

## WRITING PHOTOMEMORIES: Crossing Borders, Crossing Genres in Norma E. Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*

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This paper examines and problematizes the genre of autobiography through a reading of Norma E. Cantú's "autobioethnography," *Canícula*. I argue that her life story reflects a cross-cultural and mestiza consciousness that challenges dominant ideologies of Chicana identity. Cantú's text reveals the importance of defining oneself outside of a monolithic national identity prescribed by historiographers as she literally maps out a space and voice for Chicanas/os living in the borderlands. Her work strategically incorporates family photos and a passport that problematize further identity-subject formation, citizenship, historical objectivity, authenticity, truth-telling, and representation. I argue that these photographs or *photomemories* act as characters that participate in a type of storytelling where memories are triggered as a result of randomly picked images. Cantú's *testimonio* does not simply tell a singular life story, but rather she utilizes multiple narrative voices that reflect communal storytelling.

### Genre: Blurring Between *Fact* and *Fiction*

In her self described "autobioethnography," *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), Norma E. Cantú utilizes experimental literary techniques that convey a communal-familial history of Chicanas/os living in the borderlands. Her non-linear narrative problematizes the genres of traditional autobiography and creative non-fiction as she challenges Western notions of subject formation. In her reflection upon writing *Canícula*, Cantú

states that the process was extremely difficult as she “resurrected family and friends long gone...visited in that tiny room as I wrote and wrote” (2003, 101). Thus, as she sits at the “tiny kitchen table turned desk and write[s],” Cantú utilizes multiple voices to remember and express her own experience of living in the border towns of Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico (101). Her work not only crosses the physical borders between geographic locations, but also the multi-layered cultural borders that make up her life story. More importantly, Cantú’s work transcends our traditional ways of thinking about life stories, because her narrative is not singular, but rather connected to family memories, oral history, and photographs. Several essays on Cantú’s work suggest that discussions surrounding autobiography criticism have reached an impasse or presumptions about the genre are cliché (Adams 2001; Castillo and Cordoba 2002). Nevertheless, given Cantú’s own introductory remarks on genre classification, it is important that we examine the ways in which her work has been rigidly defined within particular contexts. Thus, before discussing the traditional defining notions of autobiography and how *Canícula* resists such categorization, I will first review how contemporary critics from multiple disciplinary backgrounds have read her work. Cantú’s autoethnography has allowed academics from a wide range of disciplines to utilize her work as a way in which to better understand the complexities of border narratives, testimonios, life stories, ethnographies, borderlands history, folklore, autobiography, and photography. In her review of Cantú’s professional and creative writing, Ellen McCracken argues that she “transcends the divisions between genres and academic fields” and “[her] varied writing evidences a creativity that erodes standard categorical borders marking genre divisions” (2001, 264). The phrases she uses to describe *Canícula* include: experimental narrative, partially fictional, ethnographic, creative, fiction, hybrid visual and verbal, post-nationalist, and postmodern (265). In addition, Jeraldine Kraver acknowledges that *Canícula*

belongs to an “increasingly genre-bending arena of life writing,” but argues that her work is much more aligned with the interdisciplinary discourse of ethnography (2005, 77). And although autobiography scholar Timothy Dow Adams calls for readings that move beyond those that attempt to define life writing, he admits that what he has “been calling an impasse has in part to do with a collective sense of embarrassment about recurring questions of genre, a subject autobiography scholars are supposed to have moved beyond, though the topic lurks behind many of our assumptions” (2001, 68). Ironically, Adams’ essay focuses primarily on an attempt to rigidly define *Canícula* by utilizing generic and confining theories of autobiography that rely on the binary notions of truth and fiction. In his article, Adams includes quotes from personal correspondences with the author, her responses to questions about *Canícula* at an American Women Writers of Color conference, and an online class discussion where Cantú responds to student questions. His reason for including her contradictory statements about the text is to prove his argument that “like all autobiographers, [Cantú] wants to have it both ways...” (66). For example, Cantú tells Adams that she describes the relationship between the photos and her narratives as “freezing memories” (66). She continues, “We remember differently from what the photo ‘freezes’ and our words often don’t quite express what we think/feel. I work with the ideas of memory and writing—but all in a cultural context of the border which itself is fleeting and fluid” (66). He notes that although she has described her work as a blurring between fact and fiction, she has also described it bluntly as a novel that is fictitious (68). And therefore, he concludes that *Canícula*, a “fictional” narrative alongside “factual” photographs is “simply autobiography, a book that like all autobiographies exists on *la frontera*, the borderland between fiction and nonfiction” (66). I argue that the conflation of her work with other conventional life stories ignores the author’s subjectivity and the real

material histories that Cantú defines as “raw truth.” Cantú is certainly not like other autobiographers nor is *Canícula* like other autobiographies.

### **Raw Truth: *Truer than True***

Although I agree that *Canícula* can certainly be read as a narrative that demonstrates a “blurring” between the literary “borders” of fact and fiction, I argue that it is more important to recognize la frontera as the specific geographical space of the U.S/Texas-Mexico “borderlands.” This locale is underscored by Cantú’s inclusion of a map at the beginning of her work—so as not to forget the actual geopolitical space referenced in her narrative that spans between Monterrey, Mexico, Laredo, Texas, Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, and San Antonio, Texas. In her move to include a hand-drawn map at the beginning of her work, Cantú disrupts the historical role of cartography that sought to colonize and violently deterritorialize entire communities. The demarcation of space through mapping that serves to establish restrictive borders and boundaries is challenged by Cantú who (re)claims, (re)writes, and (re)maps the stories/histories of her family and community.

I contend that the raw truth Cantú refers to in her introduction is perhaps the most significant characterization of her narrative. Recalling the words of Pat Mora, Cantú states, “Life en la frontera is raw truth, and stories of such life, fictitious as they may be, are even truer than true” (xi). The basis of her story after all, is the life story of a young woman coming of age in the border town community of Laredo, Texas, and her stories are grounded in these real material histories and experiences: from working in the cotton fields, to multiple border crossings, to memories of her family’s forced deportation. The voices of tias/os, abuelas/os, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, primas/os, teachers and friends are all present in the text. The raw truth in *Canícula* aights official histories and the stories told through these various

voices, lenses, and *photomemories* write Cantú's community back into history as subjects become agents of their own borderlands historical narrative. I do not mean to suggest that *Canícula* is representative of a universal borderlands experience, but rather, as she aptly titles her book, a "snapshot" of the many layered stories and memories told and yet to be told. And unlike conventional autobiographies, Cantú's narrative is not linear, but rather transcends traditional autobiographical norms that incorporate a singular life story.<sup>1</sup> As stated in her prologue, "The stories of her girlhood in that land in-between, la frontera, are shared; her story and the stories of the people who lived that life with her is one" (2). This notion of a collective borderlands history echoes Gloria E. Anzaldúa's concept of *autohistoria*, where "Chicanas and women of color write not only about abstract ideas but also bring in their personal history as well as the history of their community" (1995, 242). In addition, Anzaldúa's reflections on writing *Borderlands/La Frontera* can be applied to readings of *Canícula* where Cantú also "problematic[s] the relationship between reader, writer, and text—specifically the reader's role in giving meaning to the text" (2009, 190). In my experience of teaching *Canícula*, I have been witness to those moments in the text where students have truly identified with the protagonist and the characters as they too are immersed in the everyday lived experiences of these multiple-voices that emerge from the borderlands. According to Anzaldúa, the reader who brings her or his own experiences to the text becomes a co-author. And, "The text is not a fixed text;" as readers and critics we will read these works through different perspectives depending on our continually shifting locations and spaces (2009, 190). And in the spirit of this shifting, it should be noted that although Anzaldúa "speaks of this same terrain" Cantú reminds us that, "her words are hers; they are not mine, not ours, not those of everyone living along the border. However similar experiences may be, they are not the same,

for the frontera is as varied as the geography from Matamoros/Brownsville to Tijuana/San Ysidro, and the people that inhabit this wrinkle in space are as varied as the indigenous peoples that first crossed it centuries ago and the peoples who continue to traverse it today” (“Living on the Border”).

