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THE OTHER-SIDER: GLORIA E. ANZALDÚA, “INAPPROPRIATE/D OTHER” IN ACADEMIA?

Camille Back*

Away, she went away. But every place she went to they'd push her to the other side and that other side pushed her to its other side and the tracks went on forever. [...] Pushed to the end of the world there she made her home on the edge [...]. (ANZALDÚA, 2009, p. 99-100)

Introduction

Last year, I've been positively surprised to read that The Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas at Austin (where her archives are stored) celebrated Gloria Anzaldúa on her birthday by recalling that “during her time at UT, she felt alienated by the white-dominated university and also dissatisfied with both the Chicano and feminist movements”. It might be the first time that a major academic institution honors Anzaldúa by highlighting her continuing struggle within the university and the academic resistance toward her creative and theoretical work. A first and heartwarming step which nevertheless occults the classist, sexist and heterosexist practices that deeply structure academic institutions and against which she also had to struggle her entire life.

A self-described “third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings” (ANZALDÚA, 2015, p. 205), Gloria Anzaldúa was born in 1942 in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas to farmworkers. As one of the first openly lesbian Chicana writers, involved in and between several social movements, Anzaldúa has played a major role in developing decolonial queer theories and intersectional feminism and has contributed, through her essays, fictions, and poems, to the elaboration of broad reflections on borderlands and coalition building. Anzaldúa's published works include the groundbreaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), coedited with Cherríe Moraga, and *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Self-identified as queer since 1981 and the publication of her *autohistoria-teoría* “La Prieta”, she was also instrumental in introducing the term in university settings, even though she is rarely credited for it.

The first introduction of the terms *queer theory* into the academic sphere is indeed generally attributed to Teresa de Lauretis who coined the expression in “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” after a conference held at the University of California - Santa Cruz (UCSC) in 1990. While stating they want to counter dominant discourses and

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epistemologies by integrating the critical analyzes of queer of color theorists and insisting on the need for situated knowledges and intersectional frameworks, a significant number of queer theory's canonical texts, including de Lauretis' foundational "Queer Theory", have paradoxically participated in erasing or marginalizing their contributions¹. The marginalization of Anzaldúa's theoretical insights is all the more difficult to understand because of her presence at UCSC where she got to know Teresa de Lauretis in the years preceding the emergence of queer theory.

This paper therefore aims at questioning Anzaldúa's precarious position within the university and the academic resistance toward her writings. To do so, I will return to a specific turning point in Anzaldúa's biography: the moment when she decided to resume her doctoral studies at UCSC in 1988, which crystallizes, in my opinion, several tensions between the university and the project that she wished to carry out. The analysis of the doctoral path of Anzaldúa, "Inappropriate/d Other" in academia, will thus offer me a lead for further exploration of the dynamics of gender, sexuality, race and class operating within the university at the time of the emergence of queer theory. I will try to highlight the resistance of the university towards the new theorizing methods that Anzaldúa advocates for (especially through the *autohistoria-teoría*) as well as the strategies of delegitimization, marginalization and silencing on which the university falls back.

Most of my paper is based on an extensive research in the Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers and on oral history's interviews conducted since 2018 and is part of ongoing discussions with Anzaldúa's intimate friends.

She, the inappropriate/d other: Anzaldúa's doctoral path, from the University of Texas at Austin to the University of California – Santa Cruz

In the two pages that she dedicates to Anzaldúa in *Undoing Gender* (2004), in a chapter dealing with "The Question of Social Transformation," Judith Butler formulates the following question: "Do we say that she belongs to the group called 'academic feminists'?" (BUTLER, 2004, p. 227). Butler herself immediately replies: "Well, it would be ridiculous to exclude her from that group. Her work is read in academia. She sometimes teaches at the University of California" (BUTLER, 2004, p. 227). I've always had a hard time understanding Butler's questioning and the ease with which she seems to resolve the issue: either the answer is so obvious that the question does not even deserve to be raised, or the question arises (and has actually arisen within the university) and the answer would then deserve to be deepened and nuanced. The concept of "Inappropriate/d

¹ I have attempted to highlight some of the mechanisms of erasure and marginalization as well as the epistemic violence which operate in most of queer theory's foundational texts in an article entitled: "Unsettling Dominant Narratives: *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a pathway toward a "new" perspective on queer theory" (2019).

