

Memory and Writing: A Conversation with Norma Elía Cantú

Memoria y escritura: una conversación con Norma Elía Cantú

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INTRODUCTION

This interview was conducted by email in November 2021, with some questions being added in May 2022. Cristina Martín Hernández feels honored to have the opportunity to interview Norma E. Cantú, a Chicana author and Norine R. and T. Frank Murchison Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Cantú was born in 1947 in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. She was raised in the United States-Mexico border region. As the eldest daughter of a large working-class family, Cantú became the first one—both in her family and in her *barrio*—to earn a PhD. Following her desire to become a teacher, Cantú gained various scholarships and received her bachelor's degree in 1973 from Texas A&I University in Laredo, Texas, while working on a full-time job to support her family. Albeit the many financial and emotional difficulties,¹ Cantú became “the *atrevida* that no one doubted, everyone

¹ Cantú lost her brother to the Vietnam War in 1968. This and other pieces of personal information have been drawn from her essays and novels, but most of all, from her

trusted” and faced her family’s fears of “losing a daughter to the academy, to an alien world” (“Telling to Live” 65, 66). Such assumptions are not unique to Cantú’s experience but rather shared among many Latina and Chicana women in public and private social spheres. Thus, throughout her life, Cantú has struggled with the social consequences of having pursued an academic and independent life rather than complying with the expectations imposed on Chicana women.

After obtaining a master’s degree in English from Kingsville, Texas, Cantú earned her PhD at Nebraska University, Lincoln, while she was working as a teacher assistant. She had to face the many sacrifices that academic life bears to Chicana scholars; as she explains: “[she] made [herself] strong and thick-skinned—*hice concha*—to survive” (“Telling to Live” 66). Meanwhile, Cantú was granted a Fulbright scholarship in 1979–80 and went to Spain for a year, a journey which would later inspire the plot of one of her novels.² On her return to Texas, she began teaching at Laredo State University and eventually completed her dissertation in 1982. Since then, Cantú has become a renowned scholar and author within Latinx and Chicanx studies. Among her publications, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, originally published in 1995 and reissued in 2015, became one of the milestones in contemporary Chicanx autobiography.³ She has also authored *Meditación Fronteriza: Poems of Love, Life, and Labor* (2019), and *Cabañuelas: A Novel* (2019). As a scholar and folklorist, Cantú has co-edited and edited volumes and anthologies on numerous subjects, namely Chicanx cultural continuum. She has also conducted several research and teaching projects in Latinx studies in the United States and has taken part in collaborative projects such as *Telling to Live* (2001) or the national poetry organization for Latinx poets, *CantoMundo*. Though a general list of her works is included at the end of this interview, it is worth noting that she has made major

contributions in a collaborative project. See The Latina Feminist Group et al.’s *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*.

² *Cabañuelas: A Novel* (2019) tells the story of a young woman, Azucena, a Chicana folklorist that is granted a Fulbright scholarship to go to Spain to study *fiestas* and their connection with her hometown’s (Laredo) traditional celebrations. It is a sort of sequel to *Canícula*, though an independent story itself.

³ *Canícula* is the second instalment in Cantú’s *Border Trilogy* (although the first part, *Papeles de mujer*, has never been published), and it follows the coming-of-age story of a girl called Azucena (Nena) as she grows up in the border region and community of Laredo, Texas. Family photographs are mixed with text.

contributions within the field of Latinx and Chicanx studies, such as the translation and Spanish edition of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* in 2016. More recently, Cantú has published *meXicana Fashions* (2020) and *Teaching Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (2020). She has also served as President of the American Folklore Society (2020–21) and participated in many national and international conferences and projects to promote Latinx and Chicanx studies. At the moment, she keeps on doing what she has always done and wanted to do, that is, teaching and writing. Her current writing project is a novel called *Champú, or Hair Matters*.

Cantú has devoted her activism and lifetime work to her community since, in her words, she is full *Tejana*, which is one of the guiding principles of her creative undertakings. The following interview seeks to delve into Cantú's writing experience, more specifically into her autobiographical narratives, by exploring her border epistemology and how it permeates memory and personal narratives. Notions such as life-writing, truth and fiction, borders, and gender writing will be also key to read Cantú's works.

Part and parcel of studying the intersection of memory and writing implies a rereading of the relationship between past and present and how it affects self-representation in literature. The idea that is prompted in this occasion and that informs Cantú's works is intimately bound to storytelling and cultural affirmation and, in a particular way, to those life narratives that partake in Chicana strands of self-representation. This interview brings attention to the idea of memory as part of a cultural and social construction as well as in relation to craftiness and fragmentation. In Cantú's autobiographical works, the process of memorialization is linked to a convergence of personal narratives and collective (hi)story. Under this light, memory is not only ascribed to the personal, private nature of an individual account, but it is rather represented or conveyed through the shared experience of individuals that live in a community and that Cantú regards as folk knowledge ("Memoir" 310). Hence, in memorializing, as in writing the self, there is a merging with the community instead of a process of individualization—the latter being associated with Western traditions of autobiographical writing. Further, Cantú's preference for the term "life-writing" relays on the openness of the genre itself, which "allows for an expansion that includes blended genre works, transgeneric works, and testimonio" ("Memoir" 312), as well as on the experiential epistemologies that are ascribed to the cultural and social background of Latina/Chicana communities.