### **Genre: Autbioethnography**

*Canícula* recounts the life story of the narrator Azucena or Nena and her family/community from the late 1940s to the mid 1960s in the neighboring border towns of the two Laredos. In the introduction, Cantú challenges her audience to rethink their assumptions about authenticity and truth-telling. She states:

Many of the events are completely fictional, although they may be true in a historical context. For some of these events, there are photographs; for others, the image is a collage; and in all cases, the result is entirely of my doing. So although it may appear that these stories are my family's, they are not precisely, and yet they are. (xi)

Her explanatory introduction contests the notion of autobiography as being characterized by the idea of an “autobiographical pact” or signature that creates a contract between reader and author; therefore, displacing the myth that authenticity and subsequently authority are inherent within “naming.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, she refers to her work as “truer than true” and states, “I was calling the work fictional autobiography, until a friend suggested that they [family stories] really are ethnographic and so if it must fit a genre, I guess it is fictional autbioethnography” (xi). This renaming can be considered an act of resistance itself as Cantú refuses to accept a simplified categorization of her text. This creative agency is significant and the very act of naming one's own genre in opposition to a set of confining rules reflects Cantú's multiple positions as creative writer, literary critic, folklorist, and even ethnographer. In

fact, similar to Anzaldúa's theorizing of *autohistoria*, one quickly realizes how labels, categories, and in this case, genres, confine many Chicana writers who seek new and transformational ways of telling one's story/history.

Unlike Adams who insists on classifying *Canícula* as autobiography and reinforcing the binary construction between fact and fiction, Kraver contends that *Canícula* is much closer to a postmodern ethnography where the lines between social science and art are erased (2005, 78). By claiming the role of ethnographer, Cantú assumes a certain speaking authority. She clearly appropriates the ethnographic tradition, as her knowledge of self and community become interwoven with snapshots of life on la frontera. But unlike conventional ethnographic writing, Cantú resists the negation or invisibility of the ethno-subject, or informant, as mere object of study. Unlike those social scientists or historians who might only be interested in documenting a historical truth about a particular group, Cantú's interdisciplinary work transcends the limiting methodologies used by oral historians, autobiographers, fiction writers, and poets alike. Whereas Adams outlines the inaccuracies or discrepancies of Cantú's prose description of photographs, Kraver calls these moments "inconsistencies" that speak to a much larger critique of "Western visualism that has so long dominated anthropology and that contemporary ethnography challenges" (2005, 85). Although I agree partially with Kraver's argument that *Canícula* falls within the realm of postmodern ethnography, there is still a tendency to narrowly define *Canícula* within rigid boundaries without fully considering the implications of such classifications.

### **Photomemories**

Although it is important to contextualize and understand the history of traditional, generic, and confining categories that *Canícula* may be challenging, the anxiety over "naming" *Canícula* is less of a concern for my own readings

than the stories and histories revealed through what I call *photomemories*.

Cantú problematizes traditional notions of subject formation through her use of communal storytelling and her inclusion of image-texts that also function as witnesses to events. I am borrowing the concept of “image-texts” as outlined by photography theorist, Marianne Hirsch, who describes those texts that include both narrative and family photos as, “[t]ext and image, intricately entangled in a narrative web, [and] work in collaboration to tell a complicated story of loss and longing...” (1997, 4). She borrows W.J.T. Mitchell’s concepts of “textual pictures” and “pictorial texts” to better conceptualize “hybrid texts constituted by and around family photographs” (1994, 271). More specifically, she refers to “verbally described photographs as ‘prose pictures’ and to photographs that constitute narratives as ‘visual fictions’ or ‘visual narratives’” (272). Such theories of photography provide a more complex reading of *Canícula* and complicate further subject formation, historical objectivity, authenticity, truth-telling, and representation.

Upon reflecting on the writing of *Canícula* and her inclusion of photographs, Cantú admits, “I can’t honestly say that I set out to write *Canícula* the way that I did” (2003, 100). She continues, “...I had already decided on the photographs as the objective correlative, borrowing Eliot’s term, to include visual allusions. The ideas of Barthes and Sontag kept coming to my mind—of how photography is truth, yet it is unreliable. So I went from there. The stories emerged, merged, flowed, and bled on the page” (2003, 101). The collage of memories that emerge from these photos are fragmented and nonlinear. And the events recounted appear in a seemingly arbitrary manner. In the introduction to her book, Cantú states:

It is a collage of stories gleaned from photographs randomly picked, not from a photo album chronologically arranged, but haphazardly

pulled from a box of photos where time is blurred. The story emerges from photographs...the stories mirror how we live life in our memories, with our past and present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance. (1985, xii)

This reflection echoes Anzaldúa's description of the U.S.-Mexican border as "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (1987, 3). For Cantú, the image-texts also represent a borderlands space where memories are triggered from photos and the stories told by *witnesses* are not stagnant and lifeless, but rather emerge in a "recursive dance." The reference to "our past and present" bleeding evokes bodily quality and sensibility where there exists real material histories of not only pain, but of healing and survival. And perhaps those memories too painful to fully reveal are not chosen for her final narrative, as we are given only *snapshots of a girlhood en la frontera*.

Cantú's theories of memory and photography are not unlike Hirsch who argues that when one writes about a photo it is no longer in a realm of stasis, immobility or flat death, but rather it becomes fluid and moves into a realm of life (1997, 4). Similarly, Roland Barthes describes this photographic reading practice as a result of one's personal relationship with the photographs themselves. He argues that the interrelationship between an individual and a photograph can be explained by the symbolic meaning of a photograph as defined by the *punctum* and *studium*. He defines the punctum as that which "pricks" its observer, "for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut.... A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (1981, 27). In other words, the punctum is one's shock of recognition and her personal response to the photograph's detail. On the other hand, the studium is that element of the photo that gives one the photographer's intention. "The *studium* is a kind of education (knowledge and civility,

‘politeness’) which allows me to discover the *Operator...*” (28). In the case of *Canícula*, the young narrator, Azucena, utilizes this process of recognition to tell her stories. As she recalls a photograph it is clear from her descriptions that she is in fact being “pricked” and/or her memory is being triggered about some past event. While at the same time the studium of the photos (those instances of explanation about the history and intention of the photo itself) are also narrated by Azucena as a means of providing the photographer’s intent and allowing the reader to better grasp the composition and context of the photo.

