

# Monstrosity in Everyday Life: Nepantleras, Theories in the Flesh, and Transformational Politics

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## READER BEWARE

There are nepantleras in the academy! You may think me a blind seer in a Shakespearian drama or a woman in white in a Mesoamerican warning of doom, but I am telling you, nepantleras are queer people of color interlocutors that trouble rigid categories of identity. These iterative hesitations have the potentiality to queer and decolonize spaces by breaking apart binary ideologies (Andrade and Gutierrez-Perez; Gutierrez “Disruptive”; Calafell and Moreman; Muñoz *Utopian*). Further, these disruptive ambiguities agitate places discursively and materially through their embodied performances of the borderlands (Gutierrez-Perez “Disruptive”). In the places constructed to school higher education into the bodies of administrators, faculty, staff, and students (Cooks and Warren), there are multiple interlocking racial, sexual, gendered, classed, and spiritual borderlands that nepantleras trouble, break, and agitate, and—I am not the only one here. For instance, Bernadette Calafell illustrates how her queer woman of color femininity is made monstrous in academic spaces (“Monstrous”). Whereas other examples of nepantilism include thickly descriptive interpretive works that discuss transformations into a nepantlera, the risks and rewards of being a nepantlera, and the personal, political, and spiritual aspects of power operating in academia (Heredia; Koshy). Drawing on (queer) women of color feminisms and popular culture, I utilize theories of the flesh as a metaphorical and material bridge between rhetoric and performance to privilege experiential, subjugated knowledge in order to center the monstrous experiences of nepantleras in everyday life.

In places of higher education, nepantleras must deploy multiple tactics of resistance in order to survive the violence of heteronormativity (Yep). As a queer cisgender man that deviates from heteronormative standards, I’ve deeply felt the

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anxiety, guilt, fear, shame, hate, psychological blemishing, and physical threats that come from challenging this system of domination (Yep 21). In fact, Gust Yep calls this phenomenon “soul murder,” and in academia, I enter the slaughter house every work day. Like a shapeshifter (Gutierrez-Perez “A Letter”), I must shift and change quickly from classroom to hallway to department office; I must run and hide at my desk with the door closed or escape to a library corner with book to nose; and, it is exhausting. At times, I disidentify to maintain a space for queer folks in a conversation with a colleague (Muñoz *Disidentifications*), or I enact a “joto passivity” by turning inwards and finding solace in a purposeful and embodied stillness similar to a rabbit wary of some perceived (or real) danger (Martínez). Sometimes, I utilize a Chicano camp to deconstruct ideologies that marginalize and exclude me; however, most times, I can only parody, point out the irony, or satirize the system momentarily to make room for my desires for other men (García 211). However, if I make any mistakes or if I misperform any of these tactics, then I am vulnerable to ridicule, disciplining acts of gossip, or worse—I am that “angry man of color.”

In popular culture, this can be observed in moments such as when cast member Pedro Zamora of MTV's *The Real World: San Francisco*, a gay, HIV+, Cuban-American man, clashed with, was verbally assaulted by, or threatened by his cast mates on the hit show (Muñoz *Disidentifications*). By putting his own body at risk, Zamora mediated the borderlands between the known and the unknown to educate the public on the realities of living with HIV in everyday life. As Carbado discusses, the social construction of raced masculinity limits the performative possibilities of male of color identity and experience, and although discussing black manhood specifically, Carbado notes how “Manhood is a performance. A script. It is accomplished and re-enacted in everyday social situations” (192). For instance, Cuellar explains how the predominance of images and examples of white manhood in popular culture (i.e., Dennis Quaid, Rob Lowe, Josh Hartnett, Chris Klein, Joseph Gordon-Levitt) affected his desires, needs, and wants in a romantic partner as a questioning Hispanic male and led to several unhealthy, one-sided obsessions that ultimately did not provide a roadmap for navigating the complexities of identity and culture. Walking to my building, my heart races. Grabbing the handle of the door, my arm hair stands on end. Looking through the tinted window, I breathe a sigh of relief; there is no one there. This is my life on the fringes. This is my life in academia.

In the following, I briefly delve into Chicana feminist scholarship to answer the question: what is a nepantlera? After defining this positionality as a witness and an agent of change, I further detail the risks and rewards of nepantilism through a combination of personal narrative and scholarly research, which is a well-documented method of connecting personal and popular culture (Cuellar; Manning and Adams; Scott). By moving from the personal to the popular and back, I utilize an autoethnographic approach to the study of popular culture that is “valid, viable, and vital” (Manning and Adams 188) as well as critical in that I “also make arguments about what texts, attitudes, beliefs, and practices should and should not exist in social life” (Manning and Adams 193). However, it is by weaving Anzaldúa and Calafell in conversation with the seven theses of monster theory developed by Cohen that I draw connections between nepantlera/monster theory and theorizing through the flesh. Moving through Aztec/Mexica myth and legend, Mexican and Caribbean history, U.S. American popular culture, and the experiences of queer people of color in the academy, I provide detailed examples of how nepantleras are made monstrous through everyday performances of fear and desire. **READER BEWARE:** Nepantleras are everywhere.

