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**CAN YOU SEE ME? RE-CENTERING BIRACIAL VOICES THROUGH CHICANA
INTERVENTION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

A Thesis
Presented to
The Academic Faculty

By

Andrea Putala

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
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HOLD FOR CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Abstract

Can You See Me? Re-Centering Biracial Voices through Chicana Intervention in Children's Literature offers critical reflection on an applied research project: the writing of a children's book that interrogates how introducing a complex theoretical concept would take form. Children's media introduced in the home and the school are some of the biggest influences when it comes to identity and societal expectations. Unfortunately for students who are bi or multiracial, there has been a lot of erasure of their voices and experiences that do not help cultivate positive identity formations. Chicana feminists situated their voices, histories, and experiences within their scholarship and activism. Using autoethnography to center my own experience and introducing a complex concept to children of upper elementary age to engage with their formation of identity. It is the concept Gloria Anzaldúa expanded upon that helped change many courses of disciplinary thought. She traced her conception and shifts of new *mestiza* and *nepantla* through her body of work that culminated in the posthumous publication of *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. With the concept of *nepantla* being understood as existing within the liminal spaces or the inbetween, relating these concepts to children through the medium of literature and introducing such abstract concepts to elementary age children will help build a community of confidence and empathy with regards to how important autoethnography and positionality can be to children's literature.

Introduction

There is a moment when a brown or black child sits in a classroom and surveys the room. This structure is often different than their surroundings at home. They see the teacher who is educating in a milieu with children from different backgrounds. Their fellow students may congregate in several different small groups. They may read test questions that mirror certain students' lives. There are books available to borrow with characters who are mighty, royalty, an adventurer, or trying to learn a new skill. Every day they learn the innate and oppressive rules of their places and spaces where they belong. They do not see themselves fighting dragons in fairytales; they are designated as the problem student; and they are often an afterthought in school curriculum.¹ This was and still remains a large part of children's lives, but it has changed in certain ways since the world began battling and adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is where this project came to fruition. Reading with my child every day as a part of her schooling, we went through many different types of stories. A question was asked that I wasn't prepared for and I certainly didn't have an answer. My seven-year-old asked, "Mommy, why aren't there any stories that have girls that look like you or me?"

Books are where children and sometimes adults learn about societal expectations. From infancy they read books on sharing, sleeping, and colors. From elementary school they learn about princes rescuing princesses, animal habitats, and funny stories about friendship. In middle school they graduate to literary choices that introduce romantic relationships or problems that stem from home. In high school, students are introduced to *Romeo and Juliet* and books about

¹ "Moreover, zero tolerance policies not only contribute to the disparity of school-related discipline for African-American and Latino students but these students are also more likely than their white peers to be referred to the juvenile justice system, regardless of the demographics of the school's enrollment."

"With automatic suspensions, expulsions, and juvenile justice referrals, educational achievement is at risk because of missed academic time." David Mitchell "Zero Tolerance Policies"

vampiric love, mythology, and maybe even Middle Earth. When a student goes to college, depending on their chosen degree path, they are introduced to books about racial identity, sexuality, racism, gender, and histories that are not often taught in K-12 classrooms. This was just a bit of my experience growing up as a child who would get lost in pages of books and situated myself within the margins where often the characters of color, who were often just of one ethnic background, were mere secondary or background characters. Children are taught from an early age the places and spaces they are allowed to traverse. Instead of being introduced to a variety of characters from different ethnic, social class, or sexual identities, they are often left with trying to find themselves in stories centering heterosexual white male protagonists, where they are never the main character.

The concept of *nepantla* is certainly not entirely obscure, but it is one that is not incredibly mainstream outside of Chicana feminist theory, queer theory, and Latino/a studies. The concept was introduced by Gloria Anzaldúa in her seminal text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and expanded upon in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. The word comes from the Nahuatl language and denotes being in the middle. Anzaldúa expands upon this to include the idea of Chicanas living in these liminal spaces, these spaces in the inbetween, where their identities are constantly in flux. There is a constant transformation occurring due to traversing borders not fixed by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, economic status, or sexuality. Often being sidelined and silenced within the academy and professional institutions, it was often left to women of color to create their own spaces for activism and scholarship. It is in *nepantla* that many individuals have carved out spaces of their own and allowed themselves the freedom of belonging nowhere and everywhere all at once. Anzaldúa painstakingly took up a path with many other Chicana theorists where the self and

their perspective and identity are essential to their scholarly work. It was through the use of their positionality in their work where they could create and mold the center that autoethnography gave a foundation for *nepantla*. Autoethnography has become an indispensable tool in the arsenal of Chicana feminists. With this in mind, it has never been more imperative to introduce these kinds of life-altering concepts, like *nepantla*, to children to help them gain confidence in who they are and to develop empathy for those who are different. *Nepantla* started out as a concept for Chicanas but has evolved to include those who live within the margins. Latinx children are still severely underrepresented in mainstream media. Books written in Spanish are scarcely provided in libraries and those that are bilingual still keep English as the main language of the book. Hoping to intervene and be a part of the change, I explore the concepts of *nepantla*, Anzaldúa's legacy, and autoethnography in this project. As a direct result of this research, I situate myself into a storybook for intermediate elementary age children introducing what it means to be a *nepantlera* and using my own story as inspiration as an intervention in the erasure of biracial and multiracial stories that are imperative to identity formation.

The storybook will adhere to an anti-racist and inclusive structure. As most storybooks that are bilingual have the English language at the forefront in larger typeface and above the second language, in *Lupe*, the Spanish language will come first. It will also be illustrated being inspired by modern and contemporary Latinx art that signifies the Chicana heritage this story holds. The story is titled *Lupe* and is inspired by my own personal experiences as a biracial child growing up in the South and the name is a traditional one from my family and is my own mother's nickname. The inspiration for Gloria Anzaldúa as a spirit guide comes from learning about her journey as an adult, but it will be formatted for a child's understanding. The concept of *nepantla* and *nepantleras* are deconstructed for children in fourth and fifth grade to be able to

understand and grasp as they are coming upon a critical age where their questions of who they are becomes a more central theme in their lives. As this is not just for children, I also created a parent and/or teacher guide that will help with the probative and sensitive questions that can arise from teaching a story that deals with racial or ethnic heritage and identity and more centrally the concept of *nepantla*. The online module will provide the meaning of nepantla, how to introduce abstract concepts to elementary age children, creating an inclusive classroom or home, adding social justice to school curriculums, and an inclusive children's literature list is also included.

Literature Review

Identity, Representation, and Childhood Formation of Identity

Racial and ethnic identity has become one of the more controversial topics of the last few decades. For children of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds, this can further create stigma and exclusion as society often forces them to choose one identity to categorize themselves in the current U.S. racial order.² Researchers urge that race is a human social construct as Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue to understand, "race as an unstable and "decentered" complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political trouble,"³ designed to keep people of color at the bottom while continually perpetuating white hegemonic power not only in the United States but globally . A study on ethnic-racial development (ERI) found:

Early developmental theories, conceptualizations, and measures of identity centered White (western, male, heterosexual, Christian, middleclass, educated) as the benchmark

² Christine Kerwin, "Racial Identity in Biracial Children."

³ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Racial Formation."

of success and therefore assumed (and continue to do so), at its core, that whiteness was not only normal but also superior.⁴

In *Inequality, Power, and School Success: Case Studies on Racial Disparity and Opportunity in Education*, the writers historically found:

The transparency of race varies considerably and manifests in various contexts from willful acts of hatred (race-based aggressions) to deliberate exclusion of race (colorblindness). Discussions of race, however, venture beyond actions or policy practices reflecting racial discrimination. Instinctively, students and teachers use race to read the world and make decisions on how to act (Lewis 2003). Race never stays static and continuously functions in a dynamic way.⁵

Conchas and Gottfried found that schools were complicit in the perpetuation of racialized teaching and continued the racist practices of exclusion when it came to privileges given to the students of different races and ethnicities. It is within these public structural institutions that individuals develop the concept of race that informs them of their place in the world. Moreover, biracial and multiracial identity has often been overlooked or completely erased as Francis Wardle (1987) found the existence of a “culturally accepted notion that the interracial child must select the identity of one parent, usually the parent of color”⁶ as perpetuated by professionals who resisted the interest in learning about this specific group of children. These overlooked spaces of identity often come with aggression, exclusion, and violence at the expense of marginalized communities. Those who happen to have more than one racial or ethnic background often don’t claim or identify with that part of their heritage that belongs to marginalized communities in an attempt to destigmatize their identity. Ronald Ferguson writes, “Multiracial people have been categorized as monoracial, thus creating limitations to their

⁴ Leoandra Onnie Rogers et al., “Persistent Concerns.”

⁵ Gilberto Conchas and Michael Gottfried, *Inequality, Power and School Success.*”

⁶ Francis Wardle, “Are You Sensitive.”

identity development...The need for continuous inquiry of racial identity formation is evident in the seemingly paradoxical relationship society has with race. We live in a world that, in one dimension, sees race as a social construct, and in another, as something that is biologically significant.”⁷ As biracial and multiracial peoples continue to navigate the societal expectations regarding race and ethnic identity, they must often choose the path of least resistance which coincidentally is the safest which is something taught in adolescence as found by H. T. Wang and fellow researchers, “Parents of color often employ culturally informed, ecologically adaptive socialization practices that equip their children with tools to buttress their ability to contend with racial/ethnic marginalization.”⁸ Children of color learn to navigate the world quite early in life from watching the adults that surround them and their negotiations within and outside of societal functions. Studies in psychology have found that adults are innately in tune with the demarcations of racial lines, as Yarrow Dunham succinctly summarizes in *The Development of Race-Based Perceptual Categorization: Skin Color Dominates Early Category Judgments*:

For example, adults automatically encode race categories during incidental viewing (Fiske, Haslam, & Fiske, 1991), and incidental or even subliminal exposure to racial outgroups is sufficient to activate racial prejudice and stereotypes (e.g. Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton & Williams, 1995), especially when the faces used as stimuli are racially prototypical in terms of skin color and facial features (Blair 2006). In addition, adults rapidly and flexibly categorize faces by race, with categorization decisions influenced by skin color as well as other aspects of facial physiognomy such as nose shape, lip fullness, hair texture, hair quality (Blair & Judd, 2011) and jaw width (Strom et al., 2012).⁹

Often times, the school and corresponding activities become the biggest societal function that multiracial children learn to negotiate and becomes the place that ultimately becomes the largest

⁷ Ronald Ferguson, “Mixed Feelings”, 30.

⁸ Wang et. al, “Parental Ethnic-Racial Socialization Practices.”

⁹Dunham et. al, “The Development of Race-Based Perceptual.”

part of what influences their identity formation. Recognizing that children often formulate opinions and judgments based on how they see their parents and other authority figures, race and ethnicity categories often leads to alienation and isolation for children of color, and even more so for children who hold multiple racial and/or ethnic identities.

In an increasingly racialized society, children learn to navigate and traverse societal expectations from their home life and their school setting. Despite this growing number of students, research related to the schooling of multiracial children is still scant.¹⁰ Phinney and Rotheram (1987) used a model of four themes that detailed the understanding of children's socialization including ethnic differences, age, ethnic socialization, and the role of ethnicity in development.¹¹ This formation comes at the expense of self-esteem and confidence for children of color who identify as more than one race or ethnicity. Looking at the development of identity with biracial youth, Roger D. Herring stipulated in the problems he found among biracial children and their formation of identities, "Biracial children are particularly vulnerable to differential treatments by their parents and relatives, social rejection by their peers, and ambivalent attention in their schools and communities." Herring identified more ways in which these children must navigate their identity:

First, these biracial youth must integrate dual racial or cultural identifications (or both) while also learning how to develop a positive self-concept and sense of competence. Second, as they prepare to enter adolescence, biracial children must synthesize their earlier identifications into a consistent personal identity as well as a positive racial identity. In accomplishing this task, they must be prepared to deal effectively with the related tasks of developing peer relationships, defining their sexual orientation and sexual

¹⁰ Williams, "Black-White Biracial Students in American Schools."

¹¹ Phinney, J. S., & Rotheram, M. J. (1987). *Children's ethnic socialization: Pluralism and development*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. "...(a) Ethnic group differences have a significant impact on development; (b) the impact of ethnicity varies with age; (c) ethnic socialization has variant implications depending on the child's specific ethnic group; and (d) the role of ethnicity in development is affected by the immediate environment as well as the historical and sociocultural context. The existence of a dual racial identity and a dual cultural heritage compounds the normal ethnic socialization problems for biracial children."

preference, making a career choice, and separating from their parents, all of which may be problematic for this group.¹² (1992)

As identity becomes a forefront conversation within national and transnational conversations, representation is a vital part of children recognizing themselves as well as recognizing other children's identities to foster environments that are inclusive of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Representation in any form is a crucial part of identity development. Representation on screen and in literature have been at the forefront of conversations about the importance of young children seeing characters that look like them and with whom they can identify with as technology has become a staple in classrooms and internet connections becoming a necessity in the home. Ethnic and racial identity development happens within popular media and within the classroom where, as Christina Brown claims in an article for *Social Development*, "children's interactions with their peers and teachers can shape how they view themselves."¹³ Literature is the largest form of media involved in young children within educational curriculums where children gain exposure to new cultures and see themselves represented within storylines. Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) concept behind windows and mirrors highlights the importance of exposing young readers to multiple representations of identities and experiences in order to develop their ability to participate compassionately in a multicultural society and to provide authentic reflections so children recognize themselves as valued members of society.¹⁴ As children whose identities intersect across race, class, and gender, specifically for Latinx children, authentic representations create a space of inclusivity and positively reinforce multicultural and

¹² Roger D. Herring, "Biracial Children."

¹³ Brown, "School Context."

¹⁴ Rodriguez, Braden, "Representation of Latinx Immigrants."

diverse conversations. The recognition that promoting the innate need for representation of children with multiple identity layers is imperative to positive identity formation.

For Latinx children, they often find books generally denoted for them in the Spanish language. Occasionally they can find bilingual books with English always being the larger text that comes before the Spanish text. In storybooks, Latinx characters are often relegated to side and background characters in the books in which they appear. Stories are rarely centered around Latinx characters and the struggles that are unique to Latinx communities. In 2019, the Cooperative Children's Book Center found that only 5.3% of books published were about Latinx characters.¹⁵ Moreover, Latinx stories written in English, with typeface bigger and bolder, often, Donna Gilton claims, “use the theme of borders in their literature, referring to those they navigate between countries, languages, and cultures.”¹⁶ Explicitly placing emphasis on the theme of borders in Latinx children's literature, Latinx and multiracial children, along with their white classmates, are introduced to how issues such as race, immigration, class, and gender impact Latinx communities. These ideas centered around characters who have to navigate such existential journeys of identity fluctuation as children who herald from a multicultural background give prominence to these informative stories. Donna Norton lists her reasons for the value and importance of diverse selections of stories and authors, representing multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds in classrooms. Norton emphasizes the importance of children seeing their cultural heritage displayed authentically in order to take pride in their cultural heritage, which improves their view of themselves. Children exposed to other cultures, she explains, learn empathy for different communities, learn to respect their differences and similarities, and allow

¹⁵ “The Numbers Are In: 2019 CCBC Diversity Statistics,” Cooperative Children's Book Center, September 3, 2020, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/the-numbers-are-in-2019-ccbc-diversity-statistics/>.

