LITERARY (RE)MAPPINGS: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL (DIS)PLACEMENTS BY CHICANA WRITERS

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Let us pay attention now, we said, to women: let men and women make a conscious act of attention when women speak; let us insist on kinds of process which allow more women to speak; let us get back to earth—not as paradigm for “women,” but as place of location.

—Adrienne Rich, “Notes Toward a Politics of Location”

**Decolonizing Literary Space**

From its initial struggle for interpretive power, Chicano literature in the late 1960s and early 1970s constituted an alternative space from which to construct an identity, a culture, and an imaginary. In retrospect, we can now situate the urban Zoot Suit riots in the 1940s as a proto-ethnic moment where a community defiantly opened an “other” place from which to construct a new identity. Marked by the spirit of vanguard poetics and politics, the Zoot Suiters/the Pachucos in their search for generating a new look and a new language (Caló) were implicitly rejecting the colonizing language taught (English) which did not contain their experiences and the language violently erased (Spanish) from which they had been estranged. A decade later, Américo Paredes spoke to the effects of colonization and subsequent marginalization of a people which took effect after the 1848 war. Paredes (1958)
effectively re-members a community by remapping a territory and retrieving a memory of lost, unheard stories that had been erased, denied, or made invisible. His decolonizing work represents that of the previously settled Spanish/Mexican communities whose long history has been defaced, absent from history textbooks and from the discourses of Anglo-Euro nationalist ideologies.¹

In fact, since the 1848 War, Mexican Americans had voiced persistent critiques of their treatment as second-class citizens. These works marked in lived experience a space of resistance and a collective memory bank. The work of Américo Paredes in the 1950s was a direct affront to traditional Texas historians and opened the way for a critique of internal colonialism, addressing the racism not only against the "colonial subject" but against those of the diasporic Mexicans who indefatigably continue to migrate to the U.S. for political or economic reasons. It is the struggles through an overt political position in the 1960s, however, that confronted the legacy of colonialism head on and that made possible the emergence of a body of works that, taken together, constituted a significant talking back to discourses which either excluded or objectified peoples of Mexican origin in the U.S.

Tomás Rivera’s (1983) writings identified Chicano literature as representing the implicit desire of a people for a sense of community, particularly the centrality of memory and language. He traced the ways the Chicano Movement located a place from which to anchor a project of decolonization that would lead to the intellectual emancipation of a people. Historically and politically marginalized by the practices and discourses of a nation-state whose imperialist project of Anglo hegemony looked to deface the cultures of lands usurped, the underrepresented
struggled for interpretive and representative power in the political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, opening a space for itself to regain and redefine its historical ethos.

In this essay, I am interested in mapping the literary production of Chicanos/Mexicanos in the U.S. and particularly the self-writing practices by Chicanas that emerged at the end of the twentieth century. As counter-hegemonic activities, they mark both a commitment to and continuity of the decolonizing practices emerging with the Civil Rights Movements and a rupture and discontinuity that insists on the inscription of gender and sexuality as the missing elements of the initial male nationalist propositions. I will (re)trace these shifts and the ways these histories of literary and cultural interventions mark a particular relationship to the discourse of modernity and to the nation-state.

This remapping of cultural and literary territories defies the arbitrariness of colonial enterprises and the violence that accompanied the imposition of a dominant culture, its language, and its ideology. The redrawing of sociocultural and symbolic boundaries has memory as its organizing element. This act of re-membering of a people acquired and opened important sites for contestation after the Civil Rights movements when the disenfranchised sought to recuperate their sense of history and community. One of the sites for rememorating was literature where questions of cultural and national identity became both centrally present and critically problematized.

**Autobiographical Fictions: Writing the Self**
The Chicano literature that emerged out of the post-Civil Rights movement now counts several generations of writers and a significant literary production which engages, from distinct genres, the experiences of a people who identify as belonging to a particular imagined community. Given the contestatory nature of this writing, which narrates the untold stories of silenced peoples, it is not unusual, as is the case with other minority writing, to see a proliferation of autobiographical writings. These permit the construction of first person narratives, which, as Nancy Harsock (1990) points out, allow minority voices to write "an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top...which treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primary and constitutive of a different world" (171).

Several decades of autobiographical literature by the different generations of Chicanas has created a varied and impressive corpus of works. These constitute possible new ways of reading and mapping continuities and ruptures and demonstrate the distinct contributions these writers are making to literary and lived representations. Although writing the self by Chicanas has taken many forms, I am especially interested in theorizing a body of writing which I call "autobiographical fictions" and the ways this narration of self constitutes a genre that takes on specific characteristics as practiced by Sandra Cisneros in *House on Mango Street* (1984), Mary Helen Ponce in *Hoyt Place* (1933), Norma Cantú in *Catácula* (1995), and Pat Mora in *House of Houses* (1997). I am reading these texts as representative of self-writing where emplotments are explicitly marked by spatial configurations in which the writers are engaged in the construction of identities in the present by re-activating memories situated in social and symbolic geographies. These narratives
of place recognize the ways space and location are important in the processes of identity formation for they are necessarily implicated in history, language, and community.

Arguing against essentialist renderings of Chicana identity, my study looks at the way the texts, even though caught in familial (and familiar) resemblances, offer distinct stories through differentiated emplotments. They take into account what Betty Bergland (1994) proposes is “the complex relationships between cultures and discourses that produce the speaking subject,” which also “avoids viewing language as a transparent representation of the imagined real” (130). These particularly structured narratives speak to the multiple positionalities and experiences of a population whose differences are still marked by a legacy of colonization, diasporic displacements, and continued racism.

If earlier autobiographical writings produced after the Chicano Movement of the 1960s were written mainly by male writers such as Tomás Rivera (Yo no se lo trago la tierra, 1971), Ernesto Galarza (Barrio Boy, 1971), and Richard Rodriguez (Hunger of Memory, 1981), by the 1980s and especially the 1990s a large body of women’s self-writing appeared, constituting a visible genre worthy of attention. The different forms that autobiographical writings took, including poetry, essays, fictions, chronicles, and testimonios, have been recognized as constituting a radical feminist cultural practice. I am thinking of the work of, among others, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Pat Mora, Mary Helen Ponce, and Alma Villanueva. Chicana’s distinct contribution to the genre of self-writing has elicited a rich critical corpus, which studies their work as innovative and experimental. This is captured in the generic classifications under which they are
analyzed. But whether studied as "outlaw genres" (Kaplan 1992, 119), ethnic autobiographies (Bergland 1994), "autographies" (Perreault 1995), "cultural autobiographies and biomythographies" (Blake 1997), and "autoethnographies" (Pratt 1994), there is no doubt that their work is being recognized nationally and internationally as initiating verbal constructs indicative of a new poetics and politics. This literature has opened a symbolic space for talking back and a feminist practice of intervention which seeks to speak from the experience of marginalization.

Gaining agency through the act of writing, Chicanas/Mexicanas had the added burden of necessarily engaging the discourses of a racist Anglo society and the patriarchal structures present in both Anglo and Chicano cultures. If the struggle for Chicano civil rights in the 1960s was depicted as a male-oriented praxis, the emergence of the concept of feminism that emerged during this same period was taken up by the Chicanas who asserted their rights within the radicalized struggles for democracy and social justice to voice their experiences outside the "laws of the fathers." They contested being called Malinchistas by redefining the historic notions of betrayal inherent in the sexist terminology. Resignifying the figure of Malintzin, Chicanas decided to be true to themselves in an act of rebirth outside the narrow parameters of male defined nationalisms (Castillo 1977, Alarcón 1981, Moraga 1983).

