# RECLAIMING WOUNDS: PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN NORMA ELÍA CANTÚ'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

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## ABSTRACT

Norma Cantú problematizes the dimensions of the autobiographical genre by placing her writing at the border between two nations. Border life-writing is constructed as collective, creative, and, above all, wounded by the colonial and Western experience. Far from exhibiting rage or mere nostalgia, Cantú employs memory and historical inscription as means to empower otherwise forgotten and colonized bodies and subjectivities. In so doing, she sets out new modalities of self-representation that aim at re-membering the racialized and gendered bodies on both sides of the border. Through a display of border crossings and historical recollections, Cantú ultimately exhorts readers to delve into the border wound as though it were a threshold into subjectivity. In analyzing three of her works, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* ([1995] 2015), *Cabañuelas, A Novel* (2019a), and *Meditación Fronteriza: Poems of Love, Life, and Labor* (2019b), this essay seeks to establish bonds between Cantú's autobiographical writing and feminist theories of *mestizaje* (Anzaldúa [1987] 2012), performative self-representation and *autobiographics* (Gilmore 1994), and borders' fungibility (Brady 2002), among others, that will problematize and push the autobiographical genre to its very limits.

**Keywords**: borders; autobiography; Chicana/o literature; women writers; Norma E. Cantú.

## INTRODUCTION

For many, navigating fragilities and daily suffering has become the way of the world, or rather, the way they survive. Invisible, silent, and transient as some wounds may seem, their trace lasts as long as memory abides. Thus, historical traumas and social woes remain pending and unresolved for those whose voices have been doubly co-opted by alienation and violence. In this light, subaltern voices, to use Spivak's (1988) term, have never ceased to reclaim and restate an ever-unfolding space of resistance.[1] Some authors, such as Gloria Anzaldúa ([1987] 2012), have already identified the existence of a specific trauma in border inhabitants by describing the border as "an open wound" in

[1] Even though Spivak did heighten the impossibility of the subaltern to speak, in using the term, I argue that these voices, formerly removed from public discourse, have defied the difficulties imposed on them by means of subverting traditional identity politics.

their lives (3), a metaphor that elicits a sense of self that is born and nurtured by precariousness and pain. The border wound ultimately inscribes a type of vulnerability that does not disempower women's subjectivities located in the border, but rather that gives way to acts of resistance by "developing new modes of collective agency" based on "interdependency and public action" (Butler et al. 2016, 7). Ambiguous and disruptive as they might be, borders have been conceptualized as both sites of separation and of contact.[2] The US-Mexico border itself has generated modalities of violence that target the fragilities of its inhabitants and border crossers. Authors such as Norma E. Cantú, along with many Chicanx authors, envision this wound as a third space, to use Homi K. Bhabha's term, and as a new site of enunciation.[3] That is to say, the wound is conceived as a threshold into a particular subjectivity, which, in the case of border writing, is also specifically attached to place and time. However, in the intersection of wounds and border experiences, this article reads the border wound as a marker of historical injury (Ahmed 2014, 173) that might heal through acts of vulnerability, exposure and listening (200). This is evident in the case of Cantú's autobiographical writings, for most of them are located in the border region between Mexico and the United States. As she narrates different crossings, Cantú urges the reader to delve into memory, to write in order to re-member one's body and history.[4] In so doing, the author crisscrosses the dimensions of the autobiographical genre, of history and memory, fictionality and factuality, photograph and text, life and death. Likewise, the autobiographical subject becomes an agent of memory that looks at the present and blends it with the mythical and the historical as a way of coping with a sense of fragility and constant displacement.

This article focuses on Norma E. Cantú's autobiographical writing as expressed in three works: *Canícula: Snapshots from a Girlhood en la Frontera* ([1995] 2015), *Cabañuelas, A Novel* (2019a), and *Meditación Fronteriza: Poems of Love, Life, and Labor*

[2] See Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33-40.
[3] Bhabha's sense of thirdness is here ascribed to the debunking of binomial structures regarding culture, language, or identity.
[4] I emphasize the intersection of memory and writing through an act of re-membering, that is, the importance of assembling otherwise fragmented and displaced experiences.

(2019b). It looks at this literary production from the perspective of Gloria Anzaldúa's *frontera* and *mestiza* consciousness and Mary Pat Brady's borders' fungibility. Along with these major critical concepts, feminist theories of contemporary subjectivities, such as Rosi Braidotti's notion of nomadism and Leigh Gilmore's performative *autobiographics*, amongst others, will illuminate the analysis of autobiographical narratives. This article aims at contributing to the large scholarship on contemporary Chicanx autobiographies by constellating Cantú's prose and poetry together in the analysis of her feminist border subjectivity. Drawing from a lack of contemporary readings of Cantú's latest works other than *Canícula*, this contribution does not prioritize her major memoir and therefore it sheds light on the author's compilation of poems and other new pieces of fiction. In so doing, I argue that Cantú's autobiographical voice permeates most of her creative—and even non-creative—writing from different perspectives, registers, and genres. All in all, Cantú's poems, texts, and photographs intertwine in these works as a way of producing a multivocal testimony of liminality and upheaval. Together, these modes of representation create a new site of enunciation that requires a relocation of the speaking voice to the ambivalent and unfixed space of the border. This movement creates an intersectional, constant crossing of borders of diverse kinds as it maps out the main routes for inscribing the self as wounded but also as immersed in a healing process (Ahmed 2014; Butler 2016). Thus, personal memories and experiences will play a key role in dismantling hegemonic parameters of self-representation by embracing a fragmentary, divergent, and fluid conceptualization of the self.

In the first section, I attend to a broader disclosure of contemporary theories that support a feminist take on autobiography and that are either problematized or sustained by a particular reading of Norma E. Cantú's prose and poems. In the second section, this article hints at a reading of the performative autobiographical in Cantú's three works and how they are conflated with an interest in new modes of feminist self-representation. The border wound, as it emerges from violence and resistance, will be approached with a transversal reading of *Canícula* and *Cabañuelas*, alongside with a

deeper analysis of and a comparison with the poems and meditation in *Meditación Fronteriza*.

## CANTÚ AND THE PROBLEMATIZATION OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GENRE: A FEMINIST APPROACH TO SELF-REPRESENTATION

As one of the authors that defies the Western prospect of autobiographical narratives, Norma E. Cantú (2013), a *Tejana* born and raised at the US-Mexico border, places the autobiographical genre within the boundaries of what she calls "life-writing" (310). When defining it, Cantú acknowledges the exclusionary nature of traditional theoretical approaches to autobiographical writing, which leave aside theories of self-representation other than the Western and, to an extent, the European.[5] Given the ambivalence of the genre, contemporary autobiographical narratives such as Cantú's navigate the unsettling waters of traditional autobiographical tropes without ever adhering to a totalizing terminology or to unifying theories of self-representation. Small wonder, then, that the autobiographical has become the cultural and political arena for the emergence of epistemological defiance and creative experimentation. As contemporary writers dismantle hegemonic mechanisms of self-representation, they perform a decentralization of "the master narrative of the 'sovereign self'" (Smith and Watson 2001, 3) as mainly white, male, and Western, in favor of inclusive, hybrid and divergent subjectivities. Further, these contemporary subjectivities reject and emancipate themselves from those individualistic, monolithic, and static views on the self as celebrated by Western narratives. As a result, women's autobiographical writing has played a key role in mapping new forms of inscribing the self in creative, divergent, and collective ways (Smith and Watson, 1998, 4, 27).