¹⁶ Gilton. *Multicultural and Ethnic Children's Literature*.”

students to be a part of conversations about changes in society.¹⁷ Recognizing the benefits for multiracial children and introducing entire classrooms to concepts, ideas, and voices that do not match their own creates an environment that fosters empathy, understanding, and cultural tolerance, which children may not learn anywhere else. The introduction of diverse voices is critical to the understanding of the stories being told. As Ruth Oswald argues in *Multicultural Literature and Response: Affirming Diverse Voices: Affirming Diverse Voices*, “[g]etting to know the author through author studies frames and solidifies the authenticity of the story,”¹⁸ with children finding a center that is not relegated to the margins.

When teachers incorporate the voices and lives of children of color and multiracial children into the curriculum, it can hold infinite amounts of benefits for students, especially children’s literature, allows for children to be seen, heard, and understood. Children, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, are a part of cultural groups, partake in traditions, and have histories deserving to be seen and heard. Representation of biracial or multiracial characters in stories introduced to young children, as well as the voices and concepts that are integral to those specific communities, will allow children to see themselves as a whole rather than a diminutive category standing on the fringes of society.

II. Autoethnography, Chicana Feminism, and Gloria Anzaldúa

Autoethnography is a powerful methodological tool that has allowed voices from the margins to situate themselves, their voices, and their stories into scholarship to further magnify issues that plague marginalized identities. As activist scholars, they have worked for decades for more inclusive stories that are representative of a myriad of identities. They have used the power

¹⁷ Norton, 2003, p.457.

¹⁸ Oswald, “*Multicultural Literature and Response.*”

of inserting personal experience into essays, books, documents, and speeches to allow for those who are underrepresented and marginalized to articulate their own narratives. As these writers use their childhood and young adult experiences to situate their activist work, they speak to others who are forming their identities based on experiences at home and within the classroom. The introduction of voices from different backgrounds allows for writers and students to see themselves in a broader perspective and for students to learn about cultures, traditions, and identities that do not match their own – thereby subverting institutional racism by broadening perspectives at an impressionable age rather than as an adult. While identity is being formed, representation in the form of stories and voices that are grounded in autoethnographic activism create and relay positions central to those authentic storied experiences of marginalized groups which in turn creates prominence for their stories being centered. This creates healthy discourses for children and adults when representation becomes crucial for identity formation or recovery.

Autoethnography is a resilient form of activism and oftentimes considered contentious. It allows activist scholars the chance to combine and interweave personal experience with scholarly conversations on topics that matter to them and their communities. L. Lazard and J. McAvoy found, “Autoethnography is also reflexive and its main beneficial qualities are in education, as it facilitates our questioning and moves us beyond our own taken-for-granted assumptions and sense-making of the social world, both professionally and personally,”¹⁹ articulating how important how this method is imperative to teaching young children. It is an accessible method that has been taken up by peoples in marginalized groups to reclaim a sense of space and validate their experiences. Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe argue that “autoethnography is a powerful

¹⁹ Lazard, “What’s the point? What’s the practice?”

method for working with topics of diversity and identity. Autoethnography is predicated on the ability to invite readers into the lived experience of a presumed ‘Other’ and to experience it viscerally” (2013).²⁰ Likewise, Carolyn Ellis argues that “[a]utoethnography is a research method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political,” (2002).²¹ Beginning in the 1970s, writing about the self became popularized by Karl Heider when he asked school children about themselves and their own community. It was their responses he coined *autoethnography*.²² In 1979, David Hayano was the first to put the term in print²³ while adding an anthropologist’s eye to the methodology and distinguishing between “auto-ethnography and self-ethnography.”²⁴ Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis envisioned their concept of autoethnography differently from Heider and Hayano, describing it thus:

... a transgressive research practice that challenged, resisted, or extended the boundaries of conventional ethnographic writing practices. Nor did they conceive of auto-ethnography as a critical response to disquieting concerns about silent authorship, the need for researcher reflexivity, or as a humanizing, moral, aesthetic, emotion-centered, political, and personal form of representation.²⁵

As Ellis became a powerhouse figure within the world of autoethnography, her definition of the methodology also evolved over time. In *Autoethnography*, a book Ellis cowrote with Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones, various characteristics are included in their definition for autoethnography. They theorized autoethnography as using a “deep and careful self-reflection – typically referred to as “reflexivity” – to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political” and which, moreover,

²⁰ Boylorn and Orbe, 2013

²¹ Ellis, C., “Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography”

²² Heider, “What do people do?”

²³ Hayano, “Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects.”

²⁴ Hayano, “Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects.”

²⁵ Bochner and Ellis, “Evocative Autoethnography,” 47.

“[s]trives for social justice and to make life better.”²⁶ It is within these approaches that Chicana writers centered their positionality as a touchstone for the activism that occurred in their writings, which were often very personal and political. In her study of Chicanas prioritizing autoethnography as their methodological tool, Minerva Chavez writes “a research methodology for the marginalized is the principle that hegemonic forms of ideology are not to be taken lightly” and autoethnographic research “calls attention to how dominant forms of assimilationist ideology function within educational institutions in shaping students’ behaviors in schools” (2012).²⁷ It is with this thought in mind that Chicana feminists have used the power of their own voices in scholarship and in literature and use autoethnography as an activist methodology. It is the insistence that autoethnography is essential to validating not only the experiences of Chicanas, but also recovering voices that have been lost due to white and heteropatriarchal power structures.

Often and most notably, Chicana feminists used this method as a driving force guiding their writings about their histories, communities, the changes they wanted, and their ideas of the future. A person’s positionality, which is their personal experience, traditions, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, racial, and ethnic standing, is unique to each individual. To understand someone’s particular position, one must read about it first. Therefore, autoethnography is a critical component of scholarly research that allows readers to enter into a space that they do not know and have not known. These writers are opening a door allowing stories to be woven into research. It is a two-fold system. Gloria Anzaldúa and her fellow activists of color worked together to legitimize and bring visibility to autoethnography within their own writing, theories,

²⁶ Adams, “*Autoethnography*.”

²⁷ Chávez, “A Chicana’s Methodological Research Tool.”

and concepts that pertained to those who existed within liminal spaces. It is within Anzaldúa's position within her texts that she emphasizes the journey for many peoples of color. While Anzaldúa used herself within her work and used her voice, experiences, and spirituality, she also placed herself at the forefront of her theories:

Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. That's what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be (1987).²⁸

Anzaldúa transformed the use of the self and autoethnography, though she never aligned herself to the practice specifically, to become a powerful tool in the arsenal of Chicana feminist methodology rooted in spirituality, traditions, and spiritual activism which she saw as an impetus for change.

