

CANÍCULA: MEANINGFUL IMAGES

Imelda MARTÍN JUNQUERA
Universidad de León

Canícula is set in the borderland where Mexicans and US inhabitants are only distinguished by their citizenship, between Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, México. The history of the state of Texas is a particular one for many reasons. Apart from the vast extension of its territory and the fact of having enjoyed independence both from México and the United States of America, the geographical situation in between these two countries allows a special condition for the inhabitants that populate the state of the Lone Star. According to Americo Paredes "the earliest settlers of the region that is now Texas included mestizos, blacks, Indians, and Sephardic Jews" (Paaredes, 8).

It is my aim to show how the relationship between images and words highlights the meaning and significance of the whole novel and affords multiple ways of interpolation, mainly concerning the concept of border

Mexico got its independence from Spain in 1921. The border situation of Texas became a major problem at the moment due to the possible threat of Anglo-American settlers and Indian groups. Trying to solve the problem, in 1823, the central Mexican government decided to allow US immigrant settlers to establish in that territory with the promise that they would become Mexican citizens and Catholics. However, the result of the treaty proved very different from what Mexicans expected; the new Anglo-Texans got support from some Mexicans-Texans and started a rebellion against the central government in Mexico. Texas, the Mexican province, which until that moment had been part of the state of Coahuila, became an independent Republic in 1836. However, their independent status didn't last long due to the desire of many Anglo-Texans to acquire US citizenship. In April 1846, US troops invaded the land between the Río Grande and the Nueces River, thus starting the Mexican American War that ended with the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty in 1848. Nevertheless, the new citizenship didn't solve the existing problems between the inhabitants of the State, on the contrary, trouble increased in the area. From that moment on, flows of Mexicans started to migrate to the former Mexican territories, specially to Texas and racist violence inflicted by Anglo-Texans on Mexican-Texans became a common issue. It is not surprising, therefore, that important Chicano movements like *la Raza Unida* party were born in Texas in 1965, the same year César Chávez and the farmworkers united following blacks in their movements for Civil Rights. *Canícula* focuses on the previous years, the years that followed the uncontrolled interethnic racist violence, when Europe was fighting World War II and the US were sending soldiers to help defeating Hitler and Germany.



Norma Cantú uses a narrative technique which consist of combining flashbacks belonging to multiple scenes joined together by means of an introductory photograph. Each chapter in the novel is separated from the previous one by a title, technique which resembles the one used in mute cinema. Cantú diverts the attention of the reader from one narrator to another since the narrator thata appears in the introduction is different from one of the prologue.

The prologue of *Canicula* opens with Roland Barthes' death, thus, giving a clue of the contents that are going to follow in the narrative, as well as the announcement of the posthumous publication of *Camera Lucida: Reflections in Photography*, something which is not casually included in the prologue to this novel. Barthes died but his work remains, in the same sense, the people portrayed in the pictures, the models from which the author took her inspiration may also have disappeared but their faces are left forever in the pictures. In fact, the ghosts of the people shown in the pictures come and go without rest, it seems that their souls have been trapped in the piece of glossy paper and cannot be released, like the ancient Native-American belief. When Nena and her mother in the last paragraph of the prologue, set in 1985, sart looking at the photographs, their deceased relatives accompany them, inspire them, help them remember what the two women may have forgotten through time.

About pictorial messages, Barthes says in "The Photographic Message"

that "the photographic message is a continuous message" that extends as long as time, it is not given at a certain time but eternal and it does not provide the whole information at a first glance. *The story emerges from photographs randomly picked, not from a photoalbum chronologically arranged but haphazardly pulled from photographs, photographs through which, as Roland Barthes claimed, the dead return; the stories mirror how we live life in our memories, with our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, stepping back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance (Cunicula, XII).*

The magical moment when the lace of the shoebox is untied and the marvels that the shoebox contains are displayed resembles the African-American tradition of quilting. Just as the different patches sewn together conform an identity, complete the legacy left by the ancestry, each picture represents a piece of memory from the elders that has been preserved. The ritual of going through the photographs resembles a tradition inherited by matriarchal line, a ritual of preserving the memory of the family transmitted from mother to daughter. "The woman Nena begins to shape her story, drawing it out as carefully as when she ripped a seam from her mother, slowly and patiently so the cloth could be re sewn without trace of the original seam" (*Cunicula*, 2).

