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BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION: THE BLURRED BOUNDARIES IN NORMA ELIA CANTÚ'S BORDERLANDS NARRATIVE

GERÇEK VE KURGU ARASINDA: NORMA ELIA CANTÚ'NUN SINIR BÖLGELERİ ANLATISINDAKİ BULANIK SINIRLAR

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Abstract

In the postmodern world with constant changes and instabilities, there are several literary genres that have been considered unalterable. Amongst these genres, life writing and autobiographical account writing are in the forefront and they are exceedingly open to discussion by critics in the field. With the life writing theory, the possibility of playing with the clear-cut boundaries between fact and fiction become prominent. Within this scope, the distinct and evident border between reality and fiction has commenced to be demolished by some autobiography writers. As a Chicana feminist writer, Norma Elia Cantú is one of these reformist writers whose life has also been on the borders of the United States of America and Mexico. This form of location-based autobiography is called, in Cantú's terms, as "autobioetnography." In her novel, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), Cantú demonstrates life on the borderlands and the destruction of the boundaries between fact and fiction by utilizing photographs from her past. Through applying the photographs and vignettes to the narration, she contributes to the authenticity effect. Conversely, for some critics, there are minor inconsistencies between the photographs and the prose underneath them and this discolors the reliability of the life account. In a similar vein, Cantú neither accepts the fictionality in her narrative nor she denies it. This is considered to be controversial by traditional autobiography writers. In this study, there are scrutinized excerpts from *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) which are aimed to examine the relationship between the photographs, vignettes, and the following texts which, in return, underlines the issue of reliability in her autobiography in terms of the life writing theory. This study looks into certain aspects which are contextualized in Cantú's work, such as content, structure, identity issues, customs and traditions, religious practices, feminist point of view, language, politics regarding both her personal life and the Mexican culture.

Öz

Sürekli değişim ve istikrarsızlıkların yaşandığı postmodern dünyada, değişmez kabul edilen bazı edebi türler vardır. Bu türler arasında yaşam anlatısı ve otobiyografik anlatı yazını ön plandadır ve her iki tür de alandaki eleştirmenler tarafından tartışmaya fazlasıyla açıktır. Yaşam anlatısı teorisiyle birlikte, gerçek ve kurgu arasındaki kesinleşmiş sınırlarla oynama olasılığı öne çıkmaktadır. Bu kapsamda, gerçeklik ve kurgu arasında var olan belirgin sınır, bir takım otobiyografi yazarları tarafından yıkılmaya başlanmıştır. Chicana feminist bir yazar olan Norma Elia Cantú da hayatı Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Meksika sınırlarında geçen bu yenilikçi yazarlardan biridir. Lokasyon temelli otobiyografinin bu formu, Cantú'nun söylemiyle "otobiyoetnografi" olarak adlandırılmaktadır. Cantú, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) adlı romanında, sınır bölgelerindeki yaşamı ve gerçek ile kurgu arasındaki sınırların yok oluşunu, geçmişinden fotoğraflar kullanarak gözler önüne sermektedir. Fotoğrafları ve vinyetleri anlatıya uygulayarak özgünlük etkisine katkıda bulunmaktadır. Buna karşılık olarak, bazı eleştirmenlere göre, fotoğraflar ve altlarındaki yazılar arasında ufak tutarsızlıkların olması yaşam öyküsünün güvenilirliğini zedelemektedir. Benzer bir şekilde, Cantú anlatısındaki kurgusallığı ne kabul etmekte ne de reddetmektedir. Bu durum, geleneksel otobiyografi yazarları tarafından tartışmaya açık olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu çalışmada, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) kitabından alıntılar incelenerek fotoğraflar, vinyetler ve takip eden anlatılar arasındaki ilişkinin irdelenmesi amaçlanmakta olmakla beraber, bu da otobiyografinin yaşam anlatısı kuramı açısından güvenilirliği konusunun altını çizmektedir. Bu çalışma, Cantú'nun eserinde bağlamsallaştırılan içerik, yapı, kimlik sorunları, gelenek ve görenekler, dini uygulamalar, feminist bakış açısı, dil, politika gibi hem Cantú'nun kişisel yaşamına hem de Meksika kültürüne ilişkin belirli yönleri ele almaktadır.

1. INTRODUCTION

Norma Elia Cantú, born in 1947 in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, and raised in Laredo, Texas, is a prominent Chicana postmodernist writer and professor of English at Trinity University, Texas. Her experiences crossing between Mexico and the United States have profoundly shaped her dual identity as both a writer and scholar. This continuous movement across borders influences her work, as she explores the intersections of these countries' cultures, languages, customs, and identities. The bicultural nature of Cantú's identity is also reflected in the title of her work, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, which incorporates both English and Spanish, emphasizing her engagement with these linguistic and cultural borderlands. The meaning of the word "canícula" in Spanish refers to the time between July 12 and August 13, which is the time period also known as the "'dog days,' the hottest, most sultry days of summer" in Mexico (Portillo, 2011, p. 111). Cantú references her father as a source of knowledge about the significance of the canícula, the period spanning "July 14 and August 24." This timeframe, as Cantú (1995) learned from her father, carries cultural and seasonal importance, woven into the rhythms of daily life along the border (p. xii). Moreover, she states at the introductory part of her book that *Canícula* is the second book of the trilogy; the first work is *Papeles de Mujer*, which is entirely in Spanish and the third work is *Cabanuelas* (Cantú, 1995, p. xi). All three books depict Cantú's family stories on different periods of time.

