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## **Whose Story Is It Anyway?: Autobiography on the Border**

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CHAPTER  
TEN



*Norma Elia Cantú*

*Whose Story Is It Anyway?:  
Autobiography on the Border*

When Genaro Padilla chooses as a title for his work on Chicano autobiography, *My History not Yours*, underscoring the issue of ownership, he is addressing not just the polemic surrounding the historical appropriation of texts and of Chicano history but the very nature of authorial voice and of whose (his)story is recorded in autobiography. Writers of personal narratives in the last part of the 20th century in South Texas, often self-published by small presses in Mexico or in the U.S., focus on a life lived under conditions of colonization. Here I explore how four texts—*La Casa de Miel*, *My Spanish-Speaking Left Foot*, *Mis Memorias*, and *Infancia peregrina*—present a transnationalist perspective that living on the border affords the writers. None of the writers are too concerned with questions of belonging to a nation state, yet in telling their individual stories, all four relate anecdotes and personal memories of life along the border of two nation states. We might ask: Where do the writers who cross geopolitical borders to publish their work belong? Are they U.S.

writers? Are they Mexican writers? If the narratives' settings cross between Mexico and the U.S., if the narrators identify with both the U.S. and Mexico, if the themes span issues of politics, education and cultural development along the border, can anyone claim that they belong to either nation? Should they?

I believe as Gramsci so aptly put it that “every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (5). For this very brief presentation I have chosen to examine four texts written in the late 20th century by denizens of a border town, Laredo, Texas, three of whom were actually born there, to highlight the way that they, although coming from varied “functions in the world of economic production,” felt the impulse to *write* and thus assume one of the most visible markers of the “intellectual.” I have also chosen to focus not so much on the economic or political, although there is evidence in all four texts of strong associations to these, but on the social field that Gramsci refers to.

For a long time, I have been intrigued by the term “intellectual” and the reticence of many Chicano/a scholars to refer to themselves as such. I suspect that they eschew the term because of its elitist associative semantic weight. I do not recall ever knowing any “intellectuals” growing up. My high school English teacher, Elizabeth Sorrell often spoke of the one person whom she believed was a true *intellectual*—the head of the local antimony smelter where my father worked as a laborer. No, we didn't come in contact with intellectuals in the barrio. I admit that for me, the term connotes class as well. I have also been intrigued by autobiography, writings that tell one's own story. As a child I read the *Diary of Anne Frank*, and as a teenager I read biographies and autobiographies seeking to learn about life and perhaps as a form of escapism. I read Mary Rinehart Roberts' *My Story* because I liked her mysteries; I read Bertrand Russell's autobiography because I

wanted to know who he really was, where he got his ideas; I read Regis Debray's biography of Che Guevara, about the same time that I read Nabokov's *Speak Memory*. Of course, I read Simone De Bouvier. And I read diaries: Virginia Woolf's *A Writer's Diary*, and in the early 70s Anais Nin's diaries, seeking a Latina voice I didn't know I hungered for. I also read literary biographies and, good Catholic girl that I am, the lives of the saints. But, what most intrigued me were those books written by the authors themselves where they disclosed who they were, what they thought. I still read these books about real people's lives: most recently the biography of Colette, Katherine Graham's autobiography and Dorris Lessing's memoirs.

Since the mid 70s, I have also been fascinated with folks who have written their autobiography or who want to do so. While in graduate school in Nebraska, I met Beatriz González George who was writing her autobiography of growing up Chicana in the state. Alberto Salazar, a Tejano whom I met in Nebraska also gave me a copy of his autobiography laboriously written on a manual typewriter. My fascination with the form has led me to read a number of such works. Some of the women of color autobiographies that have continued to inspire me over the last 20 years include those by Anzaldúa, Santiago, Lucas, Ponce, Moraga, and Lorde. It is this interest that has inspired my exploration of four writers from Laredo as organic intellectuals whose work functions in very clear ways in the way that Gramsci claims intellectuals work in society.

