

Literature and Literacy Education in Multicultural and Multilingual Settings from the Perspectives of Gloria Anzaldúa's "Borderlands" and Édouard Glissant's "Poetics of Relation"

Author(s): HÉCTOR MANUAL SERNA DIMAS

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*Literature and Literacy Education in Multicultural  
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Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands  
and Édouard Glissant's Poetics of Relation*

HÉCTOR MANUAL SERNA DIMAS  
*Universidad EAN*

**ABSTRACT:** Literature has been considered a bridge among people, their languages, and their cultures. However, it has often been used as an object of multiple analyses that seem to provide aprioristic views of cultures and languages, the writers, and the narratives they tend to represent. This paper addresses the question of the role of literature and literacy education in today's multicultural and multilingual classrooms. It explores Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* to provide a means to understand these writers' own relationships with the languages and the cultures they recognized they were both part of and alien to. The paper also strives to describe the composition (writing) and literature classroom taking into considerations these writers' experiences, reflections, and scholarly works as members of multilingual and multicultural societies.

**RESUMÉ:** La littérature rapproche les peuples, leurs langues et leurs cultures. Il est cependant à noter que cette constatation a souvent fait l'objet de nombreuses études qui semblent offrir des points de vue *à priori* sur les cultures et les langues et que les auteurs et récits ont tendance à représenter. Dans l'analyse suivante, il est question de littérature et d'enseignement littéral dans les classes multiculturelles et multilingues d'aujourd'hui. On y aborde le concept de Gloria Anzaldúa dans son ouvrage *Borderlands* et on aborde aussi l'ouvrage d'Édouard Glissant ; *Poetics of Relation* et ceci, afin de donner les moyens de comprendre les liens personnels de ces auteurs avec les langues et les cultures qui admettent qu'elles font à la fois faire partie du cadre et à la fois, en sont écartées. On y décrit aussi la composition, en rédaction, et la littérature en classe à l'appui de l'expérience, des réflexions et du travail scolaire de ces auteurs qui sont parties intégrantes des sociétés multiculturelles et multilingues.

### *Introduction*

Education in many countries around the world has become an influential constituent of projects of standardization as an attempt to level populations so that they are able, among other things, to pursue studies at different educational levels, to move within countries, or to become part of the multinational workforce. In keeping with the concept of standardization, subjects in school curricula have also been subjected to frameworks, competencies, and skills. Literacy, for instance, has been increasingly subsumed by the reductionist technocratic perspectives that are aimed at training students in sets of fragmented skills to read and write. Similarly, the teaching of literature has encompassed the roles of teachers who pass down knowledge to students on seminal literary works from around the world with elements of aesthetic appreciation based, for the most part, on the development of literature and literary movements throughout history. However, students with many different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic identities are now populating increasingly pluralistic classrooms around the globe. This population is diverse, yet it is to be part of educational projects that support the ideas of commonality through general lockstep curricula and high-stakes testing. As the above situation demonstrates, educators are now confronted with several dilemmas in elucidating the role of education in paroxysmal societies of the present century.

In this article I will try to answer a question that is important to these dilemmas: What can the specific role of literature and literacy education be within multicultural and multilingual societies? In answer to this question, I explore the works of the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa and of the French-Martinican writer Édouard Glissant to argue for new perspectives in the teaching of literature and literacy to students from diverse languages and cultural repertoires. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* provide a means to understand these writers' own relationships with the languages and the cultures they recognized they were both part of and alien to.

Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* contains examples of how literature has presented the ideas of roots and errantry that are essential to discussing multilingual and multicultural settings today. Glissant gave examples from both epic and sacred literature, including examples from the Old Testament. He stated that:

The Greek victory in the Iliad depends on trickery; Ulysses returns from his Odyssey and is recognized by his dog; the Old Testament David bears the stain of adultery and murder; the Chanson de Roland is the chronicle of a defeat; the characters in the Sagas are branded by an unstemmable fate and so forth. These books are the beginning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic, and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses [to which] they will be put). These are books of errantry, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history. (p.15–16)

Errantry, even by choice, is one of the most common realities that people face these days in many different countries and cultures. Consequently, the clashes that may arise with people in these circumstances have to do precisely with their attempts to figure out their new identities and the best ways to communicate who they are and how they feel in this new process of accommodation to a new society.

My claims in this article are precisely about a change in education that sees learning as a project of differentiation instead of a project of standardization. Teachers worldwide see how their students are coming together not only in physical spaces but also in virtual arenas as transnational individuals whose education needs to be grounded on how they best communicate and understand one another. Mahiri (2004) writes about a new-century schooling whose efficacy lies largely on pedagogical designs such as the classroom as a community. Teachers and students create these communities, and more importantly, they sustain them mainly through dialogic exchanges.

### *Borderlands*

*Borderlands* is Gloria Anzaldúa's codice in the same way that we know of these texts as manuscripts written by the Mesoamerican cultures to sum up their knowledge of essential aspects of their lives ranging from scientific, economic, political, religious to literary topics. The reason I use the term codice is that *Borderlands* is about a woman's self-exploration beginning with an appreciation of her geographical birthplace followed by her conceptualization of writing and her development both as a scholar and a writer. For Anzaldúa as a woman, writing was the vital element that recapitulated her vision of her life and scholarly work.

Any time she remembered her past experiences as a child in the geographical borderland of Texas, Anzaldúa brought up the aspects of her life that embodied her writing. For example, she thought of reading as a way to escape the isolationism of her family; she described the bedtime stories she made up for her sister whenever she had to tuck her in bed. Nevertheless, she did not see these stories as 'dead' objects of Western aesthetics intended to glorify the individual as a master of techniques, contents or feelings" (p. 90). On the contrary, she asserted, the tribal cultures considered their art a communal effort and part of their everyday lives; art was the dynamics that was infused in their everyday existence.

These reflections about aesthetics very much resemble Dressman's (2004) description of the aesthetics of John Dewey and his recurrent idea of life experiences surrounded by artistic objects—particularly literary texts. Dressman asserts that the aesthetics experience should balance "the integration of the reader's prior experience—practice, intellect, and emotion—and their prior experience of reading as these were influenced by the reader's immediate environment and experience of the text as one read" (p. 39). The above

quotation illustrates the complexity of activities such as reading, especially if we think of reading literature in the classroom. The transactions of teachers and students go beyond comprehension/opinion exercises to how these readings contribute to changes in people's ideas and visions of the world, and further to the possible discussions or debates that these readings certainly stimulate in people.

Similarly, in an interview with Karin Ikas, Anzaldúa confirmed this treatment of her writing as a beginning that had emotional attachments to her. Then there was a moment of reflection that would elicit a visual idea of what she was feeling; writing happened when she wanted to articulate this picture into words. This process of articulation had to do with how she believed the disengagement between reality and spirituality occurred; she worked at the juncture of these "cracks," as she called them. She concluded by providing her definition of composition (writing):

The art of composition, whether you are composing a work of fiction or your life, or whether you are composing reality, always means pulling off fragmented pieces and putting them together into a whole that makes sense. A lot of my composition theories are not just about writing but about how people live their lives, construct their cultures, so actually about how people construct reality. (p. 238)

Anzaldúa thought her life was "both intracultural in her Chicano and Mexican culture [and] intercultural as she interacted with other related cultures such as the white, the black, the Native American and other cultures at large" (p. 233). She felt her writing had to be in contact with these broader audiences—especially in a world that was populated by immediate communication, technology, and mass media. Moreover, she brought up this idea in her poetics, as she compared such exchanges to people living around the Banyan tree:

When the seeds from the tree fall, they don't take root in the ground. They take root in the branches. So the seeds fall in the branches, and it is there, above the earth, where the tree blooms and forms its fruits. And I thought, that is where we are getting it. Instead of going to the roots of our Hispanic or Chicano culture we are getting it from the branches, from white dominant culture. (p. 234)

She concluded that it was not a matter of rejecting others for the sake of it, but a matter of knowing oneself and others and being able to choose from that. I believe she intended for us to make sense of ourselves from that. She had the same idea when she talked about the Chicano children; she wanted to teach them the narratives of their culture when they were still little. She did not want them to learn about the Chicano culture in an "objectified" version as part of curricula in Chicano Studies at the American universities.

I think Anzaldúa's voice, as both a scholar and a writer, allows us to appreciate traditional aspects of rhetoric, but reinvented with her notions of

ethnicity, gender, and authorial voice. Bizzel & Herzberg (2001) cite Andrea Lunsford, calling this reinvention a “mestiza rhetoric” (p. 1583), to account for such cultural mixing that could be applied not only to Anzaldúa’s Chicano-Mexican heritage. As a matter of fact, there is a growing movement of hybrid writers challenging the hegemony of Western rhetoric. Anzaldúa talks about very subjective (intimate) elements that propel her writing. Víctor Villanueva (1993) works towards conceptualizing writing by acknowledging the influences of individual and societal elements that are part of the self/other double bind. Haivan V. Hoang (2008) calls to attention the notion of memories as sources for creating texts from layers of other texts. Yameng Liu (1999) proposes the dyad of self and other as complementary in the literacy processes of transnational individuals.

To sum up, I think Anzaldúa wrote about her life as a codice from which she could retrieve and reinvent her life in a changing world that she inhabited as a borderland. Her writing was permeated by symbols transcending physical and emotional experiences; she, in fact, assumed that her writing performed a ritual in which she herself was the sacrifice.

The Writing is my whole life, it is my obsession. This vampire which is my talent does not suffer other suitors. Daily I court it, offer my neck to its teeth. This is the sacrifice that the act of creation requires, a blood sacrifice. For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, 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. (p. 97)

Borderlands encapsulated Anzaldúa’s ideas of crossing as “travesía,” but in this process of contact, she wanted to remove the notion of “atravesados” or the misfits caught in the middle. Thus, her idea was to see people who shared a territory where the borderlands both physical and intimate were legitimate terms of encounter and ensuing relation.

### *The Composition (Writing) Classroom According to Gloria Anzaldúa*

Students’ identities and their personal experiences are the most important elements in conceptualizing the composition classroom, according to Anzaldúa. These two factors are the guiding elements for teachers in planning and conducting their practice in literature and literacy classrooms. This particular classroom dynamics will only take place when teachers purposefully include students’ ideas and elaborations of their work to make learning both personal and meaningful. If students’ discourses are present in what the literature and literacy classes are about, teachers will find possibilities to engage them in the reading and writing activities of a course.

Anzaldúa's imagined writing classroom would have the condition of a cross-cultural site, where teachers would orient class encounters—both physical and intimate—to the task of elucidating the self/other duality. It would also make available different views of rhetoric and its values so that students could historicize and contextualize thinking about language and writing. I think one of the overriding criteria for this class would be collaboration and variety. The former is a requirement for individuals who agree to transact using a system of symbols, and the latter is necessary if people are to experiment with their writing in order to challenge the status of rhetoric.

Another feature of this classroom would be the presence of reading as a free act that did not necessarily seek either translation or interpretation; however, these readings should be considered windows from which we could watch one another. In this way, students would be able to overcome the material and superficial aspects of culture, to look for motives, attitudes, perceptions, conceptions, misconceptions, and even prejudices. In sum, it would foster a view of culture that considers these essential aspects of intimacy and legitimacy that will constitute this relation (Glissant, 1997).

