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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

PROBLEMATIZING MEMORY

The Writing of the Self from a Wounded,
Border Perspective in Norma Elía Cantú's
Canícula

Cristina Martín Hernández
Ana M^a Manzananas Calvo

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Supervisor: Ana M^a Manzananas Calvo

V^o B^o:

Signature

Summary

Inscribed in the theoretical framework provided by Bhabha's third space and Anzaldúa's *frontera* as an open wound, this essay focuses on problematizing memory and life-writing. By means of different contrapositions that put the liminality of the subject in conflict, the essay discloses the wounded nature of the border consciousness. Through an analysis of Norma Elía Cantú's autobiographical narrative *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), I will unfold the many layers of meaning as well as the endless interweaving of memory and imagination, text and image, English and Spanish, absence and presence. The journey of the self is based on conflict, as a new paradigm or structure of defiance that renders the self as a transcendental subject.

Key words: cultural studies, Chicana literature, frontera, Anzaldúa, third space, autobiography, memory, photography.

Resumen

Partiendo del marco teórico sobre el tercer espacio de Bhabha y la propuesta de Anzaldúa sobre la *frontera* como una "herida abierta", este ensayo se centra en la problematización de la memoria y de la escritura autobiográfica mediante diferentes contraposiciones que ponen la liminalidad del sujeto en conflicto, revelando así la naturaleza fragmentaria de la identidad fronteriza. A través del análisis de las técnicas narrativas autobiográficas que Norma Elía Cantú emplea en *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), descubriremos las diversas capas de significado que surgen a raíz de un continuo entramado de memoria e imaginación, texto e imagen, inglés y español, ausencia y presencia. El recorrido del *ser* se fundamentará en el conflicto como nuevo paradigma cultural o estructura de desobediencia, descolonización y expansión del *ser* como sujeto transcendental.

Palabras clave: estudios culturales, literatura chicana, frontera, Anzaldúa, tercer espacio, autobiografía, memoria, fotografía.

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1. Introduction

“No one today is purely one thing”.

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

Reality has been traditionally described in binary terms —white/black, good/bad, etc.— that is to say, by being *in opposition to* something or somebody. The result of this two-sided perspective is a monolithic, rigid, vision of reality which does not allow for movement nor change. Likewise, this binary system functions to sustain hegemonic relations of dominance-subordination through a polarized system of cultural representation. This duality has been functioning as a policy of containment throughout spaces of cultural contact, namely borders, in which distancing strategies and assimilation pervade any possibility for dialogue between cultures. Theorists such as Gayatri Spivak or Homi K. Bhabha have questioned these structures of meaning which have been ascribed to colonial discourse. Bhabha recognized that “cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other” (35-36), and so he introduced the so-called “Third Space” that, in turn, stands for an interstitial space in which two different cultural systems converge and relate to one another. Other theorists would qualify this space as a “place in-between” (Spivak 26) and as a “contact zone” (Pratt 34).

The border is one of those spaces in which any cultural contact is strongly policed and guarded through containment. As an “in-between space” or “contact zone,” the border relates to the notion of the third space. From this perspective, the border can be conceptualized as a place for cultural encounter and confluence, from which a new notion of self as more fluid and movable is brought into being. According to Gómez Peña, borders are conceived less as monocultural and unifying forces and more as pluralities based on cultural dislocation and plurilingualism. Borders thus dismantle hegemonic forms of art in favour of a hybrid cultural expression and transcultural collaboration that transcend racial, sexual and generational boundaries, and the multiplicity and decentralization of (its) voices (Gómez Peña 43). Gómez Peña agrees with Said in that one ceases to be one single thing, such as Mexican or American, in order to be part of both, yet not belonging to either of them as a whole. Thus, he reacts against duality and binary modes of representation that halve and polarize the possibilities of being and defends instead plurality, *mestizaje*, and the idea of crossing (or being crossed by) any cultural entity simultaneously. In like manner, Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands* (1987) makes a clear distinction between border and borderlands. Border stands for a dividing line that separates the “safe” and the “unsafe,” and perpetuates the distance/difference between *us* and *them*, that is to say, the border conforms a “herida abierta” —an open wound— which embodies the collision between the First and the Third world (Anzaldúa 3). Anzaldúa relates this open wound to a third cultural element, a “third country” that is materialized through (a) “border culture.” Additionally, “borderland” constitutes an undetermined space emerging from a sense of being uprooted, a place being inhabited by those who are perceived as alien or abnormal within the hegemonic sight. While duality perpetuates difference and otherness as strategies of distancing and assimilation, plurality enables cultural hybridization as well as a more creative and critical response to reality (Lugones 35). That is why a great number of authors writing from “la frontera” place their writing—in terms of site of enunciation—at the border (Poks 67) and conceive the mobility of this third space as being a constituting element of the border consciousness.

