Nepantlera, Amidst the Cracks

Shifting Concepts in Gloria Anzaldúa's Border/Body Thinking And Their Potential for Comics Studies

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HeLix 19 (2025), p. 9-38. doi: 10.11588/helix.2025.2.112141

Abstract

The article proposes a recontextualization of Anzaldúa's conceptual framework of border and body discourses. The first part focuses on "La Prieta", one of Anzaldúa's early texts, and her seminal work *Borderlands* (1987), wherein Anzaldúa exposes the racist, sexist, and queerphobic mechanisms of exclusion and repression that single out bodies as foreign and deviant, reinventing them as sources of productive potential. The second section turns to *Light in the Dark* to explore why Anzaldúa replaced some of her pivotal concepts and figures with others, in particular *nepantla* and the Mexica moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui. Drawing on illustrations Anzaldúa herself created in lectures and workshops, the third section looks at how her border/body thinking – deeply grounded as it is in mental images and visual poetry – might be applied to comics studies. A concluding analysis puts these reflections into dialogue with Latinx comics artist Breena Nuñez's work.

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> Our bodies are geographies of selves made up of diverse, bordering, and overlapping "countries." […] 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, *Light in the Dark*)

> They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label.
> (Anzaldúa, "La Prieta")

Introduction

The Texan Chicana author and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) is considered one of the most influential intellectuals and literary activists with regard to decolonial theory, border thinking – a concept further elaborated by Walter Mignolo[1] – and queer feminism, which she understood in distinction to the positions of White Feminism.[2] In her groundbreaking work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987),

[1] Cf. MIGNOLO, *Local Histories/Global Designs*.
[2] In the introduction to their critical anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa identified the experience of racism within the feminist movement as a main impetus

Anzaldúa famously developed a transcultural and intersectional concept of identity: her theory of the "New Mestiza" not only laid bare the (at least) quadruple marginalization she faced as a queer Chicana from a farmworker family with Indigenous heritage,[3] but it also bore witness to the various communities she felt connected to. To a significant extent, Anzaldúa's negotiation of these multiple forms of belonging was enabled by her (re)identification with female Nahua deities and Mexican cultural figures. In her second monograph, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, written in the last decade of her life and published posthumously in 2015, she continued her project of devising alternative forms of knowing and living in the – not only geographical – borderlands. In particular, she focused on the concept of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word meaning "in the middle of,"[4] which is used in Chicanx literature to denote in-between spaces, transitional stages, and processes of transformation.

This article proposes a recontextualization of Anzaldúa's conceptual framework of border and body discourses in light of her second study and investigates the value of her strongly visually oriented theories and figures of thought for a specific field of research: comics studies. Following a tripartite structure, it first considers "La Prieta," one of Anzaldúa's

for their (queer)feminist self-positioning as Women of Color (cf. MORAGA/ANZALDÚA, *This Bridge Called My Back*, xliii-xliv, as well as IKAS, "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa," 230-231). In the following, I will capitalize all racial and ethnic identity markers including "White," following, among others, Ann Thuý Nguyễn's and Maya Pendleton's recommendation: "To not name 'White' as a race is, in fact, an anti-Black act which frames Whiteness as both neutral and the standard. […] We believe that it is important to call attention to White as a race as a way to understand and give voice to how Whiteness functions in our social and political institutions and our communities. […] While we condemn those who capitalize 'W' for the sake of evoking violence, we intentionally capitalize 'White' in part to invite people, and ourselves, to think deeply about the ways Whiteness survives – and is supported both explicitly and implicitly" (NGUYỄN/PENDLETON, "Recognizing Race in Language," n.p.).

[3] To these categories of marginalization, one must add Anzaldúa's chronic health problems, which also had a major impact on her writing and have received increasing scholarly attention, notably in the field of disability studies (cf., for example, BOST, "Disability, Decoloniality, and Other-than-Human Ethics in Anzaldúan Thought"). This issue is also addressed at several junctures in the first two sections of this paper.

[4] Cf. *Online Nahuatl Dictionary* (University of Oregon), s. p. For a detailed discussion of the term, cf. TRONCOSO PÉREZ, "Nepantla," *passim*.

early texts, and her seminal work *Borderlands*, wherein the author identifies othering body images as powerful forces that operate in geographical, cultural, gendered, and sexual border spaces. Ranging from family structures to the geopolitical level, Anzaldúa exposes the racist, sexist, and queerphobic mechanisms of exclusion and repression by which bodies and individuals are singled out as foreign and deviant, but manages to reinvent them as sources of productive potential. The second section of the article then turns to *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* in order to explore the development of Anzaldúa's epistemologies of the border and the body since the publication of *Borderlands*. In doing so, it examines the reasons why Anzaldúa chose to reconfigure or even replace some of her pivotal concepts and figures with others (in particular, *nepantla* and the Mexica moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui), and revisits the specific biographical-historical constellation in which she wrote what would have been her doctoral thesis. The third section focuses on how Anzaldúa's border/body thinking, deeply grounded as it is in mental images, visual poetry, and cross-genre writing, can be applied to comics studies. Drawing on illustrations Anzaldúa herself created at lectures and workshops to help explain her ever-evolving theoretical constructs, it showcases the eminent utility of her ideas and imagery for comics research, and analyzes, by way of a final reflection, a work by San Francisco-based Latinx comics artist Breena Nuñez.[5]

[5] I am very grateful to the editors of this special issue, Marília Jöhnk and Elena von Ohlen, for their attentive reading of my manuscript and their many helpful comments. I would also like to thank Martin Bleisteiner and Tāne Raffa for their meticulous editing of this text. This contribution is the result of two presentations, the first of which was given at the 6th Annual Conference of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Gesellschaft (KWG) with the title *B/Ordering Cultures: Everyday Life, Politics, Aesthetics* (8-10 October 2020, Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt/Oder) in the panel "Inter-American Borders: Aesthetic, Narrative, and Temporal (Dis)Orders," organized and chaired by Jobst Welge. The second talk was held on the occasion of a Digital Study Day honoring the 35th Anniversary of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (10 February 2022, Freie Universität Berlin), which was organized and chaired by Mariana Simoni and Susanne Zepp-Zwirner. I thank the organizers and participants of both events for the stimulating discussions and valuable impulses.

