

## PHOTOGRAPHS AND MEMORY: A CHICANA STRUCTURES AUTOBIOGRAPHY\*

*Canícula*, the second part of a trilogy,<sup>1</sup> refers to a particularly intense part of the summer when most cotton is harvested in South Texas (an extremely hot miniseason) as well as the days when the book was written back in 1993. Such a time gives its name to Cantú's recreation of her growing-up process as a Chicana *en la frontera* from the early 1940s to the early 1960s, the inspiration coming from a box of old photographs taken out at random and which bring past memories and feelings back to life in a rather anarchic manner.

Azuzena's descriptions of the old photographs perceived as a series of moments in time, with very precise feelings and sensations attached to them, mix with the adult narrator's perception of the reality either before or after the moment of the shot. Sometimes there is no photograph at all and a descriptive image of still people stimulates the pictographic imagination of the reader in order to move slowly into a recalled story. Other times the description of a photograph does not correspond to the picture above the text, yet when this happens this device does not confuse the reader, already familiar with the main characters in Azuzena's big family.

The way in which the narrator strings her family and some neighbours' lives along the text recreating and fictionalising autobiographical experiences appears to be quite suggestive. That is, despite the variety of topics and characters in *Canícula* Azuzena is always positioning herself in the story, providing the personalized perspective of the omniscient narrator.

Time is fragmented in *Canícula* as there is no traditional chronological pattern followed and the descriptions are juxtaposed with no logical order. The resulting text leads the reader into emotional trips and critical appreciations of Mexican-American social history through the lives of specific people from the US-Mexican border.

The risks of such an approach are well overcome as the movements backwards and forward in time shape old memories through detailed analyses of the clothes worn at each time, the food eaten and several other representative cultural and religious traditions. These themes are powerfully present in the text and contribute to its cultural and literary richness, however, it is the family struggles and dreams that are carefully observed, with a particular emphasis given to the mother and the grandmother (Bueli).

In this sense, the female characters occupy a relevant position in the narrator's eyes who weaves her inner emotions and thoughts while studying the female role

models and cultural stereotypes around her. That is the case in “China Poblana Two” where Azuzena’s mother is photographed wearing the typically Mexican dress and a charro hat screaming “Viva Mexico!” while surrounded by a plastic Mexican scenery: “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.”

Cantú combines the stories coming out of her old photographs with her particular construction of memory in a captivating, creative “fictional autobioethnography” (as the author defines it). If you enjoyed Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, you will certainly want to journey to *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girl EN LA FRONTERA*.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The other two, *Papeles de Mujer* and *Cabañuelas*, have not been published yet.

\* Cantú, Norma Elia. *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girl EN LA FRONTERA*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1997. 132 pgs. (Winner of the Premio Aztlán)