Cantú's autobiographical work becomes self-reflective, what impels us to reconfigure tropes within self-representation, such as truth-making, fictionalization, or authenticity. In this regard, the relationship between truth-making and fiction regarding writing and memory is that of a constant crossover of traditional expectations. The inclusion of photographs in the autobiographical narrative does not undermine its literary condition but rather it impinges on the nature of self-representation. Photograph and text construe a particular dialectics that problematizes notions of memory and identity formation. Indeed, the artificiality and craftiness of both mediums permeate Cantú's autobiographical work, thus creating ambivalence and fluidity. There is a correlation between photography and autobiography that, in the scope of this interview, remains intrinsic to its combination and relates to a process of social and cultural construction since photograph and autobiographical narrative "operate in a parallel fashion both deliberately blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, between representation and creation" (Adams 20). What is fact and what is fiction are certainly fused, thus enhancing a crossing of boundaries in terms of genre. Such a traverse of genres within writing and memory is the result of the epistemological emplacement of border stories. The border becomes a site of enunciation for Chicana subjectivities and their communal experiences as well as it stands, in some cases, for a site of (trans)formation, violence, and social mobility. Interestingly, Cantú signals the centrality of memory in her autobiographical work and how photographs, as well as writing, aim at capturing those reflections of the past "but all in a cultural context of the border, which itself is fleeting and fluid" (qtd. in Adams 19). Thus, the speaking voice in Cantú's narratives is relocated to the interstitial space of the border in order to debunk binary systems of (self-)representation.

The convergence of mediums ultimately aims to "posit the existence of various Chicana/o subject positions and to engage the reader in a virtual reality validated and created through her agency," what imbues the narrative with an insight into the multiplicity of layers within Chicana experience (Gutiérrez y Muhs 9). This interview will delve into the confluence of individual/personal experiences and a wider exploration of multiple subject positions in a border community. That is why it is important to shed light on the pivotal role of women in Cantú's writing, as well as the extensive network of fellow activists, writers, artists, and scholars that has influenced her work and the entire Chicana cultural production. It is necessary, then, to stress, as Gutiérrez y Muhs does, "the

agency and power of Chicana writers such as Cantú to use novelistic discourse to intervene the transformation of received subjectivities” (5). In Cantú’s stories, women’s agency is profoundly rooted in folklore, collaboration, and cultural transmission, yet the myriad of Chicana experiences recorded in her vignettes ultimately traverses social and cultural boundaries in order to restore a central position within self-representation. The ways in which gender and writing intersect in contemporary Chicana autobiographies and ethnographies are the subject matter that this interview hopefully explores hand in hand with an author fully committed to her Chicana (his)stories and community.

1. MEMORY AND WRITING

Martín Hernández. First of all, I would like to thank you, Norma, for taking the time for this interview. It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be having this conversation with you. I would like to start by asking about your writing experience and how it has evolved throughout the years.

Cantú. *Gracias*, Cristina. I too am glad we are engaging in this conversation and I hope it serves your purposes.

Now, I guess, my writing has evolved over the years from an almost lackadaisical approach to a more structured—well, not structured, perhaps more formal process. I used to just write whenever I was struck by an idea or a phrase or an image at any time and whether it became anything or not. Sometimes it became a poem or story, or it would germinate for years and later surface in a novel or a poem. *Pero ahora*, well, in some way because of time restraints, I am more conscious, and I tend to write in my journal—as I’ve always done—but usually at night. And then transfer the piece to a word document on my pc. Or I sometimes work directly on the computer, but that is more for more academic writing. The creative prose or poetry I tend to compose by hand. But not always. More than before I now use the computer to revise and to rewrite. I had not thought about it, but I do think my process has evolved through the last 40 or 50 years, how could it not?

M.H. As a folklorist, as well as a scholar and a professional writer, how do you think your creative work intersects with those other aspects in your professional life?

C. I guess I was always a scholar and a folklorist and a writer and, in some way, the three roles have always intersected. I remember the first academic paper I presented was at the Texas Folklore Society meeting

back in the early 1970s. I do think my folklore work intersects—or perhaps a better term is “informs”—my creative work. So has my scholarly work. Always there in the background of any creative writing I do is the folklore along with the historical or cultural backdrop—sometimes it is more obvious but other times it is in a turn of phrase or the use of a *dicho* or a colloquial phrase. The creative work is almost like the public expression of the academic work; the academic work is also infused with creative work though. Many of my formal papers will also include a poem or creative non-fiction techniques.

M.H. Your autoethnography *Canícula: Snapshots from a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) has become one of the milestones in contemporary Chicana/o autobiographies and, as you have mentioned in previous conversations and essays, it has also become a turning point in your writing career.⁴ In that sense, could you tell us about the impact *Canícula* has had on your writing?

C. Wow! Writing *Canícula* did have a strong impact, so did publishing it. I wrote it in the summer of 1993 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. As you have already read or heard in interviews, I was in Ana Castillo’s house that summer with very limited time—five weeks—and I was working on another project, but the stories would not let me be until I shifted and began writing them and forgot the other project. The immediate impact was tremendous, as I realized I should have been writing more creative work all long. When it was published in 1995, I became a writer who teaches and no longer a teacher who writes. It was a transformation for sure. And the impact on my writing has also been tremendous as I began flexing my muscles, as it were, and wrote more and more in the autoethnographic style of *Canícula*. Even my academic writing was impacted; I began creating braided essays that sometimes include poetry interspersed along with personal narrative and the literary analysis.