Perhaps it is fitting then that Cantú mentions Barthes’ death, and his book, *Camera Lucida*, in her prologue as she begins her narrative by describing two lovers in Madrid in 1980 that “intently go over photographs kept in an old cigar box” (1). The image of the cigar box along with the snapshots and studio photos which are yellow and brittle is a reference to the time that has elapsed. As the woman “pieces together her lover’s life” via the images, she in turn is described as “an intimate stranger from an unknown land he cannot fathom, a land as far from Spain as the unknown, between two countries—Mexico and the United States...” (1). Unlike her lover’s photos she has none to offer because they “lie an ocean away, across the Atlantic, across the United States, across Texas, at the borderland where Mexico meets Texas” (2). And it is there, in her childhood home where there are photographs of her life, stuffed in shoeboxes, “treasured and safe in that land in between that she calls la frontera, the land where her family has lived and died for generations” (2). Thus, similar to how one might randomly remember stories and relate those stories to others through the oral tradition, Cantú frames her narrative through randomly selected photos, which trigger memories. Cantú writes:

The woman Nena and her mother bring out the boxes, untie

the white-turned-yellow shoelaces, and begin going through the memories.... For days, for weeks, for months, they hold the photographs reverently, and the stories come to them. Sometimes the sisters—Dahlia, Esperanza, Azalia, Margarita, Xóchitl—join them and then leave, taking their memories of things, the younger ones not remembering stories, only images.... The father too, curious, interrupts, contributes stories. They continue, the mother filling in gaps for the daughter...of the times before and during that she has forgotten, or changed in her mind—the family, the neighbors, celebrations, events. Some they both experienced yet remember differently; they argue amiably, each sticking to her version of what happened. (2)

Cantú's description of untying memories that were once in old boxes evokes communal storytelling that includes the audience, the listeners and, in this case, the readers. She states that the younger ones do not always remember while the mother and daughter sometimes disagree on versions of the same experience. Thus, it is Nena's family, these storytellers, and their memories triggered by images that ultimately shape her story, or *autobioethnography*. Cantú states that she strategically wrote a nonlinear narrative that mirrored the act of pulling photographs out of a box.

Whereas some critics, such as Kraver, have likened her work to an “indigenous post-modern ethnography” (2005, 80) others, such as Adams, have misread her stories as unintentional fabrications. He insists on reading the images as absolute truths, and painstakingly critiques Cantú’s “inconsistencies” of the narrative descriptions that accompany the photographs. For example, in the photo of Bueli, Cantu writes: “In the photo, Bueli sits in her high-back rocking chair, her sillón where she'd rocked all of us to sleep, surrounded by

Tino, Dahlia, Esperanza, and me..." (qtd in Adams 2001, 60), but Adams notes that the photo only reveals three persons standing around Bueli rather than four. He also cites her prose description of the birthday party in the section "Dahlia Two," and points out that in the text she states there are three candles lit, although the photo depicts four (60). And in the section "May" Cantú writes: "I and Dahlia wear white organdy—recycled first communion garb. I am all long, skinny legs and arms and a flash of white teeth" (qtd in Adams, 63). Adams argues, "Although the photograph does show just such a scene, this time with an *accurate* number of people, the *factual* effect is undercut by the *fact* that the photograph is reproduced backward, as *evidenced* by the reversed date June, not May, 1954 at the bottom. It is unclear who the 'I' narrator is—no one in the picture is smiling enough to show any teeth" (my emphasis) (63). He gives several more examples of where these so-called discrepancies occur in the narrative, and therefore questions the authenticity of the narrative, but not the photos. In fact, he describes the photographs as appearing to be genuine family snapshots and thus, nonfictional. He states, "Considering the way the words contradict the images, perhaps then *Canícula* should be taken more as fiction than life writing" (64).

I argue that reinforcing this binary between truth and fiction or even life writing and fiction does not fully consider how these photographs can also be read as characters or witnesses, that only reveal a part of the story that do not claim un-problematized authenticity. Cantú creates a nonlinear photo narrative that disrupts chronological storytelling as she strategically chooses which photographs to include and where they should be inserted in the text. There are some photos that have descriptions, while there are descriptions for photos that do not exist (at least in the final published version).<sup>3</sup> In addition, what has been framed in the photos does not capture the complexity of the narrator's stories as Cantú deconstructs the myth of the ideal family as

perceived through photographs. Hirsch argues that contemporary writers “have used family photography in their work, going beyond their conventional and opaque surfaces to expose the complicated stories of familial relation...” (1997, 7). And they “have thus attempted to use the very instruments of ideology, the camera, the album, and the familial gaze, as modes of questioning, resistance, and contestation. They have interrogated not only the family itself, but its traditions of representation” (7–8). For example, Cantú’s own explanation for reversing the photo “May” was so the young protagonist would be facing the opposite direction, gazing left. The manipulation of the image is meant to also reveal stories and memories, which are not described in the narrative. The reader is then left to interpret those events and family gatherings, which are not framed or not described by the author. In fact, readers can imagine Tino just outside of the frame in the photo of Bueli, or imagine the young Azucena’s “flashing white teeth” as she smiles either before or after the photo was taken or even imagine the persons who are taking the photos: “I look straight at the camera at Mami, who’s kneeling on one knee to be at eye level with me” (1995, 6). It is up to the readers and listeners of these stories to participate in the communal storytelling as they fill in the gaps through their own interpretations. Therefore, the photos become as fluid as the narrative moving from flat death into a realm of life as Cantú gives vivid and colorful descriptions of the black and white photos: “I ride the rocking horse Buelito’s built from discarded wood planks, painted the color of the red coyotes—red as memories. My feet sandaled in brown huaraches from Nuevo Laredo with tiny green nopales and the tinier red pears...” (6); “I’m about to take a step—on my first birthday, bald, wide-eyed, and chunky, wearing a handmade pale pink satin dress Mami embroidered...” (28); “The three-year-old girl looks off camera, probably at her father who dangles a pair to keys to make her laugh, or at least smile. She does and the

photographer snaps the photo, freezes the image of the little girl wearing the yellow dress, yellow ribbon..." (53); "An awkward teen, shy and reticent, I face the camera, wearing a sleeveless, morning-glory-blue cotton blouse" (60). Whereas the photos represent a static moment captured by the photographer, the corresponding narratives articulate stories of shared histories and lived experiences. Thus, when Adams suggests that the image "Body Hair" does not "reveal anything about a junior high girl's worry about her growing physical maturity and the cultural differences between Anglo and Chicana," one can argue that the photo as a frozen moment captured was not meant to be so closely associated with an authentic representation of self, but rather it only serves to trigger a memory. Clearly, family photos can only capture a particular moment or event and should not be read as official documents that can claim any absolute truth. On the other hand the textual narrative gives the photo life, and in this case, becomes a timeless mirror, where a younger depiction of Cantú/Azucena gazes back at Cantú, the author, who recalls, remembers, and subsequently *writes* down her memories.

What is more remarkable and perhaps speaks even further to how Cantú theorizes the idea of memory and impermanence of reality is that she never had the actual photographs in front of her while writing *Canícula*. In an interview with Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Cantú states,

I wrote the text without the photographs..., so that when I went back to match the text to the photos, lo and behold they didn't match. And that was because my own memory of the photograph was different. And then I realized...this is a really clever strategy that I've come across here. (2007a, 21)

Thus, her photomemories are a way to not only make sense of events and

experiences, but also function as witnesses and storytellers. As Cantú states, “Photography is not just the structural component for the text, it is a complementary text whereby the reader can ‘read’ in a postmodern fashion much more than the words tell” (2003, 105). As a result of publishing negotiations, Cantú was unable to include all the black and white photos she had anticipated. Therefore, there are narrative descriptions of photos that are not actually published in the text. In addition, there is one more layer of photomemories that can be examined in *Canícula*. That is, the figure of the street photographer who appears frequently throughout the work. What are we to make of these outsiders randomly snapping photos of Nena’s family? How is the ethnographic part of Cantú’s work embodied in this documentation that takes the form of a photographer?

