

## Back into the Future: Chicana/o Autobiographical Voices of the 1990s

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### RESUMEN

*Este estudio pretende re-examinar la autobiografía escrita por chicanos y chicanas de la década de los 90 cuando surgió una cantidad valiosa de escritos con ese enfoque. Primero discute cómo la autobiografía se ha manifestado en la literatura chicana y cómo corresponde a una tendencia clave dentro del postmodernismo contemporáneo y el discurso postcolonial. El escrito enfatiza la necesidad de reconceptualizar tal sub-género con el fin de entender mejor su desarrollo como una forma fluida de expresar una condición individual en contacto con su mundo cultural, es decir, la autobiografía sirve para deconstruir las imágenes estereotípicas de chicanos y chicanas mediante las perspectivas que comparten. A la vez, tal sub-género ofrece un alto potencial para emplear técnicas revisionistas sobre el individuo y su contorno social. La estudiosa se concentra en Richard Rodríguez (*Hunger for Memory*), Luis Rodríguez (*Always Running*), Gloria López-Stafford (*A Place in El Paso*), Pat Mora (*Nepantla*), Jimmy Santiago Baca (*Working in the Dark*) y Sheila y Sandra Ortiz Taylor (*Imaginary Parents*) para entresacar experiencias comunes entre ellos como diferenciadoras. Al “re-leer” el pasado, se logra explicar cómo muchas de estas autobiografías no corresponden a los fáciles patrones de oposiciones binarias. Al contrario, demuestra una vitalidad de voces y perspectivas que se conjuegan en relaciones dialógicamente históricas e individuales. La identidad, entonces, no figura como estado o condición sino como espacio transitorio de un llegar a ser continuo.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SPACES

In the course of its long tradition, autobiography has proved its historical viability. The genre has developed into a valuable tool in the processes of understanding the complex interdependencies between historical conditions and changes and the individual's cultural self- understanding. Autobiographical texts are marked by an interesting interaction of the public and the private, of history and fiction that creates infinite spaces for diverse perspectives and ambivalent meanings. Referring to Gérard Genette's metaphor of the revolving door Paul de Man has pointed out that defying genre definitions, autobiographical texts provide a highly ambiguous reservoir of reciprocal reflections that demonstrates the impossibility of finite, coherent, and homogeneous interpretations. Autobiography needs to be reconceptualized as a most flexible figure of reading and understanding capable of the discursive management of the inconsistencies and instabilities of contemporary life (Man 1993). Pursuing to create specific linkages between history or place, respectively, and the self, autobiographical writing claims an important role in the contemporary postmodern and postcolonial discourses. For artists of Mexican American descent, in particular, it is inevitable to deconstruct the stereotypical images of themselves as the *Other* as built up by dominant society in order to reposition themselves in the multiple spaces of present-day American society. Autobiography offers a rich potential for revisionist techniques to explore Chicana/o cultural experiences.

Mexican American literary traditions have always been shaped by autobiographical narratives. Whereas retrospective personal texts produced immediately during the decades following the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo expressed feelings of nostalgia for a lost homeland, twentieth-century autobiographical narratives have increasingly voiced their Mexican American writers' awareness of growing up in a borderland where they have to face exclusion on both sides of the border. Gradually recognizing their "dilemma of destabilized subjectivity in the cross-cultural terrain they inhabit" (Padilla 1993: 236). Chicana/o autobiographers began to explore the highly diverse sources of their multiple —their *mestizaje* — identities and to articulate self-esteem and pride in the rich traditions of their cultural ancestry.

The focus of this essay is directed on the 1990s which witnessed the emergence of a great number of highly diverse autobiographical narratives written by male and female authors of Mexican American descent thus documenting the Chicana/o artists' decidedness to transcend the levels of just negotiating their experiences of cultural alienation by discussing their quest for attempting a

reconciliation of their personal lives with historical disjunctions. Regardless of the multiplicity of narrative techniques to fashion individual voices the autobiographical consciousness of these texts is rooted in the strong belief of their authors to anticipate practicable ways of positioning themselves in postmodern American society both as individuals and as members of a historically grown community: They reread their past in order to sketch out their prospects.

The dimension of this achievement in terms of the levels of personal awareness as well as of the methods of artistic transformation gets the more significant if read against the background of Richard Rodriguez's autobiography *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodríguez* (1982) which at face value (and most strongly supported in reviews by so-called mainstream critics) (Saldívar 1990) seems to tell a story of ethnic assimilation thus reaffirming established power relationships in American society. Still, on a deeper level, Rodriguez's autobiographical narrative turns out as a story of self-deception, as some kind of dead-end-way.

In this essay I want to investigate several Chicana/o autobiographical texts written during the last two decades, ranging from Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodríguez* (1982) to Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in Los Angeles* and Gloria López-Stafford's *A Place in El Paso: A Mexican American Childhood* (1996), respectively, from the two essay collections *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993) by Pat Mora and *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet from the Barrio* (1992) by Jimmy Santiago Baca to Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor's blend of narrative, poetry and photography in *Imaginary Parents: A Family Autobiography* (1996). Although these writers develop highly diverse stylistic techniques and forms of narrative transmission they share an interest in the experiment of reshaping the most powerful tradition of American autobiography as a way of redefining "the marginal space[s] to which history (and the dominant society) has consigned them" (Padilla 1993: 238) by exploring stories of individual life as records of community histories. In the processes of their discursive self-construction they challenge established patterns of the autobiographical genre and discuss its potential for communicating postmodern Chicana/o multicultural experiences thus stimulating new reading expectations. Reconstructing selected moments from their life these writers do not intend to give a final or definitive statement on their present achievements but rather aspire to suggest options for their future.

