

I felt incredibly boxed-in by the openness of the prompt: “Write an argument about women and food. Or just food, if you want. That’ll work. Twelve to fifteen pages.” Really? It was as if my professor did not realize that that such tortuously broad criteria left our class with nearly infinite possible topics. It was not the length that struck fear into our hearts, but the persistent questions about where and how to begin. I should have trusted that the breadth would not be so tortuous after all. My initial skepticism about the assignment’s plausibility resulted from years of unstructured coursework that had convinced me that research writing is nothing but drudgery: sitting in front of a blank paper, praying that the Google Gods would take pity on the mere mortal attempting a paper on Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* or constitutional law.

University Writing, and the development of “I Am My *Lebeneh*” in particular, redefined research writing. No other course had emphasized that research papers require a strategy greater than simply putting pen to paper, which was my preferred, but historically fruitless, method. With a tentative topic in mind—connecting Bud’s “borderlands” in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava* to Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*—librarian Ann Brown offered invaluable resources to help develop my paper. I knew about Gelman’s databases from an earlier class, but with Ann’s suggestions, even the most basic expeditions into *Academic Search Premier* yielded far more pertinent results than any comparable internet search. As a positive externality, exploring the subject-specific databases with Ann for my University Writing course greatly improved my research in another course.

Her simplest yet most profound advice was to keep an open mind throughout the research process. As mentioned above, maintaining an open mind allowed me to refine my search criteria and target more relevant publications. But her advice was especially applicable when it became necessary to respond to points of view I may not have otherwise considered. My professor, Dr.

Smith, hosted valuable peer review sessions with several classmates. Beyond providing constructive criticism on diction and organization, Dr. Smith and my classmates posited questions that I had not contemplated, and my argument evolved in response to these new findings. Thus, my interaction with other thinkers shaped my topic just as much as my topic guided my research.

I enjoyed extensive access to publications on *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which provided assurance in framing my argument. My interpretation of “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” is nothing particularly novel, as the idea that language is important to Anzaldúa is central to many of the texts I read throughout the process. However, I did contribute something new: a close textual analysis of “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” coupled with a pilot study of *The Language of Baklava*. The openness fostered by Ann and my colleagues in the peer review sessions became crucial upon discovering the dearth of publications on *The Language of Baklava*, which was a challenge I did not face in my research on *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Instead of absorbing the ideas of published scholars, I was forced to trust the value of my observations on the memoir, as no standard for comparison exists. The lack of resources on *The Language of Baklava*, which at first seemed problematic, allowed me to participate in academic discourse as a university freshman in ways I never expected was possible.

This paper was thrilling to write, in spite of—or perhaps because of—the challenges I faced as a researcher. I am thoroughly interested in the idea of the borderlands but am not a member myself. Because I cannot personally relate to a life on the border, it was important to rigorously analyze the texts at hand rather than infuse an outsider’s perceptions into the argument. Based on my experience, I believe that the topic could encourage those who may not otherwise read a text by a lesbian Chicana feminist philosopher to think about her incredibly

insightful work by relating it to something more accessible: a memoir about food that reads like a novel. I hope that readers can learn from reading my paper, because I certainly learned from writing it.

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I Am My *Lebneh*

Abstract

*This paper examines how the culinary traditions of Bud's homeland in Diana Abu-Jaber's memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, help Bud manage a life comprised of two cultures. Bud, Abu-Jaber's immigrant father, struggles to unite the memories of his Jordanian childhood with the realities of his new life in Syracuse, New York. Abu-Jaber notes that, as immigrants, her father and his brothers live in the "borderlands" between their new and native cultures (326). Gloria Anzaldúa presents this term in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and it is upon this concept that the paper is based. Anzaldúa's use of language, as presented in her chapter "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," reinforces her position in the borderlands yet serves as a mechanism to manage conflicting identities and, in turn, construct her own. Similarly, Bud's Jordanian culinary habits separate him from American culture yet allow him to form a new identity amidst the strains of displacement. In this way, Bud uses food to negotiate life in the borderlands as Anzaldúa uses language.*