Border/Body Thinking in "La Prieta" and Borderlands Anzaldúa's essay "La Prieta," which serves as our starting point, was published in 1981 in the volume *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by herself and Cherríe Moraga. The title already contained one of the key elements of Anzaldúa's critical border thinking, namely the concept of the bridge. It is important to emphasize that Anzaldúa often feminized what is actually a masculine noun in Spanish, using "*la* puente" instead of "*el* puente." As Marisa Belausteguigoitia has succinctly argued, the moment of crossing, so central to Anzaldúa's thinking, is envisaged by her along the lines of the female body:

> Toda su obra se vincula a la producción desde las fronteras geográfica, cultural, sexual, de género, racial, de clase, a partir de dos plataformas: el cuerpo y la noción de cruce; es decir, la materialidad del cuerpo y del puente como intersección son sus fundamentos. Anzaldúa diría *la puente* para cólera de nuestros hispanohablantes, con el fin de subrayar que este cuerpo que sirve como puente y para cruzar, es siempre el cuerpo de una mujer o un sujeto que se concibe o es colocado desde lo deficitario como femenino.[6]

"La Prieta" is one of Anzaldúa's earliest *autohistorias*, a term she used to refer to writings that derived theoretical and methodological findings from her own experiences and memories.[7] In the essay, Anzaldúa revisits

The research presented in this article has been funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy in the context of the Cluster of Excellence Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective – EXC 2020 – Project ID 390608380.

[6] BELAUSTEGUIGOITIA, "Borderlands/La frontera," 152. Regarding the bridge as key metaphor and its shifting notions in Anzaldúa's work, cf. KOEGELER-ABDI, "Shifting Subjectivities," 73.

[7] In her later work, Anzaldúa defines this methodology as follows: "In enacting the relationship between certain images and concepts and my own experience and psyche, I fuse personal narrative with theoretical discourse, autobiographical vignettes with theoretical prose. I create a hybrid genre, a new discursive mode, which I call 'autohistoria' and 'autohistoria-teoría.' Conectando experiencias personales con realidades sociales results in autohistoria, and theorizing about this activity results in autohistoria-teoría." ANZALDÚA, *Light in the Dark*, 5-6. In the following, quotations and other references to *Light in the Dark* are indicated by the abbreviation *LD* and the corresponding page numbers in parenthesis.

her childhood and recounts how a set of racialized physical characteristics led to her stigmatization by, and alienation from, core members of her own family. The text begins with a description of how, immediately after her birth, her grandmother inspects her buttocks for a tell-tale black spot, "the dark blotch," which, as Anzaldúa writes, was "the sign of indio, or worse, mulatto blood." From the outset, Anzaldúa's "Mamágrande" makes no secret of her disappointment that her grandchild was born "*muy prieta*, so dark and different from her own fair-skinned children."[8] When, at the age of three months, Anzaldúa has bloodstains in her diaper – a symptom of the endocrine disorder from which she suffers – and when, for the same reason, her breasts begin to grow when she is only seven years old,[9] the premature onset of pubertal physical changes – her first "crossing," or *cruce* – is attributed to feelings of guilt and shame on the part of her mother: Anzaldúa is a child conceived out of wedlock.

> This, the deep dark secret between us, her punishment for having fucked before the wedding ceremony, my punishment for being born. [...] My sister started suspecting our secret – that there was something "wrong" with me. [...] Mixed with this power struggle was [my mother's] guilt at having borne a child who was marked "con la seña," thinking she had made me a victim of her sin. In her eyes and in the eyes of others I saw myself reflected as "strange," "abnormal," "QUEER." [...] The whole time growing up I felt that I was not of this earth. An alien from another planet – I'd been dropped on my mother's lap.[10]

Even before Anzaldúa turns to the geopolitical border space, she identifies herself as a body that is foreign even to the first social structure she inhabits: her family. From the very outset, she associates her "otherness" with her "queerness," a term that stands out from the surrounding passage as the only word that is written in all capitals, itself a foreign body

[8] ANZALDÚA, "La Prieta," 198. All italics in the original texts, if not stated otherwise.
[9] Cf. *ibid*., 199. In an interview with Karin Ikas, Anzaldúa gave a slightly different description of her health condition: "[…] I was in pain most of the time because I was born with an [sic] hormonal imbalance, which meant that I went into puberty very early on. I remember that I was always made to feel ashamed because I was having a period and had breasts when I was six years old." (IKAS, "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa," 238)
[10] *Ibid*., 199.

within the text. Accordingly, "La Prieta" ends with a self-declaratory statement that announces its author's membership in a new chosen family, a "network of kindred spirits" that includes "Third World women, lesbians, feminists, and feminist-oriented men of all colors":

> We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit *we are a threat*.[11]

The foreign body as an object of resistance that presses from within against the supposedly homogeneous fabric surrounding it can be related in several ways to Anzaldúa's imagery, her hybrid Chicana language, and her self-attributions. In *Borderlands*, for example, she repeatedly refers to herself as *terca*, "stubborn,"[12] and emphasizes: "I *made the choice to be queer*" (*B/F*, 41). This unruliness is inextricably linked to Anzaldúa's notion of the Shadow-Beast, an inner entity that embodies the author's "unacceptable parts" (*B/F*, 42) and that, due to its rebellious and non-conforming nature, refuses to bow to hegemonic norms and precepts. Anzaldúa employs this figure in relation to her queerness, but also to female identification figures in Mexica mythology and Mexican cultural history, an aspect that will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Anzaldúa's self-perception as a foreign body in the culture(s) she inhabits goes hand in hand with her assertion that it is in fact the border that is "unnatural." In Anzaldúa's poetry, it stretches like an open wound across the lyrical I's body, and its fence posts – the image oscillates here between the border as a traumatic injury and the Tortilla Curtain – literally tear her apart:

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[11] *Ibid*., 209. Underlying this inclusive gesture of solidarity, however, is the risk of equating different forms of oppression – an accusation that has indeed been levelled against Anzaldúa from various quarters. For a more thorough discussion of this matter, cf. KOEGELER-ABDI, "Shifting Subjectivities," 74-78.

[12] E.g., ANZALDÚA, *Borderlands*, 38. In the following, quotations and other references to *Borderlands* are indicated by the abbreviation *B/F* and the corresponding page numbers in parenthesis.

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja *me raja*[13]
(*B/LF*, 24)

Anzaldúa denounces the border as an artificial division imposed by force, a violent rift that also becomes manifest in the textual body of the poem and its bilinguality. And yet, despite – or maybe even *because* – of all this, Anzaldúa detects a special potential in the borderland, or rather in those who dwell in it:

> A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal". (*B/F*, 25)

One of the ways in which Anzaldúa questions the legitimacy of the geopolitical border is by tracing the migratory path of the Mexica from Aztlán – their mythical place of origin located by some strands of the Chicanx movement in the southwestern regions of what is now the USA – to the Valle del Anahuac, where Tenochtitlan was founded around 1325 (*B/F*, 26-27).[14] Significantly, this violent dividing line is also understood in symbolic terms as a hegemonic – i.e., patriarchal, heteronormative, White – boundary. The borderlands, on the other hand, are conceived as *nepantla*, as a space of productive (if painful) in-betweenness and transformation, where repressive norms, divisions, and dichotomies can be overcome – a perspective that brings us to the next section.