## 2. HUNGER OF MEMORY: THE EDUCATION OF RICHARD RODRÍGUEZ (1982)— THE PAINFUL AWAKENING OF RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Richard Rodríguez *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodríguez*, published already in 1982, opened up a highly controversial debate about the ways of identity construction of people of Mexican American descent and challenged the capacity of the autobiography as a genre deeply rooted in the literary traditions of Western culture to articulate borderland experiences. “Probably no work by a Mexican-American writer has attracted so much national interest as Richard Rodríguez’s intellectual autobiography, *Hunger of Memory*” (3). Telling the writer-protagonist’s story from “a ‘socially disadvantaged’ child” to a publicly accepted “middle-class man,” it supports the American concept of ethnic assimilation by reaffirming the dominance of Anglo-American cultural values: Rodríguez wants to cut all ties to his Mexican American past; he separates himself from his family, his language, his religion, and studying English and the English literary tradition he reconceptualizes himself in the role of Caliban who “hav[ing] stolen their books” believes “[to] have a run of this isle.”<sup>1</sup> At face value *Hunger of Memory*, as Raymund Paredes points out in his critical discussion of the book, does seem to follow the pattern of the conversion narrative (281) however the opening passage “[o]nce upon a time” and the rather dominant reverences to Shakespeare’s tragedy *The Tempest* as well as the pastoral tradition foster implications of artificiality and inauthenticity. Rodríguez has called the “Prologue” of this autobiography a “Middle-Class Pastoral” which is actually an oxymoron because the two components —the first one confirming, the second one denying social tensions and distinctions— seem self-contradictory at first sight;<sup>2</sup> only later the trope turns out as an appropriate image within the contexts of the protagonist’s self-construction as an American “middle-class man” of Mexican American descent.

Rodríguez has indeed become a “voice of ‘Hispanic America’” (Saldívar 1990: 155) for, as the title of his autobiography suggests, his *education*, his ambition to master his future in the American cultural system could *not* erase his past, his rootedness in Mexican American traditions; the writer’s commitment to the concept of American individualism did *not* succeed in replacing his being part of the Chicano communal experience —on the contrary, it nourished his *Hunger of Memory*. Significantly, the writer-protagonist does not experience hunger *for* memory (something which he would need much) but he suffers from a hunger *of* memory which implies that this memory is actually a part of his daily life that he is unable to live out because it would destroy his artificially constructed identity concept. The subtext of the narrative tells

a different story from the one appreciated by the majority of American reviewers and thus criticized by Chicano scholars:<sup>3</sup> Speaking English, Rodríguez is able to participate in the public discourses and to construct a public identity for himself. He can therefore *play the role* of an assimilated middle-class American man, however, he will never become one since he has internalized exactly those values and concepts which form the premise for his marginalization as the Other.<sup>4</sup> The protagonist can never trespass the borderline from the Mexican American outsider to the American middle-class insider because he himself has reinforced this boundary by dividing his life into a public and a private sphere. His discursive self-construction functions as long as he accepts his role as a token Chicano —finally an object of American identity construction but never a subject of Mexican American self-identification. The moment Rodríguez becomes aware of his lack of control over himself and his life, when he realizes that the spaces within which he is allowed to act are assigned to him by dominant society, he experiences the inner emptiness of his life, his “hunger of memory.” The writer has chained himself to a vicious circle: Arguing against bilingualism and affirmative action, he has transformed himself into an instrument in the struggle against himself. Reaffirming the dualities of body and mind, private and public, past and present has bereft himself of the chance to develop into an independently thinking and acting individual (Rivera 1998: 294). For Rodríguez, “the privilege,” as Gayatri Spivak has called it, of educating himself in the Western tradition has finally turned out as a loss since this “learning process” has marked a “closing down of creative possibilities, a loss of other options, other knowledge.” (Landry, D. and Mac Lean, G. 1996: 4). The writer is unable to explore the rich potential of his family’s and his ethnic community’s cultural traditions for the construction of his self.

### 3. *ALWAYS RUNNING: LA VIDA LOCA, GANG DAYS IN L.A.* (1993) — LUIS RODRÍGUEZ’S STRUGGLE FOR BELONGING

Education serves as the central metaphor also in Luis Rodríguez’s autobiography, the retrospective construction of dramatic episodes from the 1960s and early 1970s. But unlike Richard Rodríguez’s *Hunger of Memory*, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* challenges Western concepts of linear improvement thus striving for redefinitions in highly ambivalent, even contradictory contexts. “[T]hrough his sustained struggle for education and literacy [the writer] traces a quest for spiritual and cultural transcendence, and for social justice.” (Pérez 277) Rodríguez’s parents moved to Los Angeles when the boy was two years old; his father was “an

educated man,” (Rodríguez L. 1982: 14) the principal of a local high school in Mexico who completed his training in Bloomington, Indiana. But “[i]n those days, an educated man had to be careful about certain things —questioning authority, for example” (Rodríguez L. 1982: 84)— experiences that made him finally escape to the USA. And although his mother had finished high school as well, she followed her husband for love and both tried to find work in menial jobs. Rodríguez’s early childhood memories are shaped by the efforts of “this dichotomous couple” (Rodríguez L.1982: 16) to improve their living conditions in the United States. Nevertheless,

[o]ur first exposure in America stays with me like a foul odor. It seemed a strange world, most of it spiteful to us, spitting and stepping on us, coughing us up, us immigrants, as if we were phlegm stuck in the collective throat of the country. (Rodríguez L. 1982: 19)

When Luis experiences marginalization and exclusion from the white English-speaking school he decides to search for other ways of educating himself and finds them in the *vida loca* of the East Los Angeles gang scene. This decision is ultimately no free choice for since he has started high school he hasn’t had any option. He has felt labeled from the start as somebody whether criminal or alien —but always as somebody to be feared. (Rodríguez L. 1982: 84). As Luis Rodríguez confesses in the “Preface” to his autobiography, his “teen years were ones of drugs, shootings and beatings, and arrests. [...] By the time I turned 18 years old, 25 of my friends had been killed by rival gangs, police, drugs, car crashes and suicides.” (4).

