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“Making Ourselves Over in the Image of the Imagery”: Overcoming Alienation
Through Poetic Expressions of Experience

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“Making Ourselves Over in the Image of the Imagery”: Overcoming Alienation Through Poetic Expressions of Experience

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My focus for this essay is on understanding the rhetorical process that occurs when people come together despite their differences—that is what rhetoric is all about. Kenneth Burke argues that this process, for alienated people especially, happens poetically, more than semantically because there are too many differences to overcome semantically between alienated people and the dominant community. This essay is about how the rhetorical process of identification as described by Burke helps us to explain how we cross barriers that divide people who are different to create moments of mutual understanding—identification. In this essay, I look at the experience of reading Gloria Anzaldúa’s work from the rhetorical perspective that Burke’s theory of rhetorical identification provides. In the case of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa helps us understand how an alienated person can prompt a momentary, present space of shared experience through poetic language.

Keywords: alienation, attitude, Gloria Anzaldúa, Kenneth Burke, form, identification

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Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents	iv
“Making Ourselves Over in the Image of the Imagery”: Overcoming Alienation Through Poetic Expressions of Experience.....	1
Introduction	1
Kenneth Burke on Identity and Alienation	3
Identity and Identification	3
Alienation	5
Poetic Ways through Alienation to Identification.....	9
Putting it into Practice: Anzaldúa’s Rhetorical Response.....	14
Conclusion.....	24
Works Cited	27

“Making Ourselves Over in the Image of the Imagery”: Overcoming Alienation
Through Poetic Expressions of Experience

Introduction

Gloria Anzaldúa was a prominent scholar in literary and cultural studies who wrote from the American margins as a Chicana (Mexican American woman) who was also a feminist and a lesbian. She is best known for her groundbreaking work, *Borderlands*, where she theorizes what it means to be alienated—what she calls a “border person”—through her expert blending of poetic, mythic, historic and autobiographic writing. *Borderlands* was published in 1987 and Anzaldúa died in 2004, yet her work remains relevant to several academic disciplines: Chicana/Latina studies, women’s studies, cultural studies, and rhetoric and composition studies, to name a few. Not surprisingly, *Borderlands* has generated a wide range of reader responses since its first publication in 1987. In fact, the third edition of the book (2007) features “An Introduction in Ten Voices,” which frames the book with various responses from Anzaldúa’s contemporaries. Even readers whose lives are far removed from the kind of experience Anzaldúa describes pay close attention to her work, from those who find it easy to identify with the experiences that Anzaldúa describes to those who reject her articulations of what it means to live as what she calls a “border person.” However, it is important to note that any negative public response to *Borderlands* has been overshadowed by the vast positive reception the book has received.

While it is typical for any text, even academic texts, to affect readers in different ways, it is extraordinary how Anzaldúa is able to share her particular experiences of cultural alienation in America in ways that very diverse readers can both understand and accept. Her alienation was compound: as a Chicana whose culture was denigrated by whites, as a woman in two patriarchal

societies, as a feminist whose role in the movement was marginalized by white women, and as a lesbian who was, in many ways, “invisible.” With all these differences from the dominant communities she encountered, it is notable that her writing has reached so many people whose experiences could not have been very much like hers. How does this happen? The purpose of this essay is to answer this question.

Anzaldúa describes her experiences of alienation throughout her work. In “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” (1980) she writes,

Unlikely to be friends of people in high literary places, the beginning [writer who is a] woman of color is invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women’s feminist world, though in the latter this is gradually changing. The *lesbian* of color is not only invisible, she doesn’t even exist. Our speech, too, is inaudible. We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane. (26)

In countless experiences Anzaldúa shares, it is apparent she was not given the same opportunities for participation, inclusion, and success as her white peers. She describes the act of writing as a way of responding to those circumstances, naming it a process of transacting identity when she calls it “the act of making soul, alchemy” (“Speaking” 30). She continues this way: “It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think of as ‘other’—the dark, the feminine. Didn’t we start writing to reconcile this other within us? We knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered ‘normal’ white-right” (“Speaking” 30). All of these things that she wrote of herself and other people who feel swept aside by a cultural mainstream describe the experience Kenneth Burke terms “alienation.” Before I go on any further, I will need to explain this concept.

Kenneth Burke on Identity and Alienation

Kenneth Burke's concept of alienation, which developed in the context of his rhetorical concept of identification, helps us to better (1) understand the methods Anzaldúa uses to invite readers to share in her experience of what it means to be alienated, and (2) understand the reading experience that often allows Anzaldúa's readers to vicariously experience something of her alienation in a new context. Burke's concept of identity is rhetorical: we define and understand ourselves in relation to others through the process of responding to the influence of others. We are like someone, unlike someone else, in our beliefs, values, attitudes, and actions. Burke explains this concept of identity in literary terms that helps us to understand how people use reading experiences to reconstruct a more expansive sense of self and community, while Burke's theory of form helps us understand how reading can create for the reader an experience of identity—in Anzaldúa's case, of alienated identity—that becomes an important space of validation, empowerment, and understanding across differences. In her case, that space can be where alienated people are integrated into their larger communities.

