

**Borderlands and Nepantla Theories' Interactions with Western Philosophy in  
Himilce Novas' *Mangos, Bananas, Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story***

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In her first novel, Himilce Novas presents the fable-like, “magic-realist” story of twins and star-crossed lovers, Esmeralda and Juan Ona.<sup>1</sup> Separated at birth due to tragedy and the class differences of their parents, Esmeralda and Juan never know of the other’s existence; they only know melancholy and struggles with class, immigration, and sexual abuse that persist for their whole lives. They both long for something undefinable that is missing in their lives, and they catch glimpses of this “something” occasionally when they look in their mirrors and see each other, without recognizing who the other is. Finally, when Esmeralda and Juan meet and fall in love with each other, they have found that missing “something.” Yet, it is in the struggles that they endure, and in the love that they share where they cross, knowingly and unknowingly, literal and figurative borders, thereby creating new experiences, alliances, and methods of knowledge creation. Esmeralda and Juan’s love story troubles ideological borders more so than geo-political borders. In this way, Novas’ novel becomes a Cuban-American borderland and nepantla text that demonstrates how Latinx literature can theorize with and against Western philosophy on the topic of epistemology in the tradition established by Gloria Anzaldúa.<sup>2</sup> This novel shows how Latinx literature can take part in and critically expand Western philosophy’s significant work in knowledge-construction. In her critically unexamined *Mangos, Bananas, Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story*, Himilce Novas subverts the Western philosophical practice of duality by emphasizing the potentiality of the borderlands/nepantla state, while still utilizing other central Western philosophical ideas (tabula rasa and Greek mythology).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the text concludes by resorting to a reliance on duality again, thereby complicating true employment of the concepts of borderlands and nepantla.

Various literary and cultural studies scholars frame the epistemological discourse that this novel features between Latinx literature and Western philosophy. For instance, José David Saldívar argues that the borderlands space allows for particular analysis about how cultures interplay with each other: “This mapping of cultural theory within the discourse of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is an invitation to literary scholars, historians, cultural studies critics, anthropologists, feminists, mass culture critics, public interest lawyers, and antiracists to redraw the borders between folklore and the counterdiscourses of marginality, between ‘everyday’ culture and ‘high’ culture, and between ‘people with culture’ and ‘people between culture’” (17). Saldívar describes how the borderlands space muddles distinctions between “high” and “low” cultures and locates him “within a zone of dangerous crossings with new ‘centralities’ that challenge dominant national centers of identity and culture” (19). His comments reflect how the ‘everyday’ cultural product of Latinx literature can interact with the ‘high’ cultural product of Western philosophy in such a way that new knowledge, which often challenges dominant discourses in identity and culture, is created. Moreover, Renato Rosaldo endorses how “Chicanos have long practiced the art of cultural blending, [so that] ‘we’ now stand in a position to become leaders in developing new forms of polyglot cultural creativity. ... the rear guard will become the vanguard” (216). This emphasis on cultural

blending/creativity and assertion of how the rear guard becomes the vanguard allows readers to see how Latinx literature and its studies can become the vanguard in theorizing epistemology. Lastly, Juan Flores discusses how the borderlands space and the practice of multiculturalism in ethnicity theory both offer “a radically changed optic concerning center and margins of cultural possibility” (223). This ‘radically changed optic concerning center and margins’ permits borderlands and nepantla theory to be pivotal in epistemological innovation. However, the most significant scholar in staging and structuring this dialogue between Latinx literature and Western philosophy is Gloria Anzaldúa. She explains and confirms the philosophic impact of Latinx literary and cultural studies.