The devastating gang activities nearly destroy Luis. Unable to identify anything worth living for, he enters a nihilistic state of existence finally preferring death to life. (1982: 135). But it is his father’s firm belief in the values of education that prevents the son from the final collapse: Attending Taft High School, “almost 40 miles away on the other side of Los Angeles,” (1982: 135). Luis has the chance of learning something new. Strolling through the library while waiting for his father to return home he comes across books of Black and Puerto Rican “barrio boy” experiences “on the other side of America” (1982: 138) that open up new perspectives on life for him. Supported by barrio activists he is finally able to give his life a new turn. “I’ve been working my way out of that useless existence. Now I have found something to live for, bigger than you and me, bigger than Lomas and Sangra.” (1982: 244).

Telling the story of his troubled upbringing, the writer at first sight follows the patterns of the Western literary tradition; however, they just function as parameters for the processes of repositioning himself in American society, they do not serve the purpose of personal identification. Certainly, Rodríguez has basically written his autobiography from the perspective of success, of having left *la vida loca* behind, and similar to Richard Rodríguez he has started a promising career as a writer, even as a political activist of the Chicano Movement. Yet his discursive self-construction does not allow for an interpretation in terms of assimilation into American culture. On the level of discourse, the writer is still “running” since he must witness how his life repeats itself in the life of his son. His tools have changed, but he remains “always running”—now with words that form his weapons in his struggle for the Mexican American community against injustice, terror and poverty. Rodríguez’s narrative demonstrates the versatility of the autobiographical genre since Chicano life, as he experienced it, is actually not supposed to form a part of Western cultural patterns and should therefore be an inadequate subject of their literary traditions. *Always Running* challenges this premise and reorganizes Rodríguez’s story of life as the retrospective narrative of one of the disenfranchised and poor “whom society [did not want to] accommodate.” (251)

The writer trespasses borders in more than one direction. His highly personal, often shocking, sometimes even painful revelations are framed by a “Preface” and an “Epilogue” which demonstrate the flexibility of the specific potential of the autobiographical genre for reconstructing personal experiences. Rodríguez underlines the border quality of his life story: Being neither fiction nor documentation, it needs to be located in a space of interactive transition that, as Paul de Man maintains, defies definition and is situated in constantly changing spaces where “something of beauty collides with something of truth.” (1982: 11).

For this reason the writer balances the fictional quality of his autobiography with historical data that provide evidence of the authenticity of his narrative as an analysis of a more than 20-year period of American history beginning with the Watts riots in 1965 (in which he participated himself) and culminating in the 1992 Los Angeles riots (in which he witnessed his son’s struggle for and against involvement). As Rodríguez points out,

[t]his work is an argument for the reorganization of American society —not where a few benefit at the expense of the many, but where everyone has access to decent health care, clothing, food and housing, based on need, not whether they can afford them. (1982: 10)

Reconstructing individual experiences against the background of socio-historical conditions “Rodríguez’s autobiography skillfully synthesizes the narrative structure of the historical novel, the logical exposition of the sociological essay, and the collage of dramatic scenes characteristic of cinema.” (Fogelquist 1996: 307-313) Mexican American cultural experiences are deeply rooted in family traditions and communal experiences –yet their practicability depends on social integration. Luis Rodríguez’s autobiographical narrative demonstrates that these values turn into farces especially for Mexican American kids. Desperately looking for other ways to satisfy their sense of belonging, their need for protection, and their quest for being respected they form gangs. (1982: 250)

#### 4. *A PLACE IN EL PASO: A MEXICAN-AMERICAN CHILDHOOD* (1996) – GLORIA LÓPEZ-STAFFORD’S TRANSCENDENCE OF SPACE

Luis Rodríguez’s struggle for belonging in the barrios of East L.A. finds certain parallels in Gloria López–Stafford’s autobiography *A Place in El Paso* which chronicles the writer-protagonist’s search for her place in the multicultural social landscape of El Paso, Texas during the 1940s. The inner complexity of both stories is reached by a narrative breaking up of the chronological order of events. The protagonists reconstruct certain crucial episodes and experiences from memory thus establishing ties to oral storytelling traditions. Rodríguez’s and López-Stafford’s emphasis on spoken language evident in the powerful dialogic presentation of their autobiographical texts, in the frequent mixing of English with passages from Spanish everyday language, and in the glossary of Spanish terms at the end of *Always Running* suggest an autobiographical story that basically functions as a form of translating oral experiences into a language that can be understood by a wide American audience. Both artists rewrite the traditional pattern of the protagonist’s development from childhood into maturity, and the processes of his or her gradual construction of identity concepts affirm the basic premises of autobiographical writing. But in their quest for belonging they search for productive ways of positioning the self *in relation* to dominant cultural structures, not for those of identifying with these patterns.

The daughter of a Mexican mother who dies when she is five years old and an Anglo father who at the time of her birth is around 70, Gloria was born in Mexico, but since her second year she has lived in El Paso. The girl is proud of being a Texan, yet the battle slogan “Remember the Alamo” during a movie presentation at school makes her finally aware of her ambivalent status or non-status, respectively, as a Texan of Mexican descent. In search of her identity, the writer-protagonist begins to question



her existence: her early childhood adventures on St. Vrain Street when she and her neighborhood boy friends transformed an old convertible jalopy into their “metal playpen;” (López-Stafford 1996: 18) her life with María, a loving but bitterly poor surrogate mother, in the tenements after Gloria’s father realized his inability to take care of his little daughter; and finally her move into her godparents’ home first on Alameda Street and later at Five Points, an “area [...] named for the intersection of five streets that were in the center of the city at the time. It was partly residential and partly a business district”(1996: 3). Having grown up in the Projects, the female protagonist feels out of place in the childless middle class home of Fred, an Anglo of German-American descent, and his second wife Martha, who rather successfully manages to coordinate her Mexican traditions with her husband’s expectations of modern American life. Still, Five Points marks more than just a place to live –it symbolizes Gloria’s initiation into an awareness of American multicultural life, a process in the course of which she must learn to overcome binary concepts of thinking such as white American versus non-white Mexican.

