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FINDING 'POETIC TRUTH': THE POLITICS OF MEMORY AND ETHNIC TRANSCREATION IN CONTEMPORARY LATINA AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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This essay is an attempt to unveil the complexity of self-representation by Latina writers in the United States. These writers are using the autobiographical genre in order to discover their ethnic identity by "writing themselves" on paper. However, their politics of representation frequently involves many complex discursive strategies due to their status as women and members of an ethnic minority. My purpose is to call attention to their autobiographical products as literary spaces of ethnic trans-creation of the self. I will be referring to recent theories on women's autobiography and on cultural and ethnic representation. To illustrate my point I will focus on two autobiographies by Puerto Rican writers: Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales' *Getting Home Alive* and Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing. A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. Both works are challenging and innovative in their own terms but they coincidentally address one of the issues I find most interesting about contemporary autobiographies by ethnic women: the interaction of fact and fiction, of memory and imagination, of lived and imagined ethnicity.

Due to space restrictions I have not included other well known autobiographical works which deserve a separate analysis because of their formal and generic experimentation—as in the case of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera. The Mew Mestiza* and Cherríe Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*—, or because of their ethnographic interest—as Esmeralda Santiago's *When I was Puerto Rican*.

From classical times, autobiographies were used as historical texts relying on the author's records of events—an example of this is Cesar's *Commentaries*. From Saint Augustine's *Confessions* onwards, autobiographies reflect the rise of the individual already involved in self-analysis. During the 20th century and with the inception of psychoanalytical theories, the autobiography became a genre where the development of the self and its socialization through individuation could be represented as a *self in the mirror*. In general, we can say that autobiographies represent an attempt to know the self through 'consciousness' as Hegel observed, but this coming-to-knowledge of the self usually depends on complex discursive strategies involved in self-writing. Thus, writing and textual practices become a defining method of self-knowledge.

Postmodern and post-structuralist critical perspectives have questioned the myth of the

self and its representation in literature. The relation between the autobiography and his/her author has suffered this postmodern commotion that could be illustrated in the following passage by Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author": "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (143). Thus, in autobiography the writing process would inevitably estrange the author from her own subject matter creating a fictional *version* of her own self, a more or less approximate *representation* of the postmodern 'unknowable' self.

However, identity is not lost in the process, as Barthes claims, but it is created and reconstructed through the use of memory and imagination as we will see in the work of Latina women writers. Ortiz Cofer's statement "writing is not self expression, it's self discovery" (Bartkevicious 67) could be seen as the inverse process described by Barthes. The ethnic autobiographies we are going to deal with may not be a faithful account of true events and experiences but it provides an identity that is emotionally truthful for the writing subject. The 'true part' of these autobiographies plays an extraordinary role in giving voice to minority people whose experiences have been ignored and whose lives have never been represented in literature. Their political attitude requires the use of their lives as illustration of the problem they are combating. Ethnic autobiographies "often serve representative functions", "efforts to incorporate literatures of the cultural other, and efforts to expand the canon" (Bergland 130). Judith Ortiz Cofer, one of the Latina authors we will be dealing with, argues about minority autobiographies:

Autobiography plays a large part, but it's really a logical process . . . most everybody knows what it's like to be professional in middle-class America. Not many people know what it's like to be a Puerto Rican woman growing up in the 1960s. Why should I reach out and invent something, when my own life provides me with interesting material that is not readily available to the public? The minority writer has to take a political stand. Our lives are political. (Ocasio and Ganey 145)

Many recent studies have criticized the essentialism of previous autobiographical studies which ignored women's presence and significance in literary tradition. Certainly, women's memoirs do not comply with pre-established conventions of the genre but present a non-individualistic conception of the self and a fragmentariness and nonlinearity in structure and content. Many contemporary critics are suggesting insightful methods of approaching women's autobiographies. Linda Anderson in the introduction to her volume *Women and Autobiography in the 20th Century*, parallels recent critical debate on women's autobiographical writing concerning the difference among women writers and their experience as women. Anderson warns against the danger of "speaking for other women", "repeating the very gesture which has traditionally deprived women of a voice" (4).

Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytical emphasis on women's relational gender identity

and Rowbotham's focus on collective consciousness also help us develop our analysis of autobiographies by ethnic women. According to Rowbotham, women have to fight against cultural representations about the female self. This self is not based in masculine individualism and alienation as the result of creating a self in language, as Lacan and Barthes suggested. On the contrary, the female self is based in a group consciousness, "alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act. Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirror and breaks the silence imposed by male speech" (Stanford 41). In a similar mode, Chodorow argues that women's "experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries . . . The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate." (169) The women's self is never completely separated from others but it finds consistency in the relationship with others as. As an example we can mention the frequent presence of female relatives in women's autobiographies. Mothers in particular, are key figures in the development of a woman's self through the continuation of the mother-daughter bond as we will see in Morales' and Ortiz Cofer's autobiographical works.

Latina autobiographies reflect the particular development and representation of the female self that is doubly marginal for being a woman and a member of an ethnic minority. They challenge traditional notions on autobiography focussing on family relationships and the community, offering a multi-perspectival, multi-generic text. Their use of collective and individual memory raises interesting questions about the nature of ethnic autobiographies by women. I maintain that the expected analysis does not need to be centered on fragmentation and other apparently female 'textual pathologies', but on women's creative representations of the self and on cultural and ethnic elements that facilitate a creative use of autobiographies where the concept of womanhood and ethnicity is renovated and transformed.

During the 20th century studies on autobiography have claimed their fictional quality. Though it is true that the 'written self' is an invented version of the 'true self' there exists a complex relationship between the remembered and the imagined. This issue is especially relevant in Latina autobiographies for the ever present interaction between the collective memory and the impulse for self-creation. Virginia Woolf already suggested that memories are not necessarily faithful elements of a life story: "As an account of my life they are misleading, because the things one does not remember are as important; perhaps they are more important" (69). But what is the woman writer supposed to do with that 'forgotten' part of her life/self when she wants to faithfully (de)scribe herself? And furthermore, what is an ethnic woman writer supposed to do to recover the ethnic background affecting her self-formation? The answer can be easily deduced from what we have said about language and writing: the autobiographer is free to either consciously or unconsciously transform and

even "invent" memories in order to create a new ethnic self.

This process is what I have termed "ethnic trans-creation¹" through memory and imagination in Latina autobiographies, a new ethnic identity or as Gloria Anzaldúa calls it "a new *mestiza* consciousness" that emerges as a remapping of the previous divisions and dualities of the Latina/o self. This transformative process can take place thanks to the very nature of the ethnic signs that are "often intermittent, irregular, and weak" (Boelhower 85). This process is present but mostly future-oriented, as Anzaldúa claims:

. . . the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos –that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the way we behave –*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness. (80)

Latina women belong to this new hybrid race, a product of many different cultures not belonging to any in particular. In the case of Aurora and Rosario Morales and Judith Ortiz Cofer, they do not feel Puerto Rican in the way people from the island feel. Their identities are something new that requires a different system of autobiographical representation. A first stage in this process of representation would follow the similar path of most women's autobiographies, that is, the realization of the necessity to represent their selves as gendered individuals whose voice has been either absent or underestimated in the history of the genre because of their lack of an appropriate discourse/language to describe a woman's life. A second stage would connect the personal and the collective memory, that in the case of ethnic women alludes to the ethnic community and history. A third and more advanced stage in autobiographical representation would include the creative manipulation of personal and collective memories thereby reconstructing the concept of ethnicity and representing a

¹ Juan Flores and George Yudice use this term, first coined for commercial purposes, to refer to a new alternative mode of Latino self-formation that is "more than a culture of resistance . . . It confronts the prevailing ethos by congregating an ethos of its own, not necessarily an outright adversarial but certainly an alternative ethos" (74). In a cultural level, this term also parallels Angel Rama's use of "transculturación" in *Transculturación Narrativa en América Latina*, as a transformative process for all cultures involved with the resulting emergence of a new cultural reality and a new narrative expression.

new ethnic feminine self.

