



“A Tolerance for Ambiguities” – Writing and Belonging with
Gloria Anzaldúa

Honoring the 35th Anniversary of *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*

Marília Jöhnk (Frankfurt/Main)
Elena von Ohlen (Duisburg-Essen)

HeLix 19 (2025), p. 1-8. doi: 10.11588/helix.2025.2.112149

“A Tolerance for Ambiguities” – Writing and Belonging with Gloria Anzaldúa

Honoring the 35th Anniversary of *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*

Marflia Jöhnk (Frankfurt/Main)
Elena von Ohlen (Duisburg-Essen)

Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) was a writer and academic who received neither the financial nor the symbolic support she merited during her lifetime. As a self-employed writer who in her fifties started to suffer from diabetes, she never experienced the safety net a tenure-track position might offer, and she constantly struggled with financial issues and exclusion.¹ Since we are celebrating the work of Anzaldúa within the academic system, we should be aware of this struggle and keep in mind that while she kept close to the university system, she was also very critical of it.² Anzaldúa paid a price for her intellectual freedom. Beginning in 1977, when she decided to temporarily leave her PhD project, she “prioritized the writing over all else”.³ The way Anzaldúa wrote – the code-switching,

¹ On the life of Anzaldúa, cf. “Risking the Personal, Redux”, a chapter in KEATING, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, 15-45, especially 35-36. This is one of the most recent publications on Anzaldúa. The precarious situation of Anzaldúa is also portrayed by Jasmin Wrobel in her contribution to the present dossier. Cf. BACK, CAMILLE: “To(o) Queer the Writer’. Contributions et effacement de Gloria Anzaldúa lors de l’émergence de la théorie queer”, 324-325.

² Cf. ANZALDÚA, “On the Process of Writing *Borderlands/La Frontera*”, 192, 194. Cf. KEATING, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, 29-30, 36, 233. Keating refers to texts that can be found in the Gloria Anzaldúa archive and that allow for the further development of this subject.

³ KEATING, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, 24. Cf. ANZALDÚA, “On the Process of Writing *Borderlands/La Frontera*”, 189.

the mixture of different registers, the eclectic nature of citations and references – is intrinsically linked to the topic of *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. The way Anzaldúa wrote was a conscious choice and the only way that could allow her to remain faithful to her heritage:

So I had a problem because I wanted to produce artworks, to produce knowledge, but I was from a campesina-working class, a woman from a racial minority who's a lesbian. And I wanted to do it *my way*, using my approach, my language. [...] I wanted to write in a mestiza style, in my own vernacular, yet also use the knowledges and histories of the white cultures, of other ethnic cultures. I wanted to be able to deal with certain theories, to be able to philosophize. [...] Most people can't get away with doing all of this – they may not have the faith or the stubbornness or their jobs are up for review or tenure or in other ways they're threatened. There may not be a market for their writing, or if the market is there they may not be able to get one foot in the door. Art and literature are exclusive.⁴

Over thirty-five years ago, Gloria Anzaldúa published *Borderlands* – her most iconic work. The present dossier does not only want to remember and celebrate this work's anniversary; it also seeks to contribute to the ongoing dissemination of the work of Anzaldúa, which, as was recently stated by one of the most important scholars of her oeuvre, AnaLouise Keating, remains (too) little known.⁵ But can we really celebrate it, given that the subject this book touches on represents a serious, existential, and painful dimension of belonging and experience? The place in between that Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands* is not joyful, as the author herself tells us in one of its first sentences: "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds." (B/F, 25)⁶ This agonizing dimension is very present in Anzaldúa's writing. Pain, obstacles, challenges – the processes of belonging and writing

⁴ *Ibid.*, 188-189.

⁵ Cf. KEATING, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, 3-4.

⁶ On the painful dimension of *nepantla*, cf. KEATING, *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, 157. Cf. another recent contribution, which is by RADLWIMMER, *Gloria Anzaldúa's Hemispheric Performativity*, 42: "[...] *Borderlands* does not romantically celebrate mobility, but enacts painful struggles for transformation [...]."

were never thought of as easy topics.⁷ In one of the subtitles of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa proclaimed “A Tolerance For Ambiguity” (B/F, 101), which gave the present introduction its title and which has many dimensions: ambiguity in the sense of queerness, of linguistic diversity, and of plural belonging, among others. We chose this subtitle as the title for our introduction because it encompasses the many ways in which Anzaldúa envisions belonging. There are certainly more: while the present dossier covers many facets and aspects, we do not touch upon ableism, for instance, and we should keep in mind that Anzaldúa herself struggled with health issues and reflected on them in her writing (cf. “Disability & Identity”).