Gloria López-Stafford reconstructs her childhood experiences in El Paso during the 1940s in a predominantly chronological order organized along the places of her “homes;” still, flashbacks and flashforwards interrupt this linearity thus creating a network in which glimpses of the past intersect with anticipated future moments:

Up on the red porch were the two people who loved me enough to give me a home. The two represented all that I came from and all that I was. It was as if Palm, López, Fred, Martha, Francisca, and María were up there reminding me that there was a lot to me. (1996: 211)

In the center of this “lot” is El Paso, Texas, whose past and present life defies binary concepts of definition hence opening up spaces for the writer-protagonist to negotiate a place for herself not just between, (Vásquez 2000: 48-59, 49) but within the two worlds, the Mexican American and the Anglo-American, in neither one she was initially able to find a home. López-Stafford’s processes of identity construction are intricately bound not just to place but to language at the same time: Her quest for self-positioning is reciprocally tied to her ability for self-articulation. Searching for a “[p]lace in El Paso,” therefore, refers less to the physical parameters of the town but rather to a spiritual space in which the Mexican, Mexican American, and Anglo-American cultural traditions as personified by the men and women who more or less successfully try to give her shelter and love, merge into one over-arching meta-space that prepares Gloria to finally feel at home. It is this discursively constructed

experience of belonging that empowers the writer-protagonist to find her voice and to join her friends in the Christmas carol singing (López 1996: 211). The young girl's search for her "[p]lace in El Paso" finally enables her to integrate herself into the multicultural community of her friends and to feel connected to the whole world in the most meaningful moment of Christmas Night. Gloria wins her struggle for identity by finding a voice of her own in the ambivalent processes of contemplating highly diverse spaces of race, class and gender. (Vásquez 2000: 48)

López-Stafford's reconstruction of "[a] Mexican American childhood" as she calls it in her subtitle chronicles her first-person narrator's initiation into the ambivalent complexities of post-World-War II American life, however, it shifts perspectives and opens up new spaces for identity construction. Although written from a retrospective point of view, the narrative's strongly dialogical form of presentation creates a kind of fictional world thus building up an interesting tension between the immediacy of innocent childhood experiences and the distanced critical reflections of the self-reliant adult, which is further supported by a specific structural pattern of the individual chapters. Gloria's moments of personal recollection are always precluded by some general remarks –about El Paso nature and climate ("A Motherless Child," "Céfiro"), Mexican cultural history ("A September Day," "Macho"), human life in general ("Sayings and Secrets"). *A Place in El Paso* negotiates the protagonist's individual growth against the background of historical and cultural reflections of complex importance thus rewriting the autobiographical pattern in terms of natural landscapes as well as community experience and tradition. The writer's retrospective approach is characterized by deductive techniques, i.e. the "inference in which the conclusion about particulars follows necessarily from general or universal premises."<sup>5</sup> As Mary S. Vásquez maintains in her essay, "López-Stafford meticulously evokes collective life to contextualize the personal"(2000: 58). Focusing on the natural specifics of the land she is able to construct her (own)/protagonist's identity by transcending the physical realities outside the artificially erected boundaries of race, class and gender thus providing her with a multiple identity concept which prepares her to reposition herself in the socio-cultural structures of modern American life.

##### 5. *NEPANTLA: ESSAYS FROM THE LAND IN THE MIDDLE* (1993) –PAT MORA'S ENCOUNTERS WITH THE WORLD

The awareness of the necessity to tear down borders as an inevitable prerequisite for self-definition has also shaped Pat Mora's life and work. Like Gloria

López-Stafford she is a Texan born in El Paso, thus being exposed to the clashes of Mexican American and Anglo-American cultural traditions:

There probably isn't a week of my life that I don't have at least one experience when I feel that discomfort, the slight frown from someone that wordlessly asks, what is someone like her doing here? (Mora 1993: 6)

Mora discusses these feelings of indefiniteness in the image of *Nepantla*, a Nahuatl word meaning “place in the middle.”(5). Now living in Cincinnati, Ohio she recounts her life in the form of “[e]ssays from the Land in the Middle,” as the title suggests, neither belonging to the one nor the other side, thus exploring the spaces of being in-between not just in terms of geographical conditions but within the highly complex contexts of being a Mexican American woman grown up in the American Southwest, with a M.A. in English who gained experiences in various university positions and in the media, a wife and mother, a poet who has published five collections of poetry and ten children’s books so far –and of being someone who left her native area to grow as a writer. These multiple border crossings form the subject of Pat Mora’s autobiographical essay collection *Nepantla* published in 1993. The book can hardly be called a traditional autobiography; it presents much more a series of short texts that discuss moments from Mora’s life. She recollects personal aspirations and disappointments, and investigates her experiences of inclusion and exclusion within cultural contexts. What keeps the autobiographical diction alive is her highly individual voice that succeeds in the discursive construction of a female Chicana writer’s “mov[e] through two, and, in fact, multiple spaces” and her quest to “select [...] from both what I want to make part of me”(6). Transgressing the borders between the personal and the collective, her essays explore diverse interactions between European American cultural traditions and those of Chicana/o culture. Identifying herself as a “border dweller” (Fox 1996: 219-231) Mora wants her reflections to be understood as texts that translate or better mediate cultures through language.

