

**Soto, Christopher, editor. *Nepantla: An Anthology for Queer Poets of Color*.  
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1 The Nahuatl word *nepantla*, as defined by Gloria Anzaldúa in *This Bridge We Call Home*, means *terre entre medio* or “middle ground/land between” loosely rendered (Soto I). Borrowing this word from Anzaldúa’s usage, Christopher Soto founded the literary journal *Nepantla* in association with Lambda Literary in 2013. Soto’s interest with this journal project was in increasing visibility of the diversity in queer poetry; the Nightboat Anthology *Nepantla: An Anthology for Queer Poets of Color* has the same aim and is largely an extension of the journal (I). Poets in the 200-page anthology validate the queer of color experience in all its polyvalence; there are, however, some things lacking in *Nepantla*. In Soto’s same spirit of “constructive criticism” (II), because this anthology’s poet-base is an essential, vibrant, and canonically underrepresented group, some critiques of this important anthology project should be made.

2 The general lack of organization or sectioning of the anthology confuses some themes together. *Nepantla* opens with the question of belonging in America: “I am a child of America/a step child,” Pat Parker writes (3). The poet’s churning “innards” set an unsettled tone (5), relating to the backdrop of oppression in the United States across the multiple generations of poets included in this anthology as well as to the embodiment and physicality of identity. Alongside embodied content arises a laudable variety of embodied forms, like Steffan Triplett’s erasure (14) and Rajiv Mohabir’s flowing and wet “A Boy with Baleen for Teeth” (64). Unfortunately, timely (or timeless) poems on police violence and sexual violence follow, like June Jordan’s work (12) and Jericho Brown’s (26). Rage is included as well as tenderness, as in Madison Johnson’s “Actually, Yes, Everything is About Race” (34) and the seemingly pure anger of Mark Aguhar’s list poem (100) that begins, in all caps, “FUCK YOUR WHITENESS/FUCK YOUR BEAUTY.” The anthology asks questions about the performance of queerness and color, as in Phillip B. Williams’s “Maskot #1,” which replicates a Black dialect with sass: “I sho love me some Hippy Hop references” (79, formatting preserved). *Nepantla* also forefronts the desires of the queer body, “to be craved so hard/i become marrow” (Franny Choi 114, formatting preserved) and boldly proclaims: “Lick my butt/cos I’m an angry ethnic fag/& I’m in so much pain” (Justin Chin 119). Finally, the anthology moves into a cluster of poems that engage the topic of AIDS, including Melvin Dixon’s “Heartbeats” (162).

3 *Nepantla* does not clearly alert the reader to the organization of its works or the reason as to individual poems' or writers' inclusion. Perhaps because the contributions range from poems published before 1958 all the way to 2016, the experiences represented become muddled together in specific counterproductive ways I will outline here.

4 The introduction tells us that the poet themselves is at least as important as the poem included, particularly because of Soto's stated criterion "has the poet been absolutely pivotal to development of other queer of color poets" (II). Additionally, the table of contents lists only the names of the poets and not their individual poem's title. Both of these elements indicate that, for the most part, "poets" as people are important to the anthology and the works themselves are less important. Many of the young and most lauded poets of the current generation are anthologized here, like Ocean Vuong, Tommy Pico, jayy dodd, and Rickey Laurentiis. However, there is no biographical or contextual information included in *Nepantla* in order to prioritize the poet as person or identity over the poem as work included. These poets are pivotal in the way that the introduction suggests, but many of the poems included are less individually coherent in this anthology's context. For instance, Dawn Lundy Martin's "excerpt from *Discipline*" is very partially excerpted in this anthology; without more of the original piece, the work almost lacks sense (109). The excerpting of work occurs frequently throughout *Nepantla* and, with the exception of some like George Abraham's "excerpt from *Inheritance*" (which is much longer than the others, 82), dilutes what are otherwise important poets' work, bringing up the question of editorial decision-making.

5 Some poems also reverberate uncomfortably throughout the collection. Ser Serpas's "excerpt from *Last Four Months*" declares "i dont trust/cis folks," but because the definition of queer in this anthology is so undefined and uncritical, the question of conversations between the poets and their work in the anthology is strained and unapproached, seeming to wedge Serpas into a collection with cis- poets.

6 *Nepantla* at times projects queerness onto poets who might not have used that word to describe themselves, like Langston Hughes and Audre Lorde. By refusing to define multiply and instead collapsing identity down to *queer and of color*, Soto misrepresents writers and limits this anthology to a cloudy understanding of queerness and being of color (III). Stripping away the context of the writer and including no sense of chronology or belonging in-time along with no biography and projected identities strains the connections and collapses the differences that exist between queer people of color from the Harlem Renaissance to now.

7 In many ways, *Nepantla* suffers from a lack of editorial direction; it also suffers from an expectation set by Nightboat's previous anthology *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, which promoted a critical understanding and situating of every poet included. It's not that every Nightboat anthology needs to include poetics statements, headshots, and extensive biographies; what is accomplished by these elements, however—a critical and complex stance towards identity politics and poetics—is a necessity for anthologies like *Nepantla*.

8 For me, *Nepantla* reads like an unfinished anthology project clearly derived from a preexisting journal. Because the anthology resists any sense of organization, using no formal conventions of telling the reader how they might approach it, what come across are tokenized ideas of queer-of-color subjecthood; here is the police brutality voice, here is the erotic Black voice, here is the riot voice, here is the mournful Native voice. Rather than promote multiplicity, the choices made force many of these poems to read through recognizable, typed patterns. The extensive list of anthology contributors makes a grand attempt, but overall fails to anthologize in a detailed, contextualized, and productive way, these essential voices.

## Works Cited

- Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria Anzaldúa. 1981. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Persephone Press.
- Peterson, Trace and TC Tolbert, editors. 2013. *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*. Nightboat Books.
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