Other” developed by Trinh T. Minh-Ha to describe “the place/s of post-colonial woman as writing and written subject” (MINH-HA, 1986, p. 3), seems to be a relevant tool for questioning and theorizing more accurately Anzaldúa’s position in the university. In an interview, Trinh T. Minh-Ha points out that “[w]e can read the term “inappropriate/d other” in both ways, as someone whom you cannot appropriate, and as someone who is inappropriate. Not quite other, not quite the same” (MINH-HA in GRZINIC, 1998)². The “Inappropriate/d Other” is therefore both she who resists appropriation (inappropriated) and she one who is considered as improper, out of place (inappropriate) by the dominant gaze, the slash allowing both meanings to coexist. In order to question Anzaldúa’s position within the university and the attitude of the institution towards Anzaldúa and her productions, I think we need to revisit in greater detail a specific turning point in her biography and her academic career: the moment when she decided to resume her doctoral studies at UCSC, in 1988, which constitutes a breaking point in her relationship with the university, hardly discussed³. Anzaldúa’s doctoral path began in the mid-1970s. From 1974 to 1977, Anzaldúa was enrolled in the doctoral program of Comparative Literature at the University of Texas at Austin, where she specialized in “Spanish literature, feminist theory, and Chicano literature” (ANZALDÚA in TORRES, 2007, p. 122).

Disillusioned with the restrictions of the program and her supervisors—neither Chicana literature nor Women’s Studies were then considered legitimate fields of study, at least at the University of Texas at Austin—and determined to dedicate her life to writing, she left Texas for California before starting the writing stage of her thesis. In 1988, shortly after the publication of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa decided to return to college and complete her doctoral studies. She applied for the History of Consciousness doctoral program at the University of California—Santa Cruz (where each summer, between 1982 and 1986, she taught creative writing as part of the Women’s Voices Summer Writing Workshop) but she was not accepted. She eventually joined the doctoral program in Literature at the same university and received her doctorate posthumously in 2004. In 1988, she was also

² She also writes, in conclusion of her essay: “After all, she is this Inappropriate/d Other who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while pointing insistently to the difference; and that of reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at” (MINH-HA, 1986, p. 9).

³ As AnaLouise Keating explains in her introduction to *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa believed that resuming her doctoral studies would allow her to devote herself fully to writing while offering her some protection against being used as a resource by and for others (as guest speaker, consultant, editor) as well as having access to theoretical resources and to a community of scholars who could give her critical feedback on her work. See Keating, “Editor’s Introduction”, p.xiii-xiv.



appointed distinguished visiting professor in the Women's Studies program⁴.

One of the reasons why I started to get interested in this episode lies in the fact that the first introduction of the terms *queer theory* within the university takes place precisely at UCSC and is attributed to Teresa de Lauretis, who was teaching in the History of Consciousness Department since 1985 and coined the expression within the context of a conference held in February 1990, even though Anzaldúa was using the term *queer* in an academic setting as early as 1981 with the publication of "La Prieta" in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Anzaldúa's presence on the UCSC campus, occasional but regular between 1982 and 1986, then more sustained in 1988, makes the erasure of her contributions to the emergence of queer theories all the more difficult to understand⁵.

This moment—"the day I was rejected by the History of Consciousness program" (ANZALDÚA in TORRES, 2007, p. 123), she says— strikes me as indicative of how the university has turned Anzaldúa into its "Inappropriate/d Other". It may, however, seem paradoxical that Anzaldúa was not accepted into the History of Consciousness doctoral program while her work and research perspectives⁶ were perfectly in line with the department's orientations: supporting research at the intersection of several established and emerging disciplines and fields of study, operating at the crossroads of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences and drawing upon various theoretical approaches. In a 1990 interview with Héctor Torres, Anzaldúa recalls her disappointment at not having been accepted into the History of Consciousness doctoral program and makes some assumptions about what could have motivated the department's decision:

The day I was rejected by the History of Consciousness program, the literature program grabbed me. They put me on the top of their list. They had like two hundred and fifty applicants and they felt that it was an honor for me to be in their program. It was the complete opposite. Donna Haraway, one of the

⁴ She taught there during the fall of 1988, giving a creative writing class as well as a course on women of color feminism in the United States. It is in this context that she began to work on her second anthology, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (1990). Keating's timeline in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* provides invaluable insights into Anzaldúa's doctoral journey and life.

