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AUTOMITOGRAFÍAS: THE BORDER PARADIGM AND CHICANA/O AUTOBIOGRAPHY

JUAN VELASCO

FOR GLORIA ANZALDÚA, 1942–2004

Since the Mexican-American War in 1848, in which Mexico lost half of its territory to what is today the Southwestern United States, the concepts of territory, space, and nation have suffered a series of changes. For Chicana/o cultural critics, the border paradigm has defined the boundaries of writing and experience, and to a certain degree has signaled a major contribution to American Studies. In locating history and power in the liminality of the border, and in showing the latter as part of an important American paradigm, Chicana/o cultural critics have tried to challenge negative representations of the Chicana/o liminal aesthetics forged after the conflict. The emphasis on evil and war that we see in mainstream American representations of the border contrasts with the ones presented by Chicana/o autobiography. In fact, the unique voices coming from Chicana/o autobiography are expressed through a network of cultural codes involving liminality and hybridity, the rewriting of borders, and the challenging of the boundaries created by mainstream cultures and official truth.

The historical trajectory of the autobiographical tradition of Hispanic cultures in the United States goes back to Spanish letters and chronicles from the end of the sixteenth century, but it is not until the mid-nineteenth century that life narratives become a space of resistance for Mexican culture. As Lauro Flores states, the

actividad ‘autobiográfica’ chicana debe situarse diacrónicamente hacia la mitad del siglo XIX, cuando, como ya se ha dicho, los EEUU de Norteamérica, por medio de una verdadera guerra de agresión, se apropió de los territorios que en aquella

época constituían aproximadamente la mitad norte del territorio nacional de la entonces recién nacida República Mexicana. (152)

[Chicana/o autobiographical activity should be situated historically towards the mid-nineteenth century, when, as it has been said, the United States of America, through a war of aggression, took over the territories that during that period were half of the recently born Mexican Republic.]

In this context, it is important to attend to the cultural and literary “self” born after 1848, the literary models used to express the unique Mexican-American reality, and the way in which Chicana/o autobiography has evolved since the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement. As I will show later, the autobiographical text articulates the space of social demands, underlines the experiential knowledge of its individuals, and recreates the imaginary “Chicana/o community” and its myths.

Three works seem to have had a great influence in the staging of a canonical Chicana/o autobiographical discourse into the 1980s: Jose A. Villarreal’s *Pocho* (1959), Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy* (1971), and Richard Rodríguez’s *Hunger for Memory* (1981). But this conceptualization of autobiography and literary discourse has changed. As María Henríquez Betancor states, “since the 1980’s new approaches to the construction of Chicanas’ autobiographical texts have been created by the assertion of women’s self in Chicana’s literary works in the U.S.A., not only in narrative and poetry but also in new creative ways” (173). Since the 1980s, Chicana autobiographical production has openly introduced gender and sexuality into the racial discourse born during the cultural nationalist movement of the 1970s, and has radically and innovatively reworked Chicano identity politics. Some of the most significant works include Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* (1983), and *Essays on Xicanisma* by Ana Castillo (1994). The projects offered by these feminist and lesbian writers question the aesthetics of the previous two decades, create new forms of representation, and bring a new emphasis to the configuration of a liminal subject within the border sociopolitical context.

Chicana writing has received special attention from the critic Sonia Saldívar. “The Chicana feminist,” she writes, “acknowledges the often vast historical, class, racial, and ethnic differences among women living on the border” (“Feminism” 208). These recent works emphasize border identities, liminality, and new ways of understanding the notion of “self.” This is especially important given the historical trajectory of Chicana/o autobiography. According to José David Saldívar, the Chicana/o contemporary experience is in fact defined by the border paradigm. In *Border Matters*, he argues that part

of the problem is the way American mainstream representation elides the specificity of border cultures to make them invisible or evil. Saldívar's book illuminates the deep-rooted, two-way relationship between culture and the experience of borders—physical and symbolic. But how can this paradigm actually define the confines of *lo mexicano*? From Herbert Eugene Bolton to José David Saldívar, from Gloria Anzaldúa to Richard Rodríguez, the Chicana/o analytical paradigm has tackled the contradictory and liberating assumptions implied by border theory.

Because of this deep relationship between the border paradigm, the Chicana/o experience, and the writing and representation of the same, in the next few pages I will discuss the possibility of building, based on this cultural paradigm, an organic and systematic methodology for studying autobiography. I mean to discuss different ways the border paradigm explains how the cultural construction of *lo mexicano* works, and how it becomes a prescription for the representation of this unique American experience. I will first establish the distinction between traditional uses of the border and critical use of border theory by Chicana/o cultural critics. Later I will discuss traditional structures of autobiography and the influence of the postcolonial subgenre created by Latin American *testimonio*, a paradigm of witnessing especially influential in the autobiographical work of Chicanas. Finally, using Chicana autobiography as a space and zone of interaction, I will show how these writings bring out the tension between the silencing of the Chicana/o experience and the liberatory potential of the cultural voice assigned to this experience. I propose that the intersections of these elements bring together a cultural anthropology of Chicana/o self-representation. The *automitografías* constructed by these voices challenge patriarchy, heteronormativity, imperialism, and white supremacy in the historical and sociopolitical context of the border. These autobiographies also reclaim border theory from the dehistoricized applications to which it has been so widely put in many areas of the humanities.

