

## The Music of Nepantla

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*"If you have a dream, don't let anybody take it away, and always believe that the impossible is always possible,"*

*- Selena Quintanilla*

The life of the Chicana is marked by the struggle that comes with navigating dual identities in a world which demands adherence to only one. Children born in the U.S. to Mexican immigrants consequently live in the borderlands, in *Nepantla*, in the cracks between worlds, and must navigate spaces where we are neither *nos* (us) or *otras* (them). This paper seeks to examine how Chicanas navigate such identities and become *Nepantleras*, as articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* (2015). I argue that Selena Quintanilla, legendary Mexican-American singer, faithfully embodied the *Nepantlera* identity through her music, and became an interpreter of mestiza consciousness.

This theoretical framework becomes clearer when examined through a lived example. Selena's life and career unfolded within the very tensions Gloria Anzaldúa describes. Born in Texas to Mexican immigrant parents, Selena moved fluidly between English and Spanish, between mainstream American pop culture and regional Mexican musical traditions. Her performances were bilingual, yes, but also bicultural, inhabiting the in-between space Anzaldúa names *Nepantla*, a liminal terrain of transformation and possibility. Rather than resolving the contradictions of her identity, Selena embraced them wholeheartedly. She sang Tejano music, a genre itself born of cultural border-crossings, while incorporating contemporary pop, cumbia, and R&B influences. Her public persona affirmed that Chicana identity could be dynamic, modern, and rooted in tradition all at once, contradicting preexisting binary restrictions.

To better understand the significance of this in-betweenness, it is necessary to more clearly define *Nepantla* itself. "Nepantla occurs during the many transitional stages of life and can describe issues and concerns related to identity, aesthetics, epistemology, and/or ontology," (Keating, in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* 2015, 245). While Anzaldúa provides the conceptual language for understanding identity in *Nepantla*, another question emerges: how are these identities experienced, shared, and made meaningful in everyday life? It is here that John Dewey's theory of art as experience becomes essential. Dewey's theory of art as experience highlights the importance of Selena's music for Chicano identity formation, specifically through her blend of American pop music and traditional Mexican rhythm.

Before turning fully to Dewey's framework, it is important to situate Selena's artistry within the cultural influences that shaped her sound. Selena's artwork, her music, was influenced from an early age by a multitude of cultural forces. Her father, Abraham Quintanilla, grew up in the midst of La Onda Chicana, a musical movement described as a fusion of "American rock, country, doo-wop, and big-band orchestra with the traditional folk sounds of the accordion-heavy polka-influenced conjunto of South Texas," (Cantú, 2020, 121). Abraham's exposure to and love for such music led him to start a family band, with his youngest daughter, Selena, as the lead singer. She balanced English, her native language, and Spanish, the learned language of her trade. As a young adult, her music hit mainstream Latin-pop charts in Mexico, and was traditionally considered "border music," (Ibid., 122). While "on her way to becoming the most successful Tejano act south of the border," Selena's music won her a Grammy in the United States. She was preparing for an English-Spanish album at the time of her death in 1995, which was then posthumously released. This album, *Dreaming of You*, became the best selling Latin album of all time.

These musical influences are not incidental for Selena, as they emerge directly from the cultural conditions Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa speaks of her own experience with "Tex-Mex," or tejano, music. "The whole time I was growing up, there was *norteño* music sometimes called North Mexican border music, or Tex-Mex," she writes, (Anzaldúa, 2012, 60). This music developed out of the combined influences of folk-music and

German polka, mixed with guitar, accordion, and bajo sexto, the “sixth bass” of Mexican music. This music, Anzaldúa writes, serves an important purpose for those living at *la frontera*:

The everpresent *corridos* narrated one hundred years of border history, bringing news of events as well as entertaining. These folk musicians and folk songs are our chief cultural mythmakers, and they made our hard lives seem bearable, (Ibid. 61).

Building on this cultural foundation, Anzaldúa later develops the figure of the *Nepantlera* to describe individuals who actively navigate and mediate such borderlands. *Nepantlera*, as developed in her later book, *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro*, describes one who mediates between worlds, who translates, bridges, and holds contradictions without collapsing them into false unity (Anzaldúa, 2015, 81). Selena enacted this mediation through her sound and embodiment. On stage, she addressed Spanish-dominant audiences with warmth and familiarity, while also appealing to English-speaking fans who saw themselves reflected in her Texan upbringing. She was open about not learning to speak Spanish as a child, and only learning later in life. Her very presence unsettled rigid cultural boundaries: she was too American to be fully Mexican in Mexico, yet too Mexican to be fully assimilated in Anglo America—an experience all too familiar to Chicanas.

