
Norma Elia Cantú's *Canícula* *Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*

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Norma Cantú's collection of stories and photographs, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, begins with a map that depicts the U.S.-Mexico border in south Texas. Highlighting sister cities on both sides of the border, the map also includes both names for the river that divides these spaces, the Rio Grande on the U.S. side and the Río Bravo on the Mexico side. The dark line of the river/border underscores the proximity of the towns and communities on both sides while tracing the national boundary that divides them into two countries. This map, which situates Cantú's novel in the south Texas borderlands, also recalls the artificiality of the national border and the very real material conditions it creates.

Canícula is important to the field of Chicana and Latina literature because it makes use of the U.S.-Mexico border in a real, site-specific manner. Cantú reminds her readers that the border between Mexico and the U.S. is a physical site with border dwellers; some are able to cross to the other side while others are never allowed access to both sides of the border. In an interview with Jorge Mariscal at UC San Diego, Cantú states that she wanted the readers of *Canícula* to be aware of the U.S.-Mexico border as a real place, a geopolitical space where people are dying, not just an abstract, theoretical concept (Cantú, Interview). In this interview she also discusses the title of the work, *Canícula*, explaining that the word refers to the time in August/September between the hot days of summer and the onset of fall. Cantú mentions that the word *canícula* captures the liminal position that the border signifies in her work. In her novel she captures the complexities of a family divided in two by the border between the U.S. and Mexico and how these families live in in-between spaces that are part U.S., part Mexico.¹

In *Canícula*, Cantú intentionally destabilizes the relationship between the photographs and the text of the novel and she “negotiate[s] [her] own conditions of discursive control” (Richard 221). Nelly Richard in “Cultural Peripheries: Latin America and Postmodernist De-centering” notes an “unevenness” of “internal matrices” in regard to Latin America and the postmodern debate (217). In this article she explains the distinction between what she calls “celebrating difference” and “giving the subject of this difference the right to negotiate its own conditions of discursive control” (221). Like Walter Mignolo, who emphasizes the “loci of enunciation” of a subject, Richard understands postmodernism as having the

potential to dismantle center-periphery dichotomies and hierarchical structures when she states, “The contaminating and disseminating multiplicity of meaning affects the assumption of unanimity of voice according to which the originals were the depositories of a foundational truth” (Mignolo 13; Richard 220). Cantú’s postmodern novel *Canícula* celebrates Richard’s definition of difference while also identifying an “autonomous subject of enunciation” that creates a “critical *positionality*” in her work (Richard 221). I argue this “critical *positionality*” centers on the ways in which the photographs and stories function in the novel. Therefore, in order to understand how Cantú enacts Richard’s call to de-center the “model” for the “margin or periphery,” we must first understand the make-up of the novel and its recursive style with regard to the photographs and stories (221).

Canícula maps the coming-of-age of a young girl, Azucena (Nena) on the Mexico-U.S. border. Nena, as she is referred to in the narrative, is modeled after Norma Cantú and the photographs in the work are of Cantú when she was growing up in south Texas. Already, there is a disjointed nature to the work since it is part autobiographical, part fictional. Some of the stories in the novel include photographs of Cantú/Azucena/Nena; other stories describe an important moment in her life without a visual image. In the story titled “Crossings,” for example, Cantú describes crossing back and forth between the U.S.-Mexico border. This segment, which does not include a photograph, depicts the movement of the narrator’s parents and grandparents across the border. What is gleaned from the story is that Nena’s grandmother and her “Texas-born grandfather” are deported to Mexico in 1935 (5). Thirteen years later the narrator’s parents move across the border again taking up residence in the U.S. In some ways this re-crossing “meant coming home, but not quite” (5). This movement back and forth across the border is described as crossing “from one Laredo to the other” twice in one paragraph to emphasize the confusion and power dynamic of physically crossing the border (5). Moreover, employing “one Laredo to another” highlights the crossing and the bridge, which is a liminal space between two places all the while complicating the trope of crossing into or out of the U.S. and Mexico.