#### PURPOSE

My purpose here is twofold: to bring to light the writings of four writers from Laredo, Texas whose autobiographical writings (mostly self-published) create a view of growing up along the U.S./Mexico borderlands during the early twentieth century. Secondly, I analyze the content of these four texts to support my theses that these writers, first, unlike the nineteenth century Chicano/a writers of autobiographies are not so much concerned with land and the permanence of their location

as with the deterritorializing of culture that has occurred during their lifetimes, and second, that in writing about their lives they are revealing how they have survived life on the colonized border. A content-based analysis on the various topics the writers choose to document, however, yields but a very superficial view of the complex reasons for writing and fails to explore how and why the writers choose to write about their own lives and the very complex cultural shifts that they are chronicling. Like previous writers of autobiography, they respond to a need to document for posterity. But in late twentieth century it is no longer the nostalgia for land, but for language and culture that preoccupies the writers. If as Barbara Renaud contends, “Language is the last land we have left” (personal communication), the language used by the writers also signals the project of autobiography as a genre of the nonacademic—the nonprofessional writer. As I read these narratives, all first-person, all seeking to tell a personal story, I find similarities as well, of course, as tremendous and significant differences. Beatriz George and Albert’s Salazar’s working class background and Norma Benavides and José Sanchez’ upper middle class if not outright upper class, brings to the forefront different issues. In these books, the writers’ intent or motivation for writing is not so much to “rectify history” as Padilla asserts but to bring to the forefront the erasure of culture that is occurring. Additionally, the writers expect to limit their audience to their immediate family and friends, although there are references to the reader and in several occasions it is clear that there is a wider audience intended. The writers of these texts are not notorious figures in history as would be someone like Leonor Villegas de Magnon who penned her autobiography right after her personal involvement in the Mexican Revolution (1995). These writers are not writing to highlight their exploits or for self-aggrandizement. Nor are they seeking to glorify their own lives. But, there is a sense of self that emerges that reveals that they are celebrating their lives and their part in their own personal triumphs.

The four texts, perhaps exemplary of other such works, reveal the writers’ preoccupations, their concerns with culture and desire to “pass

it on” to their family. The family history they tell is interwoven with the community (his)story. Belia Treviño, Norma Benavides, Hilario Coronado and Jose Cárdenas, have chosen to tell their life story what Gloria Anzaldúa calls autohistoria ( ). I have chosen these writers from among others because they illustrate different kinds of publication and content and most clearly illustrate Gramsci’s claim of the work of the organic intellectual. Treviño’s book, *Infancia peregrina* (nd), tells her story as a motherless child who spends time in Laredo with her widowed father and her stepmother and sisters and with her maternal grandparents and aunt and uncle in General Treviño, a Mexican community formerly known as El Pontiagudo. Her story begins with her birth in Laredo, and ends with her father’s death. She writes in Spanish. Norma Benavides’ *Holidays and Heartstrings: Recuerdos de la Casa De Miel* (1995) written bilingually—but mostly in English—in collaboration with her sister Blanca Zuñiga Azíos narrates her family’s story in Laredo, Texas. Jose Cárdenas’ 1997 *My Spanish-Speaking Left Foot* also set mostly in Laredo, and mostly in English, revolves around his coming of age and becoming a successful educator and nationally recognized bilingual education proponent. Finally, Hilario Coronado, a retired railroad worker, published a book of poetry and prose, *Mis memorias* (1985), which he republishes in 1988 with the title *Memorias*. Coronado, the only one of these writers not to be born in Laredo (he was born in Matehuala, San Luis Potosi) writes in Spanish and almost exclusively in poetic form.

If the “organic intellectual” is to fulfill his or her function in society, he or she must cognizant of class position, and exercise certain actions. Because I only address issues of class differences superficially, the class privilege, real or perceived, that allows these writers to both write their books and also to have them published remains an area to be explored more carefully. The class and gender markers in the text abound with expected stereotypes of the time when they are written. But, we find spaces where there is defiance and self-assertion against the onslaught of perceived or felt and experienced pressures of the mainstream U.S. cultural hegemonic forces; the writers function much like Gramsci

described of the intellectuals as both arbiters of the outside or larger force and the masses. Unlike the autobiographies of “famous” people such as writers, politicians, heroes, or even of those who have endured incredible hardship or achieved incredible feats, these “homemade autobiographies” do not necessarily document the exploits of one person, and often include a much wider protagonist, the community.