### What is a Nepantlera?

Nepantleras are monsters in everyday life that cross racial, gendered, sexual, spiritual, and classed borders as they mediate multiple worlds, which create understandings that are both feared and desired in cultural places and spaces. A nepantlera is a person who holds a positionality at the crossroads of several different identities and cultures. She is a “type of threshold person” (Keating *Transformation* 12) that lives “within and among multiple worlds” (Anzaldúa *Reader* 322), and because of this location in the cracks, she is “skilled at living with contradiction” and “can see more than one point of view at a time and negotiate the in-between spaces that connect seemingly rigid either/or positions” (McMaster 104). In my own life, I am often asked to speak to the divides between the LGBTQ and Latina/o and Chicana/o community (See Chávez), and utilizing the understandings learned from simultaneously inhabiting these identities, I make all my selves present in that space to facilitate dialogue and help these communities learn how to communicate with each other. A nepantlera is a witness to all sides and is an agent of change for her community.

As a witness, she does not pick sides, and instead, she actively engages both sides by listening, facilitating dialogue, and creating opportunities for reflexivity (Keating “Risking” 144). Ultimately, she is a mediator between worlds, and by utilizing the understandings gained within the cracks, she develops alternative perspectives. Anzaldúa explains that these *conocimientos* are “holistic, relational theories and tactics” that “reconceive or in other ways transform the various worlds” or spaces where the nepantlera dwells (*Reader* 322). For example, at the 1990 National Women’s Studies Association conference, many women of color walked out because of the years of dismissive treatment, ongoing racism, and limited attention to their needs by the organization (*Reader*). Anzaldúa agreed with the perspective of her colleagues, but decided not to fully reject the organization, she chose to stay at the conference and facilitate a dialogue amongst all the those involved in the conflict (Keating *Transformation* 16-17). In her own life, Anzaldúa understood that there is always more than just two sides, and as a nepantlera, she mediated and witnessed all sides to offer a connectionist approach towards transformation (Anzaldúa *Reader* 567-568). Indeed, as AnaLouise Keating notes, “the willingness to witness broadly, to all parties, is a dangerous, often unpleasant task” (*Transformation* 17).

A nepantlera is an agent of change and resistance “who enters into and interact[s] with multiple, often conflicting, political/cultural/ideological/ethnic/ etc. worlds” (Keating *Transformation* 12). By making themselves present (i.e., witnessing, mediating, speaking up), nepantleras “employ liminal states of consciousness and ways of thinking” (Keating “Shifting Worlds” 7) to transform places of strategic domination into spaces of tactical resistance. Nepantleras model how to navigate liminal spaces, which can be disorienting, fragmenting, and confusing states to occupy. For example, Carrie McMaster suggests that people with disabilities “are gifted at coping with liminality and could perform work involving the reconciliation of multiple points of view, altering existing points of view, and/or resolving conflicts” (105). As the ultimate border crossers, nepantleras are often feared and desired in everyday life because of their liminal positions in/between race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, ability, and class.

## Risking/Rewarding the Personal in Nepantla

A condition of inhabiting the borderlands is that you learn how to tolerate and thrive in ambiguity. Ambiguity is a political position because intersectional systems of oppression thrive in binary, either-or thinking, which is antithetical to the nepantlera. As Keating explains, the nepantlera never fully adopts the culture of either side of the (symbolic) border, yet she belongs to both and neither (*Transformation* 12). By identifying with multiple beliefs, groups, and locations, she risks the personal by moving from liminal state to liminal state twisting, turning, switching codes to survive here and then there, and this fluidity and multiplicity opens her up to self-division, isolation, misunderstanding, rejection, and accusations of disloyalty (Keating “Shifting Worlds” 2). These risks are not just words on a page, but they are embodied in the everyday by the nepantlera, which means she is in constant danger.

