

Unit Plan: *The Collision of In-Betweenness*

Prepared by Trevor Munhall

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Subject Area: English Language Arts, Humanities

Keywords: belonging, borderlands, Chicanx, exile, Gloria Anzaldúa, in-between, Latinx, mestiza, migration, nepantla

Grade Levels: 8-12

Time Required: 3-10 lessons (flexibility built into plan)

Instructional Objectives:

This unit is designed with the following College & Career Readiness Standards taken from the Common Core State Standards.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3 Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4 Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Guiding Questions:

- How does the border create a feeling of in-betweenness (nepantla) for people who live near it or cross over it? In what ways is this feeling similar or different from the experience other Latinx - or global - migrants have in the United States?
- How do various authors present the nuances of and associations with in-betweenness (nepantla) as it relates to the formation of identity or a sense of belonging?

Materials & Resources: **PLEASE INCLUDE LINKS TO FILES BELOW AND DELETE THIS COMMENT**

- anchor text printed or digital for student use:
 - *Borderlands*, by Gloria Anzaldúa
- supplemental texts printed or digital for student use:
 - *Child of the Americas*, by Aurora Levins Morales
 - *Ode to the Diasporican*, by Maria Teresa “Mariposa” Fernandez
 - *Entre Lucas y Juan Mejía*, by Julia Alvarez
 - *Exiles*, by Juan Felipe Herrera
 - *For Ana Veldford*, by Lourdes Casal
 - *I Am Joaquín*, by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales
 - *To Live in the Borderlands Means You...*, by Gloria Anzaldúa
- paper/pen and/or computers for composition in response to short writing/essay prompts

Introduction

Migrant writers from all over the world who arrive in the United States have expressed the phenomenon of feeling in-between two or more cultures: those they have left behind in their homelands and those they encounter in the United States. This feeling can be compounded for some by factors such as language and the proximate distance or access to their home culture.

The Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa writes from the perspective of someone who lives in the borderlands of South Texas. A U.S. citizen by birth, Anzaldúa spent her life straddling dominant

U.S. cultures, her family’s Mexican heritage, and various subcultures with which she identified. She describes in her seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta (an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.” Anzaldúa borrows the Nahuatl (Aztec) word, ***nepantla***, meaning literally *middle ground*, to describe the phenomenon of feeling like you belong in a third, in-between culture.

Teenagers, whether they are migrants or not, are likely to understand the concept of feeling in between worlds; they exist in-between the worlds of childhood and adulthood and likely navigate the peripheries of other complex social realms in their lives. This unit aims to engage students in an exploration of what it means to be in-between. What conflicts arise from these spaces? How does living in-between affect the formation of identity? Is there a silver lining to operating in-between cultures or groups?

The unit includes three parts:

1. Defining in-betweenness (*nepantla*).
2. Anchoring students in the theory of Gloria Anzaldúa.
3. Exploring connections and divergences between various writers who explore in-betweenness.

Instructional & Lesson Activities

Activity 1 – Introducing In-Betweenness (Nepantla)

This first activity is designed to get students thinking about the ways in which a person’s identity can be shaped by different, and frequently conflicting forces.

Begin by defining the term for students:

nepantla: living in between two forces or cultures

You can expand on this term by explaining that *nepantla* is a Nahuatl word meaning *middle ground*. Nahuatl (also called Aztec) is a language indigenous to Central Mexico and still spoken by millions of people who originate from this region.

Next, ask students to consider these question as they listen to [Nepantla, by Aurelio Valdez](#):

- **How does Valdez feel conflicted about his identity and ancestry?**
- **What conclusion does he read about these identity conflicts?**

Engage students in dialogue (small groups or full class) about their reactions to the ideas of *nepantla* in Valdez’s song.

Finally, invite students to respond to the following prompt:

Describe a time when you felt nepantla. Consider the roles you play in your family, at school, or in your community. When did you feel like you *in-between*.

Time permitting, select students to share their writing and engage in follow-up conversations with their classmates.

Possible follow-up or homework assignments might include asking students to revise their writing, respond to a classmate's writing, or ask a family member or other adult how they feel or experience nepantla in their lives.

Activity 2 – Establishing a Critical Framework

Key Understanding: For people whose identities are shaped by multiple cultures, a feeling of *in-between-ness* can lead to confusion, conflict, and complexity.