[13] My transcription of the passage reproduces the visual arrangement in *Borderlands* as accurately as possible.
[14] Cf. León-Portilla, *Los antiguos mexicanos*, 41.

Shifting Concepts in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*

The circumstances in which Gloria Anzaldúa wrote her second monograph, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, are noteworthy in several ways, not least because they are closely interwoven with the work's creation. Between 1974 and 1977, Anzaldúa was enrolled in a doctoral program in comparative literature at the University of Texas, an endeavor that she eventually put on hold for more than a decade due to the tight constraints imposed on her by the university. She embarked on another doctoral program in 1988 at the University of California, Santa Cruz, a decision that Marisa Belausteguigoitia attributes to Anzaldúa's hope that the degree would make it easier for her to obtain secure employment. However, her first monograph, *Borderlands*, was not accepted as a doctoral dissertation by UCSC, which, according to Belausteguigoitia, was at least one of the reasons why Anzaldúa never held a permanent academic position.[15] AnaLouise Keating, editor of *Light in the Dark* and Anzaldúa's literary trustee, sums up the situation as follows:

> [Anzaldúa] believed that enrolling in a doctoral program would enable her to prioritize her intellectual growth while offering protection from being overused as a resource (guest speaker, consultant, editor, and so on) for others.[16]

The fact that Anzaldúa was tokenized as a Chicana scholar and sought-after speaker at academic events while being denied a permanent job (and thus social security) had a serious effect on her work and writing processes as well as on her health, an issue to which I will return later.

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[15] Cf. BELAUSTEGUIGOITIA, "Borderlands/La Frontera," 153. Belausteguigoitia further notes: "La muerte de mujeres famosas, que son 'mujeres de color', en la pobreza o semi pobreza no es un suceso tan extraño; Audre Lorde tampoco tenía seguro médico, ni un empleo estable, murió de cáncer sin un tratamiento especializado. 'No viven muchos años estas mujeres de color', nos dice Ana Revilla quien llama a esta forma de morir *racial battle fatigue*: 'fatiga debida a la batalla racial.'" *Ibid*. AnaLouise Keating, on the other hand, stresses in her introduction to *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (2009) that Anzaldúa refused "to take full-time jobs or to take anything else that might detract from what she called 'la musa bruja' and her work." KEATING, "Introduction," 4.

[16] KEATING, "Editor's Introduction," xiii.

She began her book project in the 1990s and kept working on it, sometimes with significant interruptions, until shortly before her death in 2004. Having constantly reformulated and adapted the manuscript's title and structure, she began the final, intensive phase of work in October 2001 under the impression of the 9/11 attacks. Devoted to this traumatic experience, the first chapter of *Light in the Dark*, "Let us begin the healing of the wound," is also indicative of an expansion of, or rather a significant shift in, Anzaldúa's key intellectual concepts.

As is well known, in her construction of the "New Mestiza" identity in *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa referred to various female deities from Mexica mythology – Coatlicue, Tonantzin, Tlazolteotl, and Cihuacóatl – which she in turn associated with prominent female figures from Mexican cultural history: the Virgen de Guadalupe, the Malinche/la Chingada, and the Llorona, "*[las] tres madres*" of Chicanx people (*B/F*, 52).[17] On the one hand, Anzaldúa unmasked the related narratives as a mechanism that props up patriarchal-hegemonic social structures:[18] "the true identity of all three has been subverted – *Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgen*/*puta* (whore) dichotomy" (*B/F*, 53). On the other hand, the concealed "true identity" of the figures in question was what Anzaldúa turned to for her conceptualization of the "New Mestiza Consciousness," a way of thinking and acting in the (actual and figurative) borderlands "that includes a transformational tolerance for contradiction and ambivalence" (*LD*, 245).[19] The latter traits are embodied by the figure of Coatlicue ("Serpent Skirt"), the Mexica earth and mother goddess, to whom the other deities together with their cultural incorporations – Tonantzin/Guadalupe, Tlazolteotl/la Malinche, Cihuacóatl/la Llorona – are assigned as aspects. Coatlicue is the giver of birth to all celestial beings, the deity of life, death,

[17] Cf. also *LD*, 50.

[18] On the queer-feminist dimension of Anzaldúa's reinterpretation of Mexica mythology and Mexican cultural history, see also Marília Jöhnk's and Elena von Ohlen's contribution to this issue. JÖHNK/VON OHLEN, "Las comadres de Gloria Anzaldúa." For a thorough discussion of the figure of Coatlicue from a decolonial and queer perspective, cf. XIANG, *Queer Ancient Ways*, 159-240.

[19] Cf. also the chapter "*La consciencia de la mestiza* / Towards a New Consciousness" in *Borderlands* (*B/F*, 99-113).

and rebirth, and thus inherently incompatible with dichotomous and binary forms of thinking. In her capacity as a contradictory, ambivalent, and constantly transforming, but – precisely for this reason – holistic being, she becomes Anzaldúa's central figure and leitmotif. Representing the search for (sexual) identity, Coatlicue is also closely associated with the above-mentioned Shadow-Beast, whose mark she bears: "*la seña*, the mark of the Beast" (*B/F*, 64). With her concept of the "Coatlicue State" (cf. *B/F*, 63-73), Anzaldúa describes a spiritual journey that involves being devoured by the divine being, a kind of catabasis into one's own subconscious. According to Anzaldúa, this implosion, this inner struggle, is necessary in order to recognize one's own self, to process memories and experiences, and thus to open oneself to new knowledge and transformation.

As noted above, Anzaldúa kept formulating new titles for her manuscript. Through the 1990s, the provisional title was: *Lloronas – Women Who Wail: (Self)Representation and the Production of Writing, Knowledge, and Identity*.[20] La Llorona/Cihuacóatl, the "Serpent Woman"[21] who searches for "the lost parts of herself […], her lost children, *los* Chicanos/*mexicanos*" (*B/F*, 60), had already served as a central figure in *Borderlands* as one of the three aspects attributed to Coatlicue. Yet what sparked Anzaldúa's interest in the figure in connection with her second book went beyond this moment of loss and abandonment. The Llorona is

[20] Other titles were, according to Keating, *Lloronas, mujeres que leen y escriben: Producing Writing, Knowledge, Cultures, and Identities*, and *Lloronas – Writing, Reading, Speaking, Dreaming*. Cf. KEATING, "Editor's Introduction," xiv-xv. In the interview conducted by Karin Ikas, Anzaldúa also gives *La Prieta, The Dark One* as a possible title and states: "I deal with the consequences of *Nepantla* as well as with the *la Llorona* figure in all its chapters." In IKAS, "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa," 237.