M.H. Writing *Canícula* was a journey in itself, a voyage through memory, photographs, and, to some extent, through the nature of truth and (hi)stories. In Spain we have this set phrase, this *frase hecha*, *hacer memoria*, which implies to struggle to bring back a certain memory or event from the past. This aspect of struggling in *hacer memoria*, also implies the parallel process of crafting memory. Do you find that bifurcation at the heart of crafting or creating memories?

⁴ See Norma E. Cantú, “Chapter Three. The Writing of *Canícula*: Breaking boundaries, Finding Forms.”

C. Yes and no. In some way *hacer memoria* also refers, at least in my Tejano Spanish, to the process of trying to remember or recall some incident or event. I like to think of it as ‘re-member,’ that is, to piece together again. So, in that sense it is a crafting of memory. I am not sure that the bifurcation is at the heart of creating memories, but certainly at the heart of crafting memories. While it may be a struggle, it is also never ending and not always achieved. A struggle implies conflict but for me it is comforting and not necessarily conflictive.

M.H. Related to this question, while reading the introduction to the novel, many are the topics addressed in terms of *Canícula*’s thematic and generic boundaries, suggestively blurred in the very title of the book. Among them, we find the idea of being “truer than true” (*Canícula* xxvii), as *Canícula* creates its own standards of the verisimilar. In this light, how do you think life-writing has problematized this relationship between truth-making and memory-making? How has this complex relationship evolved throughout your writing experience? And related to this, what kind of truth can personal narratives offer, and how does it shape collective memory?

C. Life-writing has problematized this relationship between truth-making and memory-making in significant ways as it exposes the relativity (and subjectivity) of each. So, if historical truth is telling things as they are; is remembering, or memory-making, a falsehood? Perhaps. Perhaps not. The memorialization projects that we see happening around the world—such as those around the Spanish Civil War, or the Holocaust—I believe, are attempts at reconciling our present with our past. In honoring that past and acknowledging the violations, the violence of that past, we atone and move forward. Of course, not everyone is ready to move forward with that acknowledgment. The white supremacists in the US who are still calling for the South to rise again is a case in point. They still want their monuments to that past and deny the reality of the present. In some ways that is the conflict of our current struggle against forgetting. How has this complex relationship evolved throughout my writing experience? In my own writing experience, I would say that it has evolved incrementally over time and with a bit of caution. I remember the war between the US and Vietnam for example, and because it hit me personally, the memories are layered. I visited Vietnam almost 30 years after my brother was killed in that war; it was then, in the middle of a very hot day in Quang Tri province that I realized that all wars cause pain, whether they are internal wars like the US Civil War or the Mexican Revolution, or wars of aggression or

colonization such as WWI and WWII and smaller skirmishes like Las Malvinas in Argentina, ultimately forces within or outside of the nation state impel confrontation and armed aggression. So, incrementally in the last thirty years or so I have come to realize that my memory of the War where my brother was killed is at once subjective and also personal, while also communal and public. I am glad you asked the related question: What kind of truth can personal narratives offer, and how does it shape collective memory? I believe that personal narratives offer a sort of prism through which to see the larger picture, refracted, as it were, by the individual memory and telling. It shapes the collective memory as the telling of the narratives shapes the larger—dare I say “master”?—narrative. In some way the current fascination with storytelling and autobiography, including projects like Story Corps or the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress in the US, are the result of that desire, that need, that insistence on telling one’s story. There is a beautiful incident in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* where the protagonist realizes that by listening to the people’s stories of the genocide, she is helping them heal. Just the mere act of telling one’s story can be the salve that allows us to *superar*, to be able to survive the trauma.

M.H. In a panel about writing and autobiography in 2002, and also in the introduction to *Canícula*, you mentioned that the narrative of your work came mainly out of photographs.⁵ However, many of these photographs are gone, thus encouraging a memorializing process. How would you say this re-creation of photographs affects the narrative in a broader sense? Also, did you go through the same process in *Cabañuelas*?

C. Interesting question. No, I didn’t go through the same process in *Cabañuelas*. The projects are different and the photos function in a different way in each narrative. In the cases where I recreated the photographs for *Canícula*, invariably the image was in my head, in my mind, I just didn’t have the physical photo—and actually there are a couple of such incidents in *Canícula* where Nena references a photo that is not there. If you recall [this is the case of] the photo of the friends she visits in France. Well, actually, I do have the photo, but it was lost and therefore I couldn’t include it in the book. I found it after the book was published. It’s one of my favorite photos and it would have added to the text, but then again, maybe it is best that readers imagine the photo. In *Canícula* the process was direct and it was the structuring element for the narrative and

⁵ See Julene Blair, et al. “Western Autobiography and Memoir: A Panel of Writers.”

the stories are bound to the images; in *Cabañuelas*, on the other hand, the images are more illustrative and do not necessarily elicit a story.