For some critics, *Canícula*, in terms of Cantú's writing style and structure, does not belong to the traditional autobiography genre. Her writing style is appreciated due to her distinctive genre which is coined by Cantú (1995) as "fictional autobioetnography" (p. xi). Cucher (2018) defines the distinctiveness of her unique style from traditional autobiographies, observing that

> the former [fictional autobioetnography] uses biographical and fictive elements to create a Chicana feminist voice for telling stories (without necessarily attempting to reconcile) not only generic categories and disciplines but also national, cultural, and linguistic borders. (p. 93)

Similar to canícula, peak days of summer, in Cantú's "fictional autobioethnography," the photos and memories are from her life's important moments written in a designed frame. However, some critics claim that her writings are full of autobiographical discrepancies, categorizing the book as more fictional rather than being authentic autobiography, which is claimed to be true-to-the-bone and all factual. As Cantú (1995) observes, while some stories

might be fictional others might be "truer than true" (p. xi). In light of this, it is particularly hard to limit *Canícula* only to the autobiography genre. Furthermore, Cantú's life writing, *Canícula* becomes exceptionally challenging to claim complete factual autobiography since the problematic issues such as the creation of an identity and the adversities of living on the borderland, politics and cultural differences on both sides as well as Chicana feminism and being a girl in a patriarchal household and community are scrutinized through memories and photographs.

2. BORDERS BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

This blending of fact and fiction within Cantú's work highlights a broader shift in literary discourse, one in which the boundaries between reality and fiction become increasingly fluid—a shift that has been significantly amplified by postmodernism. However, with postmodernism, the line became blurred. With life writing theory, one can say the line between autobiography and fiction is thinner more than the past to the point that it is almost invisible as the theory bends and plays with the reality. Silke Schmidt depicts a metaphor for this problematic situation in her chapter titled "Life Writing Theory: Constructing Life, Claiming Authenticity." She demonstrates that the solid ground on which the house is built is the reality and the house on the ground is the autobiographical account. When the ground, which is the reality, begins to shake, the life writing which is already built upon the shaky-ground can demolish. However, she claims that by contemplating on the rubbles of it, the house can still be recognizable (Schmidt, 2014, p. 47). Thus, the life writing theory observes this very phenomenon and in Cantú's case, she shakes the ground deliberately from the very beginning stating: "In *Canícula*, the story is told through photographs, and so what may appear to be autobiographical is not always so. On the other hand, many of the events are completely fictional, although they may be true in a historical context" (Cantú, 1995, p. xi). In fact, after reading this statement, readers become skeptical about the truth of the stories told by Cantú. Given postmodernism's tendency to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, her stories in this presumable altered reality could also be fictitious. In doing so, Cantú provides the authenticity effect. Readers enter a state of questioning reality.

In her article in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader,* Cantú (2003) states the fact that by the time she wrote the book, she did not have the photographs with her and she wrote what she remembers about the photographs from her memories (p. 103). Therefore, the truth could be entirely different from what she recalls but as she puts: "As in most fiction, many of the

characters and situations in these three works originate in real people and events, and become fictionalized" (Cantú, 1995, p. xi). Both in postmodernism and the life writing theory, the idea of continuous questioning of reality and fictionality becomes very prominent because every idea that is written can be biased and its fate is in the hands of its creator/writer. About the life writing theory, Hart (1970) utters, "the interpreter has no business assuming that certain types and persistences of "I" are more "truly autobiographical" than other" (p. 492). In autobiographical works, there are "versions of self" which make the interpretation process and accountability issue problematic (Hart, 1970, p. 492). From the perspective of some critics and readers, this results in not only unreliability but also fictionality. According to Birkhofer (2012), this is the "disjointed nature to the work" because for Cantú, this "disjointed nature" is created by growing up part U.S. and part Mexico. This is the reason why her works are part fictional and part factual (p. 49).

Structurally, one can effortlessly claim that *Canícula* conflicts with traditional way of writing an autobiography. According to Spender (1980), autobiography can be very simplistically defined as "the story of one's life written by himself" (p.115). However, this could be both authentic and fictional or reliable and unreliable. The reason for this, according to Schmidt (2014), is "writing the *self* does not exclude the process of invention – the invention of the *self* and the invention of the *other*" (p. 48). In other words, depending on a memory or what is left in photographs could influence the judgements of the writer. Cantú is writing about her childhood self from the perception of her current self. During this writing process, it may also be claimed that the autobiographical account cannot be from her childhood perception. In other words, this could also be a method of inventing different versions of herself and her memories in various periods of time in her life. For instance, at the beginning of the book, it can be observed that a map of Mexico and the U.S. where she spends her childhood (both the north part of Mexico and the south part of Texas). The map is hand-drawn and while reading the book, readers constantly require to turn back and look at the places which Cantú mentions. Annette Portillo (2011), in her essay titled "Writing Photomemories: Crossing Borders, Crossing Genres in Norma E. Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*" states:

> 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. (p. 87)

Similar to Cantú's rewriting process of her childhood, the fact that the map is hand-drawn shows that it is Cantú's method of playing with the borders in the field where she obtains ultimate authority. Birkhofer (2012) explains what the map symbolizes and states:

> [The map] highlights the unnatural borders between the U.S. and Mexico that split families in two, then perhaps Cantú's *Canícula* is her response to this unnatural border, a work that contains numerous unnatural borders between text and image, nation and citizen, memory and history. (p. 55)

In cartography, borders are supposed to be precise, however, Cantú does not have those factual concerns because it is part fictional and part factual. These borders between "text and image, nation and citizen, memory and history" are purposefully distorted by Cantú just as the border between reality and fantasy.