Chicana feminism stemmed from, and was in direct response to, the Chicano Civil Rights movement in the late 1960s, which fought for empowerment in social and public spheres through *chicanismo*. While the movement raised social consciousness, it was plagued with misogynistic tendencies towards Chicana women. Chicana women were also excluded by white second-wave feminists. Chicana feminism examines the cultural, historical, spiritual, political and social experiences of women who are of Mexican-American descent.²⁹ It is the personal becoming political that Chicana feminists and activists tirelessly worked to add their voices into their scholarship and activism to legitimize their history. Eden Torr s writes:

While we have a right to embrace our status as victims, we rarely do. Our literature is marked instead by pride in our *mestizaje*, border regions instead of national boundaries, an emphasis on difference, ancient cultural symbols with contemporary definitions, and experimental techniques and styles. The two most common characteristics of Chicana subjective expression are multiplicity and contradiction. This comes from embracing an

²⁸ Anzald a, "Borderlands," 94-95.

²⁹ Caffrey, "Chicana Feminism."

identity and otherness we have been encouraged to despise, and working through a maze of fragmented memories, national identities, and paradoxical subject positions in an effort to remain connected while simultaneously dispensing with shame (2003).³⁰

It was women, specifically women of color, who bore the brunt of creating their own spaces that dealt with the liminality of their identities while also facing exclusion, and oftentimes violence, by their own communities. It is within this trauma and these unidentifiable spaces that Chicana writers carved out spaces for Latinx feminists to highlight their struggles and triumphs.

Gloria Anzaldúa's legacy and contributions to feminist, Chicana, and queer theory still reverberate through the academy and social movements as new generations of scholars and activists are introduced to her writings. Her seminal texts, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) co-edited with Cherrie Moraga, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), and *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (2004) are parts of her journey that detailed her positionality in a world privileging White male identities. Starting with the feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, Anzaldúa, Moraga, and many other feminists of color challenged white feminist actions that claimed the idea of female unity when in reality, these essays highlighted how intersectional women's lives were ignored by White feminists if they belonged to marginalized racial and ethnic groups. *Borderlands* is Anzaldúa's autoethnographic dive into her life and identity that mirrors that of the borderland. It is this hybridity that she had to create her own liminal identity that spoke to the intersections of not belonging to either culture, being a woman, and her queerness. *Light in the Dark* was her expansion of the ideas of borderlands and new *mestiza* in order to theorize the concepts of *nepantla* and *nepantlera*. She argued *nepantla* is the space

³⁰ Torres, "Chicana Without Apology."

where Chicana or women of color with multiple layers of conflicting identities could exist and not align themselves in a static space. The growth and shifts she experienced as her concepts grew and moved with her as an activist and writer grounded more of her theories within her ideas of spirituality and spiritual activism that cannot be separated from one another. Anzaldúa was a self-proclaimed Chicana lesbian and described herself as a “feminist-visionary-spiritual-activist-poet-philosopher fiction writer” (2002).³¹ Her concepts and theories are largely founded upon on her experiences growing up in a town that ran alongside the U.S./Mexico border and then moving to a town for better educational opportunities where she and her siblings were at the mercy of white teachers who did their best to try and suppress their Chicana identity.³² This suppression and oppression would follow her through almost all of her post-secondary education.³³ As she lived in a world where she was not accepted as American enough or Mexican enough, and found herself rebuffing the cultural traditions and customs within her household and community, she challenged the very basis of identity, which “taught her to stand within and outside cultures, languages, and social structures.”³⁴ Mexican-American identities are not easily fixed, but rather their identities cross and traverse borders and exist in a constant state of flux. As she would come to define herself through the struggles she faced as a Chicana scholar, Anzaldúa would often ruminate on what led her to come this spot of activism and rebellion: “As a Chicana, I felt invisible, alienated from the gringo university and dissatisfied with both el movimiento Chicano and the feminist movement.”³⁵ Challenging white feminists and demanding that there is no inclusion or movement without the voices of women of color, Anzaldúa urged that the fight

³¹ Alessandri, “Gloria Anzaldúa as Philosopher.”

³² Ranft, “Gloria Anzaldúa.”

³³ Anzaldúa, “Borderlands.”

³⁴ Anzaldúa, “Borderlands,” 5.

³⁵ Anzaldúa, “This Bridge Called my Back,” xxxv.

for visibility and equality were far from over: “For the past twenty years identity politics have been extremely useful, but they too are constraining. We need new strategies, new conceptions of community.”³⁶ Not everyone was going to check simple racial, sexual, gender, class, or ability boxes. With her call to arms for white feminists and feminists of color alike, her and other Chicana and women of color’s works never ceased to challenge the meaning of activism, reality, spirituality, and positionality within feminist and critical race theory.

In, perhaps her most known and famous text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa proposes a definition of borders and argues for the concept of this new identity called the new *mestiza*.

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. 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 mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.”³⁷

The new *mestiza* “constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns.” The new *mestiza* “copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity.”³⁸ She situated herself in the context of this identity and with the theory of borderlands that not only applied to literal physical geographical space, but inside a person who was contending with being Mexican and American, queer, or any other dualism that is the accepted norm. There were these lines of

³⁶ Anzaldúa, “This Bridge Called my Back,” xxxvii.

³⁷ Anzaldúa, “Borderlands,” 25.

³⁸Anzaldúa, “Borderlands,” 101.

demarcation that a person was given, and they were hindered within this bubble. Anzaldúa, from her editing and contributions to her first anthology to her posthumous text, *Light in the Dark*, moved towards the concept of living in a liminal space where a soul was constantly passing back and forth and fought against the binaries and dualisms that were and still are perpetuated by hegemonic discourses in Western thought arguing:

The binaries of colored/white, female/male, mind/body are collapsing. Living *nepantla*, the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems, you are aware of the changeability of racial, gender, sexual, and other categories rendering the conventional labelings obsolete.³⁹

As her work grew and shifted, Anzaldúa moved away from the concept of new *mestiza* and borderlands and morphed into using the concept of *nepantla* and embodying a *nepantlera*. The concept of *nepantla* described a person who encompassed an aspect of identity that complicated ideas of racial, sexual and ethnic binaries, lived in the in-between, and traversed borders, constantly floating back and forth. This was a concept that was not just meant for Chicanas but for anyone who held aspects of identity that complicated the mainstream narrative of white cis heteronormativity. These concepts introduced in academic writings have allowed for much of the scholarly conversation to go back and dissect the past. They looked at how upbringings in the South and along the border are often tumultuous for those who hold dual or multiple aspects of identities. Cherrie Moraga, for example, revisits indigenous history for recovery and the violence Latinx communities have endured for centuries and how they shaped her.⁴⁰ Martha Cotera's self-published book, *A Chicana Feminist*, urges young Chicana activists and scholars to acknowledge how their identity is shaped by their ancestry and the racism that still persists today.⁴¹ Add in

³⁹ Keating, "Light in the Dark," 119.

⁴⁰ Moraga, "A Xicana Codex," 2011.

⁴¹ Cotera, "The Chicana Feminist," 1977.

other interstices of identity and there is no community, there is no home, there is no box that can be neatly checked to represent them.