These writers seek to document the quotidian, the day to day life of people as seen through the lens of a “non-writer” or as Benavides’s disclaimer says: “I apologize for any lack of literary quality, for I have taken many, many liberties.” She continues,

Aside from liberties of content, there are those of form and style, mood, language, and punctuation. The text fluctuates from one style to another, never adhering to any definite pattern or fixed set of rules. Also, it drifts from formal to informal, from carefree to soulful, dramatic, or even philosophical at times, or from comical to tragic. After all, isn’t life itself this way?” (1-2)

In like manner, Treviño and Cárdenas offer their own apology: Treviño begs of the reader “tu comprensión ya que al atreverme a contar un pedacito de mi vida, lo hice consciente de la sencillez y limitación de mi prosa” (3). In fact, all of them do not see themselves as writers but also express their belief in the enterprise before them.

In *Speak Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov writes of his exile and his search for a home; Pat Mora in *House of Houses* brings together all of her antepasados who tell stories and nudge the writer to remember. These four writers also write of home and with outright yearning; the nostalgia for times past seeps through in the tone in their words. Tey Diana Rebolledo notes of the writings of Jaramillo, Cabeza de Baca Gilbert, and Otero-Warren, that they use “narrative strategies of resistance that show the writers’ discontent” (). I found that these writers employ strategies similar to the ones Rebolledo outlines.

Because they are contemporary, however, they highlight different issues. A difference born of a different time: Rebolledo notes, “landscape is one symbolic icon for describing the loss of land” (17). (See pp 17-19). Yet, these texts speak not about land, for they are not necessarily a landed class, but of the cultural terrain that is at stake here, it is a way of life that is slipping away and that the writers want to document for posterity, to show what we were like. Rebolledo also notes that the early writers including Tejana Jovita Gonzalez “felt the need to document what they saw as a vanishing cultural heritage: their sense that their identity was being assimilated through history and cultural domination” (17). This same sense of impending loss permeates some of the contemporary texts, but not surprisingly since this is a late twentieth century borderland, the focus shifts to culture and tradition and leaves the despair over land loss behind.

#### THE TEXTS

I will take each book at a time, describe its contents and take a perfunctory look at the issues I have identified in it that marks how the writer seeks to preserve the past and to celebrate the cultural expressions of Laredo and the border. In all, the location of the writer and the setting of the historia is the border, but it is a border that is both Texan and Mexican.

#### *HOLIDAYS AND HEARTSTRINGS: RECUERDOS DE LA CASA DE MIEL*

Norma Zuñiga Benavides, the seventh of thirteen children takes on the task of documenting her family’s story. She claims to have the better vantage point because of her position in the birth order. Structuring her narrative following a calendar year beginning with holidays in December and ending the following November, she begins with the Christmas celebrations because she claims “it was Christmas, when we were most often all together, that held us closest to each other” (1). She invites her readers to enjoy her book with a culinary metaphor,



“to savor it and allow it to act as leaven that will bring much more to mind.” (1). The “diverse entries... historical data, photographs, poems, *antojitos*, prayers and other bits of family lore, including such rituals as *Las Posadas*” are woven into the text as they fit into the yearlong frame.

Norma Zuñiga Benavides, the first woman to be elected to a political position in Laredo, does not mention her political life and only alludes to her own participation in events. It is the family that emerges as the protagonist of her narrative, the family home serving an emblematic function, representing the hive where all the bees work and live. Her father had come from the northern Mexican metropolis of Monterrey to become “a partner in his brother Robert’s fledgling freight forwarding business.” Her mother also came from Monterrey. In the long section devoted to her parents’ courtship and eventual nuptials in 1915, she stresses the cultural constraints on women. My *tocaya* married into the prominent Benavides family whose dubious claim to history is Santos Benavides, one of the officers in the Confederate Army (Jerry Thompson)<sup>1</sup>. She is college educated and taught high school science at Ursuline Academy for many years. But, her family was not necessarily “in” and she belonged to what survived for a while in opposition to the ruling party, *el partido viejo*, for she belonged to the Reform Party. I remember as a child learning of her election to the school board and rejoicing for I felt a kinship because we were *tocayas*. Today she is still active and involved. My last communications with her have revolved around the board of the Friends of the Laredo Public Library where we both served until I left Laredo in the summer of 2000. She is definitely the kind of person that Gramsci would classify as an organic intellectual, for she emerged as a leader in the community’s social, political and economic fields, serving the needs of her class—the petite bourgeoisie—and of the masses who enthusiastically endorsed her politically. She still maintains a reputation among the working class as a champion of their cause in spite of having aligned herself with the Republican Party in recent years. Her book gathers her memories of growing up and just like the texts written in the early half of the century, she notes traditions and customs especially those concentrated