For both Gómez Peña and Anzaldúa, notions of border and third space are tied to

the physical and non-physical borders between US and Mexico, and, more in particular, between Texas and Mexico. This is also the case of Norma Elía Cantú's *Canícula*, an autobiographical narrative in which Cantú explores her growing up at the border between Texas and Mexico by means of multiple interplays between memory and imagination, photographs and text. In doing so, she digs into the notion of "frontera" in relation to the third space where stories of people living and growing up at these interstitial spaces come to defy those binary systems and monolithic assumptions of the Self and the Other. Inscribed in the theoretical framework provided by Bhabha's third space and Anzaldúa's *frontera* as an open wound, this essay focuses on problematizing memory and life-writing by means of different contrapositions that put the liminality of the subject in conflict so as to disclose the wounded nature of the border consciousness. These many layers of meaning will be unfolded by the endless interweaving of memory and imagination, text and image, English and Spanish, absence and presence. The journey of the self is based on conflict as a new paradigm or structure of defiance, decolonization and reconsideration of the self as a transcendental subject.

2. “Truer than true”: Memory and Imagination

As a Spanish speaker, while reading and reflecting about memory, I cannot avoid going back to the idea of “hacer memoria”¹. One may encounter this common Spanish idiom when someone is encouraged to bring back a certain memory. In doing so, we also “make”, “craft” or “perform” a memory and transform it into a story. This process, as it leads to a sort of storytelling, implies less of memory and more of imagination. That is why, in revisiting her manuscript twenty years after writing it, Norma Elía Cantú had to “hacer memoria” herself. As time went by, memories of her own life and the life of her community had been transformed and many photographs were gone. Consequently, she had to fill the gaps left by the absent photographs by delving into her memories and (re)creating stories out of them. Being that the case, we will find that there was so much space and time between the writing, the revision and the time when the photographs were taken, that it become nearly impossible to narrate it through a single story. Such are the intricacies of combining narrative and photography, the two pillars of Cantú’s *Canícula*. This autobiographical narrative follows the coming-of-age story of a young girl called Azucena (Nena) and her family, who live at the U.S.-Mexico border. Photographs belonging to Cantú’s actual life and family (on both sides of the border) intertwine with textual captions of (her) memory in order to craft a collage of the collective border experience.

What happens when we remember? In *Canícula* the question problematizes the way we approach memory both consciously bringing up a memory or “haciendo memoria,” and by interpreting or (re)creating photographs. In filling the blank spaces left by photographs, we turn to our own imagination so as to provide a (re)construction of such a past. Nevertheless, to understand how imagination works at the level of memory so as to blur the boundaries of time and destabilize any factual framework introduced by photographic evidence, it is necessary to depart from the idea that memory does not always imply pastness, albeit it bridges past, present and future frames. If we consider imagination as a point of departure in any autobiographical narrative, the conclusion may frame the writing of the self as primarily subjective and movable. In like manner, facts may no longer constraint life-experiences but will get dissolved whilst artefacts become self-expressive and autobiographical, as Louis Renza remarks, “in selecting, ordering, and integrating the writer’s lived experiences according to its own teleological demands, the autobiographical narrative is beholden to certain imperatives of imaginative discourse. Autobiography, in short, transforms empirical facts into *artifacts*” (269).

This transformation is similar to the act of reading. While reading we constantly weigh on the process of remembering through daily, familial interactions. Instances of recovering this sense of memory are inscribed by means of memorizing practices or relying on specific objects when memory fails, as it happens in the episode in which Nena has to give a speech at school so she needed a “papelito” in case her memory failed. These objects —photographs, shoe boxes or diaries— function as the repositories of memory that allow us to go back to a common place of memory, from which we restore what might be forgotten. For Nena, it was her “papelito” (*Canícula* 41); for Norma, her “librito” (*Canícula* xx). And for the whole community or family, photographs became these physical repositories of the past. They prevent memory from disappearing into uncertainty, even though sometimes they turn out to be more than a written or graphic

¹ A literal translation of “hacer memoria” into English would be “to make/do memory”.

reminder of a memory and may develop into a new way of perceiving reality beyond time frames. It is when such a “papelito” or photograph is gone that imagination starts working to support our stories so as to reconstruct memory from a creative and imaginative point of view. That is to say, we need subjective memory rather than any objective account of facts in order to reach what Cantú calls a “truer” experience (*Canícula* xxvii).