The essays address highly diverse topics from multiple perspectives –from the one of the wife and mother and from the one of the feminist activist. They do not follow an identifiable chronological structure; they defy any attempt to be organized in a linear plot –their purpose is to *try* to find answers to questions raised by a modern Mexican American woman, they want to invite debates on women’s positions in the United States and abroad, they want to provoke arguments and challenge established opinions. As its title suggests, *Nepantla* negotiates experiences of female Mexican

American life; the book does not present achievements or definitive results, but claims to be read as a work in progress.

Pat Mora's texts are written in a highly personal style, nevertheless, she frequently supports her arguments by facts and data that trespass the level of the private thus building up interactions between the stories as individual experiences and as narratives of cultural complexities that distinguish the autobiographical genre. These essays merge voices: the one of the individual Chicana woman, wife and mother, but also the one of the political activist and feminist, and the one of "the middle woman,/not my mother, not my daughter" (5) who loves the desert, whose primary source of inspiration is the "Land in the Middle." Still, *Nepantla* does not form an eclectic collection of impressions and reflections. Being aware of the intricacies and liminalities of contemporary Chicana cultural experiences the writer has built up her self from a concept of multiple identities which allows her to "say, 'Yes I am a Chicana writer, I am a Mexican American writer, I am a woman writer, I am a southwestern writer, I am a U.S. writer, I am a bilingual writer'"<sup>6</sup> without giving priority to the one or the other rather limiting label or even cliché. Mora wants to address "people of conscience [...] who [are] so open and attentive that the words have a chance of entering the reader," (Ikas 2002: 132) a sophisticated audience seriously concerned about the necessity of preserving traditional values like family, religion, the land in general and the desert in particular, who is at the same time able and willing to redefine these values within the cultural contexts of modern American society. Her essays are attempts to give sense to the complexities and controversies of contemporary border experiences. This gets particularly visible in the author's serious efforts to establish balanced relationships between her poetic voice as a Chicana writer and her polemical voice as the Chicana activist who struggles for her sisters all over the world: in the United States, in the Dominican Republic, in Guatemala, in Pakistan. The artist herself is part of these tensions and splits. Contemplating her experiences in the form of retrospective essays, she succeeds in the discursive construction of her self as an American woman of Mexican descent. As this is an ongoing process, it has to challenge familiar positions; it cannot present accomplishments but must call for responses, for actions. Mora's exploration of the specific potential of the essay to suggest contexts and interactions marks her genuine achievement as a writer who opens up new possibilities for the autobiographical genre to negotiate identities and to construct personal narratives as works in progress.

## 6. *WORKING IN THE DARK: REFLECTIONS OF A POET FROM THE BARRIO* (1992) – JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA'S CONTINUAL REBIRTH THROUGH LANGUAGE

The open, unfinished character of the essay has apparently turned out as an efficient form to discuss the many-faceted problems that Mexican American writers need to solve in their efforts to establish balanced interactions between the internal and external spaces of their life. Jimmy Santiago Baca's *Working in the Dark* presents another Chicano writer's experiment with the specific potential of essayistic techniques to reconstruct moments from life. As editor Harriet Slavitz maintains in her introduction, "Baca's history would seem to be a recipe for disaster." (Slavitz 1992: 9) Being placed in an orphanage at an early age, he escapes to make the streets and barrios of New Mexico his home at the age of ten, seeking refuge in drugs and alcohol which immediately results in a series of imprisonments. The writer resumes:

I had become the coauthor, with society, of my own oppression. The system that wanted to destroy me had taught me self-destruction. I had become my own jailor and racist judge, my own brutal policeman. I was ruthless to myself, and murdered all my hopes and dreams. I was in hell.<sup>7</sup>

Still, the country jail offers the only chance of survival for him: He discovers the power of language. Gradually able to identify "a place to stand for the first time in my life" (Slavitz 1992: 7) Baca begins to write himself into being:

Whole afternoons I wrote, unconscious of passing time or whether it was day or night. Sunbursts exploded from the lead tip of my pencil, words that crafted me into awareness who I was; peeled back to a burning core of bleak terror, an embryo floating in the image of water, I cracked out of the shell wide-eyed and insane. Trees grew out of the palms of my hands, the threatening otherness of life dissolved, and I became one with the air and sky, the dirt and the iron and concrete. There was no longer any distinction between the other and I. Language made bridges of fire between me and everything I saw. I entered into the blade of grass, the basketball, the con's eye and child's soul. (9)

In the essays published in *Working in the Dark* the writer reconstructs his passage through darkness and discrimination into light and life. The protagonist gradually acquires the prerequisites for reorganizing his personal affairs and to position himself in relation to the world, the universe. His ability to read and write empowers him to overcome his most painful experiences of "inarticulateness [... and ...] mute rebellion" (Slavitz 1992: 4):

Through language I was free. I could respond, escape, indulge; embrace or reject earth or the cosmos. I was launched on an endless journey without boundaries or rules, in which I could salvage the floating fragments of my past, or be born anew in the spontaneous ignition of understanding some heretofore concealed aspect of myself. (7)

Baca's autobiographical reflections share the genre's traditional quest for knowledge and for the power of discursive self-construction, but being in control of English, the language of his oppressors, does not transform the writer-protagonist from an outsider into an insider. Reemphasizing the arbitrary character of the linguistic sign, the author reconceptualizes the English language as a means to articulate the voice of his heart. In the processes of his discursive self-construction he is able to "bridg[e his] divided life of prisoner and free man." (1992: 11) *Working in the Dark* operates on multiple levels. The exploration of the troubled years of his youth is balanced by reflections of the adult poet, revisiting the places of darkness twenty years later. Baca is part of a movie production about "three kids from East L.A., one of whom goes to prison," (14) for which he has written the script. The artist is professionally in command of the scenes, but his personal memories of imprisonment create ambivalent interactions between the present and the past that tear down the borders between prisoner and free man, between insider and outsider. Baca's reconstruction of the past goes beyond the discursive level. The artist's language enables him to write himself into being, a being that must not be restricted to the level of discourse. His art and his poetry function as instruments of transforming Chicano life. Positioning himself successfully in American society he redefines this individual achievement in terms of his communal responsibility of "still working in the dark to create for my people our own unique light." (1992: 21). His autobiographical essays, therefore, do not just function as the discursive reconstruction of personal experiences; they articulate and negotiate at the same time the experiences of his Chicano community.