The image of the seam represents a metaphor of the borderlands, in this case, it is a reference to the line between two countries that once was sewn together and now separates Mexico and the U.S.

The tradition of storytelling so important and recurrent in ethnic literatures is recovered in the text and included as the perfect setting to unveil the secret hidden in the box. Besides, the reference to *Camera Lucida* is not accidental. Images and words intermingle in both texts, creating in the case of Cantú's novel, a collage, a quilt of events that reflects the life on the frontier, on the borderland where everything is possible and everyone seems to feel free. Freedom resides not in the United states, or in Mexico but in the land in between. Magical and extraordinary events take place in that space higher frequency. Everybody mixes up there and interrelate with each other in the same terms and in the same way images and words do in the narrative. Images in this novel do not illustrate the text, on the contrary, the text works as an amplifier of possible meanings, of signifieds that the reader may bring to the picture. Words are instructions themselves, a help to decode the image given in the page of the book.

Formerly, the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image, burdening it with culture, a moral, an imagination. Formerly, there was reduction from text to image; today, there is amplification from one to the other, The connotation is now experienced only as the natural resonance of the fundamental denotation constituted by the photographic analogy and we are thus confronted with a typical process of naturalization of the cultural. (A Roland Barthes reader, 205).

The background knowledge helps the reader interpret the meanings of the signifieds in a way or another, since images by themselves enclose a

multiplicity of meanings depending on the person approaching them. The pictures contained in *Canicula* are often very close to the comments that the text contains. Most of the times, the text seems merely a description of the picture that opens the page, therefore, there is little amplification of meaning made by connotative signifieds although sometimes the photograph shows an image whose signified differs from the one contained in the text below it.

However, it can never be forgotten that the previous statement results from a reader's perspective, another reader would infer completely different meanings. Like Barthes himself affirms: "if the ideology of the myth is obvious, then it does not work as a myth". (*A Roland Barthes Reader*, 96).

The process by which the reader adds signification to the image, occurs when signifieds must be inferred from the picture and not from the text. The reader, thus, gets included, he incorporates his knowledge and experience to the picture and to the text, by modifying it in each reading act so he becomes one of the essential elements of the narrative. This statement is linked to Barthes' idea that the author dies when the reader acquires an important role in the process of literary criticism. The reader is reading the image. "To read the picture as a transparent symbol is to renounce its reality as a picture" (*A Roland Barthes Reader*, 197).

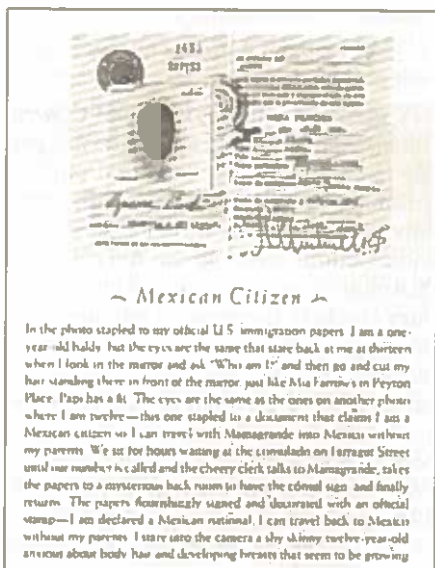
Meaning can be drawn from every single aspect of the picture even though the presence of the text, starting from the title directs the attention to a certain and definite part to which the author intends to drive the attention of the reader. In order to decode the pictures, the reader needs a special cultural competence, a historical and cultural background that allows him to bring connotative signifieds. The text, in case the reader ignores the culture in which the picture is inscribed, functions as a provider of meaning. Edward Said in *After the Last Sky* made in collaboration with the photographer Jean Mohr uses text and photographs "as two voices mutually calling attention to the limitations of the other" (*Autobiography and Postmodernism*, 86), thus encouraging the development of the reader's critical skills.