The book comprises eighty-five chapters, though categorizing them as traditional chapters is challenging, given that each is only two to three pages in length. Besides, Cantú presents photographs every other two or three chapters. At times, even in the absence of an actual photograph within a section, Cantú provides a detailed description of a photograph in that section. The photographs are used for giving authenticity, but as Cantú (1995) states in the introduction part: "Instead it is a collage of stories gleaned from photographs randomly picked, not from a photo album chronically arranged, but haphazardly pulled from a box of photos where time is blurred" (p. xii). Therefore, the photograph is displayed and yet the readers read Cantú's description of the photograph. By depicting these photographs, Cantú presents her interpretation of the given photograph, event, and the stories she recalls from her past. Consequently, it remains problematic for readers to determine the extent to which her stories are based on actual events.

The presence of photographs in the book is for authenticity but she recalls the stories behind the photographs from her memories. Hart (1970) gives an explanation to this starting, "perspective implies access, and the autobiographer's limited and erratic access to the past and present of that ambiguous "I" implies the problem of the form and authority of personal memory" (p. 492). The photograph from one's past, whenever it is observed, should bring back different feelings and memories related to the person's perspective at the time. It is because the photograph might be the same, however, each time the onlooker may be different with new

memories which affect the person's cognition. Likewise, Price (1994) states: "What is said about a photograph depends on what is perceived by the viewer" and for Cantú, it is the case of her writing style (p. 172). Moreover, relying on personal memories in time could be deceptive even with the presence of photographs. The writer's process of remembering can be altered with photographs. In other words, there can be multiple versions of the same memory with the presence and absence of the photographs. In *Canícula*, memory's reliability can also be disturbed with the discrepancies on vignettes of photos.

For some critics, these discrepancies produce some problematic issues in biographical writing. Adams, in his article, "'Heightened by Life' vs. 'Paralyzed by Fact': Photography and Autobiography in Norma Cantú's *Canícula*," engages with the issue of the discrepancies between photographs and vignettes. He claims that photographs appear to be genuine but the vignettes have "small discrepancies," as exemplified in the snapshots named "Tino," "Bueli," "Dahlia Two" and "Body Hair" (Adams, 2001, p. 60). Besides, Adams (2001) claims that all these contradictions brand the book as more of a fictional work and detract the work from being an authentic autobiography, saying: "Considering the way the words contradict the images, perhaps then *Canícula* should be taken more as fiction than life writing" (p. 64). On the other hand, Birkhofer (2012) explains the situation as: "The photographs and vignettes live in a symbiotic relationship with one another, each revealing and hiding certain facts, details, stories, points of view in a constant tension between the story and the people frozen in time in the photographs" (p. 52). Thus, she claims that there is more than what is displayed, drawing attention to the shared trauma which is experienced by these people in between borders. In this regard, she utters: "The discrepancies that Adams notes are striking, and evoke in the reader a destabilized relationship with the novel (image and text)" (Birkhofer, 2012, p. 53). In other words, these discrepancies between the photographs and proses that define them do not match and this is to make the reader alert and readers enter a process of constant questioning the reality that the book presents. Birkhofer (2012) says: "The work highlights discrepancies and, instead of teasing out the parts that don't match up, Cantú unveils deep structures of language and image in her work" (p. 55). As a postmodern "autobioetnography," *Canícula* offers a new perspective to the readers towards autobiographies whereas for some traditional autobiography readers, it is a fictional work.

2.1. IDENTITY ON THE BORDERLANDS

Attending to its content, Cantú tells her stories through photographs and these stories are related to both Cantú and her family, and from a broader perspective, the community and Mexico. In the book, there is the problematic issue of belonging. She does not feel that she belongs anywhere, which can also be observed in *Canícula*: "And in 1948 crossing meant coming home, but not quite" (Cantú, 1995, p. 5). In addition, there is a border between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo; Laredo is in the U.S. borders and Nuevo Laredo is in Mexico's border. While crossing between these two places, people lose their belongings. As Cantú clarifies, her grandfather would, with the help of corrupt officials, bring what he could across the border. Additionally, the family would often need to cross the border to access the market. She recounts in her book that

> dark aguacates [avocados] which he carefully cuts in half, satisfying U.S. Department of Agriculture requirements he extracts the pit so we can legally cross them to the United States and closes them again, like fine carved wood boxes. We carefully count out the money, figuring out the exchange pesos to dollars. … During those times the trips to Laredo, Mexico, are put on hold, only for emergencies do we cross—to see the doctor, to visit an ill relative, or to pay a manda at Santa Nino de Atocha Church. (Cantú, 1995, p. 8)

Thus, they are required to make sure that they have their papers prepared so that they can bring the goods that they have bought. Moreover, crossing the border poses significant challenges for them. These restrictions and the need to traverse between places also affect their identity and sense of belonging to one side of the border. Even seeing the doctor or visiting their patients is not something they can do regularly. Only in emergency situations, they can go to the other side of the border:

> 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 as "Who am I?" and then go and cut my hair standing there in front of the mirror, … this one stabled to a document that claims I am a Mexican citizen so I can travel with Mamagrande into Mexico without my parents. (Cantú, 1995, p. 21)

Furthermore, there are identity issues in Cantú's life. The quotation above demonstrates the problematic situation regarding the issue of identity. According to Hart (1970), initially, it is crucial to define, the type of "I" that is being selected by the writer. Hart claims that forms of

"I" include, "inductive invention" or "intentional creation" but besides that it has to be defined whether it is "one single "I" or one multiple "I"' (p. 492). For Cantú, "I" sometimes means a Mexican "I" and sometimes an American "I," along with standing for an authentic "I" and sometimes a fictional "I." Besides signaling her life and writings, the "I" she uses could even be interpreted as the Mexican nation. Portillo (2011) gives an example of this singular/plural "I," stating: "Cantú's work transcends our national way of thinking about life stories, because her narrative is not singular, but rather connected to family memories, oral history, and photographs" (p. 85).