As creative writers and critics, the Chicana feminists contested Aztlán as a male privileged territory and insisted on a self-critical politics, historically and politically grounded. Gloria Anzaldúa in Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987) established a geographical location and space of colonization: South Texas--that is, the borderlands--a space from which a new consciousness could
emerge. In a strategic multi-layered move, Anzaldúa breaks away from the initial nationalist male constructions of Aztlán (an imaginative and no less powerful referent as Anzaldúa's mythical origin, which located a territory and a culture previous to the discovery of Columbus or the settlement of the English) by feminizing and lesbianizing the foundational terrain through her elaboration of the "Coaticue State," a privileging of the female pantheon. An empowering myth, it returns to the origins, inscribing a fe-male re-membering of the community intent on retrieving a cultural sense of self erased through colonization. This return to the scene of the crime reinscribes colonization as the site of past and present conflict but also of future possibilities. From this plurilingual, multicultural space built by the layering of histories of conquest, imperialism, and diaspora, a "new mestiza consciousness" is born, one that contests the patriarchal hierarchies deeply entrenched in the imagined community. The shift to a specific spatial mapping marks the displacement from the margins, which centers and makes concrete a geography of colonization, exclusivity, sexism, and homophobia out of which a poetics and politics emerges.

I argue that in the process of authoring, these writers gained authority and inserted themselves into a history that had excluded them, their people, culture, and language. Life writing is a tie to the past in relation to a contested present, and the ways authors situate themselves in historical and political terms becomes crucial. The genre, in the case of the Chicanas, thus possesses ideological power; it serves a political function since the speaking subject is positioned outside the dominant symbolic order. This positionality of “becoming minor,” say Abdul Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd (1990), “is not a question of essence (as the stereotypes of
minorities in dominant ideology would want us to believe), but a question of position: a subject position that in the final analysis can be defined only in 'political' terms—that is, in terms of the effects of economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, social manipulation, and ideological domination on the cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses” (7). This ideological power, I would insist, cannot be separated from its aesthetic imaginings. In fact, Chicano/a literature, as Renato Rosaldo (1990) has argued, cannot be read as “minor literature,” following Deleuze and Guattari’s eurocentric model, rather it must be read within the contexts of Chicano/a struggles and from the text's own rhetorical strategies.4

The autobiographical fictions by Cisneros, Hoyt, Cantú, and Mora contest ethnic and gender discrimination from the particularities of a culture, making possible a comparative study of the ways gender, ethnicity, and class have altered a genre with a long tradition in Western literary production. The positionality taken from an ethnic gendered paradigm recognizes the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity and acknowledges the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1991: 111). Thus culture and identity, outside modernist premises that would define them as fixed, are transformative, continuously redefined and recontextualized. Their work contributes, thus, to cultural critique, feminist thought, and literary form.

I would like to emphasize the importance of their contribution to the literary form of autobiographical fiction. Their long narrative fictions are different from other self-writings by Chicanas that engage, contest, and redefine poetic, essay, and short narrative forms. They invite, I argue, a certain kind of attention and way
of reading which renders a particular kind of textual meaning and understanding of the world represented. I define autobiographical fictions as constituting a mixed genre that takes verifiable events and characters for their inspiration but insists on their fictional (imaginative rendering) delivery. The genre, that is, has to establish a delicate balance to engage the reader. Even if it establishes an imaginative rendering of events, the writer is committed to a project of constructing a recognizable self, who participates in a story credible to the readers and who is caught in a narrative that appears to point to an outside of the text (the referent) while it insists on keeping you inside the text (the emplotment).

These autobiographical fictions could best be called “testimonial autobiographical fictions” linking them to the function of testimonio literature as it emerged in Latin America. Even as John Beverley (1993) privileges the genre of testimonio over other first person genres such as the picaresque and the autobiography, he recognizes similarities when asserting that:

What testimonio does have in common with the picaresque novel and with autobiography is the powerful textual affirmation of the speaking subject itself. The dominant formal aspect of the testimonio is that voice which speaks to the reader in the form of an “I” that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention. This presence of the voice, which we are meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, to impose oneself on an institution of power like literature from the position of the excluded or the marginal. (75-77)
I argue that Chicana autobiographical fictions complicate autobiography as it is understood in traditional Western literatures, the individual will for personal agency, and the genre of *testimonio*, which relies on the role of a mediator whose class position is distinct from that of the voice being recorded and transmitted in writing. These Chicana writers bear witness from a particular space gained through struggle that permits them to act as the interlocutors/mediators of marginalized voices lacking access to the printed word. They also refuse to give up the privileges of authorship and use it to select and create a text that constructs an "I" as that of the narrator whose personal awareness and individual growth is fundamental to the story but who cannot be seen outside the group or class situation which has historically marked them as marginal. It is from this culturally or politically rooted position that the narrator becomes the voice, her own, of a self who recollects her memories and those of other members of her community.

"The narrator in *testimonio*," writes Beverley, "is a real person who continues living and acting in a real social history, which also continues. *Testimonio* can never, in this sense, create the illusion of that textual in-itselfness, set against and above the everyday life and struggle, that is the basis of literary formalism" (Beverley 1993, 84).

Testimonial autobiographical fictions refuse simple classifications and remind us, as Derrida (1980) points out in the "Law of Genre," of the difficulties of differentiating specific genres because of the inherent contradictions contained within the texts and hence the project of defining a corpus. "Every text," affirms Derrida, "participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, yet such participation never amounts to a belonging" (203-204). Regardless of that
admonition, many Chicanas are involved in what Caren Kaplan (1992) calls “the genre of choice” at this historical moment. She reminds us that "Autobiographical writing surrounds us, but the more it surrounds us, the more it defies generic stabilization, the more its laws are broken, the more it drifts toward other practices, the more formerly ‘out-law’ practices drift into its domain. While popular practitioners carry on the old autobiographical tradition, other practitioners play with forms that challenge us to recognize their experiments in subjectivity and account for their exclusion from 'high literature'" (xviii).

The genre of self-writing, as Derrida points out, has both limits and possibilities. The possibilities outside traditional modes are what Chicanas are exploring productively. Theirs is a politics that cannot be divorced from their poetics, that is, their innovative literary forms are inextricable from the stories they tell, stories which fall outside the discourses of dominant Western autobiographies. They are plotting a different itinerary. Their texts acknowledge a correspondence to a lived reality but ask that the reader participate in the truth of fiction. Narrativizing the events of their lives they impose on them the form of a story. This emploiment which Hayden White (1973) defines as “the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind,” will “provide the ‘meaning’ of a story by identifying the kind of story told” (7). In a later essay, White explains further that “the production of meaning in this case can be regarded as a performance, because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of
the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning" (1987, 4).

White is speaking about the emplotment of historical accounts, but his observations are especially applicable to life-telling accounts as well. White attests to the substantial truth value of explanation by emplotment, affirming that "in the historical narrative, experiences distilled into fiction as typifications are subjected to the test of their capacity to endow 'real' events with meaning. And it would take a Kulturephilistinismus\textsuperscript{5} of a very high order to deny to the results of this testing procedure the status of genuine knowledge” (1987, 45).

The Location of Identity

If autobiographical fictions by women in general have been seen to disrupt the life lines of male “bildungsromans” in the European tradition,\textsuperscript{6} these Chicana stories do double duty, contesting both traditional European models and male Chicano models of life-telling. Taken as a whole their narratives contest unified or essentialist concepts of Chicana identity as they construct what Norma Alarcón (1996) calls "subjects-in-process" through the textual narrative (135). Their individual stories delineate a complex map of an ever-changing imagined community, no less real in fiction, that is differentiated by gender, generation, sexual preference, class, race, and regional distinctions.