While Anzaldúa speaks of Chicanas and those who live within the realms of racial and ethnic ambiguity in a U.S. context, her ideas and concepts apply across disciplines and fields which seek to inform theories dealing with identity. AnaLouise Keating, one of the foremost scholars on Anzaldúa and trusted friend, wrote of how she has high hopes that like Anzaldúa, scholars will look further than borderlands and apply theories she wrestled with later to ideologies of social change. She lamented of the lack of attention and merit surrounding the concept of *nepantla* and how, “[n]epantleras are threshold people: they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system.”⁴² Kelly Zayton also argues that feminists and theorists of color, like Anzaldúa, are “often underread and assumed to be focused on strictly identity politics and critiques of white privilege rather than sought after as sources whose work might provide a basis for new epistemologies and ontologies.”⁴³ Similarly, Martina Koegeler-Abdi focuses on the shift from the more known concept of the new *mestiza* to *nepantla* and how Anzaldúa built upon her earlier theories: “While *mestiza* locates herself in the synthesis of many sites at once, a *nepantlera* affiliates herself with no side at all.”⁴⁴ Connecting this type of thought into mainstream feminist thought, Erin Ranft applies the concept of *nepantla* and merges it with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality. Applying both concepts to create an intersectional *nepantla* framework that broadens the aspects of feminist theory and critical race theory to allow for engagement that analyzes the personal and the political borders that relegate a

⁴² Keating, “Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change,” 6.

⁴³ Zayton, “Now Let Us Shift.”

⁴⁴ Koegeler-Abdi, “Shifting Subjectivities,” 72.

person of color's life and experiences.⁴⁵ It is this layering and crossing of feminist conceptual thought that the term new *mestiza* morphs and shifts into *nepantla* (*nepantleras*) and engages with a black feminist framework that highlights the juxtapositions that women of color face, but specifically women who have had to create their own school of feminist thought. Not only are the borders of self, community, and politics analyzed with this joint framework, but the ideas that speak specifically to women of color and their experiences.

***Nepantla* and Education**

Focusing on this concept of *nepantla* and understanding the needs and benefits of multicultural representation to children through literature and voices that are often marginalized would allow for these types of frameworks, such as intersectionality and *nepantla*, to take precedence and make a change at a critical age when identity begins to form. Abby Emerson, a fifth-grade teacher, introduced the concept of *nepantla* to her classroom and attests to “the transformative change that can happen when tensions around *nepantla* are present. *Nepantla* is a space of discomfort, but it possesses potential for growth.”⁴⁶ Rather than introducing Anzaldúa and other theorists of color and their concepts later in life, teaching the nuances of liminal space and identity allows for children to face dualisms and binary logics to sort out their place in the world.

At a young age, children start to contextualize their identity against those who are around them. Their family, their neighbors, friends, and classmates all have great influence in identity-building, but not as great as family with Kimberly A. Updegraff positing in *Mexican-Origin Youth's Ethnic-Racial Identity Development: The Role of Siblings*:

⁴⁵ Ranft, "A Feminist Fiction Approach."

⁴⁶ Emerson, Abby. 2018. "Teaching Note *Nepantla*," 76.

Families are primary contexts for ERI (ethnic-racial identity) socialization, but research has focused almost exclusively on how parents' attitudes, practices, and socialization are associated with youth's ERI (Hughes et al., 2006). Siblings may be another potentially important influence on ERI, particularly in Mexican-origin families wherein strong family oriented values are linked to close and supportive sibling relationships, and siblings spend substantial time together.⁴⁷

The differences often become more apparent, as it was for Anzaldúa and her siblings, and can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation that carry on into adulthood. Children are born into this liminal space fighting against hegemonic binaries⁴⁸ and cognitive dissonance⁴⁹ that deals with their identity without ever being taught or shown that they don't have to conform or just exist within the confines of a dual identity.

⁴⁷ Updegraff and et. al, "The Role of Siblings."

⁴⁸ Butler, "Gender Trouble."

⁴⁹ Rogers, "An Analysis of Racial and Gender Identity."

Reflection

Biracial or multiracial peoples have long fought for visibility. While there have been great strides taken for the inclusion of Black, Latinx, and Asian in many aspects including children's literature and reframing education, there is a great lack of how having multiple racial or ethnic backgrounds complicates the places a child can see themselves, like within popular books and film. Books guiding children into learning more inclusive social norms are rare even as publications in children's literature is becoming more diverse. This problem of representation of biracial children's characters has prompted me to study how I see myself and my social location, how it has affected me, and what an intervention with more accessibility to stories that are representative of their experiences would mean. Within this essay, I employ autoethnographic analysis to theorize how representation in children's literature affected my identity development through children's books. I question racial/ethnic exclusions within children's literature and articulate the need for biracial Latinx representation within children's literature and the classroom using Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the *nepantla* and *nepantlera*. The illustrated book, *Lupe*, will center on my personal story of moving to a new city and not fitting in with any group of children – even the ones that look like me. The main character, Lupe, will take a journey with her spirit guide Gloria Anzaldúa and learn how to create her own spaces where she doesn't have to conform or choose between the parts of her identity. The typeface will magnify Spanish in a bolder color and come before the English translation. The graphics will be influenced by traditional Latinx contemporary art.

It was in an American Studies classroom that I began to understand that I could even begin to ask questions of where my place truly is in the world, why I never asked these questions before, and even how to begin to answer them. The uncertainty of my identity and the readings

within my graduate classes in Kennesaw State University's Masters of American Studies made me explore the question of why no one seems to write about being biracial – and for me, why is it so hard to find the representation and the stories mirroring my own lived reality. When it was time to read Anzaldúa and I learned of her concept of new *mestiza* and the shift to *nepantla*, I finally found a theoretical and personal space I could claim as my own. It was within this space that I could begin to formulate answers to the questions that I have been asking for a long time. It also occurred to me that it wasn't until graduate school I was given the resources. I want to be a part of the change that gives multiracial and multiethnic children these academic resources at a younger age to help build a solid foundation for a positive biracial identity.

Writing of the self often comes with a certain number of emotions. It is the lived experiences of a person or persons that dons the specific identification markers that often prove to be a subset of human experiences. Latinx writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Martha P. Cotera, and many others have utilized the method to create works of literature that were representative of women-identifying experiences pushed into the margins of history, literature, and social sciences. Autoethnography, as defined by Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, is “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text” (1997). As the methodology has evolved since the 1980s, Latinx writers have utilized the mechanisms of creating on the basis of the self to provide glimpses into the realities of women of color. Working off this definition and inspiration of Anzaldúa, I aim to use autoethnography as the catalyst and underlying reasons for this paper. Anzaldúa's concept of the *nepantla* and *nepantlera* is inherently about the inner workings of the self. Placing myself into the conversation necessitates a personal narrative of trauma that comes from the process of finding identity in new created spaces. Norman Denzin further validates this point by saying social texts

“...show us how to feel the sufferings of others” (1997). Seeking to support this initiative of introducing voices that stand outside of whiteness and creating literary characters that are representative of different racial and ethnic groups creates and necessitates empathy learning in young children rather than introducing this type of literature in adulthood.

While situating the self within the text, a woman-identified writer must also utilize an intersectional feminist framework. Intersectionality, a term originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw⁵⁰, seeks to acknowledge the layered existence of marginalized individuals and groups. Merging that with a feminist framework will allow me to analyze Anzaldúa’s contributions to Chicana feminism and her efforts to validate the spaces of inbetweenness. Using this methodology will also inform how young girls and women of color of elementary and/or high school age rarely have access to books centering unique Latinx and biracial identities. Looking at the concept of *nepantla* as intersectional and feminist allows for a greater understanding and urgency of critical conversations about the need for representation in children’s literature in classrooms and how these would certainly affect the identity and empathy building of both nonwhite and white students. Becoming a *nepantlera* is not exclusive to Latinx peoples, but a concept that can be applied to anyone with a marginal identity, but imperative for those of bi or multiracial or ethnic heritages. I will show how introducing the concept of *nepantla*, Anzaldúa’s voice, and literary fiction about a biracial girl discovering her space while incorporating the spirit and movements of Anzaldúa and Chicana feminists.