I argue that women's writing may perform what Mary Pat Brady (2000) terms 'fungibility' in relation to border gnosis, meaning "the ability to slip outside of the

[5] See Rosi Braidotti's (2011) take on 'Europeanness' as a paradigm for this hegemonic sovereignty that enhances "passing itself off as the norm, the desirable center, confining all 'others' to the position of periphery" (34).

material and metaphorical and also to lay hold to both" (178).[6] That is to say that these narratives may, at one time, ascribe to the materiality of the subject's experiential knowledge in the world and, at another, generate a metaphorical, discursive space that problematizes self-representation. I adhere to the fungibility of Cantú's autobiographical writing as it heightens the potentiality of shifting between the material and the metaphorical dimensions, and other opposite categories, of the autobiographical experience. Fraught with such fungible nature, women's autobiographical writing withdraws from an essentialist view of the matter while it is grounded in a positive "sexual difference" (Smith and Watson 1998, 16; Braidotti 2011, 38). Border's fungibility, then, deflates the Anglo and androcentric, patriarchal representation of agency prompted not only in Eurocentric literary traditions of autobiography but also in those cultivated in the US-Mexico borderlands (Cucher 2018, 92). Unlike the historical trends of self-representation in Mexican American autobiography, these contemporary autobiographies mainly written by women on the border ensure new ways of escaping oblivion and mainstream fetishizations. In this regard, notions of women's bodies as nomadic and embodied subjects, as opposed to the disembodied male subject or the sedentary logocentric, prove equally fungible elements in their role as factors of resistance to cultural and epistemological assimilation.[7] The emplacement of Chicana literature in terms of genre, however, is often bound to border epistemology and, to some extent, to its fungibility, since "the border paradigm has defined the boundaries of writing and experience" (Velasco 2004, 313). In light of this reasoning, border epistemology provides women's autobiographies—Chicana autobiographies in particular—with a space to perform self-

[6] I apply here the notion of fungibility understood as the capacity of borders to function both—and not exclusively—as metaphorical and material locations. This fungibility, I argue, might be adjusted to other potential and fungible conceptualizations such as women's autobiographical writing.

[7] The material counterpart of this border fungibility is understood through the intersection of feminist approaches to women's bodies and subjectivities. Braidotti's theory of a 'nomadic body' (2011) aligns with Brady's fungibility inasmuch as women's subjectivities are permeated with the "capacity to be both grounded and to flow and thus to transcend" multiple categories (25), which also adds to the particular autobiographical subjectification of Cantú's experience as Chicana.

representation through formal, generic subversions, without ever leaving aside the real, physical, and historical location these experiences are grounded in (Cucher 2018, 93).

The autobiographical subject in women's autobiographies is thus decentered, embodied (Eakin 1999, 36-7), relational (Smith and Watson 1998, 8-10), divergent (Anzaldúa [1987] 2012, 101) and nomadic (Braidotti 2011, 25),[8] and it ultimately destabilizes phallogocentric symbolic authority. In order to evince the fault lines in mapping the new autobiographical arena, it becomes necessary to understand and interrogate the symbolic system of self-representation deployed by contemporary subjectivities. Interestingly, border women writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa or Norma E. Cantú do face the "dismemberment of the body" by outperforming the phallogocentric symbolic order and creating new "systems of signification" (Alarcón 1996, 52). The autobiographical becomes a performative project that defies traditional cognitive approaches to self-representation and relies instead on performative and transformative symbols. In this regard, Gilmore's study of performative autobiographical mechanisms (1994, 1998, 2001) gives access to the notion of "autobiographics," and describes them as "elements that instead [of traditional autobiographical plots] mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography," thus stressing "interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradictions as strategies of self-representation" (Gilmore 1998, 184). Therefore, autobiographical content might be present in literary works that are not considered autobiographical at first, as it is the case for Cantú's latest works. Thus far, Gilmore's term aptly addresses the need to further research on new forms of autobiographical writing, and seems particularly suitable to explore contemporary Chicanx autobiographical writing. Indeed, part and parcel of conducting the analysis of autobiographics—by which readers conceptualize and relocate the subject position as a woman and as an abject in historical terms—

[8] I adhere to Braidotti's (2011) nomadic project as akin to this analysis on women's subjectivities insofar as "[n]omadic consciousness is a form of political resistance to hegemonic, fixed, unitary, and exclusionary views of subjectivity" (58).

implies that critical theories must comply with a reformulation of autobiographical elements that lays bare mechanisms of identity formation. In other words, to explore the use of autobiographics in Cantú's writings contributes to a better understanding of how writing and self-representation shape identity.

Cantú's autobiographical work enlarges, thus, a feminist approach that attends to theories of *mestizaje*, fluidity, and community. Her narratives merge opposite categories, such as the personal/private, the collective/public, so as to lay out alternative border (hi)stories. This is what justifies her preference for the term 'life-writing,' since it "allows for an expansion that includes blended genre works, transgeneric works, and testimonio" (Cantú 2013, 311), enhancing a fluid modality of telling that encompasses many genres at once. Ascribed to the literary expectations of academic and creative writing, Cantú performs, as Anzaldúa does, a literary *mestizaje* which aligns with Gilmore's autobiographics in that it (a) draws attention to the mechanisms behind self-representation, and (b) works as a performative transgression and as an act of resistance within self-representation (Saldívar-Hull 2000, 70). Far from the historical implications of *mestizaje* as a way of controlling and undermining certain narratives, contemporary Chicana autobiographers defy the semiotics of self-representation by resisting assimilation and producing "another signifying system" (Alarcón 1996, 53). In this regard, Cantú engages in Anzaldúa's *mestiza* project by conflating her writing with a radical epistemological subversion to "the language of Man: the fetishized, false universal mode of Western humanism" (Braidotti 2011, 66).[9] Ultimately, the contemporary autobiographical terrain becomes a discursive space that surpasses formerly restrictive textual categories, thus opening the writing space to a fluid and transversal mode of self-representation.

[9] The *mestiza* project, originally born as a feminist discourse of resistance to hegemonic discourses and systemic violence (Anzaldúa [1987] 2012, 43), propels alternative reconfigurations of women's subjectivities from a space of cultural resistance (43, 99) as it encourages cultural and political transgressions.

## CANTÚ AND FICTIONAL AUTOBIOETHNOGRAPHY

Cantú (2013) coined the term 'fictional autobioethnography,' mostly referring to her groundbreaking work *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (2015), first published in 1995, as "a blend of autobiographic research to describe the mix of life and ethnographic research in a literary genre" (312). Such hybridity in form and in content is the point of departure of *Canícula*, a coming-of-age story of a girl called Azucena/Nena Cantú that explores the multiple intersections and (trans)formations at the US-Mexico border. *Canícula* inaugurates Cantú's autobioethnographic project, which, I argue, also comprises *Cabañuelas, A Novel* (2019a), and *Meditación Fronteriza: Poems of Love, Life, and Labor* (2019b) insofar as they present elements that are reminiscent of Chicana autobiographical subjectivity. In these works, the autobiographical narrative emerges from experiential epistemologies and collective knowledge, combining personal narratives, self-formation, and folk-knowledge (Cantú 2013, 310). Her narratives focus on the deployment of both personal and collective (hi)stories and add to Chicana autobiographical formulas "as a discourse of identity that challenges dualistic notions of the personal and the communal" (Velasco 2016, xi). The author explores the writing of the self into history by means of a series of autobiographical elements that play a performative and transformative role in cultural affirmation. These elements, which I identify as autobiographics, are part of Cantú's autobioethnographical voice and frame stories that are not culturally authorized because they do not fit in the dominant, hegemonic paradigms of traditional practices (Gilmore 1994, 26). What Cantú attempts in inscribing a border subjectivity into the autobiographical is to subvert the statism of identity categories and to give way to spaces and moments of reconciliation and imagination, which are fostered by acts of listening and remembrance (Ahmed 2014, 200). To do so, Cantú posits the border as a site of enunciation, thus colliding with other mainstream narratives, mainly coming from the US media. So much so that the autobiographical arena becomes central when inscribing Chicanas' bodies and histories not only as an act of resistance but as a way of configuring "the space of social demands" (Velasco 2004, 314) and "social protest" (Herrera-Sobek 2017, x).

