

# Learning from Gloria Anzaldúa

## Weaving Pluriversal Perspectives in Global Citizenship Education

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My job as an artist is to bear witness to what haunts us, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair el daño (the damage) by using the imagination and its visions.

*Anzaldúa & Keating 2015: xxxii*

### Abstract

By weaving Gloria Anzaldúa's ideas into Global Citizenship Education (GCED), this paper explores how her feminist, decolonial, and pluriversal perspectives can possibly inspire teaching and learning. Her work exemplifies a pluriversal approach, offering a framework to confront the modern colonial legacies in GCE and to deconstruct hierarchical worldviews in order to encourage diverse ways of being and knowing. Anzaldúa's writings on borderlands, *nepantla* and her dialogues with the more-than-human world emphasize the tensions between expanding traditional notions of citizenship and reimagining belonging. Borderlands challenges binary thinking and encourages learners to navigate the intersections of identities, cultures, and histories, where contradiction and complexity are fully present. *Nepantla*, as a space of in-betweenness, invites reflection on discomfort and ambiguity as essential for rethinking systemic injustices for example racism. Anzaldúa's emphasis on interconnected-

ness with the more-than-human world expands the scope of GCED, urging a move beyond human-centered frameworks towards a deeper relational ethic. Her *Seven Stages of Conocimiento* can guide learners through rupture, reflection, and action, nurturing the affective and relational qualities needed to co-create just and peaceful communities.

## Towards a Pluriversal Approach in Global Citizenship Education

Global Citizenship Education (GCED) is an educational approach that has gained prominence in recent years. However, the term Global Citizenship Education is inherently ambiguous. Those who use it often attach different meanings to the concept, assigning goals and programs that may overlap but are frequently quite distinct. The key dividing line lies in varying interpretations of the concept of citizenship. In some cases, GCED is understood relatively broadly as the global extension of traditional citizenship education. This perspective introduces global issues into the discussion but retains the framework of the national citizenship paradigm. In other instances, GCED is seen as education for global citizenship, emphasizing a break from the national paradigm altogether. Instead, it focuses on fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility that transcends national borders (Wintersteiner et al. 2014).

de Oliveira Andreotti's (2006) article, »Soft versus Critical Global Citizenship Education,« has become an important reference point in the discourse surrounding GCED. She noted that »soft« approaches in global learning often present Western values as universal, reinforcing the myth of Western superiority within GCED (ibid., p. 25). These values can contribute to harmful ways of being and knowing, such as hierarchies between humans, between humans and nature, and practices of othering, including racism (Pashby & da Costa 2021: 382). Therefore, the challenges we are collectively facing cannot be solved with more knowledge or cognitive frames alone. We especially need affective and relational capacities »to navigate these challenges: to feel, to imagine and to relate differently to everything around and within us« (de Oliveira Andreotti et al. 2019: 4). The increasing dominance of neoliberal perspectives (e.g., Camicia & Franklin 2011; Marshall 2011) and the perpetuation of the modern/colonial imaginary (e.g., de Oliveira Andreotti 2011; Pashby 2011) within GCED frameworks need to be challenged, as does the prescriptive approach found even in critical GCED orientations. Taking this critique seriously requires challenging

the universalizing tendencies of dominant Western traditions in GCED and embracing a more pluriversal approach without turning it into another single truth. Such an approach begins by engaging directly with difference and diversity without losing sight of power relations and hegemonic discourses (Pashby, da Costa & Sund 2020: 47). A pluriversal approach can be helpful »to respond to the tendency of dominant practices to reinforce an »us« and »them« within a colonial imaginary. Thinking with pluriversality provides possibilities for a praxis that works toward a re-existence of relationships across differences« (Pashby, da Costa & Sund 2020: 48). Pluriversal perspectives highlight the colonial roots of Eurocentric narratives in GCED, which often reproduce power imbalances by framing the Global North as the »savior« and the Global South as »deficient.« A pluriversal approach does not reject Western perspectives but instead contextualizes and decenters them. It also reveals the wider system of oppression in which Western perspectives are often rooted – a historical and social system of power imbalance. By »decentering,« the aim is to challenge the dominant position of the West without creating another West-and-Rest binary, to center so-called other voices and approaches and to imagine new ways of being together differently (Mignolo & Walsh 2018; Pashby, da Costa & Sund 2020: 47).

I believe that Gloria Anzaldúa's feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous work can support this aim. In this brief text I will explore some of the key perspectives in Anzaldúa's work and their potential contributions to GCED. Due to the word limit, I can only engage with Gloria Anzaldúa's work in an introductory way, offering inspiration for readers to delve deeper into her transformative ideas and their potential contributions to GCE.