The questions which Baca raises remind the reader of those asked by Luis Rodríguez in *Always Running*, however, their answers differ in form and diction. Both writers use the potential of the autobiographical genre to explore individual personal experiences and the cultural conditions of the community to which they belong. The semifictional dialogic reconstructions of dramatic moments of Rodríguez's life and Baca's transformations of experiences of imprisonment into a highly poetic language in his essays are two ways of contemplating contemporary Chicano life. Baca's essayistic reflections transcend the level of individual existence by discussing topics from highly different fields of life: Mexican music, the *quincentennial* of Columbus's

discovery of America, the dignity of his grandmother and other elders, traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity. Writing becomes Baca's way to bridge binary oppositions, to overcome the insider-outsider duality, the pattern which dominant American discourses set up for Chicanas'/os' cultural identity formation. Poetry opens up multiple spaces for the Mexican American artist to position himself as a speaking subject who uses his means of language as a potential for transcending the dark:

As a poet, I integrate through my art the paradoxes of my Spanish and Indian heritages. Through art I question the legitimacy of institutions that exclude us. Through art I assert myself against racism and injustice, and proclaim with my people the melting of their chains in the fire of the vision for a better life. I represent myself and I create myself. (Slavitz 1992: 98)

The essayistic techniques of *Working in the Dark* allow Baca to merge his experiences of continual rebirth through poetry with his wish to negotiate the processes of his self-creation in an autobiographical form that is able to respond to the highly sensitive tensions of his troubled history. His essays transcend the level of retrospective *records*, they breathe immediacy and the excitement of "language invented from experiences that have truly been lived, almost, in my cases, on the verge of dying" (Brooks 2004). They rather function as transformations of nightmarish visions into the realities of language. In the autobiographical form of his essays he succeeds in finding "insight into the darkness"<sup>8</sup> and the courage to live with his past. As Baca has argued in an interview, "language provides us with something that we desperately need [... n]ot to close the wound, but not to forget it." (Meléndez 2004) The highly flexible spaces of the essayistic genre enable Baca to transcend his painful past. It is the unorthodox openness and flexibility of the language of his recollections that transforms his autobiography into an ongoing story of rebirth through language.

#### 7. *IMAGINARY PARENTS: A FAMILY AUTOBIOGRAPHY* (1996) –SHEILA AND SANDRA ORTIZ TAYLOR'S DUAL VOYAGE INTO SELF-POSITIONING

Reconceptualizing autobiographical writing as a means that carries the magic of survival challenges the traditions of autobiographical writing in significant ways. Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor question the basic premises of the genre in a different, yet not less far-reaching manner when they published *Imaginary Parents* as a *Family Autobiography*. It reconstructs the two sisters' lives from their early childhood up to the time briefly after the death of their father around age 16 and 19, respectively, and creates a most remarkable and ambivalent image of a Los Angeles based Mexican American family life whose formation takes place within the interactions of textual

and visual interpretations of the past. As Sheila Ortiz Taylor underlines in the “Foreword” to the autobiography, the writer and the visual artist

...did not try to make art and text replicate each other but rather to refract, casting new shadows, throwing new angles of light. While our individual memories always differed, we learned to value this difference and to use it as a way of layering our work. (1996: xvi)

Sandra Ortiz Taylor’s illustrations tell stories that are related to the discourses of her sister’s text, still, they create their own life, their own meaning (as suggested in the “Descriptive annotations” by the artist herself (1996: 8-9). Thus it transcends the traditional notions of autobiographical writing and defies any definition in terms of established genre concepts: Call this book autobiography. Or memoir. Call it poetry. Call it nonfiction. Or creative nonfiction. Call it the purest fiction. Call it a codex. Give it a call number. (1996 viii)

These ambiguities are already suggested in the title. *Imaginary Parents* operates on more levels than the one of memory; it refers to the imaginary as that “which exists only in one’s mind and not in real life”<sup>9</sup> as well as to the image as the mental picture of the events and objects of the past. When Sandra Ortiz Taylor explains in her preliminary “Art Notes” that she “frequently make[s] use of what in art parlance is referred to as a “found object,”(1996: 16) then this identifies at the same time the basic technique of her sister since Sheila Ortiz Taylor’s primary attention is also directed toward “[s]mall objects with big meaning set out in order,”(1996: 13) “objects” such as food, photographs, mirrors, tortillas, boots, books, horses and many others that form the “bones” of the autobiographical text and materialize the Ortiz Taylor family life. Blurring the distinctions between producing a text and creating visual collages the two artists create a “uniquely fashioned” piece of work from which the images of the two most important people in their young lives gradually get shaped: their parents.

