UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ
Fondul Social European
POSDRU 2007-2013
Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013
MINISTERUL EDUCAȚIEI ȘI CERCETĂRII ȘTIINȚIFICE
OIPOSDRU
ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ

Trespassing Boundaries, Merging Homelands

Historical Trauma and Hybrid Identities in the Works of Ana Castillo and Kathleen Alcalá

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This paper was written as part of the project "Romanian Culture and European Cultural Models: Research, Synchronization, Durability," jointly financed by the European Union and the Government of Romania from the European Social Fund through the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007–2013, finance contract no. SOP HRD/159/1.5/S/136077.

Bucharest, 2015

SUMMARY

ABSTRACT

Any attempt to define the cultural identity of the Chicana ethnic group must—first and foremost—consider the complex nature of the dynamics of migration, globalization, and split identity that characterizes the American society of the present. This exercise can only begin with the painful awareness that the very essence of the Chicana community is determined by a continuous oscillation between different languages and cultures, with everything that it entails: migration, exile, violence, historical trauma, heterogeneity, and hybridity.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the concept of borderlands (real and imaginary), as it comes across in a type of fiction constantly haunted by the enigma of ethnic identity and repudiated sexuality, hoping to achieve a better understanding of phenomena such as marginality and historical trauma and the way in which they are either assimilated or suppressed in the Chicana/o collective memory and identity.

By means of Chicana/o literature, the ambiguity of identity that surrounds this community must be deciphered starting primarily from a comprehensive analysis of the concept of split or bidirectional/hyphenated identity. The collective imaginary explored by Chicana writers—shaped by their experiences in the realm of both cultures, North American and Mexican alike—provides a unique point of view on the key concept of cultural hybridity.

Undoubtedly, culture is an act of interpretation with different levels of meaning, subject to different perspectives. Comparisons of a cultural nature have evolved in recent critical history to the point where the existence of homogenous national cultures is being utterly and irrevocably denied, the same phenomenon being true of “organic” ethnic communities (H. Bhabha). In line with the postmodern opinions brought forward by some thinkers such as Homi Bhabha or Clifford Geertz, it can be easily asserted that the notion of culture is not something that can be signaled with great precision or pinpointed exactly, but rather a semiotic concept—what Geertz calls “webs of significance,” whose analysis is purely “interpretative”. Hence, the individual belongs to several traditions at the same time, automatically drawing from various subcultural categories, such as gender, ethnicity or religion.

In the case of Chicana/o community members, they are ambivalently located, always oscillating between two profoundly dissimilar cultural systems. The deconstruction of real and fictional borders as a possible solution to avoid stereotypes and intercultural tensions can only be achieved by embracing at least part of the multicultural utopia. As the initiator of the Chicana

literary movement—Gloria Anzaldúa—herself confesses, the only way to cure a schizoid identity is by reshuffling concepts once considered immutable: “To survive the Borderlands/You must live sin fronteras/Be a crossroads”.

In turn, the concept of *borderland* has a very specific history for the Chicana/o community, at the same time being an excellent metaphor for the cultural dynamics in question. Both geographically and ideologically, the members of the Chicana/o identity group become symbolic figures of an entire process of spatial and cultural marginalization. In addition, the machinery set in motion at the level of Western society enforces a rather androcentric stance, thus amplifying the burden of inadaptability for Chicana writers. Representatives of both an ethnic minority and an underrepresented literary movement, belonging to a genre oftentimes considered secondary or even having a sexual orientation different from that of the majority (as is the case of Gloria Anzaldúa), Chicanas seem to have shaped a most surprising cultural identity for themselves, one situated far outside the limitations of a rigid, restrictive, and unimaginative canon.

Chicana/o identity cannot be discussed without a previous understanding of those notions and concepts associated with issues such as mass migration and the new critical discourse in U.S. recent history, namely: feminism, gender, border, nationality, diaspora, ethnicity, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, transnationalism—all elements that led to a redefinition of contemporary American identity.

Identified as a community affected by the powerful wave of cosmopolitanism, subject to a constant process of hybridization—an ethnic group with an almost uncertain identity, at the border between two extremely modular and fluid cultures—, Chicanas/os face the risk of no longer belonging to either of the worlds that define their existence: neither the original, nor the adoptive one. Following the migration process, the Chicana/o individual’s self-perception changes dramatically; they end up feeling alien in relation to both their predecessors’ territory that was left behind (Mexico) and the new alienating national context (the United States).

Since memory is not just an individual, personal experience, but part of the collective realm, it is primarily defined as a phenomenon in direct connection with the present. The perception of the past— be it individual or that of a group—, being perpetually influenced by the experience of the present, is in a state of constant and inevitable change.

Building on the idea that cultural institutions serve as mediating structures between people and information, specifically between communities/cultural groups and the archives that—in one

way or another—document their existence, the cultural institution of memory is of crucial importance when trying to decipher the cultural identity of the Chicana/o ethnic group. Experience, be it lived or imagined, is engaged in a reciprocal relationship with memory and culture in equal measure. Culture influences experiences by providing a mediated perception, by applying a filter that ends up distorting them.

In turn, literature is a form of expression used by individuals acting in a compact, organized societal context. As this more or less traumatic socio-historical context of an identity group cannot be ignored, the so-called culture of memory—which supremely emphasizes the public awareness of history—is gaining increasingly more ground in modernity. In the case of the Chicana/o community, some forms of national historical consciousness are more visible than others, and literature is but the natural filter through which the collective representations of the past manage to become manifest. Looking at history from a postcolonial point of view, Chicana/o literature requires a reconceptualization of the very mental construct called "history" and automatically encourages the redefinition of already established benchmarks of memory. Fiction, as a valve of collective thinking, turns into an alternate history of a community blurred—both culturally and at the level of identity.

A discussion of the roles played by absence and memory in the context of cultural globalization establishes exile as a prerequisite for literary creation. Using Bhabha's concept of "third space," it can be inferred that the entire process of restoring the original space and the past is actually equivalent to manufacturing a "portable world"—as opposed to embedding them in the motionless and inorganic space of sterile nostalgia—, hence the cathartic role of writing literature in English for the representatives of the Chicana/o identity group.

Lacking the possibility to relate to a well-defined personal identity, without being able to satisfy their need for socio-cultural belonging, Chicanas/os are losing their access to the traditional function of the nation, that of offering a real basis for the formation of identity and community. Consequently, the members of the Chicana/o ethnic group end up facing a real identity crisis, caused by an acute shortage of tangible landmarks in a universe fluid and imbalanced par excellence—that of migration. As a direct result of this crisis, Chicana/o literature aims at recovering collective memory (through discourse and representation) as the only viable solution for filling an extremely vast cultural and identity void. Hence, the cultural institution of memory—formerly a restrictive and inflexible element—is turned into fertile ground for the

forging of new and valid cultural identities. The benchmarks of the dominant trend of thought are abolished, and the collective imaginary turns into a complex machine of rewriting traumatic history, the alternate reality provided in/through Chicana fiction eventually contributing to the healing process of a collective previously affected by severe schizoid tendencies.