M.H. When considering photographs as part of the structure of the autobioethnographical narrative in both *Canícula* and *Cabañuelas*, how do you think photographs have encouraged the crossing of boundaries in terms of fiction and factuality?

C. Yes. The photographs encourage the ambiguity and the fluidity across what is fictive and what is fact. That was the intention. I would add that photographs, unless they have been altered, reveal truth, present truth. Yet, in some sense it is the context that gives it factuality or uses the photo to present fiction. For instance, if I show you a photo of a donkey and tell you nothing, it is merely a representation of a factual animal, a donkey. But if I tell you it is my cousin Chente's donkey, that its name is Memo, and that Chente acquired it when he won a hand of cards at a neighborhood bar, I have given you a story that may or may not be true, or a story that may be partially true. The fact remains: the photograph is of a donkey; but the story's veracity cannot be ascertained from the image alone. It may be that photographs encourage the crossing of boundaries in terms of fiction and factuality since they pretend to present reality, truth, facts—or so we believe. But what if the boundary between fiction and fact is tenuous to begin with and the image 'lies.' I can give you an example from *Canícula* that may illustrate this point. There is a photo of my parents at a wedding in Monterrey. They are walking into the church and my mom holds my dad's arm. She is wearing black gloves, so to a spectator, it appears that he is wearing a mourning band. What is the truth? What the spectator assumes to be true or what the photo captured at that moment?

M.H. In *Cabañuelas*, there is a new sense of memory that emerges in the relationship Nena establishes with twentieth-century Spain. Can we talk about a sort of colonial memory that emerges within Nena's encounter with this old land and its inhabitants? In other words, Nena does go to the archives and "unearth[s] *all truths*" (*Cabañuelas* 24; my emphasis), and one wonders whether she is uncovering a legacy that is not her own as such but is rather inherited from her *antepasados*. What is the role of the ethnographer, or even the historian, in this process of discovering the past?

C. Yes, definitely, I believe Nena's shaping a sort of colonial memory that emerges as she encounters *la madre patria*, the root of her *mestizaje*, and its inhabitants. The conflict of whether to stay or leave is bound to that sense of duty to her family and her land, but also to the sense of betrayal and of contradiction. I have a good friend who actually stayed in Spain and

married her *Paco* and had children, but eventually she too returned to her home in Texas, although not back to Laredo. Her shaping of the colonial memory as such is different from Nena's, but I used some of her experiences for Nena in *Cabañuelas*. Now the second part of your question: What is the role of the ethnographer, or even the historian, in this process of discovering the past? I am not sure how to answer. The ethnographer, and the historian, or anyone interested in re-membering or in capturing culture is at once a liar and a truth teller. Due to the nature of the ephemerality of experience and of all that is in the past, anyone trying to capture it will fail, and yet, will also succeed in at least grasping a sense of what was, and what is lost. But, more importantly, the role of the ethnographer, or gatherer of stories and of traditions is the reflection that is captured. So, in a way the ethnographer is as much a chronicler as the historian. And the photographer—and the photograph—may be the more accurate chronicler. As a folklorist, I study folk life, that is, all that human beings do, say, perform, believe, and so on. It is a way of making sense of the past and of the present. The life of the people, not just the politicians or the celebrities but the folk whose lives are as rich and as meaningful.

M.H. Coupled with that double nature of the ethnographer regarding truth-making and fiction, is there a resemblance between the writer and the ethnographer in terms of how they work? Can writers be also considered ethnographers in some way? I would like you to elaborate on the possible correlation between the two jobs.

C. Great questions. Yes, of course, writers can be considered ethnographers just like ethnographers are essentially writers. Claude Levi Strauss comes to mind as an example of the latter and Louise Erdrich of the former. I can't speak for all ethnographers or for other writers, but as for me, yes, I definitely see a resemblance between the writer and the ethnographer albeit engaged in different enterprises and with different aims, the tools are similar, and the storytelling techniques are similar.

2. BORDERS AND WRITING

M.H. You often refer to the border as not being really contained within a geographical location, or at least not exclusively. The border is with you wherever you are (“Fronteriza Consciousness” 234) and to some extent, it may be “necessary that [you] leave the border so [you] could write about the border” (“Western Autobiography” 154), just as we may need time in order to write about the past. Is the border, then, a space one

may never cease to inhabit? Is this something you have also experienced when you are away from home? In the same way, how is your experience of “being on the border without being actually physically *on* the border” (“Western Autobiography” 158) shaping your writing?