In "Language and Identity Politics: The Linguistic Autobiographies of Latinos in the United States," Lea Ramsdell contends that feminist philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa is "situated in bicultural, bilingual contexts" and writes "in an attempt to reconcile [her] two languages into a coherent identity (168). The chapter "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" from *Borderlands/La Frontera* illustrates Ramsdell's assertion. Anzaldúa states that language, an essential element of human interaction, is integral to her identity as a *tejana* living in the borderlands, the region where her Spanish- and English-speaking backgrounds intersect. In the memoir *The Language of Baklava*, Diana Abu-Jaber's father, Bud, is situated in his own borderlands between America and his Jordanian homeland. Abu-Jaber presents food as essential to Bud's identity as he

reconciles childhood memories and lived realities in the borderlands. As such, many of Anzaldúa's musings about language are applicable to Bud's culinary practices in the memoir. Although the spectrum of human experience exhibits wide variation, language and food are widely acknowledged as aspects important to a person's sense of self. What is lacking, however, is an extensive analysis detailing the similarities between the two elements in constructing the identities of those who associate with not one culture but many. In *The Language of Baklava*, Bud's relationship with food corresponds to Anzaldúa's relationship with language in "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." Food helps Bud manage the demands of conflicting cultures as language does for Anzaldúa. Bud eventually realizes that he need not transcend the border between one culture and another; food allows him to embrace life in the borderlands and define his own identity. Although the cases of Anzaldúa and Bud are only two cases of many, analyzing their comparable experiences in the borderlands can enhance the discussion of minority identification more broadly.

Existing Research

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* is considered a seminal work in feminist and Chicana studies. In her "Introduction to the Second Edition" of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Sonia Saldívar-Hull contends that *Borderlands* "signaled a new visibility for academic programs on the study of the U.S.-Mexico border [to include] History, American Studies, Anthropology and Political Science" (12-13). Beyond the impacts listed above, *Borderlands* has also intensified the academic discussion on the role of language in identity formation. Cristina Ros i Solé writes about the use of L2, or combined second language, to construct linguistic and cultural identities in non-native or displaced persons like Anzaldúa in "Autobiographical Accounts of L2 Identity Construction in Chicano Literature." Discussion of language in *Borderlands/La Frontera* and,

specifically, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” can also be found in Ramsdell’s “Language and Identity Politics.”

On the contrary, there are very few publications about *The Language of Baklava* and little scholarly analysis. The extent of writings on the text are opinion pieces, like “Memoirs” by Joyce Saricks, and book reviews, such as “The Language of Baklava: a Memoir” by Pat Bangs, Jackie Gropman, and Susan Woodcock. In neither context is the memoir analyzed in any depth. While secondary sources on *The Language of Baklava* are scarce, many scholars have written on the overarching importance of food to Abu-Jaber’s fictional characters. Referring to one of Abu-Jaber’s novels, Carol Fadda-Conrey observes, “from her pivotal position in the kitchen, [the protagonist joins] together the different communities and individuals of *Crescent*’s ethnic borderland” (196). Brinda Mehta has also interpreted the role of food in *Crescent*, noting the importance of culinary practices to the identities of Americans of foreign descent. Therefore, it is not surprising that Abu-Jaber’s account of Bud and his struggle to unify Jordanian and American culture concentrates on food. Yet although Bud’s character and the memoir as a whole can greatly contribute to academic discussion of food, displacement, and identity, *The Language of Baklava* has remained on the shelf. This paper acknowledges food’s importance to Bud and presents its role in helping him cope with conflicting demands of separate cultures.

Borderlands: Crossfire Between Cultures

Before analyzing the two texts, it is necessary to define the concept of “borderlands.” In the poem “To live in the Borderlands means you” from *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa describes residents of the borderlands as “caught in the crossfire between camps” of races, ethnicities, foods, and languages (216). As the cacophonous alliteration in the quote suggests, *la frontera* is a place in which people face conflictual demands of multiple cultures. Notably,

where there is crossfire, there are wounds. Borderlands can be physical; Anzaldúa grew up in Texas near a physical border between two countries and cultures. However, the notion of borderlands is applicable to those without such tangible boundaries. For example, most immigrants must travel far to reach the United States. As a result, their personal borderlands do not consist of physical boundaries between new and native lands. Instead, the borderlands combine memories of their homeland with the realities of new surroundings. The result: a “dual identity” (Anzaldúa 85).