In the posthumously published *Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, edited by Analouise Keating, Anzaldúa explicates the possibilities of the nepantla state. She begins with a definition of nepantla; “the Nahuatl word for an in-between state, nepantla is that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another; when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another; when travelling from the present identity into a new identity” (*Light in the Dark* 56). Nepantla is about movement and space, how both can change one’s perspectives. In this definition, one cannot help but hear the echoes of how Anzaldúa previously defined a “borderland” as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition,” a place where “the lifeblood of two worlds merg[es] to form a third country—a border culture” (*Borderlands* 25). Keating explains the nepantla state further in her introduction: “This loosening of restrictive worldviews—while extremely painful—can create shifts in consciousness and thus opportunities for change; we acquire additional, potentially transformative perspectives, different ways to understand ourselves, our circumstances, and our worlds” (xxxv). These ‘shifts in consciousness’ and ‘transformative perspectives’ recall how “a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una consciencia de mujer*” based on inclusivity arises in the borderlands space (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 99). This simultaneous emphasis on movement, space, and transformation usefully specifies the experience of the borderlands. In short, “[n]epantla represents both an elaboration of and an expansion beyond Anzaldúa’s well-known theories of the Borderlands” (Keating xxxiv). Anzaldúa herself phrases it simply: “The border, in a constant nepantla state, is an analog of the planet” (*Light in the Dark* 57). Both the border/borderlands and nepantla are about the experience of creating new knowledge and new methods of knowledge-construction. Such moves can shift the paradigms of knowledge and its creation in Western philosophy, inevitably affecting how the individual learns. This is the work of Novas’ text; her first novel shows how Latinx literature partakes in an epistemological back and forth with Western philosophy so that attempts at new knowledge and its construction are born. It all starts with the text’s first border-crossing.

### *Crossing Boundaries and Creating Knowledge*

The novel situates itself firmly as a borderlands and nepantla text in the story of Arnaldo, a man who works on a sugar plantation in Cuba and is without family or many choices in his life. Arnaldo is just sixteen years old when he meets a religious minister from the United States: “Arnaldo found himself in the middle of a revival, a crusade led

by a freckled, orange-haired young minister from the town of Florence, Alabama, on the border of Tennessee” (2).<sup>4</sup> No one in the town knows “what Arnaldo felt and why he gave his life to Jesus” (3) at that time, but Arnaldo does commit to this minister’s brand of religion. Notably, this minister is from a “borderland,” a town on the state-line between Tennessee and Alabama in the United States, and Arnaldo’s commitment to this new spiritual practice changes him radically. He becomes a physically healthier specimen of man with a full face, tanned skin, thick, dark, shiny hair, muscular body, and straight teeth (5-6); his described change makes him a figure of machismo. Arnaldo also becomes able to read not only Spanish but English as well (6-7). His peers note the change and “speak more about him than with him” (7), a sign perhaps of their respect, awe, and even fear. No doubt, the spiritual conversion of Arnaldo changes him for the better as an individual but he also becomes able to assist his community. When a polio epidemic hits his town, Arnaldo saves his cousin Perfecto’s young daughter; he becomes a healer whose reputation grows rapidly: “Word of his miracle had spread like wildfire, and people told Arnaldo they had even heard about his powers in Havana” (12). This all happens to Arnaldo in the first chapter and by the end of the second chapter, the readers find him crossing the watery border from Cuba to America on the eve of the Cuban revolution.<sup>5</sup>

Two points are clear in the beginning of this novel. First, the borderlands setting is two-fold here because not only is the preacher who converts Arnaldo from a borderlands area of the United States, but the novel takes the readers from Cuba to the United States, conveying another border-crossing experience.<sup>6</sup> Second, the act of crossing, be it literal or figurative, represents betterment or knowledge acquisition, especially in the case of the tangible results of Arnaldo’s spiritual conversion. Anzaldúa writes that, “every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing” (*Borderlands* 70). As an individual who goes from a secular to religious understanding of the world and who travels from Cuba to the United States, Arnaldo becomes a spiritually, physically, and mentally-enhanced being within this doubly-inscribed borderlands text. His actions are central to an examination of knowledge-construction, the first of which has to do with the exercise of his healing abilities.

Arnaldo’s reputation as a healer leads him to his most important client, Patricia Ona, the daughter of wealthy landowners; Patricia’s illness teaches Arnaldo about entering a borderlands and nēpantla space. John and Maria Ona, Patricia’s parents, only call for Arnaldo as a last resort, and when Arnaldo arrives at Patricia’s bedroom, it is all but too late. He takes extreme action: “At that moment, alone with Patricia who slept the sleep of death on the rich, imported Spanish sheets, the gossamer netting hanging overhead, Arnaldo was overcome with ravenous desire to enter the young woman, to possess her not only with his enormous erect member, but with his hands, teeth, and famished heart” (15). Although, in the vein of an Anzaldúan critique, one can interrogate Arnaldo’s machismo here as he lords his prowess over Patricia by violating her and expecting her silence, his actions do bring Patricia back to life. When her parents next enter the room, they find Patricia propped up on the bed, looking peaceful and alive (15). Soon after, Arnaldo and Patricia begin a passionate love-affair despite Arnaldo’s misgivings that such a socially mismatched union can be real:

At first, Arnaldo could not imagine what conversation Patricia could possibly entertain with a lowly peasant like him. ... He told her his favorite Bible stories, substituting the key names for Arnaldo and Patricia. ... These stories seemed to equalize the class differences between them, since he almost always was the hero and she the faithful maid. ... He came to believe there really was no Big House or Little House between them, no *campesino* and no lady of the house. There was only them, Arnaldo and Patricia, the young lovers whom God had appointed for a purpose—a purpose that, blessed assurance, would be revealed in time. (19-22)

Arnaldo's actions allow him to enter a *nepantla* space where Patricia is concerned. By committing a near-act of necrophilia, and subsequently falling in love with Patricia, Arnaldo enters an uncomfortable space where new possibilities arise—a space where the lines between life/death and rich/poor are blurred, so much so that Arnaldo believes that he and Patricia can make a life together. It is as Anzaldúa describes, “[i]n *nepantla* we undergo the anguish of changing our perspectives and crossing a series of *cruz calles*, junctures, and thresholds, some leading to a different way of relating to people and surroundings and others to a creation of a new world” (*Light in the Dark* 17). Arnaldo's belief that there is a purpose to their love, that it is ordained by God, proves the creation of a new world in the state of *nepantla* created by Arnaldo's actions. Both physical and social norms here are disregarded for greater good to be achieved. These moments extend and complicate Gloria Anzaldúa's earlier critique of despot duality: “What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other” (*Borderlands* 41). Applying Anzaldúa's critique of despot duality to these situations in the novel means realizing that the dualistic structure that places people as either alive or dead and as poor or rich can and should be subverted as Arnaldo does when his actions create a *nepantla* space.<sup>7</sup> Although the novel presents a disturbing image of near-necrophilia here, tangible good results emerge as Arnaldo revives Patricia and overcomes his limited views of how class works in society.

### *Complicating Duality through Nepantla*

Another significant moment becomes evident when Arnaldo crosses from Cuba to the United States with his and Patricia's daughter, Esmeralda. Exile is the only way for parent and child to be together. Months before, Patricia's father bans Arnaldo from their house when he finds out that Arnaldo has impregnated Patricia. Arnaldo plans to get his love and child back but when he returns to the Ona household, Patricia has died during childbirth and in a panic, Arnaldo kidnaps his daughter from Patricia's room. He does not realize that his son lies in a room not far off and he escapes with what he thinks is his only child. On that long, hot, and ill-supplied voyage from Cuba to the United States, circumstances become dire and Arnaldo kills a young boy with them so that he and his daughter can live. Years later, he tells Esmeralda the truth about this crossing: “Suddenly, I had my hands around the boy's neck. I squeezed and squeezed and felt his nut crack. ... And I picked his veins with my teeth, Esmeralda, one by one, and fed you from them like a fountain, and wet your blisters till you were firm and whole again. And I fed us both from little tender pieces of his flesh. Little tiny morsels which I chewed for you first”

(36-37). Mejoral, the cannibalized young boy, becomes an unfortunate victim when Arnaldo takes what action he must in order to keep himself and Esmeralda alive.

Again, Arnaldo's actions and the area of the watery crossing create a nepantla space, and "[t]here are many obstacles and dangers in crossing into nepantla," especially for Mejoral (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark* 58). On the raft from Cuba to the United States, Arnaldo, as a young and desperate father, does what he must in order to keep Esmeralda and himself alive. His actions directly interrogate notions of what is right and wrong for himself and the reader. As Keating explains, "[i]t's as if nepantla shoves us partially outside of our previous comfortable frameworks; pushes us into a frictional, contradictory clash of worldviews; challenges us to make some sort of meaning from chaos; and thus forces us to change" (xxxv). Indeed, in this scene of nepantla, Arnaldo and the reader are pushed outside of comfortable and accepted worldviews and are encouraged to condone the acts of murder and cannibalism as the only way to make meaning of the chaos of this dangerous crossing, someone has to survive. Granted, this questioning is bold, but it continues in the vein of showing how knowledge-construction in the borderlands and nepantla space needs to be fluid and innovative. Even the most "unnatural" acts can be questioned on their basis of "naturalness" when good results in this environment.