Identity and Identification

In his early work, Burke defines identity as a “complex of attitudes (‘personal equations’) that constitute the individual's orientation (sense of reality with corresponding sense of relationships),” pointing to the central role attitudes play in the construction of identity (*Permanence* 309). In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke describes the process of identification as central to how people construct both their understanding of self and their place in a group. As Burke explains, “The so-called ‘I’ is merely a unique combination of partially conflicting ‘corporate we’s’” (*Attitudes* 264). In other words, we construct our individual identities in part from the multiple group identities (the “we’s”) with which we compare or contrast ourselves. As

Dana Anderson elaborates in *Identity's Strategy*, "Identification in this conception of the individual names the process by which 'the unique combination' of the *I*, of one's sense of identity, is assembled: it is the process of perceiving the self in relation to the various social scenes it occupies (26). Acquiring new identification, Burke explains, is "a new way of defining the individual's identity with relation to a corporate identity" (*Attitudes* 337). Put in other terms, individual identity cannot be constructed in isolation. Individual identity is, in many ways, interconnected to the group identities (the corporate "we's" with which we are always already connected). And identification is the process by which we both construct and understand our self and group identities.

Burke's definition of rhetoric as identification helps us to better understand the process through which people construct their identities that encompass the assumptions, attitudes, and actions they find inherent in themselves. In his essay "Rhetoric—Old and New," Burke states, "The key term for the old rhetoric was 'persuasion' and its stress was on deliberate design. The key term for the new rhetoric would be 'identification,' which can include a partially 'unconscious' factor in appeal" (203). Here, Burke points to both deliberate and unconscious comparisons and contrasts with others as contributing to how we construct our individual and group identities. He outlines how identification works in some detail in "The Rhetorical Situation." The first type of identification Burke mentions is "identification by sympathy," which he describes as "a way to establish rapport with an audience by stressing sympathies held in common" (268). The second type of identification Burke mentions is "identification by antithesis"; Burke explains, "Here is union by some opposition shared in common" (268). Lastly, Burke describes identification by "inaccuracy" which occurs when a person falsely identifies with someone or something.

Each of these describes a way that people construct their own identities through shared experience with others. People constantly identify with or separate from one another because of the similarities or differences they find exposed by their experience. Burke explains, “Even when considered close up, the identity of the ‘self’ or ‘person’ becomes a collective texture involving language, property, family, reputation, social roles, and so on—elements not reducible to the individual” (“Rhetorical Situation” 265). Individual identity, on the one hand, “names the commonly held belief that human selves are capable of—and arguably incapable of functioning without—some sense of self-definition, some answer to the question of ‘who I am’ in the culture, society, and world they inhabit. Created through a capacity for self-interpretation seen largely as the essence of human selfhood, identity is one’s understanding of oneself as a self” (Anderson 9). As Anderson and Burke mention, although people construct individual identity from their unique experiences, that cannot be done in isolation. Identity construction necessarily has a social component because we construct our beliefs of who we are largely in terms of our experiences that are shared and not shared with others. The majority of life is made up of interactions and experiences with others. And in order to identify with one another, we make our understanding of our experiences accessible to one another—and one way we do that is through language.

Alienation

The problem with all that for alienated people is that they are not acknowledged, and often don’t acknowledge themselves, as important elements of the communities in which they live. They are seen as “other,” and understood in terms of difference. This makes what Burke calls identification by similarity a near impossibility and identification by antithesis potentially violent. Either way, these methods of forming identity serve to further alienate or distance alienated people from others through reinforcing the differences that divide them. Consequently,

even Burke's third way of forming identity—identification by inaccuracy—also becomes extremely dangerous for alienated people. Identification by inaccuracy occurs when we falsely identify with someone or something else. Because dominant groups do not have the desire nor the motivation to identify with marginalized groups in mutually productive ways on any of these levels, identification between marginalized and other groups is especially complicated and difficult. Dominant groups typically identify with what they value, and they value that with which they identify themselves. These identifications shape the dominant group's understanding of what matters about themselves and others, and because they are the group in power, consequently, the world.

For alienated people who live unacknowledged by the dominant community in which they find themselves marginalized, the opportunities for mutual identification with people who themselves identify with the dominant group proves especially challenging. In order to better understand these challenges, it is helpful to understand Burke's concept of identification and the limited possibilities for identification that marginalized groups have with others. While the three types of identification are not entirely distinct (for example, we can make inaccurate identifications by similarity or antithesis), understanding the concept of identification in this way gives us a useful vocabulary for narrating and understanding the process whereby not only identification, but also alienation, occurs.