Let me start, however, by referring to a few of the numerous uses of the term "border" that have been circulating in recent years. In "Richard Rodríguez in 'Borderland,'" Juan E. de Castro attempts "to point out some of the central traits associated with this Chicana/o analytical paradigm" (123). In "Borders of Fear, Borders of Desire," Rolando Romero offers a summary of various metaphors that engage the border in some way or another:

Gloria Anzaldúa has described the border as an open wound while Carlos Fuentes has depicted it as a scar. The border has been drawn as a zipper and characterized as a sore. It has been called a "tortilla curtain" and a geological fault line. It has been allegorized as a scrimmage line and, more currently, has been portrayed as a two thousand mile Love Canal and garbage dump. (36)

Romero concludes by suggesting that the diversity of definitions is a reflection of how people project their own desires onto the idea of the border. I am especially concerned with the widespread abuse of the paradigm. How does it differ from other uses by Chicana/o critics? One clear example of the misuse of "the border" and the projection of desire onto this geographic and symbolic area becomes evident when analyzing the content of the art exhibition "South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination 1914–1917," which originated at the Yale University Art Gallery in 1993.

According to Aline Brandauer, "South of the Border" was "the first exhibition mounted in the U.S. or Mexico to demonstrate that the cultural relationship between the two countries is a deeply rutted two-way street" (51). Actually, the installation "South of the Border" displays representative works by Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera and Octavio Medellín, as well as other cultural artifacts that reflect one of the show's main themes: "the desire among Americans to render Mexico as eternal, rural and romantic, in spite of that country's attempts to industrialize and modernize" (51). Moreover, Brandauer sees the border crossings of these artists' imaginations "as a fresh direction in the comparison of images and ideas as they travel back and forth" (52). The same could be said of the successful "Border Trilogy" initiated by the novelist Cormac McCarthy with *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), winner of both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. This novel tells the story of John Grady Cole and his friend Lacey Rawlins as they set off for Mexico. Later a third traveler joins them, and their trip becomes a mysterious journey, since the area to the south of the Rio Grande is blank on their map.

Again, we are forced to ask: What really are these border crossings? And is this the same border? Should we compare, then, the suspenseful, lyrical "crossings" of these border-boys with the painful, violent trip of the Mexican Ernesto Galarza from Jalcoctán to California, as related in his autobiography *Barrio Boy*? Or can we establish the "border" of the exhibition "South of the Border" (which shows how the Indian woman is frequently utilized by American artists as a symbol of a distant and idyllic world) at the same level of analysis as the categories of class, gender, race, and sexual orientation explored in Gloria Anzaldúa's autobiography *Borderlands/La Frontera*? Following the example of Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson in *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*, I will be "concerned with borders like this, but more often the focus is on the sorts of 'soft' borders produced within broadly liberal discourse: benevolent nationalisms, cultural essentialisms, multiculturalisms, and the like" (1). Are the geographical location and the time where the encounters take place obsolete? If unchecked, would borders then

run the risk of becoming the dissolving agent of the specificity of their stories? And how do we account in this analysis for the policing of these borders?

To distinguish one from another, it is important to establish the difference between the notions of Frontier and *La Frontera*. Frontier is the space that separates the zone of civilization from that which is beyond, while the Spanish word *La Frontera* conveys the idea of the Borderlands as a zone of contact and interaction. Moreover, we cannot talk about borders or frontiers without inserting their purpose into the semantic field of definition. The function of every border has always been to stop the interactions, stop the crossings. The policing of these borders along sexual, racial, and economic lines becomes a very important factor. Actually, the crossings to “South of the Border” (which sounds incredibly close to the logo of the famous Taco Bell commercial, “Run to the Border”) contrast dramatically with the movie *Born in East L.A.* (1987; its title a parody of the song “Born in the USA”), where the Chicano Cheech Marín plays the role of an American citizen who has been denied re-entry into his homeland because of his lack of documentation. The “run to the border” of the Taco Bell commercial can become a very dangerous trip when you look suspiciously “Mexican” (or, more recently, Arab).

Some of the most important contributions to border theory have stressed the importance of reenacting the sociohistorical meaning of the “border” along the lines of gender, race, class, and sexual oppression. The works of Emily Hicks, Renato Rosaldo, Ruth Behar, Sonia Saldívar, Héctor Calderón, and José Saldívar have all been very successful in this regard. However, I propose a use of the borders that draws together a cultural anthropology of Chicana/o self-representation and a literary analysis of the texts in that tradition. This project links the related aspects of cultural forgetting and remembering of trauma to the use of technologies of autobiography through which to represent the personal/collective meanings of loss. I argue that historical trauma and loss complicate the representation of personal history, and trauma recasts the narrative and literary histories of the Americas. Chicana/o autobiography debunks these types of cultural mythologies around American autobiography while correcting its omissions of Chicana/o experience and life writing. This project also becomes a phenomenal contribution to American Studies, since it brings a call for an altered view of American life writing that includes the use of a different language and the construction of a new Chicana/o aesthetics empowered by a liminal subject position. “America” really looks different if one attends to this positioning. For example, José David Saldívar, analyzing *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, shows how this new space “works against the grain of dominant U.S. historiography and represents the cultures of U.S. imperialism not

only as territorial and economic fact but also inevitably as a subject-constituting project" (169).

I find Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* especially interesting in this context, since she is looking to address the theoretical border as intrinsically related to the policing of cultural memories and the establishment of official truth. Anzaldúa uses autobiography to engage the official truths of history and the experiential knowledge of its individuals in the same discourse. Sonia Saldívar also emphasizes the way Anzaldúa brings gender and sexuality to her work:

autobiography for the new *mestiza* is the history of the colonization of indigenous southwestern peoples by Anglo-American imperialists intent on their manifest destiny. Texas history, in Anzaldúa's revision, is incomplete without the presentation of the Mexican woman who dares to cross the border. ("Feminism" 212)

It is within this frame of analysis that we can start to distinguish artistic, academic, and pleasurable crossings, like the ones represented by the exhibition at Yale, from the dangerous, illegal, and forbidden crossings of the Latin Americans and Mexicans escaping poverty, even at the risk of death.¹ Furthermore, the relationship between "borders" and "crossings" runs parallel to the sociohistorical axis in which these borders have been opened, closed, or simply patrolled, depending on who is doing the crossing, and in what direction. Border policing and patrol patterns, for example, highlight the difference between the north-south route and the south-north route. Crossings that are aesthetic when they go from north to south become deadly dangerous (and illegal) when the trip is from south to north.