In this way, Cantú refuses to re-inscribe the power paradigm associated with the U.S.-Mexico border. Instead, by including the map of the border and intentionally ambiguous descriptions of it, readers are unclear as to which way the family is crossing. Cantú re-positions herself as author in a liminal space between the two countries, thereby highlighting the act of crossing and not the hegemonic relationship between Mexico and the U.S. Debra Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba explain in *Border Women: writing from la frontera*, that, “for Cantú crossing the bridge (or, alternatively, crossing the river) is a permanent referent not only for her family’s binational life but also for the structural integrity of her tale” and “this style of

presentation points toward the destabilization of the concept of the Nation itself” (98, 100). The story “Crossings,” thus questions the notions of citizen and nation for a people who were divided by an unnatural border.

Canicula, Cantú’s self-defined autobioethnographic novel, tells a story through photographs and accompanying vignettes. Explained in the introduction to the work, the novel is neither chronological nor purely autobiographical. Instead of having a traditional plot and storyline, the work is a “collage of stories gleaned from photographs randomly picked, not from a photo album chronologically arranged, but haphazardly pulled from a box of photos where time is blurred” (xii). This nonlinear narrative is told in order to mirror life: “we live life in our memories, with our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance” (xii). *Canicula* is a narrative that is not constructed in a chronological fashion. The work defies categorization and blurs the borders between fiction and non-fiction. Cantú explains in her essay, “The Writing of *Canicula*: Breaking Boundaries, Finding Forms,” that she was influenced by works that did not fit into easy classification including Rita Mae Brown’s *Six of One* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*, both of which are forms of creative autobiography (100). Cantú explains that after reading these two works she began thinking about a form of autobiography set on the border that used photographs to frame the narrative (99-100). Cantú purposefully creates an order that *seems* haphazard allowing for gaps in the narrative. She explains, “Chronological order had to go; after all, we don’t think in clean, clear chronological order; life doesn’t happen in neat little packages. I wanted a narrative that, like my memory, worked in a recursive and overlapping fashion” (102). *Canicula* also includes photographs to create a montage of image and memory.²

Stories and photographs are juxtaposed throughout the narrative of the work. Some photographs are explained in detail, others seem to be purposely misread, and still others are described in the prose that do not exist in the work. By including photographs in the novel, Cantú not only creates a concrete picture of the border in south Texas, but she also uses the photographs as a “means of making ‘real’ (or ‘more real’) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore” (Sontag 7). Extrapolating from Susan Sontag’s position on photographs of war and other people’s pain, one can say that Cantú creates a collage describing textually and visually the material conditions of those living on the border highlighting how the events of 150 years ago still have real consequences today and how as a nation we perhaps do not know or understand all perspectives of borderlands histories.³

Complicating the already intricate relationship between image and memory, Cantú’s stories describe the photographs included in the work, but the descriptions do not always match the images that precede them. As Timothy Adams notes in his article, “Heightened

by Life' vs. 'Paralyzed by Fact': Photography and Autobiography in Norma Cantú's *Canicula*," "comparing the actual photographs to the prose that describes them, reveal[s] countless small discrepancies between the words and the corresponding image" (60). These discrepancies jar the reader since the stories do not match the photograph. For instance, in "Cowgirl" the protagonist's dancing partner is described textually as wearing, "a red kerchief around his neck, a white shirt, and what appear to be blue jeans. Miss Montemayor's version of cowgirls and cowboys; he's even wearing a hat and boots" (33). Interestingly, none of the boys is dressed specifically as stated above. Quico, the narrator's dance partner is presumably the boy on the far left with boots, a white shirt, kerchief, and no hat. The only boy wearing a hat is standing on the far right and is not wearing a white shirt. There is no boy in the photograph that fully matches the description of the dance partner, only parts of the description match parts of each boy in the photograph. In this way, each of the boys pictured could be the narrator's dance partner, and yet none is described exactly right. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag notes that, "all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions" (10). In Cantú's novel, the stories that follow the photographs function as more than captions that sometimes match the preceding photograph. Indeed Cantú is unearthing a silenced border history with photographs and stories of her family's experience living on, and between, the U.S.-Mexico border effectually portraying a history that is traditionally "not being shown" (Sontag 14).⁴



From the personal collection of Norma Elia Cantú.