Cantú is of Mexican descent, however, she cannot easily identify herself as a Mexican without bringing out her American side. In her autobiographical essay titled "Fronteriza Consciousness: The Site and Language of the Academy and of Life," later in her life, she states: "That semitropical land of south Texas shaped me as much as the DNA I inherited from my parents, their parents, and the many generations back" (Cantú, 2007, p. 234). However, in the book, when she is sent to the U.S. part of the border for education, she experiences an identity crisis even more. In the book, she utters: "And holding Quico's hand, I pose in front of the blackboard with the alphabet running across the top, with the U.S. flag we pledged allegiance to every morning. Right hand over the heart—I was always getting it wrong, although I wasn't zurda [left-handed]—it still felt 'right' to pledge with the left hand not the right" (Cantú, 1995, p. 33). Being a student in another country not far from her birthplace, Cantú knows and feels that there is something absent, when she is under the U.S. flag. Moreover, she feels conflicted about her identity when she turns back to Mexico, saying: "Cousins. Kind and cruel, ask me to say something in English, I recite, 'I pledge allegiance to the flag…' to sing something, and I sing to them silly nursery rhymes and tell them great songs: Humpty Dumpty, Jack and Jill, Little Miss, Muffet, Old MacDonald" (Cantú, 1995, p. 23). Afterwards, Cantú feels homesick because of her complex identity issues. In addition, she further has a hard time understanding her cousins and she says: "Teach me to ride a bicycle, to barter with the vendors, and I laugh at their jokes even when I don't understand them" (Cantú, 1995, p. 23). As a result, she does not understand Spanish or at least the reference that her cousins make after she spends some time in America. The readers also do not know how much time she spends in the U.S. because there is not any particular information on the duration in her book, although this information is required in order to create an authentic timeline in her bioghraphy. However, the readers learn that her father was born in Texas, and her mother spent some time in the U.S. before she got married. Yet, both do not know how to speak in English. Essentially, these are the inputs that

lead her biography to the fictional side since there is the requirement of certain dates in a traditional autobiography.

On community-based grounds, not only does Cantú write about her personal traumas but she also conveys the ethnic traumas Mexican people experienced in her memories, regarding socio-economic conditions. Cantú gives voice to the problems of her relatives and neighbors, as well. In the community, people suffer from several problems caused by both natural disasters and unnatural situations. For instance, on "The Flood" chapter, the flood devastates the bridge and people's gardens. After the bridge is demolished by this natural phenomenon, they build a new one but it is not a properly-built safe bridge because it is made of wood and rope, rather than concrete. They call this bridge as "the Toy Bridge" (Cantú, 1995, p. 10) underlying its dangerous side. Illnesses and deaths are other natural phenomena from which they constantly suffer. Shedding light on these disasters in her book, not only does Cantú add to the authenticity effect of her biographical memory, but she also explains and informs the readers about the economic problems of her family and community. By naming the chapter as "The Flood" and not as the disaster or naming the unsafe bridge as "the Toy Bridge" also demonstrate that for both Cantú and Mexican culture's positivist approach to life and their hopeful attitudes towards the challenges of life. Similarly, Cantú (1995) says: "Now we fear illness, typhoid, crippling polio, some because of the flood, others whose origins are mysterious. So, we wait for hours and hours standing in line for immunization shots and for water and for more immunization shots that hurt" (p. 10). Similar approach can be observed while they were experiencing these fatal diseases. Cantú elaborates on the situation as if waiting in line for long hours and the pain induced by the shots would be more of a problem than death caused by these fatal diseases. This also serves a similar purpose and it either reinforces the truthfulness and innocence part of a child's perspective as her current memory or it can support the fictional side of her memories. Overall, these chapters could offer valuable insights into the circumstances of the period and through Cantú's memories, fictional or factual, lived experiences of people can be comprehensible to the readers.

In biographical writings, details are essential to illustrate the fictionality and factuality of the life account. In *Canícula*, not only do illnesses occur after the flood, but also when her brother Tino was three, he contracted an illness which was not fatal to him and, eventually, he recovered. However, tragically, later in his life, he goes to the Vietnam War and he dies on duty. In fact, this is a significant detail because throughout the book, Cantú mentions the death of her brother several times. Besides, this tragic event seems to be an unsolved issue in her life.

Under her brother's photograph, she states: "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" (Cantú, 1995, p. 117). Moreover, Cantú blames her father for not keeping him by his side, and her father, in return, blames Cantú, stating that, as the eldest, it is her duty to change her brother's mind about enlisting in the army. Besides, when her mother gives birth to her sister, Esperanza, she also contracts an illness but she gets through this illness and regains her health. Furthermore, in the community, innumerous people pass away due to various illnesses, as well as, murders and incidents. In biographical account, as authors are expected to write detailed information about their lives, Cantú's memories of "those moments of violence and cultural trauma, such as the forced deportation of her family, the death of her brother Tino, the flood" as well as the impacts of these traumas in her family life support the factuality of her life writing (Portillo, 2011, p. 102). Moreover, in Tino's childhood photo, he is shooting his toy gun towards the camera and knowing his death from Cantú's memories, his photograph "becomes even more poignant" (Birkhofer, 2012, p. 52).