The policing of the latter type of crossings is represented, for example, by the brutal history and tradition of the Texas Rangers, and more recently, by the increasing connections in the media linking terrorism with illegal immigration. Paul Vanderwood and Frank Samponaro record the sentiments of these border patrols at the beginning of the century: "Just how soldiers stationed on the border felt about Mexicans can be inferred by the tremendous number of postcards depicting burned and mutilated Mexican corpses which they sent back home, often with the sentiment: 'A good greaser is a dead one'" (40). In *Occupied America*, Rodolfo Acuña, referring to the *corridos* (border ballads) of the border and their view of the Texas Rangers, states that to the Mexican "they were assassins, who were viewed in much the same way as Jews see the Gestapo" (41). In *Across the Wire: Hard Times on the Mexican Border* (1993), Luis Alberto Urrea has written about the contemporary reality of this place, filled with people, history, and trauma. "[T]his is a book of fragments, stories of moments in the lives of people most of us

never see, never think about, and don't ever know exist," he writes in the preface: "poverty ennobles no one; it brutalizes common people and makes them hungry and old" (2).

William Langewiesche describes the border as a war zone, emphasizing daily killings, rapes, and robberies. Actually, the image of a "war zone" is evoked in border representations suggesting that "it is America itself, or rather the notion of America, that's under attack" (Romero 43). This move has important repercussions for the reading of these borders, and for the role played by Chicana/o autobiography in this discussion. In the case of the US-Mexico border region, both nations project onto this liminal territory their fears and desires through the criminalization of hybrid identities. When representation is transferred to the border, meaning and memories become part of a distorted reality, a landscape filled with images related to fear, hybrid identities, and sexual and racial tension.

The use of the "border," and the projection of "crime" onto this geographic and symbolic area, become particularly clear when analyzing the use of visual space in Orson Welles's 1957 film *Touch of Evil*. Welles uses film noir's aesthetic and moral ambiguity to denounce the intolerable alienation attributed to the borderlands. In this sense, Welles's *Touch of Evil* can be read as one of the best examples of contemporary perceptions of the US-Mexico border. The city's liminal and cultural hybrid space is transformed into a tale of the darkest Mexico, a nightmare in which space is no longer neutral but rather charged with distrust and racial meaning.

In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, published in 1950, Octavio Paz points at the same type of criminalization of these border crossings when he describes Los Angeles as the site of "one of the extremes" of Mexicanness, the place of the "pachuco," a term used to describe Mexican-American youth in the 1940s. The pachuco's "dangerousness," Paz explains, "lies in his singularity. Everyone agrees in finding something hybrid about him, something disturbing and fascinating" (16). For Paz, this is the result of a "psychic oscillation between two irreducible worlds: the North American and the Mexican" (18). In short, for both Welles's *Touch of Evil* and Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the border and the liminality of its space recreate the worst fears about miscegenation between *lo americano* and *lo mexicano*.

The use of the border as a code for war, conflict, and evil, with its multiple representations, is an important one. As Otto Santa Ana argues in *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse*, the policing of the border has been used as a scapegoat for a variety of problems, including economic, racial, and political issues. In my opinion, this process of the borderization of Chicana/o culture within the context of

American life, or in other words, the war zone imposed upon the center of the Chicana/o "self" and its cultural life, is especially clear when analyzing feelings of illegitimacy and the criminalization of linguistic, racial, and cultural border crossings. "Evil" and war, as projected experiences of the border by mainstream media, contrast with Chicana/o autobiography's representation of the postcolonial trauma. As has been suggested by Michaelson, without a new critical set of tools that clarifies these differences, "the entry point of 'the border' or 'the borderlands' goes unquestioned" (3). It is against this kind of terrain that Chicana/o autobiography rewrites its territory of liminality. In fact, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* is probably the first contemporary Chicana autobiography to offer a response to earlier representations of border identity and cultural hybridism. Anzaldúa's "entry point" to the Chicana's experience of the border emphasizes two aspects: the capacity of trauma to destroy consciousness (and the importance of rewriting the loss), and autobiographical writing's ability to provide a distinctive voice. In this context, personal memory becomes a political intervention, and its rewriting of mainstream media representation of the border takes place beyond the liberal aestheticized notions of "crossings," and beyond the politics of confession and sympathy.

How does the challenge take place, given these tensions between a discourse of domination by confession and the impulse for liberation and self-consciousness? These changes take place through a rewriting of the autobiographical act. Genaro Padilla, referring to how Chicana/o autobiography challenges the liberal politics of confession and sympathy, finds already in nineteenth century texts the existence of an "I" "that reveals its incarceration within a network of discursive practices invented by cultural imperialists whose goal has been and still is to lock it into a cell of alien linguistic culture and ideology" ("Imprisoned" 43). Padilla contextualizes as a positive step the consciousness of an "imprisoned autobiographic discourse" found in Fabiola Cabeza de Baca's and Cleofas M. Jaramillo's nineteenth century autobiographical texts. What is implied in that trajectory is a re-reading of the border and the recuperation of the multifaceted Chicana/o self inserted in the historical experiences of the individual and the community. Referring to the *corrido*, Teresa McKenna finds that the key piece is "in narrativity itself, in the politically laden event upon which the narrative is based, and most importantly on the social group from which it springs, whose constant crises resolve around the dysfunction or breach produced by the Anglo-American 'other'. These elements are the paradigmatic dimensions of the saga of Mexican/Chicano resistance to domination" (187). In the same way, referring to Audre Lorde's famous "biomythography," Rosemarie Garland Thompson