In a retrospective article in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, Cantú reveals that as she was writing the bulk of the stories that comprise *Canicula* in "Ana Castillo's home in Old Town," Albuquerque, she "did not have the photos" as she was writing (101, 103). Cantú explains that through this process of remembering and reconstructing the stories based on her memory of photographs that were not with her at the time of writing, she "was able to confirm the theory of how memory actually frees the past and photos freeze the moment" (103). Hence, the discrepancies between the photographs and the accompanying stories are not the crux of the novel. What is at stake in *Canicula* rather, is how the images and text function as an objective correlative to the U.S.-Mexico border invoking an emotional response from a wide range of readers.⁵

Some of the stories that do contain photographs are haunting in conjunction with the prose that accompanies them. For example, in the photograph and vignette of “Tino” the photograph is described in the text with some discrepancies. The photograph shows four children, Nena, two siblings, and Nena’s brother Floretino, or Tino. Tino “stands to the side with his hand out as if pointing a gun or rifle” (14). The photograph is poignant even before one reads the accompanying vignette because it depicts a group of three children and a fourth child slightly removed from the group. This fourth child, Tino, is posing as if he is shooting the camera or onlooker with a gun. He looks directly into the camera and is captured in the photograph in mid-fire. Cantú was strongly influenced by Roland Barthes in writing *Canícula* and she references him in the introduction to the work.⁶ Barthes’ concepts of *studium* and *punctum* seem to be especially helpful in understanding this photograph and the story of Tino. Barthes coined these two terms in order to characterize his emotional responses to photographs and discusses them in *Camera Lucida*. *Studium*, as described by Barthes, is the emotional response of a person who is drawn to a photograph for some reason. Barthes explains that *studium* means a “taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment” (*Camera Lucida* 26). He explains the types of photographs he is drawn to for myriad reasons but sets this emotional response apart from what he describes as *punctum*. *Punctum*, to Barthes, is a “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (*Camera Lucida* 27). This *punctum*, something in a photograph that reaches out and grabs the onlooker, is evident in the photograph of Tino with his siblings. There is something haunting and poignant about Tino, his hand pointed like a gun at the photographer/onlooker. It is disturbing to see a four-year-old shooting at you with his hand. This image becomes even more disturbing when one reads the vignette below the photograph called “Tino.” The story, which includes some discrepancies as related to the photograph, describes the photo as taking place at a birthday party even though the picture has “Easter 1952” written on the top. In the story we are told that “ten years later, 1968” Tino is “a soldier, and it’s not a game” even though Tino is probably four years old in the photo (14). The story continues, the same family that came together for the birthday party gathers again ten years later because, “We have all gathered around a flag-draped coffin. Tino’s come home from Vietnam. My brother” (14). After reading this story about Tino’s untimely death in Vietnam and regarding the photo of Tino shooting the camera, the photograph becomes even more poignant.

The photographs and vignettes live in a symbiotic relationship with one another, each revealing and hiding certain facts, details, stories, points of view in a constant tension between the story and the people frozen in time in the photographs. For example, these “small discrepancies” that Adams mentions occur again in a story called “Bueli,” preceded by a photograph. The photograph looks to be taken in a living room and is a close-up



From the personal collection of Norma Elia Cantú.

on Bueli (the grandmother), Nena (the protagonist), and two younger sisters Dahlia and Esperanza. Much of the accompanying vignette perfectly describes the photograph including the opening of the story, “In the photo, Bueli sits in her high-back rocking chair, her sillón where she’d rocked all of us to sleep” (24). And “Because we crowd into the small room, wanting to be in the picture, Mami takes it at an odd angle; Espy’s two-year-old face looms huge in the foreground” (24). Other details are difficult to confirm from the photograph since it is damaged and has creases in it. For example, according to the text, Bueli’s hair is “braided and wrapped on her head like a crown, adorned with grey plastic combs ... [with] encrusted rhinestones” (24). These details are difficult to confirm or deny based on the photograph. Bueli’s hair is pulled back, but because of the angle of the photograph, it is impossible to tell how her hair is held back and whether or not it is braided. Confirming or denying these details gleaned in the story however, is not the crux of this examination. Rather, these details function to destabilize the reliability of the narrator who is explaining the significance and meaning of the photographs while getting some of the details wrong. The discrepancies that Adams notes are striking, and invoke in the reader a destabilized relationship with the novel (image and text).