### *Poetics of Relation*

Just as Anzaldúa talks about borderlands as both the physical space and the emotional connection with the culture of the Other, Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* begins with the boats that took African people as slaves to different parts of the world. Uprooting, then, is one of the most influential ideas for Glissant. For the Africans, this transit produced enslavement and nomadic life in exile. For Europeans who sailed looking for new lands, movement was meant to transport their roots to other parts of the world. These views of people's movements made Glissant formulate his idea of the root culture in terms of rhizome. In other words, the essence of something was no longer to be found in its roots, but in its limbs or branches, which were in relation:

In contrast to arrowlike nomadism (discovery or conquest), in contrast to the situation of exile, errantry gives-on-and-with the negation of every pole and every metropolis, whether connected or not to a conqueror's voyaging act. We have repeatedly mentioned that the first thing exported by the conqueror was his language. Moreover, the great Western languages were supposedly vehicular languages, which often took place of an actual metropolis. Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually. Going beyond the impositions of economic forces and cultural pressures, Relation rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent. (p. 19)

Glissant saw in this rhizomatic relation an important element to understanding the current contacts of cultures around the world. Moreover, the very essence of identity was questioned since it was not going to be found entirely in the roots, but also in the rhizome of people's relationships with other languages and

cultures. Glissant thought that such a relation operated when there was a genuine interest to acknowledge the Other. He asserted that “diversity, the quantifiable totality of every possible difference, is the motor driving universal energy, and it must be safeguarded from assimilations, from fashions passively accepted as the norm, and from standardized customs” (p. 30).

The poetics for Glissant were about the dialectic relationship between French and Creole language from the Caribbean. In this sense, he determined that the themes of such poetics were “the dialectics between of oral and written language, the balance between the present moment and duration, the questioning of literary genres, and the nonprojectile imaginary construct” (p. 35).

To resolve the tension between oral and written language, Glissant spoke of the life in the enclosed area of the plantations where masses of slaves were confined. Plantations had many regulations, which included a rule of silence. This situation led to the proliferation of oral literature that took root from a strong desire to survive within these difficult circumstances inside the plantation. Through an elaborate process of evolution, this form of communication went on to create new sayings, songs, and proverbs in Creole language.

Moreover, all these manifestations carried with them aesthetic ideas in terms of what Glissant described as:

Negro spirituals and blues, persisting in towns and cities; jazz, beguines, and calypsos, bursting into barrios and shantytowns; salsas and reggaes, assembled everything blunt and direct, painfully stifled, and patiently diffused into this varied speech. This was the cry of the Plantation, transfigured into the speech of the world. (p. 73)

Besides the value of this transformation of speech and its contribution to the arts of the world, Glissant talked about the idea of memory that is at stake in the duality of oral and written discourse. He felt that there have been official accounts of institutions such as the plantation, which were created not necessarily to remember them, but to obscure the multiple stories that were not precisely tales. In fact, they were accounts of real people coping with adverse living circumstances and they emerged to let the world know precisely the marks this system left on people and societies. In defining how the plantation influenced both our memories and our time, Glissant affirmed:

Within the space apart that it comprised, the always multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle created inextricable knots within the web of filiations, thereby breaking the clear, linear order to which Western thought had imparted such brilliance. So Alejo Carpentier and Faulkner are of the same mind, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Lezama Lima go together, I recognize myself in Derek Walcott, we take delight in the coils of time in García Márquez’s century of solitude. The ruins of the Plantation have affected American cultures all around. (p. 72)



Glissant pursued these ideas of the marks of the plantation that he discerned in more contemporary times, in what he called a “second Plantation matrix” (p. 73), in cities that currently house people from diverse backgrounds and languages who also seem to be confined in so called “ethnic” neighborhoods of cities and towns. The multicultural and multilingual nature of the inhabitants of cities around the world is more evident than ever, so these two conditions call for new notions of mixed race, crossbreeding, or *métissage* relevant to different sectors of society.