In my own experiences, I have faced these risks in the classroom, and yes, I have been wounded deeply time and again. As a mestizo with a mixed heritage of Mexican, African American, English, and Dutch, my students and colleagues often do not know what to do with me. In the ocular, my dark skin, large nose and lips, and athletic body interpellate me into the politics of misrecognition—“What are you?” (Calafell and Moreman). If the visual markers of my body do not allow you to ascribe an “accurate” stereotype to my body, how can you interact with me? In the grammatical, my students laugh as I greet them with classed vernaculars (“Wassup!”), explain theory with geographic slang (“Hella”), and wish them farewell in Spanish (“Adios!”). What do they think when I say “Yaaas!” Like Calafell and Moreman explain, “the mestiza/o is not grammatically correct” (410), and in the singular, my presence in the classroom is often misunderstood: “Do we call him Latino? Hispanic? Black? Mexican? Chicano? African American?” Either way, I can never be white, and further, my presence can never be natural or the norm for this academic space. Can you imagine what happens when I claim all these positionalities, when I embrace my grammatical incorrectness, when I own all my ambiguity in the ocular? As Calafell and Moreman make clear: “This middle space causes anxiety, distrust, and fear as our bodies are ‘read’ in ways that seek to locate us in dominant logics and assign an assumed ideological underpinning” (413). These affects tear at me from within and without. It feels like I am walking through the village and all eyes are on me. Doors are closing. Windows shutting. Why are they pointing?

Internally, I do not want to choose one side over the other. As I have written about previously (Willink, Gutierrez-Perez, Shukri, and Stein 304), asking a mestizo to choose a side is akin to asking me which grandparent do I want to kill? Should I destroy my Black grandfather or my white grandfather? My Chicana grandmother or my Mexican grandmother? Externally, I use my American cultural inheritance and nationality to speak perfect English to my students, yet it isn't enough to overcome my ambiguously dark features. So, like a too small turtleneck sweater, I squeeze and restrain my affect to fit the white male cisheterosexual middle class norms expected of my performance of "instructor" (Calafell and Moreman; Muñoz "Feeling Brown"). However, this is not only about the disciplining and exclusionary politics of whiteness. With my Latino, Chicano, or Xicano friends, I am never brown enough; I am a coconut—brown outside and white inside. Additionally, in my Black circles, I am welcomed. We laugh, we cry, and we "get it." Yet, eventually my wavy not kinky hair, my lack of body and facial hair, and my ambiguous oculars begin to exclude me from the conversation. In all these examples, I am torn and divided amongst the "races;" I am isolated as different and rejected from my cultures; I am misunderstood, and my loyalty to the group is questioned because of my impurity. These are the embodied risks of being a nepantlera; however, there are rewards.

Freedom of movement and the visions/understandings that come from border crossing is the reward for nepantlism. By vision, I mean nepantleras view the world from three positions: "the distance of the outsider, the closeness of the insider, and the in-between zone, the space between worlds" (Anzaldúa *Reader* 239). The understandings that erupt from these visions of an event, community, nation, or the world is a "complex interplay among difference, sameness, and similarities" (Anzaldúa *Reader* 239). However, it is the freedom of movement that facilitate the rewards that make nepantleras so desirable and feared. As Anzaldúa clarifies, "when we experience boundary shifts, border violations, bodily penetrations, identity confusions, a flash of *conocimiento* (understanding) may sear us, shocking us into a new way of reading the world" (*Reader* 241). Whether traversing literal geographic borders or symbolic borders of race, gender, class, sexuality, and/or spirituality, the nepantlera is made monstrous by the risks and rewards of her free movement and her understandings from the cracks between worlds. As an assistant professor, I am very aware that I wear the risks and rewards of being a nepantlera everywhere I go.

*Nepantleras as Monstrous Figures*

In the following sections, I weave Anzaldúa and Calafell in conversation with the seven theses of monster theory developed by Cohen to establish nepantleras within monster theory. Moving through these seven theses, I utilize Aztec myth and legend, Mexican and Caribbean history, U.S. American popular culture, and the experiences of queer people of color in the academy to provide detailed examples of how nepantleras are made monstrous through everyday performances of fear and desire. By locating monstrosity in discursive vernaculars and embodied acts, I aim to empower nepantleras with a language and space to discuss, reflect, and act on their oppression with others. As bridge builders, las nepantleras are at risk of violence from both sides of the borders, yet to capitalize on the rewards of nepantilism for all our interconnected communities and cultures, we need a way to explain our experiences in/between worlds to others. Not to relinquish our ambiguity and the power we have cultivated within our liminal positionalities, but we need a language to hold others accountable for the violence perpetuated in the name of dominant cultural norms and binary either-or thinking.

