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## Hybridity and the Space of the Border in the Writing of Norma Elia Cantú

### Abstract

The creative and scholarly writing of Norma Elia Cantú focuses centrally on the tensions of borders that are eroding yet firmly in place. Cantú's border pivots on the geographic space in which Mexico and the United States physically intersect, yet she probes at the same time several of the other tenuous cultural borders that postmodernity has brought into focus. Transcending distinctions between genres, languages, and cultures, Cantú undertakes innovative genre hybridity, visual-verbal hybridity, and the recombination of distinct cultural codes. Whether writing cultural criticism, autobioethnography, creative fiction, or poetry, Cantú locates herself at the intersection of the geographical and epistemological borders central to postmodernity.

### Keywords

space, border space, border narrative, hybridity, Norma Elia Cantú, scholarly writing, creative writing, border tension, conflict, Mexico, U.S., cultural borders, culture, identity, language, genre hybridity, culture code, epistemological border, postmodernity

## Hybridity and the Space of the Border in the Writing of Norma Elia Cantú

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Studies of postmodernity in the late twentieth century have emphasized the erosion of the comfortable dividing lines by which we neatly separate and categorize reality. The concomitant indeterminacy is disquieting for some but celebrated by others as the site of renewal and a refreshing hybridity unfettered by fixed binary categories. The erosion of epistemological borders does not entail their dissolution; the act of crossing borders relies upon and sometimes indirectly validates the very presence of the border that is to be transcended.

In the case of geographical borders—that separating the United States from Mexico, for example—porosity and firm separation are in constant interplay. The official efforts of governments to establish unassailable borders coexists with the constant flow of people and ideas across the divisional barriers. And like the epistemological borders that postmodernism both denies and indirectly affirms, the geographical interstices between countries are the site of both openness and stricture for those who recreate them in literary texts.

One such border narrator is Norma Cantú, who writes from the space between Mexico and the United States comprised of land in northern Nuevo León and south Texas, centrally punctuated by the two dots on the map that represent the cities of Nuevo Laredo and Laredo. This geographical locale is both a unit and a bisected space in which the official separation of national borders is continually undermined and eroded on the cultural, economic, and social levels. On many levels it functions as a post-

nationalist space in which the traditional definitions of national identity are re-evaluated. At the same time, however, residues of distinct nationalism continue to obtain, echoing the deep historical memory of the conflict between unity and separation that marks the area. Cantú recounts the popular story still circulating in Laredo that when the U.S. border was drawn to separate the two Laredos, some Mexicanos disinterred their dead to re-bury them on the Mexican side.<sup>1</sup>

Cantú captures the unity of this officially divided territory in the illustrated map at the beginning of *Canícula*, her 1995 hybrid memoir. Along an area of the Río Grande/Río Bravo that runs nearly north/south, the cities of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo oppose each other as east and west, strikingly displaying the deep incursion of the U.S. southward into Mexico, and the parallel geographical presence of Mexico into the land-area now occupied by the United States. For Cantú, the unified area depicted by the map emblematically represents the complicated unitary space of her family's history and evolving identity on both sides of the border. It functions as one visual point of entry into her life narrative—a visual signifier that is both accurate and inaccurate representationally. Employing Gloria Anzaldúa's motif of the border as an open wound, Cantú suggests that the ostensibly smooth and unified appearance of the two geographical divisions on the map is in fact teeming with contradictions and the unsettling narratives to come. (See Fig.1.)

This essay examines the role of this vibrant border space in Cantú's writing in the context of the other border-crossings she undertakes such as genre hybridity, visual/verbal hybridity, and the intersection of competing critical, linguistic, and other cultural codes. While the geographic border described above is the central space of tension and unity of her writing, she frequently probes as well the postmodern intersections that replace the previously clear distinctions between genres, languages, and cultures. Cantú's border pivots centrally on the geographic space in which Mexico and the United States physically intersect, while at the same time probing several of the other tenuous cultural borders that postmodernity has brought into focus.