Though he discusses the concept of alienation intermittently throughout his work, it was in the midst of the Great Depression that Burke wrote directly and expansively on the subject. While his conception of alienation in *Attitudes Toward History* most likely comes in response to the devastation he witnessed during the Great Depression, it is readily applicable to people who are alienated for reasons other than (or rather in addition to) their present material conditions.

Burke defines the term this way: “We use it [alienation] to designate that state of affairs wherein a man no longer ‘owns’ his world because, for one reason or another, it seems *basically unreasonable*. Alienation has both spiritual and material aspects” (*Attitudes* 218). Material alienation, according to Burke, comes as a result of living “deprived of the goods which [...] society has decreed as ‘normal’” (*Attitudes* 216). Put another way, material alienation occurs—not from being deprived of life’s necessities: food, water, shelter, etc., but of being deprived of the goods that are typical to the majority of people in a society. Additionally, Burke argues, spiritual alienation, “leads [...] to distrust the rationale of purposes by which [one] is deprived” (*Attitudes* 216). Spiritual alienation might encourage people to question the dominant structures in place. It might encourage them to reevaluate their experiences in relation to that structure. It might even prompt—if possible—removal, or separation from a societal structure they find unjust and unreasonable. Understood together, material and spiritual alienation build off one another. Though people may begin in a state of material alienation, if that continues they likely end up in a spiritually alienated state. While material alienation physically marks alienated people as “other” through their deprivation, spiritual alienation further separates alienated people from their communities through inciting distrust in the power and motives of the dominant community.

Material and spiritual alienation, understood within the context of Burke’s concept of identification, helps us to understand at least partially the process through which people can become alienated. Being deprived of material goods and unable to trust the dominant structures (laws, government leaders, programs, etc.) in place in their society literally and figuratively marks alienated people as different. This difference that separates alienated people from their communities makes identification between those who are clearly within and those who are

alienated more complex and difficult. For this reason, the primary resource for identification that might be available to alienated people tends to be experiences that individuals share in families, friendship groups, and local cultures. In fact, Burke uses *immediacy* to characterize the sort of shared experiences that alienated people use to “repossess” their world and combat alienation. Burke explains, “People try to combat alienation by *immediacy*, such as the senses alone provide” because alienated people’s immediate experiences are the very materials with which they begin to construct their individual and group identities (*Attitudes* 218). What Burke means by immediacy is, in part, the sharing of physical, emotional, or other bodily experiences, pointing to the primacy of the *senses*. Considering the distancing effects of both material and spiritual alienation, alienated people are left with little choice but to attempt to share their immediate experiences with the dominant community.

They face problems when attempting to express an identity developed in their immediate experiences to people who have not shared them. In order for identification (by similarity, in this case) to occur, the alienated person would need to rely on those others (in Anzaldúa’s case, her readers) being able to imagine what it would be like to be alienated, to have experiential resources that enable them to recall how it *feels* to be on the outside to some degree. In *Imagined Communities*, in which Benedict Anderson describes a nation as, necessarily, “an imagined political community” (49), he explains that it must be imagined “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (49). If that is true, then the rhetorical task of alienated people like Anzaldúa in the United States is to find ways to carve spaces for themselves in the mainstream image of “America.”

In his essay, “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” Burke articulates how the power of poetic expression can encourage a sort of identification that overcomes rhetorical barriers and engages audiences in experiences that can change their attitudes and actions. We see this played out in Anzaldúa’s work. In her writing, she frequently positions herself as an alienated person who has experienced what Burke terms “material” and “spiritual” alienation. So she describes herself in terms of her immediate experiences, experiences that include what we might call “disidentification” with, and even rejection by, people who locate themselves comfortably in the dominant American culture. In order to have her work—and her experiences as an alienated person—understood by them, Anzaldúa often shares, using sensory language, her own immediate experiences of alienation, using what Burke calls poetic meaning to make her experiences accessible to readers who might be outside her realm of experience—but who have likely experienced alienation to some degree in their own lives.

Poetic Ways through Alienation to Identification

In order to make such experiences accessible to the collective “we,” alienated people primarily use poetic (by which Burke means, *attitudinal*) language rather than semantic language to share experience with others in ways those others can identify with and understand. Semantic language, according to Burke, “would attempt to get a *description* by the *elimination* of attitude” (“Semantic” 147-148). In other words, semantic language would align closely with what we consider an objective and simply utilitarian use of language. Burke describes semantic language as trying “to cut away, to abstract, all emotional factors that complicate the objective clarity of meaning” (“Semantic” 148). Poetic language, on the other hand, is charged by attitudes and emotions. While semantic language seeks “perception without feeling,” poetic language seeks to construct perceptions born out of feelings and experiences (“Semantic” 150). Because of the

universal nature of feelings, attitudes, and emotions, poetic expressions of experiences that are essential to the identity of a marginalized group can enable members of other groups to identify with alienated experiences, and even share in those experiences vicariously, prompting moments of an imagined shared sense of identity. In this essay my definition of poetic language aligns closely with that of Burke's in "Semantic and Poetic Meaning"—as language charged with attitudes and emotions.