*La Nepantlera as a Cultural Body*

Monsters are a reflection or projection of a cultural/historical moment in time. For example, werewolves are often connected to racist and homophobic ideologies, and the use of monstrous imagery is a way for society to confront and work through their fears and desires of the Other (Calafell *Monstrosity*). Calafell connects monstrosity and monstrous imaging to women of color in how they are dehumanized through contradictory messages in popular culture, such as asexual and highly sexualized, commodified and exoticized, or masculine superwomen (“Monstrous” 114). As Cohen writes, “the monstrous body is pure culture” (4), and nepantleras create and are created specifically by mestiza cultures (Anzaldúa). A mestiza is a hybrid cultural body with a mixed-race, mixed-ethnic, and/or mixed-nation ancestry. By inhabiting such a body, a nepantlera literally *lives* the contradictions between culture/ideology/politics/ethnicity through her interactions with others.

For example, transwoman of color Carmen Carrera through her visibility as a model, TV celebrity, and Latina mediates and actively works to transform multiple worlds (raced, sexed, gendered, etc.) as a nepantlera in popular culture.

Carrera was a drag performer featured on the 4th season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on the LGBTQ cable channel *Logo*, and although she did not win this competition, she has continued to appear in popular culture because she began transitioning from male-to-female publicly through social media (i.e., youtube, Facebook, twitter, etc.) immediately following the airing of the show. However, it was when fans began circulating an online petition to make her the first transgendered Victoria's Secret model that Carrera moved firmly into the public imaginary. In several televised interviews, Carrera has navigated the borders between sex, gender, and sexuality by interviewers (e.g., Katie Couric) that featured many transphobic questions about her genitals, her on again off again relationship with her husband, and the politics of transgender desire. To be clear, "in most Chicana/o scholarship, transgender or trans\* is treated as the "T" in LGBT. But in fact, transgender cuts across sexualities: for example, many trans\* persons are both trans\* and gay, bisexual, lesbian, or queer" (Galarte 230). As a nepantlera in popular culture, Carrera inhabits a complex cultural body that must stand in for the fears and desires of an insatiable U.S. American public grappling with the emerging visibility of transgender positionalities on film, television, and social media.

Transwomen of color and transmen of color are often viewed as objects of study, tropological figures, or stand-ins for "gender trouble" or "in-betweenness," which is how Carrera has been treated in the popular imaginary (Galarte). Francisco J. Galarte urgently calls on Chicana/o scholars, activists, and artists to acknowledge and value their transgendered *hermanas y hermanos* "as over the last five years the numbers of Chicana and Latina trans\* women who have been murdered has steadily risen" (230). As nepantleras, the border crossings of transgendered women and men of color are often met with murder, discrimination, and marginalization by all races, by cisgender and cissexual men and women, and yes, even by their LGBTQ community members (Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, and Specht). Indeed, as Galarte explains, there is a generational divide between LGBTQ Chicanas/os that has created an internal tension (See Moraga 184-190). Galarte, in describing the violent death of trans\* Latina Gwen Amber Rose Araujo, names the risks and rewards of being una nepantlera: "for most Chicanas and Chicanos, our lives as we grow up are very much informed by what we believe to be coherent and stable understandings of race, gender, and sexuality, but when that is challenged, the rupture can be transformative or violent" (231). As a cultural body, the nepantlera operates in the world of the

everyday because their monstrosity is not abstract or imaginary, such as the werewolf, but embodied and made “real” by the dominant ideologies that police the borders of race, gender, sex, sexuality, y más.

*Nepantleras Mediate the Borders of the Possible*

Whereas other monsters *police* the borders of the possible (Cohen 12-16), a nepantlera as a borderlands dweller *mediates* the borders of the possible. Cohen writes that society/culture fears the monster because he/she “prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move” (Cohen 12). Further, “to step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself” (Cohen 12), yet in the case of the nepantlera, she actively and purposefully steps outside of this geography thus making *herself* monstrous. The “monstrous border patrol” is *not* her but the dominant and binary ideologies of the societies and cultures she moves between by her border crossings.

A nepantlera often finds herself under attack from both sides of the border as she uses her faculties to mediate the differences, sameness, and similarities between multiple worlds. For example, Malintzin Tenépal, the indigenous translator of the conquistador Hernán Cortéz, is labeled as a bandida (traitor), puta (whore), or la chingada (the fucked one) by her own people, and by the Spanish, she was deemed uncivilized, soulless, and a savage, which is made apparent when Cortéz gave her to one of his lieutenants when he was “done with her” (Calafell *Latina/o Communication Studies*; Carrasco). Tenépal, also known as La Malinche and Doña Marina, was of noble birth but was sold into slavery by her mother to secure the family’s inheritance for Tenépal’s younger half-brother from a second marriage (Chasteen 54). Chasteen writes that Tenépal was one of twenty females gifted to Cortéz in 1519 (54), and at 16, Tenépal was described as quick-witted, self-possessed, and gifted with language. She spoke Maya and Nahuatl, and in a matter of months, she learned how to speak Spanish (Chasteen 54). Tenépal proved to be an essential mediator during the first contact between the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica and the Spanish. However, for her role as a mediator between worlds, she has been made monstrous by history. Indeed, there are a myriad of murals, parks, and monuments dedicated to Cortéz the conqueror, yet for Tenépal the mediator, there is no such marking of memorial space to honor this nepantlera (Calafell “Pro(re-)claiming Loss”).