[21] Different versions of the legend of the Llorona exist, but the core elements always remain the same: an (Indigenous) woman, betrayed and rejected by her (Spanish) husband, drowns their children in a river and then kills herself. Her ghost, a woman dressed in white, is heard wailing for the children near rivers. Cihuacóatl is considered one of the mythical templates for the figure of the Llorona: according to one version of the myth, she returns again and again to a crossroads where she left behind her son Mixcóatl ("Cloud Serpent") to weep for him. Through her nightly wailing, Cihuacóatl is said to have announced impending wars and also the fall of the Aztec empire. Cf. *B/F*, 55; 57-58; 60, and ALEXANDER, *Latin American*, 75.

a ghostly apparition that stands between the physical and spiritual worlds; she is a shapeshifter and a crosser of borders:

> As myth, the nocturnal site of [Llorona's] ghostly "body" is the place, el lugar, where myth, fantasy, utterance, and reality converge. It is the site of intersection, connection, and cultural transgression. Her "body" is comprised of all four bodies: the physical, psychic […], mythic/symbolic, and ghostly. La Llorona, the ghostly body, carries the nagual possessing la facultad, the capacity for shape-changing and shape-shifting of identity.[22]

Why, then, did Anzaldúa move on from this evocative point of reference? One thing is certain: in the last years of her life, at the beginning of the new millennium, her mindscape was undergoing momentous changes. Both the Llorona and Coatlicue were supplanted by the latter's daughter, Coyolxauhqui; the "Coatlicue State" as an intense inner struggle and transformation process was replaced by the "Coyolxauhqui imperative"; the concept of the borderlands was superseded by that of *nepantla*; and the "New Mestiza" identity by that of the *nepantlera*.[23] Neither are these figures of thought clearly distinguishable, nor do they stand in opposition to each other – rather, they set different emphases, shift the perspective, or expand the scope of meaning. In an interview with AnaLouise Keating published in 2000, Anzaldúa highlighted the need for new metaphors:

> I find people using metaphors such as "Borderlands" in a more limited sense than I had meant it, so to expand on the psychic and emotional borderlands I'm now using "nepantla." With nepantla the connection to the spirit world is more pronounced as is the connection to the world after death, to psychic spaces. It has more spiritual, psychic, super natural, and indigenous resonance.[24]

The term *nepantla* that plays such a prominent role here was first documented in Fray Diego Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España* (1581) and Bernardino de Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* (ca. 1540-1585),

[22] In KEATING, "Editor's Introduction," xv.
[23] Regarding the differences and shifting nuances between the "New Mestiza" and the *nepantlera*, cf. KOEGELER-ABDI, "Shifting Subjectivities."
[24] In *ibid*., xxxiv.

where it appears in several different contexts, always designating a middle or in-between position or time.[25] In the 1960s and 1970s, it was revived by the Mexican anthropologist and historian Miguel León-Portilla, who employed it to refer to the conflicted process of forced acculturation Indigenous people had to endure:

> Las instituciones antiguas habían sido condenadas y heridas de muerte y lo que los frailes imponían continuaba siendo extraño y a veces incomprensible. La consecuencia era hallarse *nepantla*, "en medio". El empeño por inducir cambios había lesionado los propios valores y raíces.[26]

Anzaldúa first introduced her idea of a "state of mental nepantilism" in *Borderlands*. Similar to León-Portilla's reading of the "trauma del *nepantlismo*,"[27] she explains the term as "an Aztec word meaning torn between ways" (*B/F*, 100) and links it to *mestiza* consciousness. In an interview with Karin Ikas that was included from the second edition onwards, Anzaldúa describes *nepantla* as a "space between two bodies of water,[28] the space between two worlds":

> It is a limited space, a space where you are not this or that but where you are changing. You haven't got into the new identity yet and haven't left the old identity behind either – you are in a kind of transition. And that is what *Nepantla* stands for. It is very awkward, uncomfortable and frustrating to be in that *Nepantla* because you are in the midst of transformation. […] *Nepantla* is a way of reading the world. You see behind the veil and you see these scraps.[29]

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[25] Cf. TRONCOSO PÉREZ, "Nepantla," *passim*.
[26] LEÓN-PORTILLA, *Culturas en peligro*, 19. Cf. also TRONCOSO PÉREZ, "Nepantla," 380-384.
[27] *Ibid*, *Culturas en peligro*, 19.
[28] For an exploration of the metaphoric significance of water in the poetics of Gloria Anzaldúa and Natalie Díaz, see Catarina von Wedemeyer's contribution to this themed issue. Cf. WEDEMEYER: "'Entre dos cuerpos de agua'".
[29] In IKAS, "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa," 237. Walter Mignolo took up the concept with the title of an academic journal published between 2000 and 2003 by Duke Univ. Press (*Nepantla: Views from the South*) and commented on it as follows: "*Nepantla* is a Nahuatl word describing the 'in-between situation' in which the Aztecs saw themselves in the sixteenth century, as they were placed in between ancient Aztec wisdom and the ongoing Spanish colonization. […] *Nepantla*

In *Light in the Dark*, the author develops this visual imagery further: in a *nepantla* state, the homogeneous "membranes" that hold cultural categories together are torn apart by the multiple and often opposed forces that affect the subject, the "foreign body," and through the cracks thus created, a view on other truths opens up. In Anzaldúa's thinking, this transitional space, which is also conceived as a bridge, is decidedly intersectional:

> En este lugar entre medio, nepantla, two or more forces clash and are held teetering on the verge of chaos, a state of entreguerras. These tensions between extremes create cracks or tears in the membrane surrounding, protecting, and containing the different cultures and their perspectives. […] Here the watcher on the bridge (nepantla) can "see through" the larger symbolic process that's trying to become conscious through a particular life situation or event. […] Nepantla is a place where we can accept contradiction and paradox. Others who find themselves in this bewildering transitional space may be people caught in the midst of denying their projected/assumed heterosexual identity and coming out, presenting and voicing their queer, lesbian, gay, bi, or transgendered selves. Crossing class lines, especially from working class to middle class-ness and privilege, can be just as bewildering. (*LD*, 56)

This passage is taken from the third chapter, "Border Arte," which begins with a remembered or imagined visit to a museum. Here, the autobiographic narrator reflects on the colonial character of museums and on artistic interventions in the (symbolic) borderlands as processes of rupture, but also as a means "of putting together the fragments and creating a new assemblage." For her, this process is "represented by Coatlicue's daughter, Coyolxauhqui, la diosa de la luna" (*LD*, 49).[30] According to Sahagún's version of the myth, Coyolxauhqui ("Painted with Bells"), the