Nonetheless, when the intricacies of Arnaldo and Esmeralda's father-daughter relationship unfold, the potential underbelly of nepantla is exposed. The "gruesome" and "unnatural" tale of murder and cannibalism that Arnaldo tells his daughter is one level of their problematic relationship, but the most serious aspect of their warped interactions is how Arnaldo sexually assaults his daughter. When Arnaldo retires to bed for the evening, that is when Esmeralda's nightmare begins:

He would slip naked in her bed, draw her near, and tell his tale of how he healed the little girl of polio or the grown man of measles. ... And while he told his stories in his slow, hypnotic voice, his wide, rough hands caressed her throat, her rose-bud breasts, her girlish arms. He would slip his fingers between her thighs and prod her petals with his thumb. (31)

This sexual abuse would happen nearly every night of Esmeralda's life since she entered puberty, and she would try to process this abuse in some "naturalized" way by thinking of insects when her father abused her: "Esmeralda breathed frantically at his side, begging for air, feeling engulfed in nests of bat-winged roaches and giant spiders" (31). Significantly, after Arnaldo tells Esmeralda of what he did for her while crossing from Cuba to the United States, Esmeralda forgives her father, which is evident in how her mind processes the scene of abuse: "That evening, Esmeralda's fear of her night-father ceased at once, and the subway tremors stopped and the batwing cockroaches faded when next he approached her in the moonlight dark. ... she saw herself floating on a bed of rainbow-colored butterflies, hovering over sky and sea, free and cleansed by the salt air, swaddled in a soft honeysuckle breeze" (38). Esmeralda's forgiveness of her father's sexual abuse of her presents itself in the change of roach and spider imagery to the butterfly imagery that now goes through her mind while he sexually molests her. Arnaldo does not stop sexually abusing his daughter, committing incest, but her way of thinking about it changes, ostensibly from negative to positive as is evident in the imagery-change. Regardless, this action of crossing lines or entering nepantla, which is a space or time of

“chaos, anxiety, pain, and loss of control,” can sometimes end in negative experiences (Keating xxxiv). The act of father-daughter incest can yield no positive result as the novel’s earlier acts of border-crossing or forays into nepantla did. Esmeralda’s forgiveness is the only good here, but in it, the “unnatural” and unproductive act becomes “naturalized” in this borderlands/nepantla setting. Here, the murkiness and indecisiveness of nepantla become evident as no good seemingly comes from this “unnatural” act, but that does not hold true for all acts of incest committed in this novel.

In time, Juan meets his twin sister on their twenty-ninth birthday, and in the complexities of their reunion, the readers see another nepantla state. When Esmeralda and Juan meet, they are instantly attracted to each other; they have found that “something” missing from each of their lives in each other. On the day that they met in Arnaldo’s store-front church, they take a long walk together through the streets of New York City. Once they find themselves alone in what appears to be an abandoned crack-house, rife with the odors of urine and human defecation, they physically surrender to each other, not realizing at the time that they were committing incest (92). In this consummation, they are described in unusually strong terms as “inventing their love-making” and “emerging as one” (92). The reader can think here of Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject. The abject (this scene of an abandoned crack-house filled with the smells of human excrement) signals the disruption of conventional identity and cultural concepts, hence the act of incest and merging into one for Juan and Esmeralda. According to Kristeva, “[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (232). Juan, Esmeralda, and their relationship disturb popular social reason (the communal consensus that holds together a social order). Furthermore, as the love of these two characters is described as one of pure invention, which merges these two beings into one, clearly some good results here from this “unnatural” indiscretion in this abject scene. In this new relationship, Juan can end his promiscuity and bouts of depression that he endures for much of his life, and Esmeralda can find an end to the sexual molestation committed by her father and some financial and legal comfort as Juan has been raised in affluence by John and Maria Ona. This act of incest provides a distinct counter example to the act of incest committed by Arnaldo. Juan and Esmeralda’s love-making provides the first of several examples, outside of Arnaldo’s actions, where binary structures are interrogated in this novel.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout a majority of their lives, Esmeralda and Juan see the other regularly when they look at themselves in the mirror; they see each other as distinct entities in the doubling mirror images of each other, thus it is notable when the images of these people are described as becoming one. Juan quickly surmises the distinctiveness and value of the image of the woman he comes to know as Esmeralda when he sees it for the first time: She appeared in the mirror as “a pastoral beauty, a young goddess from the equatorial woods... And from that moment on, Juan understood who his north, or his south, was (although he still didn’t know where she was), and the image of Esmeralda never left him again” (60-61). Esmeralda appears to him as her distinct, whole self yet Juan perceives her to be his complement. Meanwhile, another similar thought is later revealed: “And although Juan and Esmeralda lived in different worlds, they conducted the minutiae of their lives in such identical ways that someone watching them in a movie might think they were observing halves of the same screen” (68). These characters are seen as and