Burke describes his essay, "Semantic and Poetic Meaning" as a "rhetorical defense of rhetoric" ("Semantic" 138). Gregory Clark discusses the implications of such a statement saying, "If this essay defending the primacy of poetic meaning is Burke's rhetorical defense of rhetoric, its point is that what we call rhetoric can wield rhetorical power only when its content expresses and asserts meanings that people feel—or, in his preferred term in this essay, when it expresses and asserts their *attitudes*" (104). Burke defines identity as a "complex of attitudes" (*Permanence* 309), pointing to the central role attitudes play in the construction of identity, and the difficulties one would face in communicating identity in purely semantic terms. Burke also describes an attitude as "a state of emotion, or a moment of stasis, in which an act is arrested, summed up, made permanent and total" (*Grammar* 476). Attitudes, then, can be demonstrated through emotions. If we understand Burke's theory of identification as an integral part of the process through which we construct our identities, then it is through the process of identification that our attitudes can change. If, as Burke argues, the most powerful type of rhetoric is that which asserts attitudes, and attitudes are, essentially, feelings (what Burke terms "poetic language"), then poetic language has the power to not only assert attitudes, but change them in the process. Additionally, as poetic language enacts such attitudes, the process of reading then becomes an *experience*.

In other words, Burke argues that the most powerful type of communication—the type that can take the form of *experiences* that ultimately determine the identifications that construct our identities—comes through poetic language. We might consider the ultimate “end” of the poetic ideal as communication that prompts a sharing of attitudes that are made of the emotions tied to how individuals or groups understand themselves and those around them. Burke describes poetic meaning as “strongly weighted with emotional values, with *attitudes* [...],” and adds that, “an attitude contains an implicit program of action” (“Semantic” 143).

Alienated people, like Anzaldúa, need their audiences to adjust attitudes in order to ultimately change actions and make room for alienated experiences in their communities. Burke explains this point in detail in *A Grammar of Motives* saying,

As an attitude can be the *substitute* for an act, it can likewise be the *first step towards* an act. Thus, if we arouse in someone an attitude of sympathy towards action with regard to it—hence the rhetoric of advertisers and propagandists who would induce action in behalf of their commodities or their causes by the formation of appropriate attitudes. (236)

Because of the subtleties associated with communication of poetic meaning—because it does not confront people who understand those things differently with a direct challenge to their understanding as semantic meaning can, people of a dominant community might feel less threatened by the prompts for changes offered by the alienated through poetic language. Semantic language, which seeks to exist independent of attitude and emotion, and focuses more explicitly on prompting specific actions, might be a less effective route for acceptance for people whose reasons and reasoning are not valued nor, sometimes, even recognized by their communities.

While the *end* of the poetic ideal can be understood as enacting the appropriate attitude and corresponding “program of action,” the *process* through which that occurs, according to Burke, is through inviting and encouraging a dialectic of competing potential attitudes in place relating to the alienated subject. Burke describes the function of the poetic ideal as an “attempt to attain a full moral act by attaining a perspective atop all the conflicts of attitude” (“Semantic” 148). The poetic ideal would “try to derive its vision from the maximum heaping up of all these emotional factors, playing them off against one another, inviting them to reinforce and contradict one another, and seeking to make this active participation itself a major ingredient of the vision” (“Semantic” 148). In this way, the poetic ideal encourages this dialectic between the attitudes of the speaker and audience. It encourages inclusion of all types of experiences and attitudes and puts them into conversation with one another. It necessitates the inclusion of competing attitudes in order to come to a new level of understanding. Through addressing competing “conflicts of attitudes,” alienated individuals would be able to create a rhetorical space for their respective experiences. Additionally, they would be able to point to spaces of both identification and separation inherent in both the alienated and dominant groups’ life experiences. In this way, alienated people are able to communicate their experience in a marginalized group through poetic expressions of experience—expressions that assert certain attitudes and encourage their audiences to imagine life from a new perspective. While Burke’s essay provides us with a useful framework for responding to alienation, it falls short in describing exactly *how* and *why* these shifts in attitudes occur. Burke’s theory of form helps us to understand the process of identification more clearly, and how changes in attitudes occur as a result of an encounter with poetic expressions of experience.