[…] links the geohistorical with the epistemic with the subjective, knowledge with ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and nationality in power relations. The 'in-between' inscribed in *Nepantla* is not a happy place in the middle, but refers to a general question of knowledge and power. The kind of power relations inscribed in *Nepantla* are the power relations sealing together modernity and what is inherent to it, namely, coloniality." (MIGNOLO, "Introduction," 2)

[30] In the interview with Ikas, Anzaldúa explicitly links *nepantla* and Coyolxauhqui to creativity: "The concept [*nepantla*] is articulated as a process of writing: it is one of the stages of writing, the stage where you have all these ideas, all these

Mexica moon goddess, planned to murder her mother Coatlicue when the latter became pregnant by a feather ball, which Coyolxauhqui and her 400 brothers, the Centzon Huitznahuas ("Four Hundred Southerners"), considered a disgrace. Huitzilopochtli ("Hummingbird of the South"), with whom Coatlicue was pregnant, therefore killed his sister Coyolxauhqui immediately after his birth, dismembered her, and hurled her head into the sky, where it still orbits the earth as the moon. Coyolxauhqui did not come into focus as a symbolic figure, or *antigua*, as Anzaldúa would have put it,[31] until the twenty-first century, and there seem to be at least three reasons for this.

First, Coyolxauhqui's killing at the hands of Huitzilopochtli, who, as we know, goes on to become the patron god of the Mexica, symbolizes the shift from a gynocentric to an androcentric understanding of the world. She is also a potent symbol of the consequences of colonialism: "Decapitated by her brother," Anzaldúa writes, "Coyolxauhqui exemplifies women as conquered bodies. […] First [the dominant culture] took our land (our actual bodies), then our cultures through commercialization, and then our tongues […]" (*LD*, 49).

Second, as already noted, Anzaldúa resumed her work on *Light in the Dark* after the 2001 terror attacks. The very first paragraph of the book's

images, sentences and paragraphs, and where you are trying to make them into one piece, a story, plot or whatever – it is all very chaotic. So you feel like you are living in that mist of chaos. It is also a little bit of an agony you experience. My symbol for that is *Coyolxauhqui*, the moongoddess [sic], who was dismembered by her brother *Huitzilopochtli*. The art of composition, whether you are composing a work of fiction or your life, or whether you are composing reality, always means pulling off fragmented pieces and putting them together into a whole that makes sense." In IKAS, "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa," 237-238. In *Light in the Dark*, she further states: "I am often driven by the impulse to write something down, by the desire and urgency to communicate, to make meaning, to make sense of things, to create myself through this knowledge-producing act. I call this impulse the 'Coyolxauhqui imperative': a struggle to reconstruct oneself and heal the sustos resulting from woundings, traumas, racism, and other acts of violation que hechan pedazos nuestras almas, split us, scatter our energies, and haunt us" (*LD*, 1).

[31] Anzaldúa referred to the cultural figures she drew on for her own theoretical constructs as *antiguas*, in the sense of "somebody who is a greater figure, more of a divine presence." In IKAS, "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa," 241.

opening chapter refers to Coyolxauhqui in an attempt to express the trauma she had experienced:

> The day the towers fell, me sentí como Coyolxauhqui, la luna. Algo me agarró y me sacudió, frightening la sombra (soul) out of my body. I fell in pieces into that pitch-black brooding place. Each violent image of the towers collapsing, transmitted live all over the world then repeated a thousand times on TV, sucked the breath out of me, dissociating me from myself. (*LD*, 9)

For Anzaldúa, the pervasive horror of the collapsing World Trade Center has created a need for new images. The Coyolxauhqui state, the implosion and inner fragmentation triggered by 9/11, has dramatically altered her perspective: "[…] the world doesn't so much stop as it cracks. What cracked is our perception of the world, how we relate to it, how we engage with it. Afterward we view reality differently – we see through its rendijas (holes) to the illusion of consensual reality" (*LD*, 16). In a manner akin to James Hodapp's concept of "lateral solidarities" ("the way Global South subjects recognize one another and view their conditions as shared"[32]), Anzaldúa uses the first chapter of *Light in the Dark* to reflect critically on the war in Afghanistan and on previous U.S. interventions in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In that sense, Coyolxauhqui, "the product of multiple colonizations," as Keating puts it in her introduction to *Light in the Dark*, "also embodies Anzaldúa's desire for epistemological and ontological decolonization."[33]

Third, Anzaldúa's choice of Coyolxauhqui as a key symbolic figure appears to be linked to her precarious state of health. The author had been diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in 1992. At the end of the 1990s and especially in the first years of the new millennium, she was increasingly unwell. Anzaldúa had to finance most of her medication herself, and her lack of financial and social security contributed significantly to the aggravation of her illness. Mounting physical limitations – a literally fragmenting body – combined with phases of debilitating depression greatly affected her work, all the more so because she considered corporeality as essential to her writing process:

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[32] HODAPP, *Graphic Novels and Comics as World Literature*, 6.
[33] KEATING, "Editor's Introduction," xxi.

> For me, writing is a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, a working from the inside out. My feminism is grounded not on incorporeal abstraction but on corporeal realities. The material body is center, and central. The body is the ground of thought. The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it's about being in your body. The body responds physically, emotionally, and intellectually to external and internal stimuli, and writing records, orders, and theorizes about these responses. (*LD*, 5)

Anzaldúa died on May 15, 2004, one month after turning down the PhD title UCSC had offered her in recognition of her previous work.[34] Through her writing between and across borders – characterized by its oscillation between poetic, essayistic, and academic language, by constant code-switching between hybrid linguistic varieties, and by the eloquent rejection of any form of binary thinking – the *nepantlera* Anzaldúa has herself become the bridge, *la puente*, that links systems and traditions of knowledge that extend far beyond the geopolitical border space between Mexico and the U.S.

The Value of Anzaldúa's Concepts for Comics Studies

Anzaldúa's intersectional and decolonial border/body thinking carries considerable interdisciplinary potential. Especially her strongly visually oriented concepts – be it *nepantla* as an in-between space where the subject finds herself amidst the cracks, or be it Coyolxauhqui's dismembered body, which features prominently on *Light in the Dark*'s cover[35] – invite us to examine their applicability to a field of research where image-text relations take center stage, and which has gained increasing attention as an art form that addresses intersectional and decolonial issues: comics

[34] In spring 2004, the director of the graduate program at UCSC's Literature Department, Rob Wilson, informed the already very sick Anzaldúa that she could be awarded a PhD for her previously completed work, an offer she refused on the grounds of academic integrity: "Though going the non-dissertation route would be easier I think it's unfair to other grad students who have to fulfill all the requirements. I also don't want a 'free' ride. But I also feel that the dissertation has to be quality work and I have reservations about pulling it off this quarter." In *ibid*., xviii.

