

CHICANO AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: IDENTITIES ON THE BORDER

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(Resumen)

La comunidad chicana y la afro-americana muestran una identidad claramente heterogénea debido a su tradición migratoria. En el caso de los chicanos, su situación geográfica les proporciona una metáfora muy adecuada para su condición: se encuentran en una "frontera cultural". Así, muchas autobiografías de autores chicanos muestran, por una parte, un afán por definir la propia identidad, no ya como algo rígido sino como una realidad dinámica. Por otra, se aprecia la creación de un lenguaje particular mediante la incorporación al discurso dominante de formas de expresión propias. Por su parte, la comunidad afro-americana presenta algunos intentos de naturaleza similar. Esto indica que sus escritores avanzan en la dirección adecuada hacia una "escritura de frontera".

Marie Louise Pratt's concept of "linguistics in contact" acknowledges that cultures are not intact, homogeneous groups, but are, instead, heterogeneous and changing. This is more evident in the case of Chicano and African-American cultural identities. Their migratory tradition, and the combination of different cultural influences in their history has forced these ethnic groups to engage in a constant relocation and a questioning of their identities.

Migration implies change: cultural change, change of references and, on occasions, the fact of trespassing limits. Many Africans were brought from their continent and sold as black slaves to different parts of the country throughout the 17th century. Later, in the 20th century a massive black exodus took place between 1915 and 1940 from the southern farms towards the industrial cities of the North. In a parallel fashion, Mexicans always had a tradition of migration, "a tradition for long walks," as the *chicana* Gloria Anzaldúa identifies it:

El retorno to the promised land begun with the indians from the interior of Mexico and the *mestizos* that came with the *conquistadores* in the 1500s (11)

The Mexican immigration continued during the next three centuries. Finally, thousands of Mexicans continue to cross the border both legally and illegally during the 20th century. The most massive movements were due to the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), and later to the construction of the railway from the American Midwest down to the south-west of the country. The displacement of the Mexican border 100 miles south, through the *Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo* in 1848 also constituted a migration for many Mexicans. Even though it was not a geographical migration, these Mexicans suddenly found themselves as involuntary citizens of a different country.

During the 20th century, the Mexican and African-American migrations have had a similar sociological character. Both involved the displacement of large numbers of

low-class agricultural workers. In many cases the migration implied a change from an agricultural environment to an urban one, from illiteracy to culture (and consequently from marginal language to dominant language), from nature to technology, and frequently from a state of innocence to one of maturity. Due to these changes, the migrants underwent a period of social and cultural adaptation. This adaptation required a reformulation of their own identity, since their old points of reference were no longer valid. Later, once the process of assimilation into a new culture was almost completed, the formation of identity within these minority groups became even more complex. The African-American and the Chicano communities, as well as any other minority groups, were placed in the margin in America, that is, on a metaphorical border. The hegemonic culture which considered the country as a unified entity based on European patterns, ignored the specificity of its minority groups. Due to this, Chicanos and Afro-Americans had difficulty in reconciling their own cultural heritage with the culture common to the entire country. In fact, their identity was formed with elements from both cultures.

Furthermore, these ethnic groups were not originally homogeneous themselves. Mexicans originated from a mixture of Castilian and Indian blood. Spanish traditions and Aztec myths merged progressively, creating the Mexican culture. Later, when a great number of Mexican *mestizos*, indians and whites migrated to the United States and faced the Anglo-saxon culture, the melting of both cultures (Mexican and North-American) gave rise to the *chicano*. On the other hand, African-Americans underwent their first process of cultural mixing during the times of slavery. The cultural assimilation almost erased their African rites, religions and languages. However, in spite of adopting some American social patterns, blacks continued to develop unique forms of expression, such as "the Blues," voodoo practices and stylistically unique forms of dance. Later, the migration of many African-Americans to the North imposed a further degree of cultural assimilation. The migration meant distancing themselves from a sharecropping culture, and this resulted in the breaking of bonds with many traditional aspects of African culture, such as agricultural work and an oral tradition.