From the personal collection of Norma Elia Cantú.

Moreover, some of the details included in the prose section do not occur in the photograph at all. Still considering the story and photograph “Bueli,” the room in which the photograph is taken is cramped, and could be a “nine-by-nine living room,” but there are no “pseudo pink lace plastic curtains” in the photograph, and, more importantly, there are only four people pictured in the photograph, even though the prose description states that Bueli sits “surrounded by Tino, Dahlia, Esperanza, and me [the narrator Nena]” (24). Tino is not captured in the photograph. This detail

is striking since the preceding photograph/vignette in the work is the one in which we find out how Tino dies. The next photograph/vignette included in *Canícula*, “Bueli,” then includes him in the prose description when he is clearly not present in the photograph drawing attention to his untimely death. This mismatch of Tino’s presence in the photograph with Bueli mimics the way in which photographs have been theorized by Sontag and others, as both a presence and absence.⁷

Canícula begins with several quotations, one of which is from Susan Sontag, “All photographs are *memento mori*” meaning that all photographs remind us that we are mortal and will die (Cantú vi). Like Barthes’ explanation of Time as *Punctum*, the caption under the photograph Portrait of Lewis Payne reads, “*He is dead and he is going to die*” (*Camera Lucida* 95). After reading the story of Tino’s death while fighting in Vietnam, the photograph takes on a more intense form of *punctum*, what Barthes calls “another *punctum* (another ‘*stigmatum*’) than the ‘detail.’ This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (‘that-has-been’), its pure representation” (*Camera Lucida* 96). The photograph of the child pointing his hand and shooting the camera is disturbing; it pierces the onlooker of the photograph. But with the knowledge of his death in battle in the accompanying story, the photograph’s intensity is heightened. Adams suggests that “these small mismatches [between photograph and accompanying vignette] ... are deliberate attempts at keeping the reader off balance in terms of the book’s genre in a way that parallels the more complicated issue of assuming that *Canícula* is autobiographical because the narrator and the author are the same person” (62). In my opinion, Cantú’s discrepancies and mismatches have more to do with the way one relates to the past and the present than with the categorization of the genre of the work. Since Cantú says that she wrote the vignettes based on her memory of the photographs and then added the photographs to the work later on, the discrepancies make a statement about memory. The discrepancies between what is photographed and what is described is mismatched and shows the complicated structure of narrative and memory. By taking a deeper look at *Canícula*, we learn that the book is structured in the way we remember, in a dialogue between story and photograph that calls into question both the truth-value of the vignette and of the photograph since the mismatches call on us to read/see what is outside the frame of the photograph/story.

Cantú seems to be creating a historical yet fictionalized embodiment of Emma Pérez’s concept “*sitio y lengua*,” a place that is also a language (Pérez 161). If, for Cantú and Roland Barthes, a photograph is living time and space, then a photograph with an accompanying vignette is living time and space with language. In “The Photographic Message” Barthes defines the photographic image as “*a message without a code*” but in the case of *Canícula* the, or rather, *a code* is included with the photographs (*Image, Music, Text* 17). Because these codes seem to be at odds with the photographs they are encoding,

Cantú shows the broken structure of the message. Since the descriptions do not match the photographs they purport to be describing, Cantú is enacting Barthes' notion of describing a photograph: "however much care one takes to be exact, a connotation: to describe is thus not simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is to change structures, to signify something different to what is shown" (Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* 18-19).⁸ If *Canícula* then is a work composed of descriptions of photographs that do not exactly match, the work is also an attempt to "change structures" (18). *Canícula* becomes a work that "signif[ies] something different to what is shown" (19). The work highlights discrepancies and, instead of teasing out the parts that don't match up, Cantú unveils the deep structures of language and image in her work, destabilizing the relationship between image and text, all the while drawing attention to the artificial national border that divides her family into two nationalities. If Barthes' photographic message is a paradox, then Cantú's *Canícula* enacts this paradox on the U.S.-Mexico border.