In occupying this space unapologetically, Selena modeled a *mestiza consciousness*. *Mestiza consciousness*, as Anzaldúa articulates it, is a mode of awareness forged in the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2015, 44). It rejects the violent simplicity of binary thinking and instead cultivates a tolerance for contradiction. The *mestiza* learns to live with ambiguity, to negotiate cultural, linguistic, and gendered expectations without dissolving into them. This consciousness produces new cultural forms from the friction of difference. It demands emotional labor and strategic self-fashioning, yet it also offers expansive possibility. In this way, *mestiza consciousness* becomes both a survival mechanism and a source of identity making. Anzaldúa describes this process as multifaceted and interactional, and as taking place alongside others:

It’s not race, gender, class, sexuality, or any single aspect of the self that determines identity but the interaction of all these aspects plus as yet unnamed features. We discover, uncover, create our identities as we interrelate with others and our *alrededores/surroundings*. Identity grows out of our interactions, and we strategically reinvent ourselves to accommodate our exchanges (Anzaldúa, 2015, 75).

If identity emerges through interaction, then art becomes one of the primary spaces where such interaction unfolds. Music, in particular, creates a shared environment in which artist and audience participate in mutual recognition. Selena’s music gave her audience spaces of exchange in which they could face their own identities. She did not offer a resolved answer to the question of belonging. Instead, she performed belonging as an ongoing negotiation done in the context of others—her music was the music of *Nepantla*, because she was already living there. “I speak and write from what grounds me,” Anzaldúa says, “my physical body, the body of a female, a Chicana tejana, embedded in an indigenous Mexicana culture rich in symbols and metaphors, a body immersed in many cultures, a queer body,” (Anzaldúa 2015, 182). Selena too wrote from what grounded her, blending her lived experience with her cultural identity through her artwork. It is no coincidence, then, that Selena became known as “the unquestioned queen of mestizo pop, part wetback and part gabacha,” (Stavans, 1996, 38).

While Anzaldúa helps us understand the formation of mestiza consciousness, her work leaves open the question of how these identities are felt and experienced collectively. Dewey's aesthetic theory offers a way to answer this question. Dewey's theory of art as experience deepens our understanding of Selena's cultural impact through art. For Dewey, art is not only an object but also an event, an experience that arises in the interaction between artist and audience. Dewey stresses that aesthetic experience is defined primarily by the quality of engagement. Emotion, perception, and action are integrated, creating a sense of wholeness (Dewey, 1934, 51). Traditional aesthetics often focus on the artwork as a finished product, emphasizing formal properties or symbolic meaning. Dewey criticizes this approach for isolating art from the conditions of its creation and reception. Art emerges when materials, sounds, colors, words, and movements are shaped through intelligent, expressive activity to create an experience that can be shared. The artist is an individual deeply engaged with their environment, transforming lived experience into a communicable form. Similarly, the audience is not a passive observer but an active participant whose perception completes the artwork. This view dissolves rigid boundaries between artist and audience, creation and appreciation, and art and life. This is most evident, I argue, during a musical concert, where the audience is directly engaged with the process of music-making. The call and return, cheering and chanting, and singing along, are all ways through which the audience and artist become one. Art is continuous with everyday experience but distinguished by its heightened organization and expressive clarity, components most available during a musical concert. I place Selena Quintanilla's music squarely within the boundaries of Dewey's aesthetic theory.

This understanding of art as lived and shared experience becomes especially visible in Selena's live performances. A particularly illuminating example of Selena's role as a Nepantlera can be found in her live album *Selena Live!*, recorded during her 1993 concert at the Memorial Coliseum. This performance captures the dynamic, participatory nature of what Christopher Small terms "musicking," where meaning emerges through the interaction between performer and audience. Throughout the concert, Selena moves seamlessly between English and Spanish, addressing the crowd with familiarity—"¿Cómo están?" followed by "I want everyone to sing with me,"—inviting multiple cultural and linguistic identities into the same shared space. This fluid code-switching enacts Nepantla in real time, as Selena mediates between worlds without privileging one over the other. The audience's enthusiastic response—cheering, singing along, and echoing her calls—demonstrates how identity is actively produced through collective experience. From a Deweyan perspective, this concert exemplifies art as experience at its most fully realized; emotion, perception, and action are unified in a moment of heightened engagement that dissolves the boundary between artist and audience. Selena's performance of songs like "Como La Flor" becomes a site where listeners can feel the tensions of cultural hybridity reorganized into a coherent, if temporary, sense of belonging. In this way, *Selena Live!* operates as a lived instance of *mestiza consciousness*, where contradiction is neither erased nor resolved, but held, expressed, and shared. Selena performs with her audience, creating a communal space in which the borderlands of identity can be inhabited collectively and meaningfully.