C. Yes, in a sense, the border is a space one may never cease to inhabit. Especially using Anzaldúan thought and perhaps even Américo Paredes’s view of borders, it is that which we who grew up in the interstices carry with us. And the border is not specifically the geopolitical border, either, but that which occurs wherever two ideas *colindan*, edge upon each other, or two ethnicities, or two neighborhoods, or two realities. Certainly, the border is the interstitial space where two nation states meet on a geopolitical level but also bleed into each other culturally. You ask if it is something I have also experienced when I have been away from home and the answer is yes, but also when I am home. The border between academia and my family life, for instance. Especially with my parents, when I came back home after being away earning my PhD, that border was pretty palpable. I have told this story before of how my father was perplexed and amazed that I would get paid to deliver lectures. He was a worker, a hard worker, and in his life experience, it was physical labor that earned one a livelihood. Of course, he and my family understood the ‘work’ of being in an office and of working in a store, but it was beyond my dad’s experience to be paid for what appeared to be no labor at all, talk. So that too is a border, a division between what is work and what is not work. Throughout my travels, I have always felt that I am on the border regardless of whether I am physically on the border or not. What I mean is that I am always the outsider. In a way on the border, we are neither one nor the other but a *mestizaje* as we inhabit Nopantla; that is the sense that I hope my writings convey, that the reality for many in the world is not bound to one place or one culture, but that it is fluid. I would even venture to say that it is also true in terms of sexuality and gender. This in-betweenness shapes my writing somewhat but not as much as I would expect. I still cannot get my texts written in Tex Mex published, and I am aware of that when I translate into English what would normally be a mix. Such as with this interview, I am on the border. I want to speak/write in Spanish and here and there I do, but to make it accessible and because you are asking in English, I answer in English. So it is with my writing, the in-betweenness of being on the border shapes how I write and what I write about.

M.H. In your writing, whether autobiographical or not, the border becomes a site of enunciation both in content and in form. In your own

words, “place *was* the writing” (“A Panel” 157). Thus, if writing elicited self-representation, writing *from* the border might align with concepts such as Donna Haraway’s “situated knowledge,” understood as “[a]ll knowledge is situated, that is to say, partial” (Braidotti 40, 65). Drawing on these notions, how are knowledge and self-representation ascribed to location in your autobiographical works?

C. Place definitely defines. Circumscribes. Dictates. In a sense, place creates the subject linguistically and perhaps most importantly culturally. Who we are depends on where we are and with whom. I wrote in an essay that “geography is destiny” [(“Fronteriza Consciousness” 233)], what I mean by that is that the place one calls home, or where one is born or where one grows up, that place is a defining factor in one’s life’s journey and how we see ourselves in the world. It is not necessarily the borderlands, although it is certainly so for me, but wherever one happens to be we are affected by that environment. It is “situated knowledge” as much as an “embodied knowledge,” as Moraga and Anzaldúa call that knowledge that is situated in one’s body.⁶ I already had some intuitive knowledge of this, but I found in Anzaldúa an articulation of it that made sense. She writes that all the places we have inhabited with their particular cultures are “like a map with colored web lines of rivers, highways, lakes, towns, and other landscape features en donde pasan y cruzan las cosas, [and] we are ‘marked’” (69). Her ideas of the “geographies of self” are also rooted in the notion that the body and the land create knowledge.⁷

All this to say that in my work, knowledge and self-representation are definitely linked to location and in fact reside in the same landscape. For instance, in *Canícula* I often describe what people are wearing; in a sense, I am really showing the reader the dress of that location and time. In *Cabañuelas*, because it is set in a very specific year, 1980, and in a specific country, Spain, the knowledge base is located there. Nena’s geographical background, though, is the Texas-Mexico borderlands and thus she demonstrates a borderlands ethos and a situated knowledge that instead of being limited is limitless as it can navigate from that place of multiple realities to other spaces and locations. In a way, she embodies the border and carries it with her wherever she happens to be.

M.H. What changes, then, when borders are configured as fluid and movable rather than static and fixed?

⁶ See Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back*.

⁷ See Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s “Geographies of Selves.”

C. The principal change when borders are no longer fixed and static is the freedom of the subject to be without restraints. The concept of the border is no longer a constrain but a means to exist *sin fronteras* and to thereby express and perform one's identity anywhere and at any time.

M.H. In relation to your works, how does the border operate when the action in *Cabañuelas* is set elsewhere yet also ascribed to a border consciousness?

C. Again, it is the freeing of that constraint that allows Nena to be elsewhere, in this case in Spain, and yet retain the border consciousness that allows for multiplicity of views and for an all-encompassing viewpoint that also allows for perspectives that, in her case, experience the folklore of Spain—its *fiestas*—and see overlap with the experiences in Texas. I suppose what changes lies in the experience of being deterritorialized but not deculturalized.

M.H. In a similar way, and as you write in your essay “Fronteriza Consciousness: The Site and Language of the Academy and of Life,” has your “tejana-ness” always permeated your writing, reading and general perception of the world? In which ways?

C. I would say yes and in numerous ways. Tejana-ness means language; it means a certain *weltanschauung* and an ethos based on being Mexican and *estadounidense*. My family has been in the region for over three hundred years, and I cannot imagine that that fact has not impacted my whole being. A general perception of the world that I think is directly linked to being Tejana, for instance, is the way we dance, not just polkas and rancheras, but conjunto and country western. I love to dance Tejano, true, but also polkas. The general perception of the world that is exemplified in the dancing metaphor applies to my reading and writing as well. I guess I can't *not* be Tejana. The sensibility and the notion that the world exists in a particular way. For example, when I am in California, the ocean to me is on the wrong side. I am used to the Gulf of Mexico being on the east! Same way with the vegetation, I discern a difference say between the mesquites in south Texas and those in Arizona. *Fronteriza* consciousness *is* my Tejana self.

M.H. Some authors have conceptualized this state of being, this perceiving and facing the world as *fronteriza* consciousness, as border epistemology or, in Juan Velasco's case, as “canicular consciousness.”⁸

⁸ See Juan Velasco's *Collective Identity and Cultural Resistance in Contemporary Chicana/o Autobiography*.