Their located stories privilege a spatial categorization that rejects stories whose organizing principle seems to be grounded primarily in temporal configurations. Memory matters as the self constructs an identity in relation to place. Explicit in their privileging of spatial categories, the texts redirect the
perspective of the protagonist from an “I in time” as the privileged locus of enunciation to an “I in location.” This locational poetics of self-writing is constitutive of the ways these writers ground their stories in the complex interactions of language, history, and place, marking a difference from narratives of temporality.

Narratives of temporality in Chicano literature include at least two types of narrative emplotments that seem prevalent. There are those that establish linear time and posit a narrative of integration/assimilation such as that of Richard Rodriguez in *Hunger of Memory*, a documentary *bildungsroman*, which traces the narrator’s entrance into the dominant order, and those that configure a mythical structure, which posit a search in time past for origins (Aztlán) to ground a genealogy such as *Peregrinos de Aztlan* (1974) by Miguel Méndez and *Heart of Aztlan* (1976) by Rodolfo Anaya. The narrative of assimilation would accept colonization; the other proposes an alternate decolonizing project. The return to Aztlán, in fact, contested modernity’s linear progressive time and telcology. It constituted an empowering moment to re-member a community and thus a fundamental move for self-affirmation, constructing, albeit an identity located in myth, a temporal inscription in the past. Whereas Rodriguez’s narrative posits a move forward, toward a future time where/when memory is lost as the condition of arrival to modernity, the mythical narratives by Anaya and Méndez are engaged in a backward move, a retrieval of memory that will make possible an “other” future, where the self enters “modernity” culturally whole but essentialized, that is, from a fixed notion of cultural nationalist identity.
In privileging a spatial category, the narratives by Cisneros, Mora, Cantú, and Ponce contest teleological conceptions of progress, that is, narratives of assimilation, besides nationalist mythical essentialist paradigms and space conceived from patriarchal perspectives. In this sense they can be considered as opening an alternative space that considers the temporal through place. They open a space where time is located in a specific represented and representable site, elaborating an identity constructed and located differentially in history which transcends the also contestatory but essentialized identities located in myth.

The four narratives chosen construct a self in space using different narrative strategies. The narrating subject of enunciation is constructed in a present of narration (moment of (re)writing the past) different from the time of narration (when events in the story took place). This construction of identity through writing represents a synchronic moment fixed through the text itself. In their retellings, the authors escape the plots and portrayals of male texts as they rewrite homes and habitats in barrios or borders, (re)drawing geographies and genealogies. In these autobiographical/testimonial fictions, the authors, chroniclers of their time, put on different masks. As “historians” they unearth the past, as “ethnographers” they describe and interpret cultural patterns, as “linguists” they capture the language of their time/space, the work that writers/narrators/novelists have always done. They change their names to Esperanza or Azucena, a narrative strategy that establishes a critical distance between the person in the past that is being constructed and the narrator who is speaking from the present of narration and insists on the truth of fiction over the truth of correspondence to reality.
Refusing to write a straightforward testimonial that might be read as a transparent window to their lives, they engage the complexities of literary form. In these Chicana narratives the individual story, which treasures choice details of the personal life, is merged with the collective memory that the writer records as witness or historian (memorista). The narratives implicitly deconstruct notions of essentialized identities as well as cohesive senses of cultural community. The return to community and tradition is not nostalgic but a feminist political positioning, fundamental to the regrouping of a community dis-(re)membered. It is the struggle for a rewriting of history, “a textual quest for truth, for truth in historical discourse” (Kazanjian and Kassabian 1993). As Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squares (1993) state in their introduction, commenting on the article on Armenian narratives by David Kazanjian and Anahid Kassabian, "the search for a homeland is not an innocent utopia for them. The recognition these quests seek to gain involves a certain narrative position of historical truth, which corresponds to specific political issues that recognition will allow—for example, reparations (perhaps material—a ‘homeland’—yet certainly emotional, a space to feel, and feel justified).” (xiv-xv)

The spatial configurations in the texts by Cisneros, Ponce, Cantú, and Hoyt point to the spaces of colonization such as borders and geographies of exclusions such as urban barrios or rural communities. These writers’ counter-hegemonic narratives contest the marginalization of a people and also the space of domesticity, which can be seen as either containment or the basis for a new thinking of community and family. Both become the sites for writing the self, new cartographies where space implicates a physical, social, and political territory. In this next section, I trace the ways these stories are mapped and the ways gender and
culture are inscribed onto the space of the text to analyze how the figuration of facts and the choice of emplotment affects the nature of the story told and the constitution of the subject constructed in the process.

**Urban Districts**

An awareness of marginality is central in Sandra Cisneros’ *House on Mango Street* (1984). There is no nostalgia in her recounting, no past illusions, no celebration of community. The act of remembering becomes a painful recollection and naming of the marginality, the inequality, the injustice, and the poverty suffered in the barrio. The desire and dreams of the protagonist are charted to escape but not to forget her origins as she retraces her steps to return to the site of her childhood, a point of origin and destination. The protagonist/narrator does not engage in any idealization of home or barrio. Critical of women’s subordination, Esperanza deconstructs male narratives that would celebrate barrio camaraderie. She vividly recreates scenes portraying how neither streets nor homes are safe spaces/places for women under patriarchy and also refuses to accept the “place by the window” that the great-grandmother occupied. Concerns of space in Cisneros are linked both with the ways women have been restricted under patriarchy to assume “a place” in the home (private sphere) and in society (subservient) and to the houses occupied by the marginalized classes in these “out of place” settings.

The iconoclastic narrator critiques the living conditions in which most disenfranchised families survive. She sees family values, rituals, and celebrations with an outsider/insider eye that affirms her cultural roots yet refuses to accept the
marginality. The protagonist remains critical of oppression, no matter its source. Home here is unhomely, crowded, and dirty.

But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. It’s small and red with little steps in front and windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in. There is no front yard. Our back is a small garage for the car we don’t own yet. There are stairs in our house, but they’re ordinary hallway stairs, the house has only one washroom, very small. Everybody has to share a bedroom...the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn’t fall out. (8-9)

Cisneros’ description is responding to lived realities and to the literary tradition of authors reconstructing the grand houses, desired or dwelled in, of their childhood and that go from Manderley to Tara, Wuthering Heights, Thornfield and the House of Seven Gables. Paradoxically and most intentionally the unliterary house at Mango Street serves, as in the Anglo-European tradition, as the repository of memories and has become a powerful literary image.

A home can either be a place of origin or a place of destination, and the circularly structured narrative of House on Mango Street breaks linearity and the idea of progression or progressive journey out of the barrio and culture into dominant society. A narrative of progressive assimilation and integration into the dominant order would be better represented by Richard Rodriguez’ Hunger of Memory or Esmeralda Santiago’s When I Was Puerto Rican (1993). In those autobiographical fictions the linear structure does belie a liberal ideology whereby
education and English literacy, to the detriment of native culture, permits the protagonist to assimilate into sameness. These are "bildungsromans," novels of personal development, albeit the story, as in Richard Rodriguez, of a disenfranchised person, who in the novel (not necessarily in life since the authors have their books to mark them as marginal) demonstrates the power of the individual will to self-fulfillment.

