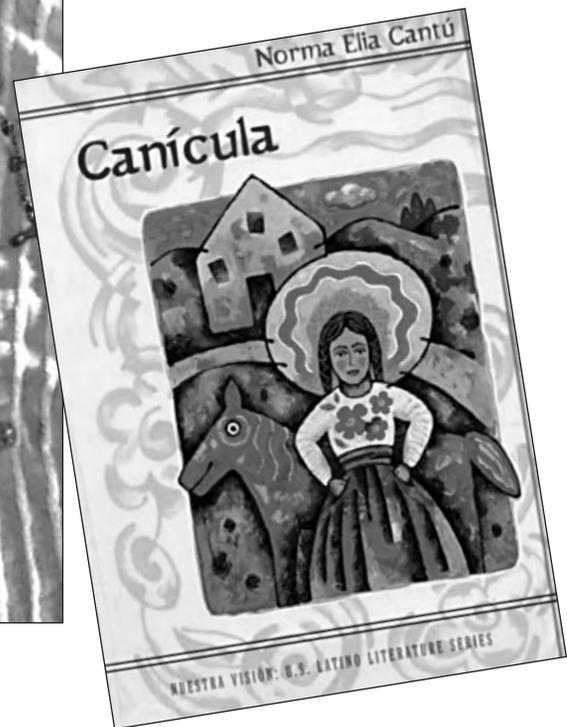


Reviews



Canícula. Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera

Norma Elia Cantú

University of New Mexico Press

Albuquerque, 1995, 132 pp.

Canícula. Imágenes de una niñez fronteriza

Norma Elia Cantú

Houghton Mifflin Company

Boston, 2000, 238 pp.

A Literary Quinceañera¹

Quinceañera fiestas, or coming-of-age celebrations, are still very big in Mexico. And en la frontera. On April 23, an unusual event, a Literary Quinceañera—complete with madrinas and padrinos, godmothers and godfathers—was a literary happening in the borderlands. It celebrated the fifteenth anniversary

of the publication of Norma Elia Cantú's moving, unique and unconventional fictionalized memoir, *Canícula. Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, originally published in 1995 and available as of 2000 in a Spanish version translated/rewritten by Cantú—quite a literary feat in itself.

A celebration such as this—that took place in San Antonio, Texas, Cantú's present home—is a

reminder that literary and community activities and events transmute traditions into meaningful statements that continue to recreate rich, ever-changing tapestries of everyday life experience en la frontera.

Chicana pioneer theorist and writer Gloria E. Anzaldúa in her acclaimed ground-breaking book *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) refers to the Mexico-U.S. border as “*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.” Chicana poet Gina Valdés writes about “a wall of barbed lies,/a chain of sighs, a heart/pounding, an old wound/...A cross of stones/extending to the four points,/each stone a prayer,/each prayer a murmuring stone/...a fresh wound on an old cut.” Chicana writer Alicia Gaspar de Alba personifies la frontera as a “sleeping beauty”: “Her waist bends like the river/bank around a flagpole....Her legs/sink in the mud/of two countries, both/sides leaking sangre/y sueños.”

Speaking from the herida-frontera, *Canícula* addresses major moments of personal and collective drama and minutiae that Sandra Cisneros refers to when she writes about it.

A re-reading of *Canícula. Snapshots of A Girlhood en la Frontera* 15 years later brings the reader face to face with myriad realities of this “land in-between,” as Norma Elia Cantú calls life en la frontera, those “borderlands” that embrace far more than 1,952 geographical miles of barbed wire, built walls, flowing blood-tinged waters, hundreds of cameras and border patrol units. Over a century and a half ago this boundary came into being through the 1848 Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty that signed away 55 percent of Mexico’s territory to the U.S. in return for a sum of money that around the time *Canícula* was written could be said to be roughly equivalent to a year’s of Mexico’s annual budget.²