Fig. 1. Map, *Cancicula*, p. x.  
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Working both as a creative writer and a professor of literature, Cantú frequently transcends the divisions between genres and academic fields. Her varied writing evidences a creative conjoining of cultural criticism and literary creativity that erodes standard categorical borders marking genre divisions. Merging cultural studies and ethnography, she charts new paths of scholarly endeavor. Already in 1982 in her Ph.D. dissertation written at the University of Nebraska, she broadened the boundaries of traditional English literary study by examining the tradition of the *pastorela*, focusing on an example of this Christmas shepherds' play that has been performed for many years in Laredo. Arguing that emphasis either on a literary analysis or on the folk quality of the play would be flawed, she combines disciplines to understand the complex nature of the text as a literary and oral artifact and as folk ritual. Perceiving herself to be following in the footsteps of folklorists such as Jovita González, Cleofas Jaramillo, and Aurora Lucero White as well as going beyond their work, Cantú spent a year in Spain sponsored by a Fulbright-Hayes research grant to study the Spanish origins and developments of the Christmas shepherds' play for her interdisciplinary study.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, Cantú has written on the popular tradition of the *Matachines*, the dancers in Indian costumes who venerate the Holy Cross in Laredo during religious festivals on May 3, December 12, and December 24. Again she returned to the Spanish roots of the tradition by researching in Spain in 1985. She terms the *Fiesta de la Santa Cruz* "a site of not necessarily syncretic expression but of postmodern development of a centuries old tradition in a geographical site that is at the interstice of two major cultural worlds—the U.S. and Mexico—yet firmly rooted in . . . the private world; that is, the world of a community in contact with and affected by U.S. hegemonic forces and yet true to its values and worldview" ("Soldier" 11-12). That is, not only does her study transcend disciplinary boundaries, but it analyzes the geographical and temporal hybridity evidenced in the ancient tradition of the *Matachines* dance performed to this day in Laredo.

In another study, Cantú examines the *quinceañera* celebration, the rite of passage ceremony for fifteen-year-old girls, view-  
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ing the tradition as a communal and individual performance with religious and social elements. As in the other studies, Cantú breaks down borders further by integrating her own experiences of these cultural rituals in her scholarly analysis. Here, she ethnographically presents her own *quinceañera* Mass years earlier with both insiders and outsiders in mind: “The aisle seemed interminable, my knees were shaking and I was trying not to hobble, for that day I wore high heels for the first time. After Mass, we went home to hot chocolate and *repostería*, a kind of pastry that is traditional for the Christmas season, which in Mexican tradition extends until February 2, the Feast of Candlemas, or *el día de la Candelaria*” (7). She is both author and subject in these ethnographic studies, one of the local informants whose experience openly shapes the scholarly narrative she herself writes.

As Cantú worked on the study of the Matachines in 1993, she found that even more of her own personal stories surfaced as she wrote, and she decided to focus immediately on writing them. Later, after giving them an order and a narrative frame based on the motif of photographs randomly selected from a storage box, Cantú published her first major work of creative writing, *Canícula* (1995), which joins the tendencies of her scholarly and poetic writing in an experimental, partially fictional, ethnographic account of her own life and family traditions. Transcending traditional generic classifications, this collage of 85 vignettes and 23 interspersed photos is a hybrid of the visual and verbal, fiction and autobiography, the novel and the short story, and ethnography and creative writing. Cantú settles on the neologism “fictional autobioethnography” to classify the book, a creative new genre that merges this both fictional and veridical account of the self and community.

Inspired by Rita Mae Brown’s *Six of One* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood Amongst Ghosts*, Cantú attempts to write an experimental narrative about her life on the Texas-Mexican border. She tells her own story from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s in the “land in between”—the single geographic unit we now know as the border area around the cities of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, depicted in the hand-drawn map that opens the book. Inextricably connected to the

lives of her family and community, this self-narration recounts the daily life, work, traditions, fiestas, and history of her family, friends, and the larger Mexicano population of the borderlands. Using the real names of those who have died, and fictional names for the still-living (the names of eight flowers stand in for the eight girls in her family), Cantú describes the everyday and the extraordinary—from the repaying of *mandas* “vows” at the Santo Niño de Atocha church in Nuevo Laredo to the tragic death of her brother Tino in Vietnam in 1968. The disturbing memories of repatriation, the poll tax, and picking crops under the hot summer sun join the pleasant remembrances of performing “declamaciones” ‘recitations’ on special occasions, watching Hopalong Cassidy on television, memorable outings, and fiestas.

Celebrating the epistemological questioning common in postmodernist experimentation in the late twentieth century, *Canícula* intentionally blurs the border between fact and fiction from the beginning. Undermining the common readerly expectation of “truth” in autobiography, the text lies openly from its first sentence, as Cantú situates the book as the second part of a non-existent trilogy she pretends to have written. In a disquieting paradoxical statement, she notes: “In *Canícula* the story is told through the photographs, and so what may appear to be autobiographical is not always so” (xi). The authorial “I” here asks readers to question the presumed truth value of both photographs and first-person accounts; just as photographs may be incorrectly interpreted as truthful representations of one’s past life, so too, must readers be wary of that other representational strategy in the book, verbal autobiography, which readers might falsely trust as completely truthful.