Furthermore, Tenépal's life is often connected to the monstrous myth of La Llorona (the weeping woman) (Anaya). La Llorona is a folkloric monster geographically located in the U.S. Southwest, and she is often told as a cautionary tale to children and men to regulate their behavior. Although versions of this tale change from region to region, the story I was told is as follows:

La Llorona was a beautiful woman with two children from a previous marriage. She was a widow who fell in love with a man that did not want to have kids. Although he wanted to marry her, he refused her because of her children. Desperate, she led her children to the river and drowned them one by one. At the time of her death, she was refused at the gates of heaven for her filicidal sins, and now, she is forever doomed to haunt rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water searching for her lost children. She is the weeping woman in white crying into the night, “¡Mis hijos estan perdidos!” (My children are lost), and if you happen to come across her, then beware because she may just snatch you up to join her in purgatory.

Whether young or old, whether male, female, or trans\*, whether in the U.S. Southwest or Mexico, La Llorona is feared and desired on both sides of the border as she mediates the spaces between the known and unknown. For example, La Llorona has been reproduced in American popular culture through films, television, and theatrical productions, and she is also featured in the annual haunted house created at Universal Studios (Arrizón; Moreman and Calafell).

Recently, on a camping trip at a lake with my husband and his extended family, the children were being *traviesos* (naughty) and kept sneaking out of their tent to go to the lake shore, which they had been playing at all morning and afternoon. In order to keep them in bed and away from the wilderness lake at night, we gathered them around the campfire, and each of us told the version of the La Llorona story told to us. Some tweaked the story to match the narrative of Malintzin Tenépal (“the Aztec princess betrayed by Cortéz murdered their children in an act of revenge”); others retold the story as being an act of revenge towards an abusive, alcoholic, and/or philandering husband; and still others shared a version where a man abandoned his wife for another woman (“He only cared about their children. He no longer cared for her, so she took away the only thing he did care for”). By the end of our storytelling, the children looked up at us with large puppy dog eyes trying to assess whether we were telling the truth or

lying to them; in the end, they did not sneak out of their tents for the rest of the vacation.

*Nepantleras Dwell at the Gates of Difference*

As a mestiza body that defies categorization because of their threshold positionality, nepantleras are “difference made flesh, come to dwell among us” (Cohen 7). As such, nepantleras are often labeled “transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker” (Cohen 16), or as Calafell writes, “I have been animalized, exoticized, tokenized, and sexualized. The ‘excesses’ of my body and my emotional affect mark me as a monstrous Other in the sanitized world of the White academy” (“Monstrous” 112). In academic spaces, (queer) women of color are often made monstrous because of their mestizaje and for their performances of a feminist and queer politics. For example, Calafell recalls a confrontation with a white woman professor that ultimately boiled down to an administrative error that scheduled both their classes in the same room with overlapping times (“Monstrous”). Although Calafell apologized for the confusion via email, this white woman professor spread rumors of Calafell as an “angry woman of color” and gossiped that she is afraid of her and has had several “breakdowns” since their interaction, including claims that students felt they needed to “protect her” from Calafell (“Monstrous”). Citing Davis, Calafell notes how white women crying has historical roots in racist practices where Black men were lynched and murdered for the accusation of rape from a crying white woman. The need to protect white femininity at all costs validates violence against women and men of color.

This strategy of white women crying is often used in classrooms and professional settings to make monstrous women of color by “deflecting blame and guilt, ‘victimizing’ the white woman while centering whiteness and reaffirming the savage Otherness of women of color. It also often functions as an opportunity for white women to reinforce the bonds of their privilege with white men through the role of innocent victim who must be protected from Otherness” (Calafell “Monstrous” 122-123). As a nepantlera in the academy, Calafell’s racialized, classed, and gendered performances of queer professor is deemed “excessive” by the white, heteronormative male structure that polices bodies through the politics of “civility.” These excesses cast nepantleras as “out of control, uncivil, and scary” (Calafell “Monstrous” 123), yet the white female professor is the desired

one because she plays “into a heteronormative performance that desires protection from her white male colleagues in power (reinforcing patriarchy)” (Calafell “Monstrous” 123). Further, Calafell’s appearance (“I am Chicana. I am fat. I am short. I am queer.”) juxtaposed alongside the white female’s appearance (“tall, straight, thin, fair haired, and White”) marks Calafell in the ocular as dwelling at the gates of difference (Calafell “Monstrous”).