They had come from poor working-class family backgrounds and they were determined not to duplicate the lives of their parents. They managed, together, to live out the American Dream, Southern California Style. It was as if they invented themselves. (Ortiz Taylor 1996: 15)

This explicit allusion to Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* creates the external frame of their lives –the “limits of wonder” (Lehan 1990) between how they want to appear and how they actually are. In the loosely arranged kaleidoscopic episodes that read like



movie shots several incidents intensify this impression: There is the beautiful castle-like home on the Horseshoe that turns out as a trap, as a confinement which the mother, as the father must realize, “is always laying plans to leave;” (Ortiz Taylor 1996: 59) there are the frequent references to movie stars contextualizing various family members in the fashion of Hollywood, artificially created, focussing on external appearances, neglecting questions of inner substance, of an identity of their own. But the dinner scenes that occur regularly in the narrative are most telling about this discrepancy. Their title suggests a moment of being; it always nourishes the idea of a family gathering around the table in order to eat together (an image of to be) –however, the short texts tell very different stories. In 1942 the sisters are excluded from the grown-up dinner due to their age, in 1944 the focus is on different opinions on fast food, in 1945 the discussion about how to prepare dinner reveals the lack of mutual understanding between the parents, and finally, in 1952, the family sits together but ultimately each of its members remains alone. (1996: 20-21, 38-40, 58-62, 198-199)

Like parts of a puzzle the fragmented memories are discursively assembled until they come full circle in the image of the straw puppet of Pancho Villa which the two sisters acquire as part of their collection. (252) Being able to reclaim their grandmother’s Mexican heritage, Sheila and Sandra feel prepared to open the “storage room” of their memories, all the small boxes “containing little items that trigger off memory.” (Fellner 1998: 153-163, 158) On the level of discourse they rewrite the tradition of their grandmother, because like Mymama who collected her *pocadillas*<sup>10</sup> in glass shelves in order to keep the past alive by remembering the stories they all have to tell, (Ortiz Taylor 1996: 48) the granddaughters reconstruct “the small objects with big meaning” from the altar of their family life by telling the stories of their parents and by presenting the collages of family scenes.<sup>11</sup>

Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor’s family narrative challenges the traditional premises of autobiographical writing in multiple ways. Extending the concept of reading a text beyond the level of written language by adding visual artifacts such as photographs and collages has already resulted in the production of interesting autobiographical narratives (Cantú 1995). But Sheila Ortiz Taylor also experiments with her narrative voice. The moments of family life until the father’s death are all reconstructed from the first-person-perspective of the writer-protagonist, regardless of whether she experienced them herself or heard about them in stories told by other family members. However, with the death of the father, the *family* autobiography seems to end and the narrative is taken over by a third-person voice who apparently

tries to decipher the ambivalences of the images of the past in order to reconstruct the young women's place within the multiple roots of their family's history thus trespassing the threshold from individual experience to collective history. Significantly, only in the final chapter, the female family members' reunion in Mexico, the narrative voice re-emerges in the first person plural: In this house under the stars we will fall asleep, dreaming the past into tropes and signs and symbols, beginning the dangerous art of fitting it all back inside the heart of a child (Ortiz Taylor 1996: 257).

This narrative voice allows to be interpreted as a compromise between the traditional genre parameters of the autobiography as the story of an individual self and the necessity to rewrite this paradigm as a prerequisite for the articulation of Mexican American female experiences. The authors of *Imaginary Parents* are two woman artists who construct their individual voices in the form of narrative texts and visual artifacts, respectively. But the processes of growing into this awareness of and potential for individuality which are the focus of their autobiographical recollections, are shaped by experiences of collectiveness, first in the sheltered spaces of their family home and later in the ambivalent realms of a female community. Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor's book emphasizes the relevance of a shared collective experience for the formation of individual voices. This interaction of collectivity and individuality determines the thematic and formal composition of *Imaginary Parents* since the text presents itself not just as the retrospective reconstruction of the life stories of the two women but applies at the same time a dual technique of negotiating the past: the language version and the visual artifacts. The two media reconstruct a shared past; still, the stories they narrate are told by highly personal –individual– voices. *Imaginary Parents* thus reaffirms the fundamentals of the autobiographical genre by simultaneously opening it up for the significance of a collective history for the formation of the individual self.

## 8. CONCLUSION: BACK INTO THE FUTURE

The examples of Mexican American autobiographical writing discussed in this essay document fundamental changes in Chicana/o cultural consciousness that call for a rereading of the past in terms of identifying visions for a future, the realization of which is worthwhile to struggle for in present-day life. Although Richard Rodríguez's *Hunger for Memory* at face value suggests an affirmation of assimilative efforts, its ambivalent implications directly prepare the ground for the experimental autobiographies of the 1990s which negotiate the necessity or inevitability, respectively, to bring highly diverse cultural experiences into interaction.

Luiz Rodríguez, Gloria López-Stafford, Pat Mora and Jimmy Santiago Baca, as well as Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor tell highly diverse life stories frequently shaped by the painful realization that everyday experiences cannot be structured (and hence controlled) by patterns of binary oppositions; they construct retrospective narratives of their lives from a postmodern awareness of the pluralities and inconsistencies of their contemporary existences. In turn, their texts are shaped by fragmentary non-linear structural patterns, by shifting multiple narrative voices, and by exploring the creative potential of blending diverse genre and media. Still, even a highly pluralistic rereading of these books reveals their common denominator, their power to create dialogic interactions of the individual story and the cultural narrative. (Stone 1991: 95-120) The examples of Chicana/o autobiography discussed in the essay strongly support the genre's achievement of being "simultaneously expressive experiment and historical record." (95). They reflect diverse, highly personal visions of the past, present and future, still, they are deeply rooted in the historical traditions and socio-economic conditions of postmodern American society. This focus on the individual's interaction with the here and how that determines her/his processes of self-positioning against the background of one's place in the community gains particular importance with regard to the contemporary discourses of fragmentation and dissolution which, as Stone points out, threaten "to destroy many hopes of coherence and continuity of personality in autobiographers" resulting in the acceptance of "the diminution of the separate individual and [the writing of] personal history with the author/actor functioning simply as the nexus of social and historical forces [...or in...] tak[ing] refuge in the realm of the psyche and the private imagination, leaving the nightmare of history for others to record" (1991: 112-113).