The book challenges readers to discern what Roland Barthes has termed “the photographic paradox” at work in the photos Cantú carefully integrates into the text. Despite the ostensible documentary level of photographs, Barthes notes, numerous, hardly visible techniques add the highly subjective code of connotation to the denotative level. To emphasize this, Cantú sometimes deliberately mismatches photographs and narratives (75, 117), reverses a photograph (4), omits photos (26), retouches photographs (21, 22), and writes about a photograph (14, 130). She



reverses the family photograph on page four (See Fig. 2), for example, to emphasize her sense of standing apart from and outside of the family unit at that time;<sup>3</sup> she forges her fictional name (one of the eight flowers that represent the eight daughters), “Azucena Cantú” in the retouched immigration and citizenship documents pictured on pages 21 and 22 both to call into question facile markers of identity and to deconstruct the veridical aura of documents and photographs. (See Figs. 3 and 4.) And the avowed photographic impetus of the book turns out also to be a lie, since Cantú first wrote the stories and then later decided upon the motif of photographs randomly selected from a box as the frame to hold the stories together.

Cantu’s border crossing between the visual and verbal in this hybrid text engages in both terms of the dichotomy that Linda Rugg poses for photographs that “enter the autobiographical act”: one, “the rescue of autobiographical referentiality through the presentation of the author’s body in the world,” and two, the undermining of “the integrity of referentiality through multiple or posed presentations” (1). The inclusion of photos and the playful deceptions Cantú engages in with them ask readers to understand the self as multiple and unitary at the same time, as both fixed and changing, and as unfinalized. Although on an initial level the visual and verbal appear to complement each other, allowing the two “semiotic Others” (Mitchell 156-57) to remedy one another’s insufficiencies, Cantú’s playful postmodernist deceptions work to dislodge the epistemological certainty of both the verbal and visual levels. Conflicting verbal phrases confuse the anchorage of the photo on page 14, for example. Although a handwritten inscription on the photo itself delimits it as “Easter 1952,” the text below suggests that the occasion of the photograph is Tino’s ninth birthday party in which he wields a toy gun, proleptically imaging his own death in Vietnam ten years later. Beyond the postmodern questioning of epistemological certainty, Cantú suggests that this repeated image from the past not only eerily foretells her brother’s death but warns us to question children’s ostensibly innocent play with war toys. (See Fig. 5.)

Together text and image in *Canícula* ask us both to trust and distrust traditional signifiers of identity. The identification docu-

Fig. 2. Family photograph, *Canícula*, p. 4.





Fig. 3. Photo of U.S. immigration papers, *Canícula*, p. 21.

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Fig. 4. Photo of immigration document, *Canícula*, p. 22.

**FILIACION**

Edad: 16 años  
Estado Civil: soltera  
Profesion: estudiante  
Estatura: 1.62 mts.  
Color: moreno  
Ojos: café  
Pelo: negro  
Señas particulares: ningunas

Lugar de nacimiento: Nuevo Laredo, Tamps. 3 enero 1947.  
Domicilio: 104 San Carlos St. Laredo, Texas.

FIRMA DEL PORTADOR  
*Ayucena Cantú*

Reservaciones:  
Reg. Ext.  
6-890-531.

NOTA: Esta Matrícula deberá ser renovada cada dos años






Fig. 5. Family photo, *Canícula*, p. 14.

ments in figures 3 and 4 have been “falsified” to correspond to the fictionalized identity of the narrator of this autobioethnography.

Readers float between trustworthy and untrustworthy visual and verbal signs in these images—ostensibly truthful photographs and documentary notations such as the birthplace, date of birth, and seals. Yet the surname “Cantú” which has only appeared paratextually on the book’s cover, title page, and in the Acknowledgements, now appears beneath each photo with the fictional first name “Azucena.” What we assume to be Cantú’s own handwriting lends a spurious documentary reliability to each document, although the possibility of a one-year-old child signing her name to the first document disrupts that certainty. The matching signatures tease us to uncover the adult Cantú’s “forgery” of her own documents in the hybrid visual/verbal border crossing of this book.

In the text below the final photo on page 130, Cantú lies to readers that she is the girl whose “pink headband holds back a sixties flip” (130) and who wears a white sweater. The girl with the flip and headband has no sweater, while the figure resembling Cantú in the photo does. Cantú indicates with these deliberately contradictory visual and verbal signifiers that identity is unfinalized and unstable; readers must continually question assumed truths, and abandon the security of epistemological certainty. The hybrid narrative that promises to describe the self ethnographically in fact foregrounds its own unreliability and its status as a simulacrum. (See Fig. 6.)