En la frontera, the in-between land where dreams and nightmares cohabit, those borderlands where boundaries between reality and the imaginary seem almost seamless, is where the narrative voice in *Canícula* is situated, witnessing and testifying to a

legacy of generations. The protagonist Azucena’s “situated knowledge,” as Donna Hathaway calls it, is where genealogies acquire new yet recognizably traditional values and perspectives; where the dogged continuity of old ways is (suf)fused in unique hybridity; where the cross-borderings of realness and fiction are integrated into daily life as a matter of course, as the annual seasons arising and passing away. Where reality can often be larger than fiction. From this land in-between is voiced a range of everyday experiences that acquire renewed dimensions when carefully crafted and shaped into a deliberate aesthetic form. When they are lovingly shaped into shareable ways en la frontera communities by making both English and Spanish versions available.

“*Cuando vives en la frontera*,” Gloria Anzaldúa once wrote in her poem “To Live in the Borderlands Means You,” “people walk through you, the wind steals your voice.” The fact is, though, that having written *Canícula. Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, the wind has not stolen a single note from Norma Elia Cantú. This Literary Quinceañera event attests to this, along with the numerous readings Cantú has been asked to do at universities and community colleges throughout the U.S. in these 15 years, including one in Mexico shortly after its publication. There is no danger Cantú’s voice or that of the communities she voices can be stolen by the whirlwinds of history. At this distance in time, it could be confidently stated that this is now a classic of Frontera and contemporary Chicana literature.

Speaking from the herida-frontera, *Canícula* addresses major moments of personal and collective drama and minutiae that celebrated author Sandra Cisneros refers to when she writes about *Canícula*: “Intimate as a poem and as large as a Texas sky, these stories are at once diminutive and grand.” This “collage of stories,” as Cantú refers to them, take place during a specific time of year related to the book’s title. As she explains in a brief introductory note for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the term, “la canícula” refers to 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.” Moreover, the title alludes to the specific time she wrote the book with intense dedication during the 1993 dog days under a New Mexico and a Texan sun.

Canícula, as the curiously tongue-in-cheek introduction to the book announces, is the second volume of a (fictitious, in reality) trilogy that opens with *Papeles de mujer* (written entirely in Spanish) and concludes with *Cabañuelas*. *Canícula* is aptly subtitled *Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*. These “snapshots” that suggest the spontaneous, the ephemeral, the instant chance moment frozen into a permanent paper memory, are able to hold time within the contours of a faded frame, and trigger a string of associative memories in the narrator-author that lure the narrative flow forward while moving backward in time. *Canícula* smells of musty, parchment-like, sepia-tinted pictures that live suspended in time in an old shoebox, from where, tied up with an old ribbon—so the author announces—these photographs are taken out at random, whether they are textually included or not as specific visual memory-moments in the book itself: “a collage of stories [is] gleaned from photographs randomly picked, not from a photo album chronologically arranged, but haphazardly pulled from a box of photos where time is blurred.”

The 86 “snapshots” or “short stories” are strung together into what many critics consider a novel. Happy times are retraced, so are fears, death and sorrow, physical and psychological heridas (wounds), several thresholds of Azucena’s girlhood’s life-moments. These time-shiftings are fingerprinted by a narrative omniscience that shuffles photographs, memories, time-frameworks, experiences, providing an overall picture. Cantú explains in her introduction, “The story emerges 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, seeping back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance.”

By means of the young Azucena’s narrative voice, fresh testimonial honesty is gathered and conveyed, even as the author’s aesthetic awareness is able to transmute, for instance in the opening story “Las

pizas,” the rough-and-tough experience of cotton-picking chores under a blazing sun with poignant and breezy poeticity.