Cantú's wide interest on life-writing neatly points to a preoccupation with the continuity of Chicana modes of self-representation. In this vein, her autobioethnographical project opens the way to self-representation as a cultural artifact, feminist modalities for the telling of the self, and the historical and cultural reality of border life and communities. Withal, Cantú's writing proves subversive as it works as a fungible source of experience and representation, that is, the autobiographical space becomes 'a political arena,' as understood by Bhabha, whereby stasis and unity are debunked in favor of a hybrid reconceptualization of cultural symbols.[10] Consequently, a sense of memory or cultural memory results from a subjectivity that is at the same time grounded in personal, material experience but also attached to the ethnographic research in which memory inscription is framed.[11] Autobiographical writing, thus, emerges from a situated knowledge" (Haraway in Braidotti 2011, 65), which refers to the idea that "[a]ll knowledge is situated, that is to say, partial" (Braidotti 2011, 40). Cantú (2007) constantly refers to a sense of situated epistemology as an unavoidable and constituent element of her experience of the world, since "[a]ll this is shaped by where [she] first learned to be in the world, on the border" (235). Her perception of the world is traversed then by her personal experience situated on the border. Despite such a strong reliance on being 'situated,' the fungible and nomadic vein ascribed to contemporary subjectivities prompts not "a fluidity without borders, but rather an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries" (Braidotti 2011, 66). To understand it in the context of Cantú's *tejana-ness* or border experience, it is worth noting that her sense of 'situated knowledge' advances transposition and *transfronterizo* experiences.[12] In other words, border epistemology is carried *within*

[10] I adhere to the notion of third space, where "the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, historicized, and read anew" (Bhabha 1994, 208).

[11] See Hirsch and Smith 2002, cultural memory.

[12] Cantú (2007) expresses her *tejana-ness* as nondependent—or not entirely—on location albeit simultaneously inscribed on a 'situated knowledge,' what in her words means, "I have been a *tejana*, while in Europe, Madrid, Vietnam, Nebraska, and California. *No importa*, it doesn't matter, the border is with me; my *tejana-ness* is who I am. That semitropical land of South Texas shaped me as much as the DNA I inherited from my parents, their parents, and the many generations back, *mis antepasados*" (234; italics in the original).

oneself regardless of location. No sense of loss or exile might be then imposed on the mobile nature of some border subjectivities, nor fixity nor unity should be prescribed to identity politics and self-representation. As the following section illustrates, for some, crossings—in the movable and fluid aspect of traversing spaces—stand as performative acts of self-formation and self-affirmation that at the same time unveil the mechanisms generating the border wound. A contemporary subjectivity emerging from border mobility is then "grounded in but not limited to geographic space," and works within self-representation as "an organizing metaphor for Chicanas living in multiple worlds and multiple cultures" (Saldívar-Hull 2000, 67). Here, Cantú's autobioethnographical voice aims at dismantling binary systems of representation and violence. It enacts a discursive space for creative remembrance, a site from where the self is enunciated and read through the lens of a situated knowledge. As a result, the border becomes a site of enunciation for the self and history, thus eliciting "the possibility of building, based on this [border] cultural paradigm, an organic and systematic methodology for studying autobiography" (Velasco 2004, 315). In sum, this situated epistemology is what propels new and feminist modes of self-representation that do not ascribe to fixed, already-set identities.

## CANTÚ'S *AUTOBIOGRAPHICS*: ARTICULATING THE BORDER WOUND

> All borders remain spaces of conflict, of violence; indeed, my border is a wound. But all over the world the wounds bleed, migrants flee the violence of war, military violence, flee drug cartel violence, the violence of poverty, of woman hating, of racism, of intolerance. All over the world those who can work work for a borderless world, a violence-free world. They dream an end to violence, dream of the tranquility of an accepting world. Dream the fulfillment of equality for all. Imagine, and it shall be so. Believe that it will be so. (Cantú 2019b, 129)

Rather than being exclusively ascribed to just one theory of cultural fluidity and liminality, the reading this essay proposes is keen on multiple and interdisciplinary approaches to autobiography and border epistemology. Albeit trite, the figuration of the border as a wound pivots most of the interpretations on Chicanx contemporary autobiographies. However, this notion of fissure works twofold in a similar way to

borders' fungibility: Cantú's autobiographics help inscribe the border wound both symbolically and in material terms. Firstly, a wound might be articulated as a corporeal fissure and as an open gate to a particular subjectivity. Further, the inscription of the border wound opens the gate for the reader to elucidate and become aware of the insights of border experiences, while it simultaneously provokes a reaction of distancing and abjection against hegemonic power relations. The disclosure of such a wound underlines the mechanisms that construct the crossing of borders as a transgression of social order, thus releasing a whole patrolling system regarding othered subjects. However, this metaphorical endeavor ought not to be understood as an appropriation of one's identity, but the material exposure of a "historical injury" (Ahmed 2014, 173).[13] Secondly, the border wound reports the politics of exclusion and unveils the injuries and pain within spatial and temporal dimensions. Anzaldúa, as Cantú does, envisions this wound as the continuity of historical violence that is marked by silencing, displacement, and criminalization of nonhegemonic narratives.

The way the border wound is articulated in Cantú's autobiographical writing is made visible when considering the autobiographics at work in most of her narratives. These autobiographics work as agents of memory and self-representation, therefore disclosing what otherwise was rendered invisible and amnesic. Other than giving emphasis to the author's implication in the narrative, these autobiographics, understood by Gilmore as 'irruptions' in the text, help readers fathom the multiple layers of Chicana self-representation (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2017, 9), as well as women's historical inscription. I attend in the subsequent subsections to these irruptions, these autobiographics, as they emerge from spatiality. These performative elements shed light on how spatial metaphors permeate the liminality of Chicana subjectivity and its imbrication with power relations and violence by highlighting connections between the material and ontological aspects of Cantú's autobiographical voice. In accordance with

[13] On the idea of the wound and its relationship with identity, I agree with Ahmed (2014) that the fetishization of the wound might problematize and even obliterate "a history of 'getting hurt' or injured," however, the response to that ought not to forget the wound as a marker of historical injury (32, 173).

Gilmore's (1994) standpoint, the autobiographics of border spaces bring attention to "not what autobiography *is* but what it *does*" (39; emphasis mine).