Cisneros refuses that emplotment. Her stories do not pretend a realist (documentary) aesthetic even as they insist on verisimilitude.⁸ The characters are placed in specific situations, but the lack of realist detail and her poetic sense of language direct our attention away from any verifiable referent. We are not asked as readers to identify this or that city, persons, or events as factual entities. By naming the childhood protagonist Esperanza, Cisneros both creates a distance for remembering the child she was and assigns herself the role of a self who is more intent on rendering true the conditions of oppression she witnessed than in constructing a self who might be read as a transparent and "true" correspondence to a lived reality. This strategy redirects our gaze inwardly to the site of the textual production which elaborates what appears to be a timeless scene, an ever present geography of exclusion⁹ narrating the daily and on going encounters of a people struggling for survival.

The distanced and critical narrator does not equate victimization with goodness but with a system that is unjust. The circular structure gives the reader a feeling of desperation and entrapment which underlines the fact that even if Esperanza escaped others did not. They have stayed behind and are still there, like Sally who got married and the husband "doesn't (even) let her look out the
window” and so she “sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission” (95). Transformation in this geography of exclusion is not about possible escapes through individuated ambition. This emplotment marks a difference from the narrative of individual triumph traced by Rodriguez and Santiago where the will to self-fulfillment is the message. The protagonist’s remembering is painful. It constitutes the return itself since in the process of writing, Esperanza constructs a subject in the present, one with agency that makes evident her intervention, through writing, for social change. In the chronological disposition (story line), Cisneros’ protagonist succeeds, but the artistic disposition (circular structure) emphasizes that attention be paid to the dynamics at play in the barrio, that is, of the barrios that stay behind. The focus of the autobiographical fiction shifts from the person that left to those that remain trapped whether because of exclusionary racist, classist, and sexist practices from the outside and/or from within. The protagonist continues, nevertheless, to identify, even if critically, with her cultural community. The conflicting pattern of allegiance to community and allegiance to self is symbolically resolved. The theme both defies and affirms the saying “home is where the heart is.” This is an unhomely place which remains fixed in the affective space of the writing subject’s memory and the reader by extension.

Her intense yearning for another place is not to be interpreted as a desire to move and join the dominant order but rather as a move for emancipation, an escape from the private domains assigned by patriarchy and an entrance into the public space of writing. To publish becomes a defiant act in a culture where a “mujer que publica” is admonished as una “mujer pública,” a wicked woman who contests the positions sanctioned by a still male-dominated society. A quote from Aida Hurtado
explicating the poem, "Letting Go," by Gloria Anzaldúa speaks directly to this independent act of self-birth: "To love oneself as a woman is a revolutionary act. The reclaiming of self has come for Chicana feminists through self love—not narcissistic, selfish involvement but as a political act of valuing what patriarchy has devalued. Chicana feminists proclaim that redemption does not come through men but, rather, comes from giving up the illusion of security and safety that results from being chosen by a man" (1996, 89).

Sandra Cisneros’ early narrative written in 1984 anticipated, energized, and could be said to have opened the way for both postmodern and post-western autobiographical fictions. Cisneros writes her life as fiction, that is, by her strategy of self-conscious writing, portraying the child she was and the writer she was becoming. She foregrounds the fictional and always textual nature of the autobiographical enterprise or any attempt at constructing the autonomous identity. When she wrote, women’s raised consciousness and access to formal education created the spaces from where an important body of writing emerged that has now found an equally broadened international public.

At this time such writers could not foresee the falling of the Berlin wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, or the enormous changes being brought about by the policies of neo-liberalism and politics of globalization. The 1990s were marked by tremendous fluidity, mobility, displacements, and repositionings. With the continuous diasporas from the south forming communities in the U.S. with cultures that maintain strong ties to their original homelands and that establish regular circuits of communication, the original and arbitrary lines of demarcation become less clear. This movement has always occurred, but at the turn of this
century it is such that it is accelerating the linkages between nations and between
diasporic communities and their places of origin. The growth of other Latino
populations and the use of the Spanish language are bringing about a renewed
energy which continues to generate a rich literature. These changes in linguistic and
writing practices are decentering Western (Euro-Anglo) hegemony as Latinos
continue to speak ever more clearly from these contestatory spaces.10

Border Regions

Canícula by Norma Cantú maps a territory that defies nationalist political
boundaries. It redraws a cultural geography, which like the borderlands described
by Anzaldúa, literally and metaphorically speak directly to the effects that the
displacement of conquest and colonization brought about during and prior to 1848.
Even if people there stayed in what is now a shared “space,” it is through the
imposition of the colonizing language and its accompanying cultural literacy that the
sense of place held by peoples of Mexican descent and embedded in cultural
history, legend, and language was (and continues to be) disrupted. The
displacement in situ transforms the once “homeland” into a contested site of
struggle. The literal and literary description of the depressed “borderlands” where
dwellers have survived lynchings, burnings, rapes, and other aggressions, blocks
any celebratory reading of border spaces. The border zone, however, can be read
metaphorically as a place that emblematizes the social relations embedded in its
geopolitics.

Cisneros’ unsentimental and un-nostalgic story, located in an unnamed
space (even as we read "Chicago"), posits from the perspective of a nomadic
subject the search for a place she can call home, outside patriarchy and poverty. Cantu's text locates an identity which is recovering her sense of place/in place through memory. Both texts are counter-discursive acts as they speak to the exclusivist nature of the nation-state discourse that forces "the other" to a marginality which is configured as an off-space, that is, a place outside the centers of power. Even if the protagonist Esperanza finds her way to writing, it is a writing that takes her back again and again to the place of disenfranchisement. The desire for a home and fulfillment is not a transformative act in the text since the writer seems to be in a bind, always anticipating a house/homely abode in the future, always returning to the house on Mango Street. Caught between memory and desire, the poetic protagonist/writer dwells in an eternal and interiorized present time which contains both the past and the future.

Norma Cantu's Canicula re-centers the marginal area of the border to speak from its heterogeneous nature, defies the monolithic and officialist discourses of both nation states, and chooses a realist aesthetic which is far from traditional. Cantu's narrative locates a contained transnational border space thus documenting a region and its people. It is no less experimental in its autography than Cisneros. Under the guise or behind the mask of an invented name, Azucena, she makes sense of her bilingual, bicultural life on the border. The protagonist/narrator thus distances her-self, as author, from her-self as protagonist, to re-member and re-create an area on both sides of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo called Laredo and Nuevo Laredo and to re-locate her-self. This repositioning symbolically reclaims a territory lost and retrieves its silenced voices and images. She speaks from a differentiated persona—Azucena—not only to underscore the mediated nature of autobiography,
but because Cantú, like Cisneros, is participating in what Walter Mignolo (2000) says, in reference to the writings of Rigoberta Menchú, “the belief in the truth of enactment rather than the truth of representation, a belief which distinguishes between hegemonic epistemologies with emphasis on denotation and truth, and subaltern epistemologies with emphasis on performance and transformation” and "which shows the intentions and the struggle for power” (26). Cantú warns us “that what may appear to be autobiographical is not always so” as “many of the events are completely fictional, although others may be true in an historical context. Although it may appear that these stories are my family’s, they are not precisely, and yet they are. But then again, as Pat Mora claims, life en la frontera is raw truth, and stories of such life, fictitious as they may be are even truer than true” (1997, xi).