on religious feast days. She inserts a letter her father wrote one of her sisters on the occasion of her quinceañera. There is a photo of another of her sisters at her quinceañera mass. She writes eloquently of her own participation in the George Washington's Birthday Parade as Pocahontas. Complex and revealing, *Heartstrings* also documents a very female world-view and often addresses the readers, whom she very clearly marks as members of her extended family, nephews, nieces, cousins and their children. The book is a collection of mementoes including poetry and letters and a *memoria* penned by her mother that recalls the couple's 25th wedding anniversary and subsequent second honeymoon to Tasco Guerrero. The poems are written by various family friends and by her father, A.J. himself. These "literary gems" are collected in *El Alhajero*, and include poetry by A.J. the narrative by Concepción, and the poetry by the Monterrey poet Alfonso Junco and his father Don Celedonio Junco de la Vega.

Benavides, firmly rooted in Texas, writes of her parents' families in Monterrey and clearly documents an upper-middle class coming of age. She and her sister write of their life in Laredo and only hints at any of the usual vagaries of life on the border or at her own very political life.

#### MI INFANCIA PEREGRINA

In contrast to Benavides' narrative describing an extended family-life free of problems, Belia Treviño's short narrative documents a very personal and sad story, of what she calls her *infancia peregrina* when she had no solid foothold, or home. She chronicles a common story of many families whose reality took them back and forth across the border then as well as now. She divides her book into sections, each focusing on a particular cultural aspect, but she also throughout the narrative places herself in a victim position as an orphan. A mere 44 pages long, Treviño's book, written entirely in Spanish, is the shortest of the four under consideration. In her prologue she claims that reading Pablo Neruda's memoirs on January 1, 1993 she was moved to fulfill a long-held desire to "escribir mis vivencias" (3). She writes: "*inspirada por*

*él (Neruda) decidí tomar la pluma y plasmar en el papel los viejos recuerdos que por fortuna se remontan a mi tierna infancia” (3).*

As the fifth child, she enjoys certain privileges, but her life takes a dramatic turn in 1919 when her mother dies of tuberculosis. As a three year old, with her older siblings interned at Holding Institute, she goes to live in a village in Mexico, el Puntiaquedo, with her paternal grandparents. A great part of the book documents her suffering at the hands of a cruel aunt who wanted to adopt her and yet would punish the child for seemingly minor transgressions. “*Me castigaba por faltas insignificantes que cometía, como tardar mucho en moler el nixtamal o derramar la leche de la vasija” (9).* It was a rural life where the child went to school but was responsible for many household chores associated with rural life. It is in this section of the narrative she describes the process involved in the slaughter of pigs for chorizo and tamales. Carrying water from the acequia, preparing the dough for wheat flour, which she calls *harina de flor*, tortillas and making the tortillas before going off to school (10). She describes life before refrigeration or gas stoves, electricity, or running water. She goes into a detailed description of the preparation of the corn for tortillas. Most poignant is her obvious resentment of the cruel aunt who would not even allow the orphan child to share with her grandmother the pain she feels on Mother’s Day as the other children memorize poems and prepare gifts for the occasion. She returns to Laredo at age 8 when her father remarries and attempts to bring the family together. Upon her return to Laredo, she learns of the death of her sister Ethelina Rosa who died of intestinal fever at 16. To protect her from further pain, the family had kept Ethelina Rosa’s death from Belia. Once in Laredo she is enrolled in school and placed in the third grade with the caveat that she learn English. All seems to be going well. She offers a detailed description of a dress that she has made patterned on a dress one of her cousins wears. She talks of Sunday rides to Ft. McIntosh with her father and with her mother’s brother. But in spite of becoming “*la niña bilingüe más pequeña del mundo*” and her willingness to help her stepmother, it is a short-lived stay as the stepmother angered over the purchase of a pair of shoes forces the father to send Belia back to