In *Counter-Statement*, Burke describes what he meant by aesthetic form saying it is “the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (31). This is, in a word, an experience. Burke adds, “Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence [...] Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of expectations” (*Counter-Statement* 217). As Hans Lindquist put it, “Besides the interest in information and possible outcomes, literature can appeal because of its *form*.” He describes the implications of form, saying, “Thus, the focus is on the *process of reading* a text, which is a temporal, dialectical, rhetorical process, where the meaning is created. In order for the text to be appealing, the audience must have some experience which matches the text.” Therefore, Burke’s theory of form can help us to understand the process of vicarious, imagined sharing of experiences and how that sharing can enable identification to occur when dominant groups are confronted with alienated people’s poetic expressions of identity. Burke’s theory of form helps us understand the process (or rather, the *experience*) through which identification can occur. Inherent in the rhetorical process of identification is prompting changes in attitudes. These changes in attitudes create room for readers to identify with the experiences of the alienated and imagine themselves a part of a more inclusive community.

Understanding our responses to poetic or aesthetic expression in the context of Burke’s theory of form points to the power authors have in orchestrating these experiences for their readers. Burke explains that poetic language strives to lead audiences through the type of experience that Burke’s theory of form invites—arousal and fulfillment of desire. He explains, “The poetic ideal envisions a vocabulary that *goes through* drama” (“Semantic” 149). The poetic ideal “would contend, by implication, that true knowledge can only be attained through the battle,

stressing the role of the participant, who in the course of his participation, it is hoped, will define situations with sufficient realistic accuracy to prepare an *image* for action” (“Semantic” 150). He describes audience participation as essential to completing the end of the poetic ideal and understanding the way audiences *experience* poetic expressions, which helps us understand how alienated people can invite audience participation with their work.

Indeed, Burke emphasizes that participation as the ultimate end of the poetic ideal, a kind of participation he describes in his concept of aesthetic form that engages the reader in a sequence of connected expectations that lead to the appropriate desired conclusion—the attitudes and feelings the author would have that reader experience. Writers who invite reader participation through their use of that sort of form are better able to elicit responses that change the attitudes of their readers. Burke argues the power of poetic expressions (what he called “the arts”), “is their ability to make us feel such shifts of attitude not merely from without, but from within [...] And it is through the arts that we are best able to exercise our sympathies by seeing such differences from *within*” (“Art” 158). The power of the arts lies in this experience *within* our bodies.

Putting it into Practice: Anzaldúa’s Rhetorical Response

Up to this point, I have described the process through which alienated people can prompt identification with the dominant community. I focused on Burke’s theory of identification as both central to understanding the condition of alienation and the possibilities for overcoming alienation. Because alienated people are understood in terms of difference, they are largely unable to identify with the larger community and are seen as “other.” This condition forces alienated people to construct their identities from immediate identifications. Unable to identify

with the dominant community, alienated people must find alternate ways to identify with other groups in order to prompt identification with the dominant community.

Because poetic language is weighted with attitudes—and emotions—it serves as an important medium through which alienated people can assert their attitudes and encourage identification. Because alienated people are understood in terms of difference, they must rely on the common experiences they share with the larger community, like inhabiting a physical body. Poetic language, with its focus on feelings and bodily, visceral responses, provides the ideal medium through which alienated people can prompt identification with the larger community. Kenneth Burke's concept of poetic language and theory of form help us to better understand the process through which alienated people are able to assert their identities and share their work in ways that other groups are able to understand through describing how audiences become willing to do the work of imagining an alternative community because they are ultimately “gratified by the sequence” (*Counter-Statement* 217).

On the one hand, Gloria Anzaldúa is concerned about identity, about her particular and peculiar identity, and being able to assert and perform that identity in whatever space she occupies: be that in her home, the academy, or the supermarket. On the other hand, *my* focus for this essay is on understanding the rhetorical process that occurs when people come together despite their differences—that is what rhetoric is all about. Burke argues that this process, for alienated people especially, happens poetically, not semantically because there are too many differences to overcome semantically between alienated people and the dominant community. This essay is about how the rhetorical process of identification helps us to explain how we cross barriers that divide people who are different to create moments of mutual understanding—identification. So I will conclude the essay by looking at different experiences of reading

Anzaldúa's work from the rhetorical perspective that Burke's theory of rhetorical identification provides, and offer it more as an example of how Burke suggests we can communicate in ways that begin to overcome separation and the alienation that it causes than as a study of her rhetoric itself. In the case of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa helps us understand how an alienated person can prompt a momentary, present space of shared experience through poetic language.

Gloria Anzaldúa illustrates the power of poetic language to create these important spaces of identification throughout her work, and particularly in her now famous text of essays and poems—*Borderlands*. In this text, she seems to be able to prompt identification with its diverse readers, many of whom are quite different from Anzaldúa, because of her expert blending of semantic and poetic language throughout her text. She is careful to incorporate historical details and facts combined with personal *testimonio* and myths. Additionally, Anzaldúa shifts between writing in English and multiple Spanish dialects throughout the text to illustrate her multilingual identity. She constructs a *mestiza* (mixed) identity using the immediate materials her culture has armed her with: language, myths, experience, and history.