One of the most fascinating aspects of Anzaldúa’s work is the way she wrote – between an academic style and poetry, mixing not only literary and academic genres, but also languages and registers. *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, the work we are honoring with the present publication, is characterized by a diversity of literary citations, from the American Yiddish writer Irena Klepfisz to the Ranchera group *Los Tigres del Norte*. This eclectic, transgressive character is important for the present dossier, which is a product of a digital study day organized by Susanne Zepp (Duisburg-Essen) and Mariana Simoni (Free University Berlin) in February 2022, amid the pandemic. The fact that the presentations came from diverse academic fields and backgrounds is consistent with the writing of Anzaldúa, which is situated between the fields of literary theory, activism, literature, Hispanic and Chicano studies, comparative literature, decolonial studies, and more. This dimension is also reflected in the different contributions, which deal with issues ranging from present struggles and activism against *feminicidios* to theoretical reflections on belonging and performance art. **Sara Ibáñez O’Donnell**, for instance, interprets contemporary feminist movements by drawing on the work of Anzaldúa. She discusses two diasporic movements located in Europe, *Mexicanas contra la violencia* in London and *Sor Juanas* in Berlin. Based on her fieldwork and multiple interviews with activists, she reconstructs

⁷ Anzaldúa shares this with other theoreticians of migration, such as Vilém Flusser: “Denn die Migration ist zwar eine schöpferische Tätigkeit, aber sie ist auch ein Leiden.” [“Migration is a creative act, but it also means suffering”, our translation] (FLUSSER, “Wohnung beziehen in der Heimatlosigkeit”, 17).

the emergence of a ‘mestiza consciousness’, just as Anzaldúa envisioned it, in the movements against *feminicidios*.

Most contributions are situated in the field of cultural and literary studies, where the reception of Anzaldúa flourishes most. **Catarina von Wedemeyer**, for instance, compares the decolonial dimension of *Borderlands* with the work of the contemporary poet Natalie Díaz, who recently published her *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Von Wedemeyer’s reading centers the metaphor of water as a means of emphasizing plural belonging and the importance of the body for writing, themes that are present not only in Díaz and Anzaldúa, but also in the writings of Hélène Cixous. Very important for this article is Anzaldúa’s concept of *nepantla*, which is also at the heart of the article by **Jasmin Wrobel**. In her contribution, she reflects on the potential of Anzaldúa’s border and body thinking, and specifically its visual dimension, for comics studies. **Minerva Peinador** also interprets Anzaldúa’s work through the methodology of comparison. This methodology, which is evident in the dossier’s discussion of Díaz, Cixous, and María Lugones (cf. the article by von Wedemeyer), or of the Latinx artist Breena Nuñez, who Wrobel thinks about in relation to Anzaldúa, is also present in Peinador’s contribution. Peinador discusses another contemporary writer whose texts dialogue with those of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, namely the Peruvian author Gabriela Wiener (specifically her work *Huaco retrato*). The contribution of Peinador compares the two authors according to the decolonial dimension of their writing, the genres to which they relate, the place of enunciation, and narrative strategies, which in the last part of the article are analyzed in the context of agency and the importance of memory. The dialogical dimension of writing, which was so important for Anzaldúa, therefore becomes especially palpable in these three contributions that establish intertextual connections to other writers.

The communitarian aspect of writing is reflected on in **Elena von Ohlen’s** and **Marília Jöhnk’s** article on “Las comadres de Gloria Anzaldúa”, which revolves around themes of community and queer reading and the rewriting of mythological figures such as Coatlicue and Yemoyá. In choosing the term ‘comadre’, we draw on Anzaldúa’s own designation for the artists and colleagues with whom she regularly met and discussed her writing.