When dealing with restoring and portraying instances of the past in the present, subjective memory is evoked through multiple perceptive elements, namely colours, shades, laughs, voices, etc. If so, we might wonder whose memory is leading the process. As Cantú herself states in the introduction, the whole manuscript is “entirely [her] doing” (*Canícula* xxvii); that is to say that the master memory is the narrator’s. Being so, the entirety of it seems grounded on the assumption of not being completely factual nor entirely fictional but something *in-between*, or “truer than true” (*Canícula* xxvii). The factual weight of memory is displaced, again, so as to make room for the artefact, a construct that goes beyond the factuality of facts and enters the uncertain terrain of artistic elaboration. This kind of narrative weaves in and out of the photographs, out of the characters’ looks and gestures, but also out of their absence: “There is no photo to remind me, but in my mind’s eye I see her in the early morning darkness” (*Canícula* 62). The narrative voice starts this textual caption by stating the absence of the photographic evidence; yet, in doing so, she also opens a new dimension in which reality is shaped by her “mind’s eye”, whose sight emerges both from memory and imagination.

Likewise, a combination of imagination and memory converge into the process of “re-membering” by means of connecting existing and/or non-existing objects drawn from her past in a subjective manner. In “Blue Stroller”, for instance, the narrator states: “my memory for everything but the stroller is like the photo, black and white; the stroller is the blue of my winter coat when I was sixteen” (*Canícula* 66). The stroller is introduced as a fixed instance in memory, but, at the same time it opens up to other memories, thus destabilizing the unifying quality of the photograph. It activates the “re-membering” by means of personal association as carried out in her imagination. This connection between an objective representative of a particular memory and the story displayed gives way to a process of epistemic decentralization by which it defies the linearity and coherent correspondence between text and image. This process of decentralization and the shaping up of a liminal space from which to locate a voice is not unique to *Canícula*. In *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes about herself and her community’s experiences from the in-between space of “la frontera”. In so doing, Anzaldúa also goes through the process of *hacer memoria*, that is to say, a process by which she accesses memory through imagination.

Hence, reality is not conceived as fact but is conveyed —from past to present and from memory to writing— as an artefact. Memories might remain the same, but stories are always brand new. Picking photographs out of shoe boxes is a process genuinely led by chance or, as in this case, by emotional ties. Moreover, this delving into memory is presented as a collective and communal remembrance, for recollection conveys many individual stories as one. The younger girls would not remember anything but brief images of their favourite dresses, whereas the father would “contribute stories” (*Canícula* xiv); and all of them would interfere in the narrative so as to provide stories to create the collective family history. In Marianne Hirsch’s words in her book *Family Frames: photography narrative and postmemory* (1997), family photographs are configured both as “documents of memory (the survivor’s) and of *postmemory* (that of the child of survivors)” (21-22) and as sites of remembrance. These sites are a reference to Pierre

Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* and are "created by a play of memory and history," and described as "mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound, intimately with life and death, with time and eternity, enveloped a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile" (qtd. in Hirsch 22). This is relevant since the narrator restores not only past experiences and her family's experiences. Nena—as narrator—mixes dreams of Mami with the reality reflected by photographs; she imagines the joys and sorrows of her relatives and even makes up her grandparent's crossing, her mother's childhood and desires, and the whole life-experience of the border throughout the different generations in her family.

All these different strands of *hacer memoria* create a kind of memory in process. Following Hirsh, *postmemory* stands as a form of memory whose lacing with its source is mediated "not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (Hirsh 22). It differs from memory in terms of "generational distance" and distinguishes itself from history by means of a "deep personal connection" (Hirsh 22). Family photographs convey the notion of what Susan Sontag terms "memento mori" since they shelter both the living and the dead (Barthes 9). Besides, different levels emerge within the narrative as it refers to various generations on both sides of "la frontera": the stories of all of them create what we can term border epistemology through a collective autobiographical framework. By border epistemology, I adhere to Walter D. Mignolo's reflection about border thinking as "an other thinking" in which border gnosis stands for a divergent structure of thinking—in relation to the colonial discourse and power—and whose production of knowledge—from the border as site of enunciation or "dichotomous locus of enunciation"—implies a "disruption of dichotomies through being themselves a dichotomy" (Mignolo 85). Thus, this composite of layers within the narrative, the instability of the location of the narrator's voice, along with the creative and malleable qualities conferred to this re-remembering, fosters the display of a third space which blends past and present and makes us enter an undetermined space of constant cultural crossings and transformations.