notes that this type of autobiographical form “eliminates the dynamics of sympathy and the potential for objectification that often merge when a narrator mediates between the reader and a marginalized character” (126). With this tradition in mind, Chicana/o autobiography situates a new perspective, drawing a line between writing as confession and sympathy, and writing as a denaturalization of norm aiming at the cultivation of agency. Furthermore, the metaphors of hybridity, border crossings, transculturation, and *mestizaje* become the space from which the Chicana/o experience negotiates the reconstruction of “self” while trying to short-circuit or interfere with the purity-oriented theories of war and evil. Moreover, Chicana/o autobiography’s writing in *la frontera* does not become another “higher” form of border crossing. The political intervention and the impact of Chicana/o autobiography’s revisionist concept is measured by its attempt to name the topography of horror and trauma that is located in Chicana/o experience. This legitimates the concept of *la frontera* as a zone of contact and interaction, and insists that when analyzing borders we should always ask who is the subject and self that is performing these “crossings.” At this point we are perhaps better disposed to answer the question which opened this article: How is this cultural experience being written about?

AUTOMITOGRAFÍAS: REWRITING THE TOTAL SELF

The autobiographical tradition of Hispanic cultures in the United States can be traced back to the Spanish letters and chronicles from the end of the sixteenth century. Particularly significant is Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s work *La Relación*, first published in 1542, and based on his experience living with Indians in the Southwest of the US for more than ten years. This rich Hispanic literary tradition continued through the nineteenth century, when life narratives flourished in a more modern format in works such as Father Antonio José Martínez’s *Relation*, published in 1836, and Juan Nepomuceno’s *Personal Memoirs*, published in 1858.² These publications helped to create a space of resistance for the Mexican culture, especially after the loss of the Mexican territories of the Southwest in 1848. Raymund Paredes rightly argues that “By the 1860s, they were wrestling with questions of identity, gauging their position in that uneasy space that marked the intersection of the cultures of Mexico and the United States” (“Mexican-American” 31). The analysis of the cultural “self” born after 1848, and the literary models used to express the new reality, underline the way in which since the Civil Rights Movement, Chicana/o autobiography has redefined itself as, and continues to be, a political weapon. Seen in this way, the literary text assumes

the position of an intermediate space that articulates political and social demands, justifies individual experience, and at the same time, connects these elements with a Chicana/o community and its representative figures.

This is a crucial aspect, since we will be using the term "community" as suggested by Benedict Anderson in his work *Imagined Communities*. According to Anderson, communities do not distinguish themselves from each other by their degree of falsehood or reality but by the manner in which they are "imagined" or reconstructed. For Anderson it is the middle class of the nineteenth century that first acquires and utilizes this relationship of close solidarity based on the reworking of these "imagined links." This is one of the most fundamental aspects of Chicana/o autobiographical production. In fact, the aspiration to recreate the imagined Mexican community in the United States acquires its most determining moment in the efforts of these writers to elucidate and reinterpret personal narratives at the center of the circle of values and norms that identifies the new culture.

Referring to feminist autobiography, Leigh Gilmore points out that "the autobiographical subject is a representation and its representation is its construction. The autobiographical subject is produced not by experience but by autobiography" (25). The importance that language and speech assume as defining elements of identity is confirmed as these are transformed into tropes that reconstruct and validate the Chicana/o experience. The law of genre and the cultural category used by Mexicans to create an original "I" is discussed in Padilla's *My History Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography*. This work is especially interesting since many of the writings analyzed by Padilla are nineteenth century texts which engage the cultural identity of those Mexicans witnessing the aftermath of the 1848 war. As suggested by Padilla's analysis, the strategies used by the autobiographers are essential in order for them to locate their situation in history, and their discourse of identity in relationship to the newly formed "official truth." How have these technologies of representation developed in contemporary Chicana/o autobiography? In my opinion, there are two elements that characterize this form of writing. First, through the use of *mito*, Chicana/o writers have connected the histories of loss with the geography of trauma (the border). Second, radical implications arise from the construction of crossing in opposition to silencing. For the most part, within the wide range of experiences and ideological positions, the combination of these unique strategies of writing expands the characteristics of contemporary autobiography.

This is especially important in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. For Anzaldúa, "imagining" this new "self" means being able to reenact the sociohistorical implications of the border in the Chicana/o

experience along the different lines of oppression—mainly gender, sexual identity, class, and racial formation. The “point of entry” to these experiences, however, also emphasizes the liberatory potential of writing from the space in-between, and a new aesthetic policy that no longer regulates hybrid identities and border crossings.

When compared with other works, Chicana/o autobiography is able to construct what could be considered a type of “autoethnographic text” which engages in multiple identities and the “representations others have made of them” (Pratt 35). Writing, in this territory, becomes a celebration of “difference” as opposed to uniformity; there is an emphasis on the “nomadic” as opposed to the “fixed.” Based on a new way of understanding the relationship between cultural production and identity, Chicana/o autobiography rejects monolithic forms of thinking in order to emphasize process (crossing) and the continuous reconceptualization of identity. Such autobiographical writing rejects specific identity formations and their ideology, and creates new processes of identity formations. This is an important point, since this positioning avoids “the undermining of the notion of cultural difference that is at the root of multiculturalism” (De Castro 124). Some of these principles can be seen in some of the most original autobiographies of the canon. As I mentioned before, three works in particular mark the different stages of canonical Chicana/o autobiographical discourse, as well as the various interpretations of the literary Chicana/o subject and cultural identity: Villarreal’s *Pocho*, Galarza’s *Barrio Boy*, and Rodríguez’s *Hunger of Memory*. During the later 1980s and 1990s, a new series of literary works emerged to emphasize border identities as a “positive” experience of community, multiplicity, hybridity, and liminality, and as an opportunity to produce and build a higher sense of self. As noted, these works include Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, and Castillo’s *Essays on Xicanisma*. Other new works by Francisco Jiménez, Norma Cantú, Alberto Alvaro Ríos, Pat Mora, Carmen Lomas Garza, and Lourdes Portillo have recreated in interesting ways issues that explore the visual and written representation of “self.” These projects offer a new Chicana/o subject, questioning not only the aesthetics of the previous two decades, but also the apparent ideological uniformity in the configuration of the liminal subject within the border sociopolitical context.