“Martin High,” the story that brings to a close the “girlhood en la Frontera” time-framework in *Canícula*, is introduced by a photograph of several Martin High School students and briefly explores the variety of roads taken by those specific characters caught in a past moment of innocence and hope—even a touch of teenage awkwardness. These roads, reader is reminded, have not been easy or sorrow-free, often caught in or freed by multiple-layered meanings and experiences of the land in-between. “Martin High” brings the book to a close by stating, “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.” The author ends with the reminder of memory as all-important in personal and collective memories, however painful the past, which

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is something each of the stories between these covers celebrates as being still alive. Another final implication is that the once-upon-a-time future is, in fact, now—even as we engage in reading *Canícula*, or re-reading it 15 years later, or even reading this very book review.

The sense of spontaneity and the fragmentary nature of *Canícula*, reminiscent of other writings by Chicanas in which the coming of age life-threshold is brought to the forefront, bears witness to another frontera: the elusive border between autobiography and fiction that Cantú deliberately and provocatively embroiders on. The author’s introductory note offers the fascinating term “fictional autobioethnography” as a means of encompassing the multiple intentions encoded in *Canícula* that are as much autobiographical as they are fictional, as much personal as collective, as much a story as herstory (vs. history) en la frontera. In this sense, *Ca-*

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nícula becomes, as renowned Chicana author Ana Castillo has aptly put it, a “personalized ethnography that feels as familiar as my own family album, and as touching.”

Linguistic fronteras are also crossed in this unprecedented collage of kaleidoscopic memory-fragments. In the English version, Spanish is naturally interspersed with what could be referred to as classical Chicana literary precision and spontaneity. Yet the difference between codes is erased through the deliberate non-use of italics, thereby integrating the Spanish code of intimate expression akin to oral code-switching common to everyday language en la frontera and U.S. Chicano/a culture.

Cantú does make concessions to readers unfamiliar with the Spanish language. Several strategies are used, for instance, to integrate a natural and unobtrusive translating process into the narration itself, as this example from “Las piscas” shows: “Strange insects —frailillos, 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 pus-filled ampulas that burst and burn with the sun.” No exact parallel translation is overtly provided. Instead, a particular interplay revealing the complexities of bilingualism and interlingualism (the alternate use of both codes in a spontaneous and natural way) is illustrated on the very page. English-language comprehension is never jeopardized, yet the right to use untranslated Spanish as an assertion of a collective cultural and heart-held expression becomes almost a character in itself. One of the implications being, of course, that the literary and the political can happily cohabit en la frontera.

The authorial consciousness in *Canícula: Snapshots from a Girlhood en la Frontera* becomes a self-consciously politically-engaged and community-

devoted gifting to the reader, wrapped with a musty ribbon like that of the shoebox full of sepia-tinted photographs mentioned in Cantú’s prologue. The authorial voice is simultaneously detached from and is an intimate alphabet for Azucena’s rites of passage. As claimed at the end of the prologue that is integrated, the reader may be surprised to note, into the narrative process itself, “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 expressed concern for who the recipient(s) might be, for those on the decodifying end, alludes to yet another frontera, to a communication crossbordering the author undertakes and includes in the writing act itself.

In this sense, the adolescent rites of passage en la frontera bordercrossed by Azucena, the female protagonist —Cantú’s alter ego positioned on somewhat shifting sands by the very fact the label “fictional autobioethnography” is offered on a silver platter to the reader— becomes aptly commemorated by the Literary Quinceañera celebration of *Canícula*.

Whether this will set a new trend in future literary communities remains unknown, although, in the meantime, it is certainly in a celebratory mood that we can embrace reading or re-reading *Canícula*. Gloria E. Anzaldúa once wrote that to “survive the Borderlands/you must live *sin fronteras*/be a crossroads.” We could easily assert that *Canícula* and Cantú are indeed living and memorable crossroads. ■■■

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NOTES

¹ The deliberate strategy of using un-italicized words in Spanish interspersed in the English text in Cantú’s *Canícula* is mirrored in this review as a tribute to the novel and its linguistic-literary strategies. In this review I have respected, too, Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s use of italics in those texts of hers that are quoted. In this way, I aim to maintain consistency, above all, with those decisions made by each of these writers.

² Michael C. and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 351.