With regards to the present moment and its duration, as well as the questioning of traditional genres, Glissant drew an interesting contrast between Western and Eastern conceptions of time. The former conceive of time with respect to linearity and the latter with respect to cycles. Both conceptions have a particular vision of individuals: in the Western, they are conditioned by the community via filiation; in the Eastern, they are made responsible for themselves and are willing to be born-again. In Western thinking, the conception of time is based on the idea of history; in Eastern traditions and religions, individuals reincarnate through life cycles.

Glissant used the literary genres of epic and the tragedy to exemplify these notions of linearity of time, and more importantly, of filiation. In the case of epic, he argued:

Filiation is explicit in the Old Testament; it is implicit in the Iliad, in which the reputed or chosen sons of Gods play out the projected rivalries of the Immortals among themselves. It is legitimacy that is disrupted by the abduction of Helen (with its threat of *métissage*—mixing the blood of East and West); and legitimacy, perhaps, inseparable from the project of discovery and knowledge, provides the tragic driving force for the Odyssey (Ulysses and Penelope’s faithfulness to each other). (p. 50)

Glissant considered that tragic events unfolded when illegitimacy broke the idea of filiation and threatened the community, pushing it towards a point of its dissolution. He affirmed that:

Shakespeare is considered to have confirmed this work of legitimacy in his theater. If there is something rotten in Denmark, it is because the “line” of succession to the throne has been broken, demanding catharsis with Hamlet as victim. During this same period Camoens, in his epic poetry, was renouncing the sacrifice of a prostituting hero, singing instead of a community of heroes set off to conquer the world. (p. 53)

Glissant concluded that legitimacy and filiation were present in both epic and tragedy. However, he considered that modern epic and tragedy would be more

concerned with the concept of legitimacy than the idea of filiation in itself, asserting:

Today it is not only the legitimacy of cultures that is threatened in the world (the life energy of peoples); also threatened are their relations of equivalency. A modern epic and a modern tragedy would offer to unite the specificity of nations, granting each culture's opacity (though no longer as *en-soi*) yet at the same time imagining the transparency of their relations. (p. 55)

Glissant's thoughts about relation itself and how it emerges are associated with the idea of uncertainty. He affirmed that studying cultures and languages in comparative terms gives the idea stability and certainty. However, the concept of relation is active, and only the people and cultures that experience it can imagine its development. In fact, he was critical of the somehow aprioristic ways of studying cultures, stating:

Cultures coincide in the historic precipitousness (the confluence of histories) that has become their commonplace. There is no point now to the vast expenses of time (let us get back to this) that formerly allow slow, deep sedimentations to accumulate gradually. . . . Industrialized nations have long beat time for this precipitousness, determining its speed and giving rhythm to trends, through the control they exert over modes of power and means of communication. The situation worldwide "integrates" cultures becoming exhausted by this speed and others are stuck somewhere off by themselves. The latter are kept in a state of sluggish, passive receptivity in which fantasies of spectacular development and overwhelming consumption remain fantasies. (p. 175)

### *The Literature Classroom According to Édouard Glissant*

Glissant credits reading literary pieces with the potential to serve as a bridge or a conduit for people's multicultural and multilingual equivalent exchanges and understanding. Literature may become such a conduit because it does not seem to imply political or ideological connotations up front. At least, it is up to the readers to make sense of these relations on their own.