## RITUALS OF MEMORY: *CANÍCULA* AND *CABAÑUELAS*

Not surprisingly, Cantú's autobiographical writings construct the self as decentralized, communal, and in transition. To do so, she articulates her narrative as crossed by various and at times oppositional codes that result in her particular autobiographics: text and photograph in *Canícula*, but also fact and fiction in both *Canícula* and its sequel, *Cabañuelas*.[14] Certainly, *Canícula*—which presents a narrative of self-formation located geographically and epistemologically at the border—holds a central position in almost every analysis on Cantú's writing due to its confluence of photograph and text and the subsequent problematization of traditional mechanisms of self-representation. Its autobiographics flesh out not only Cantú's family history or past, as it is not an interpretation of significant events or experiences as traditionally understood, but rather they stand for a reconfiguration of the autobiographical mode as cognitive and performative, and most of all, transformative (Gilmore 1998, 188). Indeed, recent studies suggest that the period of girlhood presented in *Canícula* resonates with the quality of Chicana literature to disclose "discursive spaces where this materiality is very well rendered" (Fernández-García 2020, 5). The aspects of life-hood presented in *Canícula* speak to the fictional autobioethnographical voice of its author insofar as commonplaces and everyday experience become pivotal. Such endeavors conflate Chicana subjectivity with an interest in the 'quotidian,' which is contemporarily read as "a mode of feminist representation" (Cucher 2018, 93), and that I identify as part of Cantú's autobiographics. Further, queries about the subjectification of Chicana experience to the material location of the border are argued in this article as in response

[14] Both novels belong to Cantú's *Border Trilogy*. The first novel of this trilogy is the unpublished *Papeles de Mujer*, followed by *Canícula* and *Cabañuelas*. *Canícula* follows the coming-of-age story of Azucena/Nena Cantú, as she grows up in the border region between Texas and Mexico, and between her two families at both sides of the border.

to Gilmore's (1994) notion of the autobiographical subject as "produced not by experience," or not only, "but by autobiography" (25).

As one of the major elements of Cantú's narrative, the dialectics of photograph and text partakes of a feminist approach to Chicana self-representation by focusing on the incorporation of women's racialized bodies in the contested frame of fictional realities and cultural memory. With that in mind, it is worth looking at the photograph as a material source of a fixed and spatial version of history, while the text reflects a rather metaphorical, ambivalent and temporal quality of the border experience. Such confluence dwells between the memorializing and mythmaking of family stories and the ethnographer's imagination, which creates links between the past and the present. History is then made from memory and constructed through autobiographics, thus leading to a dialogic mode within the autobiographical act.[15] In this regard, a conversation between Nena, the protagonist, and her grandmother, *Mamagrande*—between the former's imagination and the latter's storytelling, but also between photograph and text—encompasses both history-making and collective, cultural memory (Cantú [1995] 2015, 20-1).[16] *Mamagrande*, along with Nena's older—and mostly women—relatives, tells Nena about the familial border experiences, about crossings and *cuentos*, saints and myths, and ultimately, she applies older, ancient *remedios*—literally and symbolically—to Nena's actual wounds, thus exposing their current consequences in space and time. Further, this traditional knowledge and personal mythmaking are retrieved not so much in a nostalgic way but as a subversive gesture against colonial wounds and disruption, reclaiming cultural resistance within transmission and vulnerability.

*Canícula*'s retrospective view counts on an active exposure to the precarity of life on the border, as well as to the displacement and harm resulting from constrictive autobiographical formulas. Indeed, Cantú's narrative builds on a space of vulnerability,

[15] In light of this, Velasco (2004) adds that "[t]he link, then, between literary construction and history in autobiography is memory" (332).
[16] "Mamagrande tells me stories of crossing the river 'en wayín'—and I imagine a covered wagon like in the movies—she pregnant with my dad" (Cantú [1995] 2015, 20).

which is understood in Judith Butler's (2016) words as "a deliberate exposure to power," (22) since it unveils a material demonstration of loss and pain as a way of autobiographically expressing a collective mourning. In "Tino," a chapter that revolves around the death of Nena's brother in the Vietnam war, the effect that creates the idea of Tino being alive in the photograph coincides with the revelation of Tino's fatal death in the narrative sequence (Cantú [1995] 2015, 16-7). This memory that incorporates both the death and the life of Tino's body, integrates the personal and the historical wound(s) in the narrative, a wound that does not entirely nor exclusively belong to Nena's family, but one that alludes to a Mexican American history of war, displacement, and suffering. In so doing, the historical scope is relocated within a personal, collective space by means of autobiographics.

What autobiography does for history is to keep memory alive and in constant transition. *Cabañuelas, A Novel* shares with *Canícula* the dialectics of photograph and text but differs from its prequel in that it presents itself as a novel.[17] Cantú (2019a) places the protagonist, Nena, in a crucial reminiscent subject position as "a folklorist studying fiestas, a student of life—after all, isn't life a series of fiestas" (3), which advances the problematization of her work as a testimony and as an investigation both in terms of content and form. *Cabañuelas*'s autobiographics emerge, nonetheless, in the intersection between ethnographic work and the material experience provided by the autobiographical account. Nena's way of arranging and interpreting ethnographic and historical data within the boundaries of personal relationships and experiences releases a new subject position based on feminist subjectivities and interconnectivity, a process of healing that is achieved through the act of listening to others (Ahmed 2014, 200-1). In *Cabañuelas*, Cantú (2019a) inaugurates a new set of cultural relations appointed as *transfronterizo* experience, evincing the "intersection of time and space and the development of cultural artifacts that help communities live and hope" (107). Thus, the movable nature of border epistemology is performed in Cantú's novel by placing the

[17] The novel follows Nena as a grown-up woman who is awarded a scholarship to do research in Spain. The opportunity allows her to find connections between Spanish *fiestas* and South Texas' festivities.

Chicana subjectivity in a location fraught with colonial memory and contested power relations. By being placed in between Indian and Spanish roots, Nena cannot completely detach herself from the land of colonizers nor from her *Tejana-ness*. Her love for her homeland is key to understanding Nena's *mestiza* and crisscrossed position as an ethnographer and as an autobiographical subject since her self-consciousness is early ascribed to her national identity: "[s]he is one with the land… not just visceral but with conciencia, with full consciousness … Her south Texas home resides in her as she resides in it" (3). This sense of belonging is based on contradictions, for culture is presented as both home and incarceration, meaning "a culture that protects and shelters" but also "circumscribes and limits" (5). The process of Nena's identity formation is, at one time, committed with her cultural background as *Tejana* and as historically colonized, and, at another, not willing to resist cultural integration. Thus far, it is her promise to come back to her family and borderlands which reveals a pondering about vulnerability and cultural resistance in the face of historical blending and oblivion.

Nena impersonates a woman autobiographer whose main aim in Spain is "to reconnect with her past" and "to learn" (158). Her role as an ethnographer may amount to that of the autobiographer in that she records against loss and change, for she is "aware that she is witnessing a tradition that is in flux" (40). In this way, Nena embodies a silent witness "that expands the confessional 'I'" (Velasco 2016, 32), an agent of memory that looks at the present moment and transforms it into history. To consider this ethnographic role in a new light, the author's emphasis on embodied subjectivities and relatedness is noteworthy, because "[l]ike a good ethnographer, she absorbs it all, allows them [locals] to speak as she *listens*, soaking it all up and asking questions to elicit the more complete story" (2019a, 160; emphasis mine). In a similar vein to *Canícula*, historical and cultural recollection is constructed collectively and in a dialogic relationship between past and present. Thus, when she cannot find answers, Nena imagines the lives of these people as she consciously reconstructs their (hi)story, that is to say, "what is not yet visible propels the autobiographer into a textuality of invention as well as documentation" (Gilmore 1994, 27). Seen in this way, Nena does not only witness performances of cultural memory and historical tradition (Hirsch and Smith

2002, 7), but rather, she reconstructs the (hi)stories of a community upon a restoration of national and family myths. Fiction then occupies an important position within the autobiographical account, though the latter is mostly problematized due to the incorporation of factual elements, such as photographs. However, it is Nena's involvement both at a personal and professional level that highly problematizes the autobiographical. *Cabañuelas*'s autobiographics are intrinsically tied to the focalization of the point of view—historical yet fictional and personal—as well as the form in which the (hi)stories unfold as a self-reflexive technique regarding the nature of history and recollection. The autobiographical is, thus, constructed mainly by these self-conscious autobiographics. Nena becomes an embodied and vulnerable subject as she reclaims the wounds of a colonial heritage and exposes herself to the coloniality of power relations. She ultimately embodies the *mestiza*, and her body becomes the site of collision of her *transfronterizo*, border roots.