explained as distinct entities to the “other” in the mirror, yet they also express, in viewing the other’s image, a sentiment that they are also two entities in one and this idea is realized when they meet each other: “The girl in the mirror became the man, and the man became the most fierce and passionate woman in the world” (75). If two entities can be distinct and also one, as Juan and Esmeralda are to each other, and this idea is previewed by how they see each other in the mirror and actualized when they meet, then these two characters are in *nepantla* and thus are *nepantleras*:

Dwelling in liminalities, in-between states or *nepantlas*, *las nepantleras* cannot be forced to stay in one place, locked into one perspective or perception of things or one picture of reality. ... Instead *las nepantleras* construct alternative routes, creating new topographies and geographies of hybrid selves who transcend binaries and de-polarize potential allies. (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark* 82)

Binary thinking has no permanent basis in knowledge-construction, especially in a borderlands/*nepantla* space.<sup>9</sup> This example highlights other sophisticated points that the novel makes about *nepantla* and duality,<sup>10</sup> and is complemented by the novel’s further narration of Arnaldo’s death and the value of painting (images) for Juan and Esmeralda.

#### *The Simultaneous Death and Birth of New Knowledge*

The patricide of Arnaldo is the last act which questions that label of “unnatural,” thereby reemphasizing the characters’ dwelling in a borderlands/*nepantla* space. When Arnaldo confirms the true identity of Juan and his sexual relationship with Esmeralda, his sister, Arnaldo goes over to their love-nest for the express purpose of not only confrontation but assistance. He needs to tell his son and daughter the truth but has no strong inclination to punish them. This frame of mind changes when he walks into their studio apartment and catches them in their middle of love-making. Arnaldo attacks Juan with a screwdriver and violent chaos ensues:

While Arnaldo continued his disembodied jabbing into Juan with a force as monstrous as a hurricane, his own daughter, his Esmeralda, who’d pried herself from his Herculean foot that had her pinned against the floor, turned on Arnaldo with Juan’s painted hammer, the one he used to nail his canvass on the wall. ... Esmeralda dealt her father the deadly blow that felt like melting tar on hard cement and split his brown and blood-red coconut head in two. (141)

The splitting of her father’s head in two is a symbolic gesture in three ways. First, it eradicates the sexually-abusive patriarchal figure of this novel. Second, it ironically splits into two that key area of the body most associated with traditional epistemological modes, the head. Third, this scene invokes the Greek figure of Hercules in the description of Arnaldo’s foot and the Greek myth about the birth of Athena, where she emerges fully grown and armed when Hephaestus (or some say Prometheus) breaks Zeus’ skull due to his complaints of a headache and after he has swallowed a pregnant Metis.<sup>11</sup> Similar to