Where do you locate yourself among the many conceptualizations of this particular border consciousness?

C. That's a difficult question because I am not sure where I locate myself—in a way I am all over the place. I do believe I embody a border epistemology, a “canicular consciousness,” if you will, and of course the *fronteriza* consciousness that is inherent in me by the very fact of having been born and raised in that space, that geography, and with the mores and cultural customs of that land. When in Mexico, I feel more Mexican, but when in Texas, I am a Tejana.

M.H. Likewise, border crossings are also a pivotal element in your autobiographical writing. In this regard, the (trans)formative mobility performed through crossings has changed throughout time. Crossing the border was “coming home, but not quite,” in *Canícula* (3), as well as it was an underpinning element in your *fiestas* and *transfronterizo* project in *Cabañuelas*, since you studied the deterritorialization of traditions that “move across space and time and yet remain the same” (186). In like manner, in *Meditación Fronteriza*, you refer to the border crossing as a return to the past and to “tantos cruces” (127). Drawing from that notion of mobility in border communities, I would like you to shed light on how border crossing might be (or not) a constituent element of Chicana identity? Is the border, or at least your border, evincing a new sense of self in terms of diversity, mobility and social (trans)formation?

C. I do not believe we can generalize in such a way and claim that border crossing is a constituent element of Chicana identity. It may be so for many who have lived that experience, but many have not. Those in New Mexico or Arizona for example who have never crossed and whose ancestors have been in the land from before there was a border to cross. My case is different, although my paternal and maternal ancestors were here before there was a border, we kept crossing it once it was established. In some ways the second part of your question apparently contradicts the first part for me because yes, I do see a new sense of self in many ways for those who literally cross whether with papers or without. All crossings are unique and, in my view, there is no one way to define the experience in general; it is always a particular experience albeit there may be similarities in the narratives themselves. The new sense of self in terms of diversity, mobility, and social (trans)formation may come from the new space, the place where certain cultural norms no longer apply. I know of many cases where the border crosser acquires survival skills that may indeed be a sense of self that was not possible in the home country. But here I am delving

into a different kind of border crossing and not the kind that I or Anzaldúa experienced first-hand as border dwellers.

M.H. All in all, the border has largely been conceptualized in negative terms, that is, a wall, a division, a space of conflict and, above all, a wound (Anzaldúa 25; Cantú “Meditación” 129). In *Canícula*, the border is configured to an extent as a space of belonging, one that is mobile and fluid, extending sideways. In *Cabañuelas*, it is the *transfrontera* experience that articulates the border in space and in time, but we also find homesickness, political commitment, and love for the land one belongs to. Finally, the last lines in *Meditación Fronteriza* aim at appraising the possibilities of a “borderless world” (129). What are the implications of these multiple approaches to the border in relation to Chicana self-representation and border consciousness? What are the current implications of inhabiting the borderlands and crossing borders?

C. In a certain way, our border with Mexico is an experiment that is ever evolving, and it is not necessarily site specific as many other borders also exhibit similar bleedthroughs so that a kind of codeswitching emerges along linguistic borders.

3. *CANÍCULA* AND OTHER WORKS: GENRE, FAMILY AND WOMEN’S ROLE

M.H. In the introduction to *Canícula*, the novel is labelled as “autobioethnography” rather than an autobiography, thus defying generic expectations. In this way, your work does not only traverse geographical borders, but also crisscrosses genre boundaries, thus navigating a sense of thirdness, to use Bhabha’s term, between the factual and the fictional. Could you dig deeper into that premise that is introduced so early in *Canícula*? Which role does *Canícula* play within the boundaries of the so-called life-writing genre? How does it dialogue with other contemporary Chicana/o autobiographies?

C. I would say that yes, that “thirdness” that you refer to from Bhabha’s third space is also the third space feminism that Chela Sandoval, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Emma Pérez write about; in fact, it may be more accurate for me, as theirs is grounded in Chicana feminism. Nena in *Canícula* occupies a third space—not just geographically, but as a *mestiza*, as a Tejana, as a Chicana, as a first-generation college student, and as a border dweller. But the *canícula* itself is a third space in time—between summer and fall—and the text does traverse expected genre characteristics to create a new genre, creative or fictionalized autobioethnography. And

thus, it is possible to tell truths that are not strictly bound to history, but to story. You ask which role *Canícula* plays within the boundaries of the so-called life-writing genre, and frankly, I am not sure how to answer. I did set out in some sense to write an autobiographical text, but also an ethnographic text, and also a poetic text. But it is not any of these entirely. The photos further blur the genre boundaries as you would expect a text with photos to be more historical or at least autobiographical like Judith Ortiz Coffer's or Marjorie Agosin's life stories. I would venture to say that the idea of Anzaldúa's *autohistoria* is also embedded in any autobiographical writing by women of color in the United States. For example, Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* is what she called a biomythography that joins history, autobiography and myth. In some ways, *Canícula* is a departure from autobiographies or *autohistorias* as it includes photographs that tell a story, but it is also clearly fictionalized or embellished stories that the photos reflect. In another way, it resists to establish a dialogue with other contemporary Chicana/o autobiographies like Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* by attesting to a truth truer than true and not written as creative non-fiction or using academic prose.