The true genius of Norma Cantú consists of offering images and text combined to produce extended meanings, leaving a deeper imprint in the mind of the reader who gets to know about the realities of a land and the people that populate it, by means of looking to pieces of their history and traditions. Images do not follow a chronological order, they appear to have been placed at random, but maybe the order has been conciously and previously established in order to produce an extended meaning, or at least, this is my perception as a reader of the novel.

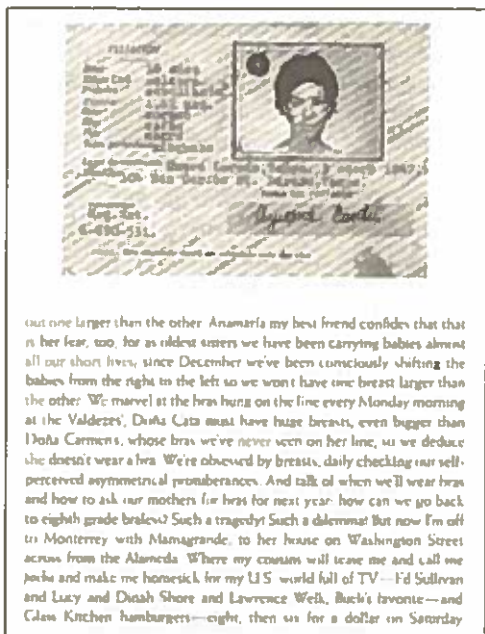
Canicula may as well be read as an illustrated biography which reflects the life in a borderland and recreates the events that populate the mind of the author. The border line no longer separates but joins two realities different on either side but equal inside the land contained in between. In this case, *la frontera* may well be a literal bridge that was crossed to get to Nuevo Laredo or a figurative bridge that would cover the area from San Antonio to Monterrey. Immigration, both legal and ilegal constitutes a major

theme in the novel. People crosses constantly the border, mostly on foot, between Mexico and the US while Cantú crosses the border between images and texts and blurs it making both complementary items part of the same reality. One of the great topics related to any borderlands, the action of crossing borders, does not escape allusion in *Canicula*; it is the grandmother who tells her grandchildren about their “crossing the river”. A mental picture reflects the moment of the Cantú family’s move in order to establish in the US part from where their ancestors had been thrown to Mexico: *Bueli and Mami and Papi crossed the bridge on foot from one Laredo to the other; they took turns carrying me, or maybe only pushing my blue stroller. Chirinola, our dog, came too, papers and all. It was 1948. For Bueli the move brought back memories, mental photographs gone now, except for the stories she told: how in 1935 she and Maurilio, my Texas-born grandfather, and their two young daughters packed all their belongings and drove their pickup truck down from San Antonio. They felt lucky, most deportees left with nothing but clothes on their back—sent in packed trains to the border on the way to Mexico, even those who were US. Citizens (Canicula, 5)*

This nostalgic sad testimony contrast with the tone of another picture which now shows the Cantú family crossing the bridge placidly, not as immigrants but as part of their daily routine, going shopping to the other side and coming back afterwards. However, the moment of awareness for Azuzena, the main character and narrator of the story, of her immigrant condition happens in Monterrey while visiting her grandmother; a feeling of alienation invades her when playing with her Mexican cousins.