The texts under consideration offer a great diversity of techniques ranging from semi-documentary recollections of prison experiences to highly imaginary transformations of memory into collages and other visual artifacts – "found objects," yet they always remain under the careful control of the writer-protagonist. They do not assume significance per se but materialize the main persona's search for an understanding of the historical processes and the role of the self within history. This focus on the processuality and fluidity of the cultural contexts "renders problematic the traditional concept of historical identity as the aim and end of autobiographical activity" (Stone 1991: 113). The texts analyzed reread their protagonists' unique individual achievements in their quest for establishing a balanced relationship between the inner spaces of personal experience and the outer spaces of cultural networks against the background of their entire ethnic community's struggle to claim its place

in the American symbolic order. This “trajectory [...] from the idiosyncratic to the shared” (Rodríguez 1993: 268-290, 268) signifies not only a distinguishing moment from mainstream traditions of autobiographical writing but opens up multiple possibilities for the genre to trespass less flexible borders of definition and convention in order to respond to the highly dynamic processes of change that mark postmodern American life. For the protagonists of the texts under consideration, self-positioning means to identify one’s self in the ambivalent and often controversial contexts of a mixed cultural legacy that defy categorization and definition thus establishing a highly sensible realm of liminality in which the individual consciousness is constantly challenged to reposition itself against the background of shifting borders or changing contexts. *Identity* can therefore never describe a state or condition; an achievement completed, but will always remain subject to negotiation signaling a transitory or transitional stage in the processes of establishing balanced relationships between her/his awareness of individuality and of being part of a larger ethnic community. Mexican American autobiographical writing keeps options open with regard to both form and content of identity construction. As the individual texts have shown, the power of language is intensified by bilingual passages, oral story telling elements, photographs and artifacts to build up a multidimensional pattern from which memory is constructed in the dynamic processes “of negotiating multiple legacies and distinct senses of the self” (Rodríguez 1993: 271).

As Joe Rodríguez maintains, mainstream or “classical autobiography has to be modified to suit the Hispanic.” The retrospective texts reread in this essay demonstrate the creative power of their writers to alter the mainstream patterns of a classical Western genre in order to transform it into a means of articulating hybrid Mexican American cultural self-awareness. They suggest a concept of autobiographical writing growing from discourses of flexibility and ingenuity in which “language shapes behavior”(1993: 272). The Chicana/o writers want their autobiographical narratives to be understood as works in progress, which grow in the continuous process of selecting “the best from all their legacies, and depending upon context, place and occasion [of] weav[ing] them into an eclectic whole.” (1993: 275). Exploring the individual past within the contexts of communal ethnic history autobiographical techniques support the process of reporting one’s personality within the present cultural contexts of American life by developing “an understanding of group loyalty and an extended sense of the self” (1993: 270) thus sketching out prospects for shaping an awareness of multiple American cultural identity. Mexican American autobiographies symbolize discourses “back into the future.”

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Caliban image, see José David Saldívar “The School of Caliban: Pan-American Autobiography,” in Payne, *Multicultural Autobiography* (1992): 297-325. Print.

<sup>2</sup> I would go a step further than Paredes who refers to the image of the “middle-class pastoral” as “a hybrid designation conveying Rodríguez’s bourgeois American consciousness and his affinity for ‘classic’ – particularly English literature. (See Paredes, R. A. “Autobiography and Ethnic Politics: Richard Rodríguez’s Hunger of Memory” in Payne, J. R. ed., *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives*. Knoxville: The U of Tennessee Press, 1992.)

<sup>3</sup> In his critical rereading Tomás Rivera, for example, “consider[s] *Hunger of Memory* as a Humanistic antithesis.” See Rivera, T. & Rodríguez R. *Hunger of Memory as Humanistic Antithesis.* *Hispanic-American Writers*, ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, (1998): 107-115, 107. Print.

Raymund Paredes attributes the book’s extraordinary media attention to “Rodríguez’s denunciation of ethnic activism and his corresponding endorsement of conservative cultural and political positions.” See Paredes, R. A. “Autobiography and Ethnic Politics: Richard Rodríguez’s Hunger of Memory” (1992): 280.

<sup>4</sup> As Ramón Saldívar maintains in his discussion of *Hunger of Memory*, “Rodríguez’s uncritical celebration of the autonomous individual is perhaps the most obvious expression of his investment in the American middle-class myth of individuality” Saldívar R. *Chicano Autobiography*. (1990): 169. Print.

<sup>5</sup> *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster, Inc., (1994): 301. Print.

<sup>6</sup> “Pat Mora. (2002): 138. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Jimmy Santiago Baca quoted in John Wilson. “*Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio*,” Review article, *Magill Book Reviews*. 1 January 1993. <<http://web13.epnet.com/delivery.as...&cf=1&print=Print&cad=on&ft=on&est=>> 3 December 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Meléndez “‘Carrying the Magic of His People’s Heart’: An Interview with Jimmy Santiago Baca.” 10. 21 of January 2004 <[http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/baca/melendz.html](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/baca/melendz.html)>

<sup>9</sup> *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. (1994): 578. Print.

<sup>10</sup> *Pocadillas* are little objects like pictures, mirrors etc. that the grandmother was presented by family members and friends which assume the significance of cultural symbols as they bring back past memories and adventures.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Ortiz Taylor’s visual recollections in “*La Galería*” mainly consist of collages in the form of boxes which can be opened and closed; her sister reconstructs the stories of her childhood and adolescence in the form of a series of rather short episodes loosely arranged like movie clips which directly associates to the impression of “text boxes.”