Anzaldúa's poetic expressions of her immediate experiences throughout *Borderlands* prompt opportunities for identification with both fellow Latinas and Chicanas as well as other, "mainstream" groups. She begins her book describing the borderland she experienced on the Texas/Mexico border, comparing the physical, land-based borderland with her borderland identity. Anzaldúa's borderland experiences are born out of the multiple figurative and literal borderlands she encountered throughout her life: her experiences reconciling her Mexican cultural roots with her Chicana upbringing in the United States, for example. She also experienced an educational borderland of sorts, being one of the only people in her town to leave in order to pursue an education. Additionally, she experienced a world where English was the

primary language of the dominant group, Spanish was the dominant language to her ancestors, and Spanglish was the language she was most comfortable speaking (Tex-Mex to be more precise). As a border person, she never really felt like *either* this or that, but rather felt her identity and life experiences were composed, in many instances, from conflicting, competing materials. Instead of understanding herself in dichotomous terms, she understood herself as “an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings” (*Borderlands* 103).

While Anzaldúa relies primarily on poetic language throughout the opening chapter of *Borderlands*, she also incorporates more semantic language in places, detailing the historical significance of the Texas/Mexico border from 1000 BC to today. Anzaldúa uses semantic language to provide the context for her discussion of borderlands throughout her book not only to provide a universal definition of the land Chicana/o people occupy, but also to further illustrate a metaphor for her identity as a multilingual and cultural citizen. In *Borderlands*, She describes the Texas/Mexico border in a poem:

1, 950 mile-long open wound
 dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
 running down the length of my body,
 staking fence rods in my flesh,
 splits me splits me
 me raja me raja

This is my home

this thin edge of

barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.

The sea cannot be fenced,

el mar does not stop at borders. (25)

Anzaldúa's description of the border is charged with what Burke terms *attitudes*, a term that involves emotions, that point to the predicament border people face when defining and asserting their identities. Anzaldúa describes the border as an "open wound" to demonstrate the pain and vulnerability border people experience at having to reconcile two competing cultural identities. She draws a comparison between the man-made Texas/Mexico border with the undivided "skin of the earth." For Anzaldúa's readers who do *not* share her life experiences, her vivid descriptions of border experience enable them to imagine what it might *mean* to be a border person—neither here, nor there, but somewhere in-between—and the difficulties associated with straddling two cultures. For Anzaldúa's readers who share her experiences of what it means to be a border person, the poem offers validation of (and poetic language to describe) the difficulties associated with living on both literal and figurative borderlands.

In *Counter-Statement*, Burke describes this type of reading experience as the poetic form of qualitative progression, closely connected to what he terms "progressive form." Burke explains, "Such progressions are qualitative rather than syllogistic as they lack the pronounced anticipatory nature of the syllogistic progression. We are prepared less to demand a certain qualitative progression than to recognize its rightness after the event. We are put into a state of mind which another state of mind can appropriately follow" (*Counter-Statement* 125). In the case of Anzaldúa's poem, the progression is subtle. Anzaldúa begins her poem with an image portraying the Texas/Mexico border as an "open wound," and the cause of division and violence

not only to Anzaldúa's community, but also to her very body. She uses the border as a metaphor for herself, inviting readers to imagine what it might feel like to experience not only life on the border, but life as a border person. Ending her poem with the image of an earth whose "skin" is "seamless," and a "sea that cannot be fenced" invites readers to contemplate the artificial nature of borders, and the difficulties that arise from forcing borders upon people and places that previously were separate. The two contrasting images put readers (in Burke's terms), "into a state of mind which another state of mind can appropriately follow" (*Counter-Statement* 125). Anzaldúa guides her readers to make sense of the contrasting images. She does not perform the work for them, but asks them to do the work of moving from their current imagined community that doesn't account for border experiences to a different imagined community that includes them. She guides her readers' experience of her text through using poetic language, weighted with emotions. The act of making sense of the images in Anzaldúa's poem allows her readers to be "gratified by the sequence" (*Counter-Statement* 217).

Recalcitrance is another important component of Burke's theory of form that prompts readers to make room for alienated identities in their conception of the imagined collective "we." Part of the vicarious experience requires an adjustment to readers' current "imagined community." Recalcitrance introduces discrepancies between an audience's imagined community and that which the author is presenting them with. It prompts the audience to reconsider and alter their imagined community in order to make sense of what they are experiencing both mentally and emotionally. It requires the audience to revise the current community they imagine in order to continue in the experience the author (up to the point of recalcitrance) has created (*Permanence* 256).