Mexico. As she says, "*La realidad fue que mi madrastra no me aceptó*" and tearfully she is taken to Nuevo Laredo just as she is about to get her wish of a piano as her mother had wanted her to learn to play. She stays with her father's cousin and is soon sent back to the hamlet that soon is renamed General Treviño. She taught her classmates the little English she had learned, she learned to paint and for the ceremony renaming the community she was chosen to dance El Jarabe Tapatío dressed as a charro, perhaps due to the fact that it was not considered manly behavior for little boys to dance as Cárdenas points out in his text (14). But the cruel aunt tried to prevent the performance because one of her grandmother's brothers in law had died a few weeks before. From her aunt she learns to cook traditional dishes, and describes the preparation of machito and cabecita, both delicacies prepared from the kid goat or cabirto (26-27). Just like Benavides, Treviño talks of traditional meals for lent and of the practice of taking food to the relatives of the deceased for three days following the wake. She ends her narrative with her return to her father's side. He has fallen ill and asks for her. At fourteen she returns to Laredo. "*Por primera vez en mi corta vida tenía conmigo a Papá que me consentía, ... que me hacía sentir social y económicamente respctada y segura*" (44). Her father urges her not to return to General Treviño. "*Quedese aquí hasta que Dios la ampare*" (43), and encourages her friendship with the young man that would become her husband.

This brief summary reveals many of the concerns found in Benavides book as well, but the personal nature of the narrative and the focus on the coming of age of the narrator as an orphan deviates from the other books. Of the four, perhaps Treviño's is the least communal and thereby she is the one that easily fits into the schema of the "organic intellectual." However, she does represent her class well and interjects at critical junctures commentary on the way that her family had *servidumbre*, or servants, to help with the children. The book also lacks good copy editing, although it is in impeccable Spanish. For example on page 5 we read that her sister Ethelina died at age 15, but on page 17 her age at time of death is 16. All in all, we can look to

Treviño's short narrative to get a sense of what life was like along the border for a young orphan girl. Unfortunately, the narrative as do all of these, seems to be restrained and the tone is one of cautious expression. Although rich in specific dates and names of teachers and neighbors, there is no connection with the outside political situation of the area, aside from the comments about the naming of the small village.

*MY SPANISH-SPEAKING LEFT FOOT*

In contrast to Treviño's lack of involvement with the world, José Angel Cárdenas imbues his narrative with a socio-political context that explains, for example, how the border denizens are not immigrants. He cites the example of his wife's family whose ancestry is Irish and Spanish going back to the 17th century Canales family. Born in Laredo, Texas, in 1930, Cardenas exemplifies a kind of organic intellectual for he devoted most of his professional life to working in the development of multicultural and bilingual programs, seeking to help the children of the border and beyond whose Spanish proficiency schools deemed a disadvantage instead of the asset that it is. For over forty-seven years Dr. Cárdenas worked as a professional educator; he founded the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) in San Antonio and currently holds the office of director emeritus of the organization. Just like the other authors, Cardenas sets forth the purposes for his book, but he is more proficient and specific outlining four major purposes. He says:

In this, my fourth book, I intend to depict the cultural influence of Mexico and the Spanish - speaking world for a Mexican American living in the United States.

Second, I intend to show the ease of adjustment to a multicultural existence without ambivalence or incapacitation...

A third purpose of this publication is to allay the fears of the extensive number of xenophobes in this country who are concerned with the impact of foreign cultures and languages. I wish to show that multiculturalism is, like love, infinite. (viii)

Just like the other autobiographies, his narrative stresses the fact that his extended family resides along **both** sides of the U.S./Mexico border. In his book, as the IDRA web site states, “He depicts the cultural influence of Mexico and the Spanish speaking world on a Mexican American living in the United States.”

I remember sometimes saying that I was born with my right foot in the United States and my left foot in Mexico. I specifically designate my left foot as the Spanish speaking one because I was taught in the U.S. Army that the left foot always comes first, and Spanish was my first language. (vii)

But the narrative is not just Cárdenas’s quaint reminisces of growing up along the border with two cultures, it “provides compelling reflections of multicultural topics such as wealth, class, language, religion, education and family.” For example, he clearly situates himself and his family as belonging to one of the buenas familias, but, he claims, “almost all Mexican Americans in Laredo, regardless of economic or social status, considered themselves to be from good families” (18) Cardenas’s narrative also self-consciously provides clues to the construction of masculinity in the border community. At one point he writes: “even at this early age, I had acquired from the Mexican culture strong concepts of what was considered manly behavior and what was not. Dancing the Jarabe Tapatío at my mother’s insistence was not considered macho, and it caused me no small amount of problems in my peer relationships (14). The book is comprised of seven chapters. The first five are reflections on his youth sprinkled with memories like Treviño and Benavides’ of preparing specific foods, like tamales (66) and of traditional cultural expressions, like the *mal de ojo* or the prevalence of *dichos* in everyday life (67). The last two chapters

merely recount the various places Cardenas has visited and offers his perceptions of these. Of all the authors, Cardenas is the most “educated” with a Ph.D. and the most widely traveled, and though it may seem that he seeks perhaps higher purposes, it too is a document of life along the border during the mid twentieth century.