The next step is to engage students in reading and dialogue that helps create a critical framework for thinking about the nuance and complexity of identities shaped by multiple (sometimes opposing) cultural contexts.

Begin by reviewing the definition of the term:

nepantla: living in between two forces or cultures

Pass out paper or digital copies of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* and point out the footnotes in the text that will help students make sense of key terms.

Next, ask students to read the excerpts from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Then, engage them in writing and discussion (in small or large groups) using some of these guiding questions:

- What is the conflict Anzaldúa is naming in this passage? What are other situations, scenarios, or experiences in the real world where similar conflicts occur for people?
- What is Anzaldúa's tone about her identity as a mestiza? Does she have more than one tone? What words and phrases create these tones?
- What are the images and metaphors Anzaldúa uses to communicate the feeling of nepantla/being between multiple cultures and identities?
- What might be Anzaldúa's reasons for using both English and Spanish in this passage? What ideas has she chosen to write in English? In Spanish? Why?

Activity 3 – Applying the Critical Framework

Activity 3 is better described as *activities*. This should be thought of less as a singular activity and more as a menu of texts and possible avenues through which you can explore the concept of nepantla.

Each text below could be used to structure at least one full lesson, so you could feasibly have more than a week's worth of content to explore. If time is limited, choose the texts you feel will best help your students unpack the concept of nepantla.

I have included guiding questions for seven short texts, as well as other texts and multimedia resources you might consider using. The questions I have included could be structured as guided reading, discussion, or writing tasks. Consider which questions will best help your students unpack each text.

Text 1: *Child of the Americas*, by Aurora Levins Morales

- What does Levins Morales mean by, “Child of the Americas”? How does she define “Americas”? Why is she a child of the Americas?
- What are the identities that Levins Morales claims in this poem?
- In lines 9-14, the author roots her identity in specific parts of her body. How is her body literally part of her complex identity? How is her body also a symbol of her identities?
- In the last two stanzas, the author explores the contradictions of her identity. How does she reconcile these contradictions? How do the contradictions help her make sense of who she is and who her ancestors are?
- In what ways does Levins Morales experience in-between-ness? In what ways does this poem build on the ideas in Gloria Anzaldúa’s text? In what ways does this author disagree or have different perspectives on what it means to be in between multiple cultures? (Also compare to other texts on this list when appropriate.)

Text 2: *Ode to the Diasporican*, by Maria Teresa “Mariposa” Fernandez

- What identities does Fernandez claim in this poem? What are specific words and phrases that reveal her attitude toward her identities?
- Why does Fernandez choose to begin and end her poem in Spanish? What point is she trying to make and how does Spanish help her make that point?
- What might be the author’s reason for naming specific places and geographical features (e.g. the Bronx, Río Grande de Loiza)?
- How does Fernandez make sense of her identities?
- In what ways does Fernandez experience in-between-ness? In what ways does this poem build on the ideas in Gloria Anzaldúa’s text? In what ways does this author disagree or have different perspectives on what it means to be in between multiple cultures? (Also compare to other texts on this list when appropriate.)

Text 3: *Entre Lucas y Juan Mejia*, by Julia Alvarez

- What is Alvarez’s explanation for the meaning of the expression, “Entre Lucas y Juan Mejía”? How does this explanation help us understand her feelings about in-between-ness?
- Alvarez uses personal details from her life to explain how she feels in-between-ness. What are the experiences she has had that have led her to feel between multiple cultures or identities?
- In what ways does Alvarez experience in-between-ness? In what ways does this memoir build on the ideas in Gloria Anzaldúa’s text? In what ways does this author disagree or have different perspectives on what it means to be in between multiple cultures? (Also compare to other texts on this list when appropriate.)

Text 4: *Exiles*, by Juan Felipe Herrera

- What are the connotations of the expression on lines 2-3, “Women, men, children; cast out from the new paradise”? How do the connotations of the word “paradise” inform the relationship between those in exile and those “from here”? How are these connotations complicated by the realities those “from here” face in this “new paradise”?
- In line 4, Herrera suggests that, “They are not there,” and then in line 6, “...and they are not here.” So where are “they”? What might the author be suggesting about identity and belonging?
- How does the author use a shift in perspective to present the similarities and differences between those in exile and those observing? How does this complicate the ideas of belonging and being an outsider?
- In what ways does Herrera portray in-between-ness in this poem? In what ways does this poem build on the ideas in Gloria Anzaldúa’s text? In what ways does this author disagree or have different perspectives on what it means to be in between multiple cultures? (Also compare to other texts on this list when appropriate.)

