



**Canícula: Snapshots of
a Girlhood en la Frontera**

Norma Elia Cantú

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132 pp.

SNAPSHOTS OF A GIRLHOOD
EN LA FRONTERA: THE ART OF
THE LAND IN-BETWEEN

The U.S.-Mexico border: Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa calls it “*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.” Chicana poet Gina Valdés refers to it as “a wall of barbed lies, / a chain of sighs, a heart/pounding, an old wound.” This is the same border another Chicana writer, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, personifies as she writes: “her legs sink in the mud of two countries, both sides leaking *sangre y sueños*.”

In this “land in-between,” as Norma Cantú calls *la frontera*, dreams and nightmares coexist; the boundaries between reality and the imaginary seem seamless; change and exchange are, uniquely, a matter of course. It is from

this “land in-between” that Norma Cantú voices a range of experiences that would remain as mere words stolen by the wind were they not carefully and lovingly shaped, crafted into an aesthetic form, doggedly determined to survive as written words. For, as Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa rightly states in her poem “To Live in the Borderlands Means You,” “*Cuando vives en la frontera*/people walk through you, the wind steals your voice.”

But there is no danger of Norma Cantú’s voice being stolen, and one can hardly hear any wind in the *canícula* that lends this book part of its title. *Canícula*, as the author explains in a very brief introduction for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the term, means the dog days, “a particularly intense part of the summer when most cotton is harvested in South

Texas; at that time because of the intense heat, it is said, not even dogs venture out.” But for the author it has other meanings too: “In my childhood scheme of things, it is a miniseason that falls between summer and fall.” Moreover, the title refers to the time when she wrote most of the book: during the 1993 *canícula*.

Canícula, the second volume of a trilogy that opens with *Papeles de mujer*—written entirely in Spanish—and concludes with *Cabañuelas*, is subtitled *Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*. And in this book it is these sudden “snapshots”—as the very name onomatopoeically suggests—that freeze a chance moment into a permanent paper memory, holding time within the contours of a faded frame, that trigger spontaneous and associative memories in the narrator-author and lure the narrative flow. *Canícula* smells of musty, parchment-like, sepia-tinted pictures that live suspended in time inside an old shoebox tied with faded ribbon, enclosed in near-oblivion until the miracle of sight, memory and articulated words restore them to life—to a life of their own.

The 86 brief texts in this vol-

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ume cross *fronteras*, the threshold of many memories; happy times are retraced, as are fears, deaths, sorrows, moments of the past that have unavoidably become the future and bear markers of inevitable omniscience—an omniscience that shifts reality around, that brightens up even the toughness of cotton-picking under a

thunderous sun with breezy poeticity. The final text in the book—entitled “Martin High” since it deals with the memories triggered by a picture of several Martin High School students—strives to lay bare the variety of roads taken by those characters captured in the picture in a moment of innocence, hope, even a touch of teenage awkwardness. These roads have not been easy or sorrow-free, but cannot simply not be, since they have been, they are. And it is in the multiple-layered meanings implied in the “land in-between” that some remain while others seek new spaces, as this text states at the very end of the book: “Some of us love, and some of us hate, some of us love and hate our borderlands. Some of us remember, some of us forget.” Thus Norma Cantú points to the ambiguous relationship Chicanas and Chicanos have with their past, and to the imperative need *not* to forget that past, even when it is painful, a concept brought into being through the narration itself.

The sense of spontaneity and the fragmentary nature of this volume are closely related to other writings by Chicanas and remind one, for example, of Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (published this summer in Mexico in a translation by Elena Poniatowska and Juan Antonio Ascencio entitled *La casa en Mango Street*). In *Canícula*, as in Cisneros’ book, the rites of passage of childhood and adolescence become

borders to be crossed by a female narrator.

There is another *frontera* in this book worth mentioning: the elusive border between autobiography and fiction. In the introductory note the author offers the term “fictional autobioethnography” as a means of encompassing the multiple intentions encoded in these texts that are as much autobiographical as fictional, a point she deliberately underscores—although the reader may well have the impression that she is not entirely willing to label her work at all. This need to insist on a difference and distance between

graphical slant and which might straitjacket its sense of spontaneity. Some of the texts begin, literally, with a picture, enriching the reading experience; other texts simply start from the memory of an image, at times solemn, at others humorous and occasionally even ironic, in a style that shies away from any exaggerated or unnecessary ornamentation.

Linguistic *fronteras* are also crossed in this collage of texts. And although Spanish is interspersed in a code that is predominantly English linguistically—though not necessarily culturally—the difference between codes

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her characters and herself is similar to that of Sandra Cisneros, equally adamant about the reader’s all-too-easy tendency to indiscriminately equate her life with that of her characters.

Canícula crosses other borders as well: those of perception, for instance. Cantú places pictures of herself, her family and other people as visual points of departure for many of the texts, pictures apparently selected at random from an old shoebox, a device that has the effect of nicely eluding a chronological linearity common to literature with an autobio-

is not underscored since, for instance, words in Spanish do not appear in italics. These very insertions in Spanish are integrated as a matter of course in the discourse, much like the oral code-switching common to the border and to Chicano language and culture.

It is nevertheless interesting to note the concessions made by Cantú to readers unfamiliar with the Spanish language; this becomes apparent in the creation and use of several strategies that integrate a natural and unobtrusive translating process into the narration

itself. Here is an example from the text entitled "Las piscas": "Strange insects —*frailesillos*, *chinches*, *garrapatas*, *hormigas*— some or all of these pests— ticks, fleas, tiny spiders the color of sand —some or all of these *bichos*— find their way to exposed ankles, arms, necks

and suck life-blood, leaving welts, ronchas —red and itchy— and even pusfilled *ampulas* that burst and burn with the sun." There is no exact parallel translation and not every word in Spanish is translated; there is, instead, an interesting play with the text whereby

the meaning (in English) is sufficiently suggested, and the translation of something like "frailesillos," for instance, becomes unnecessary.

The consciousness in *Canicula: Snapshots from a Girlhood en la Frontera* of an enunciating voice—that of the female narrator—is complemented by a concern for who the receptor is to be, who is at the decodifying end, across on the other side of the communication border. The "Prologue" (which, contrary to what one might expect, begins the narration process) ends with these words: "The stories of her girlhood in that land in-between, *la frontera*, are shared, her story and the stories of the people who lived that life with her is one. But who'll hear it?" This concern for the potential receptor is, in fact, very present in Chicana literature today: it questions the variety of borders —real and hypothetical— that are actually crossed while seeking to place voices with specific Chicana markers in spaces where those voices may resound, creating echoes. But the question is... for who? —"who'll hear them?"

We could conclude that since it has become as important to determine who speaks —or writes— as who listens —or reads— the reader tends to lose her or his anonymity and recover an identity, whereby yet another *frontera* is crossed.

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