*Nepantleras as Harbingers of Category Crisis*

As mestizas, nepantleras are constantly shifting, moving, and crossing borders of race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and/or class, which makes categorizing nepantleras difficult if not impossible. Cohen explains that monsters are “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinction” (6). Indeed, in the previous example, Calafell discusses how “women of color are often read as non-normative, threatening, or violent in their communication because they do not conform to hegemonic standards of white femininity and passive aggressiveness that is so often favored in the academy” (“Monstrous” 124). Additionally, my own story of fitting in everywhere and nowhere resonates with this portion of monster theory. Further, the trope of the tragic mulatto who would sacrifice her life for her white male lover that has propagated through popular culture (i.e., films, television, print media, etc.) is another example of this category crisis, which inevitably is about the difficulties of categorizing hybrid individuals (Arrizón). For the normalized individual, a nepantlera shouldn’t exist because they inhabit bodies and positions that they have been disciplined/schooled/indoctrinated into believing are impossible.

For instance, Coatlicue, the Aztec mother goddess of the earth, is often depicted as a monstrous half-woman/half-snake deity that embodies the spaces in-between creation and destruction. Coatlicue is “the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 68). She is a monstrous mythological figure because she is the embodiment of birth and death, and as the goddess of duality in life, synthesis of duality, and something more than duality or synthesis, she is a nepantlera that “gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 68). For those outside of Chicana/o or Mexicana/o culture, Coatlicue

is non-normative, threatening, and violent in her appearance. Anzaldúa explains, “She has no head. In its place two spurts of blood gush up, transfiguring into enormous twin rattlesnakes facing each other, which symbolize the earth-bound character of human life” (Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 69). As a nepantlera in mythology, she mediates the worlds of life and death, and as such, she is a harbinger of category crises as she occupies a “third space” or liminal zone of both/and/neither/or.

Coatlicue smashes and destroys distinction with her very body, and through this hybridization of supposed opposites, she births new understandings forged from this liminal space. Anzaldúa continues her explanation, “Coatlicue depicts the contradictory” (Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 69). For example, Anzaldúan scholars have reclaimed Coatlicue to study identity and society by creating spiritual and psychological theories from her embodied category crisis (Capetillo-Ponce 166). In performance art, the Coatlicue Theatre Company “blends ancient myths with current social and political issues, including racism and sexual oppression” to create staged performances for public consumption (Arrizón 66-68). As a nepantlera in Aztec mythology, Coatlicue is a symbolic figure utilized to theorize, research, and perform the contradictory experiences of nepantleras. She is: utilized as a form of revisionist myth making in the transformational theories of language (Keating *Transformation* 119-120); present in Chicana art (León 247); vital to theorizing the subjectivity of Xicana dykes (Moraga 95); embodied in opposites like the narratives surrounding the “tragic mulata” (Arrizón 83-117); and deployed to theorize resistance and agency (Lugones), mythopoetic thought and spiritual healing (Levine), and female sexuality (Garber). She is a guide for those who are harbingers of category crisis, and Coatlicue is a state of being. She is an ontological archetype to live by.

#### *Nepantleras as Threshold People Who Always Return*

As everyday interlocutors, nepantleras are not restricted to abstract, highly metaphorical, or fantastical characters in fiction. They are mestizas, queer people of color, transgendered persons, and women of color to name a few examples. Throughout history, societies have attempted to destroy nepantleras (e.g., the murder of LGBTQ peoples during the Holocaust), or they have integrated their knowledge into their very understanding of the world (e.g., two-spirit people in the Americas). Either way, nepantleras always return because they are human

beings that are brave and courageous enough to stand in the borderlands of what is possible (Gutierrez-Perez “El Mundo Zurdo”). As a monster, nepantleras are part of your family, your workplace, and your history, and as human beings, nepantleras will always be a part of society and culture.