In Canticula, memory is triggered by looking at family photographs. This act of re-membering a community is implicitly connected to the moment when in Madrid the narrator learns about the death of Roland Barthes and reads his book on photography, Camera Lucida. Theory is not the only motor that triggers her imagination; there is another complementary and competing act. As the protagonist is looking through her lover’s album and listening to his voice narrate and recall the stories that the photographs inspire, her imagination is awakened to a different way of self-writing in community. Sylvia Molloy (1991) points out that even autobiographies plunder other texts and not just lives for their staging, and certainly these texts invite an intertextual reading.

Travelogues, first person accounts of various types, testimonios, diaries, autobiographies, all “genres” or hybrid modes of representation that would
have the reader believe he is dealing with direct, unmediated accounts of real life narrated by real individuals, are no exception: these modes of structuring reality through writing that claim not to obey preconceived structures are also dependent upon a textual (if sometimes unwritten) prefiguration. Dependency does not mean, here, the strict observance of a model or a slavish form of imitation but reference to an often incongruous conflation of possible texts that the writer uses as a literary springboard, a way of projecting himself (herself) into the void of writing, even when that writing directly concerns the self. (16-17)

Within the spatial reconfiguration of the border, the narrator organizes and recreates voice/orality (a speaking), produces script (a writing), and presents photographs (a seeing) to record her people and her language. These become the necessary mediums through which a community outside representation can be remembered. From the distance, Spain, the "Old World," she directs her vision to a space in the "New World." Spain remains connected through language and culture, and this new border space has yet to be narrated and represented. It cannot be left unsaid. The use of photography can be subversive, says Roland Barthes (1983), "since photographs speak, make us reflect, suggest a meaning different to the literal one...not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when is its pensive, when it thinks" (38). Cantú thinks from the photographs. Her purpose is evident—to narrate a geography and a people within a specific historical space/time, her space/time, and to fix in time their forgotten images, their untold stories and knowledges. Not photographed because they were famous, the previously unknown people are now immortalized and endowed with status, circulating in the
public sphere of cultural production. The words of Roland Barthes are illuminating in this respect.

The photograph does not necessarily say what is no longer, but only and for certain what has been. This distinction is decisive. In front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory, but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty: The photograph’s essence is to ratify what I represents. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation. (1983, 87-89)

Cantú plays with both the representational and fictional aspects of narrating a self from the present, naming herself Azucena, and yet in displaying her passport picture she insists on authenticating Azucena as herself. The picture is her “real” self even if it is forged with another name. As Barthes says the photograph [in general] is not metaphoric; it carries its referent with itself (1983, 5).

In its emplotment, Canícula constitutes a different undertaking from the excellent autobiographical fictions of Julia Alvarez’s How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent (1991) or Cristina Garcia’s Dreaming in Cuba (1992). Their narratives demonstrate a tension in the traveling between the Caribbean Islands and the Mainland. In Canícula, there is no conflict in the going back and forth between cultures since the territory drawn is a geo-cultural area arbitrarily separated but containing a rooted and settled people whose linguistic practices disrupt notions of purity as the language of the cultural imaginary. Spanish, its legend, traditions, and
world views, seeps through to disrupt the imposed language and its legacies creating what Mignolo, following Anzaldúa, calls bi-languaging, “as the moment in which ‘a living language’ (as Anzaldúa puts it) describes itself as a way of life (‘un modo de vivir’), at the intersection of two (or more) languages,...a dialogical, ethic, aesthetic, and political process of social transformation rather than ergeia emanating from an isolated speaker” (2000, 264-265).

This is clear in the following passage by Cantú. “Panchita came around weekly with her bags full of ‘encargos’ and to collect money owed on merchandise bought on time. She was our Avon Lady, instead of the ‘ding-dong’ of the doorbell, we heard ‘Ave Maria Purísima,’ and Mami or Bueli or whoever was closest would answer, ‘Sin pecado concebida.’” (52). In this case, the bi-languaging mind is a product of the colonial experience but has, in the process, acquired what Cherríe Moraga (1993) calls a “bicultural mind,” a genealogy built on dual memories, articulated in two languages. In speaking about her songs, Cantú makes evident how she constructs her memories from realities and discourses lived in two languages.

Then at home, declamando for New Year’s and for parties. Tino and I testing our memorization skills, competing to see who could declamar the longest poems and remember the most lyrics from songs—en English and Spanish: “El brindis del bohemio,” “The Raven,” “Porque me dejé del vicio,” “Anabelle Lee,” “El Seminarista de los ojos negros,” and on and on through high school when we would write down the lyrics to our favorite songs: “La cama de piedra,” “México lindo y querido,” “Sad Movies Made Me Cry,” “Go Away Little Girl.” (Cantú 1995, 62)
Because Cisneros' lived space in childhood is reconfigured as unlivable, one with which she cannot identify with and wishes to transcend, she constructs a self outside the space of enunciation. Cantú constructs a self in a felicitous space—she is her space. This is not to say that she does not critique the racisms lived or the sexisms fought on a daily basis. In what appears to be a much different project, she participates in narrativizing the lives of peoples in a geopolitical space that was colonized, but whose culture and daily practices she sees as life affirming. This new remapping of regionalism contests discourses of homogeneity of the nation-state and Anglo Western history—the melting pot assimilative narrative—to privilege bilingual, biliterate and bicultural practices which point to multicultural and linguistic ones.

This geographical/genealogical story through photographs becomes the story of all those left out of history, the heroes and heroines of a space/time location. Neither migrants nor immigrants, the characters represent the settled and rooted communities whose stories and presence disrupts the nation-state discourses of a monolithic culture and implicitly proposes a redefinition which posits a new concept of nation and community from a politics of inclusion. Unlike migrant stories where spaces become reterritorialized representation, the multilayered stories by a rooted people indicate a process of de/re/territorialization that is implicitly pointing to a community (symbolically and materially) becoming aware of its own power as they recover memory and history.

Cantú's text constitutes a new regional writing that transcends the old definitions of regionalism as "local colour" (Jordan 1994). Ideologically, this "new regionalism" posits a complex regional and transregional history where legacies of
empire have left their mark. The text makes evident the global consequences of industrial capitalism, the disruptive effects on the region from economic restructuring and the policing and maintaining of an inside/outside mindset. It also offers lessons in perspective as it posits questions from both sides—from the Rio Grande and from the Rio Bravo—engaging questions of purity and authenticity, property and propriety, legality and illegitimacy. In the process, the narrative disrupts traditional categories of self and other, sameness and difference, national and foreign culture. It deconstructs the teleology of assimilation and constitutes a radical questioning of the very concept of distinction between identity and alterity.

Cantú’s cartography draws an unofficial geography of exclusion that has its own center. There is no idealization by the protagonist but certainly no wish to escape or be outside it. Her story self-consciously shows the mechanisms writing exploits, illustrating the chaotic and erratic ways memory works to recover the past. Moving back and forth from the moment of enunciation to the time of enunciation, she shifts personas as she gathers and presents her memories from childhood to the adult she is at the end of the story. The story, necessarily in chronicle fashion, remains inconclusive, that is, without closure, open to the future. The “I” becomes a “we” as she collapses individual self and community. “And some of us never leave, and some of us never come back. Some of us keep coming back. Some of us love, and some of us hate, some of us both love and hate our borderlands. Some of us remember, some of us forget” (1995, 132).
Rural Terrains

In Hoyt Place, Mary Helen Ponce (1993) seemingly assumes a more traditional strategy as the text links protagonist, narrator and author and calls itself purely and simply an autobiography. Her story, however, is the antithesis of an individuated self in search of self-definition or liberation. In her project of recreating the 1940s and 1950s in Pacoima, California, she constructs an "I" in the Mexican American community of immigrant and migrant agricultural workers where space becomes reterritorialized place. Although she sees her writing as a "social history of sorts," she says in a brief introduction to the text that it was "written de memoria. I thought of researching Pacoima history, the founding of the town. Often my siblings corrected a fact or two, but for the most part, I wrote what I remember. The end result is an autobiography, or life story, but also a communal history" (x).

