

Hoyt Street: An Autobiography or Una Memoria de Desplazamiento
or A Communo- Biography

Esra Sahtiyancı Öztarhan

The memory is a mysterious--and powerful--thing. It forgets what we want most to remember, and retains what we often wish to forget. We take from it what we need (Ponce ix).

Memory is especially powerful for people who never had the opportunity to live in their homelands. Therefore longing for a past, remembering friends and family creates an "imaginary homeland", where the diasporic people feel they belong somewhere. Memory as a reinvention of one's past has multiple intentions whether conscious or not. First of all, remembering is a necessity, which emerges out of constructing the dissolved, lost and manipulated past (Seyhan 4). The act of remembering has a double function of both trying to narrate what has happened with names, numbers and dates as well as an act of creating a past, as one perceives or wants it to be. The purpose of creating a past may fill the gaps of the untold history. According to Seyhan, the narrative of displacement "is a narrative about narratives, more specifically, it is an investigation of stories and histories that recuperate losses incurred in migration, dislocation, and translation those deeply felt signs and markers of our age" (Seyhan 4). Such narratives are challenges to the dominant discourses.

The act of creating one's past may simply satisfy the psychological need of belonging. This function of remembering is further explained in *Memory and Cultural Politics*. The disillusionment of immigrant generations results in an attempt to recover their ethnic past. This conscious effort of remembering causes a collective memory to be in flux and to experience multiple memories (Singh 6).

Hoyt Street: An Autobiography is what Mexican American Mary Helen Ponce remembers of her life between early childhood, in Pacoima, northeast of Los Angeles, California. The narration of her past, is an attempt at finding a place to belong more than the political act of creating a counter discourse. Salman Rushdie claims that emigrants create fictions as imaginary homelands because of the loss they feel (quoted in Seyhan 3). Mary Ponce as a Chicana felt the same loss of belonging to a home to call her own in United States as a second generation immigrant. Therefore she has created her narrative of displacement as a communo-biography where she belongs and feels safe.

Öztarhan

Technical terms abound for people whose lives are forced to live outside of their actual homelands such as exilic, ethnic, migrant, diasporic, transnational, hyphenated or deterritorialized peoples. According to Azade Seyhan, life on a hyphen creates a space for this people to live in their memories, as they have no actual homelands here or there (Seyhan 15). Border theory creates another imaginary space, where Mexican Americans live in their created memories. The compulsory separation of Mexican American immigrants between United States and Mexico establishes a new culture distinct from both the American or Mexican cultures. It resembles the double consciousness concept of W.E.B Du Bois, which formulated African American experience, being both African and American at the same time. For Mexican American immigrants the case became more complicated as they form a peculiar "border culture" on the barbwire belonging to neither culture. Mexicans who have migrated to the United States and have become United States citizens long for their motherland, their distinct culture and history but at the same time become foreigners to their own Mexican culture while living in the United States. They form a cultural minority in a no-man's land. This border situation is much more difficult for the Mexican American woman who faces a double oppression from both cultures and who is a female immigrant. These women literally live on the border of two cultures. Anzaldúa calls this new culture and identity for Mexican American women as the new *mestiza consciousness*.

In *Borderlands/ La Frontera* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa writes about this borderland between the United States' Southwest and the Mexican border and the emotional effects this has on Chicanas. This physical border divides both the land now belonging to two different countries as well as the people who now have to live literally on the border:

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a pueblo, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me...
This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire (Anzaldúa 2-3).

The actual borderland also creates an emotional or an imaginary space as Anzaldúa mentions in the poem cited above. The metaphor of borderland does not occupy a single space or a single geographical location, so it is subject to many interpretations (Rotger 44). The Mexican American experience of belonging nowhere creates a need for an imaginary homeland too, just like Mary Helen Ponce's narrative. The depiction of her life in her memoir seems to focus only on what has happened in her childhood; but it is indeed the communo-biography of her childhood. The actual borderland for Ponce is the Mexican American barrio in Hoyt Street in Pacoima in the late 1940s. It is a farm worker's community, its people living in simple and poor houses with numerous children and relatives who have migrated to the United States. Their living conditions are quite difficult especially

Hoyt Street: An Autobiography

with regards to their crowded homes. There are children to be fed, sent to school and that need to be taken care. Besides Mexican Americans are the underpaid laborers in California. So Chicanos use every opportunity, like seasonal jobs to make a living. Life for Chicana mothers is also hard, as they lose their health after having so many children and the daily drudgery of their lives.