In Roland Barthes' essay, "The Third Meaning" he also explains three levels of understanding a still image. He explains that these stills have three levels of meaning, first, the communication, which takes place on an informational level, the message of the image. Second, the symbolic level in which the image refers to a certain signification, what Barthes calls the obvious meaning. Finally Barthes articulates a third meaning in the image he terms the obtuse meaning, which is not "located in language use" and is "outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocation" (*Image, Music, Text* 60, 61). He explains that if the obtuse meaning "cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything -- how do you describe something that does not represent anything?" (61). What Barthes says is that this third meaning, the obtuse meaning "disturbs" and "sterilizes" "metalanguage (criticism)" (61). Barthes' Third Meaning mutes the metalanguage of the text and Cantú's novel disrupts and destabilizes the relationships between text and image all the while it creates a blueprint for how to read the work. If we refer back to the map at the beginning of the work that highlights the unnatural border between the U.S. and Mexico that split families in two, then perhaps Cantú's *Canícula* is her response to this unnatural border, a work that contains numerous unnatural borders between text and image, nation and citizen, memory and history, that sometimes fit and sometimes disrupt the narrative of the work showing the unnaturalness of the imposed borders between language and image that are both "counter-logical and yet 'true'" (Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* 63). This then, is Cantú's successful attempt "not to destroy the narrative but to subvert it" in order to speak from in-between and outside the frame (64).

In this way, Cantú uses "the border as a place of enunciation" to create her own genre used in *Canícula* that destabilizes the roles of the "original and translation" (Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba 9; Richard 220). Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba note that

Cantú uses a box of photographs as the organizing point of departure for her narrative and plays with the reader's expectations that in the photographic record there may be always found some irreducible residue of fact. And yet, at each moment, Cantú warns her reader not to be fooled by appearances. (99)

This resonates with the reading of the photographs and vignettes that make up the novel since it seems that *Canicula* is an example of a recursive text that can be repeatedly read with new sequences and patterns emerging with each reading just as the border can be understood from a multiplicity of perspectives.

Notes

¹ This division of families which took place in the 1840s is addressed in other Chicana/o works including Américo Paredes' "The Hammon and the Beans" in which the young narrator does not fully understand why his family was split into two nationalities and learns the official and unofficial histories of the events leading up to the forced Mexican secession of land with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. In this treaty the United States mandated the annexation of a large swath of Mexican land that extends from present-day southern California, Arizona, Utah, to parts of southern Colorado.

² *Canicula* includes the photographs before stories that accompany the photograph. Other works of literature that include photographs embedded in the text are Ana Menéndez' novel *Loving Che* and W.G. Sebald's book *Austerlitz*, to name a couple.

³ It is important to note the relevancy of these material conditions on the U.S.-Mexico border. Currently in Arizona, the Tucson Unified School District has cut the Mexican American studies department and is now banning Mexican American books. Despite the fact that the United States has no official language, English-Only laws continue to be passed in which business transactions can only take place in English.

⁴ Some of the ideas developed in this section stem from a course on Latina/o Literature taught by Dr. María DeGuzmán at UNC Chapel Hill: "Imagen doblada: Photography in Latina/o Short Fiction in the Americas."

⁵ Cantú notes in her essay, "The Writing of *Canicula*: Breaking Boundaries, Finding Forms" that she purposefully tried to "layer the narrative so that the text would speak to many – my family, my friends, Chicanas/os, readers at large – about many things" (103).

⁶ See also this interview by Jorge Mariscal in which she states that she was influenced by Roland Barthes (Cantú, Interview).

⁷ Some stories in *Canicula* include textual descriptions of missing or absent photographs. These descriptions are important to the work, though not my focus in this article, since they refer to an original that is not present. I thank Norma E. Cantú for the use of the photographs included in this article.

⁸ This is what Barthes describes as the photographic paradox: "The photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art', or the treatment, or the 'writing', or the rhetoric, of the photograph); structurally, the paradox is clearly not the collusion of a denoted message

and a connoted message (which is the – probably inevitable – status of all the forms of mass communication), it is that here the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message *without a code*” (*Image, Music, Text* 19).

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