In Mexican culture, both family traditions and religious traditions are also significant. In a traditional Mexican family, similar to Cantú's family, female children obtain more responsibility in the household as they advance in age. Which is significant for comprehending her Chicana feministic outlook in her life writing as she is displeased with most of her duties as a female member of her family. Amongst these responsibilities, the elder sister is supposed to take care of her younger brothers and sisters in addition to having other domestic responsibilities. Cantú (1995) remarks:

> I want to carry the baby [Esperanza], bathe her, wake her up, teach her to talk, sing her to sleep as I swing the cradle. A few months later, it's no fun at all to rinse her diapers, burying the mustard yellow mass that stinks worse than rotten eggs and makes my stomach want to come up. I run the tap water straight onto the soiled area, and then pile the diapers into a pail with bleach. (p. 12)

At first, she is keen on taking care of her sister but in time she becomes more of her mother rather than a child herself. In fact, at that time, she is only a seven-year-old girl. From Cantú's recent perspective, it may be claimed that she is writing her memories with the pictures as the oldest child and sister in her family. Similar narrative can also be heard in the previous part where she is putting the responsibility of her brother Tino's death on her father. Besides, writing about her father's claim that she should have changed her brother's mind about enlisting gives

voice to an authentic biography as most of the Mexican families share these responsibilities in the family. However, no individual including Cantú can verify the authenticity of these events with their details as she is writing from her memory, the factuality and the fictionality of her autobiographical account depend on the readers interpretation and their point of view.

Another example is indeed humorous as well as superstitious. In the early years of her puberty, when she was twelve years old, she says: "Anamaria my best friend confides that that is her fear, too, for as oldest sisters we have been carrying babies almost all our short lives; since December we've been consciously shifting the babies from the right to the left so we won't have one breast larger than the other" (Cantú, 1995, p. 22). Thus, they are both oldest sisters in their families and their duty is to hold, carry, and take care of the babies in their families without having proper knowledge or experience. Just as she is about to drop her sister, Azalia from her arms, she catches her by the leg and for years, she suffers from this incident until Azalia grows up and becomes healthy again. Then, Cantú feels proud that she took good care of her. From a broader cultural perspective, they learn to be mature at an early age; correspondingly, this also means that they cease to be children very early. Moreover, considering the challenges experienced by Cantú in early ages, fictional and factual polars do not become the focus of attention on her autobiography. These challenges can be exaggerated (may or may not be deliberate), misremembered, or as factual as they happened recently. This is one of the qualities of writing one's own life, Cantú may not be as objective as a critic towards her own experiences and traumas. Even though, they are children, these children must learn to take care of their baby brothers and sisters and sometimes they teach how to be mother to each other. About this teaching experience, Cucher (2018) says that

> the three friends not only respond the hegemonic gender expectations they face in their own homes, they actually challenge these expectations through demonstrating that childcare has less to do with the biological abilities they possess as women and more to do with how they pool their resources and knowledge. (p. 102)

They only need each other to teach and learn how to care for babies and manage household chores. However, in their families, naturally, they are expected to be good at these tasks because taking care of babies and attending to chores are considered as the duties belonging to females in the family. Inferring from Cantú's memory about fearing of Azalia's health and not fulfilling the meets of her family and community, the pressure it can generate on little girls' lives and their childhoods is also traumatic. Although, it is culturally one of the key duties of the females in the family.

According to Cantú, Mexican community in *Canícula*, hold tight to their traditions, especially the ones mediated by their religion. As Baker (1995) claims: "For most Mexican Americans, religion is an integral part of everyday life" (p. 77). Therefore, they are very deterministic and strictly convey their religious practices, as well. They go to church regularly, even in politics, a Mexican American politician, Sal Trevino claimed that "to be a Mexican American leader you must take an active role in the church" (Baker, 1995, p. 77). Besides, they pray for the goodness of their community after bad events like flood, incidents or illnesses. Similarly, in *Canícula*, after Bueli's (her grandmother) death, they gather and pray for her soul saying: "In the very same room, we prayed around her coffin. The night she was buried I saw her. She sat rocking back and forth on her sillon [chair] in the living room. She told me to take care of the baby… Mami instructs, 'Pray so her spirit can be at peace.' And I do" (Cantú, 1995, pp. 24-25). At her first visit to the church, Cantú becomes quite confused with the concept of confession. She explains her confession as: "My first holy communion. The scolding and all the preparations lessened my fear of going to confession and receiving Jesus—a concept that I never understand so I confessed to the same sins over and over for years—I hit my brothers and sisters, I disobeyed Mami, I told a lie, I didn't say my prayers" (Cantú, 1995, p. 57). In fact, she is skeptical towards the concept and practice of confession, nevertheless, she goes to the church to confess throughout her life. She says that there is a particular cultural way of mourning according to the Latino "code" which is not comprehensible to the individuals outside of this culture (Cantú, 2007, p. 235). In this sense, Mexican funeral traditions also hold a significant ground in their lives. In *Canícula*, Cantú (1995) mentions:

> Every evening right after sunset, we gathered at the Valdezes and knelt, squeezed in their living room where the coffin had been. And we prayed the rosary every night, the mirrors remained covered, the candles lit for those nine days. As we walked back to our own home, Bueli would cross herself and point to a tall cubreviento, but no matter how much I tried, I couldn't see the owl she claimed was there watching us. Sometimes, though, I thought I heard the song the angels sang over and over in my mind. (p. 68)