Ponce's family lives in a crowded home. Her parents, Tranquilino Ponce and Vicenta Solís decide to sleep in separate bedrooms, after they have borne 11 children (Ponce 8). The kids are of various ages, of different weights and heights and having all shades of color: from light olive to dark olive (13). Ponce's narrative is the story of growing up poor in the barrio. Her parents were so poor they could not even afford medical expenses. Many Mexican Americans die of tuberculosis as a result of malnutrition and the poor living conditions they live under. Poverty and lack of education determine the options available to her community (57). Despite these hardships, the good memories experienced in her community enable her to forget the hardships of being a Chicana in the 1940s.

The children, relatives at home, neighbors, people at the church, friends at school, even the relatives who live far from them constitute the community to which Helen belongs. As a minority group, discriminated in United States for decades, the strong communal ties constitute the feeling of solidarity in a borderland, in which they feel as if they were legal aliens. Her autobiography includes long chapters where she describes each and every member of her family, as well as relatives, neighbors and friends. *Hoyt Street* as a communo-biography is a detailed remembrance of the lives of Mexican Americans living in the barrio. As Seyhan argues, the narratives of dislocation result from crisis and change, and they suffer either from loss of memory or too much remembering (Seyhan 4).

Helen remembers a happy childhood in which she is surrounded by other Mexican Americans living in a paradise-like environment. She recalls playing in tree houses, in gardens full of flowers and fruits (11). She creates her cultural space in the past. However, she does not remember the suffering and pain experienced by her community as narrated in other Mexican American novels. She depicts a happy life in her community, surrounded by her people and not interacting with other races, especially whites or Anglo Americans. This creates a safe space within the narrative.

Besides creating safety in an imaginary past, Ponce's communo-biography also serves to enhance Mary Helen's personal development and is useful for reinventing one's self. The journey back in time, to one's past enables the writer to find one's place not separated from one's ethnic community. Defining one's self within the community, not as a separate individual but a self in relation to her ethnic roots, tends to be an important characteristic of much of the literature written by women of color. Mary Ponce's narrative examines the adolescent years of the writer which are her formative years.

According to Phinney and Rosenthal, the internalization of ethnic identity as a safe haven for transnational communities emerges and develops similar to the ego

Öztarhan

formation of children (Phinney and Rosenthal 150-151). The first stage, especially the early years of childhood, is an unrecognized ethnic identity, where encounters with negative attitudes towards one's community determine the commitment to one's ethnic group. Feelings of belonging to an ethnic group, are not derived independently, but are derived from the larger community, family or neighbors. This will result in an undeveloped ethnic identity. Later at a certain time in the second developmental stage, ethnic adolescence explores what it means to belong to an ethnic group. The new experiences, learning different cultures, meeting the prejudices of society may be the different reasons for this awakening. The final stage is the resolution stage of the conflicts caused by their ethnic roots. This would be the recognition of one's peculiar ethnic identity, which is also called internalization.

Mary Ponce passes through these stages in her book. Her book is divided into 37 short chapters, which are further grouped under three main parts, entitled: Innocence, Reason and Knowledge. These parts as their names imply, exhibit the development of Mary Helen. In the first part, Innocence, Mary Helen introduces her community; she mentions her family and other Mexican Americans close to her, in chapters like: Hoyt Street, la familia, Dona Luisa, la doctora Barr, the three trinidads, Uncle Rosario. This chapter explores the early childhood years where her first encounters with Mexican American society takes place. She has not yet developed a sense of ethnic identity as she doesn't have relationships with anyone other than her close circle.