All in all, the protagonist in *Canícula* and *Cabañuelas* is situated both inside and outside the autobiographical process, thus heightening the fungible nature of cultural memory. By cultural memory I adhere to Hirsch and Smith's (2002) distinction between historical archives and those of cultural memory, the latter described as "the product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences articulated through the technologies and media that shape even as they transmit memory" (5). This idea of memorializing through personal and collective experiences resonates with this essay's argument insofar as it construes a counternarrative to hegemonic narratives or historical records, thus restoring those stories otherwise inaccessible and silenced. What is more, Hirsch and Smith (2002) articulate these acts of memory as released from traditional modes of accessing the past and self-knowledge (11), and envision the intersection of feminist theories and memory since "both presuppose that the present is defined by a past that is constructed and contested" (12). I argue, then, that the fungibility of the autobiographical body and voice in *Cabañuelas* and *Canícula* might be the result of the narrator's capability to navigate and embody the material and symbolic attachments to her borderlands in a *fronterizo* (*Canícula*), and *transfronterizo* (*Cabañuelas*) context.

## WOUNDED BODIES: *MEDITACIÓN FRONTERIZA*

In her poems and meditations, Cantú pursues the historical re-enactment of national, racial, and patriarchal violence against "women's brown bodies" (Cantú 2019b, 51). In so doing, Cantú aims at reclaiming wounds within cultural, collective memory. Quotidian violence, vulnerability, acts of resistance, and the impossibility of *becoming* are some of the many themes that populate Cantú's autobiographical writing. In a similar vein to *Cabañuelas*, Cantú's poetry has been considerably removed from the autobiographical analysis of Chicana production. It is not that her poems and meditations are articulated as part of self-narration but, I argue, the constellation of border experiences found in this compilation reasonably adheres to the cultural memory here discussed.

By means of its diverse autobiographics, *Meditación Fronteriza* initiates a process of self-restoration and border memorializing that integrates the personal and the collective while at the same time giving way to a cyclical and creative (trans)formation. These poems and meditations work as the means to fashion a materialist approach to Chicanx experience from a feminist scope (Saldívar-Hull 2000, 78). While these poems integrate the multiplicity of Chicana experiences by displaying personal and historical events, Cantú's meditations ponder over the experience of crossing the border and how it is traversed by various factors, such as destination, race, gender, class, etc. In sum, Cantú's autobiographical voice incorporates into the social, collective memory a wound that is currently active as well as traceable through the cultural and historical continuum. In giving solace to the victims and survivors of yet unresolved conflicts, Cantú's border cogitation proposes a counternarrative based on acts of remembering and resistance.[18] Configured as the focal point of colonial and postcolonial violence, the 'women's brown bodies' Cantú refers to unfold as the autobiographical subjects, amongst others, of Chicana self-representation and life narratives. These poems unveil the hegemonic structure of power relations by which the 'nonunitary sel[ves]' or

[18] This aptly illuminates what Brady terms border amnesia (2000, 174; 2002, 60), which explains how "[t]he border functions through strategic forgetting and remembering, for the border system's economy encourages a violent amnesia, erasing cultures, identities, and differences, while simultaneously producing subjectivities, differences, and cultures in terms of itself" (2002, 60).

"divergent individual[s], living in borderlines" (Lionnet 1989, 18) are displaced and excluded, and which perpetuates the centralization of power as violence. Hence, the wounded, colonized bodies that are exposed in Cantú's three works come into being as material and mnemonic bearers of asymmetrical power relations and systemic violence emerging from the geopolitical border. Drawing on the analysis of Cantú's *Meditación Fronteriza*, the following subsections explore how Cantú's autobiographics voice border wounds and denounce violence from multiple perspectives, such as spatial, political, and epistemological.

## BORDER REALITY AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Unlike other autobiographical narratives that conceal a desire for social homogenization and unity, the speaker in Cantú's poems in *Meditación Fronteriza* does not resort to Manicheism or rage, but, rather, she does recognize the fault lines of the 'becoming' scheme, that is, the social incorporation of who is considered alien to the country. Those rifts will mainly point at the impossibility of overcoming the gap imposed by the binomial formula of the Self and the Other (Lionnet 1989, 9). Hence, a convergence within identity formation is considered an impossible aspiration for the subaltern, who can scarcely attain empowerment within hegemonic power relations.[19] Not surprisingly, violence becomes inevitable as well as the constituent mechanism of the dualistic representation *I – You*, *We – They*.

By taking notice of such disparity, the struggle for becoming within Cantú's autobiographics relies on the static assumption of the self (Lionnet 1989, 16, 18) and the criminalization and capitalization of border crossings. In contrast, a new sense of self is foreshadowed as incomplete and in constant state of transition, thus using the metaphor of crossing as "constructed in opposition to the notion of silencing" (Velasco 2004, 323-24). The border is read as a performative and discursive space that shifts

[19] This impossibility is made evident in the lines, "our lips learned to shape yet another language / … and [yet] they whipped us / … lynched us / because we were not them" (Cantú 2019b, 27).

violently depending on direction, social status, and other identity markers, thus producing a series of "material and symbolic effects upon those who cross and those who are not allowed to" (Sánchez-Palencia 2021, 15; my translation). Whereas 'difference' constrains the self when it is set 'between' cultures, Braidotti (2011) points out to a "difference *within* the same culture, namely, within every self" (34; emphasis in original). To illustrate it, the speaker in the poem "Trying to Be," a woman who is reflecting upon border crossing, senses an unsettling estrangement towards her former self, the one she was before crossing the border/river (Cantú 2019b, 20-1) and which no longer 'is.' In crossing the river, mobility is performed in terms of economic transformation or transition—the 'dreamed, utopian arrival'—by which, once arrived on the other side, these crossers' status would have changed or uplifted (Brady 2000, 178). When this movement across nation states, languages and cultures occurs, self-making is affected by the subsequent instability of crossings and its social consequences. However, the speaker goes beyond the disavowal of violence and shifting social, cultural, and economic status implied in crossing the border. In other words, Cantú acknowledges power relations, dependency, and subalternity when such a transformation needs to be endorsed by others, "[w]e will be who we are / *if they let us*" (Cantú 2019b, II, 20; emphasis mine). The author figures the disposal of agency as subjected to hegemonic validation, the latter being unattainable due to asymmetrical power relations in self-making and identity politics. Therefore, the autobiographical form disrupts the politics of identity emancipation and resorts to framing the peripheral nature of the subject position.