⁵ It is also interesting to note that Teresa de Lauretis was aware of Anzaldúa's work as she has even reviewed one of her fiction, entitled « El Caballo Negro », in 1989. This point was raised by Elizabeth Anne Dahms in her doctoral thesis «The Life and Work of Gloria Anzaldúa: An Intellectual Biography» (2012), p. 96.

⁶ Successively entitled « Lloronas – Women Who Wails: (Self)Representation and the Production of Writing, Knowledge and Identity », « Lloronas, mujeres que leen y escriben: Producing Knowledge, Cultures, and Identities » and « Lloronas – Writing, Reading, Speaking, Dreaming », Anzaldúa's doctoral project focused on writing as a space for the production of personal and collective knowledge. See Keating, « Editor's Introduction », p. xiv-xv.

History of Consciousness professors, was on leave then but when she came back she started yelling and screaming at them “Are you crazy?” because they didn’t accept me into the program. The History of Consciousness program here advocates high theory and my writing, because it incorporates lived experience, is considered low theory so there’s that split here between high and low critical theory⁷. (ANZALDÚA, in TORRES, 2007, p. 123)

In “Speaking Secrets: Living Chicana Theory”, which analyzes the multiple difficulties that Chicana lesbian feminists encounter within the university, Deena J. González likewise outlines the alleged theoretical weakness of Anzaldúa as a ground for refusal, not without pointing to a certain hypocrisy from the department: “At UCSC’s History of Consciousness graduate program, which uses Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* as one of its primary texts, Gloria was presumably denied admission because she ‘was not theoretically sophisticated’” (GONZÁLEZ, 1998, p. 61)⁸. To better understand the underlying reasons that led to Anzaldúa’s non-admission into the History of Consciousness doctoral program and to try to go beyond her own perception and legitimate disappointment, I interviewed several professors teaching at UCSC in the late 1980s in History of Consciousness, Women’s Studies and Literature⁹, as well as some of Anzaldúa’s intimate friends¹⁰, relying heavily on oral history practices.

Randy P. Conner confided to me, in a long filmed interview that we made at his home in 2018, that beyond the alleged theoretical insufficiencies of her writings, the spiritual dimension of her work has certainly been another major obstacle to her admission into the History of Consciousness doctoral program:

⁷ In the same interview, Anzaldúa mentions other elements that could have contributed to motivating the department’s decision. She evokes the fact that she would have been considered already “too established” at the time and identified as a “creative writer” and also expresses her fear of having been judged according to the skills and attitudes of other Chicanas who were studying at UCSC, indicating in passing that a Chicana student was then suing the History of Consciousness Department for sexual harassment.

⁸ González refers in her paper to a phone call she had with Anzaldúa in 1990.

⁹ Especially with Donna Haraway (History of Consciousness), Bettina Aptheker (Women’s Studies), Carla Freccero (Literature), Rob Wilson (Literature). As Keating points out, Anzaldúa had two dissertation committees. In the 1990s, her committee was chaired by Helene Moglen and composed of Norma Alarcón, Donna Haraway and José David Saldívar. As a result of retirements in the 2000s, her committee was then chaired by Helene Moglen and composed of Donna Haraway and Aída Hurtado. See Keating, “Editor’s Introduction”, note 20, p. 209.

¹⁰ Especially with Deena J. González and Elie D. Hernández, Randy P. Conner and David Hatfield Sparks, and Ariban Chagoya.

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That was shocking, that was really shocking! Because Gloria wanted to be a part of a really important program at UC Santa Cruz that was called History of Consciousness or “His/Con”. A gay man that we were friends with, he was able to get into the program. But Gloria was turned down, and allegedly what was said to her was that her theory wasn’t “high enough”, and that seemed to most of those of us who knew her to be ridiculous, because her theory inspired, as you know, like the whole borderlands theory. And she was an intellectual, and yet I think partly because of ethnicity and maybe partly because of her spirituality, as I mentioned to you, she was not accepted, and ultimately was accepted by what they called the Literature program [...]. But I really still hold it against those people for not taking her into the “His/Con” program. I do remember I interviewed at UC Santa Cruz once too, and she warned me. It’s ironic because the very first conference at a university that I know devoted to goddess movement was at UC Santa Cruz. But by the time she went there, they had completely changed, and were opposed to any woman who mention spirituality or the goddess, and I remember when I wanted to interview there, Gloria said: “don’t say goddess, don’t say that word”. And I slipped, and I did, and they weren’t having me either¹¹.