Being Chicana is not important for Mary Helen, she doesn't even care for her name:

Although I liked my Spanish name, I was never attached to it. While my friends and I spoke Spanish all the time, we liked our names in English best, never questioning teachers who, rather than struggle with our "foreign" names, quickly deduced their American counterparts and entered them on our school records. In time we identified only with our names in English and even forgot how to spell our Spanish names (35).

This first part, exhibits the good old days when Ponce as an innocent child was unaware of problems she will face in the racist world. Her memories of those years were simple details of her ordinary life. The Hoyt Street was a safe haven for her.

The second stage and also the second chapter of the book, is when she begins to discover a life other than the life in Hoyt Street. As a result of this interaction she begins to get closer to her community at this particular stage in her life. The chapters about her family and the church, emphasize an important element in her personal development which is the recognition and acceptance of her ethnic culture. In this part, there are several chapters on Mexican American traditions, culture and life she writes about their everyday routines, the food they eat, how they work in the farms and the handicrafts of her mother. Many chapters include Mexican American beliefs and rituals, the ceremonies at church, funerals, holy days, religious education, many details of Catholic life. The closer she gets to her culture, the more she begins to doubt about it as well. As this developmental stage requires the questioning phase for the child:

Hoyt Street: An Autobiography

At times Father Mueller preached about Jesus Christ confused me. He was already dead and in heaven, but on Good Friday he would once more be put on the cross. Although he was only recently born (during Christmas) and was barely three months old, he grew quite fast (He *was* a God!) and now a grown man, destined to die on the cross! Everything was too confusing! Still Father Mueller stresses that we as Catholics must believe, have faith, and not ask too many questions (145).

She begins to realize that there is a determined place for Chicanas in her culture; which she is yet free as a child. But she could not help but wonder about her place as a Chicana:

In the Catholic church, I saw, all the important people were men. God the Father, Jesus Christ, Saint Joseph, Moses, Adam. And even the dreaded Lucifer! I was never sure about the Holy Ghost, as we didn't have a book on ghosts, but I assumed that it too was male. The popes, men with funny Latin names of Pius, Innocent, and Urban were hombres." (191).

Besides learning about the Mexican American culture, she also begins her limited interaction with the outer world in her early adolescence. The first chapter about first days at school, is also the time when she first experiences racism and discrimination. Ponce writes: "...at times we felt like second-class citizens with our funny customs, hard-to-pronounce names, and bad English. At school we were constantly told: 'Speak English, English only. You're not in Mexico now'"(121). These first encounters with the world other than her community, enlightens Ponce more about her place: "We lived in two worlds: The secure barrio that comforted and accepted us, and the Other, the institutions such as school that were out to sanitize, Americanize, and delice us at least once a year, usually in the spring, when everything hatched, including lice" (121).

The Mexican American community living in Hoyt Street have some health problems due to their living conditions, and lice is one of them. In her school, lice is found on the hair of some Chicanas, which increases the prejudiced attitudes of teachers and students towards them.

It seems that lice were part of our culture, along with poverty, shabby homes, low paying jobs, and too, too many children. It seems that we Mexican Americans, as we were then called, had so many things wrong with us that I wondered why it was we were happy... I lived what I felt was a good life. We felt content and could not understand why we had to be singled out as a group when it was suspected that one of us had lice (122).

Such negative attitudes towards her community raise feelings of belonging and solidarity for the first time in her personal development. Mary Helen feels so sad when the nurses could not find any lice on her hair. She wants to be a part of other Chicana girls with lice. For her being Chicana, belonging to the community requires facing discrimination together:

Öztarhan

We were once more together and could seek consolation from each other. We smiled as we walked...the shame was over...this experience was part of our culture, of being Mexican American-like having black hair and brown eyes. The inspections went with our identity, as did the yellow slips we wore home as badges of honor (124-5).