3. Thirdness: Between Text and Image

This intervention of the Third Space, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

This undetermined space that *Canícula* ushers us in is akin to Homi Bhabha's "third space", a place of "in-betweenness," as described by Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (26). What we find in this new space is the confluence and clash of different cultures, which gives room to a new identity, conceptualized as fluid, organic and in "constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa 25). Cantú wrote her border stories from this third space, meaning that she had to defy historical and hegemonic autobiographical narratives so as to debunk a linear, monolithic and fixed conceptualization of the self. As it usually happens at the border, Cantú treaded on the unfamiliar (*Canícula* xxv) to problematize autobiographical conventions and to defy Western epistemology. The result is an unfixed and organic telling of the self from multiple crossroads. One of the main narrative resources that consolidate a monolithic conceptualization of the self is the handling of time. Bearing in mind the traditional dynamics of a temporal framework in autobiographical narratives, in *Canícula*, the snapshots discontinue the linear narrative. This discontinuity is noteworthy in that it opens the framework of the photograph and allows for its transformation. The photograph of Mamagrande, Nena's grandmother, as "a woman sitting surrounded by children" unveils her story as "the tired woman almost lost among the children" (*Canícula* 20). Hence, the photograph seems to split into two by means of the text, the story, and the visuality of the image. Thus, one object is presented as many at once. This contraposition between the photographic evidence and the text constitutes a third space in which memory is not represented as unique but as plural.

Chronology then is not linear, as Cantú anticipates in the introduction, but "haphazardly pulled from a box of photos where time is blurred" (*Canícula* xxviii). The shoe box from which memories are recollected is portrayed as a museum, a repository dedicated to memory, yet it belongs to a domestic domain. This private space might imply that chronology depends on an emotional bond, which links memory within and beyond the snapshot. Thus, when stating that "Mami, a young woman takes the photo, nineteen when I was born; does she see herself ten years and five children later? Twenty years from then, ten children later?" (*Canícula* 67), the narrator is introducing a personal, subjective way of timing the past. The photograph may work as a point of departure from which stories are displayed following different strategies or paths, but subjectivity is constantly transforming such processes so as to mirror the organic, plural and fluid nature of the self *in-between*. We find recurrent elements which are placed at this juncture, such as the death of Nena's brother —Tino— at war, and, most importantly, the trace it left behind, which is portrayed through the dialogue between a photograph of a young Tino, dressed as a soldier, which contrasts with his childish looks, and the story of his death at war. Far from the superposition of time frames, other combinations of text and photograph emerge, for instance, when writing about "First Steps." The opening

photograph shows a baby girl standing on her little legs (and) about to start walking, but frozen in the shot. The text starts as follows: “I am about to take a step” (*Canícula* 36), which seems a simple assessment of what it can be intuitively perceived by looking at the photograph. Withal, the resulting contraposition shows a connection between literal and non-literal meaning that allows the narrator to interpret memory through and beyond the photograph. This third space where opposite categories are decentralized and dissolved is a place for encounter and, in a way, delving into the shoe box of memories equals a new way of working through reality. As a *montage*, the photograph emerges from a liminal space and dwelling between the photographic element and the subjective memory of the narrator. However, these photographs as repositories of memory may not be sufficient inasmuch as they might be lost or even incongruent within a more subjective and personal remembrance.

4. Conclusion

Borders have been defined and conceptually limited in numerous ways, yet one of the impressions that have stayed with me as a reader is that the border is a liminal space that is not necessarily represented as a physical edge but as an invisible one. The border is not only about patrolling differences or cultural containment, but it may as well entail the idea of contact and dialogue. Authors writing from these spaces, such as Norma Elía Cantú, have found a way to articulate the border as the locus from which to defy what is prescribed as normal and universal. Memory and imagination, as well as image and text, interweave as they contradict each other and problematize the writing of the self. This confrontation displays a third space of confluence and interaction, and in doing so, it epitomizes Anzaldúa's "frontera" as an open wound in which two different worlds collide and *bleed*.

If writing is considered to be a revolutionary act (*Canícula* xxiv) which is meant to put any former knowledge and experience of the world in conflict, reading is not meant to comfort and reassess our sense of self but rather, to lead us instead to an act of deconstruction and decolonization of ourselves. Border writing, thinking and reading have come to problematize self-recognition through others so as to dismantle binary categories and decentralize asymmetrical relations of power. In doing so, border literature such as *Canícula* leads to a space where difference and dialogue and cultural contact are not being patrolled; a space that makes possible to understand, to turn into living bridges, and, in Bhabha's words, "to emerge as the others of our selves" (39).

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