Barthes (whose 1980 death and book *Camera Lucida* Cantú refers to in the Prologue) distinguishes between the levels of *studium* and *punctum* in photographs. In many photos only the level of *studium* is present, a general arena of interest that attracts us to the image, the photographer’s intention present in the photo, his or her means of drawing us to look at an object in a certain way. The *punctum*, in contrast, is an element—usually a small detail—of some photographs that “pricks” a given viewer in a particular way and produces an altogether different experience of the photograph; “it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (Barthes,



Fig. 6. High school photo, *Canícula*, p. 130.

depending upon a particular viewer's experience of the photograph.

Cantú's verbal narrative strives to communicate both the *studium* and the *punctum* of the photos she includes in the book. Her words guide us to "read" the general representational characteristics of the photo either present on the page or imagined. We are to understand the overarching cultural meaning of the posed First Communion photo of the young Cantú on page 56, kneeling, wearing a veil and white dress, and holding a candle and missal. The *studium* of this photo, Cantú implies, is the standard image of the perfectly outfitted young girl, dressed like a bride, participating for the first time in the standard Catholic ritual of Communion. The accompanying narrative introduces an element of the photo's *punctum* that Cantú wishes to communicate to readers: the missal she holds in the photo has "a picture of a blonde child receiving communion from a long-haired, red-robed Jesus on the cover" (56). The photo before us stands in contrast to the stereotypical image of ideal childhood innocence the young Cantú and thousands of other children of color were expected to pray with in their childhood. (See Fig. 7.)

The *punctum* operates on a more literal level in Figure 5 discussed above in which the play gun that the young Tino shoots toward the viewers creates the experience of an emotional and physical wound. Like the piercing arrow shooting out of the photograph of which Barthes spoke metaphorically, the gun in this image foretells a literal death which Cantú narrates in the accompanying text. The border between text and photo in this section is literally the "wound" that Gloria Anzaldúa describes in one of the epigraphs of *Canícula*. And as Barthes elaborates later in *Camera Lucida*, the real *punctum* of photographs is that they foretell our own death. Almost as if he were speaking of the photograph Cantú shows us here, Barthes notes:

The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence. (*Camera* 96)





Fig. 7. First communion photo, *Canícula*, p. 56.

In fact, Barthes notes further on, the common *punctum* of all photographs is “the imperious sign of my future death” (97). Cantú’s autobioethnography, indebted to Barthes’s theory and his own death, is a hybrid photo-text that represents life while foretelling death.

Cantú’s insistence on the continuum between fiction and reality that is so often celebrated by postmodernist writers is one of several levels of hybridity in the book involving linguistic, cultural, generic, disciplinary, and geographic border crossing. In an unpublished essay, “How I Wrote *Canícula*: Musings on Writing, Reading and Life,” Cantú summarizes her own intriguing hybrid identity as a literary critic, an ethnographer, and a creative writer with respect to the book: “All in all, the critic had to write *Canícula*, and the novelist had to be the soul for the mind. . . . How can someone who does all these things: write literary criticism, folklore, ethnography and fiction—separate these into neat little boxes labeled and set aside?” (7).

In earlier creative writing, Cantú merged disciplinary concerns more subtly by developing an ethnographic overlay in fiction. Because a cousin on her father’s side of the family had settled in Omaha, Nebraska years earlier, Cantú’s father allowed her to leave home to attend graduate school there, assured that his relatives would watch over her. Based on that experience, she wrote “Nebraska Family: A Triptych” which implicitly patterns itself on a the visual model of a three-paneled painting. It recounts three tales of life in Nebraska focusing on a daughter who is just turning fifteen, her mother, and her grandmother. Cantú views the three women as versions of a single story and through the triptych form presents three key feasts—Thanksgiving, a *quinceañera*, and a wedding which represent, respectively, a secular U.S. American celebration, a tradition that emphasizes Mexican roots, and an official Church ceremony marking the union of an Anglo and a Mexican. Through this narrative, Cantú notes, she came to know her “other” family.<sup>4</sup>

Cantú crosses temporal and historical borders in several poems that are structured by revisionist readings of historical women and goddesses. In “Trojan Horse” the authorial voice

changes the world and “bears the power of triumphant entry.” Beyond beauty and betrayal, she is neither the figure of Helen of Sparta nor Malinche, but the bearer of a gift that may or may not last forever. She invites the reader to “take my skeletal hand, / look into the eyes of night, / Come into the blinding light / Storm the fortress, / rescue those who need rescuing / offer the proper offerings” (44-45). Joining the perspective of contemporary feminism and the recuperation by Chicana feminists of the figure of Malinche to a reconceptualization of women from previous centuries, Cantú merges distinct temporal periods into a hybrid artifact of difference and unity. The poem’s social message works as a counter model to traditional images of both ideal and negative femininity, suggesting that women’s power is connected to helping those in need with the gift of oneself.