M.H. In terms of genre, *Cabañuelas*, as opposed to *Canícula*, is introduced from the title as “a novel,” thus outperforming the autobiographical voice that readers of *Canícula* might have expected. To what extent does this change have an impact on the continuity of Nena's (hi)story? Is there any distancing from an autobiographical subject, or from *Canícula*'s original genre framework as autobioethnography?

C. Yes. The premise for *Cabañuelas* is one of fiction, albeit the protagonist is the same as in *Canícula*—the same name, the same history, the same family. But in other ways, they are different as the narratives are different. The autobioethnographic nature of the narrative remains but it has a narrative arc, and follows a chronological trajectory.

M.H. Family seems to play a key role in your writing. The process of arranging stories, photographs and memories is performed through the collective practice of storytelling and through family albums. Every family member seems to contribute to the collective portrait in *Canícula*. In the same way, in *Cabañuelas*, Nena longs for her family as the basis of a sense of belonging. In this light, to what extent are family and the family gaze important to your narratives?

C. They are most important. You picked up on the way that the family structures the narratives and storytelling as continuity. Also, as the family members in both engage in folklife tasks—cooking, dancing, telling jokes,

etc.—the narrative evolves. In a way, we could say that the folklore—the ethnographic parts of the autobiography—is as essential to the telling as the folklore, the characters, and the land itself. If *Canícula* is about coming of age, *Cabañuelas* is about love of land. In both family is the palimpsest upon which the narrative is deployed.

M.H. Both in *Canícula* and *Cabañuelas*, we find an outstanding connection between cultural transmission and women. *Bueli*, *Mamagrande*, sisters, mothers, *comadres*, among many others, are present in the narrative with active roles such as storytelling, mythmaking, and healing.⁹ They are the ones bearing wounds on their bodies and their psyches; they are also the ones offering *remedios* and healing practices. Could you give us a broader view on the role of women in the border communities in your works?

C. I think you got it! Women are the ones carrying on and making things happen. They heal and they hurt, but they also laugh and dance and cook and love. I am not sure that such work is limited to border communities but certainly in my border community that is fact.

M.H. Indeed, not limited to border communities, women's salient and active role in your works seems intrinsic and central to Chicax self-representation. While male—dare I say—characters appear keener on moving forward, assimilating a new language and ascribing to public spheres, women, as we have mentioned, are strongly bound to cultural transmission, memory, and mythmaking. This is not always the case, but, while reading, I could not help recalling Anzaldúa's statement on this problematic yet internalized assumption, “[m]ales make the rules and laws; women transmit them” (38). In this regard, which is the role of women as *transmisoras*? Is there a chance that women's traditional role subverts hegemonic and patriarchal discourses? How are memory and history affected by these assumptions?

C. Excellent question, one that I am not sure I can answer, but I will give it a try by pointing out that women are the *transmisoras* of culture and there is power in that role, a power that they may not even be aware of. For instance, in *Canícula*, I write quite a bit about *la china poblana*—the mother, then Nena, and finally Dahlia, each wears the traditional dress that signifies Mexican womanhood. Why? Well, it may not have been an entirely conscious choice to resist the anglicization of the community

⁹ [Note by M.H.]. By “Bueli,” “Mamagrande,” or “comadres,” I’m referring to particular members of the protagonist’s family and/or social network.

through the celebration of George Washington's birthday, but the fact that Nena wears this heavily laden signifier constitutes a resistance, nonetheless. The mother is also the one who sews and who engages in acts that show agency and self-reliance. With her *comadres*, she represents the barrio logics of strong ties that assist in insuring the survival of the family and of the cultural practices. It is the women, Doña Carmen, Doña Lupe or others who heal when healing is needed and counsel when someone seeks advice. Similarly, in *Cabañuelas*, the women form friendships and come together for mutual assistance. It is invariably the women who tell their stories, yet, but also who help Nena find lodging or food. The *fiesta* in Zamarramala is a case in point as the women celebrating Santa Agatha invite Nena to join them.

M.H. In a similar vein, there is a particular emphasis in your writing on the role of traditional celebrations, rituals, and the cultural continuum. In *Canícula*, we have Nena, her mother, her grandmothers and other women who participate in telling stories. In *Cabañuelas*, we encounter local elders, women who also give clues to their (her)stories and *fiestas*. What are your thoughts on the role of myths in autobiographical writing, or life-writing in general? How does it affect border (her)stories?

C. For me, the folklife, as I mentioned earlier and to which you are alluding to in this question, is at the core of the narrative. It is through folklore that the cultural and family history—memory—is transmitted. I guess because I am a folklorist, the traditional cultural expressions surface in my work. The role of myths and of storytelling are integral parts of *autohistoria* in general and may or may not affect border stories—herstories, histories. The myths we grow up with and that shape our ethos invariably shape the narrative we tell of our life. So, in that sense, yes, border herstories are affected by the myths and tales of that border.