We’re crossing the bridge sometime before the flood when the street photographer snaps the picture. (7)

Papi’s walking, holding me. I sit up high above the street in his arms. A street photographer captures us in a crowd. He, lean and thin wearing his good hat and dress clothes, a freshly starched shirt; and I, chubby-cheeked wearing a red hand-knitted hat and sweater bundled up for winter. So comforting, so secure to be held aloft and feel the security, the strength of his arms. So many times he held me. For some of these there are no photographs. (37)

Mami and Mase, sit on a green wrought-iron bench in the plaza in Nuevo Laredo. They relish the opportunity to sit, talk, laugh as the street photographer jokes with them, thinking them sweethearts. Their sisters Nicha and Lupe have walked away, not wanting to be photographed. (49)

She [Tia Piedad] became a figure of mythic proportions, so when I saw the photograph of her and Luz, captured by a street photographer, walking arm in arm on the street across from the Zócalo, I was surprised that she was no taller than Luz, even in her platform shoes. (85)

The rather obscure figure of the street photographer brings to mind the role of the image-maker, the person, usually outsider, capturing or documenting an event or individual. If we interpret this character within the context of ethnography or the field of modern anthropology, s/he might be defined as a person who utilizes the camera as a research tool to record a fieldworker's observations.<sup>4</sup> But Cantú's street photographer moves beyond this rigid definition, because s/he is not simply attempting to capture primitive images, or exoticize a culture to which s/he does not belong, but rather, Cantú constructs an insider-ethnographer that disrupts and re-imagines the role of the ethno-photographer and the unequal power relations between subject-object. When asked about the figure of the street photographer, Cantú replies that it reminds her of how we now have to always be aware that there are cameras everywhere recording and acting as surveillance tools in our everyday lives. The reality is that we are unaware of the cameras that are capturing our images (2010a). So the question becomes who is doing the gazing and what do these images freeze, that is, memories, histories, stories, events, and for what purpose? If photos are meant to capture a certain truth and convey veracity then Cantú's non-published "imagined" photos become central to her project to rewrite her community into history; claiming an authoritative voice that refuses to be captured or photographed by an outsider whose only purpose is to acquire data for scientific or academic purposes. On the contrary, Cantú consciously manipulates photographs and the role of the ethno-photographer to disrupt notions of absolute truths as it relates to image-

texts. She also underscores the importance of images as indicators of one's actual existence and representative of her community; since they are "silent witnesses of her life, her history" (2).

### **Critical Witnessing: Engaging with Trauma**

Beyond those photos published and non-published, Cantú also includes descriptions of photos that never existed and which she *imagines* as she writes her photomemories. These imagined photos serve to counter the so-called permanence of a published image that captures a moment or event. Upon reflecting on this narrative strategy, Cantú states:

There were many pieces that I have, even in the book, that don't have a photograph. The first one, "On a hot August day, when all the Chicharros ran..." I asked my mom, how come there weren't any photographs? She said, "We were working. We weren't posing for photographs." And yet, in my mind there is a photo and that photo is an image of the 1930s, Dorthea Lange and those photographers who photographed the field workers. (2007a, 23)

Cantú's reference to documentary photographer Lange as a point of departure for her own imaginings of migrant workers complicates further one's ability to tell their own story, to testify, to give voice, and to ultimately write oneself and one's community back into history. A discussion of the power relations between Lange and her subjects as well as the significance of Lange's photos within the context of photojournalism is beyond the scope of this essay, but speaks to the medium of photography as a way to document and record life stories. Although in some cases, there is an absence of photos of Cantú's community and family, thus rendering them invisible in the national imaginary, she strategically gives detailed descriptions of photos that she has

imaginatively (re)created in her narrative. Such a move privileges the oral tradition, where communal stories are constantly changing and shifting, and cannot be confined by the genre of autobiography or even a photograph that is fixed and frozen in time. Therefore, Cantú's use of Lange's photographs to speak about her own experiences is a way in which to speak about a collective experience of migrant farmworkers, making them visible through narrative and photomemories. In an interview with Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, Cantú further discusses this notion of fluidity and her sense of urgency to remember and tell the stories in order to keep the culture alive. She states "it also makes you think about why people think it [culture] is disappearing, why things have changed the way they have, why we must remember, and why we must keep it alive. Culture is a very fluid thing; it changes all the time. There is not one culture" (2009, 119).

In her discussions of critical witnessing, Tiffany Ana López offers us another theoretical lens with which to read the narrative voice of Azucena. In the context of children's literature, López describes critical witnessing as "the process of being so moved or struck by experience of encountering a text as to embrace a specific course of action avowedly intended to forge a path toward change" (2009, 205). In other words, the author of personal stories of survival and healing invites "young readers into a shared circle of critical witnessing..." (205). The reader is forced to move beyond the simple act of "bearing witness," as the narrative "actively insists that an event is pivotal and in need of expanded context and critical address" (206). López's theories and readings of Latina/o children's literature are relevant to Cantú's work as the young narrator, Azucena, comes of age and consciousness in the borderlands, a space where she not only remembers the celebrations of birthdays, quinceañeras, first communions, graduations, and marriages, but of "women sharing life, tending to each other. Supporting each other. Teaching each other to

mother, to survive, to understand, to live" (36). But she also remembers those moments of violence and cultural trauma, such as the forced deportation of her family (5, 110), the death of her brother Tino (14–15, 49, 117), the flood (9–10), the fires (97–100), the powerful mayors and judges who "abuse, rape, embarrass, harass, taunt, demean women" (31).

For example in "Las Piscas," Cantú, as a critical witness, describes Azucena at the age of nine working in the cotton fields with her parents. She describes the environment where the workers are nauseated by pesticides, bitten by insects, and burned by the sun.

On a hot, hot, hot August day, the chicharras' drone forces me to the present; they madly hum incessantly, insistently. A long row of cotton to be picked, capullos de algodón, nothing moves, the dust has settled on the green leaves and on my skin. El olor a sudor, mi sudor, heavy odor of sweat I wear with the blue plaid flannel shirt. Can't get away from it. As comforting as in its intimacy as Mami's sweet scent of talcum powder and sweat. Sun so bright it hurts my eyes, barely look at it and I see bright red spots. Sweat runs in rivulets along my back. The acrid smell of the pesticides nauseates, sticks to the cushy, dusty white fruit, glassy fibers in my fingers as I pull as carefully as when I pick a burr off my socks. I hold and stash tiny white filaments soft as *barbas de chivo* weed we harvest from Doña Carmen's fence when playing comadritas. Slowly, I fill the saca, custom made by Mami to fit a nine-year-old shoulder. It'll bring fifty cents or even maybe a dollar. (3)

Although no documentary photos exist, the harsh working conditions vividly told through a child's voice are enough to evoke strong emotions and perhaps

a visceral reaction from the readers who also become critical witnesses. And unlike a conventional ethnography that might erase the true or “raw” voice of the ethno-subject, Cantú’s descriptions reveal and unearth what could never be told by an outsider, one unfamiliar with this material history and lived experience. Through the voice of Nena, Cantú gives authorial agency to field laborers and humanizes a community so often silenced. The photographs, such as those taken by Lange, are unnecessary as the testimonio serves to authenticate personal and communal experiences. Thus, storytelling becomes a narrative of survival, of remembering, of not forgetting, as she creates a sense of presence over historical absence.