Non-Chicana/Latina readers might experience Anzaldúa's repurposing of the concept of borders as a form of recalcitrance. In Burke's terms, Anzaldúa "introduces discrepancies" between how readers currently imagine borders with her own experiences and understanding of what borders represent. For many "mainstream" Americans, borders and fences are put up for the purpose of keeping certain people out. For Anzaldúa's readers who have not experienced the borderland as she describes it, she invites them to imagine what it might *feel* like to live on the border through using familiar images to describe the border—a "wound," "body," "fence," "home," "earth," and the "sea." Through using these universal images, Anzaldúa is able to generate places of common ground between her experiences and those of her "mainstream" readers. She compares the border with these universal images to help invite such readers to experience life, if only for a moment, from a new perspective.

Additionally, for Anzaldúa's non-Spanish-speaking readers, her use of Spanish throughout her poem is another source of recalcitrance. Anzaldúa breaks with what Burke terms "conventional form" in her use of Spanish in this poem and throughout her text. Burke describes conventional form as "the appeal of form as form" and "categorical expectancy" (*Counter-Statement* 126). He explains, "Whereas the anticipations and gratifications of progressive and repetitive form arise *during the process* of reading, the expectations of conventional form may be *anterior* to the reading" (*Counter-Statement* 126-127). The categorical expectation in the case of *Borderlands*, for many of Anzaldúa's non-Spanish-speaking readers anyway, would include her academic book being completely accessible to English speakers—and the expectation that any use of Spanish would either be translated or be relatively obvious in context. Again, Anzaldúa invites her non-Spanish-speaking readers to experience (on some level) the confusion that comes from participating in a world that does not accommodate their language preferences

or deficiencies. For her bilingual readers, Anzaldúa (once again) offers validation and a model for incorporating her identity as a border person into her scholarly work. In both cases, Anzaldúa invites her readers to do the work of participating in an imagined community that includes and privileges border experiences. Of course, for Anzaldúa's readers to ultimately be changed by their vicarious experience will depend on the experiences they bring to the reading, and their willingness to do the work required to have such imaginative experiences. To examine those in detail is another project, one that would inform further our understanding of the rhetorical power of what Burke calls poetic meaning.

There have been vast and varied responses to *Borderlands* since its first publication in 1987. These responses illustrate various readers' experiences with the book and help us to better understand how it was received by readers. Most of all, they provide us with concrete examples of how Anzaldúa's writing works on an audience and help us to understand how alienated people are able to communicate their experiences to a society where they have been historically marginalized. As I conclude this essay, I will be focusing on two such responses: one from Julia Alvarez, a Latina contemporary of Anzaldúa who describes her experience of quite intense identification in her response to *Borderlands*, and one from Carla Peterson, who describes the difficulties her class of twenty white women faced when reading the text. Though these two responses are not indicative of the wide range of reader responses to the text, they provide a good sample to illustrate the different ways identification works on different audiences.

Julia Alvarez's response to *Borderlands* illustrates how her experience with form equips her with not only new language with which she could interpret her experiences, but also a framework for understanding Latino literature:

When I read *Borderlands* in 1988 in preparation for teaching the first course on Latino literature at Middlebury College, my heart was in my throat. Anzaldúa was giving voice to what it meant to be a hybrid, a mixture, a mestiza: “Alienated from her mother culture, ‘alien’ in the dominant culture, the woman of color [is] caught between los intercicios, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.” This book not only provided me a way to understand the literature we would be reading, it also confirmed personally the painful sense of marginality many of us had been feeling.

In *Counter-Statement*, Burke describes form as giving “simplicity and order to an otherwise unclarified complexity” (154). Put another way, form provides readers with language and a framework for understanding life experiences. Here, Alvarez articulates how her experience with Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* provides her with such a framework. Alvarez’s encounter with *Borderlands* provides her with the words to articulate what occupying such a liminal space means and a context in which to understand and read the literature of other border people. While before, Alvarez might not have been able to put words to her experiences, after reading Anzaldúa’s account of what it *means* to be Chicana, and what it means to occupy such a liminal space, Alvarez is able to identify with the *feelings*, we might even call them the *attitudes*, in Kenneth Burke’s sense of that term. Rusty Barceló echoes this sentiment in her response, saying, “I read it [*Borderlands*] eagerly, hanging on to key messages that captured my imagination and heart and gave new meaning to Chicana identity.” Because Anzaldúa uses language charged with emotions, with attitudes and experiences, Alvarez and Barceló are able to identify personally with Anzaldúa’s experiences and imagine a new conception of what it means to be

Chicana/Latina. They describe this experience of identification as validating to their own life experiences as Chicanas and Latinas.