The space is remembered through the liturgical calendar of Catholicism, a space which the narrator presents as offering dignity and hope to the displaced populations. The territorialization of the workers in places with Spanish names speaks to an origin which culturally contains them and makes the foreignness of the new land less ominous. The narrator begins the recollection of stories heard, remembered, or imagined, changing names, characteristics, and physical descriptions of people “to avoid embarrassing or hurting anyone”(x). Recreating the stories of a community marginalized from the dominant Anglo society of the time that is Pacoima or, as she says “my Macondo,” alluding to the work and literary place created in Latin America by Gabriel García Márquez.
The story is chronologically narrated but sequenced through the ritual calendar of Catholicism, that is, through the eternal recurrence of rituals and acts. This configures and contains the community recreated in a tightly organized spatial form in which the child remembers a happy childhood which is lived within this social and moral order. It is a geography of community. The story symbolically resignifies the rural regions whose stories have been misrepresented or absent from the literary imaginary. “For those who wonder why I feel my life story merits discussion, let alone publication, let me say that Mexican-Americans need to tell their side of the story in order to put to rest negative stereotypes. The majority of Mejicanos who lived in Pacoima during the 1920s to the 1950s (when some homes were torn down to build the ‘projects’) were hard-working, decent, and honorable. It is for them that I write” (Ponce 1993, x). It is a talking back to the stereotypical images in Tortilla Flat by John Steinbeck for sure and a female rewriting of Y no se lo trago la tierra by Tomás Rivera.

The narrator maps a community whose internal spatial ordering is regulated by the church and patriarchy. Albeit her at times idealization of the community, the liturgical calendar that structures the stories mark a geography of dynamic immobility. Movement occurs but is manifested as recurring cycles, whether secular or sacred. Memory constructs the harvesting rhythms that mark how the time passes for the farm workers and migrants in rural agricultural areas. “In the summer many Mexican families in Pacoima harvested crops. Picking fruit entre familia was what folks did come June, July, and August; it was the only way we had to add to the income earned by a parent” (169). Memory also constructs Mary Helen’s religious space. “Catechism was where we went on Saturdays. Cada
sábado before ten o’clock, Concha, Mundo, Virgie and I would trot up the street, across the lane that bordered Doña Chonita’s yard, and on to the church yard, where we waited for the black-robed nuns who taught el catecismo at Guardian Angel Church” (188).

There is no transformation of the social conditions of poverty, isolation, and gender inequality. The autobiographical novel ends with the narrator’s menstruation and at the point of entry into the “adult” world. Ponce refuses to continue her story into the present as a success narrative, which could showcase her achievements and the ways she escaped from poverty. Instead, she constructs a specific space/time in the past, which is not textually brought into the present. It is the story of a loss of innocence, the loss of a sacred and communal space. There seems to be a nostalgia for a community, for a sense of belonging to an organic and holistic space that would once again secure a stable identity.

Her ordering, however, and the lack of intervention of the adult narrator in the telling of the story from the child’s point of view, is more complicated than it appears. There are only two photographs—both outside the narrative text—a picture of herself as a child on the front cover and a picture of herself at the time of publication on the back flap. The lack of a post-modern self-reflexive protagonist, which announces the constructedness of her fictional "I," does not erase the critical eye of the ethnic decolonizing and adult author. Even as she speaks about her happy childhood, a careful reading reveals the marginalization suffered by the adult population. Ponce’s spatial ordering implicitly posits a community impeded by its economic and ethnic marginalization to a life of bettered social conditions. “Mostly we were poor folks who welcomed the extra money in summer. Working entre
*familia* was trying for some. Whole families were forced to share a tent or tiny hut. As the summer temperatures rose, tempers flared and children became irritable. Still most families did become accustomed to sleeping 3 to a bed” (170).

A time suspended in a marginalized space, whether secular or sacred, is telling of a hierarchical society where patriarchy reigned and a racist society kept the community outside the centers of power. In fact, the lack of irony and the spatial/temporal ordering becomes a self-critical representation of a time when the child could not see what the adult in retrospect could interpret but leaves outside the text. The sense of a cultural community and the importance of memory and language is not abandoned, yet there is an implicit critique of the structures of power that impeded the group’s transformation into legitimacy, equality, and futurity.

If Cisneros recreated an urban geography of exclusion, Ponce reconfigures the rural geographies of exclusion that the displaced migrants occupied, but her Hoyt Place is not the unhomely Mango Street. “Mejicanos in our town took pride in their homes and, when money allowed, repaired dilapidated roof or painted their casitas a bright color. They took special pride in having a yard full of plants and flowers, and these grew well in the rich California soil. Our house was built by my father when he and my mother and their three older children moved from Ventura to the San Fernando Valley, sometime in the 1920s” (5, 7). Home and community are remembered warmly and generously, and their inhabitants become idealized in their practices of everyday life. This works since all is seen from the eyes of a child who felt nurtured and protected.
Ponce, who acts as both narrator and protagonist, has the information and manipulates the events. In presenting the “I” of narration as herself, she seemingly refuses to escape from establishing what might appear as unmediated representation, as she decides not to hide behind a guise allowing the reader to forget her real existence. This, of course, can be read as yet another strategy to create “the effect of the real.” The text in its 338 pages is rich in dialogue and detail of the experiences of the child. These are structured in three sections, going from “Innocence” to “Knowledge” and conforming to the traditional novel of formation, the bildungsroman, but as all autobiography, especially read by post-modern readers, this is a reconstructed self. The following by William Cronon (1992) points to the manipulative nature of writing, including autobiography, or perhaps particularly autobiography since the author is the authority on the subject. “It is a common place of modern literary theory that the very authority with which narrative presents its vision of reality is achieved by obscuring large portions of that reality. Narrative succeeds to the extent that it hides the discontinuities, ellipses, and contradictory experiences that would undermine the intended meanings of its story. Whatever its overt purpose, it cannot avoid a covert exercise of power: it inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others” (1349-50).

Ponce’s narrative structuring chooses to hide the adult voice and persona in the present of enunciation, thus sanctioning the voice of the adult and with it the knowledge that experience and hindsight bring to the past. This is a virtuoso rendering which eliminates any interference from the future. It ironically moves us in the opposite direction that designs her text, that is, a move from “knowledge to innocence.” She insists that we “willingly suspend disbelief” to relive with Ponce
the moment of childhood, unhampered by the future. This makes the recreated past come to life, a historical moment in which we, like the child, live in for the duration of the writing.

**Private Provinces**

Pat Mora (1997) in *House of Houses* constructs a self in the literal and metaphoric space of her home. Mora might have had the home Cisneros desired. A marked symbolic class difference from the other protagonist is noticeable in this text since this family is not suffering from conditions of economic displacement but from cognitive dissonance and cultural discontinuities. This is a border story not of rootedness, as the case of Norma Cantú, but of up-rootings and re-routings that construct a different and equally powerful story. Trapped in the house of memories, the narrator becomes a prisoner of a time/space paradigm from which she brings back the dead to tell the stories of a family displaced from Mexico during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 who resettled in El Paso, Texas. Mora structures a time captive in the space of the family house. Her narration is triggered not by Roland Barthes, as in Cantú, but by Gaston Bachelard (1969) who sees the home as the space of protected intimacy. A self-reflexive narrator like Cantú and Cisneros, Mora theorizes as she narrates. She speaks from the physical and metaphoric house that grounds and contains her past identity. From her memories, Mora constructs an “I” as she maps a geographic genealogy.