Autobiographies, both fictional and non-fictional, serve as a good comparative base of the process of formation of such a complex identity among the individuals of these two ethnic groups. Frequently, autobiographies help the individual to construct his/her self in the process of assimilation into a specific environment. An analysis of Chicano and African-American autobiographies shows the following: first, the identity of these groups can no longer be considered as homogeneous, nor can it ignore the dominant culture for its definition; secondly, through the use of a specific set of referential codes, these groups can find a distinctive mode of expression, which would reflect the combination of the specific and the dominant culture in their identity. Luis Leal points to this second aspect in his article "The Problem of Identifying Chicano Literature:"

Chicano literature, like all other literatures, can give expression to the universal through the regional. ... And [the Chicano writer] is giving expression to this in an original style. By writing in a combination of English and Spanish, he is creating new images. And the creation of a new image is precisely the problem that confronts the Chicano writer, for it is not easy to give universality to the regional or particular if the writer does not go beyond his immediate circumstance. The Chicano has to create a synthesis out of history, tradition, and his everyday confrontation with the everchanging culture in which he lives. (Jiménez 4)

The close proximity of Mexican-Americans to the Mexican border provides them with a useful metaphor of their situation in the United States. The image of people crossing back and forth over the border suggests the position of the minority writer. The Chicano writer or, by extension, any other minority writer must be able to situate himself/herself on both sides of the cultural border: the border that not only separates the culture of their country of origin from that of their present country, but one that also separates their ethnic group from the hegemonic American culture. The concept of "cultural borderlands" was first introduced by the *chicana* Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). Anzaldúa defines it as follows:

A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and the forbidden are its inhabitants. Los *atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over the confines of the "normal." (13)

According to Anzaldúa, the psychological and cultural borderlands are present wherever two or more cultures "edge each other," where two or more races come into contact, when people from lower classes interact with people from working classes, or every time "the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (Anzaldúa Preface).

Later, in 1991, Emily Hicks uses the term in a more specific manner, and identifies Chicano literature as "Border Writing." As a group differentiated from the dominant culture, Chicanos do not identify themselves with the standard English of the United States.

For this reason, they create a different referential code that allows them to express their heterogeneous and differentiated identity. In the introduction to her book, Hicks explains the implications of border literature: "By choosing a strategy of translation rather than representation, border writers ultimately undermine the distinction between original and alien culture." (xxiii).

In this sense, "border writing" is related to Linda Hutcheon's postmodern concept of de-centering the center. In border writing the Other is no longer the Other; he/she is Self and Other, since the concept implies the ability to be on both sides of a cultural border. The referential code of the South integrates both elements of the universal dominant culture and the specific minority culture. Two illustrative examples of forms of border expression in these two cultures are African-American Blues and Chicano *corridos* .

I consider, nevertheless, that the concept of border literature as conceived by Hicks can be too narrow in its application. Taking Deleuze and Guattari's definition of "Minor Literatures" as a point of reference, Hicks establishes four fixed categories of expression for border literature: 1)non-synchronous memory, 2) deterritorialization or nonsynchrony in relation to everyday life, 3) decentered subject/active reader becoming animal, and 4) the political. (Hicks xxxi). Even though these categories may be useful and many border literary works conform to them, the fact of considering them as the only possible choices is the equivalent of actually setting borders on border writing. Therefore, this concept may be more useful if considered in a broader sense, by simply trying to identify the various specific modes of expression of each ethnic group. Since identity is a heterogeneous concept, its form of expression must consequently be heterogeneous as well. Thus, a plantation-born migrator, who settles in Chicago, is not likely to use the same forms of expression as a New York native quadroon woman, who returns to the South in search of her cultural roots. In spite of their common ethnic background, questions of gender, class,

education and environment, cause differences in the way they understand their identity.

In the following pages I will first analyze the formation of identity and the creation of a distinctive semantic code in some "border" Chicano autobiographies. Secondly, I will show how the process of identity searching is similar in the Afro-American culture, and also how the concept of "cultural borderlands" can be useful to express the singularity of Afro-American literature, as well as its interrelation with the dominant culture. Some autobiographies written by blacks in American have succeeded in using a distinctive form of expression and, therefore, can be considered as border writing.

