

Vanishing Fronteras: A Call for Documentary Filmmaking in Cultural Rhetorics
(con la ayuda de Anzaldúa)

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ALL: Cheers

DAPHNIE: To us getting together, to friendship, continuity, good luck, all those other things. Que aproveche, buen provecho. I always have to say that in Spanish.

I wanted to introduce you to Yatna, Daphnie, Melainie, and Teboho. We'll return to them throughout this video as they help me explore what is gained and what is lost when we make our rhetorical arguments through documentary filmmaking instead of print. To represent the possibilities of documentary as a medium for scholarly research in Rhetoric and Composition, I use scenes from *Vanishing Borders*, a feature documentary about immigrant women I directed and produced. I feature behind-the-scenes images of the making of *Vanishing Borders* to provide viewers with a sense of the filmmaking process as I make my arguments. I also use Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as the foil to *Vanishing Borders* in this experiment. I match scenes from the film with passages from the book and make an argument that documentary filmmaking can enrich and complicate our scholarship in exciting new ways.

I chose *Borderlands* because it is as complex and profound a text on gender and immigration as has ever been written and because Anzaldúa uses words to craft some of the most beautiful images of any scholar I have ever read, making her writing a natural fit for this project. As Anzaldúa herself explains, "When I create stories in my head, that is, allow the voices and scenes to be projected in the inner screen of my mind, I 'trance.' I used to think I was going crazy or that I was having hallucinations. But now I realize it is

my job, my calling, to traffic in images. Some of these film-like narratives I write down; most are lost, forgotten” (69-70). Sometimes her work indeed reads like surrealist film, with images so rich they play in our minds with the same power they must have exuded when bursting forth in hers.

It is ironic, given that film is such a visual medium, that many of the images she creates are impossible for a documentary to capture or to at least match their effect. There is a flexibility and an invitation to merge our own experience with metaphorical written words that is hard for a documentary to recreate. Take this passage, where Anzaldúa is discussing what the consciousness of a mestiza like herself goes through when trying to reconcile the plurality of cultures that dwell inside her:

The gaping mouth slit heart from mind. Between the two eyes in her head, the tongueless magical eye and the loquacious rational eye, was la rajadura, the abyss that no bridge could span. Separated, they could not visit each other and each was too far away to hear what the other was saying. Silence rose like a river and could not be held back, it flooded and drowned everything. (45)

This quote is filled with rich images that describe the abstract and particular feeling of alienation that mestizas experience in a way that a more straightforward description would be unable to recreate. There is no adequate equivalent to this kind of rhetorical strategy in documentary filmmaking. If one tried to film a version of these images to accompany this text spoken in narration, they would look foolish. The closest possibility would be animation, but even if the animation was successful, the images would be so fantastical that they would distract from the complex feeling she is trying to convey. Being able to instead see the images in our mind’s eye as we read these words is much

more effective than actually watching representations of them because our mind will project exactly what we as individuals need to see to understand her meaning.

It isn't only the effect of metaphorical writing that can be hard for documentaries to recreate. The poetry of language such as Anzaldúa's can also be lost on screen. When she discusses leaving her home, she writes, "I was the first in six generations to leave the Valley, the only one in my family to ever leave home. But I didn't leave all the parts of me: I kept the ground of my own being. On it I walked away, taking with me the land, the Valley, Texas" (16). There are, of course, interviews in documentaries, and one could have an interviewee say something that was as rich in imagery and beautifully phrased as Anzaldúa's quote. However, most interviewees, no matter how eloquent, do not have such poetry on the tips of their tongues, and even if they did, complex statements like this one often need to be read slowly and maybe reread a few times to really set in. Although rereading a paragraph doesn't stop the flow of reading, rewinding and replaying a scene creates a break in our experience of the story and of the ideas the documentary is trying to convey.

Of course, documentaries have their own poetry. They can use images to evoke certain thoughts and feelings in the audience, and more effective still, they can combine images with words and music to drive an idea home, but there is a power and depth to words alone on a page that documentaries cannot replicate. In spite of their limitations, documentaries can bring new features to cultural rhetorics scholarship that can help the field better capture the ways in which culture helps define our experience and how others perceive us. In the most obvious—yet no less useful to us—way documentaries let us see and hear people. Explorations of how our skin color and features affect our experience

are important aspects of cultural scholarship, as discussed by Cecilia Milanés, Victor Villanueva, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Aja Martinez, Dora Ramirez, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Joyce Middleton, and many others. Take this quote from Anzaldúa, for instance: “I am visible—see this Indian face—yet I am invisible. I both blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot (86). The moment I first encountered that quote, I interrupted my reading and turned to the back of the book to find her photo. I’d, of course, seen Anzaldúa’s picture before, but now I wanted to see it again to be blinded by her hook nose as she tells me I’d be. Yet the photo wasn’t enough to satisfy my need to see her face, so off I went to Google-land, where I found her, mixed with many others and wondered what made those people appear alongside her. Eventually I returned to *Borderlands* and reread the quote with this new visual knowledge, struggling to regain the concentration I had before. Here, on the other hand, is a scene where Teboho Moja describes her skin color:

One of my favorite moments that I remember was my two sisters and I went to the shops, and everybody knows you. So the owner starts talking to us like, “Oh, what do you want to do when you grow up?” And I answer first. I say, “I want to be a nurse.” And my two sisters burst out laughing, and I looked at them like, “Why are you laughing?” And they said, “Have you seen such a dark-skinned nurse? Like, you can’t qualify.” Both of them are slightly lighter than me, but it was like, I couldn’t even be a nurse. I’m too dark to be a nurse.

Being able to hear Teboho tell us that she was too dark to be a nurse and to see her as she does, gives us a sense of exactly how dark was too dark, at least in her sisters’ minds. We also experience the way in which she is still affected by this moment in her childhood by

watching her tell it. Although it has become a somewhat humorous anecdote for her, it is a humor that stings with the pain of internalized racism, for it was, after all, her own sisters who made the comment. The words alone would be unable to capture her nuanced reaction to that memory.

Another aspect of documentary filmmaking that is particularly useful to cultural rhetorics is the medium's ability to show us what accents sound like. Like many scholars in cultural rhetorics, such as Geneva Smitherman, Isabel Baca, Victor Villanueva, Keith Gilyard, Aja Martinez, Steven Alvarez, and Vershawn Ashanti Young, Anzaldúa discusses how speaking in a way that deviates from standard English has helped define her experiences, including her relationship with her mother. She writes: ““todavía hablas inglés con un ‘accent,’ my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican” (54). This one was harder for me to Google, so I just imagined the sound of Anzaldúa's accent as I read. Her accent, in fact, had been coming in and out of my mind's performance of her words. Whenever she wrote about it, it would show up, and when she moved on to other topics, it would fade to Standard English, the sound of most things I read in my head. Here, on the other hand, is Melainie Rogers discussing her accent:

Even though we speak English, the Australian accent is a little bit tricky here in the states. And I have to say that the first year or so I was kind of mocked at times, where people would be like “what?” So you learn very quickly though, don't you? So you learn how to modify some of the syllables and, you know, pronounce something with a little more of whatever edge that you need to. So the irony of that is that even though I feel now I'm probably better understood, people still think that I have a very strong Australian accent. And then my family thinks

that I've got an American accent, so it's kind of like whatever.

It is particularly key to hear her accent in this discussion because she argues that different people experience it differently. In true mestiza form, she now has an accent that is neither Australian nor American, an accent that marks her as outsider in both countries. Not only do we need to hear her speak to understand what such a middle ground accent sounds like, but it also helps us define where we stand as listeners. To me, for example, she sounds completely Australian. Here is another discussion of accents from Daphnie:

So one of the things of coming here, to America is that I used speak with an accent. [With a heavy accent] I would speak like this a little, no so much but enough, you know so it's hard sometimes [back to regular accent] when I was speaking for people to understand me. And I went to an international school where you did learn English and so I did learn English – I knew English – but I didn't speak it like I speak it now. And I have a pretty strong ear, so I really worked on accent reduction, on really trying to get rid of it. And I don't necessarily have an accent, I mean there are certain words that really just come out and my accent's just very predominant and I can't help it. But anything like “literally,” yeah I can't say the “L-Y.” Tough words to say like that, that still comes out. If I have a couple glasses of wine, sometimes my accent comes out again. And it's a blessing and it's not. It's a blessing because here in America, when you have an accent either you're eroticized or you're discriminated against. It's one or the other. So as a woman, I know I would be eroticized. All my friends are like – male friends – “oh that would be so sexy, why don't you actually talk with your accent again like Penélope Cruz.” And I was like “Mm, no.” The

problem is, the blessing in disguise is that people don't realize I'm not from here, so they expect me to understand all of these colloquialisms, and they expect me to understand all of these things and culture and all of this stuff.

One of the most interesting transformations that come with immigration is the taming of the accent. Although we have no footage of Daphnie when she first arrived in the States, we get to experience the transformation she has undergone by hearing her speak today and then revert to her original English pronunciation. Getting to hear the profound difference between how she once spoke and how she speaks now in one sentence, makes her immigration journey tangible for us in ways that print would be unable to convey.