In fact, this part significantly elucidates their religious and superstitious inclinations simultaneously. Cantú (1995) indicates her culture's perception of religion by asserting, "We had prayed so her dead would find peace. But what I regretted most was missing the visit to the camposanto to visit Buelito's tomb, because you couldn't visit if you were sick or had a wound, even something as minor as a scratch, much less a burn like mine" (p. 70). Prior to their annual

visit to their dead, she burns her leg, therefore, she could not visit that year. When Cantú (1995) tells the story of Lucita, this superstition becomes crystal clear:

> When a gitana [gipsy] approaches her and putting her hand on Lucita's head, proclaims "This child shall die young in tragedy, she will never know sorrow and pain." Mamagrande tries to plead with gitana not to place such a curse on the child, but the gitana insists it is not a curse, but the child's destiny, and nothing can be done about it. … Lucita goes to the corner store with a neighbor girl on an errand. As they pass a neighbor's house the neighbor's son is cleaning his pistol, accidentally fires one shot, the shot meant for her Lucita. It hit her en la cien [in the head], killing her instantly. She was twelve years old. (p.73)

Afterwards, the gipsy's prediction becomes true, and this corresponds itself in the community as a bad omen or the gipsy's curse on the child. By the community, it is also interpreted as the gipsy's talent of reading little girl's future. Besides, the community itself is very deterministic as well. For example, when Cantú's mother figures out that Dona Lupe's daughters are having a love affair with the same man, she says: "Maybe it was God's punishment to her that her daughters share a husband" (Cantú, 1995, p. 100). Therefore, the community is Catholic and in the community's value system, God punishes those Christians who do not follow God's path. For Cantú, as she recalls from her childhood memories, these superstitious events could have happened in reality. On the other hand, there can be the possibility of exaggeration which leads the biography towards more on the fictional side since these memories depend on her perception as a child.

3. CHICANA FEMINISM AND CANTÚ

Through her connection to the U.S. and accordingly, her education on the other side of Mexican border, Cantú also stands out in her community as a Chicana feminist writer. Her distinctive point of view about religion, politics, or her remarks on women's position in her community could be referred in that sense. Cantú obtains her distinctive feminist agenda towards the events that happen around her. According to Baker (1995): "Chicano perspective of masculinity is one that views men woman as having distinct gender roles, with the male having a higher status in male-female relationships" (p. 67). From Cantú's (1995) perspective, it can be stated that she conflicts with this patriarchy and constantly challenges this notion, saying: "The work, endless. From cooking daily meals … to keeping the linens whiter than white, fighting the dust and the grime of life on a ranch of a town" (p. 17). Women are responsible from all the domestic duties and in Cantú's case; they are not only on women but

also specifically on the older sisters of the families. Her mother's life was harsh but Cantú and other girls in the community are still responsible for all these house chores. Similar to Cantú's perspective: "Chicana feminists criticized the notion of the 'ideal Chicana' that glorified Chicanas as strong, long-suffering women who had injured and kept Chicano culture and the family intact" (Garcia, 1989, p. 222). As a little girl, Cantú could not comprehend her responsibilities in her family and she also criticizes the placements of women in her own family, specifically her mother and her grandmother.

Chicana feminists as well as Cantú with her current point of view, "believed that a focus on cultural survival did not acknowledge the need to alter male-female relations within Chicano communities" (Garcia, 1989, p. 222). Cantú also criticizes herself from one of her autobiographical accounts. She is asked to write a cowboy story and when she reminiscences at that story with her current state of mind, she is embarrassed saying:

> I received the story back with the judges' comments, which I have erased from my memory, but one thing I remember about the story is that it had no female characters and the cowboy, the hero, saved the day for his friend and killed the bad guys in a shoot-out—not very creative and quite predictable given the models in the form of movies and shows I was watching. (Cantú, 1995, p. 34)

Cantú wrote that story with no female characters and in this anecdote, it can be easily claimed that she blames the patriarchal society which is legitimized through movies and stories. Cucher (2018) says: "Image and text also work together to describe the process and institutions through which children in the United States are taught to worship the image of the white male hero" (p. 100). In her book, Cantú also mentions that there is a rape incident which happens to one of her childhood friends. Her friend Lucy is raped by a man, named Tom, who owned a store with her wife, who wears cowboy boots and chews tobacco all the time. Lucy gets pregnant and she is doomed to raise her child on her own. For Cucher (2018), the reason that there is no photograph in these chapters is that these characters, "like so many of the characters in *Canícula*, is based on a person (or a combination of people) from Cantú's life, publishing an image of her as a young woman could further expose to her to the predation of the male gaze" (p. 103). Although absence of images may deteriorate the factuality of Cantú's life writing, it can also support her Chicana feminist attitude, and it helps her give voice to not for a victim but all women who are victimized by similar acts. Besides it can demonstrate Cantú's own priorities and control over her biography and to what extent she exposes her life for her readers. Furthermore, Cantú (1995) expresses her repulsion against Tom by saying, "I don't like cowboy boots. I don't wear cowboy

boots, and in fact when I see a man, especially an Anglo, wearing cowboy boots, I cringe, react like I do when someone scratches the chalkboard with their nails" (p. 118). In fact, she demises him. Cucher (2018) mentions this situation in Mexican popular culture as well, saying: "Mexican film project their own problematic gender relations when they represent men as active heroes who sing and woo their way through story lines in which women appear as passive objects of sexual desire" (p. 101). Thus, even Mexican culture partakes these codes in their popular culture. Overall, Cantú's input about her story without any female heroes in it and the man in cowboy boots, Tom and the rape incident gather her life writing around her feminist agenda and serve both for fictionality and factuality as these events may or may not have occurred in her life.