From its beginnings, Chicano literature has been concerned with the essence of Chicano identity. Gloria Anzaldúa remarks that until the publication of *I am Joaquín/ Soy Joaquín* (1967) by Rodolfo Gonzales, "chicanos did not even know we were the people" (Anzaldúa 63). *I am Joaquín/ Soy Joaquín* is a collection of poems and documentary photographs which constitutes not only a personal, but also a collective autobiography. The constant repetition of the term *Yo* throughout the book reveals an effort of autodefinition by the poetic voice. The author, a *chicano* born in Denver and son of a Mexican migrant, expresses his purpose in the introduction of the book:

Writing *I am Joaquín* was a journey back through history, a painful self-evaluation, a wandering search for my peoples and, most of all, for my own identity. ... *I am Joaquín* became a historical essay, a social statement, a conclusion of our *mestizaje*, a welding of the oppressor (Spaniard) and the oppressed (Indian). (1)

The identity defined in Gonzales' book has a strong connection to history. Uprooted from his original land, the Chicano needs to recapture his history and learn about Mexican myths. Thus, the poet repeatedly refers to the Mexican heroes of the *revolución mexicana*, such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Mythical indian figures are also present in his poems: "I am Cuahatemoc/ proud and noble" (16). Also, the reference to the various aspects of Mexican society creates a collective frame. The photographs, many of them showing popular Mexican works of art, the inclusion of poems addressing different social groups of Chicanos, which deal with various aspects, provide the autobiography with a communal character. This collective tone is one of the most common traits of border Chicano literature.

Another important theme in *I am Joaquín/ Yo soy Joaquín* are the contradictory implications of being Mexican-American. The poet addresses the question of the racial mixture of this ethnic group:

The indian has endured and still
emerged the winner,
the *Mestizo* must yet overcome,
And the *gachupín* will just ignore.
I look at myself
and see part of me
who rejects my father and my mother
and dissolves into the melting pot
to dissappear in shame. (52)

This conflictive identity finds a method of expression in the bilingual production

of poetry. The poems in the book are presented both in English and Spanish, in alternating pages. This, along with the use of Mexican mythology and epic and its collective tone, contributes to create a distinct mode of expression.

Barrio Boy (1971), a narrative autobiography by Ernesto Galarza, constitutes another example of a border autobiography which attempts to define Chicano identity, using a characteristic style. Ernesto, born in a Mexican village called Jalcoacán, migrates with his family to Mazatlán in the northern part of the country. In Matzalán the Mexican revolution forces them to continue north, moving to Nogales and Tucson, and, finally to Sacramento, California, where they establish themselves. The journey constitutes a process of self-knowledge and spiritual growth for the protagonist. According to Saldívar, "the intersections and crossroads he experiences are literally signifiers of some turning point in the life of the autobiographer" (165). Therefore, the journey constitutes not only a process of maturation but also one of cultural relocation.

During his childhood, Ernesto's education begins in the streets, and later continues through his mother reading to him and through going to school, where he learns some Mexican history. Mexican culture is presented to him in Galarza's novel as something quite unified and homogeneous. However, this entire cultural process is interrupted and counteracted when they arrive in Sacramento. The points of reference that the protagonist had in his country are no longer useful. The greatest barrier between himself and this new society is mainly linguistic. Initially this creates confusion in the child, as the narrator evokes when he writes about his experiences at school:

I tried interrupting to tell Mrs. Ryan how we said it in Spanish. It didn't work. She only said "oh" and went on with "pasture", "bow-wow-wow" and pretty. (210)

Here, the young Ernesto, trying to synthesize his two major cultural influences, adopts a border perspective. In spite of being interested in the process of learning the new language, Ernesto feels the necessity of preserving and even communicating his own language to others. Even later in his adolescence, when Ernesto's process of acculturation is almost complete, he succeeds in keeping some bonds with his old culture. For example, he enjoys telling his *vecinos* stories about his former life in Mexico. Therefore, his process of cultural change is dynamic and bidirectional.