Beyond being able to see and hear the Otherness that scholars have been describing in print for years, there are subtler advantages to documentary as a medium for cultural rhetorics. Anzaldúa explains how one of the great sins a woman can commit in her culture is talking back: "Muchachitas bien criadas, well-bred girls don't answer back. Es una falta de respeto to talk back to one's mother or father" (54). She grew up surrounded by derogatory words used for women who spoke their minds, words like "[h]ocicona, repelona, chismosa" (54). Words that were not applied to men because they, unlike women, have the right to talk however and whenever they wish. The silencing and censoring of women's voices has also been discussed by cultural rhetorics scholars like Malea Powell, Deborah Tannen, Jamie White-Harman, and Cristina Ramirez and will remain an important discussion in the field until the situation improves.

Many of us have experienced it, and in return our voices become louder, our pulse raises, our faces flush as we try to defend our right to express what we think and feel. We

can effectively fight for the right to speak up by writing about it, but there's something powerful about literally using our voices to discuss our right to speak. Here is Melainie talking about her childhood encounters with gender inequality:

My parents did a really good job of raising us with the idea that things always had to be fair. So, I was raised with this sense that everything needed to be equal. And then when I started to observe the world around me, I realized actually, that wasn't the way things were. And particularly, I saw women kind of getting the raw end of the deal, so as a kid of course you start speaking out about that. And, my god, did it cause trouble. You know, even like, for example I remember very distinctly with my grandparents. My grandfather would sit at the table. The pantry was right here, and he would say to my grandmother who was at the other end of the table, "I need the salt." The salt was right here. She would get up, and go and get the salt for him and I remember as a kid, you know, realizing what was going on. And I said to him on this one day, I said "Pop, the salt's right there. Get it yourself!" And the family all went [gasps]. 'Cause my grandfather was quite a, you know, quite a strong man. To his credit, he laughed, and my grandmother thought it was fantastic. And he did, he got the salt on his own.

Although the story would still be effective in writing, being able to see how she is still a little shocked by and proud of the trouble she caused as a child adds depth and a sense of humor to what she is telling. The angry feminist stereotype that is so often used to undermine women who speak their minds cannot be applied here because Melainie's tone and demeanor tell a different story.

Not only do documentaries let women speak but they also let women speak to

each other. Anzaldúa writes, “The first time I heard two women, a Puerto Rican and a Cuban, say the word ‘nosotras,’ I was shocked. I had not known that word existed. Chicanas use nosotros whether we’re male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse” (54). *Nosotras*, the female we, brings us the possibility of creating profound connections between women, of relating to each other in ways that don’t revolve around men. Here is a *nosotras* moment:

YATNA: My husband was here first, and he was an immigrant too. He wasn’t a citizen yet, and then during the time we got married, we had a not very good relationship with India. So they weren’t allowing that many Indians at a time, so the process was very long. I mean, after I got married my husband came back because he had work, and so I had to wait 11 months before even I got my Visa call.

DAPHNIE: My brother, he eventually got citizenship, and he immediately, immediately gave his citizenship to his daughter, so that she has it. Because he knows he wants to move here, but he cannot file for his wife until he’s here. ‘Cause he’s already gone to the embassy and been like, “We’ve been married for three years.” And they’re like, “Well you can’t file unless you’re in the United States.”

TEBOHO: The poorer you are as a country, the harder it is to move to other places, even if it’s temporary. I look at my own country as an example, South Africa. Americans can go there, they don’t need Visas. But for a South African, which, I’m not married and want to come to the U.S. the Visa process, I mean it’s an understatement to say it’s humbling. My mother comes to visit me once a year,

too. And for her, applying for the Visa, it's like one of those threatening experiences. I mean, she wouldn't even sleep well the night before she's going to the consulate.

MELAINIE: Because it's that stressful?

TEBOHO: It's stressful, and it's intimidating.

Documentary film can let us experience female and intercultural relationships as they unfold in ways that the written word cannot. Books are lonely places. We enter their pages to commune with an author and their ideas. Even if the author chooses to provide quotes from many others, we still experience one quote at a time, a solitary conglomeration of words that is followed by another, and so on. A film, however, can, as we saw, capture four women—in this case from different cultures and races—conversing, inhabiting a space together, and relating to each other. If there can be said to be a common goal to cultural rhetorics, I'd argue that it is the demystification of the Other so we can battle the many --isms that come from fear of those who are not like us. We want to show the richness that can occur when those who are different come together, and documentary filmmaking is an ideal medium for doing just that.

Although it certainly has its drawbacks, documentary filmmaking has much to add to cultural rhetorics. Whether scholars use documentaries as standalone works, publish them along side alphabetic writing analyses, or make video essays like this one, documentaries can greatly enrich many of the conversations currently taking place in cultural rhetorics. I never managed to take my camera to Anzaldúa's doorstep and ask to capture her wild and gorgeous wisdom, but there are many other stories waiting to be told and while some will shine in print, others will unfold better as moving images. Let's pick

up our cameras and bring them to life.

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Soundtrack

“Orchestrale triste” by Patrizio Mingarelli. Downloaded by Jamendo.com

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