With this information in mind, I do not pretend to discern or advocate for a monolithic position coming from such a diverse group of autobiographies. It is also necessary to “read them individually and to mark the unique way in which each text inhabits change and domesticates liminality” (Perry 194). What I argue, instead, is that for the most part, within the wide range of experiences and ideological positions, one of the most unique characteristics

of contemporary Chicana/o autobiography is that the attribute of crossing is constructed in opposition to the notion of silencing. As Anzaldúa declares: "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, and white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, and my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (*Borderlands* 59). This dialectic can also be observed in *The Devil Never Sleeps*, an autobiographical documentary by Lourdes Portillo. As she crosses borders, Portillo's Chicana voice transcends the previous walls of silencing, of family structure, as well as historical and political secrets. This process of recreating memories as crossing can also be observed in those artists exploring the integration of literary autobiographies and visual culture. The collage of photographs and text created in such diverse works as Ríos's *Capitotada: A Nogales Memoir* (1990), Mora's *House of Houses* (1997), Jiménez's *Breaking Through*, Lomas Garza's *Family Pictures* (1990), or *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), by Norma Elia Cantú, transforms this back and forth between photography and written text into "silent witnesses of her life, her history" (2). These technologies of self-representation are linked to contemporary attempts to create a Chicana border feminist theory inclusive of racial, gender, and sexual difference, and a practice of "resistance against attempts by the mainstream to silence, incorporate, or ignore the voices of oppressed and exploited people living within the borders of the United States" (Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism* 46).

Chicana/o autobiographical narratives become a way of transcending the main effect of oppression—their subjects' invisibility. But these autobiographies do not directly oppose that political subject position as much as they aim to replace the "binary cage" altogether. Cantú's "fictional autobioethnography" (xi), for example, creates a very clever rhetorical tool, and becomes the frame for a new form of cultural autobiography, a "voice" and a political weapon that refuses an "other" to the subject that positions it. But how does the creation of a "voice" take place? As these crossings become increasingly linked to the creation of witnesses who look simultaneously upon personal life and history, the voice created is also undermining the coherent small "I" by which traditional autobiography defines itself. This re-arrangement of writing takes place along the lines of re-inscribing new notions of home, crossing, and self. Guillermo Gomez-Peña explores these complex dimensions in *Border Brujo*, as he includes himself in a border that seems to multiply the many versions of home, language, and the "I" that speaks. More traditional autobiographies address these issues in different ways. Francisco Jiménez's *The Circuit* (1997), and its sequel *Breaking Through* (2001), use border crossing as a metaphor "to voice the experiences of many children and young

Just Francisco (Francisco) and Roberto, picking plants in Orosi, California

Francisco, Just Francisco (Francisco), and Roberto, Tree City, Santa Maria, California

My mother and father in the 1930s in front
of our new adobe house. This is the
photograph in the *Memorial*, with text:
Everything was new.

Border crossing in Chicana/o autobiography can involve integrating literary and visual texts, as well as transcending time, space, and family, social, and historical structures, as in the photographs from *Breaking Through*, by Francisco Jiménez (1996, above, copyright © 2001 by Francisco Jiménez; reprinted by courtesy of the author and permission of Houghton Mifflin Company; all rights reserved), and in the "Prologue," left, from *Capirotada: A Nogales Memoir*, by Alberto Alvaro Ríos (copyright © 1998 by Alberto Ríos; reprinted by permission of SLL/Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc.).

adults who confront numerous obstacles in their efforts to 'break through'" (195). Dionicio Morales's *A Life in Two Cultures* (1997) rewrites the territory of the border as home to reflect on his experience, but also rewrites the border as oppression when exploring the ideological trends experienced through Morales's cultural crossings: "I was to become a person of two rich cultures, but a person perceived by some to be a 'stranger' in both lands" (9). Within the same realm of empowering ambivalence, Norma Cantú writes in her autobiography: "In 1948 crossing meant coming home, but not quite" (5). Gloria Anzaldúa adopts the same position when, as a Chicana, working-class, lesbian, feminist woman in a patriarchal society, she challenges the traditional racial, sexual, gender, and class divisions. When rewriting her experience as a Chicana, however, she also transcends it, as she recognizes that "The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest" (*Borderlands* Preface). In its place, Anzaldúa proposes a new space, an identity and a voice based on the solidarity of that crossing over, and the interpolation of many "selves":

And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. . . . "Los atravesados" live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." (*Borderlands* 3)

If we recognize the new space and the multiplicity of voices created in these works as a way of transcending the limitations of the small "I," whose autobiographies are being written about? Chicana/o autobiography's use of border crossings becomes the essential element in the formation of a radical practice of writing, a process of life writing that links communal truth and personal narratives. This is achieved as the new "I" created along with this writing implies a temporal axis of representation in which the voice is simultaneously adopting the experience of the personal and the communal—the analysis of the experiential and the political, the historical and the mythological. As stated by Anzaldúa: "I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become" (*Borderlands* 71). This process is what we will define throughout this essay as *automitografía*. The use of *mito* (myths) linked to the autobiographical act becomes a powerful way of achieving a new voice for a higher sense of the cultural "self." In an *automitografía*, the autobiographical act becomes the performative agent of transformation, as it reverses the forms of representation of traditional autobiography to connect with the cultural production of *lo mexicano* within the US: "When I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart, a

Nahuatl concept” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 73). This act connects the act of writing to pre-Columbian configurations of “self.” The use of *mito* is also connected to the histories of trauma linked to the loss of those cultures, and brings back into the writing the rebirth of the new consciousness created during the Chicana/o Renaissance of the late 1960s.