The product of this autobiographical ethnic trans-creation is subjected to a politics of representation which does not pursue a factual truthful narrative but a "poetic truth," an emotional representation of the ethnic self, as Judith Ortiz Cofer points out in the preface to her autobiography: "in writing about one's life, one often has to rely on that combination of memory, imagination, and strong emotion that may result in "poetic truth" (11). Although Cofer acknowledges Virginia Woolf's influence on her idea of memoir writing, she clearly departs from Woolf because of the varied ethnic character of her memories, a common past shared with other ethnic women as she lived between two cultures and two spaces, Puerto Rico and the United States.

Ethnic memory plays a fundamental role in this process of ethnic trans-creation². It is the main tool for the archaeological search for ancestors, for a past that influences the present of the ethnic woman who needs to design her ethnic identity in a society that encourages cultural assimilation (read cultural deprivation). As Michael M. J. Fischer argues, "ethnic memory is, or ought to be, future, not past, oriented" (201), because the concept of ethnicity itself is subject to continuous transformation:

ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual . . . Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided. (195)

² The function of memory in ethnic fiction has received greater attention in the last decades as can be observed by the appearance of studies like *Memory, Narrative and Identity*, and *Memory and Cultural Politics*, both edited by Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Sjekerret, Jr. And Robert E. Hogan.

The Latina autobiographer's use of memory is certainly genealogical at first since it is a necessary reconnection with the past but it also becomes a means to liberation. This process of recollection of ethnic memories is much more complex than what it seems to be. On the one hand, the Latina writer who recovers a collective ethnic memory and subjectively translates that information to her autobiography, may be at risk of reducing her work to mere ethnography or anthropological account, with all the suspicious implications related to them³. At the same time, imagination plays a fundamental role in the act of remembering as Boelhower remarks: "The whole process of ethnic seeing is as much an act of the imagination as it is an act of recovering lost origins" (83). Indeed, we have to bear in mind that for many Latina writers the experience of the "lost" heritage may be too scarce and even non-existent as in the case of immigrant daughters born in the USA or brought to the United States at an early age. That is the case of many Latina writers such as the Cuban writer Cristina García, and the Puerto Rican Rosario Morales and Sandra María Estevez with no personal experience of the island heritage until late in their lives.

The importance of memories and the problem of forgetting is constantly addressed by Latina writers. In *Getting Home Alive*, Aurora is haunted by the feeling of losing her memories of her childhood in Puerto Rico. As many immigrant writers, Aurora feels the ethnic anxiety of losing a precious part of her identity, her ethnic heritage: For years after we left Puerto Rico for the last time, I would wake from a dream of something unbearably precious melting away from my memory as I struggled desperately to hold on, or at least to remember that I had forgotten. I am an immigrant, and I forget to feel what it means to have left" (22). Through a conscious process of recollection, these memories come back to her in the form of stories, dreams, pictures, smells, taste. She tries to recover her past Jewish heritage by remembering her grandmother and grandfather and her father's childhood in Russia.

Rosario, on the other hand, has lived with memories of Puerto Rico that are not her own because she grew up in New York. Rosario is able to recover that ethnic memory even when it was not hers. She knows this process of longing and remembering brings power to her mestiza identity. The power of ethnic information is present in the nostalgia she feels for her mother's Puerto Rico as we see in "Memory" and "Nostalgia": I grew up with nostalgia for a place I did not

³ Ethnographers have been blamed for their partiality emphasizing particular aspects in their representations of a culture. This has frequently led to a misunderstanding of the culture described favouring stereotypes and false assumptions.

grow up in . . . I grew up with nostalgia for green landscapes and tropical fruit, for broad leaves and red flowers, for the smell of coffee roasting, the sound of cocks crowing and hens scratching behind the house. I grew up wanting blue skies and rain falling in hard punishing drops. I grew up yearning for trees, yearning for trees. (87-8)

At this point, Rosario locates herself in a non-productive stage of the process, that of nostalgic longing. As Gayle Greene suggests, "'nostalgia' is the desire to return home, 'to remember' is 'to bring to mind' or 'think of again,' 'to be mindful of,' 'to recollect.' Both 'remembering' and 'recollecting' suggest a connecting, assembling, a bringing together of things in relation to one another" (297). Indeed, memory becomes the thread that facilitates the creation of a new home/self. When as an adult Rosario comes back to Puerto Rico she realizes the island is a nostalgic place that cannot be her true home. In "Puerto Rican Journal", both the mother's and the daughter's memories of home are oppositionally presented:

Home, I'm going home, I thought, and the happiness bubbled in me and spilled over . . . Photographs, someone else's memories and my vivid dreams as I grew up. Home? A place where I am never completely at home? . . . Aurora comes here and says, yes, this is still home. I come here and say this is too much like home for comfort. (76-80)

What seems at first mere nostalgia becomes 'remembering' at the end through the transformation of memories into a present component of her self. Even though she goes back to the US, her real home, Rosario will always carry that imagined heritage of Puerto Rico with her. The US may be her home now but Puerto Rico is in her as well: "I carry my island tucked inside and I'm going home" (76).