The productiveness or unproductiveness of these border crossings in terms of self-making, hegemonic validation or identity politics is also connected with collective memory and self-restoration**.** An afterthought on the scene mentioned above would evince the idea of crossing as a performative element of identity formation since it undertakes a transformation in myriad ways. More recently, Sánchez-Palencia (2021) has explored the performative vein of the border experience as it is ascribed to corporeal practices of displacement, containment, and surveillance (15). The conceptualization of the border as a transforming site aligns with the idea posited by Brady when advancing

the non-productive status of borders as "static object[s]: wall, fence, riverbed" (2000, 174). In Brady's opinion, this stasis is opposed to the actual productiveness that emerges from cultural transference and transversal mobilities (175). It is no surprise, then, that border crossings are configured as autobiographics implying transformation, fluidity, and *mestizaje*, but also as nomadic spaces that envision the subject as well as space as "movable diversity" (Braidotti 2011, 41).[20] Thus far, self-representation becomes both self-restorative and retrospective as referring to what is lost and is object of cultural, collective longing, namely, in the poem analyzed, "*she* who remained in the river" (Cantú 2019b, 22; emphasis mine).

The autobiographics in *Meditación Fronteriza* are deeply intertwined with space and the materiality of borders, which are constantly rewritten in order to conflate the autobiographical account with social and political meaning. Indeed, autobiographics mark a location in Cantú's poems and meditations that heightens the autobiographical by "seeing and feeling space as performative and participatory, that is, by refusing a too-rigid binary between the material and the discursive" (Brady 2002, 10). It is in her meditations that Cantú revolves around her *realidad fronteriza* as it is ascribed to a collective mode of living as well as to a space of transit.[21] By means of representing diverse collectiveness, untotalizing experiences and generic dwelling, this border reality is traversed by a sense of fluidity, liminality, and heterogeneity that advances the multiple layers of border experiences so as not to prioritize one. It stands for a constituent element of body, memory, and, ultimately, the sense of self of some border inhabitants "[s]í, esta realidad nos forja y nos hace lo que somos" (Cantú 2019b, 125).[22] When locating herself by the border, the speaker in Cantú's (2019b) first meditation navigates the waters of her 'situated knowledge' by experiencing contradiction: she is neither "atrapada," nor "situada," nor "desplegada," nor "estacionada," nor "parqueada"

[20] I tentatively connect the border with nomadic consciousness not in traditional terms, but in the way Braidotti explores nomadism, that is, a form of subverting static assumptions of the self, language and nation.
[21] By 'meditations' I refer to the three last prose writings in *Meditación Fronteriza*, namely "Meditación Fronteriza I, 2000," "Meditación Fronteriza II, 2005," and "Meditación Fronteriza III, 2015" (Cantú 2019b, 125-29).
[22] "[y]es, this reality does forge us and shapes who we are" (Cantú 2019b, 125; my translation).

(125).[23] Indeed, she is neither of these things, yet aware of the substantial implication. Unable to specify her situatedness within the border, the speaker dwells in the spatial images of border reality.

Once the semiotics of space fail at being coherent with this new 'situated reality,' the material aspect of border reality is reappropriated by means of a discursive interpolation which unveils the autobiographics of border spaces and works through images of the river, the border queue, and the desert. While in *Canícula*, the river is a material delimitation between two homelands, Mexico and Texas, and crossed by a bridge (Cantú [1995] 2015, 6); the river in *Meditación Fronteriza* is a performative site of social (trans)formation. As a natural element that proves uncontainable and unfathomable, the river echoes the situated self by the border since it is "siempre y nunca el mismo" (Cantú 2019b, 125).[24] This fluidity of the natural stream speaks to a broader sense of the border as a site of constant transformation and displacement. The material landscape of a natural border is conflated with the historical and social implication of geopolitical borders. This does not only resonate with the actual, national borderlines between Mexico and US, but it introduces the discursive and performative potentiality of space within the realm of autobiographics. In its fluidity, the river is reminiscent of contemporary theories of the borders that foreshadow not the loss but the displacement and/or mobility of borders (Martins 2007, 150). Thus, by fostering such prospects, Cantú's meditation on border reality aptly aligns with nonunitary epistemologies and the weaving of third elements that break dualistic systems of representation.

Unlike unifying strands of *fronteriza* consciousness, Cantú (2019b) acknowledges the diversity and heterogeneity at work in the experience of border reality by locating herself in the material and social location of the border queue, "estoy haciendo cola para cruzar calmadamente, tranquila … y legal no como los que se arriesgan con coyotes o a

[23] An approximation to these terms in English might be: "trapped," "situated," "displayed," "stationed," "parked." The two last terms might refer to the Spanish and Spanglish forms of "parked."
[24] "always and never the same" (Cantú 2019b, 125; my translation).

solas, no como los que vuelan como pájaros sin fronteras" (125).[25] It is in the liminal and passive nature of a border queue that the border's multiple intersections are elucidated. Cantú's position within the border queue is not amnesic nor totalizing, but read as a tentative open and, in Foucault's term, heterotopian space.[26] The interstitial space is here traversed by a myriad of intersections regarding race, sexuality, gender, class, etc. In picturing the border queue as both static and mobile, with its multiplicity of directions and crossers, Cantú unfolds a space of cohabitation and intersubjectivity that questions the US synecdoche of these national borderlands (Brady 2002, 61). Cantú interacts with the formulas of (self-)representation as though she were reinscribing a diversity of bodies and experiences through spatial production. Following this, the border crosser in Cantú's meditations is located in the limen of the border queue, and in her double contemplation she is able to evenly cross to one side or the other. It is not that the border crosser is homeless or seeking shelter, but rather, she performs a 'nomadic task' regarding "transitions and passages without predetermined destinations or lost homelands" (Braidotti 2011, 60). Cantú acknowledges this border site as simultaneously containing and producing difference. Her border crossing is read and stated as legal mobility since she is not an undocumented crosser adduced by *coyotes* or on her own, neither is she a natural nomad, a bird, whose perception renders borders invisible or transparent. That is why, in *Canícula*, when recalling her family's crossings, Nena establishes the complexity of this very same spatiality in terms of belonging, "in 1948 crossing meant coming home but not quite" (Cantú [1995] 2015, 3).

Along with the border queue, another metaphorical space, the desert, is introduced as a site of transition akin to the river image. Nonetheless, the desert becomes a container of loss and residual history. Baudrillard (1988) would claim that the essence of desertic spaces emerges "from their being, in their aridity, the negative of the earth's surface and of our civilized humors" (6). Moreover, the desertification of

[25] "I am standing in a queue, awaiting to cross in calm, still … and legal unlike those who put themselves at risk with *coyotes* or alone, unlike those who fly like birds without borders" (Cantú 2019b, 125; translation and italics mine).
[26] One of the principles of 'heterotopia,' as understood by Foucault (1986), is that it is "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several places, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (25).

spaces hinders the knowledge of the past at the same time that it perpetuates it in memory and silence, "a sliding of geological strata one upon the other giving out nothing but more than fossil murmur" (ibid.). For instance, in the poem "Border Tryptic," what is left in the desert remains in the collective memory and nurtures the border landscape and its historicity. Far from spatial emptiness, the desert is fraught with material debris of border transactions and mobilities, leaving aside patriarchal expectations of land's infertility. Objects such as lost pieces of clothing—"[a] shoe, a scarf, a thimble of faith"—are left behind in a space that becomes a memorial of national and gendered violence (Cantú 2019b, I, 29). Other scholars have envisioned this space as reminiscent of an open wound (Manzanas and Benito 2011, 137) from where the collisions of national and transnational power relations emerge. In other poems in *Meditación Fronteriza*, the desert turns into a hostile place that engenders violence and forgetting. It escapes the mechanisms of containment while it serves as a site of historical violence. In a way, and following scholar Patricia Price (2013), the space of the desert becomes a 'place,' that is, "a social production" (120).[27] Thus, the desert turns into a place of "historical injury" (Ahmed 2013, 173) that points to the bodily surface that has been fractured by national and gendered violence. Rather than being exposed and eventually healed, this brutality becomes normalized, localized, thus eliciting the material strata emerging from experiences of alienation in the context of a bordered world.