The language that Cantú uses in her life as well as in her book is mixed as her life between borders. Her sentences include both Spanish and English words and structures. For instance, in "Santa Maria" chapter, when her father buys a new car, they go out for a test drive. When a police officer stops them, her father says, "Papi stops and yes, the police officer asks for his license. But Papi sweet-talks him in to letting him go with a warning—'Andamos estrenando carro, so we were testing it,' he says … 'Bueno, if you say you're estrenando and you're only testing it, but be sure not to drive that fast, okay?'" (Cantú, 1995, p. 103). Cantú tells her story both in Spanish and in English because she experiences this bilingual, two-sided life throughout her childhood. Portillo (2011) claims: "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" (p. 110). Correspondingly, Baker (1995) states: "One's language assists in creating and sustaining one's identity" (p. 68). In light of this, individually or as a community, language is a part of both individual identity and identity as a community. Besides, the broadcast serves this bilingual narrative in language. Cantú (1995) states that there were only two channels on radio, "one from Laredo in English and one from Nuevo Laredo in Spanish" (p. 25). In her book chapter, Cantú (2007) herself says, "I am lucky to live and work in the place where I feel at home, where people speak my Spanglish" (p. 236). She calls this hybridity as "Spanglish," and this is another indicator of this created borderland culture about which she writes around the border. For Baker: "many Mexican Americans 'code switch.' In code switching a person uses both English and Spanish interchangeably because the languages do not always express the same things; different languages create different social realities" (1995, p. 68). Given that this border community, obtain two cultures, two languages, and two social realities, they can

express themselves with both English and Spanish. For a community on borders, one language is not adequate for expressing their complex identity of their community.

Cantú claims that she does not understand the way politics works but her perspective towards it is rather skeptical and she questions politics at that time. In this regard, the chapter called "Politicos" is one of the significant chapters in the book. In the chapter, Cantú (1995) says:

> At twenty-one I'll still ask why and rebel, and won't give my vote to the machine. Papi shrugs, "We'd vote Democrat, anyway. And this way if the smelter lays off again, I may get a job with the county." I don't understand. Remain angry at the machine, the bosses who control, who deprive. The politicos. Our money lines their pockets, paves private roads on their ranches, while our streets unpaved, run like rivers after every rain, while our public library remains as small as someone's private library, while the dropout rate remains between 50 and 80 percent; while judges, mayors, sheriffs, high and low powerful ones abuse, rape, embarrass, harass, taunt, demean women. I see the pain, the hopelessness, the survival strategies of the poor. At eighteen, I can't forgive. At eight I ponder what makes men so important. (pp. 30-31)

Cantú criticizes the government for the services they are supposed to receive, the corruption in politics, and poverty as well as women related issues. As a part of her autobiographical approach, it can be claimed that she explains her life from all these different aspects. However, when it is comprehended that this can rather be for creating the authenticity effect. From her stance regarding the political affairs, she has always been a rebellious, an activist, and a feminist from the very early ages. She states: "And I march to Austin protesting with the farmworkers; march in rallies protesting Vietnam, march for the ERA; wonder what else I can do, a lowly office clerk, wear a Cesar Chavez button, read Marx" (Cantú, 1995, p. 31). At that time, she works at an office as a clerk from nine to five. Cucher (2018) states, "Azucena embodies the feminist adage that the personal is political, putting her personal, familial knowledge to use in the pursuit of social justice" (p. 103).

Between pages eighty-seven to one hundred-four, we do not see photographs but we still have stories about the parts of Cantú's life. This shows that the book has both fictional or factual aspects. Absence of pictures can be apprehended as signaling women's unbearable, cannot-be-shown lives or the fictionality of the stories. About one of the chapters without a picture, Cucher (2018) articulates: "This may appear to reinforce the notion that women's lives (especially the

lives of the women in Azucena's family and community) are unpresentable in relation to the ubiquitous mythology of the Texas gunslinger" (p.101). Thus, the absence of photographs may also contain much more meaning such as the unpresentable, inexpressible life of those borderland people. Throughout her life, as the book similarly displays, Cantú lives and feels her life on the borders. The fact that she has lived on both sides of the border demonstrates the hybridity of her life and at times, she prefers not to be stuck in this dichotomy.

In her essay, Birkhofer (2012) claims, "by including the map of the border and intentionally ambiguous descriptions of it, readers are unclear as to which way the family is crossing" (p. 49). As in the aforementioned quotation, from the very beginning of the book, she demonstrates a pseudo-fact which is the drawn map and then she plays with the factual references. Not only have the photographs and vignettes discrepancies in the book but Cantú also contradicts herself. For instance, she claims not to know much about politics although she took an active part in politics in her entire life. Besides, most of her traumatic memories such as her friend Lucy's rape and the outcomes of this incident, her responsibilities in her family as a little girl, and place of women in family and in Mexican community are related to Chicana feminist agenda more than general problems related to her community, supporting Cucher's (2018) idea of "the personal is political" (p. 103). Throughout the book, she holds this critical stance on some recurring themes such as the domestic relations and power distributions both in her family and in Mexican community. Naturally, she expresses general problems related to Mexican and Mexican American communities such as educational and language problems, political issues, and problems derived from unreceived services although they gather around the lives of women in her community then lives of members in her community.