Gohldy Muhammad writes, “Literacy is not just about reading words on the page; it also carries some sort of action. In other words, reading and writing are transformative acts that

⁵⁰ “Intersectionality is an important concept within the social sciences precisely because it challenges traditional, often taken-for-granted assumptions about privilege and oppression in American society.”
Justin D. García “Intersectionality”

improve self and society” (9). Reading in classrooms and providing a wealth of representative literature will allow for greater empathy building and an introduction to diverse cultures that children will be able to start responding to and acting on. For children to construct their identity based on their surroundings, they must first have educators and parents willingly give access to curriculums and literary works that is both self-identifying and new. Children thrive in their early years, when development and identity is partially affected by how other children and adults perceive them within a societal function. Bettina Love claims of abolitionist teachings is,

...the practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice in and outside of school.⁵¹

Employing this type of feminist and antiracist framework for education that can reconcile the disparities in school for children of color. Producing children’s literature that is representative of past and present voices for young students who have been left to the wayside and grow within the margins is a large move in that type of reconciliation.

⁵¹ Bettina Love “We Want to do More”

Conclusion

To continue to extoll the racist and oppressive institutions that have systematically kept children of color in the margins will simply perpetuate societal norms that seek to invalidate their experiences and continue to do so through adulthood. This will further hinder children in the development of their identities and how they perceive themselves within the borders of the world. An abolitionist and anti-racist teaching framework will assist and validate the need to educate teachers and parents alike on how to combat this problem and become culturally sensitive to the needs of children of color and also provide the representative literature that is needed for this framework. It is with this hope that children and adults alike will be able to reconcile questions and displacement and create spaces where children can feel they belong with the inclusion of their racial and ethnic identities being represented as it is within this children's book and project as a whole. I explore the use of autoethnography as a critical tool used by Chicana feminists and assimilation that is harmful to minority groups which is specifically individuals who hold two or more racial or ethnic identities. Situating myself and the conversation within American Studies, my application of Anzaldúa's concept of *nepantla* and children's representation and identity formation lends itself to the ongoing conversations of challenging the exclusion of voices of color in the classroom and reframing ideas of American identities and culture through a transnational lens.

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Appendix

Synopsis of Children's Book - *Lupe*

Lupe is a new student at a new school in a new town. She misses her old school, her friends there, and mostly living in the town where her abuela lives. She and her family had to move because of her dad's new job. While she looks like some of the other kids, she is different. She is half White and half Mexican. Lupe has the dark hair, dark brown eyes, thick eyebrows, and tan skin that matches the other children - but she doesn't speak or understand Spanish. Her family doesn't follow customs and traditions like the other Mexican families in the town. As Lupe struggles to find her place - her abuela reminds her of the spirits that came before her and the strength they imbued upon her to carve out her own space. That night as she is falling asleep, a spirit named Gloria arrives to discuss Chicana history and conditions to show Lupe what it means to not have a fixed Mexican or Chicana identity and what it means to be a *nepantlera*.

Text of the Book – *Lupe*

Lupe starts her walk down the hallway to her classroom. Every morning is the same. She gets awakened by her mother singing and flipping her bedroom lights on.

“Up and Adam mija,” Mamí sings in her chirpy voice five days a week.

Lupe sits at the breakfast table with her two younger sisters and father who all eagerly chat about the new house, new neighborhood, and new school. Meanwhile, Lupe stares out and just occasionally nods her head.

“I miss our old house,” Lupe thinks to herself pushing around the mushy eggs on her plate.

Lupe folds her head into her hands and sighs deeply.

“I miss Abuela, I miss our talks, and I miss my own room,” Lupe says quietly so no one will notice her and quietly moves her chair back to start her journey to school.

As she makes her way down the hall to her classroom, Lupe begins to tremble.

“No one will like me,” she thought sadly to herself.

She is the new girl. The new lighter-skinned girl. The new girl with dark stringy hair, a shaggy haircut that is always messy, and bushy eyebrows.

Lupe enters her new classroom and looks for an open desk and sits down and quickly and quietly as possible. She has only been at her new school for a few weeks, and she spends most of her time either finishing up her schoolwork or reading to escape the stares and whispers. The worst part of her day is when it is time for recess.

Lupe slowly makes her way around the playground and finds a quiet spot by a big tree to sit beneath and be hidden away so she can return back to her fantasy world. Most days the other kids just ignore her or don't see her, but today she sees the most popular girls in her grade walking towards her.

“Hi LUP-E,” the leader of the group, Hannah, sweetly sneers at her.

“Hello,” Lupe squeaks out not wanting to look up and meet the other girls' gazes.

“What are you doing over here by yourself?” Hannah asks.

“Just reading a book,” Lupe answers quietly.

“Well, we were talking and we want to know – where are you from?” Hannah demands.

Lupe stares up at the girls and wonders why they would ask her that after the teacher announced she grew up about two hours from here the first day she entered the new classroom.

The group of girls are waiting for their answer with their arms folded across their chests mimicking Hannah's posture and demeanor. Lupe knows they will not go away until she answers the question.

“What do you mean? I am from Santa Anna just like Mrs. Kemp said,” Lupe meekly answers.

“No. Where are you from – your skin and hair are a funny color. Where is your mom and dad from?” Hannah demands to know tapping her foot impatiently.

“My da-dad is from Tennessee and my mom Mami grew up here in Texas,” Lupe tries retort proudly.

Lupe can see in the groups' eyes that the answer she gave them wasn't the one they were looking for.

"Well, since you are brown why aren't you hanging out with the other brown kids?" one of the girls standing behind Hannah sarcastically asks.

Lupe turns to look at the group of children playing tag over in the open field. They have similar hair coloring and somewhat of a darker skin color. They look like they could be her cousins.

Lupe continues to sit quietly for a bit wondering how to answer the question. She doesn't want to admit that they don't talk to her because she can't speak or understand Spanish. Her grandma spoke it to her, but her dad preferred that English be spoken in the house around him, so Lupe and her siblings never really learned how to speak or understand Spanish outside of the few words their Abuela taught them. One of the girls in the group clears their throat waiting for the answer.

Lupe looks up and struggles to form a satisfactory answer. Before she knows it, she just simply blurts out, "We don't speak the same kind of Spanish."

Hannah and her group of friends strangely just look at one another and then back to Lupe who has gathered up her knees to her chest to try and make herself smaller and maybe they would leave her alone. As Lupe is looking down at the grass, she can hear the girls starting to giggle which eventually turns into full blown laughter. Lupe can feel her cheeks getting red and hot and she is trying to stifle back the tears she can feel starting to form in her eyes.

"Not the same Spanish?" Hannah asks with disbelieving sarcasm.

Lupe thinks back to her first day in class. She was seated next to a girl who had slightly darker skin, the same dark hair and eyes, and a nice smile named Connie. She greeted her with an "hola" and Lupe answered back with the same. Connie continued to ask her questions in Spanish and Lupe wasn't able to understand or answer back so she just sat there quietly embarrassed. Connie soon realized that Lupe couldn't understand her and turned forward. On the playground that day when Lupe thought about approaching Connie and her friends, she immediately looked

at her and started giggling. Lupe slowly retreated to the tree that had become her safe space and knew there wasn't a place for her at this new school. Even with the kids who looked like her.

As Lupe is trying to breathe through the embarrassment and ignore the laughter from Hannah and her friends, the group of girls turn and start moving back towards the playground. When they finally reach the other side and Lupe is no longer in their sight – she gulps in air as a few tears escape down her cheeks. She does her best to compose herself and stands up. She brushes off the dirt and leaves that have stuck to her shorts and wipes away any evidence of her tears. She takes a deep breath and starts to head towards the door where the class is supposed to line up when recess is over.