In everyday life, you have seen what happens to nepantleras as they walk down the street, the hallways, or into your homes. They are threshold people. They are the genderqueer person who as they walk past a group of people at the movies are immediately made monstrous through communication: “Did you see that?” They disturb the boundaries of what society and culture have dictated as acceptable: “Was it a boy or a girl?” With their embodied presence, they challenge our very notions and assumptions of ourselves: “Why would they do that?” As a threshold person, she “ask[s] us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression” (Cohen 20). Nepantleras are a unique monster because they exist in everyday life, and unlike other monsters, nepantleras are acutely aware of the fact that they stand on the threshold of becoming:

*I am running a bit late to class because students in my prior course had questions about their upcoming oral history performances.*

*I take a deep breath, smile, and greet my intercultural communication course. I am looking forward to today because I assigned my own work alongside Richard Rodríguez’s article, “Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic.”*

*It is a day dedicated to introducing Jotería Communication Studies as a subdiscipline through a lesson that focuses on how class, race, sexuality, and masculinity operate in the realms of the aesthetic to maintain dominate constructions of culture and society.*

*I open with my usual question: “Let’s get those value judgements out to the way! Did you like the pieces? Did you not like the pieces? Why?”*

*His hand immediate shoots up. He has been waiting for class to start. He is too eager to speak. He says, “I thought it was disgusting. I would never assign something like this in a college class.”*

*I'm disgusting! I'm inept and unqualified?*

*Doesn't he know I will return to this class again and again? I am resisting  
the urge to rage. I am standing*

*on the threshold                    receiving*

*homophobic comments in front of my classroom. I am creating*

*a teachable moment*

*I am a nepantlera. I am bridging to survive.*

*I find out later in my course evaluations  
three students had been stalking me on social media.*

Nepantleras as everyday interlocutors always return, yet as threshold people, we operate in multiple worlds. An example from popular culture is international drag superstar RuPaul who often mediates the borders placed around race, class, gender, and sexuality in the popular imaginary on television, film, advertising, and print media (Carroll, Redlick, and Hanchey). Unquestionably, RuPaul is *the* most well-known drag performer in the world, yet her place in popular culture and her voice as a celebrity has been critiqued by both the LGBTQ community and the dominant U.S. mainstream. As threshold people, nepantleras are not restricted to the examples that I have provided, but others as well can be described as nepantleras, such as Muslim-practicing Latinos, Blacktino interlocutors, and within Filipino mestizaje (Arrizón; Johnson and Rivera-Servera; Martínez-Vázquez). In the end, operating in liminal spaces in everyday life connects monstrosity in popular culture to the experiences one has as one moves through the world. It is a kind of art imitating life imitating art.

## Fearing and Desiring the Other

Liminal spaces can often be disorienting, fragmenting, confusing, and/or violent, and a nepantlera braves this space over and over because of her (multiple) mestizaje—she exists in a vortex of becoming. Coyolxauhqui, the daughter of Coatlicue, is the Aztec goddess of the moon and sorcery, and she is the original

nepantlera that demonstrates with her nightly travels across the sky how to dwell in and survive the in-between state of nepantla. After taking a vow of celibacy, Coatlicue became pregnant by a feather while sweeping the temple at Mt. Coatepec. Coyolxauhqui embarrassed by her mother used her great spiritual powers of communication to convince her 400 brothers to kill their mother. Gifted with the ability of foresight, she saw that the fetus growing within their earth mother was Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of the sun and war. Realizing that her mother was about to give birth to the incarnation of war with all its attendant qualities of death, rape, and destruction, Coyolxauhqui led her brothers toward Mt. Coatepec, but before they could achieve their matricidal plans, Huitzilopochtli sprung fully grown and armed from his mother and cut up all 400 of his brothers and threw them into the sky—they became the southern stars we know today. As for Coyolxauhqui, he chopped off her head and tossed her body down the mountain where it was torn apart into several pieces. Placing her head and her body parts into the sky as a reminder to all, she is now the ever-changing moon fated to continuously gather herself together and fall back apart monthly as she travels her path across the heavens. Having experienced violence as the first sacrificial victim, Coyolxauhqui is the patron goddess of las nepantleras as she demonstrates how to manage the confusion and disorientation that comes from living in a state of constant fragmentation.

As a queer, working-class Xicano, I am both feared and desired, and I have often looked towards the heavens to Coyolxauhqui for guidance. Nepantleras are feared for their ambiguity and multiplicity; however, like other monsters, she is desired because of her freedom to migrate where others are afraid to go, for her ability to shapeshift to survive any given context, and for the understandings she creates by inhabiting the cracks/margins. In higher education, there are not a lot of Chicanas/os because systemic structures of oppression continue to hold my community within its grasp. Yosso and Solózano report that out of 100 Chicana/o students that enter elementary school less than one (.02%) will achieve a doctoral degree. Intersect this statistic with my queer identity, and I am an anomaly in academia. I am not supposed to exist here, so I am desired because my presence allows an institution, organization, or scholarly field to claim a tokenized illusion of diversity or inclusive excellence. However, like Calafell, the moment I begin to voice my critically-influenced understandings from the cracks between race, class, sexuality, gender, and spirituality—I am made monstrous. They want me, but they don't know what to do with me.