[35] The design by Natalie F. Smith reproduces fragments of the Coyolxauhqui disk found near the ruins of the Templo Mayor in 1978.

studies. Indeed, several efforts in this direction have been undertaken in the recent past.[36]

The relationship between Anzaldúa's theoretical positions and the discipline of comics studies can be understood as reciprocal. Comics can be closely linked to Anzaldúa's concerns on a structural and stylistic level: they are an inherently hybrid artistic medium that is situated between different semiotic systems in which, moreover, interstices, voids, and interfaces are constitutive carriers of meaning. Comics therefore tend to resist hegemonic attempts at classification, as Véronique Sina has astutely observed:

> Mit dem Stigma der *in-betweenness* versehen, stellt der Comic eine grenzüberschreitende Form dar, die sich gängigen, auf hierarchischen Strukturen basierenden Klassifizierungen widersetzt, damit aber gleichzeitig auch das (produktive) Potenzial besitzt, als 'natürlich' geltende binäre Oppositionen – wie z.B. Natur/Kultur, Leiblichkeit/Geistigkeit oder Weiblichkeit/Männlichkeit – ins Wanken zu bringen.[37]

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[36] Cf. JESÚS, "Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness," 77-80; RUTHERFORD, "Visualizing an Alternate Mesoamerican Archive," 169; KAUR, "Community Narrative as a Borderlands Praxis," *passim*; ARAMBURÚ VILLAVISENCIO, "Curations of a *Nepantlera*," *passim*. Melinda L. de Jesús discusses Lynda Barry's autofictional graphic novel *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002) in relation to the "New Mestiza" identity; Guneet Kaur reads Jaime Cortez's graphic novel *Sexile/Sexilio* (2004) about the life of Cuban American transgender and HIV prevention activist Adela Vázquez with an eye to the Anzaldúan concepts of the "Borderlands" and the "New Mestiza consciousness"; Jessica Rutherford and especially Andrea Aramburú Villavisencio focus on the potential of *nepantla* as a liminal in-between space in their analyses of Daniel Parada's *Zotz* comics series (2011-2016) and Inés Estrada's collection *Impatience* (2016), respectively. At the moment of writing this contribution (August 2022), Aramburú Villavisencio's article was still in the process of publication – I am very grateful to the author for providing me with an abstract of her work beforehand.

[37] "Carrying the stigma of in-betweenness, the comic is an art form that crosses borders and resists common classifications based on hierarchical structures, but possesses, for that very reason, the (productive) potential to shake up binary oppositions that are considered 'natural' – such as nature/culture, corporeality/spirituality, or femininity/masculinity" (trans. JW). SINA, *Comic – Film – Gender*, 76. On this issue, cf. also David Carrier, as quoted by Sina: "We expect the world to fit our preconceived stable categories, and so what falls in between is easily felt, depending upon our temperament and politics, to be either exciting or menacing. Hence the fascination with, and fear of, cross-dressing, androgyny,

In comics, the gutter (i.e., the space between two panels) is the site where the cognitive process of connecting two (or more) fragmented images plays out, a process referred to as "closure" that Scott McCloud's paradigmatic study *Understanding Comics* (1993) describes as follows:

> [The] phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. / It's called closure. […] See that space between the panels? That's what comics aficionados have named "the gutter". […] // Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. […] // Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. // If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. / And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements – // then, in a very real sense, comics is closure![38]

Intriguingly, in the first chapter of *Understanding Comics*, McCloud touches upon the crucial role of visual language in Mesoamerican cultures. In particular, he cites the Mixtec *Codex Zouche-Nuttall* as a kind of proto-comic, showing some excerpts of the pictographic screenfold and demonstrating – albeit briefly – the interplay between "words" and "pictures" in the script.[39] Another aspect worth mentioning in this context is the fact that comics are playing an increasingly important role in decolonial and (queer)feminist movements in the Global South. Especially female and non-binary artists in the field are challenging and re-appropriating lines imposed not only by their male peers, but also by colonial and Western art traditions. Imposing lines is a fundamental modus operandi of colonialism,[40] and the idea of "decolonizing the panel" in graphic narratives from the Global South has recently been taken up at international

people of 'mixed-race,' comics, and other forms of in-betweenness." CARRIER, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 71.

[38] MCCLOUD, *Understanding Comics*, 63-67. Transitions from one speech bubble or caption to the next are indicated with a slash (/), and those from one panel to the next with a double slash (//).

[39] *Ibid*., 10-11; cf. WROBEL, "Latin America's *Tinta Femenina*," 37.

[40] Cf. INGOLD, *Lines*, 2-3; WROBEL, "Resisting Imposed Lines," *passim*.

conferences in the UK, India, Germany, and Qatar (2021-2023),[41] as well as in several scholarly publications.[42]

Meanwhile, Anzalduá's methodology of achieving *conocimiento* is itself grounded in the visualization of ideas and feelings:

> Usually I come up with something visual of what I am feeling. So then I have a visual that sometimes is like a bridge, sometimes like a person with fifty legs, one in each world; sometimes *la mano izquierda*, the left-handed world; the *rebollino*, et cetera, and I try to put that into words. So behind this feeling there is this image, this visual, and I have to figure out what the articulation of that image is. That's how I get into the theory.[43]

Especially in *Light in the Dark*, where Anzaldúa – even more than in *Borderlands* – makes the attempt to "talk *with* images/stories" and not *about* them (*LD*, 5), she links this visual dimension with the spiritual and shamanic[44] aspects of her conceptual and theoretical work: "My naguala (daimon or guiding spirit) is an inner sensibility that directs my life – an image, an action, or an internal experience. My imagination and my naguala are connected – they are aspects of the same process, of creativity" (*LD*, 4).

Visuality plays out in at least two ways in Anzaldúa's conceptualization processes. On the one hand, the poetic passages in her writings frequently take the form of visual poetry. While the first poem presented in *Borderlands*, quoted partially in the first section of this essay, meanders across the page, evoking both the flow of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo and

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[41] "Crisis Lines: Coloniality, Modernity, Comics" (City, University of London; 9-10 June 2021); "Decolonising the Panel, Deconstructing the Gutter. Postcolonial Studies in Comics and Graphic Narratives from South Asia" (Indian Institute of Technology Patna, in association with the Postcolonial Studies Association, UK; 25-26 September 2021); "Lateral Solidarities: Visualizing Global South Comics" (Freie Universität Berlin; 2-3 June 2022); "Comics and the Global South: Decolonial Conversations on Comics Studies" (University of Cambridge; 6-7 July 2022); "Drawing the South" (Northwestern University in Qatar; 8 February 2023).

[42] Cf., for example, ALDAMA, *Graphic Indigeneity*, and HODAPP, *Graphic Novels and Comics*.