The Texts

Borderlands/La Frontera discusses conflicts of linguistic, sexual, and ethnic identity that exist on the border of Mexico and the United States, conflicts which are particularly influential on its author. Anzaldúa is one of many writers who “view language as the very essence of their selves” (Ramsdell 167). Anzaldúa articulates in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” that “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity;” the languages she possess wield extraordinary influence over her cultural identification (81). Her concise assertion that “I am my language” reinforces this point. She combines both Spanish and English to emphasize the significance of the multifaceted position from which she writes. Yet Anzaldúa also depicts the near impossibility of reconciling the cultures her speech reflects. When she speaks English, she speaks “the oppressor’s language” (77); when she speaks Chicano Spanish, she speaks “an orphan tongue” (80). As a result, the implications of language on her identity are, at times, problematic. Since the English speakers she must accommodate deem her tongue “illegitimate,” she deems herself illegitimate (81). However, the chapter’s tone does not solely reflect frustration and irreconcilable conflict. Amidst the struggles of life in the borderlands, Anzaldúa

is resilient and even hopeful. She will use her native tongue to “overcome the tradition of silence” indicative of life in the borderlands and, by speaking, establish her legitimacy (81).

It is true that Anzaldúa is uniquely situated since she perceives that her languages—amalgams of Spanish and English—are considered “bastard” (80) by the English “oppressor” (77). Not all minority groups experience such discordant interactions with the dominant culture. Although Bud endures his share of contention, his relationship with American society is hardly as antagonistic as Anzaldúa’s. However, many of the experiences Anzaldúa articulates in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” are useful in analyzing Bud’s relationship to food in *The Language of Baklava*.

Abu-Jaber’s memoir presents direct observations on experiences of a first-generation immigrant to the United States. At the beginning of the text, Abu-Jaber does not call Bud “Arab-American,” a hyphenated designation typical of minorities in the United States. Instead, she says that she is “raising an Arab father in America” (3). The physical separation of the words “Arab” and “America” parallels the disconnect Bud notices between his Jordanian homeland and American life. The word “raising” suggests that Bud is dependent on his American family to familiarize him with the intricacies of American society and help him adapt. However, as the memoir progresses, Bud no longer feels this estrangement or dependence. Decades after the opening scene, readers find Bud in a Jordanian restaurant, reminiscing over Arabic food with a childhood friend. When Bud’s friend admits, “I thought you were an American,” Bud reveals, “I am” (313). Despite this seemingly dramatic change—what appears to be a sacrifice of one culture for another—a critical fact remains. No matter the circumstances, Bud never abandons the foods of his homeland. Arabic food helps Bud manage the conflicts of life in the borderlands and form an identity within them. While Bud cannot recreate in Syracuse, New York his

childhood amongst the Bedouins, he can recreate the scents and tastes that remind him of his first home. Thus, he is able to establish a new life and identity in America without forgoing his connection to Jordan. Bud, initially an Arab man living in America, is now an Arab-American.

Notably, the identity-defining elements in each text—language and food—relate to the tongue. At the most basic level, the tongue allows for certain sounds in oral communication and facilitates eating; an organ that encourages interpersonal interaction and helps sustain life, the tongue is an invaluable component of the human experience. “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” opens with three anecdotes from visits to the dentist’s office, where the presumably oppressive dentist desires to “control” Anzaldúa’s “strong” and “stubborn” tongue (76). Yet wild things are undomesticated, nonconformist, and generally free from the confines of a restraining power. Anzaldúa’s “wild tongue” remains wild to the last page, as the dominant culture is unable to tame her, linguistically or otherwise. As the following analysis indicates, the inhospitable nature of the borderlands does not stifle Bud’s tongue, either; food helps him reconcile his identities and his tongue remains wild.

Linguistic and Culinary Identities in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” and *The Language of Baklava*

For both Anzaldúa and Bud, language and food derive their meanings from specific cultural settings. The connotation of certain phrases may vary when uttered in English or Spanish, just as a dish from Jordan may not retain the same significance if it is eaten in an American restaurant. Although Anzaldúa’s Spanish phrases are often accompanied by comparable English phrases, she writes many items in Spanish precisely because they cannot be expressed in English. “*Muchachitas bien criadas*” is followed by the translation, “well-bred girls don’t answer back” (76). Despite Anzaldúa’s English translation, people living on the other

side of the border may not understand the relational hierarchies and power politics embedded in the statement if they lack insight into Mexican-American culture. In this case, Spanish is a tool that systematically reinforces Anzaldúa's position in the Mexican-American borderlands yet offers her avenues of expression not available in English alone.

The meaning of food, too, can be lost in translation. In *The Language of Baklava*, Abu-Jaber converts the names of some foods into English: "*magloubeh* [...] means upside-down," a description of the dish's preparation method (128). However, for many dishes, language and food are intractably linked; the dishes and their names do not have English equivalents. Abu-Jaber provides no translation for the dish *lebeneh*, only details of its white, therapeutic purity. Just as Anzaldúa offers English renditions of Spanish sayings, Abu-Jaber attempts literal and figurative descriptions such as "yogurt," "cream," and "mother's milk." In the end, though, *lebeneh* "is the sort of food that can't be replaced by anything else" (229). The dish is plainly Arabic and reflects a culture not widely represented and recognized in American society. The *lebeneh* tucked inside Bud's American refrigerator emphasizes his location on the Jordanian-American border but helps preserve part of his character.