Bereft of reductive and monolithic abstractions that seal notions of stasis and wasteland, the image of the desert construes an interesting place in the imagination of these Chicana narratives. The apparent no-man's land and emptiness of the desert are no longer plausible as part of a space of historical and national brutality. Indeed, Cantú does not abide by the traditional and to some extent colonial and androcentric conceptualizations of space, but, in turn, she depicts a sort of 'countercartography' which dismantles the assumptions of a normative spatial narrative, thus giving way to

[27] Price distinguishes 'space' from 'place' in that "spaces *are* and places *are reproduced*," thus eliciting the idea that "[s]pace is thus made into place through human intervention" (2013, 120; emphasis in the original).

a complete re-imagination of spatial metaphors (Brady 2002, 6). These enunciations of the border wound find their foundational rubrics in the restoration of the pain and suffering the communities within the borderlands have gone through historically. Cantú's autobioethnographical voice, in particular, projects the subjectification of the women's border experience as she explores the spatial dimensions of border transitions. On its part, the river, whose water might be for some readers an adequate image of purification and rebirth, stands for a space of potential contamination. Such idea of contamination speaks to border fungibility insofar as it is attached to both the materiality of the river as a national and historical borderline as well as to the metaphorical cogitations drawn from the diverse symbology drawn around it. The border queue, however, exposes the heterogeneous aspect of a rite of passage and the multiplicity of social strata at work in such a particular state of mobility. Finally, the desert restores a site from where the historical injuries reverberate in the cultural memory of the author and of her borderlands.

## VIOLENCE AND REMEMBRANCE

> The past is living rather than dead; the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present. (Ahmed 2014, 33)

Cantú's notion of border reality is rooted in the attempt to give historical and cultural context to border experiences by restoring and integrating communal life narratives as part of her autobiographics. In her works, the act of crossing a border, as we have seen, often involves violence and cultural assimilation. Likewise, these crossings have been conceptualized as "recognizing a set of historical narratives, of family memories, of vectors of various national fantasies that have an effect on identity and agency and on the formation of subjectivity" (Brady 2002, 52), so border crossers become privy to the many intersections of these mobilities. Indeed, for Cantú, crossing means revisiting and widening interdependence and family bonds, "cruzando de un lado a otro siempre me

lleva al pasado, a tantos cruces" (Cantú 2019b, 127),[28] although many times it equally implies venturing into dangerous places, both material and metaphorical. What is certain is that borders hold a central position in the negotiation of power relations since "[borders] never sit still, but rather shift with incredible violence" (Braidotti 2011, 31). In this vein, violence and alienation are key to understanding the arrangement of border experiences as a result of what Brady calls the abjection machine or the loss of America (Brady 2000, 172). In all, violence cannot be disentangled from the autobiographics of border reality, as it is expressed in this second meditation:

> La violencia se acuesta a dormir con la cotidianidad y se levanta tempranito. No sabemos de dónde viene ni a dónde va, pero sabemos que está siempre ahí, in our midst. En este mundo donde se encuentran muchos otros, solo los ángeles que andan desesperados y acongojados saben lo que yace en el corazón de quienes matan por matar. Y a los mismos ángeles se les cierra el mundo y no saben cómo responder. (Cantú 2019b, 127)

Violence, pain, and historical injuries are there to be found in Cantú's autobiographics, in the remembrance carried out in many of her poems. In these, a sense of fragility is ascribed to gendered and racialized bodies. The embodiment of these 'othered' subjects is done from multiple perspectives. Spectacles of violence within traditional celebrations are represented in the poems as a way of exploring the performative aspect of cultural violence. In like manner, the *fiestas* project in *Cabañuelas* explores celebrations as a performative ritual of cultural memory, whereby narratives of colonization and assimilation emerge from an interiorized set of asymmetrical power relations.

One of the primordial aspects of how this violence is denounced and brought to the front in Cantú's autobiographical writing is through the exposure of vulnerable, gendered, and racialized bodies. In the poem "She was a Bobolo Grandmother," the reader attends to colonial brutality as impressed on women's racialized bodies. After

[28] "[c]rossing from one side to the other takes me to the past, to so many crossroads" (Cantú 2019b, 127; my translation).

the display of violence and co-option that results in the rape and murder of a woman and her baby by Spanish colonizers, the Bobolo grandmother, after her daughter and grandchild have been killed, takes action by self-immolating in the "center of the town" (Cantú 2019b, 9). Whether this is conceived as a reaction to pain and suffering, it is the body of this woman that becomes the material container of violence and vulnerability at the same time that it performs an act of resistance by refusing to give in to cultural assimilation.[29] This idea of the body as performing resistance through the disclosure of its vulnerability is largely explored by Judith Butler (2016) in "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" where she reflects on the intersection of bodily performance of vulnerability and acts of resistance (15). Notwithstanding the power of bodily surfaces to demonstrate vulnerability, the acts of resistance found in Cantú's poetic recollection are those attending to historical, often obliterated, acts of cultural affirmation and defiance. So much so that the case of the Bobolo grandmother is in Cantú's poems revisited as a way of elucidating a cultural memory that goes beyond the individual body of both author and protagonist, thus staging the autobiographical technologies of feminist self-representation.

The idea that there is no such a thing as a social body (Butler 2016, 15-6) complies with Ahmed's (2014) disapproval of the appropriation of the pain of others (32-5), thus eliciting the impossibility of univocal and unidirectional remembrance. As it is demonstrated in the collective remembrance in *Canícula*, whereby many members in the family and in the community partake of the autobiographical testimony, or in the ethnographic recollection of traditional stories and myths in *Cabañuelas*, the pain that assails individual bodies does not necessarily amount to a single one but rather to a collective (process of) remembrance (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 7). Cantú's feminist modes of autobiographical representation are those concerned not only with the act of telling but also with the act of receiving, witnessing, and retelling, since "[a]n act of telling and listening, performing and watching, it is, most important, an act of retelling … And it

[29] The poem goes as follows: "The others, her own people, / wanted her to succumb, / to give in. Pretend to believe in the foreign god" (Cantú 2019b, 9).

acknowledges the unavailability of the original experience and the fragmentary and mediated nature of the reconstruction" (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 9). The speaker in Cantú's poem becomes aware of the fact that Bobolo's story complies more than an individual mourning, that is, it unveils an experience of violence, a wounded body, whose story has added up to a communal history: "No markers honor her death / and no one knows her name, / but the historian chronicled her death, / and thereby she lives" (Cantú 2019b, 10). The author subverts colonizing, patriarchal obliteration of these (her)stories by exposing, from a witness position, the vulnerability and resistance of women's racialized and colonized bodies in the intersection of history and memory. Thus far, the act of listening as well as the act of exposing the damage are part of a counternarrative of vulnerability and resistance that work towards a sense of healing and restoration (Ahmed 2014, 200), which in turn implies less of forgetting and assimilation and more of listening and remembrance.