Her idea of Puerto Ricanness is in fact the Puerto Ricanness lived in New York, therefore quite different from her daughter's in Puerto Rico. Both mother and daughter have been aware that cultural and ethnic memories are the most endangered part of their identities, constantly threatened by assimilation. As Gayle Greene points out, "memory is our means of connecting past and present and constructing a self and versions of experience we can live with. To doubt it is to doubt ourselves, to lose it is to lose ourselves" (293). Latina writers respond to the potential loss and instability of the self by transforming memories in creative spaces for the self. For Aurora and Rosario these memories of Puerto Rico help them create a strong sense of self. As they declare in a poem, they are "whole", they have inherited all heritages and have profited from all of them. They have created themselves as if they were writing a script from dispersed "memories of being" by uniting all these identity components carried by memories. Both Aurora and Rosario acknowledge their invention in their life stories, transforming ethnic memories into present and future elements of their experience as Latinas. They discover their creative role becoming storytellers through their creative life-telling. Ethnic trans-creation is at work when the power of the imagination

reconstructs an ethnic heritage and creates a new identity as we see in "1930" (Aurora):

My grandmother Lola, . . . tells me the story, tears and words spilling slowly. . . The images, once heard, are unforgettable. . . This is a story I make up from the scraps my mother and grandmother have let fall, a story I tell myself over and over, embroidering it, filling in the missing details of wind and weather and smells . . . My mother is the infant in the picture, but this is not my mother's story. It is my story for her, told to myself as I invent the details of her history, the foundations of my own. (42-3)

In a similar way, Rosario's short story "I never Told my Children Stories" brings attention to the mechanism of writing/inventing a life story, the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred and diffused by the postmodernist stance of the writer who calls her reader's attention encouraging her to fill in the gaps. Aurora and Rosario are creating their written selves by remembering and recreating a blurred, almost forgotten past where only primary and significant sensations, feelings remain. It is out of these feelings and sensations that have stayed, that they create a new identity through language and discourse:

Now me –I like the truth. I figured if I ever wrote any stories, they'd be true stories, things that happened to me, the real stuff of life, not all that airy invention. Of course, that was before I realized how much of my truth was embroidered. No, not embroidered exactly –just remembered in special ways . . . Before *I* began seeing *my* truth as the story *I* tell to let you know what I think I'm all about, to clue you in on what is *really* happening: how I'm pretty lucky, and about the rotten childhood I had, or how mean people have been to me. (167)

Rosario Morales confesses her own autobiography's fictionality but she also stresses the fact that this part of invention is necessary to understand her own self. The collective project and attempt at self-description is fairly obvious in *Getting Home Alive*, co-written by mother and daughter. Aurora and Rosario take this project to its maximum potential as part of Rowbothan's 'group consciousness'. Mother and daughter's allegiance refers to what Doris Sommer points out in her article on women's testimonial writing: "her singularity achieves its identity as an extension of the collective. The singular represents the plural not because it replaces or subsumes the group but because the speaker is a distinguishable part of the whole" (108). In their text the voices of both women are interwoven as an example of communal goals collaborating in the book's structure as well, where their memories, prose and poetry build a monument where memory and politics play an strategic importance. Their life-stories complement each other and acknowledge what Chodorow suggested about women's autobiographies as descriptions of relational gender identities where the boundaries of the self are blurred. Aurora and Rosario's lives and experiences as ethnic women answer affirmatively the question posed by Rita Benmayor: "Can personal memory and personal politics be turned into collective and constructive strategies?" (113). In their work, memory

not only serves identity transformation and ethnic trans-creation but it also serves a political function