Although *Canícula* is an autobiography addressing memories and integrating fact and fiction; on closer examination, there is nothing in the book related to Cantú's personal life. Readers do not know any explicit details about her personal life except for some of her family members and her friends. Cantú (1995) only briefly mentions her boyfriend saying, "and those summer afternoons recruiting shoeshine boys and dreaming of a different life, a life married to Rene, a beauty shop all my own, a two-story house in front of a neighborhood plaza, a life as a Mexican" (p. 129). Cantú does not want to marry Rene and does not want to be a beautician but she still wonders about how her life would turn out to be if she chose that path. As her life between borders of the U.S. and Mexico, she says her borders between love and hate is blurred, as well. Cantú (1995) ends her book saying, "some of us never leave and some of us never come

back. Some of us keep coming back. Some of us love, and some of us hate, some of us both love and hate our borderlands. Some of us remember, some of us forget" (p. 132).

4. CONCLUSION

In his essay, Adams (2001) claims that Cantú is similar to traditional autobiographers who need her book to be considered as "an authentic representation of her Chicana childhood," however, in the meantime, she does not desire to displease her family members who might say that it is all fictional (p. 66). As is implied above, this is precisely how life writing theory functions, since it constantly challenges some unchangeable notions such as truth, reality, and history. As Cucher (2018) states that "[autobioetnography] is a way to understand the methodology Cantú uses to construct subtle yet subversive alternatives to conventional literary genres and to Anglocentric, patriarchal representations of the Mexico-Texas borderlands" (p. 92). For traditional autobiographers, these notions are considered to be facts but the theory itself bends and plays with the factuality. Although she remarks on various problematic issues regarding her community, she mostly draws attention to women's life challenges in Mexican American culture in her life writing. As Cucher (2018) states "[the book is] dedicated to recovering women's voices from historical structures of oppression" (p. 93). Overall, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* by Norma Elia Cantú is an autobioethnography which describes Cantú's and many more people's difficult lives on the borderlands. By explaining the life on the borders, she sheds light on her family's and her past as well as Mexican life experience on the border of the U.S. As Cantú (1995) conveys, some of her memories are fictional and some of them are "truer than true" (p. xi). With the presence of photographs and vignettes, *Canícula* can be considered as factual as a traditional autobiography. However, the fact that the book and stories are written without the photographs; and, the photographs are added later; in addition to the unreliability of past memories, illustrate that there is probability of fictionality in her work, as accepted by Cantú, as well.

Information Note

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the postmodern world with constant changes and instabilities, there are several literary genres that have been considered unalterable. Amongst these genres, life writing and autobiographical account writing are in the forefront and they are exceedingly open to discussion by critics in the field. With the life writing theory, the possibility of playing with the clear-cut boundaries between fact and fiction becomes prominent. Within this scope, the distinct and evident border between reality and fiction has commenced to be demolished by some autobiography writers. As a Chicana feminist writer, Norma Elia Cantú is one of these reformist writers whose life has also been on the borders of the United States of America and Mexico. This form of location-based autobiography is called, in Cantú's terms, as "autobioetnography." In her novel, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), Cantú demonstrates life on the borderlands and the destruction of the boundaries between fact and fiction by utilizing photographs from her past. Through applying the photographs and vignettes to the narration, she contributes to the authenticity effect. Conversely, for some critics, there are minor inconsistencies between the photographs and the prose underneath them and this discolors the reliability of the life account. In a similar vein, Cantú neither accepts the fictionality in her narrative nor she denies it. This is considered to be controversial by traditional autobiography writers. In this study, there are scrutinized excerpts from *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) which are aimed to examine the relationship between the photographs, vignettes, and the following texts which, in return, underlines the issue of reliability in her autobiography in terms of the life writing theory. This study looks into certain aspects which are contextualized in Cantú's work, such as content, structure, identity issues, customs and traditions, religious practices, feminist point of view, language, and politics regarding both her personal life and the Mexican culture.

Experimenting with the borders of writing autobiography, Cantú challenges both the genre's and her personal borders. Providing the information on not obtaining the photographs in the process of writing *Canícula,* she consciously makes her readers suspicious about the reliability of factuality, which is a part of both postmodernism and the life writing theory. To what extent the factuality and fictionality of her memories are based on her authentic memoirs still remains as a conundrum. Writing about herself from a retrospective supports the claim that, in the process of writing, she re-experiences her childhood from her current perspective. Although without the presence of photographs in this process, in a way, Cantú re-writes herself, starting from her childhood towards her current self. Besides, this leads to the formation of

multiple versions of herself in different versions of her memories. According to some critics, the discrepancies between some of the photographs and their vignettes lead her work to be categorized as fiction, although for some, these conflicts are purposely set forth by Cantú to offer a new perspective.

Cantú's and her family's lives, as well as Mexican community's living conditions on the borderlands at the time, are primarily the factors that construct her identity on both sides of the border. Although her educational life on the American side of the border leaves a shaken sense of belonging in her childhood, she reminisces about her childhood through photographs and accepts those memories and feelings as a part of her current identity. In *Canícula*, Cantú demonstrates both the traditional and religious Mexican community of her childhood, and the Chicana feminist and highly political part of herself. From her childhood memories, she exemplifies the gender roles forced by traditional Mexican families which include both her own and her friends', in addition to the responsibilities of little girls in those families. As she writes about her childhood memories, she also criticizes women's place, traumas, and the inefficiency of politics in her community.

From a broader perspective, it can be claimed about Cantú that her memories are authentic and genuine; however, when her work is scrutinized, there are various potentials for criticisms prove the opposite. With the fluidity of fact and fiction amplified by postmodernism and the life writing theory's possibility of bending and playing with these boundaries, Cantú's childhood photographs and memories on them can congregate around the Chicana feminist agenda making people conscious about the occurrences on the borderlands. Dissimilar to traditional autobiography writing with authentic inputs, *Canícula* may be claimed to be more on the fictional side due to its structure and the lack of personal details.