Donna Haraway, then a professor in the History of Consciousness Department and a member of Anzaldúa’s dissertation committee, has been of invaluable help to me in my attempt to retrace the doctoral admission process at UCSC at the end of the 1980s and the selection requirements effective at the time:

HistCon did not interview applicants. We typically had several hundred applicants for about 10-12 positions. That was the case in the year Gloria applied. All along, grad students also served on the admissions committee (without access to the confidential letters of recommendation). In the early years (at least through the 1990s), we all read all of the applications before making a first big cut and then rereading more carefully and gradually making a list of folks to invite to come. [...] Applicants wrote a Statement of Purpose/project proposal about what they wanted to do. That was the single most important part of the application. We looked for students who did not better fit the regular disciplinary departments but needed the kind of inter- and trans- and non- disciplinary things we did (students as well as faculty). We did not accept students who proposed political or literary or performance or artistic projects only; we sought people who approached their work primarily through scholarly writing, but we also encouraged applicants who wanted a serious component of their work to be art/performance/writing/etc. I think Gloria’s application was read (incorrectly) to fall between those cracks¹².

Insisting on the high number of applications received each year and the meticulous selection process, Haraway underlines however that Anzaldúa’s doctoral project might

¹¹ Interview with Randy P. Conner and David Hatfield Sparks conducted on May 7, 2018 in Chicago.

¹² Email exchange dated February 28, 2019.



have been misread and fallen between the cracks of the department, even though it seemed to be fully in line with its research perspectives. In response to Anzaldúa's quote from her interview with Héctor Torres (reproduced above) that I sent her, Haraway revisits her reaction following the announcement of Anzaldúa's non-admission into the History of Consciousness doctoral program, as well as the tensions that then plagued the department and the collective inability to perceive the value and legitimacy of Anzaldúa's work:

I think that is true (maybe not yelling screaming, but objecting vigorously for sure). HistCon—we—*were* crazy. HistCon always tried to ride a line, or build a contact zone, between doing, performing, storying, and also analyzing in forms the university recognized as scholarly. Bettina [Aptheker]¹³ was easy; Gloria was hard on just this line. I think we were wrong, in demonstrable ways about Gloria's writing. Her writing was that contact zone in its very being! It was full of conceptual innovation as well as lived experience, and did them together. That split is hugely overstated here, and it ended, but not before we lost Gloria to Lit! The problem, I think, was not incorporating lived experience (which I think was welcome from the start), but in questions of how to write both/and. I think Gloria did write both/and (story/scholarship; I don't think the issue was ever low/high theory (something I and most faculty always despised in HistCon), but HistCon was caricatured that way, and I understand that Gloria felt that way for good reasons based in that rejection). But just those issues were in flux in HistCon and the university in the early 1980s. Gloria was a trail blazer, and she got hurt. [...] I suspect it had to do with needing some more writing of the classical scholarly kind as well as the writing she most loved to do. We were blind.¹⁴

Haraway's last sentence is particularly insightful: "We were blind". What were the blind spots—or blank spots, as Anzaldúa preferred to call them¹⁵—of the university? Anzaldúa herself underlines it in another interview:

In academia I find that my lesbianism gets hidden behind the overt race stuff. The race stuff is so dreadful, so horrible and painful, and I'm so busy dealing with it that it makes the lesbian stuff – especially in Santa Cruz – smaller by

¹³ A few years earlier, in 1983, Bettina Aptheker had bypassed the usual doctoral process when the History of Consciousness Department awarded her a doctorate for her book *Woman's Legacy* (1982).

¹⁴ Email exchange dated February 22, 2019.