“Las Piscas,” can also be read as a collective history of violence against the bodies of farmworkers. And although Cantú remembers the comforting intimacy of her mother’s “sweet scent of talcum powder and sweat,” she also remembers the “[s]trange insects--frailesillos, chinches, garrapatas, hormigas—some or all of these pests—ticks, fleas, tiny spiders the color of sand—some or all of these bichos—find their way to exposed ankles, arms, necks and suck lifeblood, leaving welts, ronchas—red and itchy—and even pus-filled ampulas that burst and burn with the sun” (3). Although not all readers will be familiar with such experiences, the story of Nena, is at once a reminder of the physical and emotional violence that not only shapes her life, but the collective lives of other “stiff bodies posed for life” (3). López argues that these types of narratives provide “window[s] into the world of Latina/o children and the various and complex ways they are forced to grapple with situations and histories of violence” (2009, 206–207).

Other moments in the narrative where this “grappling with trauma” is apparent are in the vignettes that recall Tino’s death (14–15, 117). Cantú recalls that it took her over thirty years to write about this experience, which

speaks not only to the pain of remembering, but also the burden of violence and trauma that can render one voiceless about particular events (2010b).

In the vignette “Tino,” readers are introduced to a playful young boy in a photograph who holds “his hand out as if pointing a gun or a rifle,” and “[o]nly ten years later, 1968, he is a soldier, and it’s not a game” (14). Cantú remembers tíos, tías, neighbors, and family from Mexico gather “around a flag-draped coffin. Tino’s come home from Vietnam. My Brother. The sound of the trumpet caresses our hearts and Mami’s gentle sobbing sways in the cool wind of March” (14). In the next vignette, “Perpetuo Socorro,” the somber mood surrounding Tino’s funeral intensifies as readers are immersed into her father’s internal conflict with religion as he struggles with the death of his son. This vignette recalls how Tino’s illness at the age of three almost took his life, but her father, a devout Catholic, cries, prays, and weeps in front of the image of Nuestra Senora del Perpetuo Socorro as he “hits the wall with his fists” and “Tino survives the illness” (15). “In 1968, in his pain, tears running down his face, he’ll talk to the image” which he has framed in gold leaf and built a repisita, “For this, you spared my son,’ he’ll take the image down from its place on the wall, cannot bear to see it, to be reminded” (15).

After reading several vignettes, including “Tino,” during a class visit, one student asked about the vignette, “Perpetuo Socorro,” because it had evoked such strong emotions for him personally (2010b). Cantú replied that this was exactly the reason why she chose not to read this excerpt; because she wasn’t sure if she could get through it. She noted that although *Canícula* tends to highlight the relationships between women, and celebrate motherhood, she felt it was important to focus on her father’s pain that was just as real as her mother’s, but different (2010b). She mentions that her father felt betrayed by God, by religion, and this pain and conflict is shown through his actions as he takes the image down from the wall leaving a “rectangle of nothing...

hits...the mesquite tree in the backyard with his head sixteen years later like a wounded animal, mourning, in pain, that morning when Tino's death came to the door" (15). In her reflection on writing this piece, Cantú states that she overcame "affective interference," an emotional block that had kept her from writing about this memory (2010b). One can only imagine the author's emotional pain and sadness while writing "Nun's Habit," where she reveals, "Papi's guilt must've been tremendous. Must be why he blamed me. I, the oldest, the one who spoke English, why didn't I talk to my brother? He usually listened to me. I could've told him not to enlist, to wait till he finished high school, at least (117). As for the process of writing about these memories, Cantú states, "Tino" is "one of the shortest pieces" and "took hours, if not days, of sifting through almost twenty pages of prose to arrive at the published piece" (2003, 105). "The physical act of writing has always been for me a mixed blessing.... Real and physical pain. Of course, there is also the emotional toil.... But then, it's such a joy, this writing, this putting down on paper feelings, observations, and thoughts and making sense of reality. Writing the pain, the anger, the joy, there's nothing comparable" (2003, 103). Thus, the writing becomes a form of healing and survival as these lived experiences evoke collective memories where the reader, as critical witness, cannot escape their own memories that might emerge after reading these vignettes.

#### **Ethnography, Oral History, Testimonio: "Telling to Live"**

In her analysis of *Canícula*, Kraver suggests that Cantú is not only "participant-observer," but also a "participant-narrator" who defies classical ethnography and "deconstructs the subjective/objective balance" (2005, 85). She also argues that *Canícula* "integrates oral tradition, material culture, family life, and rituals that are central to the work of ethnographers and folklorists" (86). Similarly, in their discussion of collective remembering,

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, “We move in and out of various communities of memory—religious, racial, ethnic, familial.” They state, “[L]ife narrators incorporate multiple ways of accessing memory, multiple systems of remembering, into their narratives. Some of these sources are personal (dreams, family albums, photos, objects, family stories, genealogy). Some are public (documents, historical events, collective rituals)” (2001, 20). Therefore, Cantú’s inclusion of photographs and her passport can be compared to the methodologies used by oral historians who utilize interviews, photographs, recordings, and primary documents in order to (re)write histories. According to Gary Okihiro, oral historians counter the notion of absolute truths by arguing that “[o]ral history is not only a tool or method for recovering history; it also is a theory of history which maintains that the common folk and the dispossessed have a history and that this history must be written” (1981, 42–43). In the case of *Canícula*, Cantú takes on multiple roles as oral historian, interpreter, recorder, and storyteller to (re)write her community into history.

Similarly, in her discussion of Chicana oral narratives, Emma Pérez argues since minimal history of racial minorities and even more so of women exists, oral narratives provide an alternative way to reconstruct Chicana history (1994, 8). She critiques the discipline of history for its exclusion of Chicanas and argues: “Like literary critics I also do not imagine documents speak for themselves. As interpreters of historical documents, whether written or oral, we as researchers, writers, and scholars underscore our social, political and cultural predilections, always inflicting present-mindedness, or else we would be living in a vacuum” (7). This emphasis on interpretational bias of historical documents is significant, especially for Pérez, who claims that her work on Chicana history takes her outside the “accredited realm of historiography” as it is “dubbed a-historical” along with cultural studies, women’s studies,

and ethnic studies (1999, xiii). Therefore, Pérez argues that we can find no “pure, authentic, original history,” but rather “only stories—many stories” (1999, xv). Thus, similar to the ways in which Kraver defines *Canícula* as an ethnography, we can also read *Canícula* as an oral history where the narrator and photographs serve as witnesses to historical snapshots. Such a reading counters the argument made by some that autobiographies, testimonios, oral histories, and life stories somehow do not constitute truth-telling or credible sources of history. Instead, *Canícula* should be read as part of a story that contributes to the expansive history of Chicanas/os and more specifically experiences of communities on the borderlands of Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. In response to a question that characterized the main protagonist, Azucena, as a camera recording, that is, someone who is preserving a dying and changing culture, Cantú replied that she definitely had a desire to “preserve, chronicle, testify to” (2009, 119). She states: “A lot of it is testimonio in one way or another, but also, to investigate and theorize through a literary lens.... In *Canícula* it has to do with the border reality, but it also has to do with memory and how memory works in a tenuous fashion. We don’t always remember things the way we ‘know’ they happened or the way they actually happened” (2009, 119). Therefore, Cantú’s work can be situated within the genre of testimonio, because her narrative does not claim to be a strictly objective account of events witnessed firsthand, but rather stories (re)told and (re)constructed from memory. According to John Beverley, testimonio is “told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts” (1993, 70). Beverley also characterizes testimonio as a narrative that emphasizes oral discourse where the “single speaking subject” portrays her own experience in the name of “a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle” (83). Cantú’s self reflection on *Canicula* underscores

that her narrative is not a conventional autobiography, but rather a testimonio, where at times she plays the role of both storyteller and recorder.