The events in this autobiography occur in several metaphorical spaces: the *vecindad* or *barrio* and the road. Ernesto's journey is a circular one, from the *vecindad* in Jalcoacán, to the road, and finally to the *barrio* in Sacramento. The parallel between the initial and the final stages presents the two parts of the border in a mirror-like manner. Also, the heteroglossia, that is, the inclusion of Spanish terms throughout the narration, demonstrates the interaction between American and Mexican culture in the life of the Chicano. The direct, colloquial style of the novel, with very simple sentences, and the distinct ethnographic character of the narration, are other means of preserving the Mexican past in the Anglo-saxon culture of the United States.

Anzaldúa carries the concept of border identity even further. Her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* is not only an ethnographic essay, but also an individual and collective autobiography. Anzaldúa begins by identifying herself as a border person due to her texano origin. But there are other factors that qualify Gloria Anzaldúa as a border person: she is a mestiza, an iconoclast born in a culture where women must be passive, and a lesbian in a country of traditional catholic values. In her youth Gloria finds herself limited within her own culture. Those around her identify her as *hija de la Malinche*; she is una

atravesada. For this reason, Gloria faces two alternative options. Staying in her own culture means being constrained and not being able to find her real identity. Moving to a different culture represents an opportunity of finding her own self, at the expense of losing contact with her original people. She eventually decides to situate herself in a border position, both physically and culturally:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode ... Not only does she sustain contradiction, she turns ambivalence into something else. (79)

According to Barbara Harlow, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* "the already complex identity is fragmented further in the bilingual, even trilingual, multigeneric textual composition" (Calderón 159) The book combines different modalities of Spanish and English, and different genres, such as poems, essays and confessions. Moreover, like González's book, *Borderlands/La Frontera* creates an epic and collective tone. Thus, Anzaldúa practices a multidimensional perception, not only spatially, but also temporally in that she produces an interaction between the Chicano of the present and the Mexican myths of the past. For example, she parallels the contradictions of the *chicana* identity to those of the catholic figure of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, which originated from the Aztec Goddess Coatlicueh.

Therefore, according to Anzaldúa, Chicano identity is not resolved into simple oppositions or solutions. It demands flexibility and the ability "to juggle cultures." The language of borderlands thus constitutes "one of the crucial places for identity building" (Wolfgang 51), in order to live on the margin "keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity" (Anzaldúa Preface).

The search for identity has also been a crucial and complex issue in African-American migration autobiographies, parallel to that of Chicano autobiographies. Butterfield traces the trajectory of the black autobiography in the United States, and establishes three different periods. In his opinion, slave autobiographies defined Negro identity by taking the white person as a point of reference. Many slave narratives were actually directed by whites. Later, "between 1900 and 1961, the age of DuBois and Wright, ... the identity is more alienated, not only from white America, but from other blacks" (Butterfield 7). He finally states that after 1961 the autobiographies become more political and move towards a more colloquial discourse. Whether his classification is accurate or not, it shows a tendency in the formation of African-American identity from rigid patterns to more flexible ones, parallel those of Chicano autobiographies. In 1985 Barbara Johnson refers to the necessity of contemplating black identity as a dynamic concept:

If I initially approached Hurston out of a desire to rereferentialize difference, what Hurston gives me back seems to be difference as a suspension of difference. Yet, the terms "black" and "white", "inside" and "outside," continue to matter. Hurston suspends the certainty of reference not by erasing these differences by foregrounding the complex dynamism of their interaction. (289)

Thus, we need to aim to identify any minority through its contacts and crossings with the dominant culture in its social practices. What defines a minority identity is not its

opposition to the Eurocentric American model, but its interaction with it. In this sense, the position of African-American literature is a position of borderlands, as well. Furthermore, the migration process still establishes another border in African-American culture: the border that separates the traditional culture of the South and the industrial way of life of northern cities. As borderland people, African-American writers should attempt to develop a distinct mode of expression, in the same way Chicano writers do. Even though African-Americans do not possess a differentiated language, they have been able to preserve unarticulated semantic codes of reference, in some cases only meaningful to them. Thus, an African-American border language must integrate those genuine elements in their standard English forms of expression. An analysis of several African-American migration autobiographies reveals the conflictive process of a search for identity in this ethnic group. It also shows the success of some African-Americans in developing a specific type of "border language."

Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter* (1946) constitutes an example of an African-American migrant in search for self-definition. This autobiography narrates the life of a woman born in North Dakota, granddaughter of a free black woman and a white slaveholder. As an adolescent, she migrates to Chicago, where she works for a while. Later, she attends Dawn College in Iowa. After settling down in Chicago again, she begins a journey west.

Both the journey and the act of writing her autobiography are means to learn about her identity. Era grows up in a predominantly white environment, for black families are very rare in North Dakota at the time. Even though she never experiences discrimination, Era has formed her concept of identity by taking whites as a point of reference. Events such as lynchings or riots, which are familiar experiences for other African-Americans, sound remote to her. For this reason, she initially has great difficulty in identifying herself with the African-American culture of Chicago and the South. The fact of receiving an education also distances her from other blacks. Thus, at some point in the novel, she considers herself an uncommon Negro: "I began to feel uneasy, to feel the color line, boundaries within black boundaries" (183). Her journey around the country makes her become more aware of the heterogeneous nature of her racial community, and also of the entire country. Eventually she expresses her desire to see a united America, but it is not evident to the reader whether she has been able to reconcile her American and African sides.

Even though the language in *American Daughter* is quite conventional, some metaphors and images are characteristic of African-American literature. For example, she finds herself repeating the words of the slave spirituals at moments of difficulty. Also, the various spaces of the novel, which differentiate the stages in the life of the protagonist, are very recurrent in African-American literature. The Mid-West represents unity with Nature, a life of harmony and interaction with the natural world. In opposition, the city, Chicago, is associated with modernity, technology and excitement, but also alienation and dehumanization. The third space in the novel, the South, represents the past and the land of prejudice and discrimination. All these characteristics reveal *American Daughter* as an early attempt of creating an Afro-American distinctive literature.

Invisible Man (1952), a fictional autobiography by Ellison, proposes a reevaluation of the preceding hegemonic interpretations of African-American identity. From his education at the Tuskegee Institution to his career as a speaker in New York, the protagonist adopts several fixed identities. None of these identities, formed according white American patterns and syntethised in the phrase "keep the Nigger running," seems effective to him. He realizes that he cannot avoid being invisible in the eyes of whites. Finally, in a

moment of epiphany, he decides to adopt an attitude of "hibernation." Isolating himself from the others, he ceases to embrace fixed identities and starts a metaphorical journey of descent by writing his autobiography. At the end of this process, the protagonist is ready to take action. The final sentence of the book, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?," indicates a resolution to start a dialogue between blacks and whites, that is, to end the state of invisibility.

In spite of its linear structure, Ellison's novel is a melting pot that includes allusions to a majority of the elements of the African-American culture. Through the dialogue with a slave woman in the prologue the protagonist resorts to history in his process of self-examination. Ironically, since history has been constructed, it cannot provide him with an answer. It is for this reason that the protagonist decides to detain the process of history and hibernate. The connection to the past, along with the final decision of "telling others" in order to start the process of history again, shows the non-synchronous character of the book. The book encourages an interaction among past, present and future in the search for identity.

On the other hand, the slave woman introduces the element of folk narration. As opposed to the written articulated language of whites, African-American forms of expression have been essentially oral. Oral folk, however, is not the only mode of expression of African-American culture; less articulated forms of semantic codes are also recurrent throughout the novel. Thus, the blues and jazz frame many of the events of the book, providing it with a particular tone. "Louis Armstrong and his jazz reflect both an articulated self and a mode of breaking through the ordinary categories of Western clock time" (Benston 96). Also, the signs of tribal culture, such as Tod Clifton's sambo dolls and his leg iron, are interpreted in the book successfully only by those submerged in African-American culture.