this myth, the reader can see Esmeralda's cracking open of her father's head as her attainment of freedom and control, much like Athena's birth from the head of her father, Zeus. Because of these points, and the reality that Arnaldo almost killed a truly innocent man, this act of patricide resumes the novel's earlier exploration of nepantla, specifically on the point of possible new and alternative knowledge-construction. Killing Arnaldo in this scene also does yield some productive results in terms of the novel's plot as now Juan and Esmeralda can be together unencumbered by anyone. This action, along with the truth of her relation to Juan which she soon learns, rattles Esmeralda to the core. She hides underneath her and Juan's bed for nearly two weeks, unable to truly process all that is happened and all that is "true." Juan eventually finds her and nurses her back to health. He convinces her that though they are safe for now from murder charges, it is probably best if they move to the South and marry. Juan's attempt to calm and quiet Esmeralda could be read as a masculine effort at "taming her wild tongue," which Anzaldúa writes about in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, but there is more to Juan's actions here. This question of whether to move to the South or stay in the North also becomes fecund with references to duality and other philosophical ideas.

Juan and Esmeralda's decisions to marry and move to the South, despite knowing their biological relationship to each other, demonstrate their willingness to figuratively wipe the slate clean and start anew, building a new life as a couple. But this willingness is short-lived, at least for Esmeralda. At first, Juan convinces Esmeralda that the only choice that they have now is to be together at whatever cost. When Esmeralda asks how this can be possible, he responds by figuratively describing the act of forgetting: "But it can be...if we can paint over certain things, cover them with mother-of-pearl white, paint a vase of flowers or a seascape in place of all those things that would try to render our love asunder" (152). At this time, Juan creates a metaphor with painting and forgetting in order to convince Esmeralda that such erasure and recreation can happen. Interestingly, this metaphor appears earlier in the novel. Juan uses the same metaphor to describe the process of getting to know Esmeralda when they first meet: "Juan had described these moments as the times when her reality erased his with a white paint roller, and he gave himself to her like an empty canvas" (105). In both uses of this metaphor, there is the idea of the tabula rasa. Dating as far back as Aristotle's *De Anima*, the tabula rasa is the epistemological theory that individuals are born with no mental preconceptions and all subsequent acquisition of knowledge is based on experience and perception. This implication of the tabula rasa here demonstrates the strongest example of how Western philosophy can support a borderlands and nepantla reading of this text. According to Juan, their relationship has always been about starting anew and this extends to the creation of a new reality. Juan and Esmeralda are nepantleras, and as Anzaldúa writes, "[n]epantleras are not constrained by one culture or world but experience multiple realities" (*Light in the Dark* 82). Even after they know their biological relationship to one another, Juan contends the ability to create a new reality, new knowledge, a space where they can live together as husband and wife is still there.<sup>12</sup>

To emphasize this point of "new" knowledge-construction in both examples, Juan distinctly uses painting as opposed to writing or the written word as the means to inscribe this new reality. In these two moments, the novel advocates for more inventive and non-Western ways of knowledge-construction, which can place equal values on words, images, and emotions. Anzaldúa explicates: "An image is a bridge between evoked

emotion and conscious knowledge; words are the cables that hold up the bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness” (*Borderlands* 91). Although images and words are linked in a pathway to critical thinking, images are more immediate than words, hence Juan’s usage of painting. Anzaldúa continues her description of the power of images: “For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body-flesh and bone—and from the Earth’s body—stone, sky, liquid, soil” (*Borderlands* 97). Images and words drawn from the earth and the body can transform Juan and Esmeralda’s reality to one where they can live together. Moreover, on both occasions, Esmeralda also concedes that such erasure of the past in becoming blank canvases is possible, and that they have ability to create themselves and their life and world anew, as true nepantlera subjects.

Juan and Esmeralda marry in Florida, under the watchful yet unsuspecting eye of their maternal grandparents, John and Maria Ona. In time, however, Esmeralda grows restless and moves back to the North on the wings of her butterflies (159). This action seemingly seals the fate of Esmeralda. The New York City detectives, who investigated her father’s death and were suspicious of Juan and Esmeralda as they learned many disturbing facts about Arnaldo and the Ona family history, read the wedding announcement of Juan and Esmeralda and still have their suspicions. This returning to the North signifies a returning to binary thinking in that if Esmeralda cannot live in the South, she must return to the North. There is no third or other option. For all the work this novel does in presenting bold, thought-provoking examples of what the borderlands and nepantla state can contribute to new and alternative knowledge-construction, while still relying on certain Western philosophical ideas, it troublingly and uncomfortably returns to a reliance on binaries, making it a limited borderlands/nepantla text.