Dressman makes a case in point when he talks about the Deweyan ideas about aesthetics, beyond the reading of literary texts, from researching and writing reports to performing or viewing television or movies and using the internet. To sum up, the academic/literary readings and their responses must encompass personal responses within a socially, culturally, and even a politically responsive framework. (p. 48) He clarifies these ideas by stating that:

For readers of *Huckleberry Finn*, responses are likely to center around Twain's use of the n-word and the relationship between Huck and Jim, and in particular around whether Huck ever comes to see Jim—and by extension, all African Americans—as

his moral and intellectual equal. In this case, rather than simply asking students to explain or clarify their views on these issues, from a Deweyan perspective it would be also important for a teacher to have students explore the origins of their opinions in their own cultural and historical backgrounds. (p. 48)

I think that if teachers are to believe in the poetics of relation after Glissant, they have to be convinced that every time they have these encounters of men and women from various parts of the world, they are to write the books of the beginning, the book of Genesis. García Márquez (2007) in the first pages of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* writes about the arrival of the first inhabitants at Macondo, when everything they saw was new to them, so that they had to give names to all the things that surrounded them. Naming worlds is probably one of the most beautiful aspects of writing, creativity, and authorship. Glissant made a very similar assertion, averring that “rather than discovering or telling about the world, it is a matter of producing an equivalent, which would be the Book, in which everything would be said, without anything’s being reported” (p. 25).

Glissant also placed great value on oral and written language for the creation of poetry, which he considered a valid source of knowledge. In fact, poetry was his ultimate example of relation as a “transformative mode of history”:

The poetic axiom, like the mathematical axiom, is illuminating because it is fragile and inescapable, obscure and revealing. In both instances, the prospective system accepts and grasps that in the future, it will be transcended. Science transforms its languages; poetry invents its tongues. For neither is it a question of exploring, but one, rather, of going toward a totality that is unrealizable, without being required to say where they will come together—nor even that they have the need to do so. (p. 85)

Hanauer (2003) has a very similar contention when he discusses the epistemological status of poetry. He asserts that “poetry is a literary text that presents the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the writer through a self-referential use of language that creates for the reader and writer a new understanding of the experience, thought or feeling related to in the text” (p. 76). He also considers that any approach to poetry has to go beyond the formalistic or even linguistic understanding of the genre, towards the cognitive and epistemological activation of knowledge through a distinctive form of discourse that he considers unique. According to Hanauer, there is in this “uniqueness” of poetry, considerable promise for the nurture of multicultural settings in which individuals have legitimate moments to negotiate ideas worth communicating. This meaning negotiation presents itself as a very enriching environment for both language and culture learning, due to the double bind of interlanguage and biculturalism or multiculturalism. Hanauer concludes by adding that “poetry can facilitate the expression of individualized human experience in a new linguistic

and cultural system and allow the entrance into the language classroom of diverse human experience and points of personal, cross-cultural contact" (p. 85).

### *Conclusion*

The life accounts and the scholarly work of both Gloria Anzaldúa and Édouard Glissant provide multicultural and multilingual educational settings with important features for conceptualizing and/or reconceptualizing approaches to teaching literature and writing. Literary and literacy education cannot set aside the multifarious circumstances that motivate these aesthetic expressions. In fact, both Anzaldúa and Glissant frequently maintained that this study needed to look for the many moments of intimacy that all these literary pieces contain and suggest. Calvino (1986) argued that one of the most harmful circumstances for the preservation of written literature and the physical survival of books in the 21st century was the excessiveness of commonplaces in literature. However, I think that probably the new commonplaces for teaching, studying, and enjoying literature in multilingual and multicultural settings are legitimacy, intimacy, and equivalent relation.

That Those Beings Be Not Being

"Being is relation": but Relation is safe from the idea of Being.

The idea of relation does not limit Relation, nor does it fit outside of it.

The idea of relation does not preexist (Relation).

Someone who thinks Relation thinks by means of it, just as does someone

Who thinks is safe from it.

Relation contaminates, sweetens, as a principle, or as flower dust.

Relation enferals, lying in wait for equivalence.

—Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

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*Héctor Manuel Serna Dimas* is Director of Grupo de Investigación en Lingüística, Traducción y Comunicación Organizacional in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Universidad EAN in Bogota.

Author's Address:  
 Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales  
 Universidad EAN  
 Bogotá, D.C. Colombia, Suramérica  
 Email: hmserna@correo.ean.edu.co