you're old
This is the way it is.
Old-new-new-old
Old is not without the new
New is not without the old.

Moving
You're moving
But you get caught up in this existential vortex
You get stuck
You stuck yourself
You forget that you dwell in a body marked by all these movements and constrictions.
Geography is written in this body
This body screams at you sometimes
because you tend to neglect her.
She wants to fly
She wants to ground
She wants to be cared for with tenderness.

Your geography is forever being altered.

And there's deep spiritual work happening as you reimagine the maps of your being. There is a danger, however, of neglecting the nourishing parts of the old when attempting to create something new. Reimagining does not mean to start from zero. It means to add new patterns, to change and transform. To imagine again does not mean to completely erase. Remember this!

Reimagining geographies of selves is a work of creativity. It's the travail of re-envisioning boundaries of selfhood.

This does not mean however to throw away your boundaries, but it is about making them more malleable.

A sense of wonder is also key to reimagining as you re(create) a relationship to all that is; you look out, you look within.

But please be aware that deconstruction without re-construction is pointless.

We pull things apart so we can see them more clearly but if all the fragmented pieces of existence are simply scrutinised without a focus on healing and putting the parts back together, I might suggest that ignorance is bliss. But then again, this bliss might only be accessible to the people who are on the right side of the *status quo*. If you are on the wrong side, perhaps ignorance is not an option. That's a thought. Anyway, just pondering post-modernity and dissecting without a plan for re-creation.

Oh, so many questions ...

Questions

Can we ever accept that some questions will never be fully answered with words?

You want to free yourself from mental slavery.

Maybe some people might say that this is indulgence, selfishness. Shouldn't you focus on freeing people from actual various forms of slavery?

This spiritual healing stuff might sound like escapism.

But how can any sustained social change and emancipatory realities materialise if we are slaves within our own selves? Slaves to destructive mental patterns and belief systems that divide and oppress—the self, the community and the environment?

Fabi, hear me on this one, the revolution is spiritual.

I'm not claiming originality here, I'm echoing my teachers because I feel this really matters.³

And remember to create community so you can do this work in coalition with kin. There is a lot of self-inquiry on the road ahead, but this self is community, among the multiple parts that make you. The self is also community with the multiple groups that constitute your realities. You are not alone.

It's important, however, not to fall into the traps of tribalism.

creating community

What comes to mind when you hear the word tribalism?

You might think of strict belonging and loyalty to one group. You might think of dichotomous division between groups and community only existing within that singular group. You might think of people with similar characteristics sticking together against other people.

Anzaldúa (2015; Anzaldúa and Keating, 2000, 2002) spins this definition around and around with 'new tribalism'.⁴ The connotation of cooperation and solidarity remains, the idea of being in community is central, but singular rigid membership to a group is out the door.

The new tribalism is about being part of but never subsumed by a group, never losing individuality to the group nor losing the group to the individual. The new tribalism is about working together to create new 'stories' of identity and culture, to envision diverse futures. (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 85)

³ Nhất Hạnh, 1998 [1987]; Anzaldúa and Keating, 2000; hooks, 2003; Anzaldúa, 2015.

⁴ Here I acknowledge the politics of language and the potentially problematic use of the term 'tribalism' with its semantic link to tribes being applied outside of Indigenous / Native American struggles. The term 'new tribalism' is employed by Anzaldúa (2015) as a play on meaning with the notion of tribalism in its connotation of hostile division between groups.

In 'new tribalism', we have membership to multiple groups because we live in multilayered realities. Our belonging to one group does not mean exclusion from another group because the very definitions of labels and categories are undertaking deep transformations.

Categories are fluid, groups are fluid and that blurring of boundaries makes rigid definitions of otherness hard to sustain. The web of connections and interconnectedness of all beings is at the centre and is the sustaining foundation of 'new tribalism'.

Differences (and the very real differences in material lived realities) are not ignored—we are different, but we are still made of the same substance. There's difference and sameness co-existing.

This might sound like a no-brainer to you, Fabi, but right now this seems harder than ever to achieve. Yet, as you know, the recognition of this interconnectedness is more urgent and important than ever in the reimagining of feminist futures centred on care and healing of collective wounds.

The polarisation of political ideologies is growing to an extent where hate is the imperative. People don't seem able to dialogue, to disagree with respect and to consider the possibility that their worldview, whatever it might be, doesn't hold absolute truths. Anyone who disagrees is the enemy. We have leaders on all sides of the political spectrum who fuel a simplistic division of evil versus good. Black-and-white explanations for extremely complex phenomena. Unsophisticated readings of reality where you are either with me or you are an ignorant fool. No space for nuance and multiple readings.

I thought that all the skills we have acquired in critical thinking would have helped us to realise that grand narratives and claims of absolutisms do not serve us. But it seems like we are descending into darkness even though we have the thinking skills to see a lot further than we do right now.

Perhaps this is part of the problem—the privileging of rationality over other ways of knowing. To purely rely on rational thought to solve our difficulties.

Rationality is one of the ways to knowledge but not the only one.⁵

Yet, 'I think therefore I am' rules.

I am capable of thoughts.

I think that I'm better than you.

Your group sucks and I'm totally different from your toxic ideologies.

Am I that different to you after all?

Purely relying on thinking has contributed to this mess but rationality alone will not get us out.

Somewhere along the way we forgot heart.

We left spirit up in the sky, disconnected from our materiality.

We ignored the visceral and imagination.

⁵ See a discussion on the limits of rationality in favour of more expansive ways of knowing in Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti (2016).

If you listen very carefully: they will tell you that we are not that different from our so-called 'enemies'.

I breathe, feel, think, imagine, dream, create ... therefore I am.

In this place of being and becoming where you seek methodologies for reimagining our feminist futures, Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) gifts you (us) with 'geographies of selves', as a possibility to create new meanings in defining the self and our multilayered identities. Rigid boundaries are questioned, multiplicity is embraced. This reimagined self is community. Community within, by working with and not rejecting the multiple aspects that constitute each of us. It is also community with the world(s) around us: after all, relationships matter, coalitions matter, as we navigate our intricate lives.

This reimagining is radical because it puts self-inquiry and love at the centre, not in an egotistical self-centred sense but to integrate all the seemingly conflicting parts of our being. From here, we are more likely to be in a well-grounded position to truly create community with one another. This reimagining is emancipatory because it frees us from the need to erase or assimilate differences, creating spaces for being and becoming in-relation, in-community, with loving respect to all our complexities.

Love,
Fabi

author biography

Fabiane Ramos is a pathways lecturer at UniSQ College, University of Southern Queensland, Australia. Her work is interdisciplinary with an emphasis on the application of feminist theories and methodologies to education research. Another focus is on reflective types of inquiry expressed through alternative academic writing styles. In this strand of her work, Fabiane experiments with philosophical themes grounded on self-reflexivity and a poetic approach to research. Email: fabiane.ramos@unisq.edu.au

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