### *Conclusion*

Applying the concepts of borderlands and nepantla to Himilce Novas’ *Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story* allows one to craft an analysis that contributes to the blossoming field of pan-Latinx Studies, which views conversations and comparisons across Latinx groups as useful to theorizing epistemology. Borderlands and nepantla theories allow for the creation of hybrid selves, whose perspectives and realities can be changed; and encourage subjects to leave comfortable frameworks of knowledge and culture, so that meaning can be extracted from chaos. Multiple realities and ways of communication can be achieved in the borderlands/nepantla space that critique and expand Western philosophic ideas and concepts. Fantastic events do occur in this novel, but so does a budding philosophic commentary on Western knowledge-construction. To see this novel subvert duality by stressing the borderlands and nepantla state in bold textual examples and using certain ideas of Western philosophy and its texts, but then return inevitably to a reliance on binary thinking perhaps demonstrates the unshakeable strength of Western culture, thinking, and knowledge. Or maybe Novas’ novel shows the readers how the ideas and ways of Western philosophy and knowledge construction do not have to be deconstructed to be of value. Perhaps, all they have to be is re-conceptualized and repurposed, so that they can be of more productive service in an ever-

increasingly diverse and global world, where multiple ways of knowing, engaging and reacting are needed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I share Jon D. Rossini's observation about the limitations resulting from an overreliance on magic-realism in the analysis of Latinx literature: "Though some might call this magic-realism, that aesthetic is too easily read as a commodified form of Latino cultural production that distances the effects of the [work] from the audience. To do so runs the risk of undercutting the realism of this different space by making the 'other' part of a different materiality and effectively sanitizing the representation by displacing anything uncomfortable or unfamiliar on the other side—*el otro lado*" (141). Overuse of "magic-realism" in Latinx literary analysis can create a distance between the significance of the work and the audience by placing difficult truths evidenced in the texts on the "other side" of reality, thereby sanitizing the overall effect of processing these realities. Despite the fantastical renditions of certain characters and actions in Novas' first novel, I avoid application of the term "magic-realism" and all its connotations in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> In stating that "Novas' novel becomes a Cuban-American borderland text," I want to make clear that I am aware of the dangers of applying the label "border subjectivity" so liberally that it loses its important connection to material reality and thus stymies the label's potential for reconstruction and liberation in identity and cultural formation. Instead, I claim that "border-subjectivity" can apply to Cuban and Cuban-American individuals, as the label can apply to Chicanos and Nuyoricans: "Nuyorican and Chicano are both border identities based on their spatiality. Nuyorican is based in the colonial displacement from Puerto Rico (a product of labor practices and economics rather than direct forced migration) in which the everyday lives of Puerto Ricans in New York mutually rewrite the space and the people. Chicano identity not only is created in the geographic reality of a shift in national borders, it exists in the spaces between U.S. and Mexican subject positions" (Rossini 117). Cuban and Cuban-Americans can lay claim to border identities and subjectivities based on spatiality (with the Atlantic Ocean separating Cuba and the United States) and the reality of different knowledges and practices being produced when Cuban and American cultures interact.

<sup>3</sup> At the date of the writing of this essay, there was still no published critical studies of Novas' first novel searchable in the *MLA International Bibliography*.

<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of brevity, in-text citations and paraphrases from Novas' novel will be cited by page number only.

<sup>5</sup> This border-crossing on the eve of the Cuban revolution, when a whole new government, society, and way of life is initiated in Cuba, further strengthens this idea that any type of "crossing" invokes ideas of radical change.

<sup>6</sup> Additionally, this invoked image of a watery border reminds the reader of the historical and economic connections between Cuba and the United States: "The steam line and the flourishing cigar industry created flesh-and-blood ties between Cuba and the United States. By the early twentieth century, as many as 50,000-100,000 people travelled annually between Havana, Key West, and Tampa—so many that Cubans typically did not have to pass through customs or immigration" (Gonzalez 110). Migration paths from Cuba to the United States and back again were so numerous and common-place that customs and immigration offices were by-passed, thereby creating a borderlands/nepantla space.