M.H. In a broader sense, women's writing has become, or at least it appears to be so through the hegemonic lenses, preeminent from late twentieth century onwards in certain literary areas. Though not exclusively, female characters and women's role in general hold a central position in contemporary Chicana autobiographies. Likewise, this has brought with it the problematization of literary and nonliterary genres, languages, and symbols. What are your thoughts on these strands? Are we moving forward to a disentanglement from what Braidotti calls the "language of Man, the fetishized, false universal mode of Western humanism" (67)? Are the destabilization of conventions and genres along with the decentralization of the hegemonic subject and language the

current forms of political subversion? How do you relate to the work of other Chicana women writers in this regard?

C. Over forty years ago, in graduate school, I designed a course on Women's Diaries and Life Writing; I taught that course with various iterations for several years in various institutions. I loved that course because we would read not just fiction by women as we did in my usual literature classes but the real-life stories of women's lives. At that time, there were few Chicana authors to teach, not because there were no authors but because they were either out of print or not being published. That has certainly changed, and I celebrate and rejoice in the proliferation of life-writing that Chicanas and other Latinas are publishing. The need is there on both ends, the need to write our stories and the need to read them. So, readers are consuming these recently published autobiographical writings by established Chicana authors like Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo as well as relatively newer authors such as Reyna Grande and ire'ne lara silva. I agree with some literary critics like Braidotti who discern that there is a shift, a new way of writing that often destabilizes literary conventions. The novel in verse, the graphic life-story monograph, spoken word poetry—all seem to be pushing and nudging the traditional genres and the traditional literary theories in new and exciting directions. I don't necessarily agree that these are new entirely, as they have been around in one way or another for a while, but what is new is the attention that these authors are getting and the paths they are forging for new writers.

I celebrate the women writers who are bold and fierce in tackling new formats and deviating from the conventional genres. Anzaldúa's hybrid form in *Borderlands*, I believe, freed us to experiment, to go outside the conventions and create our own literary formats, just as she urged that we create our own theories, in writing *Borderlands* she taught us a new way of writing autobiography.

M.H. In your academic, but also in your poetic work, there is a consistent and strong praise for your colleagues' works. Whether poets, activists, teachers or writers, these women that you bring attention to have contributed in the best ways to the current, at times devastating, but never completely hopeless world(view). In what ways Chicana writers are dreaming, as you wrote in *Meditación Fronteriza*, "the fulfilment of equality for all" (129)? The last words of this last meditation are projected to the future, "[i]magine, and it shall be so. Believe that it will be so" (129). It strikes me how long we have been imagining—while living yet not so

differently—a wide variety of hopeless and helpless futures. In this light, is it so futile and useless to imagine hospitable futures?

C. I am so glad you note my highlighting of women who are indeed trailblazers and who are helping us shift into a new state of consciousness. And no, it is never hopeless. I am an optimist and do believe that while change may not be apparent, it is there. In these current times of political and social upheaval, it would be easy to be defeatist and succumb to the “what’s the use” attitude of some who opt out of the political system and don’t vote, but for me, the magic, the miracle, the everlasting hope resides in our collective effort to indeed create a better world for all. An inclusive world that respects individual differences and is made stronger by its unifying goodwill and solidarity.

Chicana writers dream a better world and often write about it. Not just a dystopic future but one where, as in Rosaura Sánchez and Beatriz Pita’s novels, good prevails. Some of my favorite Chicana authors right now are those writing young adult novels. I find their work refreshing and significant as it often deals with topics young people are dealing with and offers hope and positive narratives that will guide these young people.

I do mentor and support writers, all writers but especially Chicanas and especially those working for social change. As one of the founders of *CantoMundo*, the Latinx poetry workshop we call a “homeland for poets” and as a member of the Board of the Macondo Writers Workshop founded by Sandra Cisneros, I believe I am also supporting writers.

M.H. Influences change throughout time, what are your literary and cultural influences today? What are the readings in terms of autobiographical writing or life-writing that have an impact on your current writing?

C. Currently, I guess the most important influences are the horrors of border immigration policies. I am aghast watching the images of the Haitian migrants at the border and the debacle of our immigration policy, but not just in the US, it is all over the world where borders exist—the violence and the crises with climate change, those are certainly influencing what I am writing today. The Polish-Belarusian border is another example. The literary influences are many. I read about four books a month—or at least I try to!—: one non-fiction, one novel, one poetry and one in Spanish. Right now, I am not reading any autobiographical writing. I’m reading Reyna Grande’s *A Ballad of Love and Glory*, Carmen Calatayud’s poetry collection *In the Company of Spirits*, and *Folk Tales of Puerto Rico* for a book review, and I will reread, also for a book review *¡Viva George!*:

Celebrating Washington's Birthday at the US-Mexico Border. No book in Spanish this month. Recently, I read *Pan de bruja*, a novel set in Galicia. Everything I read influences me in some way. I am trying to finish a novel set in Laredo titled *Champú or Hair Matters*. Not sure if I will use photos or not. I'm having so much fun, I do not know if I will ever finish it.

M.H. Finally, as a passionate reader of your work, I want to restate my gratitude for giving me the opportunity to read your thought-provoking words and for allowing me and the forthcoming readers to have this conversation with you. Albeit any distance between us, I really appreciate every word and effort put into this interview, or rather, bridge.

C. *Gracias a ti*. I am honored! Thanks for the opportunity to think about my work with your thoughtful questions. You pushed me to think about the writing and the ideas behind the writing. *Mil gracias!*

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