

Teacher's Guide

Nepantla: An Anthology for Queer Poets of Color

In 2014, Christopher Soto and Lambda Literary founded the online journal *Nepantla*, with the mission to nurture, celebrate, and preserve diversity within the queer poetry community, including contributions as diverse in style and form, as the experiences of QPOC in the United States. Now, *Nepantla* will appear for the first time in print as a survey of poetry by queer poets of color throughout U.S. history, including literary legends such as Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, June Jordan, Ai, and Pat Parker alongside contemporaries such as Natalie Diaz, Ocean Vuong, Danez Smith, Joshua Jennifer Espinoza, Robin Coste Lewis, Joy Harjo, Richard Blanco, Erika L. Sánchez, Jericho Brown, Carl Phillips, Tommy Pico, Eduardo C. Corral, Chen Chen, and more!

QUEER POETS OF COLOR

NEPANTLA: AN ANTHOLOGY
EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER SOTO



Questions for your students:

1. In the introduction of the anthology, Gloria E. Anzaldúa is quoted from *This Bridge We Call Home* and gives a definition of the word “nepantla.” Anzaldúa writes, “Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio.” Given this definition, what are some of the metaphorical bridges that you see being built between spaces in this anthology?

2. In the introduction, Christopher Soto names some limitations to the anthology. Please pick one limitation and expand upon its reasoning, detailing why it was important to name in the introduction.

Limitations:

(1) To state that something is the “first major” anthology can be dangerous. What if there is another anthology for queer poets of color in the United States that we somehow have not heard of? (2) The title of this anthology references Gloria E. Anzaldúa whose notions of mestizaje are currently being heavily debated in academia. What if Nepantla should not have been used as the title? (3) Notions about who constitutes as people of color are also questionable. If someone is Native American, how does the term “people of color” operate from the colonial gaze? (4) When this anthology is read by people who are based outside of the United States, can that be a form of pink-washing and imposing contemporary American understandings of gender and sexuality onto other places? (5) This anthology did not publish poets prior to the Harlem Renaissance because definitions of gender and sexuality have shifted so drastically over centuries. (6) How is the word “queer” also an inaccurate description of poets included in this anthology? It may have been more accurate to list: queer, trans, gender non-conforming, intersex, etc. (7) Not everyone in this anthology may have identified exactly as a queer person of color. Yet, everyone in this anthology has likely been perceived as, or perceived themselves as, both non-white and a gender or sexual minority.

3. Four figures from the Harlem Renaissance are included in this anthology: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson. Research the personal biography of one of these poets and also discover what their influence is on queer black poets that followed. For help, some black literary movements that followed include The Black Arts Movement (Nikki Giovanni), The Dark Room Collective (Carl Phillips), The Dark Noise Collective (Danez Smith), The Black Took Collective (Dawn Lundy Martin).

4. Pick one poem in the anthology that is rhetorically centered and discuss the relationship between literature and activism in the poem. How does the politics of the poem function in relationship to the aesthetic of how the poem is written?

5. The HIV/AIDS epidemic hit the queer of color community especially hard and several writers in the anthology discuss or allude to HIV/AIDS in their poems (Essex Hemphill, Melvin Dixon, Assotto Saint, Reginald Shepherd). Pick two of these poets and do a comparative analysis about how they approached the subject matter from different points of view.

6. Some possible themes in the book are race, police violence, immigration, the body, and love. Name five themes (and three poems that depict each of these themes). Why do you think these themes are important to queer of color poets?

7. One of the longer poems in the anthology is “The Border Crosser’s Pillowbook” by Rigoberto González, which is a sequence poem that uses much white space on each page. Copy the form of this poem by writing a long poem, with each section occupying a different page, with each section having fewer than 75 words. Option two, pick another poem with a unique form and explain why you would like to copy that form instead.

8. A prominent tone in the book is angst and perversion. Many of the poems seem to “shock” the reader. Why do you think this is a common thread in the book? What is one poem or line that might have shocked you? Why so? Was this shock approach necessary?

9. Trans and Gender Non-Conforming poets in the anthology include Joshua Jennifer Espinoza, Juliana Huxtable, Mark Aguhar, Meredith Talusan, and more. Research the publishing histories of these poets in order to find other literary and media publication platforms that are dedicated to trans and gender non-conforming writers. Some immediate examples of these platforms are *Troubling the Line* and *Vetch*. Name five platforms that you’ve discovered and create a list of your favorite ten poems written by trans and gender non-conforming writers that appear in these platforms.

10. Native poets in the anthology include Joy Harjo, Natalie Diaz, Tommy Pico, Beth Brant, Qwo Li Driskoll, and more. Some of these poets will also appear in an anthology released in 2018 from Graywolf Press called *New Poets of Native Nations*. Pick one contemporary native poet from this anthology or the *New Poets of Native Nations* anthology to do a book review on and then pitch that book review to a media site such as *The Rumpus* or *Lambda Literary*.

11. Concluding: Why is this anthology necessary? Did you learn about any new poets in the anthology? Are there similar anthologies that you have read? Did you see parts of your life reflected in this anthology that you haven’t seen reflected elsewhere? Did you see poets write about subjects that you didn’t know poets could write about? Did you see poets write in forms you didn’t know poets could write in? What is the most important takeaway you learned from this anthology?