## Embracing Anzaldúa in GCED

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (1942–2004), a feminist Chicana author and social justice activist living at the U.S.-Mexican border was known for her theories and practices on borderlands and border thinking, especially as outlined in »Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza«. Over time, some of her other concepts, such as *conocimiento*, *nepantla*, and spiritual activism in »Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality« have received increased attention. However, other theories, such as *autohistoria*, *nos/otras*, geographies of selves, and *El Mundo Zurdo* have gained less recognition (Keating 2022: 3).

AnaLouise Keating has engaged with Anzaldúa's substantial body of work and curated various books, including the most recent »Anzaldúan Theory Handbook«. Anzaldúa published in various forms, including poetry, short stories, children's books, autobiographies, monographs, and other formats. Her works resonated far beyond academia, inspiring artists, social activists, healers, and individuals from varied social and geographic locations. Her style of writing can be described as an »aesthetics of transformation,« deeply grounded in her metaphysics of interconnectedness. As Keating (2022) explains: »Anzaldúa's metaphysics of radical interconnectedness posits that each individual (both human and more-than-human) is interrelated with all existence: personhood does not stop with our skin, our individual self-enclosed identity, our simple life (birth date, history, and so on)« (Keating 2022: 6).

For Anzaldúa, theory and knowledge creation were deeply personal, embodied, and embedded in daily life. By simply existing on this planet, we are inherently connected to the world and all its inhabitants, continuously interpreting our experiences and forming theories along the way. Yet, the academic sphere has largely failed to acknowledge this expansive view, instead limiting the concept of theory to abstract intellectual constructs created by an elite group of people (Keating 2022: 65; Keating 2005). Through her writings, Anzaldúa shared intimate aspects of her life, highlighting the painful in-betweenness she experienced living in the borderlands – both geographically and psychologically. She engaged dialogically with everything she encountered, including landscapes, wisdom traditions, and Indigenous ways of knowing, particularly with *Nahua* traditions – a Mexican Indigenous group (Keating 2022: 65). For her, writing was a liberating process of healing and a way to imagine/create a more just world in which everyone could thrive.

This is how I do theory. When I re-experience an event, a series of tiny explosions of association – poetic association, not logical ones – interlock as pieces of my life unfold in my mind's eye. Bits of knowledge gained from others and from books are attached to these experiences (Keating 2022: 67–69).

She often reimagined her biographical memories, using imagination and other forms of knowing to analyze and feel her individual life and societal structures (Keating 2022: 67–69).

This relational and embodied understanding of theory provides the groundwork for Anzaldúa's conceptualization of borderlands and *nepantla* as lived, affective, and epistemic spaces of in-betweenness.

## Borderlands and Nepantla: Navigating the In-Between

Anzaldúa's concept of the borderlands has two meanings – the geographical borderland in the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border and the borderlands related to identity, consciousness, spirituality and reality (Keating 2022: 91). Metaphorically, the borderlands signify psychological, spiritual, and cultural in-betweenness – a space where identities and realities intersect and collide. Through this lens, Anzaldúa critiques the binaries of »us« versus »them,« exposing the arbitrary divisions of nation-states and cultural identities.

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (Anzaldúa 1987: 3)

The Borderlands are disorienting, yet transformative. They are spaces for outsiders, for those who do not fit neatly into predefined categories. For GCED, the borderlands lens is invaluable as it challenges learners to navigate the literal and metaphorical boundaries of identity and cultural difference. It encourages them to move beyond simplistic binaries and engage with the interconnected realities of the world. The borderlands also invite learners to reflect critically on their own positionalities, privileges, and intersections to move beyond homogenized global citizenship ideals by emphasizing the diversity and complexity of lived experiences. This approach seeks to resist tokenistic inclusion and instead fosters deep, onto-epistemic reflexivity – a profound questioning of the ways we know and exist in the world. Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness* describes a way of being that embraces ambiguity and multiplicity. It rejects binary thinking and recognizes the »shine and shadow« of modernity, where progress and oppression coexist (Mignolo 2011).

## Dialogues with the more-than-human

By the 1990s, Anzaldúa felt that the term borderlands was becoming too geographically bound, often interpreted solely as the Texas-Mexico border. To address this limitation, she introduced the concept of *nepantla*, a *Nahuatl* term that refers to liminal spaces of transition, transformation but also pain.

*Nepantla* reminds us that growth often happens in the cracks – in moments of uncertainty, when we're forced to question what we thought we knew. With the term *nepantla*, she also introduced the term *Nepantleras* – people who survive the in-between space and live within and among multiple worlds. Through their perspectives from the cracks, they can act as mediators. *Nepantleras* are threshold people, living within and among multiple worlds; through painful negotiations, they develop what Anzaldúa describes as »perspective[s] from the cracks.« They use these transformed perspectives to invent relational theories and tactics that enable them to reconceive or, in other ways, transform the various worlds in which they exist (Anzaldúa & Keating 2015: 245).