Memory through writing is reactivated from a here and now to a there and before. She recognizes, as David Morley and Kevin Robbins (1993) do in their article on identity and memory, that the stories we tell ourselves about our past
construct our identities in the present (9). The stories are remembered through the yearly calendar. The chapters go from January to December, establishing again a circular time contained in the space of the house. Through the tellings the reader becomes a captive audience as the stories of several generations are told. The house contains a garden, which is described according to the seasons and becomes the only space of respite from the house of memories past. It offers a temporary escape from the enclosed and, at times, stifling atmosphere of yesteryear, but in its design as an inner and circular patio integrated into an overall architectural plan (textual and contextual), it makes unavoidable the re-entry into the rooms which house memory and from which the narrator cannot escape until the last spirit /ghost is exorcised through rememorialization.

Even though the text begins with a series of family photographs emphasizing the autobiographical pact of correspondence to lived experiences, the photographs and genealogical tree reproduced become the documentation that serve as a textual strategy to verify identities. As Barthes affirms in his study of photography:

First of all I had to conceive, and therefore if possible express properly (even if it is a simple thing) how Photography’s Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call “photographic referent” not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often “chimeras.” Contrary to these
imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past....what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (operator or spectator); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred. (76-77)

The photographs included as preface to the narrative serve as “circumstantial evidence” to more fundamentally foreground the haunting voices that come back from the past to narrate their untold tales. Voices and dialogues are recreated, as in Hoyt Street, signaling the strategic use of mimesis (representation), but the narrating self remains ubiquitously present through self-reflexive diegesis (narration). She roams the rooms of the private abode dialoguing with the dead brought back to inhabit the house-text.

How can you still be hungry if you’re dead? Aunt Chole sing-songs her question in the high pitch she reserves for birds, children, spirits. “Ay, mi Raúl, querido, what do you want?” “I’ll get him something, Tía,” I say. In my dreamhouse father returns, dark-skinned, balding, filling the room. “What do you want, Daddy? Coffee?” “Get her some honey, Patsy,” he says using my childhood name, seeing me both in the past and in the present... My father chuckles, munches his cookies and sips his coffee, smiles at me. “How are you doing, honey? Everything all right?” I want to say: how can it be all right if you’re dead? How can it be that I will never again lean on your chest, feel your arms encircling, protecting, like the house? (Mora 1997, 1-2)
The home is not unhomely, as in Cisneros, but affects the narrator in contradictory ways, making her feel secure at times and helpless at others. Her search for self becomes the search for origins, a symbolic entrance into the house/womb, a ritual endeavor from which she will be reborn. Registering the passage of time as the sure marker of the passage of peoples, her text speaks to the irretrievability of the past and the transmutations it brings about.

Why in my fifties did I decide to explore this house and its garden? Indeed a place to put the stories and the voices before they vanished like blooms and leaves will vanish on the wind outside, voices which, perceived as ordinary, would be unprotected, blown into oblivion. Since the family isn’t together geographically, using the tools I know, I created a place welcoming to our spirits, a place for communion and reunion, no invitation necessary; a space, like all spaces, as real as we choose to make it, ample enough for the family spirits who will refer to us in the past tense can turn to us and create with us what they need, the cycle continuing, as they have inhabited one of our bodies, inhabit the body of the house, a complex earth dwelling as we are dwellings and dwellers; the past, our present in the house and garden with its water song, daily wind-swept, transformed by light. (Mora 1997, 272-3)

Mora’s circularly structured narrative and lyrical language creates the space for inwardness and self-reflection in a tribute, recasting Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* and Elena Garro’s “Recuerdos del Porvenir” (1963). Cisneros projects an escape from an unhomely place. Mora looks to inhabit a haunted one. Ponce imagines a happy home from a distanced present. For Cantú, it’s just a place called
home. All finally construct an "I" at home in writing, for writing is, finally, their true home and final destination.

The genealogies traced in Cantú all belonged to an already hybrid, mixed border culture whose territory during colonization changed the terms of their inhabiting it. In Mora, the stories narrate a space of before (Mexico) and after (U.S.), a politics of displacement and cultural dislocation, a once Mexican and indigenous space now under Anglo domination.

The house knows the sound of el Río Grande, river that for centuries wandered through this Chihuahua desert, the largest desert in North America, old ocean bed where millions of years ago, land emerged from water, mountains rose. Brown women and men knew this river, washed in it, planted with it, played in it, slept with its voice, long before conquistadores, historians, and politicians divided the land into countries and states, directed the river to become a border. (3)

Allowing the language of the cultural imaginary to seep through, she refuses to translate the Spanish as she bi-languages to join other Chicanas/Latinas in a process of creating an "other tongue" that comes from living between languages. This cannot be read as just a bilingual aesthetic exercise but a "way of life" (Mignolo 2000, 264).

The use of Spanish in Chicana writings of self, I would add, implicitly validates the language of the cultural imaginary, establishing its value as a public language equal to English. The use of English is also subversive since the Chicanas appropriated the language of the colonizer to indict the long history of oppression and defacement of a language and culture. Spanish is close to English in a hierarchy
of languages, says Alfred Arteaga (1994), and the presence of an alternative and literate linguistic tradition causes a crisis for Anglo America since “it precludes the status for English as sole, unchallenged mode for civilized American discourse, but it also underlines several myths that are at the very heart of the self-image propagated by Anglo America” (22).

In her book of essays, *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993), Pat Mora states, “These old arguments that citizens must shed their language to ‘melt in’ simply no longer apply. Many of us are not immigrants. This country has both the opportunity and the responsibility to demonstrate to this world of emerging representative governments that nurturing variety is central, not marginal, to democracy” (19).

**Routes for Reading/Plots for Writing**

At the turn of the last century, Latin American writers initiated the literary movement called “Modernismo,” a new aesthetic which liberated writing from Spanish literary models. Seen as a final decolonizing move against Spanish cultural dominance and US imperialist imaginings, it opened the way for the Golden Age of Latin American writing in the 20th Century. At the turn of this century, it is Latinos/as, as previously colonized settlers, migrants, exiles, or citizens of semi-colonies, who continue through their writings this long process of decolonization against both Hispanism’s distancing gestures and Anglo assimilative politics.

In the U.S., the 1980s prompted the so-called “Decade of the Hispanic” and recognized the arrival on the literary scene of Latino Americans at the same time that Latin American literature had established an international reputation. This conflation
of Latin American and Latino literatures is both problematic and liberating. On the one hand it tends to essentialize and/or neutralize the particularisms out of which the different literatures and texts emerge, while on the other it proposes a strategic and powerful alliance against hegemonic conceptions of "Third World" peoples and their cultures. "At times," says Latin American cultural and literary critic Roman de la Campa (1999), "one can sense the potential for a clash between the British and Hispanic literary traditions, jockeying to see which will constitute the true precursor for a new global literary order" (14). Latino literature complicates that purposefully dichotomized and provocative statement.

As I have traced in this paper, at the beginning of this century it is necessary not only to consider Latina/o literary production as cultural political intervention but also to distinguish between the different histories of a heterogeneous people which now stands at about 30 million. The different literary productions of Latinos/as in the U.S. are in many ways a collective project of peoples linked through similar histories, cultures, language, and imaginary. Their literature is constitutive of an alternative canon, one in the process of remapping cultural and literary terrains, which defy a monolithic conceptualization of the nation-state by marking the porous nature of literal and imaginative borders.