¹⁵ In an unpublished text entitled "The Poet as Critic/The Poet as Theorist: Speaking in tongues, Dear Women Writers of Color. Letter two", dated April 4, 1988, she includes a whole section on "blank spots", explaining that she took the decision to rename "blank spot" the area outside one's field of vision, instead of "blind spot", in order to avoid using ableist language. The adjective *blank*, which means "empty" or "unmarked", also connotes whiteness. She thus connects blind spots to racial biases. In this text, she rightly insists on the social and historical construction of these blank spots. According to my research, admission files for doctoral programs at UCSC are due in December and candidates are informed of the decision of the departments before April. The text was therefore written shortly after Anzaldúa was informed of her non-admission into the History of Consciousness doctoral program.

comparison. The Literature Board, Women's Studies, and His/Con people have an awareness of lesbianism and an awareness of not stepping on people's toes too much, but they have a blank spot about race and class. (ANZALDÚA, 2000, p. 143)

The theoretical insufficiencies that has been held against Anzaldúa, and which has contributed to affiliating her work to literature rather than theory, overshadows the classist and ethno-racial Eurocentric biases which deeply structure academic discourses on what constitutes (il)legitimate knowledge and what counts as theory. As the editors and contributors to *Presumed Incompetent: the Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* have shown, the “presumption of incompetence” that particularly affects women of color is largely related to the “coloniality of knowledge” (LANDER, 2000) in academia¹⁶. Despite its utopian and experimental roots and its commitment to alternative methods of teaching and learning, UCSC does not escape these practices of exclusion and marginalization of people of color and/or from the working class¹⁷. The non-admission of Anzaldúa into the History of Consciousness doctoral program is not attributable to her alleged theoretical weakness but rather to blind spots and unthoughts, both individual and institutionalized. These highlight the university's resistance to the new methods of theorizing that Anzaldúa advocates for through the *autohistoria-teoría* (which, as an epistemology, seeks to interrogate the dominant production of knowledge) and to her political and activist commitments, especially the explicitly decolonial perspective of her writings¹⁸.

I think that this refusal to support Anzaldúa's research project should be seen as a process of delegitimization of her theoretical work which anticipates—even authorizes—the process of erasure and marginalization of her contributions at the time of the emergence of queer theory, at UCSC, between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. When Butler wonders if Anzaldúa belongs to the group of “feminist academics”, she only entertains

¹⁶ See also Teresa Córdova, “Power and Knowledge: Colonialism in academia”.

¹⁷ See *Seeds of Something Different: An Oral History of the University of California, Santa Cruz (2020)*, which traces the evolution of the campus since its creation in 1965, where the editors insist on these tensions in the foreword. A whole chapter, entitled “‘Open the Door’: Finding a Place on a ‘Very White Campus’”, is also dedicated to the growing hostility towards affirmative action during the 1990s.

¹⁸ See Paola Bacchetta, “Decolonial Praxis: Enabling International Queer Coalition Building”, p. 181. She especially insists on the difference in the academic reception of postcolonial et decolonial theories: “It's important to note that the reception of decolonial theory in the U.S. and European academies has been radically different from the reception of postcolonial theory, and to ask why. Xicana feminisms are excluded or devalued in the most elite sites. The appalling problems faced by Norma Alarcon at Berkeley, the fact that Gloria Anzaldúa, the author of so many books that were part of syllabi in universities across the country, was never seen to merit a PhD in her lifetime at UC Santa Cruz, all this should indicate the place, or rather the nonplace, reserved for Xicana feminisms in U.S. academic institutions. What academic positions or high-level academic chairs specifically for Xicana feminisms studies exist in any elite universities in the U.S.? In contrast, postcolonial theory has been able to move into the center of the U.S. academy, in elite institutions, in university-wide chairs. I think it's important for us to look at that situation and to analyze why”.



the doubt around the theoretical insufficiency of her work, taking part in both these processes of delegitimization (which tend to turn Anzaldúa into an “Inappropriate/d Other” in academia) and of late reappropriation of Anzaldúa by the academy.

She, the other-sider: theorizing from the cracks

The end of the 1980s and the refusal from the History of Consciousness Department to accept her in its doctoral program—and then the “official” emergence of queer theory at UCSC—constituted a breaking point in Anzaldúa’s relationship with the university, from which she became all the more critical of the academic appropriation of her writings, *Borderlands* in particular, and of the resistance to their spiritual dimension. In 1990, Anzaldúa began to work on a major text, entitled “To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, escritora y chicana”, which can be read as an indirect response to “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexuality. An Introduction” by Teresa de Lauretis and highlights the formative role that Anzaldúa played in the development of queer theories. In “To(o) Queer The Writer”, which appeared in 1991 (the same year as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*), she is extremely critical of the strategies of appropriation and marginalization deployed by academic institutions and researchers. She thus questions the appropriation of the terms *dyke* and *queer*, of working-class origin, by middle- or upper-class lesbian scholars¹⁹; the erasure of queers of color in queer theories generated in the university²⁰; the control of knowledge production and the occupation of theoretical space by white theorists for neo-colonial and non-emancipatory purposes:

[...] white middle-class lesbians and gay men frame the terms of the debate. It is they who have produced queer theory and for the most part their theories make abstractions of us colored queers. They control the production of queer knowledge in academia and in the activist communities. Higher up in the hierarchy of gay politics and gay aesthetics, they most readily get their work published and disseminated. They enter the territories of queer racial ethnic/Others and re-inscribe and recolonize. They appropriate our experiences and even our lives and “write” us up. They occupy theorizing space, and though their theories aim to enable and emancipate, they often disempower and neo-colonize. They police the queer person of color with theory. They theorize, that is, perceive, organize, classify, and name specific chunks of reality by using approaches, styles, and methodologies that are Anglo-American or European. Their theories limit the ways we think about being queer. (ANZALDÚA, 2009, p. 165)

The turn of the 1990s also coincides with a time when Anzaldúa take a stand, in a very assertive way, on the theorizing modes she developed and advocated for through the *autohistoria-teoría*. In her introduction to *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo caras* (1990), the anthology she designed as part of the “Women of Color in the U.S.—Third World Feminism Theory and Literature” course she gave in 1988 at UCSC, she insists on

¹⁹ See Anzaldúa, “To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, escritora y chicana”, p. 164.

²⁰ In “The Poet as Critic/The Poet as Theorist” (box 61 ; folder 25), dated 1988, she indeed wrote that “the other has not been accidentally ‘lost’ but deliberately ‘erased’”.

the dire need for new theorizing methods (to which belongs the *autohistoria-teoría*, although she does not explicitly mention it in the text):

What is considered theory in the dominant academic community is not necessarily what counts as theory for women-of-color. [...] *Necesitamos teorías* that will rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries – new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods. We need theories that will point out ways to maneuver between our particular experiences and the necessity of forming our own categories and theoretical models for the patterns we uncover. [...] We need to give up the notion that there is a “correct” way to write theory. Theorists of color are in the process of trying to formulate “marginal” theories that are partially outside and partially inside the western frame of reference (if that is possible), theories that overlap many “worlds.” We are articulating new positions in these “in-between,” Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies, feminist and job worlds. In our literature, social issues such as race, class, and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of a text, elements in which theory is embedded. In our *mestizaje* theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of the existing ones. (ANZALDÚA, 1990, p. xxv-xxvi)

For Anzaldúa, these new theorizing modes also correspond to a specific positionality (both a social position and a political positioning), which is constituted in the “in-between” and the borderlands, through an ambiguous and complex relationship to exteriority and interiority (“partially outside and partially inside”). Although in the introduction to *Light in the Dark*, AnaLouise Keating refers to Anzaldúa’s “outsider status”²¹ within the university, in several unpublished documents Anzaldúa has theorized her own conflicted position within the university through the concept of “other-sider”. In a section entitled “The ground from which I speak,” included by Keating as an appendix to *Light in the Dark*, she states:

Soy de rancho. I speak and write from what grounds me at any given moment and that hub of core identity – my physical body, the body of a female, a Chicana tejana, embedded in an indigenous Mexicana culture rich in symbols and metaphors, a body immersed in many cultures, a queer body. My struggle, like yours, is an anticolonial one against cultural imperialism, intellectual piracy, and mental colonialism, while dealing with my complicity in being positioned as an “internal exile”. I am not an academic (having done a three-month stint in 1988 and three months in 2001, a total of six months in the last eighteen years). But via the lecture circuit and participation in conferences, I circulate on the fringes of women’s, ethnic, Chicano/a, Latino, composition, and American studies and other disciplines where my work is taught. [...] I write from the position of being an other-sider, half way between a complete outsider and an insider. (ANZALDÚA, 2015, p. 182)²²

²¹ See Keating, “Editor’s Introduction”, note 65, p. 216.

²² Anzaldúa also uses the term “other-sider” in a speech dated February 2000, “The Cracks and Holes between the Worlds” (box 112; folder 15).