Lupe stares at the clock the rest of the school day trying to will the hour and minute hands to go faster so she could get home. She was tired of the stares, whispers, and giggles from her classmates. More than ever, she wished she was invisible. She wished her dad would have kept his old job. She wished her Abuela was just down the road, and she could walk down the road to her house again and be welcomed by the warm smells of homemade tortillas, rice cooking on the stove, and her Abuela singing hymns in Spanish. She wished she had a place to belong to again. Here, Lupe was alone.

When Lupe arrives home that afternoon, she does her best to rush to her room to avoid her mamá and sisters seeing her tear-streaked face. She tries her best to sneak past them all sitting at the kitchen table, her sisters doing homework and mamá prepping vegetables for dinner, but just as she is about to reach the stairs, Lupe hears her mother call her name. Lupe stands there debating on if she should pretend that she didn't her name being called or answering. As she knows the punishment would not be fun for ignoring being called, Lupe begrudgingly walks into the kitchen with her head down and dragging her book bag by one strap behind her.

Lupe's sisters don't even bother to look up at her as she walks up to their mother. Mamá is busy chopping up some peppers that she doesn't look up at first when Lupe approaches her.

“How was your day mija?” Mamí asks as she continues chopping vegetables and humming along in rhythm quietly.

“It... was fine,” Lupe answers meekly, “We did math, I got a new book from the library, and we learned about the fifty states and their capitals.”

Mamí is nodding her head as Lupe answers and just murmurs under her breath as she continues chopping away. Lupe takes a step back hoping the answer she gave satisfies her mother. She waits for a moment quietly surveying the room looking from her sisters to her mother. They all seem very focused on their own tasks and not really paying attention to Lupe, so she backs up as silently as she possibly can and moves towards the stairs so she can escape up to her room. Once she has safely made it up there without anyone really noticing she falls on her bed dissolving into tears.

When she has finally cried out all of her feelings from her day, Lupe sits up in her bed and wipes away the tears with the sleeve of her sweater. She sits cross-legged and leans back against her headboard and pillows. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. She has never felt so alone before. There is no place for a girl like her. She can't speak Spanish and doesn't participate in Mexican traditions like her cousins, tías and tíos, and Abuela. She doesn't fit in with the other kids as they all grew up together, their parents are all friends, and mostly live in the same nice part of town.

“Is there something wrong with me?” Lupe asks herself under her breath.

She can feel tears starting to well up in her eyes again and tries to take some deep breaths to calm herself down. As she is still struggling to keep it together, she decides she is going to call her Abuela. Abuela is the only person that seems to understand Lupe. Lupe reaches for the phone and dials the number she has known by heart since kindergarten.

Lupe is anxiously listening to the trill of the phone waiting for Abuela to answer. She is almost ready to hang up the phone when Abuela hastily picks up the phone.

“Hola! Hello?” Abuela answers loudly.

Lupe struggles to speak back to her.

“Hello – who is this?” Abuela demands.

“Abuela, it’s me, Lupe,” she trembles out.

“Ay! Mijita! How are you?” Abuela joyously asks.

“I’m... I’m okay,” Lupe stutters trying to sound like she has everything together.

“Ay, no” Abuela scoffs, “Tell me. What is the matter? I know something is wrong!”

Abuela could always see and hear through any of her grandchildren’s attempts at trying to downplay something that was bothering them. Lupe knew she wouldn’t be able to lie to her grandmother. She takes one more deep breath and begins to tell Abuela about her day and how alone and isolated she is feeling.

“Abuela...I...I just don’t have a place here. I don’t have any friends. I can’t speak Spanish like some of the kids and I look and dress differently than the others. Mamí and dad seem to be happy here and so do my sisters, but I can’t seem to find where I belong. I am not fully Mexican. I am not fully White. No one wants to be friends with me. It makes me hate how I look. All I can see now is the dark skin, bushy eyebrows, and frizzy black hair. I’m not like anyone else. I just want to go back home,” Lupe blurts out seemingly all in one breath.

She can hear her grandmother taking measured breaths on the phone formulating how to answer her granddaughter that seems to always internalize what others think of her.

“Lupita,” Abuela says with steady kindness, “You have a place. Sí, you are different. You belong to two different heritages. Those worlds do not have to collide though. They make you unique. They make you strong. They make you see more than just one side to things. They make you, you Lupe.”

“Me?” Lupe wonders out loud, “But I don’t even know who I am!”

“Ay, do you remember the stories I told you when you would have bad dreams or were scared to fall asleep?” Abuela asks.

“Yes... about our spiritual ancestors. They felt they had no place to call their own either. There was no space for them and had to make their own within the cracks, right?” Lupe answers.

“Well, in a sense, yes. You see mija, our ancestors who now guide us in our spiritual lives found that living inbetween the spaces of everyone else allowed themselves to continually slide back and forth between different parts of their identity. They no longer had to choose one part over

another. They allowed themselves to transform as they saw fit. If no one was going to accept them for every aspect of who they are – they were going to accept themselves and help create a space for others just like them,” Abuela says with a determined strength.

Lupe is silent for a time. She mostly understands what her grandmother is saying, but how can she live in the inbetween at home or at school?

“Mija, are you still there?” Abuela asks cautiously.

“Yes ma’am, I am just thinking Abuela,” Lupe replies.

“Well mijita, why don’t you call me tomorrow after you have had some time to think and sleep and we can talk some more, okay? I love you my Lupita,” Abuela offers lovingly.

“Okay, I love you so much Abuela,” Lupe says as she lowers the phone down onto the receiver.

Lupe makes it through dinner and family game night without anyone making much fuss over her quietness and is allowed to go on up to bed with just letting her parents know she is tired and would like to go to bed early.

“Goodnight mamá,” Lupe says as she gives her mother a hug.

A quick hug to her dad and a goodnight to her sisters and she rushes back up the stairs to the comfort of her bed to think about what her Abuela had said about being able to be everything at once. As Lupe climbs underneath her covers and cuddles up to her favorite stuffed animal, Mr. Squeakers, she realizes how tired she actually is. All this sadness and loneliness she has carried around all day with her has made her exhausted. Her eyelids are beginning to get heavy as her breathing becomes steady and she can feel all the heaviness starting to slip away. As she is about to fall asleep she hears a quiet voice calling her name.

“Lupe...” the voices sings.

Lupe’s eyes are wide open now and she is trying not to move an inch as she wonders if she was just imagining that. She hears the voice singing her name again. This time, Lupe sits straight up drawing her knees and her covers to her chest to protect her.

“Lupe, my dear, don’t be afraid. I am here to help you. I am always with you,” the figure who had sung her name just a moment earlier says.

Lupe isn't sure what to do or say. She asks herself, "Is this real?" and pinches her arm to see if hurts. It does.

"Lupe, I am your spirit guide, Gloria. In my physical life I was Gloria Anzaldúa. A Chicana, writer, activist, lesbian, feminist, poet, and so much more. I am here to help you understand what your abuela was talking about on the phone. The ability to live in the inbetween spaces and constantly slide between the different parts of yourself that make up your identity. We are nepantleras," Gloria informs Lupe with a warm smile.

"Nepantleras? What is that?" Lupe asks even more confused now than she was a moment ago. Gloria floats closer to the bed and seems to almost be sitting while she is floating. She lovingly gazes at Lupe as she reaches out her hand.