<sup>7</sup> In her second novel, *Princess Papaya*, Novas continues her critique of binaries in new ways in her creation of a character named Cooper, who identifies as an intersexual: "As an intersexual, his very presence undermines binary structures of male/female sexual dimorphism by moving between them unexpectedly" (Socolovsky 172). It is this possible movement and "inter" identity in sexuality and gender that models new notions of belonging and national identity, according to Socolovsky.

<sup>8</sup> The novel presents other critical points involving Juan or Esmeralda where strict binaries and the taxonomic structures that they often lead to are questioned. First, the readers see how Esmeralda attracts both men (Rob Sanders, her high school English teacher) and women (a Broadway star by the name of Cristina) equally (43). She does not fit into convenient categories of “heterosexual” or “homosexual.” Second, both Esmeralda and Juan confess to taxonomic behaviors that also fail to yield good. Juan confesses to organizing his love-life the way one might organize a closet (70), and Esmeralda too proclaims to have the same neatness and precision when organizing romantic entanglements in her life (74). Both Juan and Esmeralda are described as organizing their lives into convenient categories; such efforts are to no avail as neither person experiences fulfillment in his or her life. It appears that Juan and Esmeralda exhibit signs of possessing the mestiza consciousness; the mestiza “has discovered that she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 101). The mestiza consciousness does not function within an environment of rigid boundaries; it thrives on fluidity, the flow and flux which create new ideas. The taxonomic approach, of which binary structures are a part, is fixed and appears as a stalling tactic, a way for Esmeralda and Juan to compartmentalize their lives until they meet each other.

<sup>9</sup> Yet, the love story of Juan and Esmeralda cannot help but still make the reader think of Western philosophy, particularly Aristophanes’ speech about love in Plato’s *Symposium*. Aristophanes describes humans as existing in three sexes (male, female, and the union of the two). Each individual physical being is described as round with four hands, four feet, two faces, and one head. Zeus and the other deities feared these powerful beings, so he split them apart and doomed each half to be in search of the other half in order to attain that feeling of wholeness: “And the reason is that the human constitution was originally one and we were a whole and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love” (Pelliccia 233). In this moment, the reader can view Western philosophy in connection with the borderlands/nepantla theoretical application in this text.

<sup>10</sup> At two distinct moments in the novel, Novas presents uses of binaries in a common saying, “For every south, there is a north, and even though the north may know nothing of the south or the south of the north, they need each other to be what they are” (53), and in Arnaldo’s thoughts about being drafted into the Vietnam war, “He fervently believed that war was waged by the devious, by men who halted between two opinions, speaking for peace and hungering for carnage—calculating men, bloodthirsty men, lovers of the ambush” (127-128). Both references demonstrate binaries to be linked to notions of fate and inaction, which can lead to stagnation and violence. Thus, a binary is rendered as a rather static structure for knowledge-construction.

<sup>11</sup> According to Robert Graves,

Zeus lusted after Metis the Titaness, who turned into many shapes to escape him until she was caught at last and got with child. An oracle of Mother Earth then declared that this would be a girl-child and that, if Metis conceived again, she would bear a son who was fated to depose Zeus, just as Zeus had deposed Cronus, and Cronus had deposed Uranus. Therefore, having coaxed Metis to a couch with honeyed words, Zeus suddenly opened his mouth and swallowed her, and that was the end of Metis. (51-52)

But this myth is arguably the beginning of Athena, as it is from the “ingestion” of a pregnant Metis that Athena (ostensibly the girl-child) can emerge from Zeus’ head. The implication of this myth here also depicts another way Western philosophy/mythology is in conversation with borderlands/nepantla theory in this novel.

<sup>12</sup> In her second novel *Princess Papaya*, Novas continues her use of “twinning” in order to allow for the possibility of creating anew in her characters named Victoria and Cooper, who are not related biologically but are described as physically very similar to each other: “In particular, their relationship challenges normative family structures (that depend on exogamic heterosexual reproduction) because of the images of twinning that are frequently used to describe how physically similar they are. ... Ultimately, this ‘twinning’ moves Victoria and Cooper away from their particular ethnic group and toward a new community organization” (Socolovsky 180). This same new community/family organization is happening in *Mangos*,

*Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story* when Juan and Esmeralda attempt to go off and make a new life together.

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