Desired for their transgressive and transformative potentiality, nepantleras are nonetheless quickly undermined, disciplined, and/or ostracized whenever they voice their expertise or attain any power within an institution. For instance, acknowledging the lack of space for Chicanas/os and Latinas/os in higher education, I co-founded an organization during my time in my doctoral program meant to address the lack of representation and retention of Latina/o graduate students on campus, and I was even officially elected as Navigation Chair for the first Concilio of this nascent student group. However, as we worked together to organize a conference conceived by me that aimed at improving the educational pipeline for Latinas/os, others began to undermine me by accomplishing tasks assign to me without asking, making major decisions without including me, or dismissing my breadth of organizing experience as derivative of an “out of control ego.” As the only queer Xicano in the organization, I was held up as a token of the groups’ inclusivity, yet the heteronormativity of the group remained firmly and aggressively in place. When I mentioned at every meeting that this space needed to encourage, welcome, and focus on women and queer people of color, I felt blamed when the cisgendered and cissexual straight men “visiting” never came back. I came to understand that I was only welcome in this brown space if I sanitized my sexuality to the point of erasure.

The final insult came when I had to leave a meeting early because it had been scheduled during one of my graduate-level courses. As the Navigation Chair, it was my responsibility as outlined in the constitution to create and print out an agenda for every meeting and facilitate the discussion to make sure every point of business was addressed. On this occasion, I moved quickly through the most important parts of the agenda, and after an hour, I turned over my responsibilities to another member of the Concilio, so I could make it on time to a very important course (i.e., Latino Religious Cultures). Later, I found out from multiple sources that several members of the group and the Concilio used my absence as an opportunity to talk about me behind my back. This betrayal by a group of people claiming to be my friends (*mi gente*), claiming to be advocates for marginalized identities, and claiming to offer a “safe space” for all Latinos *broke me into pieces*.

Like Coyolxauhqui, this moment was like having my head cut off and my bleeding body being thrown down the mountain. For weeks and months, I desperately searched for the pieces of me that had been scattered across the heavens. Why did this happen to me? I was confused and hurt that people who

had been to my home and ate food at my table would ostracize me in such a public way. Disoriented by this betrayal, I reached out to colleagues only to face further violence by people who I had called friends. Am I really the person they tell me I am? Looking at the myth of *la hija rebelde* (the rebel daughter), I know these people may see me as a monstrous figure capable killing my own mother, but if they took the time to look at me as a human being, then they would see that my true goal is to protect other women and queer people of color from violence. I rebelled against the heteronormativity and the normalized ways of being in that space because it was not inclusive for marginalized positions. Time after time, I invited the very, very few LGBTQ Latinas/os in my friend circles to attend, and time and again, they felt uncomfortable coming to the space. For voicing my understandings from the cracks and daring to disrupt the patriarchal, heteronormative order, I was sacrificed by my own community. How do you recover after a wound that deep?

### Conclusion: Monstrosity in Everyday Life

In this essay, I have attempted to provide a language created through a non-Western epistemology and ontology to discuss the experiences of *nepantleras* in everyday life. By connecting Cohen's seven theses of monstrosity with Anzaldúa and Calafell, I demonstrate through personal experience, academic research, popular culture, history, myth, and legend how *nepantleras* fit each of these characteristics of the monster. To be a *nepantlera* is to live in constant danger as you continuously move and disrupt geographic, psychological, and symbolic borders between the known and unknown. In popular culture, we can see *nepantleras* operating as ultimate border crossers by the ways in which they mediate multiple worlds, such as with Carmen Carrera, Pedro Zamora, and others. Further, as an always returning monster, *nepantleras* have inhabited space in popular culture for decades, such as in the propagation of the exotic, sensual, and tragic mulatto (e.g., Tongolole a.k.a. Yolanda Montes) in popular mid-twentieth century Tropicana Nightclub shows (Arrizón). The connection between the popular and the personal is often a thin-blurred line.

We, *nepantleras*, brave the risks of this position because the reward is freedom of movement and an alternate understanding of the world carved from our flesh. We are feared and labeled monsters through vernacular discourse and embodied

acts, yet we are desired for our ability to mediate, to witness all sides, and to transform ourselves, others, and the spaces we inhabit. Rather than offer this essay as a tool to translate our ambiguity for the dominant culture, I am whittling out a space where nepantleras can discuss, reflect, and act together towards our transformational vision of the world. We are not monsters because we are actually monstrous. We are monsters because you made us this way. Monstrosity in popular culture is a reflection and a constantly shifting refraction between and betwixt monstrosity in everyday life.

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