"Come with me and I will show," Gloria offers as Lupe looks from her outstretched hand and back to her face.

Lupe slowly rises from her bed and cautiously takes a hold of Gloria's hand not sure if she actually could or not. When their hands touch Lupe is whisked away transforming into a spirit-like ghost herself floating behind Gloria through time and space.

As they are coming to a place they can stop Gloria turns to look at Lupe and begins to speak again with a voice like her mother or grandmother would use when trying to explain something important, "Lupe, being a nepantlera means embodying the idea of nepantla. Nepantla comes from a Nahuatl word meaning "in the middle or in between." It comes from a period in history when the Spaniards led by Hernan Cortes invaded the Aztec empire and the missionaries thereafter stripping Mesoamerican peoples of their heritage, religious practices, and traditional identities.

Lupe looks down at where they have stopped. They are hovering above an indigenous family celebrating and praying to Quetzlcoatl secretly in their home as to not be caught still practicing their native religions. Even though the family is smiling, they seem sad as they have to hide this part of themselves out of fear of punishment. Lupe stares at the little girl who surprisingly looks somewhat like herself. Gloria grabs her hand and once again they whoosh off through time and space with Lupe floating behind her wondering where they would go next.

As Lupe is letting go of the fear and questioning whether or not she was losing her mind, she realizes they have stopped again. This time they are stopped above a muddy encampment. Sitting around the fire are some older women, some who look like Lupe's abuela, and huddled close to them are little children. The women are praying through the Virgin Guadalupe (the Virgin Mary). They have their rosaries in hand. Lupe can't understand what they are saying. She looks up at Gloria confused.

"They are praying for safety. They are praying for their families still in the middle of all the violence with the revolution. They want to try and make a fresh start," Gloria contends.

"Oh. My Abuela's parents came over during that time... they settled here for a new beginning," Lupe mused realizing why Gloria brought them here to this moment.

"Your ancestors had to create new identities as the world around them changed rapidly. They were no longer just peoples of Mexico, but they would soon become people of the United States as well. Not only did their identities straddle physical borders, but they straddled spiritual, traditional, and emotional borders as they started creating new communities," Gloria offered with a proud smile.

Lupe looked down at the fire and the women and children sitting around it. She wondered if one of the small girls was her Abuela. Before she had time to ask if it was, she and Gloria were off again being whisked away to another moment in time.

As they both come to a stop, Lupe recognizes some of the features and buildings they are floating above.

"This is Austin. Some of my cousins live here," Lupe informs her spiritual mother as she recognizes the university her oldest cousin graduated from.

"Yes, this is the place where I became most frustrated, and I began using my writings to speak to the experiences of Chicana women. There was no place for me or my students. Not in the academy, not in the Chicano Movement, not in their homes. Queers, radicals, feminists, women of mixed races and ethnicities, those who were seeking a place to belong just like you. We had to carve out our own space where our identities did matter in a way that we could continuously transform and slide as we needed. We didn't have to shut out one thing for another. We could be all things in this space that was made by women just like you and me," Gloria replies.

Lupe is silent with shock.

“There were more like me?” Lupe wonders to herself.

Lupe looks down at the school and sees the bustling of students. She wonders what it will be like once she gets the opportunity to make changes like that for more girls like her.

“I can’t wait for that to be me,” Lupe tells Gloria.

Gloria replies, “That can be you right now.”

“What do you mean?” Lupe asks.

“Come on and I will show you,” Gloria retorts.

They speed off again through time and space and land back at Lupe’s favorite spot at the tree she can make herself invisible at. Lupe can see the top of her head.

“Why are here?” Lupe asks Gloria.

“Because I wanted to remind you how you felt today. How you thought you were the only one who struggles with finding a place. Come on, I have some more to show,” Gloria gleefully cheers.

They whisk off again and find themselves above a small brown home not far from Lupe’s house. As they move to float inside and enter a small bedroom, Lupe realizes that this is Connie’s house. Connie is sitting at a small desk writing in a journal. She has her headphones on but Lupe can’t tell what she is listening to. Lupe moves forward to see what she is writing. As she leans over Connie’s shoulder, Lupe sees that Connie is writing about her day. Her friends made fun of her that her family still only watches Spanish television and not any of the cool shows her friends talk about. They laugh at her. She tries to make light of it, but it really hurts they laugh at her. Her family doesn’t speak or understand English well. Lupe can hear her sigh as she takes off her headphones.

“Why can’t they just understand my family isn’t like theirs?” Connie softly cries.

Lupe realizes in this moment that even those who seem to fit don’t exactly fit into that space.

As they float away from Connie’s house Lupe begins to shake and cry.

“What is it mija?” Gloria asks as she puts her arms around Lupe.

“I want to be proud I am a nepantlera. I want to be proud and stand up for myself and not be ashamed. But... those girls at school. They remind me every chance I get that I am different. That I don’t belong there,” Lupe sobs into Gloria’s shoulder.

“Shhh shhh now,” Gloria comfortingly adds, “Everyone is different. Nepantlera is not just an identity for Chicanas like you and me, but for all those who don’t fit into the mold. Those who pass through borders whether it be religion, ethnicity, race, political views, sexuality, you name it. Nepantla is a space where transformations can occur. Where we can constantly change, be in flux, create our own molds. Sometimes it can be comforting and other times it can be uncomfortable.”

Lupe looks up at Gloria and smiles.

“I like that,” Lupe replies.

“There is beauty in struggles just like in the triumphs. Living in the inbetween may be hard at times but we come out stronger because of it,” Gloria says with a smile.

Gloria wipes away Lupe’s tears and gently grabs her hand. They are off again floating through time and space. This time they land back at Lupe’s house and inside of her room. Lupe climbs into her bed and pulls her comforter over as she lays down. Gloria is floating beside her bed.

“Remember mija, I am always with you. All of your ancestors are with you and within you,” Gloria says with a smile as she floats back into the darkness and disappears into the night.

Lupe smiles and snuggles into her pillow to sleep and dream of all the nepantleras before her.

Lupe wakes up the next morning not to the sound of her mother singing and telling all of her children to get up out bed, but to the sun brightly shining through her window. She panics for a moment but then realizes that it is Saturday and her mother has let her sleep in. She groggily puts on her robe and slippers and heads downstairs.

“There you are sleepy head! You almost missed breakfast,” Mamí chastises as Lupe pulls up a stool to the counter where her mother is cooking.

“I’m sorry. I had a crazy dream. I talked to Abuela last night and after I dreamt of what we talked about,” Lupe says while watching her mother stir the atole.

“Ah, I see. Do you feel better now mija?” Mamí asks stopping to look at her bewildered daughter.

“Yes, but... but how did you know something was wrong?” Lupe implores.

“I am your Mamí. We know everything. Especially when something is wrong with our little ones,” she answers lovingly with a wink.

Lupe looks her mother up and down.

“Mamí, are you a nepantlera too?” Lupe questions cautiously.

Her mother looks at her with a bit of surprise but then her face softens and she smiles.

“Why yes miija. I am. Is that what you and your Abuela talked about yesterday?” she asks.

“Yes. I feel like I have no place. Not here, not at school, not anywhere. She reminded me of the stories she used to tell us and Gloria Anzaldúa came to visit me last night and show me things about our ancestors,” Lupe excitedly responds.

Mamí moves around the counter and gathers Lupe up in her arms.

“Mija, you have a place right here and a place that is just for you. It is time for me to tell you what your abuela told me when I was about your age,” Mamí counters.

Lupe looks up at her mother smiling and waits.

“Now let us shift.”