The key terms of the present introduction are 'belonging', 'writing', and 'ambiguity'. 'Belonging' (or rather 'becoming') and 'ambiguity' are also at the center of **Esra Akkaya**'s article on Anzaldúa, which dialogues with many other articles. Her contribution is dedicated to one chapter of *Borderlands*, "Más antes en los ranchos", which is interpreted through the concept of 'palimpsest' and becoming (*devenir* in Deleuze and Guattari's sense). The metaphor of palimpsest helps us to understand how historical experience (conceived as different layers of time) and intersectional experience (class, gender, race) are constructed in *Borderlands*.

All contributions comment on the relevance of Anzaldúa's work for current political and/or artistic debates. The political dimension is especially explored by O'Donnell's analysis of diasporic feminist movements against *feminicidios*, and by **Camilo Espinosa-Díaz**, whose article argues that Anzaldúa should be included amongst political theorists such as Johan Galtung, Gayatri Spivak, and John Paul Lederach. Concentrating on the key elements of violence, peace, power, and identity, the contribution shows how Anzaldúa's conception of the 'border' offers potential for political theory, and this indicates how programs beyond those of women's and gender studies and literary and cultural studies should receive Anzaldúa's work.

The political implications are also crucial for the connection between decoloniality and Anzaldúa, as Peinador, von Wedemeyer, and Wrobel explore. The latter analyzes Anzaldúa's contribution to comics studies and therefore relates to new (or not entirely new) media formats that increasingly attract critical attention. And when dealing with allegedly established subjects (such as queer theory, the rewriting of mythology, and theories of reading), the inclusion of Anzaldúa can shed new light upon them (von Ohlen & Jöhnk), as they remain of utmost importance in every introduction to literary studies – no matter which philology – and literary theory: we suggest nothing less than placing Gloria Anzaldúa next to Wolfgang Iser and Roland Barthes on reading lists. The present dossier is by no means comprehensive. Its goal lies in fostering interest in Gloria Anzaldúa scholarship and further disseminating her thoughts into different academic disciplines, both for research and for teaching.

We extend our warmest thanks to Susanne Zepp and Mariana Simoni for their organization of the "Digital Study Day honoring the 35th Anniversary of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*" in February 2022,

their inspiration to study and read Gloria Anzaldúa, and their ongoing support in editing the present dossier. Anzaldúa published *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* with Aunt Lute, a subversive publishing house engaged with feminist discourse. For the publication of the fruits of our discussion, we chose a place that is consistent with the work of Anzaldúa, namely the open access journal *HeLix*, organized by German scholars as part of their academic work and therefore non-profit. Our thanks extend to all the journal's editors for their patient, competent, professional, and generous support, and for the opportunity to publish a multilingual edition. Nothing would have been further from Anzaldúa's thinking than a monolingual anthology.

The present dossier revolves around the best-known work of Anzaldúa, but many of the volume's contributions center on unexplored texts. In this way, we hope that the volume also sheds light on Anzaldúa's lesser-known essays, which contain important insights and deserve their place in academic discourse. We consider the present dossier itself a manifesto for tolerating and celebrating ambiguities, over thirty-five years after Anzaldúa showed us her struggles, but also her vision and hope for the future. We therefore dedicate this dossier to all participants and to all readers of Gloria Anzaldúa.

Elena von Ohlen & Marília Jöhnk
Essen and Frankfurt/Main, August 2023

Bibliography

ANZALDÚA, GLORIA: *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, 4. ed., San Francisco: Aunt Lute 2012.

— “Disability & Identity”, ANALOUISE KEATING (ed.): *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2009, 298-302.

— “On the Process of Writing *Borderlands/La Frontera*”, ANALOUISE KEATING (ed.): *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2009, 187-197.

BACK, CAMILLE: ‘*To(o) Queer the Writer*’. *Contributions et effacement de Gloria Anzaldúa lors de l'émergence de la théorie queer. Etudes sur le genre*, Paris: Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle 2022.

FLUSSER, VILÉM: „Wohnung beziehen in der Heimatlosigkeit”, *Von der Freiheit des Migranten. Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus*, Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt 2007, 15-30.

KEATING, ANALOUISE: *The Anzaldúan Theory Handbook*, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2022.

RADLWIMMER, ROMANA: *Gloria Anzaldúa's Hemispheric Performativity: Pieces, Shuffles, Layer*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2023.