The position of “Inappropriate/d Other” to which she has been assigned by the academy, and in which she is maintained, then becomes a positioning—“other-sider”—that must be reclaimed and recovered in the same way as the strategic and potentially transformative space of the borderlands. Anzaldúa forged the concept of “other-sider,” quite similar to that of “Inappropriate/d Other” and “outsider within” (HILL COLLINS, 1986)²³, in close connection with her reconceptualization of the border(s) and the politicization of her experiences of multiple belonging and marginalization.

This positioning as “other-sider” must also be seen as an attempt to resist the logics of appropriation and erasure that Anzaldúa opposed and to claim a space from which to develop other epistemologies, the “other-sider”, just like the “Inappropriate/d Other”, being she who cannot be fully appropriated by the university. As she points out in the unpublished text “Navigating Nепantla and the Cracks Between the Worlds”, “creatively theorizing concepts like nepantla is a form of resistance against total assimilation of western epistemologies” (ANZALDÚA, box 61; folder 19). By occupying these *nepantleros* theoretical spaces—in between spaces, borderlands, edges, interfaces, cracks between the worlds—, and by theorizing from that position (at the same time on/from the other side and on/from both sides), the “other-sider” helps to dismantle the center/margin binary, while pointing out the shortcomings of dominant theoretical frameworks and craft new paradigms through the *autohistoria-teoría*.

The positionality of the “other-sider”, who claims a certain mobility, is indeed similar to that of the *nepantleras*, those mediators who, in the decolonial queer epistemology of Anzaldúa, develop the ability and flexibility necessary to be a bridge and facilitate the crossing between the different spaces to which they belong and which they help to transform. In *Light in the Dark*, the book resulting from her doctoral thesis in preparation at UCSC, she insists on the epistemological and political importance of the *nepantleras*:

We need nepantleras whose strength lies in our ability to mediate and move between identities and positions. Necesitamos nepantleras to inspire us to cross over racial and other borders. To become nepantleras, we must choose to occupy intermediary spaces between worlds, choose to move between worlds like the ancient chamanas who choose to build bridges between worlds, choose to speak from the cracks between the worlds, from las rendijas. We must choose to see through the holes in reality, choose to perceive something from multiple angles. [...] Let’s look toward our nepantleras [...] who have a tolerance for ambiguity and difference, la facultad to maintain numerous conflicting positions and affinity with those unlike themselves. (ANZALDÚA, 2015, p. 93-94)

²³ Hill Collins refers to the “outsider within” status to describe the marginal positions of black women in the university. She insists that this particular status has allowed them to develop a specific perspective and positioning, or *standpoint*, towards existing sociological paradigms and to produce distinct analyses. Unlike Anzaldúa’s “other-sider,” the “outsiders within” “master sociological paradigms yet retain a critical posture toward them” (HILL COLLINS, 1986, p. S29). The “other-sider” seems to maintain a stronger position of exteriority and a more offensive anti-assimilationist stance towards the university.



The refusal from the History of Consciousness Department to accept her into its doctoral program and the subsequent marginalization of her work during the “official” emergence of queer theory at UCSC, led Anzaldúa to reaffirm a decolonial and anti-assimilationist positioning, inside and outside the university. Analyzing her own marginal and precarious position within the university, through her “other-sider” status, she concludes on the creative, political and epistemological potential of such a positionality and on the necessity to theorize, precisely, from “the cracks” into which, in the words of Donna Haraway, her work has fallen.

Conclusion

After being admitted into the doctoral program in Literature, Anzaldúa worked intermittently on her dissertation during the 1990s before being forced to set it aside. As Keating rightly points out in her introduction to *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa has been unable to complete her doctoral studies on time for several reasons, including her health, financial concerns, several publishing projects, and a particularly demanding revision process of her own texts. In 1992, Anzaldúa was diagnosed with type I diabetes, a chronic illness that significantly affected her daily life and work. The management of diabetes and the many related complications as well as the need to secure health insurance at a reasonable price, which posed a significant financial challenge for Anzaldúa, drained much of her energy throughout the 1990s²⁴.