As pointed out by Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano in her article “From *acto* to *mito*: A Critical Appraisal of the Teatro Campesino,” the transition to this new form in literary production is crucial. The inclusion of the mythical and religious aspects of Chicana/o life in the already political *acto* will lead to the understanding of new forms of expression: “whereas the *acto* concentrates on political issues expressed in the cultural terms of its audience, the *mito* attempts to explore the content of culture itself” (177). In similar terms, Juan Bruce-Novoa points out in “Chicana/o Theater: Editing the Origin Myth” that “myth is not synonymous with lie or untruth, but a symbolic representation of what is held to be true by the group generating the narrative” (106). What is held to be true by the writers as they delineate the “self” occupying the center of this experience becomes also a profound acknowledgment of loss. This process of writing illustrates Chicana/o distrust of the structure posed by traditional autobiography and official history, and uses *automitografía* to advance a way of witnessing that expands the traditional confessional “I.” As Norma Alarcón has pointed out, in mainstream representations of Chicana/o culture “bodies are often multiplied, racialized, and dislocated as if they had no other contents” (“Chicana” 375). In fact, the recuperation of the destroyed cultural practices, the body as embodiment of trauma, and traditions (as myths), become the signature of *automitografía*, and the goal is to locate the forgotten history of the “self” within a new discourse of truth and identity. As Gilmore mentions when referring to Audre Lorde, she “re-members as myth a history that has been forgotten and destroyed” (27). This aspect can be observed in the portraits of Chicana artists as they address themselves as different variations of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Ana Castillo’s *My Father was a Toltec* (1988) uses this strategy as she combines in the poem “Ixtacihuatl Died in Vain” her own experiences as a Chicana with the traditions set up by the pre-Columbian myth:

Hard are the women of my family,
Hard on the mothers who have died on us
and the daughters born to us. . . .
We are Ixtacihuatl,
Sleeping, snowcapped volcanoes
buried alive in myths. (39)

This ultimate act of creation of a new self and consciousness transcends the act of (historical) silencing, and is articulated in contrast to that which has been silenced within one's own personal experience. The dialectics of silencing, and the difficulties of finding a way of expressing it, are described in Cherríe Moraga's autobiography as created by "lo que nunca / pasó / por sus labios . . . but was / utterly / utterly / heard" (149).

The intersection of the experiential knowledge of the particular and the mythical and historical traditions of the community refuses and transcends an oversimplification of the autobiographical act as "confession." In fact, to the limitations of the confessional mode, Chicana/o autobiography opposes the articulation of writing as witnessing, and witnessing as a recreation of what Anzaldúa calls the "total Self": "Deconstruct, construct. . . . She learns to transform the small 'I' into the total Self" (*Borderlands* 82). The notion of "total Self" allows Chicana/o autobiography to create a unique Chicana/o vision, as well as a "testimonial" narrative of his/her own experience. The concept of the total Self has similarly been articulated by Norma Alarcón when she refers to the "plurality of self" found in *This Bridge Called My Back*:

it is this struggle of multiple antagonisms, almost always in relation to culturally different groups, and not just genders, that gives configuration to the theoretical subject of *Bridge*. It must be noted, however, that each woman of color cited here, even in her positing of a "plurality of self," is already privileged enough to reach the moment of cognition of a situation for herself. ("Theoretical" 39)

The total Self recognizes the multiplicity of voices created in these works as a way of breaking away from the imprisonment of the small "I." The "totality" of this new self is also manifested in Chicana feminist writers through a reconstruction of the "dislocated," "racialized" bodies of Chicanas, and the multiple names of the mestiza and Indian women (Alarcón, "Chicana" 374). For example, to the traditionally acknowledged silencing and fracturing of the "I," Anzaldúa presents her border and woman's body as one, the same entity from which the new voice of the autobiography speaks:

1950 mile-long open wound
dividing a "pueblo," a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh. . . .
Yo soy un puente tendido
del mundo gabacho al del mojado,
lo pasado me estira pa "tras
y lo presente pa" delante. (*Borderlands* 2)

In *A Piece of My Heart/Pedacito de mi corazón* (1991) and *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* (1990), Carmen Lomas Garza very graphically draws together the space of culture and personal experience as she constructs it as “the place where bodies are their own signs” (Coetzee 157). Her paintings and text embody her own story and her family’s within a different and extended notion of “self.” The paintings of *Pedacito de mi corazón* dissolve the boundaries of the small “I” as she recreates the flexible cultural borders that define her life experience in family and community. Pat Mora’s autobiographical work, *A House of Houses*, re-creates a similar voice as her family’s and her own experience are embedded in the metaphor of the body-house: “Through generations, sun, wind, rain, hands, voices, and dreams create and alter this place pregnant with possibilities in a landscape as familiar to me as my body. What does the house, the body, know?” (4).

As these “bodies” resist liberal attempts to reduce their experience to a harmless politics of confession and sympathy, it becomes also the transcending element from which Chicana/o autobiography voices its own sense of consciousness and cultural experience. In these autobiographies the total Self also becomes the signifier for the act of recuperating the postcolonial pain of the Mexican self in the US, mutilated by the experience of internal colonialism:

I am possessed by a vision: that we Chicanas and Chicanos have taken back or uncovered our true faces, our dignity and self-respect. . . . I acknowledge that the self and the race have been wounded. I recognize the need to take care of our personhood, of our racial self. (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 87–88)

Transcending the borders of personal and cultural experience and of art and text, in Carmen Lomas Garza’s *Family Pictures • Cuadros de familia* (8–9; reprinted with permission of the publisher, Children’s Book Press, San Francisco, CA, www.childrensbookpress.org; *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia*, art copyright © 1990 by Carmen Lomas Garza).