[43] In IKAS, "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa," 236.

[44] Anzaldúa conceived of *nepantleras* as "[c]hamanas, curanderas, artistas, and spiritual activists, […] liminal people, at the thresholds of form, forever betwixt and between" (*LD*, 31). Cf. also ARAMBURÚ VILLAVISENCIO, "Curations of a *Nepantlera*."

the movement of a snake (cf. *B/LF*, 23-25),[45] her poems dedicated to Coatlicue in the fourth chapter of the essayistic part of *Borderlands* ("protean being"), as well as the short piece titled "Cihuatlyotl, Woman Alone" in the eponymous fourth chapter of the poetry section of *Borderlands* ("*Un Agitado Viento* / Ehécatl, The Wind"), recall the emblematic statue of the deity displayed in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. The gaps – or rather, following Anzaldúa's poetics, *cracks* – between the words make the poems appear porous and fragmented, but simultaneously dynamic and ever-changing (cf. *B/LF*, 63-65; 195). The crack as a visual, structural, and epistemological phenomenon or method appears time and again throughout Anzaldúa's work:

> For example the feeling of not belonging to any culture at all, of being an exile in all the different cultures. You feel like there are all these gaps, these cracks in the world. In that case I would draw a crack in the world. Then I start thinking: "Okay, what does this say about my gender, my race, the discipline of writing, the U.S. society in general and finally about the whole world?" And I start seeing all these cracks, these things that don't fit. […] After having realized all these cracks, I start articulating them and I do this particularly in the theory. I have stories where these women, these *prietas* – they are all *prietas* – actually have access to other worlds through these cracks.[46]

On the other hand, Anzaldúa habitually made use of drawings during her lectures and workshops, mental images that visualized the connections between her ideas and thus her path to *conocimiento*.[47] For Anzaldúa, this process was intimately related to Mesoamerican writing systems:

[45] The poems "White-wing Season" (124-125), "Poets have strange eating habits" (162-163), "Creature of Darkness" (208-209), and "Canción de la diosa de la noche" (218-221) perform similar movements across the page.
[46] In IKAS, "Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa," 236-237.
[47] "I come to knowledge and conocimiento through images and 'stories.' […] I gain frameworks for theorizing everyday experiences by allowing the images to speak to and through me, imagining my ways through the images and following them to their deep cenotes, dialoguing with them, and then translating what I've glimpsed. […] There are two standpoints: perceptual, which has a literal reality; and imaginal, which has a psychic reality" (*LD*, 4).

> More than twelve years ago, I switched from using flow charts during my speaking engagements to using what I call pictograms or rough glifos (pictograms or hieroglyphs), which I sketch on transparencies. The images I place on overhead projectors "contain" or "illustrate" my ideas and theories […]. Recently I learned that the ancient teachers and wise people used the images they painted on accordion-unfolding codices to teach. (*LD*, 60)

Eight such images are included in *Light in the Dark*: "Remolinos," "Naguala, Inner Dweller," "Identity Crisis," "Geography of Self," "Between the Cracks," "Nos/Otras," "Nos/Otras Disrupts," and "El Cenote."[48] The latter motif, in particular, played a very important role in Anzaldúa's (visual) thinking, as the image of sacred wells interconnected by underground waterways mirrored her idea of *nepantla*:

> Via nepantla you tap "el cenote," the archetypal inner stream of consciousness, dream pool or reservoir of unconscious images and feelings stored as iconic imagery. El cenote is a mental network of subterranean rivers of information that converge and well up to the surface, like a sinkhole or an opening to the womb of the Earth. (*LD*, 98)[49]

In the respective "pictogram," Anzaldúa shows a vaguely human-shaped figure moving along what appears to be an underground river. After crossing a "threshold" (the accompanying list of words also refers to it as "fissure," "crack," "Aperture" [sic], "gate," "rajadura," "agujero," "hueco," and "rupture"), the stream of water – and with it the figure – emerges at the cenote, or "pool of images."

Final Reflection: Breena Nuñez's Graphic "AutoHistorietas"

By way of a final reflection, this concluding section examines a comic by the San Francisco-based Latinx artist Breena Nuñez from the vantage

[48] Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptual drawings were on display in an exhibition series titled *Entre palabra e imagen: Galería de pensamiento de Gloria Anzaldúa* in Mexico City (2016), Alicante (2018), and London (2018), as well as in an exhibition titled *A(r)mando Vo(i)ces* in Vienna (2016). Cf. also the chapter "Part Three. Gallery of Images" of *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (KEATING et al., eds., 217-226).
[49] The corresponding "pictogram" titled "El Cenote" is featured on the opposite page (99).

point of Anzaldúa's border/body thinking. Latinx comics, which have become a major field in U.S. comics production at least since the Hernández brothers' *Love and Rockets* series in the 1980s, operate across various cultural/linguistic interfaces and (national) borderlines. As Frederick Luis Aldama has put it in his preface to the anthology *Tales From La Vida: A Latinx Comics Collection* (2018), the conceptions of identities negotiated in and by them "don't fall neatly into individual national spaces, ethnicities, and races,"[50] a statement that holds particularly true for the works of Nuñez, a comics creator with Salvadoran-Guatemalan roots who grew up in the U.S. Her comics address the implications of colonialism, racism, sexism, and queerphobia from an autobiographical perspective, constantly questioning her own affiliations as a Black, non-binary Latinx[51] that she does not find sufficiently represented in mainstream culture:

> I think because I didn't see enough of myself and other types of Central Americans depicted in the mainstream, I ended up drawing myself in my comics just to show up as a character who deals with many experiences that don't often get to be discussed in comics, and it's also been a powerful way for me to connect with other Black folk from different parts of the diaspora. The idea of writing and drawing myself circles back to the need to challenge the stereotypes we face as well as wanting to show folks that Black Central Americans or Afrodescendientes exist, and that I'm not any less proud of being Black, Salvadoran, or Guatemalan. My comics touch on how mestizaje can be harmful to those who are Black or Afrodescendientes because it forces us to negate our identities in order to be able to feel like we are a part of Latinidad.[52]

Based on Anzaldúas concepts of "autohistoria" and "autohistoria-teoría," i.e., a blending of "cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth, and other forms of theorizing" (*LD*, 242), Nuñez's comics could be described as "autohistorietas" (the term *historieta*, "little story," refers to comics in Spanish). The two-page comic strip "They Call

[50] ALDAMA, *Tales from La Vida*, xiii. Note that one of the anthology's sections is titled "Betwixt & Between," an expression also used by Anzaldúa for the characterization of *nepantleras* (cf. *LD*, 31).
[51] Nuñez uses the pronouns she/her and they/them.
[52] In WROBEL/BREITENWISCHER, "Closing the Gap," 258. Cf. also *ibid*., 242-243; 251.