The Chicana writers I studied, no longer a silenced society, are in search of attentive outside readers that should, according to Doris Sommer (1999), "proceed with caution" when reading "minority literature," take care not to read the other as same but in fact to recognize the differences inscribed in the text (whether cultural, linguistic, or ideological). Sommer proposes a "particularist" reading instead of a "universalist" one which would neither maintain the "other" as an essentialized
exotic other or assimilate the “other” to self, finally neutralizing or deafening the texts' intervention in lived realities.

Particularist literature would logically vie for central importance while holding off universalists who would claim co-authorship. But our tradition of criticism [Anglo-European] takes the underdeveloped practices of “reader response” theory as basic and unobjectional. The “strategies of containment” that claim our attention here would defend cultural difference as a value in itself. It is what Jean Francois Lyotard calls the differend, the stubborn residue that survives on the margins of normalizing discourse. Acknowledging that residue is the precondition for democratic negotiations. Difference safeguards particularist identities against seamless assimilation, a word that rhymes with neutralization and sometimes also with physical annihilation. (xiii)

I suggest that the texts by the Chicanas that I have examined want to be read in their difference, by insiders and outsiders, as both products and producers of a collective imaginary, selectively retrieving from a cultural heritage as well as constructing new rituals, patterns, and memories for future sharing. Books are made from and make societies and, in that sense, this literature is clearing itself a space from where to think and be, which Mignolo calls “border knowing.” He cites Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands as “articulating a powerful alternative aesthetic and political hermeneutic by placing herself at the cross-road of three traditions (Spanish-American, Nahuatl, and Anglo-American) and by creating a locus of enunciation where different ways of knowing and individual and collective expressions mingle” (2000, 5). Modeled on the Chicano experience and owing to
the idea of "African gnosia," he says "border knowing is unthinkable without understanding the colonial difference. Furthermore, it is the recognition of the colonial difference from subaltern perspectives that demands border thinking" (6). bell hooks calls this "a space of radical openness," and Homi Bhabha (1994) defines it as "a context from which to build communities of resistance and renewal that cross the boundaries and double-cross the binaries of race, gender, class and all oppressively Othering categories" (84). Bhabha calls it a "third space of enunciation," the transitional space between colonization and its erasure and which Emma Perez (1999) refers to as the "decolonizing imaginary" where "the silent gain their agency" (33).

In the autobiographical testimonial fictions I discuss, there is a radical break with rhetorical patterns traditionally found in autobiographical literature. As Nellie Y. McKay (1988) points out in reference to the literature of Zora Neale Hurston, life and autobiography are not the same. Strategies rather than truths are used to construct realities lived and to deconstruct racism (and, I would add, sexism). She reminds us that Hurston was not the first writer to create an image that did not offer a wholly accurate reading of the self. The discrepancies in Frederick Douglass's three narratives of self, she says, were "less interested in documenting facts than in employing rhetorical strategies that enabled him to replace the erroneous identity that dominant culture had bestowed on him with an equally fictitious soiled black self" (180-181). For Emma Perez (1999), women's voices are creating a "third space feminism," a "practice that implements the decolonial imaginary" (33), and it is here that I place the self-writing counter-hegemonic practices of these Chicanas.
Notes

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1 The Hispanic Recovery Project directed by Nicholas Kanellos is a project engaged in the recuperation and publication of primary literary sources written by Hispanics in the geographic area that is now the U.S. from the Colonial Period to 1960. In the enormous endeavor of recovering historical and literary texts, the Hispanic Literary Recovery Project has contributed to making visible alternative literary and cultural practices in the Southwest among other regions of the U.S. These have been crucial in affirming and re-inscribing the presence of local/border resistance by an ethnic and linguistic community vis-à-vis an Anglo national/nationalist center.

2 This statement should not be read as attributing any foundational status to that historical moment, but as one that recognizes a particular watershed period when a people’s political intervention directly contested colonization, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.

3 For analysis of comparative male autobiography, see Ramón Saldivar (1985), Antonio C. Márquez (1990), and Lauro Flores (1990).
4 Renato Rosaldo (1990) argues against the theories set forth by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983) in asserting that minority discourse can be distinguished from great literature by three features: deterritorialization, an emphasis on politics, and a collective value. He asserts these theories are not applicable to Chicano literature or history because like “the experiences of blacks and Native Americans” they “cannot readily be assimilated to a tale of immigration and displacement.”

5 The notion implied in this term refers to those whose attitude makes them smugly narrow and conventional, indifferent to cultural and aesthetic values, and, in this particular case, to the power of fiction to endow meaning.

6 “Bildungsromans” or novels of formation have, with few exceptions, followed the personal growth and development of a protagonist from childhood or adolescence into adulthood. The representation of female and/or minority protagonists have more recently questioned the assumed universality of the traditional form offering, from the perspective of gender and ethnicity, variations on the coming-of-age story.

7 Cisneros says about Esperanza:

Yes, she wants to get out, she sees the barrio as something very threatening, and rightfully so. I wrote it as a reaction against those people who want to make our barrios look like Sesame Street, or someplace really warm and beautiful. Poor neighborhoods lose their charm after dark, they really do. It’s nice to go visit a poor neighborhood, but if you’ve got to live there every day, and deal with garbage that doesn’t get picked up, and kids getting shot in your backyard, and people running through your doorway at
night, and rats, and poor housing. It loses its charm real quick. I was writing about it in the most real sense that I knew, as a person walking those neighborhoods with a vagina. I saw it a lot differently than all those “machos” that are writing all those bullshit pieces about their barrios.

(Rodríguez Aranda 1990, 69)

8 In an interview Cisneros says: “What I’m doing is writing true stories. They’re all stories I lived or witnessed or heard of, stories that were told to me. ... In Iowa City I decided to write about something far removed from here which was my childhood. ...Some of these stories happened to my mother, and I combined them with something that happened to me....Some of the stories were my students’ when I was a counselor; women would confide in me and I was so overwhelmed with my inability to connect their lives that I wrote about them” (Rodríguez Aranda 1990, 64).

9 David Sibley (1995) says in the “Introduction” to Geographies of Exclusion that: Because power is expressed in the monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments, any text on the social geography of advanced capitalism should be concerned with the question of exclusion. ...Human geography, in particular, should be concerned with raising consciousness of the domination of space in its critique of the hegemonic culture....To get beyond the myths which secure capitalist hegemony, to expose oppressive practices, it is necessary to examine the assumptions about inclusion and exclusion which are implicit in the design of spaces and places. (ix-x).
See Rosaura Sánchez (1998) for the role the Spanish language is playing in the Latino communities which she sees as “a heterogeneous population, politically fragmented, but united by a history of conquest and colonialism, a history of proletarianization and disempowerment in this country and, to a large extent, by a common language” (111).

11 *Nepantla* is a nahuatl preposition meaning “in the middle,” which can be used either as *Tlalnepantla* (in the middle of the earth) or as *Nepantla Tonatiuh* (middle of the day). It was used in the sixteenth century by Nahuatl people to describe their situation in relation to the Spanish colonizer. “*Estamos nepantla,*” they would say in response to their situation. Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, renowned Mexican poet and Nahuatl scholar, translates the sentence as meaning “We are in a state of waiting. It is no longer the place we knew, but we don’t know yet what it will become.” (Conversation with author in Mexico City, 1990).
Works Cited