To some extent, the "hatred, anger and exploitation" of the border "landscape" necessitate Anzaldúa and Bud to compartmentalize their cultural identifications to preserve a healthy sense of self (Anzaldúa 19). To cope with the stressors of the borderlands, Anzaldúa uses different languages in different settings. At home with her sister, brothers, and friends, Anzaldúa speaks variations of Spanish that have emerged on the Mexican-American border. In settings where white culture is dominant, such as "school [...] and job situations," Anzaldúa speaks "standard and working class English" (78). Anzaldúa comments that if she accidentally uses a language out of its intended context, she ostracizes herself and those with whom she is

speaking. Ironically, to “talk freely” and be understood, she must exhibit only those aspects of her identity which are appropriate on a particular side of the border.

Bud encounters a similar issue on the border between his native Jordan and new home in Syracuse. In the first chapter of *The Language of Baklava*, Abu-Jaber notes that her family is “Arab at home and American in the streets” (5). This statement indicates that the context in which it is appropriate for Bud to exhibit Jordanian qualities is in the privacy of his family’s home. Outside of their house, “American” behavior is expected by society, a notion exemplified by the following example from *The Language of Baklava*. After years of deliberation, Bud finally opens his own restaurant. It is not a Jordanian restaurant that serves the Arabic food of his childhood but rather an American restaurant on an American golf course that offers archetypal American cuisine: “rows of burgers, sizzling French fries, blistering hot dogs, and grilled cheese sandwiches” (324). Abu-Jaber notes that her father is happy “feeding people and watching them eat,” even if the food they consume is not Arabic. The restaurant, Bud acting “American in the streets,” represents his compartmentalized identities.

However, by definition, to live in the borderlands is to occupy more than one culture. Realistically, neither Anzaldúa nor Bud can seclude themselves from the American side of the border, nor is it likely that they would desire this isolation. After all, Anzaldúa defines herself not by speaking Spanish but by alternating between and juxtaposing Spanish and English in a variety of contexts. In her refusal to speak English alone, the surrounding English-speaking culture may consider both her and her language inferior. For example, when she instructs her “Anglo teacher” how to pronounce her name correctly, she is punished for “talking back” (75). However, rather than conceding to the demands of the teacher’s side of the border, Anzaldúa embraces the languages “closest to [her] heart” (78), and in so doing, defines herself as neither

“hispana india negra española ni gabacha” but as a unique combination of all (216). Language allows Anzaldúa to construct her own border identity.

Like Anzaldúa, Bud’s Jordanian food and cooking practices essentially ostracize him from American society yet allow him to retain particularly meaningful aspects of his native culture. Returning to the example of his American restaurant, Bud was able to partition his identities only to a limited extent. Two years after Bud finally achieved the object of his desires—a family-run restaurant in America—he decides to sell it. Bud recognizes the implausibility of maintaining such clearly-defined arenas of identity as the restaurant. Rather than identify with Jordan or the United States exclusively, Bud effectively constructs his own border identity. He incorporates elements of one culture into his life in another, even at the risk of receiving negative reactions from the dominant American culture. In a particularly telling anecdote, Abu-Jaber writes, “the front lawn will allow us to share food, cross our legs on the plastic lawn chairs, and gossip with the neighbors, as we did in Jordan.” But they do not live in Jordan. They live in Syracuse, New York, where “the neighbors don’t barbeque in their front yards” (78). Here, Bud integrates Jordanian traditions into his American life. The day after cooking in the front lawn, young Diana learns that her classmate’s parents consider Bud’s front-yard cooking to be an “unholy disgrace.” The classmate proceeds to threaten the Abu-Jabers: ““If your family doesn’t know how to behave, my parents will have to find out about getting you out of this neighborhood”” (82).

The previous statement is notable for two reasons. In the eyes of a middle-class American family in white suburbia, Bud misbehaved by cooking in the manner of his homeland. The family decides that good behaviour is American and bad behaviour is Jordanian. This diction ascribes to American identity a certain privilege, a privilege that can be revoked by the

dominant culture; practicing Jordanian traditions becomes a punishable offense. The statement is also emblematic of Bud's life in the borderlands. If he continues to unite his two worlds by making Arabic foods in his suburban American community, he faces conflict and isolation.