Multi-genre and interdisciplinary works that defy categorization should never be read as purely fiction, lies, or inconsistencies as some critics of testimonios have suggested. For example, Adams insists on an absolute categorization of Cantú's work and even likens *Canícula* to Rigoberta Menchú's testimony, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984). Although Adams is attempting to praise Cantú's work for not purposefully telling lies, by making such a comparison he inadvertently results in silencing both authors as well as the significance of their storytelling within a larger context. His reference to Menchú comes at the end of his article without serious consideration of the testimonio genre or the extensive discussions and studies of Menchú's work.<sup>5</sup> He states, "Unlike such celebrated cases as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*...in which both genre and ethics were involved, in the case of *Canícula* questions about genre are not linked to an ethical dimension. Norma Cantú is not trying to trick anyone, not pretending to be someone she is not, not making false or ambiguous claims" (2001, 70). This sweeping generalization and accusation of lying underscore not only the anxiety of categorizing these works, but also the insistence on hyper-authenticity. Such a reading is simplistic and reinforces the truth/fiction binary that continues to silence the multiple voices and histories within both works. In fact, this interpretation maintains the notion of the "autobiographical pact" as outlined by Phillip Lejeune who claims that the title page or the author's signature is what distinguishes an autobiographical novel from an autobiography and the signed "document" indicates a truthful representation of an actual person (1989, 3–30). Leigh Gilmore and others have critiqued this model, but acknowledge that Lejeune's argument, that is, the idea of the title page functioning as a signed document and therefore "attesting to the historically

truthful representation of the cohesive self of an actual person,” has inevitably “maintain[ed] a powerful hold on discussions of meaning in autobiography...” (1994, 76). The pressing need for some critics to authenticate the native voice is nothing new and serves as a reminder that life stories and autobiographies by women of color are perhaps the most significant/real representations of self that become the authoritative voice of not only their lived experiences but of their communities.

The authoritative voice of *Canícula* is located in the testimonio, as well as those moments characterized by her ethnography, where the collective voices of parents, grandparents, aunts, brothers, sisters, and neighbors are provided a space for alternative histories and stories to be told. The complexity of such narratives and identities is articulated further by the Latina Feminist Group in their anthology *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (2001). Although many, including Cantú, consider themselves professional testimonadoras (producers of testimonios), including oral historians and ethnographers, they also argue for the “importance of *testimonio* as a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (Latina Feminist Group, 2). I argue that *Canícula* is also written within this tradition where the producer of knowledge or testimonio is intricately and intimately connected to the collective stories within the autobioethnography. Thus, we can read *Canícula* as embodying characteristics of the genre outlined by the Latina Feminist Group, as Cantú’s work allows her to “speak with humor, beauty, spirituality, and sensuality” as well as engage with shared experiences of silence, trauma, and sadness (15). It should be noted that the Latina Feminist Group acknowledges that their experiences should not be conflated with those women in Latin America<sup>6</sup> with whom this genre has come to be identified. Instead, they are reconstructing the genre and acknowledging the complexity of testimonio as a process and

that those “*papalitos guardados*” are continuing the tradition of “collective bearing witness” and “making our histories visible” (20).

***En La Frontera: Publishing in Spanglish***

Similar to Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s articulation of *mestizaje*, Cantú also embodies a mestiza consciousness in her life and writing. Both Anzaldúa and Cantú have theorized and located their identities in that in-between space, nepantla, a Nahuatl concept for the constantly changing space that is not confined by rigid boundaries. This space of ambiguity is a crossroads of cultures, voices, languages, races, and genders. And most importantly, mestiza consciousness calls for the acceptance of contradictions and uncategorizable multiplicities. According to Anzaldúa the new mestiza

...can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior.... Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. *La mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations... from (a Western mode), to divergent thinking...toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (1987, 79)

Similarly, Cantú states that the borderlands are a “collusion of a myriad of cultures, not just Mexican and U.S.” and this is what makes it “a culture forever in transition, changing visibly from year to year” (“Living on the Border,” n.p.). For both writers, language is of considerable importance when discussing identity and borderlands culture. Similar to Anzaldúa’s assertion that her “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity” (1987, 81), Cantú also affirms the significance of Spanish as a language that not only informs her own identity, but that of her community and the borderlands region.

Therefore, when publishers asked Cantú to translate the Spanish to English or even change the title of her book, she refused to do so. Although some compromises were made in terms of length and the number of photographs included, Cantú insisted on maintaining the “‘border talk’ feel so that a monolingual English speaker could understand, so that a Spanish speaker, would have a little harder time, but could still get it” (2007a, 25). She states that her ability to see the English as if it were Spanish allowed her the ability to write a narrative that is not literally translated (2007a, 26). She felt so strongly about the integrity of the language used in the text that she decided to translate *Canícula* herself, from Spanglish to English and then back to Spanish, because she was unable to find a translator who “honored the sentiment of the border...” (2009, 123).

In many ways, Cantú’s refusal to give up the title of her book or her use of Spanglish can be seen as an act of resistance against a publishing industry that too often erases, changes, or in some cases refuses to publish the voices of characters who do not necessarily represent a mainstream audience. She recalls that publishers also wanted her to use a glossary in the English edition, but Cantú was adamant that not only the title of her work remain unedited, but also that the Tejano Spanish/Spanglish was not edited in order to simply accommodate a particular reader (2010a). Ironically, for the Spanish edition that was published by Houghton Mifflin in their textbook series, Cantú was also asked to include a glossary for translations of the Tejano Spanish to standard Castillian Spanish as well as rewrite or translate some phrases and words (2010a). Most writers are aware that such compromises are inevitable, but for Cantú it was important that her use of Tejano Spanish/Spanglish and ultimately her narrative voice not be erased. She recalls that the title was especially significant since she wrote the book during “Canícula,” referring to the “dog days,” the hottest, most sultry days of summer from July 12–August

13. And although the publishers did not know what the word meant she was determined that it not be edited out, because of the “magical and very special way” that she came to the title (2007a, 26).

I was asleep one morning—during this very intense writing period you know, I take four or five-hour naps, a madrugada—and I wake up you know, six, seven, eight in the morning. And I was coming out of sleep and the word was right there, *Cantúcula*, and I knew that’s it, that’s the title, that’s what it’s going to be. So I couldn’t let them take that away from me, and it works. I would think, on many levels. It says what I want it to say, about the place, the people, the work, the little girl growing up, that in-between stage. It just works on all those levels. (2007a, 26)

For Cantú, the words and descriptions she chooses to use are integral to her narrative. And clearly, Azucena’s identity and that of her family and community are intricately linked to the language they are speaking and the language with which Cantú is writing. It is perhaps, as Anzaldúa argues, that for many people living in-between, in the borderlands, that a new language is created. “A language which they can connect their identity to one capable of communicating the realties and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both (1987, 55).