Furthermore, Ellison is able to create an interaction between both articulate and non-articulate forms of expression within the novel. Referring to this aspect, George Kent states:

We may see the interaction through several characters who, in varying degrees, are folk figures or are a part of cultural tradition. In more complex form, the interaction of folk and cultural tradition ranges from motifs to situations, symbols, and strategic appearances of folk art forms. (Benston 97)

Therefore, *Invisible Man* may be considered as border writing, not only because of its rejection of a fixed identity pattern, but also and principally, due to its distinctive African-American mode of expression.

Another frequent Afro-American pattern for autobiographies is that of slave narratives. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1937) and Maya Angelou's *I know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969) are constructed according to this pattern. Both present many of the elements typical of slave narratives: education, resistance, inability to fit the mold of slave, discontentment, journey north, politics, movements upward in social scale. However, although the formation of identity undergoes a similar process in these two autobiographies, the exploration of womanhood adds a different perspective to Angelou's book. The protagonist feels alienated due to her skin color and her dark eyes, but her alienation partly comes from the fact of being a woman. Being raped by her mother's partner makes her aware of this alienation and causes the beginning of the process of maturation regarding this aspect of her identity. Her pregnancy at the end of the book represents the final stage in

the exploration of her identity as a black woman.

Even though it may seem that the concept of black identity in these two books is understood solely as opposed to white identity, the final paragraphs in *Black Boy* reveal a more interactive concept:

So, in leaving, I was taking part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and perhaps to bloom...(284)

Going north, the narrator expects to encounter a new culture that will permeate him. However, the process will be bidirectional, since the protagonist carries his own culture, which he wishes to transmit as well.

Finally, both Wright and Angelou utilize African-American representative images and expressive codes in their autobiographies. For instance, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* mass-media and literary references alternate with allusions to folk modes of expression, such as church songs and recipe books. Its ethnographic character, the use of images stereotypical in AfricanAmerican culture (the train, the North) and other traditional metaphors, such as the cage, also reveal a distinct type of language.

It seems evident, therefore, that in the process of defining identity, polarities are no longer valid. A specific individual or culture may be defined according to various points of reference. Also, according to Johnson, "there is no universalized Other, no homogeneous 'us' for the self to reveal itself to" (288). Thus, identities are dynamic and changing entities. Taking this into consideration, the concept of "cultural borderlands" can be extremely useful to define two cultures that come into contact. Mexican-American literature has appropriated this concept not only by being able to look at its culture both from inside and outside the dominant ideology, but also by creating a unique mode of expression through the interaction of Western forms of signification and its specific regional modes of expression. On the other hand, African-American writers have strived to surpass the various fixed patterns proposed for African-American identity, in search of a more flexible model. There have also been numerous attempts to create a distinct "black aesthetic" in literature. This demonstrates that African-American literary works are moving in the right direction towards a position of borderlands which will ultimately lead to a more accurate depiction of what AfricanAmerican identity represents.

GLOSSARY

ATRAVESADOS (adj)	the deviant
BARRIO (n)	neighborhood
CHICANA (n)	feminine term of the word chicano
CONQUISTADORES (n)	conquerors
CORRIDOS (adj)	Mexican border ballads
EL RETORNO (n)	the return
GACHUPIN (n)	Spaniard settled in Latin America
HIJA DE LA MALINCHE (n)	Malinche's daughter
LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE (n)	Our Lady of Guadalupe
MESTIZAJE (adj)	racial mixture
MESTIZO/A (n)	person born of a Spaniard and an Indian
REVOLUCION MEXICANA (n)	Mexican revolution

TEXANO (n)	Texan
TRATADO (n)	treaty
UNA ATRAVESADA (n)	a deviant woman
VECINDAD (n)	neighborhood
VECINOS (n)	neighbor
YO (pr)	I (first person pronoun)

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