Anzaldúa's concept of *nepantla* also enabled her to articulate her dialogues with the more-than-human world. In »Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro«, she weaves a philosophy of radical interconnectedness, emphasizing the unity between humans, the natural world, and the spiritual realm. »I've been developing an ongoing relationship with the spirit of trees and nature sites since I was a child and that I can alter consciousness in order to communicate with them« (Anzaldúa 2015: 24). For Anzaldúa, consciousness is not confined to humans. Trees, streams, animals, ancestors, and even imaginal figures all possess agency and are alive. Her perspective challenges Enlightenment-based Western thought, which often separates humans from nature and privileges human-centered knowledge. Anzaldúa's imagination functions as an epistemological bridge, enabling her to perceive and communicate with more-than-human realities. Writing became a ritual for her – a means of connecting with the more-than-human world. For Anzaldúa, words and images were not merely representational but carried their own agency. This understanding expands what it means to »know,« situating knowledge as an emergent property of dynamic interactions between humans and the world around them. Her relational philosophy underscores the importance of recognizing humanity's embeddedness within larger ecological and spiritual systems. Her work is a call to deconstruct anthropocentric hierarchies and embrace an ethical framework that fosters care and respect for the planet. These ideas hold significant implications for GCED, particularly in addressing global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss or social injustice. By emphasizing interconnectedness learners can be encouraged to view environmental crises as shared responsibilities requiring collective action. Incorporating relational philosophies can inspire learners to value and protect biodiversity by recognizing the intrinsic agency of all living beings. Furthermore, this approach can help stu-

dents reframe social injustice as an ethical failure within broader systems, motivating them to address inequalities through a systemic perspective.

Through her dialogues with the more-than-human world, she also created a framework for transformation called the *Seven Stages of Conocimiento*, a nonlinear, recursive journey of rupture, reflection, and action. It weaves imagination, dreams, and dialogues with the more-than-human. It starts with *El arrebato* that cracks reality wide open, rupturing safety and exposing systemic injustices. It's a wake-up call, urging learners to confront multiple crises like, for example, climate change and racism. In *Nepantla*, you stand in the chaos of in-between, where opposing realities intersect, sparking critical reflection and relational ethics. *Nepantla* challenges the binary thinking that often underpins multiple crises and encourages viewing these issues as interconnected and systemic rather than isolated, fostering a more holistic understanding of their causes and impacts. The *Coatlicue State* plunges into despair, where fears and biases surface. This is the phase of introspection where learners realize their own complicities, fears, and biases in relation to these crises. Dealing with issues like climate change or racism reveals uncomfortable truths about systems of privilege, oppression, and exploitation. Then comes *the Call*, where clarity emerges, and commitment replaces paralysis. Learners begin to set personal and collective goals, embracing agency and accountability. In *Putting Coyolxauhqui Together*, new collective stories for reimagined futures arise. In this stage, learners metaphorically »gather the pieces« of broken relationships and identities, striving for a sense of wholeness that incorporates diverse perspectives and experiences. This stage fosters the reintegration of relationships severed by systems of oppression and exploitation. For climate change, this might mean restoring harmony with ecosystems through regenerative practices. For racism, it involves rebuilding trust and solidarity across racial and cultural divides, centering voices historically excluded from decision-making processes. Finally, in *Shifting Realities*, vision turns into action. Learners embody ethical practices, creating alliances and fostering collective healing, grounding transformation in daily life and global initiatives. This stage demands that individuals and communities live out the principles they've embraced – interconnection, peace and justice. In climate action, this could manifest in protests or everyday choices. In combating racism, it involves consistently standing against discrimination and becoming a responsible ally (Anzaldúa & Keating 2015: 121–156).

## Conclusion Reimagining GCED with Anzaldúa

Drawing from Anzaldúa's vision, we are reminded that the journey toward global citizenship is not just about acquiring information but about expanding our capacity to feel, imagine, and relate differently. How might educators reimagine their classrooms as spaces where learners feel their connections to the world – not just intellectually, but emotionally and relationally? For educators and learners, this means stepping into the discomfort of complexity and sitting in the tension when there are no easy and right answers. GCED comes alive in the chaotic, in-between spaces where identities intertwine, histories intersect, and perspectives collide. It's about recognizing how global challenges, such as climate change and racism, seep into the air we breathe, the choices we make, and the privileges we carry, all while moving beyond paralysis or guilt. How do I stand in solidarity and responsibility with people, communities and the more-than-human world? This question unsettles and grounds us simultaneously, inviting educators and learners to embrace pluriversality, hear the echoes of erased voices and co-create just and interconnected futures. Anzaldúa's work reminds us that this learning is not only intellectual but deeply transformative – uncomfortable enough to move us, yet grounding enough to connect us to a shared reality.

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