Nena's Mexican passport heads a commentary about the fragmented identity of the narrator, she questions her nationality when she is declared a Mexican national although she lives in the US. border, in Laredo, and recites the national anthem followed by typical Caucasian songs that have nothing to do with Mexican folklore.



out one larger than the other. Anamaría my best friend confides that that is her fear, too, for as rickety sisters we have been carrying babies almost all our short lives, since December we've been consciously shifting the babies from the right to the left so we won't have one breast larger than the other. We marvel at the bras hung on the line every Monday morning at the Valdezes', Doña Cata must have huge breasts, even bigger than Doña Carmen's, whose bras we've never seen on her line, so we deduce she doesn't wear a bra. We're obsessed by breasts, daily checking our self-perceived asymmetrical prominences. And talk of when we'll wear bras and how to ask our mothers for bras for next year: how can we go back to eighth grade braless? Such a tragedy! Such a dilemma! But now I'm off to Monterrey with Mamagrande, to her house on Washington Street across from the Alameda. Where my cousins will leave me and call me Jucha and make me homesick for my US world full of TV—Fid Sullivan and Lucy and Dinah Shore and Lawrence Welk, Buch's favorite—and Colea Kitchen hamburgers—eight, then us for a dollar on Saturday

As for the literary genre in which to include *Canicula*, I have already considered it as an illustrated autobiography, literary genre which has been the most recurrently used among chicanas and ethnic women writers at large. Certainly, autobiographies, together with epistolary novels and diaries, have throughout history constituted the perfect vehicle for women writers to render their fiction. First person narrators, who in most cases identify with the main character, offer the reader a vision of the events that conform their memory and help them reach balance in a chaotic world. The concept of reflection from reality necessary for autobiographies has been lately and finally erased and the mirror has been enlarged to include reflections of memories filtered through the author's mental portraits and selected among many other remembrances not equally significant for them. *In Canicula, the story is told through the photographs and so, what may appear to be autobiographical is not always so. On the other hand, many of the events are completely fictional, although they may be true in a historical context. For some of these events, there are photographs; for others, the*

image is a collage; and in all cases, the result is enterely my doing (Canicula, Introduction, XI)

The key concepts common to any woman's autobiography are undoubtedly history (revisited), memory and intertextuality, characteristics that attach to their fiction the label of postcolonial. Talking about postmodern autobiography, photography becomes a recurrent characteristic as well. Michael M.J. Fischer affirms that "one of the things that postmodern is about is the juxtaposition of things, and experiences once separated by time and space (*Autobiography and Postmodernism*, 81).

The statement joins with Barthes' thought about images: *Certainly the image is not reality but at least it is its perfect analogon and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph (A Roland Barthes Reader, 196)*

Hence, the autobiographical events told in the narrative do not represent faithful reality, like the pictures do. Details have been altered, either consciously or unconsciously, fictionalised, ornated and made attractive to an audience who ignores what really happened. Certainly, a feeling of nostalgia can be perceived through the pictures and the texts that accompany them. Going back in time, sharing her childhood makes the author long for it to come back, for the good times when the whole family enjoyed life together. In fact, family life becomes a major theme in this novel; most of the stories include a member of the Cantú family. A time of sorrow comes with the death of Tino, Azucena's brother in Vietnam, something remembered at the very beginning of the novel. It is in a sense, a way of denouncing the injustice of a country which sends Blacks, Indians and Chicanos to fight for a country which despises them. Azucena herself will take part in demonstrations and marches against the war and for the Chicano movement in 1965.

Notwithstanding, the most relevant character is the grandmother, recipient of culture and wisdom, who appears as a memory keeper like in most Chicana fiction; the Mamagrande, translation of grandmother, which reveals the degree of acculturation suffered by Texans, is the one who instructs in the traditional ways of her people by the ritual of storytelling. She introduces her to the world of myth and legend, telling her the story of La Llorona, for example, and to the realm of the supernatural. Even after her death, Bueli talks to the protagonist commanding her to take care of her youngest sister. This is not the only contact that Azucena will have with the supernatural during her childhood. Apart from seeing her grandmother after death, she foresees the death of her cousin Chalo seeing him the day he dies and she hears angels singing at the death of Martha's grandmother.