Text 5: *I Am Joaquín*, by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales

- In what ways does the narrator express confusion about his identity? In what ways does the narrator express certainty about his identity?
- What are the contradictions Gonzales presents in the poem? How does he attempt to reconcile these contradictions? Is he successful?
- Gloria Anzaldúa was at least in part influenced by earlier Chicano writers and activists such as Gonzales. What are the parallels between the writing of Anzaldúa and Gonzales? In what ways does Anzaldúa diverge from or expand on the ideas in *I Am Joaquín*?
- In what ways does Gonzales portray in-between-ness in this poem?

Text 6: *For Ana Veldford*, by Lourdes Casal

- What are the tensions the narrator feels between Cuba (her homeland) and New York (her adopted home)? Does she feel more affinity for one of these places more than the other?
- In what ways does Casal feel like she belongs in the United States? In what ways does she feel foreign?
- What does she mean on lines 40-43 when Casal writes, “too *habanera* to be *newyorkina*,/too *newyorkina* to be/-even to become again-/anything else”? How is it possible that someone can be too much of one identity?
- In what ways does Casal portray in-between-ness in this poem? In what ways does this poem build on the ideas in Gloria Anzaldúa’s text? In what ways does this author disagree or have different perspectives on what it means to be in between multiple cultures? (Also compare to other texts on this list when appropriate.)

Text 7: *To Live In the Borderlands Means You*, by Gloria Anzaldúa

- In what ways does this poem reinforce the ideas from the earlier Gloria Anzaldúa passage? In what ways does the poem challenge or complicate her ideas about nepantla?
- How does Anzaldúa define the borderlands as a literal/physical space? How does she define the borderlands as a metaphorical space?
- What effect does Anzaldúa’s use of both English and Spanish have on her overall message about living in the borderlands?
- This poem is both an observation of what it means to live in the borderlands and also an instruction guide. Who might Anzaldúa’s intended audience be for this poem?

Extend & Elaborate: Additional Learning

While this unit focuses particularly on Latinx and Chicanx voices, within the canon of migrant and immigrant literature representing every culture, there are numerous texts and media that address nepantla in one form or another. Some further suggestions:

- [Migration & Belonging](#): A Teacher Created Unit from Facing History
- [América](#), by Los Tigres del Norte – Lyrics are in Spanish with many translations available online.
- [Legal Alien](#), by Pat Mora
- [Sonnet: The History of Puerto Rico](#), by Jack Agueros

Assessment

The following prompts are intended to be summative/comparative reflections on the concept of nepantla as presented in the texts. While they are composed as writing prompts, they could also be adapted as discussion topics for Socratic seminar, posters, or other forms of assessments.

1. Choose any two texts we have studied and compare and contrast the ways in which the authors develop the ways in which being in between two or many cultures affects the way people develop a sense of identity.
2. Gloria Anzaldúa describes the coming together of her various cultures, “un choque, a cultural collision.” What are the ways that other authors make sense of this collision or make peace with it? Choose at least two other texts to reference.

Accommodations & Modifications

Create reference sheets or word walls for key vocabulary.

Reading accommodations might include: previewing a text with a student one-on-one or in small groups, read aloud, or using a screen reader. Since all of the texts are relatively short, consider reading them multiple times (teacher read aloud, student read aloud, partner/group read aloud, independent reading).

Create sample outlines or provide graphic organizers to help students organize their written responses to prompts.

References

Acosta-Belén Edna, and Ilan Stavans. *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2011.

Anzaldúa Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Aunt Lute Books, 2007.

Reflection

My experience in the English classroom has taught me that students are hungry to see themselves and the struggles they face in the literature they read. Exploring the concept of nepantla is one way to engage students in a larger conceptual framework for understanding

their own identities and how the struggle of belonging or feeling stuck between cultures or groups affects the formation of identity.