In the poem "Living in Dangerous Times," the author exhorts readers to call for action in the face of violent events (Cantú 2019b, I, 120). Not limited to a particular time, violence is interwoven with a historical continuum, which goes back to "[b]rown bodies hanging from trees" to "Vietnam" to "Aztlán" (Cantú 2019b, I, 120). It is worth noting how this systemic and systematic violence both conforms to the 'dangerous times' and demands in turn 'dangerous measures' or new forms of resistance, thus generating a cycle of precarity and fragilities enacted by border dynamics. Again, the precarity and fragilities of individual bodies are ascribed to their contextual imbrication in time and space (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 12, 'situatedness'), thus informing Cantú's autobiographical voice with a multivocality that does not fail to diminish or unify border patrolling of difference. Far from endlessly recreating the violent moment, Cantú attempts to break this cycle of co-option through acts of resistance of her own, such as writing, remembering, or mythmaking.[30] This is not exclusive of her poems, but also achieved in her novels *Canícula* when delving into the death of her brother Tino in the

[30] Saldívar-Hull (2000) would refer to these strategies as the "mestiza political hermeneutics" (66), while Lionnet (1989) highlights "a reaffirmation of life through the emancipatory potential of writing" (21).

Vietnam War and incorporating his body through photographs, and also in *Cabañuelas* whenever the politics of cultural imperialism work towards her displacement in Spain. The border wound is exposed and inscribed, then, through the act of writing, which is considered a revolutionary one (Cantú 2015, xxvi), as it enables the author to construct and deconstruct notions of selfhood as well as "making meaning out of experience, whatever it may be" (Anzaldúa 1987, 95). Withal, Cantú resorts to writing and memory in her works as a way to enunciate what has been forgotten and to expose and break with the same mechanisms that have contributed to such violent obliteration of historical and gendered injury.

Notwithstanding this, in articulating wounds, Cantú acknowledges the power of anonymity that perpetrators and victims of violence share within mass media and collective memory. While it seems indulgent with perpetrators, this quotidian violence leads victims and survivors to oblivion or forced amnesia. In the uncertainty of statistics, anonymous faces and names, there is a promulgation of impunity, mutism, and silence:

> Who are those on the evening news?
> The maimed? The killed? Who are those
> whose faces appear in the evening news?
> Whose names I don't and do recognize. (Cantú 2019b, III, 30-3)

The daily vision of death in the news and the naturalized exposure to violence of a public that seems anesthetized are at the core of an endless cycle of violence and trauma (Brady 2000, 171, 174). The poems unravel invisible warnings that expose 'border amnesia' and social abjection resulting from the institutionalization and normalization of racial and cultural crimes. Thus far, violence becomes a daily practice, for instance, in the constant patriarchal expectations imposed on border women in *Canícula*, or in the racial misrecognition and violence enacted by feminists in the 1980s Spain, as experienced by Nena in *Cabañuelas*. Here, trauma might partake in identity politics insofar as these historical injuries are so deeply interiorized as a continuity of what Saldívar (2012) terms

the "coloniality of power" (xi).[31] To illustrate it, Cantú's poetic voice introduces an account of a man who loses his wife and who must deal with the aftermath of violent events. The last section of the poem is framed as the materialization of this apparent yet not so aimless violence:

> He moans. Sollozando.
> She. My Wife. A statistic now.
> And I? De luto. No se que hacer.
> ¿Llorar? ¿Morir de dolor?
> *I* can only remember her.
> *I* will.
> *We* will remember her. (Cantú 2019b, IV, 122; emphasis mine)

The words of the man who has just lost his wife are fused with the words of the poet, not in a symbiotic relationship but in that of a multivocal problematization of the consequences of systemic and systematic violence. Thus, *I* turns into *we*—the ultimate transition from an individual mourning to a collective one. Solace and healing are rendered collective and representative—inclusive—of all of us. No appropriation of the pain of others, no means of fetishizing the border wound, or any wound, but, once again, a healing through exposure, as Ahmed (2014) explains, "[h]ealing does not cover over, but exposes the wound to others: *the recovery is a form of exposure*. The visibility produced by recognition is actually the visibility of the ordinary and normative or the visibility of what has been concealed under the sign of truth" (200; emphasis in the original). On her part, Cantú's 'remembering' stands out as the counternarrative against statistics, media indulgence, state impunity, and violence deployed as anonymous and naturalized. Moreover, cultural memory plays its part in developing Cantú's autobiographical voice as it is intersected with feminist modes of knowledge. That is, feminist scholars within the field of memory studies heighten the intersubjectivity and

[31] Saldívar (2012) frames this idea as follows: "when the formal colonial states ended through the wars of independence and what we today call decolonization, the coloniality of power did not end," what results in the contiguity of "the coloniality of power [which] was itself essential glue in the articulation, interpellation, and integration of the interstate system within the modern and colonial word-system" (xi).

collaborative role of remembrance since cultural memory includes both the historical object that is recollected along with the interpretation of those who recollect (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 9). As part of such counternarrative to hegemonic narratives of forgetting and power, for Braidotti, as well as for Cantú, there is an urgent need for "resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self" (Braidotti 2011, 60). Inherent to the process of remembering, the poem aforementioned portends the historicization of what otherwise is made amnesic and uncertain through the lenses of patriarchal, androcentric representation. It claims border wounds and the exposure of injuries as a means to heal and restore symmetrical power relations and equity. Indeed, Cantú aptly navigates these new feminist modes of knowledge by refusing to settle in traditional and gendered autobiographical expectations since "[w]hat a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender" (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 6). Thus, autobiographical voices that congregate communal and ethnographic modalities of knowledge and produce a safe space for wounded bodies to heal are rendered indispensable in the arduous, contested effort of cultural remembrance.

## CONCLUSION

Cantú's autobiographical writing interrogates these perspectives of self-representation and cultural memory, among others. The border epistemology enacted by her Chicana autobiographical voice enables a double conceptualization of liminal subjects and spaces as vulnerable, disobedient and under surveillance as well as creative and resistant. Critical theories that have supported the border's fungibility are coeval with notions of contemporary feminist subjectivity and memory, thus fostering divergent, transgeneric, and fluid patterns of self-representation in Chicana autobiographical writing. However, what has been set out by the feminist theories this essay draws on aims at pursuing the negotiation of autobiographical and self-representation parameters in an extensive, inclusive approach. Theories such as Anzadúa's *mestiza* feminism—a feminism of mythmaking and resistance—or Braidotti's nomadism—a feminist embodiment of mobile diversity—help us appraise new modalities of self-

representation and cultural memorialization that go beyond falsely essentialist and restrictive scopes attached to women's writing. By virtue of these new modes, Cantú embarks on a transversal project regarding border stories whose enclave is rather mobile and fluid. This author's proclivity contends a new form of autobiographical writing that defies racist and gendered bigotries and emphasizes in turn a regenerative and inclusive writing of the self.

The three works here analyzed resist and depart from the phallogocentric symbol. They integrate in turn text, image, and transpositions of all autobiographical and ethnographic elements at work, thus unfolding a space beyond border amnesia, systemic violence, and colonial memory. Cantú's autobiographical mechanisms are understood as performative, that is, as autobiographics, to use Gilmore's term, and help inscribe the brutalized, wounded body at the border into history. So much so that the author revels in the fragmented, discontinuous, and personal features ascribed to women's autobiographical writing without ever finding them restrictive. Nonetheless, her narratives go beyond traditional expectations by providing new modes of memorializing with an emphasis on women's agency and cultural transmission. Her autobiographical writing does not forge, then, border's history or brutalized and colonized bodies, but it somewhat explores border wounds at the same time that it uncovers their multiple fragilities. Through her turn of the autobiographical scheme, Cantú joins a type of feminist activism that is based on collaboration, resistance, remembrance, and healing. Thus far, her stories help to transform sites of struggle and exclusion into creative spaces of resistance, memory, and collaboration.

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