This experiential dimension of Selena's performances can be further deepened through Thomas Alexander's interpretation of Dewey. Alexander argues in *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature* that Dewey's theory of art should not be understood merely as a theory about artworks, but as a broader philosophy of how humans experience and make meaning in the world. According to Alexander, Dewey sees art as the culmination of ordinary experience, where

perception, emotion, and action become unified and intensified. In this framework, “feeling” functions as the organizing force that integrates human experience with the rhythms and processes of nature. Art, therefore, reveals the continuity between nature, everyday life, and cultural expression, showing that aesthetic experience is not separate from reality but arises from the dynamic interaction between organisms and their environments—art “forces us to think about how human beings are related to the world and to each other,” (Alexander, 1987, 189). Alexander calls these expanding possibilities the “horizons of feeling,” suggesting that aesthetic experience deepens awareness, enriches meaning, and connects individuals more fully with both nature and community. “Both the self and the community emerge and determine their significance within these horizons,” (Ibid., 186). Selena’s concerts and recordings were communal spaces where Chicanas could feel their fragmented identities cohere, if only momentarily, into a shared, significant, and meaningful interpretation of self and community through music. Her music transformed personal tensions into shared rhythms, allowing listeners to recognize themselves in her voice, her costume, and her dance. Through this experiential process, identity was actively shaped.

Art, for Dewey, reorganizes experience into meaningful form; for those living in *Nepantla*, such reorganization offers a way to inhabit in-betweenness creatively, and provides “a reservoir of shared experience,” which is “vital in the exploration of the meaning of existence, (Alexander 1987, 200). While Alexander emphasizes the role of feeling in aesthetic experience, Christopher Small extends this insight by focusing specifically on music as a social activity. Small argues that musicking is a powerful, emotion-evoking means of exploring, affirming, and celebrating the “socially constructed meanings” of relationships and identity within various communities, often reflecting underlying societal values and hierarchies (Small, 2011, 131). While reality is socially constructed, individuals are not bound to accept it unquestioningly. Musicking as an art form offers a way to explore and question this reality, giving opportunity for re-interpretation of identity in the midst of complexity (Ibid., 140). Selena’s music did not eliminate the contradictions which come with living in *Nepantla*, but she rendered it rhythmic, embodied, and survivable through the act of musicking. Selena’s art became a site of collective meaning-making, where the borderlands of *Nepantla* could be inhabited as community—she welcomed the audience to join her there. It became “a gathering space, an assemblage, a conrescence,” (Scott, Tuana, 2017, 5).

Taken together, these perspectives reveal the depth of Selena’s cultural and aesthetic significance. Selena Quintanilla’s life and work illuminate the lived realities of *Nepantla* as an embodied, creative, and communal practice. Through the lens of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Nepantlera* and *mestiza* consciousness, alongside John Dewey’s theory of art as experience, Selena emerges as a cultural mediator who transformed the tensions of in-betweenness into meaningful aesthetic expression. Her music gave contradiction form, rhythm, and voice, offering Chicanas a way to inhabit their identities without needing to conform to dominant cultural expectations of coherence or singularity. Selena’s significance lies in her refusal to be confined to one cultural framework. She moved fluidly across linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic boundaries, embracing hybridity as a central feature of her identity. This positioning reflects Anzaldúa’s conception of the *Nepantlera* as one who bridges, translates, and sustains multiplicity. Selena’s performances enacted this mediation in real time, especially in concert settings where the boundaries between artist and audience dissolved. In these moments, her music became what Dewey describes as a fully realized aesthetic experience—one that integrates emotion, perception, and communal participation into a unified whole.

When viewed through Dewey's framework, Selena's artistry functions as experience itself. Her music created environments in which listeners could engage actively with their own identities as evolving processes shaped through interaction. The call-and-response of her concerts, the blending of genres, and the movement between languages all contributed to an experiential space where identity could be felt, negotiated, and reimaged. This aligns with Alexander's notion of "horizons of feeling," in which art expands the possibilities of meaning and connection. Selena's work opened such horizons for her audience, allowing fragmented identities to cohere temporarily through shared emotional and cultural resonance.

Through the concept of musicking as articulated by Christopher Small, Selena's performances can also be understood as participatory acts of world-making. Her concerts operated as active gatherings where social relationships and cultural meanings were constructed and affirmed. Within these spaces, the contradictions of Nepantla remained present and were collectively inhabited. Selena invited her audience into this space, modeling a way of being that accepts ambiguity as generative and meaningful. Her presence affirmed that identity unfolds through continuous negotiation rather than fixed resolution. Ultimately, Selena Quintanilla embodied the Nepantlera in both identity and practice. She translated the complexities of Chicana existence into a form that was accessible, affective, and communal. Her music stands as a testament to the power of art to reorganize experience and to create spaces where individuals can encounter themselves and each other in new ways. For Chicanas navigating the borderlands, Selena offered a method of survival and a vision of possibility. She offered a message of representation: "Just when Latinos were convinced no one cared for them, along came Selena," (Stavans, 1996, 43). In the rhythms of her songs and the energy of her performances, Nepantla emerges as a site of creation, connection, and enduring cultural meaning.

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