In 2001, Anzaldúa nevertheless decided to resume her doctoral studies: she started a writing group, “las comadritas,” with which she shared the drafts of her dissertation chapters, and reconstituted her doctoral committee, planning to defend her thesis in the winter of 2002 or in the spring of 2003. In April 2004, Rob Wilson, the director of the Literature Department at UCSC, contacted Anzaldúa to offer that she receive her PhD for her published work, specifically for *Borderlands/La Frontera*, reminding her that it has

²⁴ Anzaldúa had no stable source of income and relied solely on her publication royalties, the gigs and writing workshops she gave on a regular basis, and occasional course loads. As she had no literary agent, she also had to take care of organizing and securing these different activities herself, which could be extremely time-consuming. See Keating, “Editor’s Introduction,” p. xvi; footnote 31, p. 211. On the precariousness of her status as an independent researcher and the social relations of race, class, sexuality, see Anzaldúa, “Doing Gigs” (1991) (box 60; folder 4).



been done in the past for Aptheker²⁵. Anzaldúa declined the offer for at least two reasons: on the one hand, she perceived it as an unfair preferential treatment, on the other hand, the original manuscript she was about to submit as her dissertation was at last almost completed. Anzaldúa died of diabetes-related complications on May 15, 2004, a few weeks before defending her thesis. She received her PhD in Literature from UCSC posthumously, during a ceremony that left a bitter memory to Donna Haraway and Bettina Aptheker²⁶.

Despite sustained collective efforts by community activists, artists and scholars to raise awareness about her work²⁷, and a late but limited academic reappropriation of her writings, Anzaldúa still is an “Inappropriate/d Other” in academia. The recent unveiling of the Literary Landmark honoring Anzaldúa at the University of Texas—Rio Grande Valley, where she studied from 1967 to 1973 and where, as she recalls in *Borderlands*, Chicaxs students had to take two speech classes “to get rid of [their] accents” (ANZALDÚA, 2015, p. 76), reminds us that it took fifteen years to get her that institutional recognition.

²⁵ It was Hayden White, her supervisor and director at the time of the History of Consciousness Department, who suggested to Aptheker that she present *Woman’s Legacy* as her doctoral thesis (email exchange with Bettina Aptheker dated March 11, 2019). Donna Haraway, who was also part of her thesis committee, pointed out the similarity in the backgrounds of Aptheker and Anzaldúa, both recognized authors and lecturers at UCSC, insisting on the fact that this possibility of circumventing the usual process should have been proposed to Anzaldúa much earlier (email exchange dated February 22, 2019).

²⁶ Haraway wrote: “I was very happy, even if devastated that it had to come that way. The presentation of the award was given at the Graduate Student Commencement ceremony by an administrator who had no real idea how important Gloria’s work was, and he botched the speech, even mispronouncing her name. I was furious”, (email exchange dated February 22, 2019). Aptheker made very similar comments: “The failure of the Literature Department to award her the doctorate for *Borderlands* even though that was not the actual dissertation she was writing, was a most egregious decision. [...] (I can also say that it was very poorly done because the colleague reading the names was not briefed as to who she was, and did not speak Spanish, and mispronounced both her name and the title of her work!) I did know that she was rejected by Hist Con in one of its less “brilliant” moments, and her treatment at UCSC still grates” (email exchange dated March 4, 2019). The initiative to grant Anzaldúa her doctorate posthumously has been carried out by Carla Freccero, Helen Moglen, and Rob Wilson.

²⁷ Founded in 2005 and hosted by the Women Studies Institute of the University of Texas at San Antonio, the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa (SSGA) organizes every eighteen months since 2009 an international symposium dedicated to the life and work of Gloria Anzaldúa: El Mundo Zurdo Conference. In 2007, Priscilla Celina Suarez, Noemi Martínez and Daniel García Ordaz founded the Gloria Anzaldúa Legacy Project in the Río Grande Valley to help raise awareness of Anzaldúa’s work in the Valley and address a lack of institutional recognition. Since 2008, Emmy Pérez and the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas—Rio Grande Valley, organize, sometimes in collaboration with the SSGA, an annual event: El Retorno: El Valle Celebra Nuestra Gloria. In 2015, Bettina Aptheker and Karen Yamashita organized the conference “The Feminist Architecture of Gloria Anzaldúa: New Translations, Crossings and Pedagogies in Anzaldúan Thought” at UCSC.

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Anzaldúa's life and writings commit us to maintaining a critical stance towards the university, towards the way in which knowledge is constructed, circulated and transmitted, and the processes that (il)legitimize it, and towards our own position and involvement. Honoring Anzaldúa as the queer "other-sider" she was is one way of doing it.

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