Me Morena... For a Reason" (2018), which is included in the above-mentioned anthology *Tales From La Vida* and which revolves around Nuñez's uncertainty regarding her own cultural heritage, constitutes such an *autohistorieta*. During a coffee break, Nuñez's avatar (hereafter referred to as "Breena") is lost in thought as she blows into her cup. The black liquid it contains turns into a swirling vortex; words and phrases expressive of her inner conflict – "not latinx," "doubt," "you're a phony" – emerge in milky white letters, while a miniature Breena threatens to drown in a maelstrom of insecurity (Fig. 1). This imagery is picked up by the captions: in addition to being torn between different ethno-cultural communities (Central American, Afrolatinx, etc.), Breena questions her entire artistic career.

Fig. 1_Breena is in danger of drowning in her own stream of thought[53]

A key element of Anzaldúa's notion of *nepantla*, the idea of being caught in a vortex (*remolino*) is one of the most frequently recurring images in

[53] NUÑEZ PERALTA, "They Call Me Morena," 20. Whereas this specific comic is published under Nuñez's full family name, she normally employs the author's name "Breena Nuñez," which is also used throughout this text.

Light in the Dark, both in her textual explorations and among her "pictograms":

> In nepantla we realize that realities clash, authority figures of the various groups demand contradictory commitments, and we and others have failed living up to idealized goals. We're caught in remolinos (vortexes), each with different, often contradictory forms of cognition, perspectives, worldviews, belief systems – all occupying the transitional nepantla space […]. (*LD*, 17)

Anzaldúa's conceptual drawing "Remolinos" shows a figure floating face upwards at the equator line; one half of their body protrudes to the (Global) North, the other part to the (Global) South, while two *remolinos* above and below exert a competing pull (cf. *LD*, 18). It is noteworthy that Breena's perilous vortex of thought materializes out of a colonial commodity – coffee – which, with its milky component, can also be read as a reference to Nuñez's *morenidad*, her Brown skin and mixed heritage. The following three panels show Breena raising the coffee cup to her lips, swallowing both her self-doubt and the colonial legacy associated with its content, and then touching her necklace pendant, a Mayan symbol that seems to perform the function of a stabilizing anchor here, as Breena's thoughts subsequently turn to a childhood memory of Lake Atitlán in Guatemala. From her pendant, the focus moves to the Guatemalan landscape around the lake and the surrounding volcanoes, and ultimately to a figure with flowing, curly hair ("wild colochos"), who is identifiable as Breena only through the final caption. In the last panel (Fig. 2), this figure is surrounded by colorful elements, which, according to the caption, are inspired by a *huipil*, a traditional linen garment of Indigenous women in Central America embroidered with elaborate, polychrome motifs. The final panel conveys stability through its harmonious composition: Breena, with eyes closed and a smile on her lips, is depicted in the center; her voluminous hair, which mirrors the shape of the clouds while also referencing her African heritage, undulates evenly to both edges of the panel; the colorful elements, whose shape resembles Mayan characters and the speech bubbles used in comics, form a kaleidoscopic spiral around her face.

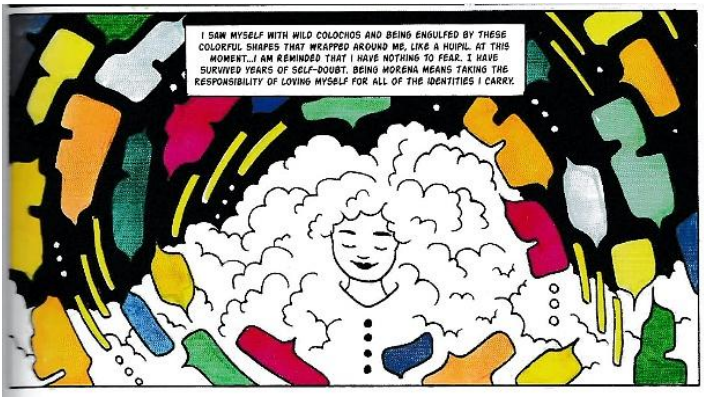

Fig. 2_ Being Morena[54]

The black background, meanwhile, establishes a link to the lake shown in the earlier panel. Named Atitlán – a Nahuatl word meaning "place in the midst of water" – it can be interpreted as an in-between space of healing, a prototypical *nepantla* in Anzaldúa's understanding of the term: "the space between two bodies of water." "Being morena," the final caption concludes, "means taking the responsibility of loving myself for all the identities that I carry."

Nuñez addresses her multiple ethno-cultural belongings in much of her work, for example in a series of comic strips whose title condenses her mixed heritage as "Half and Half: One." This, too, resonates with Anzaldúa's ideas: a section entitled "Half and Half" in the second chapter of *Borderlands* questions gender binarity and states: "But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within" (*B/LF*, 41). Gender queerness is another recurrent topic in Nuñez's comics: in "How Do You Translate Non-Binary?," published on September 28, 2020 in *The Nib*, her avatar stresses the entanglements between gender binarism and colonialism, while educating her therapist, a "cis-hetero lady,"[55] about forms of non-binary belonging in the autochthonous Hawaiian, Zapotec, and Samoan cultures. In analogy to Anzaldúa's shamanic and spiritual reflections on cultural and gender

[54] *Ibid*., 21.
[55] NUÑEZ, "How Do You Translate Non-Binary?," s. p.

identities, Nuñez's avatar quotes from a *Medium* article by Shanna Collins entitled "The Splendor of Gender Non-Conformity in Africa": "Gender identity is 'purely energetic… one who is male can vibrate female energy + vice versa.'"[56] What is particularly interesting about this more discursive comic is the way in which Nuñez's *autodibujo* or self-drawing differs from the earlier example: in this phase of her oeuvre, Nuñez adopted a more round, bubbly drawing style,[57] which is congenial to her project of challenging gender binarism – her avatar's "body image" is not readable as either "male" or "female."

As I hope to have shown with this brief glimpse into Breena Nuñez's work, Gloria Anzaldúa's visually informed concepts have much to offer to the study of comics, which – due to their multimodal language and their positioning between different semiotic systems – themselves exhibit a great potential to function as artistic *nepantlas*, as spaces of ongoing negotiation where the author's multiple belongings are visualized without entering into conflict or competition with each other. In this sense, *nepantleras* like Nuñez bring together different belongings in their artistic space, and, in doing so, help to widen the emerging cracks in the armor of heteronormativity and White supremacy.

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[56] *Ibid*. Cf. also COLLINS, "The Splendor of Gender Non-Conformity in Africa," s. p.
[57] Cf. also WROBEL/BREITENWISCHER, "Closing the Gap," 258.

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