While the reading experience of *Borderlands*, for many of Gloria Anzaldúa's contemporaries, is facilitated by the immediate experiences of what Anzaldúa calls border life they share with her, the reading experiences of those who do *not* identify with Anzaldúa's experiences are different and difficult. Not all who read Anzaldúa's text willingly accept or are able to vicariously experience the American community that she imagines. Although there are many who are able to identify with *Borderlands*, there are others who struggle, like the students that Carla L. Peterson describes in her essay, "Borderlands in the Classroom." For them, the experience was one of resistance. And that resistance seems to have been located at the place where they encountered Anzaldúa's poetic, rather than semantic, meaning.

The issues exploded [during our reading of *Borderlands*], I believe, because certain tonal and linguistic elements in *Borderlands* foregrounded, as other texts had not, the radical alterity of contemporary ethnic/racial experience in such a way as to *displace* the students from their secure position as middle-class, white women and transform them into others. They felt displaced, first of all, because the ethnic writer's anger was no longer directed at white settlers, cops, or ghosts, but rather at them, women readers who had been prepared to identify sympathetically with her plight. They became angry at Anzaldúa's anger, and their anger intensified as they confronted her use of Spanish—of eight different Spanish idioms in fact. They claimed that, as an American writer, she had no right to use any language other than that of the dominant culture, English. Finally, they resented her insistence that the borderland cannot be confined merely to one

geographical place—the Texas/Mexico border—or even to a place outside the self.

(298)

Peterson's students represent a very different reading experience than that of most who report on their reading of Anzaldúa. The vicarious experience their reading provided them was palpably not their own and threatening to them as white women. Their visceral reaction was to reject Anzaldúa's text altogether.

To describe Peterson's students' response in Burke's terms, we could identify Anzaldúa's anger toward whites and her use of the Spanish language as the recalcitrant materials these white female students encounter. Instead of identifying with Anzaldúa's anger toward the injustices she had experienced at the hands of whites or her desire to speak her own language to tell her stories, Peterson's students feel their own identities threatened at the thought of making room for Anzaldúa's marginalized experiences. As a result, they resent the message of *Borderlands*, reject its claims, and make the differences between their and Anzaldúa's life experiences even more distinct. This scenario points us to the difficulties associated with forging these spaces of cooperation and identification—even when poetic meaning is powerful enough to create in readers a vivid vicarious experience that the author would have them share. As in all of our daily, lived experiences with one another, there remains the possibility of alienation.

Conclusion

What all this suggests is that alienated people can create spaces for themselves in the collective "we" only when they make some of their immediate experiences that constitute their own sense of who they are and where they belong available to members of the "mainstream" group and more dominant others not only to understand, but to *experience*. But there are no guarantees. Because poetic language encourages not only intellectual—but physical and

emotional—identification, it is perhaps the most powerful form of communication that alienated people have at their disposal. While no single sharing of poetic expression of experience is guaranteed to result in identification, because poetic language is grounded in expressing universal emotions and attitudes, as human beings, we are able to more easily identify with one another through these important prompts for identification.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle describes this process of identification in other words saying, “People like seeing images, because as they look at them they understand and work out what each item is [...]” (20). We can understand poetic language and aesthetic experience as types of “images”: an encounter with poetic language invites interpretation, engagement, and change. The way readers “work out” these images is akin to the process of “working through” Burke describes in his theory of form—“the arousing and fulfillment of desire.” The writer provides the text (the novel, poem, essay, etc.), but the reader is ultimately held accountable for making the aesthetic experience meaningful. The “fulfillment” of desires comes to readers when they are able to make meaning from the text, and in the case of *Borderlands*, part of that meaning involves imagining life from another’s perspective. Because poetic language functions as an invitation to an audience to work through an image, a problem, a situation, or reality (with the speaker—or author—as a *guide* to that experience), it not only can function to open the doors of communication between people who previously could not communicate (for whatever reason), but also helps both speakers and listeners to begin to imagine life from another’s point of view. Ultimately, such aesthetic experiences, invite us to, in Burke’s words, “make ourselves over in the image of the imagery” (*Philosophy* 117). Sometimes, however, that invitation cements our separation. Still, it is likely that more often such an invitation does indeed bring people together.

Understanding the aesthetic experience of reading Anzaldúa's work from the rhetorical perspective of Kenneth Burke's theory of identification helps us to understand how we can communicate in ways that begin to overcome separation and the alienation it causes. Although identification binds people together, (as Burke reminds us) there is always a corresponding separation that accompanies each experience of identification. Anzaldúa's text, for example, prompts identification by similarity in many of her Chicana/Latina readers who identify closely with many of Anzaldúa's life experiences, while for many of her white readers it reaffirms their whiteness and separateness from her. However, these readers are still able to experience identification with *Borderlands* on some level if they are able to recognize universal human emotions and attitudes in a new context that helps them to understand in new ways what it means to be alienated.

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