Yet the risk of conflict is not enough to prevent Anzaldúa from using an array of languages or Bud from steadfastly making the foods of his homeland. The two experience ceaseless tension between aspects of themselves, but they eventually come to realize that this tension does not make their multiple identities mutually exclusive. They do not live on one side of the border, but in the borderlands. The borderlands, where cultures coalesce, are a worthy place to live. To thrive in the borderlands, neither Anzaldúa nor Bud abandons aspects of their characters under "the hammer blow of the dominant *norteamericano* culture" (Anzaldúa 85). The hammer blow, while violent, reinforces and fastens together the seemingly disjointed pieces of Anzaldúa and Bud into coherent identities. Language and food are the nails.

Anzaldúa's use of language signifies that her "position is one of both appropriation and resistance" (Aigner-Varoz 47). She does not surrender her border tongue and the identity to which it is linked, for it has rendered her "persevering [and] unbreakable" (Anzaldúa 86). Her purpose in writing "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" and *Borderlands/La Frontera* is neither to recoil toward the Mexican border nor produce a polemical against oppressive American society. She appropriates attributes of the white border as she writes predominantly in English but intersperses a multiplicity of dialects that resist dominant expectations to emphasize her subject position in society. Anzaldúa calls her multilingual work an "invitation" to dialogue among all sectors of society (20). The noun "invitation" embodies Anzaldúa's progression in accepting herself and her language, with language defining her in turn. "Invite" is an active verb; Anzaldúa actively calls upon each open-minded person to engage in meaningful discussion on

issues of ethnicity, language, sexuality, and many others. Her tongue may emphasize her location on the Mexican-American border, but it exerts such power in doing so. Where English alone may have caused her to fade into the background, to be swallowed by the borderlands, her “illegitimate” wild tongue ironically allows her to establish her legitimate sense of self.

Bud, too, appropriates aspects of the society to which he migrated, but he resists the status quo by persistently cooking Arabic food. Bud Americanizes throughout the memoir, but not once do the recipes depart from their Jordanian origins. The only non-Arabic recipes within *The Language of Baklava*—namely Velveeta sandwiches, angel food cake, and crème puffs—are associated with other family members. From the author’s youth in Catholic school to her Fulbright research as an adult in Jordan, her father cooks Arabic food. Jordanian culinary traditions in suburban Syracuse are not widely accepted, and may in fact be a misbehaviour that justifies expulsion from the neighborhood. But like Anzaldúa’s book, Bud’s cooking is an invitation to all to accept his border identity. Bud does not barbeque in the front yard to be reclusive, to retreat toward his Jordanian childhood, but rather to “share food [...] and gossip with the neighbors” (78). Bud’s food is an open invitation, if society is willing to accept. His food distinguishes him from white America but helps him establish his place within it. Through food, Bud comes to realize he need not be exclusively American or Jordanian. He can be both. Bud, like Anzaldúa, establishes his identity with his wild tongue.

Implications

In "Language and Identity Politics," Lea Ramsdell notes that “there is no universal Latino experience of language” for Anzaldúa or any of the writers she discusses. However, Ramsdell claims each writer recognizes “that the evolution of a private and public self is conditioned by language” (168). Similarly, this paper does not contend that language and food are

homogenously important to all minorities living in majority worlds. There is still much to be discovered about identity formation, but the preceding analysis of two seemingly disparate texts is a valuable launching point in broadening the discourse regarding the nature of identity in the context of majority-minority relations. Anzaldúa's relationship to language and Bud's to food are clearly emblematic of life in the borderlands. Despite the differences between the two, they provide comparable tools to manage the conflict inherent to the border between cultures. Further studies may show that residents of other borderlands can contribute valuable mechanisms for dealing with this conflict as well. These methods could, in turn, limit the wounds that arise in the crossfire.

Anzaldúa and Bud are able to legitimize their identities through language and food. What is clear, however, is that this should not have been necessary in the first place. The United States is widely acknowledged as a melting pot of ethnicities, religions, and creeds. Despite the incredible openness of this nation, the hands with which it embraces minority groups can also stifle and repress. If American society as a whole is unwilling to accept and encourage difference, English-speakers will not hear Anzaldúa's Spanish phrases, no matter her pleas to listen; Bud's *lebeneh* will bridge no cultural gaps. Yet if they are willing to listen to wild tongues and the language of baklava, Americans can learn from the resilience of Anzaldúa and Bud.

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