"Through generations . . . what does the house, the body, know?" "Contents" from *House of Houses*, by Pat Mora (viii–ix, copyright © 2004 by Pat Mora; reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.).

TESTIMONIOS AND AUTOMITOGRAFÍAS

The construction of *automitografías* describes, then, two operations: a rewriting of notions of identity based on the small, fixed notion of “I” (which derives from Augustine’s model of identity); and the construction of the “total Self” as a way of enacting the many sources of the Chicana/o experience beyond the constraints of time and space, and in between myth and history, between writing and witnessing.

The total Self becomes the subject of Chicana/o autobiography, and as such, it is able to propose a new model that refuses the limitations of the “confessional” mode of writing, and its self-enclosed, individual “I.” As Chicana/o autobiography expands the notion of the individual “I” and rewrites the notion of the “total Self” instead, it is able to create a voice through which we can envision individual self-empowerment and community agency. With its refusal to trace a line of division between myth and history, between “I” and the “total Self,” contemporary Chicana/o autobiography is an evolved form of writing that may very well have absorbed the lessons taught by Latin American testimonial writing (see Doris Sommer).

From Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *The Answer* to the controversies surrounding Rigoberta Menchú's autobiography, *testimonio* literature has expanded the understanding of "confessional" literature as witnessing in the work of contemporary Chicana/o writers.³ Latin American testimonial literature makes explicit two lines of discourse that influence Chicana/o autobiographical writing: first, the admission that writing is informed by the struggle of its people; second, the acknowledgment of the power of silence in autobiography, both in its positive and negative aspects. Examples of this would be both Sor Juana Inés and Rigoberta Menchú, who have profoundly influenced the role of *testimonio* literature by bringing silence and silencing, in strikingly common ways, to the center of self-representation: "One must name the silence, so that what it signifies may be understood" (De la Cruz 41). This concept operates in contemporary texts as "silence as protection" and "silence as horror." Describing the first type, John Beverley points to Rigoberta Menchú's "secrets," noting that "there are certain things—her Nahuatl name, for example—that she will not speak of" (80). Describing the second, Beverley remarks on the impossibilities of language given Menchú's horror. Beverley describes the representation of the torture and murder of her brother and mother by the Guatemalan army as "a form of figuration that gives these episodes a hallucinatory and symbolic intensity different from the matter-of-fact narration one expects from *testimonio*. One could say this is a kind of testimonial expressionism or 'magic realism'" (81).

I Rigoberta Menchú, witness to the power of silence and struggle on the borders of *testimonio* and autobiography (cover copyright © 1984 by Sophie Herxheimer, and reproduced by courtesy of Verso Publishing).

As Sonia Saldívar-Hull has proposed, the collapsing together of *automitografía* and *testimonio* is important for discussing representation in the context of autobiography studies. As we move toward an alliance between *automitografía* (with Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga) on the one hand, and *testimonio* (with Rigoberta Menchú and Domitilla Barrios de Chungara) on the other, the underscoring of autobiography produced by writers and activists will leave a mark on Chicana/o and autobiography studies. This effect is especially important given the understanding that the “silence and silencing of people begins with the dominating enforcement of linguistic conventions, the resistance to relational dialogues, as well as the disenabling of peoples by outlawing their forms of speech” (Alarcón, “Theoretical” 36). But this relationship of Chicana/o autobiography to silence plays an important role in more general autobiography studies. In his already classic article “Autobiography as Defacement,” Paul de Man has suggested that autobiography is the “possible convergence of aesthetics and history” (919). The link, then, between literary construction and history in autobiography is memory. While discussing the concept of “memory” in his work *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, Jacques Derrida defines the term “prosopopeia” as the “topology of memory” and “the signature of its own epitaph” (25). However, I would question Derrida’s belief that prosopopeia is that which both defines and kills memory. Prosopopeia, or personification, derives from the Latin word “persona” and the Greek expression “face making.” Interestingly enough, the tropos of memory simultaneously implies the meaning of “mask” and “face.” In autobiography, then, the face and the mask interact in different versions of truth as fictional construct.

In her anthology of “creative and critical perspectives by women of color,” *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, Gloria Anzaldúa acknowledges both the value and the subversive nature of the role of masks and faces in Chicana/o and Mexican literature. In the section entitled “Mask and Interfaces,” she argues:

Among Chicanas/Mexicanas, *haciendo caras*, “making faces,” means to put on a face, express feelings by distorting the face. . . . For me, *haciendo caras* has the added connotation of making *gestos subversivos*, political subversive gestures. . . . “Face” is the surface of the body that is the most noticeably inscribed by social structures. . . . Between the masks . . . is the place—the interface—between the masks that provides the space from which we can thrust out and crack the masks. (xv, xvii)

In this way, the text is not only the mask and the face behind the mask, but also the space between the two. This aspect is not a casual element, as it links

with the use of *mito*. Carlos Fuentes mentions in his book *The Buried Mirror* how the Aztecs placed burial masks on their dead, essentially to guide them on their long journey into the afterlife, but also to keep their true faces and identities guarded from the demons of the netherworld, so that the dead could complete the journey to paradise without being recognized or jeopardized.

This space becomes the key to understanding the relationship between truth as historic fact and truth as a literary construct. Based on Derrida's assumptions, autobiographical discourse has been described by Paul de Man as a "discourse of self-restoration" (925). In Chicana/o autobiography, of course, the historical mutilation of 1848 plays an important role. When examining the idea of "self-restoration" as a reaction to mutilation, we must first consider the autobiographical text as a safe space for the reconstruction of the Mexican self. The text then becomes not so much the signature of the epitaph as it becomes the setting for the restoration of the subject, as well as the space in-between created to crack the masks.