In the 1994 poem “Action, Thought, Spirit,” Cantú engages in what Néstor García Canclini terms multi-temporal heterogeneity as she merges temporally and culturally distinct images in a unitary, hybrid utterance. She argues that Santa Teresa is to be celebrated not only for her mysticism but for her action; contemporary women, whether working with “test-tubes or computers,” should imitate Teresa’s commitment to action, or the warrior goddess Coyoxaquhui who led the attack against Coatlicue in Aztec mythology. Cantú focuses on the practical side of Teresa, who perhaps “was a woman just trying to get things done” as she traveled throughout Spain to various sacred sites. St. John of the Cross, Cantú suggests, could have learned a lesson from Teresa, as should young women today. Cantú again crosses geographical, cultural, and temporal borders in the 1997 poem “Diosas,” written entirely in Spanish, as she creates a modified litany to goddesses such as Tonantzin, Coatlicue, Shiva, Gaia, and the Virgin Mary; instead of the usual repeated supplications of the litany, Cantú’s poem chants affirmative statements about an alternate hybrid pantheon of female goddesses who suffer with women today, crying for their daughters who suffer on earth.

Much of Cantú’s writing engages in the linguistic hybridity of bilingualism common to border writing. She carries this linguistic experimentation further in the 1998 short story “El luto,” dividing the narrative into a Spanish and an English section to

represent the separate worlds of a mother and daughter. Where Spanish and English intersect with one another in *Canícula* and many of Cantú's other texts, here she re-establishes a firm separation between the two codes to reflect the border tension between the worlds of the mother and the daughter. Offering an updated version of the biblical narrative about Ruth, "El luto" suggests that the contemporary Ruth will engage in filial piety while at the same time breaking with traditional expectations for women in Mexican culture. Unwilling to follow the prescribed mourning rituals after the death of her father who had deserted her and her mother, plunging both into greater poverty, Ruth nonetheless continues to live at home and care for her mother while her sisters pursue exciting careers elsewhere. As wide a gap exists between mother and daughter culturally in the story as between the Spanish and English sections of the story, but Ruth's sensible rejection of public mourning for the father who was not a father suggests that she successfully negotiates the tradition of the biblical Ruth's goodness and her own contemporary needs of identity and autonomy.

Cantú's 1999 story published on the Internet, "Farewell in Madrid," carries the motif of linguistic hybridity further by showing how distinct cultural signifiers merge with one another. The story deploys the central motif of equivalencies—linguistic, actantial, and generational—to work through a woman's pain as loved ones pass in and out of her life. The technique of the cross-word puzzle whereby one set of signifiers is substituted for an equivalent set frames the story: the title, "Farewell in Madrid," is the query seeking the substitute signifier "adios," while the ending word, "father," is the substitute signifier not only for the cross-word query but for the larger question that the story as a whole subtly poses. The narrative about the imminent departure of the protagonist's son for college is superimposed on the memory of her own painful separation from a lover in Spain a generation earlier; the revelation of an equivalent for the lover's identity at the end is the answer to the story itself as a metaphorical cross-word puzzle. Cantú deliberately includes ambiguity so that the reader must move sometimes confusingly back and forth between equivalent linguistic, actantial, and generational signifiers, high-

lighting the homologous structure and the overlay of the two key moments in the protagonist's life. Just as the six-letter word "father" substitutes by fitting exactly in the crossword puzzle space, so does the story itself substitute for the mother's telling her son about the her private memories of her time with his father.

Cantú's innovative scholarly and creative writing—two parts of a continuum—provides seminal information about Chicano/a identity, the border, hybridity, and postmodernity. Her writing is centrally concerned with the tensions of borders that are eroding yet firmly in place, that serve as the site of both exuberant, experimental transcendence and the concrete pain of the "herida abierta." As an important postmodernist writer of the border experience, Cantú probes temporal, cultural, and genre hybridity, the dynamic intersections of the visual and verbal, and the teeming, "in-between" space of the geographical border between the United States and Mexico from which her creative writing and cultural criticism arise.

### Notes

1. Lecture by Norma Cantú, University of California, Santa Barbara, November 4, 1998.
2. See page 4 of the Introduction to Cantú's book manuscript, "Soldiers of the Cross: Los Matachines de la Santa Cruz."
3. Lecture by Cantú, University of California, Santa Barbara, November 4, 1998.
4. Interview with Cantú by Ellen McCracken, Santa Barbara, California, February 17, 1999.

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