### **Crossing Borders: Identity and Citizenship**

Cantú’s experience of living on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and the many crossings that occur plays an integral part in shaping her identity. For example, in the vignette “Crossings,” Cantú tells the stories of her parents and grandmother who would regularly cross the border on foot. In 1935, her grandparents had to move from San Antonio back to Mexico as a result of

the deportation of Mexican-Americans during the 1930s. Her grandmother's memory of the forced deportation is ironically triggered by the "present" (1948) move from one Laredo to the other. "For Bueli the move brought back memories, mental photographs gone now, except for the stories she told; how in 1935 she and Maurilio, my Texas-born grandfather, and their two young daughters packed all their belongings and drove their pickup truck down from San Antonio" (5). This passage emphasizes the importance of memory and oral history, a passing along of experiences from one generation to the next as pieces of history are woven into a larger narrative. Bueli tells how "[t]hey felt lucky" because, "most deportees left with nothing but the clothes on their back—sent in packed trains to the border on the way to Mexico, even those who were U.S. citizens" (5).<sup>7</sup> Cantú writes her displaced family and community back into history as she recalls the history of deportation through storytelling.

Cantú's grandmother recalls also that crossing from one Laredo to the next meant losing everything including "Buelito's pride and joy, a black Ford pickup truck...to the corrupt customs officials at the border" (5). It is not until much later in the text that this particular memory is recalled again by Cantú's aunt Nicha whose memory is triggered by a photo of her grandfather standing by his Ford truck.

I pick up another photo—Buelito as a young man his right foot on one end of the running board of the Ford and a teddy bear on the other end. "How Papá loved his car!" Tia exclaims. "He was so proud of his truck, too. I think that's what hurt him most when we left San Antonio; he sold the green car and bought a black pickup truck so we could bring all our furniture, everything back to Mexico. I don't think he minded losing everything as much as he minded losing the truck." And I sense she's near tears again. (110)

This image-text evokes not only nostalgia, but also a material reality, as the truck ironically becomes the mode of transportation in which her family is forced to leave the United States. The automobile in the 1920s became a symbol of the technological change and progress that was occurring. Henry Ford was largely responsible for the increased factory productivity and assembly lines that made the automobile more affordable for the average American. Thus, the pride of Cantú's grandfather can be read as a pride in becoming a self-made American man, whose Ford truck came to signify a certain status in society. According to Cantú, “[A]nytime you subconsciously anchor an image in a brand you're already making a statement about how imbedded culturally, these symbols and icons and brandnames are in our world” (2010a). As they were forcibly deported, her family's aspirations for social mobility and cultural capital that were tied to this brand were abruptly stolen and unavailable, as was their U.S. citizenship. This was the case with many Mexican American families during this historical period: Their civil and human rights were violated as they were deemed non-citizens. Therefore, for Cantú's grandmother, crossing back in 1948 “meant coming home, but not quite” (5). In her reading of this scene, Mary Pat Brady likens these Depression-era deportations to an informal system of apartheid labor that “emblematiz[ed] the state's and capital's need to control who could cross, when and how, and who could be ‘sent back’ and why, the U.S.-Mexico border served (and serves) not simply to highlight inclusion and exclusion but also to regulate the uneven development of wealth and labor (2002, 71). Thus, Brady argues, through her stories of crossings Cantú “deploys a local history” and makes present what has systematically been absent and “largely unrecorded in canonical U.S. histories” (71).

These border crossings, both literally and figuratively, continue with the vignette “Mexican Citizen,” where Cantú addresses the issue of citizenship

in relation to the borderlands. Cantú has included two official documents in this section, that is, two separate affiliation papers with her one-year-old and sixteen-year-old photos attached to each. The first is a document declaring the “Media Filiacion” of Azucena Cantú who is white with brown eyes and black hair, born in Nuevo Laredo. Cantú strategically alters the passport by pasting the signature “Azucena Cantú” over the original one “Norma Cantú” (21–22). This narrative strategy complicates further the autobiographical “pact” between reader and author. Gilmore notes that one way to identify the individual is through the name itself where the question of who the autobiographer is, “...can be answered by a simple cross-check and verification of the author’s name against the main character identified in the text. If the names are the same, you have autobiography” (1994, 65). Thus, the name functions as a referential anchor or an identifier of the person. By including the altered passport in her narrative, Cantú challenges questions of authorial agency, authenticity, and the contractual agreement. In addition, she challenges preconceived notions of citizenship that are determined by the nation-state. By altering her name on the affiliation papers that are supposed to be representative of one’s official identity, Cantú challenges the presumed transparencies that are associated with fixed identities, especially as they relate to one’s status as a citizen.

In the photo stapled to my official U.S. immigration papers, I am a one-year-old baldy, but the eyes are the same that stare back at me at thirteen when I look in the mirror and ask “Who am I?”...The eyes are the same as the ones on another photo where I am twelve—this one stapled to a document that claims I am a Mexican citizen so I can travel with Mamagrande into Mexico without my parents. (21)

Thus, through a renaming and manipulating of official documents, Cantú

reclaims the power to identify oneself. As unaltered official papers, these documents originally represented how others have identified her nationality and ultimately gave her permission to cross the border as a dual citizen. But for Cantú, the use of these documents within her story becomes a metaphor of her own shifting identity on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. It is interesting to note how the official immigration papers that allow her to travel to the United States list her color as *blanco* (white), whereas the document that allows her to travel back to Mexico without her parents describes her color as *morena*, or brown and dark-complexioned (21–22). Cantú states that she always points this out to her audience during readings or during conversations about her book “because it really is a constructed identity, it’s a government official who fills out the form, who decides what you are. And it’s called Mexican citizen because that’s that ambiguity of this young girl who is not Mexican, because she’s not in Mexico and doesn’t have the cultural capital of the Mexican cousins, yet she *is* officially a Mexican citizen in that document” (2010a). These documents are then juxtaposed with the narrative that describes Azucena’s coming of age as she straddles two countries. “But now I’m off to Monterrey with Mamagrande, to her house on Washington Street across from the Alameda. Where my cousins will tease me and call me *pocha* and make me homesick for my U.S. world full of TV—Ed Sullivan and Lucy and Dinah Shore and Lawrence Welk...” (22).<sup>8</sup> Thus, she not only describes the difficulty of her literally traveling across the border, but she also reveals her lived experience as a young girl living betwixt and between cultures. The seemingly innocent remarks made by her cousins evoke feelings of alienation that are felt, not only by Azucena, but also resonate with the experiences of many Chicanas/os living on the borderlands.