Third stage is the knowledge phase, the final reconciliation with her community. It is her recognition that she belongs to her community with all its odds and ends. She is powerful and happy with "black heads pressed together, sharing secrets, sharing life" (125). The final phase also includes the knowledge that, the world is hostile to Mexican Americans out there, so the last safe place remains in their past in Hoyt Street :

We feared few things in the barrio. We knew everyone; everyone knew us. We belonged. We had family: parents, sisters, brothers, tias, tios, abuelos, and godparents. Ours was a secure world. We were free to play in the streets, climb trees, and snitch fruit off a neighbor's tree without fear. The poverty of our homes and the lack of education and jobs was something our parents and older siblings worried over. For us there were only the security of community, school, church, and the corner store (199).

That's why Ponce's life takes place within her community of family, friends and the church. Her communo- biography depicts a happy life in the barrio, regardless of all the hardships. It seems as if life outside the barrio will not bother her.

Hoyt Street has many similarities with the works of another Chicana writer, Sandra Cisneros. Her 1984 novel *The House on Mango Street* has the same depiction of community in the life of a Chicana girl. Both books have similar titles; the name of the street they live is used as the metaphor of imaginary spaces. They both give detailed accounts of other people who live on the same street with them. Therefore both place their communities, at the center of their developments. Ponce also used the same techniques of telling her story in the form of *vignettes*, small story chapters, which have unity in them. Cisneros' work is more political in the sense that she relates the lives and experiences of her community to the problems of Chicanas who had to live in the patriarchal and racist culture. The naive depictions of the small girl in her novel are bitter criticisms of these. However in Ponce's communo-biography, Mary Helen seems safer in the realm of her imagined past. Hers was a happy memoir where the barrio protects them. Ponce doesn't want to portray the past as it is, but more idealistically.

Cisneros' latest book *Caramelo*, also resembles Ponce's book, in many aspects. Both are created autobiographies. On the last page of *Caramelo*, Sandra Cisneros wrote:

And I don't know how it is with anyone else, but for me these things, that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country I am homesick for, that doesn't exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrates caught between here and there (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 434).

Hoyt Street: An Autobiography

Both books are memories of displacement. The creation of family and community history, details of Chicana culture all serve the purpose of belonging somewhere for the Chicana girls. The books seem identical although they cover different periods and different experiences. This proves that both intended to portray a universal Chicana childhood, where even the grandmothers, neighbors, experiences are similar.

The past is a pleasant reminder of belonging to the ethnic group of Mexican Americans. As a displaced community member, Ponce felt the sense of belonging to something as she remembers the past. She says: "I knew this hymn by heart; I had heard it since infancy and had memorized each stanza. Still it pleased me to sing church songs that were special to my parents and a part of our culture. I felt chills on my arms; the Spanish words filled my eyes with tears" (168).

Ponce expresses that writing her autobiography came out of writing a research paper about the cultural traditions of Mexican American Easter traditions throughout three generations (Ponce ix). She says that while writing about their culture she found herself writing about families and friends, her childhood. She says she only wrote what she remembered, she even refrained from undertaking research about area. And the result became an invented communo-history. In Mary Ponce's autobiography, depictions of her invented past like home, Mexican American traditions, family and friends all serve the purpose of creating a safe space, an ideal past which will, according to Ponce: "encourage the other Mexican Americans to write their historias. It is through the common experience that we learn about a society" (x).

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.
- _____. *The House On Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1984.
- Phinney, Jean S. and Doreen A., Rosenthal. "Ethnic Identity in Adolescence: Process, Context and Outcome". *Adolescent Identity Formation*. Eds. Gerald R., Adams et al. London: Sage, 1992. 145-173.
- Ponce, Mary Helen. *Hoyt Street: An Autobiography*. Albuquerque: U. of New Mexico Press, 1993.
- Rotger, Antonieta Oliver. "Places of Contradiction and Resistance: The Borderlands as Real and Imagined Spaces in Chicana Writing". *Chicana Literary and Artistic Expressions: Culture and Society in Dialogue*. Ed. María Herrera Sobek. California: Center for Chicano studies pub, 2000. 41-77.
- Seyhan, Azade. *Writing Outside the Nation*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.
- Singh, Amritjit et al. "Introduction". *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures*. Eds. Amritjit et al. Boston : Northeastern UP, 1996. 3-19.