This last passage connects the novel with Catholic religion, whose presence acquires a great importance through the narrative both in images and text. Pictures portraying weddings, First Communions and major religious celebrations like Christmas and the Day of the Dead that don't need explanation are shown in the narrative, characters often pray and go to Church. The curandera ancient figure of chicano folklore herself practices



~ Bueli ~

In the photo, Bueli sits in her high back rocking chair her sillón where she'd rocked all of us to sleep, surrounded by Tina, Dahlia, Esperanza, and me, in our nine by nine living room with the pseudo pink lace plastic curtains, her hair braided and wrapped on her head like a crown, adorned with grey plastic combs, my Mother's Day gift from Kress's where I spent thirty minutes and thirty cents deciding on just this pair with the encrusted rhinestones. Because we crowd into the small room, wanting to be in the pleasure. Mami takes it at an odd angle. Lopsy's two-year-old face looms huge in the foreground. On the wall hangs the calendar from San Luis Rey Church. In the very same room, we prayed around her coffin. The night she was buried I saw her. She sat rocking back and forth on her sillón in the living room. She told me to take care of the baby. With-

her cures with the help of religion, praying over her clients but she relieves the pain produced by illnesses like *susto* or *mal de ojo* which doctors are unable to cure. *But even after the long bus trip to get the shots and more trips to the doctor's office with the calendar with the print of the Indian woman cradling a sick child, even after all that, I still didn't want to eat and grew thinner. The fevers dissappeared but not the bad dreams. There was one only solution: a healing for fright. Bueli asked a neighbour to come and pray over me. The warm smell of pirul engulfed me and I was to reply three times, "ay voy", when Doña Cipriana called to me: "Vente Azucena, no te quedés". After mumbling prayers to herself, I did as I was told and got well (Canicula, 98-99).*

Third World women writers at large and Chicano writers in particular have benefited the opportunity that autobiographies offered them to submit the account of conflicts that surrounded their existence in a white, male and middle class world where they didn't belong fully. The process of writing, works as a therapy that heals the wounds of silence and deletion which had been inflicted upon them. Moreover, their writings are going to become also a therapy for women readers allowing the Chicano writer to acquire the equality of "curandera", the so beloved figure of Mexican tradition. Alicia Gaspar de Alba highlights this condition of the woman writer as curandera, as the woman in charge of keeping the culture of her people: "she is also the one who changes the culture, the one who breeds a new language and a new lifestyle, new values, new images and rythms, new dreams and conflicts into that heritage..." (Literary Wetback, 245).

Norma Cantú conveys in her narrative traditions reflected through pictures, some of them ironical like the one that shows Nena's mother in a China Poblana costume, a woman who had never been to Mexico taught to speak English instead of Spanish. Photographs, then, prove to be the reflection of her own reality, of the memories which reside only in her mind. Images created by and for herself because the rest of the people may remember events differently and sometimes, pictures even lie not showing the truth about the events that really took place at the time.



~ China Poblana Two ~

Mami isn't even nineteen when she's photographed as a china poblana at the plaza in front of Santo Niño de Atocha Church, with a whole setup—fake horse and all. She holds her skirt and points her foot as instructed, in the wide-brimmed charm hat the embroidery screams (Vera Mexico! She who wasn't even born in Mexico, who went there as a ten-year-old knowing only to read and write in English because the nuns at Sacred Heart in San Antonio wouldn't tolerate Spanish. Settled in the tiny hamlet of Rodriguez with the sunbaked packed dirt yard, and the two-room adobe, Rodriguez, where school was a few rough-hewn wood benches and a young teacher humming with socialist ideas—after all it was during the Cárdenas presidency—taught the songs of a nationalism routed in revolution. She saw her gentleman father driven in self-pity and drink, a gentleman who wrote poems and owned a Model T, a gentle-

WORKS CITED

- CANTÚ, N.E. Canícula, *Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (University of New Mexico, 1995)
- FISCHER, M. "Autobiographical Voices ;1,2,3) and Mosaic Memory", *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, (Boston, 1994)
- GASPAR DE ALBA, A "Literary Wetback" *The Massachusetts Review* 29, 242-246
- PAEDES, A. *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin, 1958)
- SAID, E. *After the Last Sky* (New York, 1986)
- Sontag, S (Ed), *A Roland Barthes Reader* (London, 1993)