Although Cantú’s inclusion of her old passport further complicates and counters imposed definitions of citizenship, it also serves as a reminder of the

ways in which we are forced to internalize state-sanctioned identities. Cantú's narrative might resist such sanctions, but the reality is that people of color must still fear the constant threat of the hegemony that is embodied in the militarization of the borderlands. Cantú remembers that even as a child she was fully aware of the dangers that existed if one did not follow the rules of crossing. "We were really young and I remember one time walking back [from Nuevo Laredo to Laredo] and my little sister Laura, because they would ask the kids, and you would have to say 'U.S. citizen,' and she [Laura] wouldn't, ...and we would all be there really scared. And my father was furious with her, and he shouldn't have been angry with her, but with this system that was doing this to us" (2010a). Clearly, Cantú's stories and memories of crossings still evoke a sense of fear, anger, and sadness that cannot be forgotten. But her narratives of crossings, and especially her manipulation of affiliation papers within *Canícula*, are what Brady argues are the desire by Chicana writers to "double-cross the border—to trick the extensive machinery of containment, of discipline, and of exploitation that has historically made the border a proving ground not simply for citizenship but for humanness as well (2002, 53).

During our interview, Cantú mentioned that she was carrying her passport since she had recently returned from a trip to Nuevo Laredo. "You used to just cross and say 'U.S. citizen' and they let you go through, but not anymore, you have to show documents" (2010a). She refers to this geopolitical space as "harsh, inhospitable land" and her "raw truth" is the "lived experience of living in a border zone" that is "not easy to live in" (2010a). And although living in the borderlands region between the United States and Mexico means one must live their everyday lives with a military presence, Cantú is quick to remind me that regardless of the militarization, of the politicos and poverty, it is what she knows, it is still home, and communities still persist, still live. The people she says, are like the "flora and fauna" that must struggle

to survive; like the mesquite and *nopales* which all have thorns for a reason; like the animals, armadillos and rattlesnakes who have to have some kind of protection (2010a). “It is a hard place, a place as hard as the dry *caliche* of the *monte* and as rough as the prickly thorny bushes and plants, from the mesquite to the huisache and the cacti.... To survive life in this terrain, one must develop a concha, a thick shell” (2007b, 233–34).

### **Literary Quinceañera**

In April of 2010, family and friends gathered to celebrate the fifteen-year anniversary of *Canícula*'s publication. This literary quinceañera was also a communal reflection on the impact *Canícula* has had on the lives of students, faculty, family, and communities beyond San Antonio and the borderlands region. And through the oral tradition, several vignettes in *Canícula* were not only read that night by Cantú, but the audience participated in the storytelling, as they listened and contributed their own testimonios and snapshots of life, inspired by this narrative.

On this day of celebration at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas, Cantú thanked everyone for attending, especially her siblings who were all present. But before her reading she reminded the audience that the day, April 23, 2010, also marked the day that SB 1070 was signed into law in Arizona, an anti-immigrant policy that would most certainly sanction the legal discrimination and racism toward communities of color. In her call to action she asked the audience not to forget that the struggles continue. One of the vignettes Cantú chose to read that night was “Tino,” the story about her brother playing soldier at the age of four and nine who later dies in the Vietnam War in 1968. She prefaced this reading by stating that she identifies herself as a pacifist and believes it is always important to speak out against any wars, especially since we are currently in a time of war. Tino’s story resonates

with many and reminds us of the importance of communal storytelling, of remembering, of collective consciousness and most importantly of healing. Therefore, those of us who hear these stories become a significant participant in the witnessing and active agents of history who must also continue to tell our own testimonios as a form of survival and resisting silence.

### **Conclusion**

*Canícula* challenges categorization and counters the traditional definition of autobiography; that is, a singular, linear self-representation that tells an absolute truth. She strategically includes photographs that trigger her memories as a way to tell her multi-layered stories about growing up on the borderlands. Cantú not only writes the oral, but also the photomemories. Similar to the way that photographs capture family events and portraits, Cantú's written text captures particular memories of her childhood. Her descriptions and captions give life to the characters as they play an integral part in the storytelling; and these stories are only a few of the many that exist. Unlike the "dark aguacates" that her father carefully cuts in half and cores in order to legally take them back into the United States; the narrator refuses the coring of herself and her community.

### **Notes**

I am grateful for those who read earlier versions of this essay and provided invaluable comments: Anonymous reviewers from MALCS, Sunn Shelley Wong, Kathryn Shanley, Helena Maria Viramontes, and especially Mary Pat Brady for introducing me to the work of Dr. Norma E. Cantú.

<sup>1</sup> I am borrowing the definition of "traditional autobiography studies" from Leigh Gilmore (1994) who characterizes it as that point which ended in the early 1970s. Thus, her use of the word traditional does not mean past but rather it characterizes the interpretations of autobiography that define the self as a coherent and unified autobiographer of truth formed outside of a community (*Autobiographics*, 21). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) note that during this historical moment, the field of autobiography studies was marked by a few landmark canonical works that were the primary focus for articles and book-length studies; such as, St. Augustine's *Confessions*,

Cellini's *Life*, Rousseau's *Confessions*, Fox's *Journal*, Franklin's *Autobiography*, Goethe's *Truth and Poetry*, Mill's *Autobiography*, Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro vita sua*, and Thoreau's *Walden* (*Reading Autobiography* 121).

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth discussion on the idea of naming and the signature as an autobiographical contract see: Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Cantú had the difficult task of compromising with the publisher (University of New Mexico) who would not allow all the photographs she chose to be included in the final version. She originally had eighty-five photographs that were negotiated down to forty-five, but due to the expense of publishing photos the final version only included twenty-three. “[I]t was very difficult to decide not to include some photographs. I, however, had to insist on some that are not the quality of studio photographs and didn't reproduce as well. That was the whole point. I wanted them to see that, here we were, working class, we didn't have access to studio photographs every year or...every five years. But yet, there was a record and I was very fortunate for that” (2007a, 24). Note: In the vignette “First Steps” she refers to the “real photographer” who takes a studio photo for her first birthday (28–29).

<sup>4</sup> It is well documented that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnologists and anthropologists utilized the camera as a tool to capture images of the Other that unfortunately still continue to perpetuate gross misconceptions and stereotypes about ethnic minorities. More recently, visual anthropologists have resurrected historical photographs in order to better understand the photographer's view of the Other and the circumstances under which the images were created. A primary focus for analyzing these early photographs is to determine the power relations that existed between the subject and the ethno-photographer as well as the purpose they served. For a more extensive discussion see: Johanna Cohan Scherer (1990). “Historical Photographs.”

<sup>5</sup> See, Gugelberger, ed. (1996), *The Real Thing*; Beverley (1993), *Against Literature*; Arias, ed. (2001), *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*.

<sup>6</sup> Some examples given by the Latina Feminist Group in their bibliography are: *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray (1984); *Hear My Testimony: Maria Teresa Tula, Human Rights Activist of El Salvador*, ed. Lynn Stephen (1994); *Forged Under the Sun/Forjado bajo el sol: The Life of María Elena Lucas*, ed. Fran Leeper Buss (1993); *Let Me Speak: Testimony of Domitila, A Woman of the Bolivian Mines* (1978).

<sup>7</sup> According to historian Rodolfo Acuña (1988), “It has been estimated that 500,000 to 600,000 Mexicans and U.S. citizens of Mexican descent were deported from 1929–1939. In order to control immigration during the depression the administrations of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover placed a restriction on visas from Mexico City and formed the first border patrol. During this time xenophobia ensued as nativists began scapegoating Mexicans, both citizens and non-citizens alike. In some cases repatriation occurred as local officials implemented programs that encouraged Mexican families to return home” (202–204).

<sup>8</sup> The term pocha/o is often used as a derogatory term used by Mexican nationals to describe someone of Mexican descent who is now living in the United States.

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