While Paul de Man produces an image of speechlessness in his account of autobiography, Chicana/o autobiography's narrative (influenced by Latin American *testimonio*) is produced as a defiant act of witnessing. "Self-restoration" is delivered in Chicana/o autobiography as the act of "making faces":⁴ the metaphors of postcolonial horror's resistance to language, and silence as "an enigma, a survival strategy, a wall which confines us, the space that protects us" (Chávez Leyva 429). This is significant considering that *Making Faces* is a collective project, and creates a communal "self" to break away from silencing as horror while maintaining it as a guarded space of protection.

In this way, *automitografías* are one of the most successful attempts in Chicana/o literature at writing the personal horror that cannot be told, choosing to tell the story of the total Self as the mark of a new definition of identity working at the center of the narrative voice. The cultural anxiety conferred upon autobiography by poststructuralists is transcended by *automitografía* through the notion of the total Self and its principle of hope—the larger community. As Saldívar-Hull points out, US Latinas and other border feminists, through their *testimonios*, have not only expressed their solidarity with this tradition, but "contextualize themselves within a global literary history" (*Feminism* 47).

Let me then return to the beginning of this article. Writings that present "border crossings" without attempting to name the topography of horror that relocates the speakers' voices legitimate the ultimate goal of borders: the policing of the marginalized. Chicana/o autobiographies also bring to the forefront what Bakhtin defined as the distinct relationship between silence and the word, a "special logosphere, a unified and continuous structure"

(134). Chicana/o autobiography renders impossible the metaphysicalization of the border, and the striving to make it a paradigm of speechlessness. I wish to underline this point, since Chicana/o autobiography's new form of writing also includes these forms of silence as a way of naming that which traditionally cannot be told—the histories and the stories of those who have been silenced. As these narratives are able to revise the very notion of truth making, this narrativity also becomes a new way of looking into the character of the Chicana/o experience. Chicana/o autobiography refuses the fixed logic of the separate “I” to embrace the interconnectedness, crossings, and alliances of the total Self. Thus the political responsibilities generated by the autobiography are aligned with the remapping of a new community, a fluid and mobile total Self that challenges “the political law of the subject” (Gilmore 31).

As the “I” expands into the total Self, a new text emerges—an autobiography that implies personal and communal, experiential and political knowledge, as well as the historical and the mythological dimensions of a common culture. As such, Chicana/o autobiographical discourse also allows for a new sort of strategic agency.⁵ This writing allows Chicanas, for example, to emphasize the community, but also to replace inherited repressive values within the community with new options. This process involves the liability of mediating an intersection of identities designed to escape the dangers of Eurocentrism and narrow nationalisms. Furthermore, the use of *mito* allows for an ever expanding understanding of culture and creation that permits the author to go beyond the effects of loss, trauma, and mourning. This has a tremendous effect on the present and future as well. Juan Bruce-Novoa comments that such a narrative functions “typologically, its features constitute a cosmic order being promoted, not simply as memory, but as a viable model for the present, accepted and promoted by the practitioners evoking the myth” (113). Moreover, the notion of community itself takes place along the switching and reenacting of the different sociohistorical experiences of the multiple groups living on the margins. For example, the many cultural communities from which this new voice speaks show that the space of its definition expands to areas in the sexual sphere (the “hyeros gamos”), the racial and ethnic sphere (“the new Mestiza”), the geographic sphere (Aztlán), and the cultural and linguistic sphere (Spanglish and its variants), among many others. This writing makes explicit the differences between liberal and aestheticized paradigms of border crossings, and those of the Chicana as experiences of trauma and loss. Even more importantly, these writers rewrite *automitografía* as a cultural autobiography where a new conception of self gives voice to the multiple experiences of the personal and the multiple communities the Chicana/o inhabits.

Chicana/o autobiographies' contribution to autobiography studies is a reformulation of the ideologies of truth and identity as they explore "the philosophico-political limits of border theory work" (Michaelsen 3). As they combine what has been silenced with the experiential knowledge of the marginalized, *automitografías* create a liminal subject position where we can account for that which can not be named—the oppression of the "I," the inexpressibility of postcolonial trauma, and the intangible and more subtle forms of institutionalized violence against the marginalized. Chicana/o autobiography rewrites identity as a zone of contact between cultures, languages, races, and gender. This rewriting helps us to understand the tension between witnessing and difference, between what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as the total Self, and the liberal aesthetics and politics of confession and sympathy (the traditional "I"). In Chicana/o autobiography, the so-called total Self emerges as a transgression of the liberal aesthetics of confession, and as an interruption of the dichotomies established by traditional autobiographies as they create boundaries between the "I" and the community, and between official truth and experiential knowledge. As *automitografías* are able to restore the voice of the personal experience as total Self, this restoration links witnessing and writing to transcend the silenced truths of the individual's and the community's experience. Through Chicana/o autobiography, the writer's voice becomes closer to the Chicana/o experience; it becomes a real tool that can be used in the search for the nature of power and domination in the American Southwest.

NOTES

1. More than a thousand people died in 2003 trying to cross the border, a considerable increase when compared with the data of past years. Activists blame new regulations that force illegals to look for routes that are more dangerous in order to evade the border patrol.
2. For further studies on nineteenth-century autobiography, see Genaro Padilla's *My History, Not Yours*.
3. Although virtually ignored by publishing houses in the US (in sharp contrast to the success of Magical Realism), Latin American testimonial literature has had a great deal of influence on Latina writers.
4. Anzaldúa argues that "'Making faces' is my metaphor for constructing one's identity" (*Making Face* xvi).
5. In Anzaldúa's case, for instance, strategic agency seeks to "blend" feminism and the Mexican tradition without erasing differences (*Borderlands* 85).

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