Judith Ortiz Cofer's autobiographical work also stresses her fictionality from its very title: *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. Ortiz Cofer successfully uses the image of silent dancing to bring attention to an event where some components are missing. Her memories prove to be partial recollections, fragmented memories where the sound or other elements are missing. In *Silent Dancing* all stories are remembered from the perspective of an adult Puerto Rican woman living and teaching in Georgia, a well-educated woman who has found a comfortable home in the US. The word "partial" also make us think of a fundamental aspect of all autobiographical writing: its partiality in reporting, in choosing those memories you want to remember and not others. The author herself calls her work "creative fiction" and she justifies her option: "my first step in writing *Silent Dancing* was to allow the memories to come and then shape them by using the techniques of fiction" (Bartkevicius 58).

In a formal level, Ortiz Cofer, like the Moraleses, mixes poetry and prose. Some of the prose sections like "Tales Told under the Mango Tree" are narrated as *cuentos*, stories she was told by her grandmother. Most pieces are direct accounts of her childhood experience and that of the people who surrounded her as we can see in "Some of the Characters." Ortiz Cofer, like Rosario and Aurora Morales, plays with the reader, putting into question the reliability of her account with the use of "characters" that makes us think of a fiction though they are described as real people as Ortiz Cofer claims in her prologue:

I faced the possibility that the past is mainly a creation of the imagination also, although there are facts one can research and confirm . . . I am not interested in merely 'canning' memories . . . I wanted to try to connect myself to the threads of lives that have touched mine and at some point converged into the tapestry that is my memory of childhood. (13)

Throughout the book, Ortiz Cofer continually wonders about the reliability of her memories. Her memoir seems to be a search for that "poetic truth" she mentions in her prologue, a truth that has nothing to do with factuality but with the emotional heritage brought by memories, a heritage that becomes a source for creativity in the present and future of the author. This poetic truth is what encourages the ethnic writer to recreate her own self through a redefinition of her ethnic heritage and a revision of her cultural memories. In *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer questions her mother about events she remembers differently but even so, she follows her memories, strongly tied to the emotions inspired by those moments. In "The Last Word", the author brings attention to the unstable nature of memories depending as they are chosen in each person's different version of a communal past: "I have my own memories about this time in my life, but I decide to ask her a few questions, anyway. It is always fascinating to me to hear her version of the past we shared,

to see what shades of pastel she will choose to pain my childhood's 'summer afternoon'" (162). In Ortiz Cofer's work, the mother-daughter bond is present as both women reconstruct their histories, sharing the communal experience of being women in a Puerto Rican family. Her mother becomes the "witness of my childhood, she has the power to refute my claims," however, Judith remembers in a different fashion, defying her mother's own memories: "That is what really happened?' 'Es la pura verdad,' she says, 'Nothing but the truth.' But that is not how I remember it" (165).

As in the case of Aurora and Rosario Morales, the problem of forgetting or not remembering becomes an essential issue for Ortiz Cofer in *Silent Dancing*. Cultural and ethnic memories are the most endangered part of her identity, constantly threatened by assimilation, but she finds strength in the act of not forgetting as she confesses:

I found out that what I really needed to communicate were the basics in our culture. Language and memory became important, because I realized that memory was the treasure in my backyard. My education has allowed me to become perceptive enough to be able to use memory plus imagination, to transform remembering into art. Not forgetting is a spiritual matter with me. It connects me to the reality of my life. (Kallet 68)

As we have observed, memory and imagination, fact and fiction are essential elements in Latina self-exploration in autobiographical works. These works reflect an inner process of ethnic trans-creation that provides a new ethnic identity, a new version of the self that is more appropriate for their situation as ethnic women in American society, living among cultural borders. As Alvina Quitana remarks about self-definition: "The tension between fact and fiction in some ways resonates with the anxieties generated by a bilingual, bicultural environment, in that they all ultimately revolve around issues of social construction and self-fashionings. How does one construct an identity in an alien environment?" (11). The creative use of memory that we have observed in three Puerto Rican women writers responds to the ways in which the self can be represented in a poetically truthful way. A new attitude towards ethnicity emerges, one that acknowledges a past heritage but which adapts it to the new situation of Latinas' life in the cultural borderlands.

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