#### MEMORIAS

Hilario Coronado’s *Memorias* also seeks to document and to render a view of life in Laredo via a collection of personal writings. Hilario Coronado’s unusual collection of poetry and prose, gathers his creative work that covers a span of over 40 years. Impelled by the autobiographical nature of the poetry and the prose pieces I include Coronado’s work, first published in 1982 as *Mis Memorias*, and reissued in 1988 with the letters of response from various writers in Northern Mexico and south Texas. Like Benavides’ father, Coronado marks the quinceañera of his niece with a 16 line poem in traditional rhyme scheme (abab) and with common constructions, almost cliché, for example, he refers the honoree as: “Bella princesita, tan hermosa cual una rosa” and uses word play as he ends:

Van hacia tí mis votos más fervientes  
porque sean siempre tus sueños realizados  
y porque tus deseos más vehementes  
si son nobles, veas siempre coronados. (65)

But, his poetry also celebrates the quotidian, weddings, birthdays, pets, and special events: his dogs, Teddy and Rags. On August 3, 1962 he writes Marcia Sybert his granddaughter a birthday poem full of portent and best wishes (70). He divides the text into sections and then arranges the poems thematically. His love poems to his wife Paquita span over 50 years of marriage. The poems to his family are first, then come the reflections on life and death and on nature: la lluvia, la urraca. One he titles: “Rewritten on this the 17th day of November 1977 on which I am celebrating my 79th birthday, Remembering the

Old Iron Horse,” (110) tells of his work for the railroad and his retirement. Originally written in April of 1965, it is one of the few written in English.

Cornado’s life and work in Laredo can be gleaned from his poetry and prose. But, unlike a true autobiography the text doesn’t have the “self consciousness” that the others have. Ye, Coronado’s work does reflect his concern with who he is; his reflections on life and the advice he gives his grandchildren, nephews, and nieces all express a concern with culture and identity. Although mostly poetry, his *Memorias* constitute a memorial and function as a testament to his life well lived.

Here I’d like to venture into a reading beyond Gramsci’s organic intellectual. Edward Said reminds us of the importance of “the role of geographic knowledge in keeping one grounded [...] in the often tragic social, historical, and epistemological contests over territory—this includes nationalism, identity, narrative, and ethnicity” (68). Indeed, the autobiography is by definition in geography, and the border area remains a contested territory. The Treaty of 1848 may have ended the war but the cultural conflict continues.

These four writers inhabiting what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “nepantla,” the in-between state, grounded in that border region between the U.S. and Mexico, keep the “geographic knowledge” at the forefront. I propose that the writers, through their autobiographical work, become the chroniclers of what of their lived experience under colonization. They as colonized subjects, in spite of having the desire to tell, choose not to “tell it all.” Save a few instances where the veil so carefully upheld slips a bit, we know nothing of the racism, or of the subaltern status that they are relegated to for being of Mexican descent in the U.S.

When José Cardenas expresses a subdued rage against the xenophobes, when Benevides explains off handedly a business loss, when Coronado and Treviño chooses to write in Spanish—the writers make a political statement that definitely signals that they are writing in the U.S. about their lives in the U.S./Mexico border region and that their narratives are not telling the whole story.



As critic, as scholar, indeed as intellectual, I read these works and celebrate that they are written and published at all. But I cannot stop there. I seek to problematize the ways that readers, historians, and critics understand the role of the writer in a community, a writer who may not seek an audience beyond her or his immediate circle but whose work reflects a truth and questions through its very existence what writing is, why autobiographies exist and finally what social, political, or life-affirming change such writing effects for the community, the reader, and, specifically, for the writer. The answer to the question: whose story is it? is a simple one: it is a story/*historia* of any autobiography/*cuento* that belongs to all of us, as it tells our collective story.

Why would these four individuals write their memoirs? What impels someone to write? And, more specifically, to write an autobiography? Scholars of the genre hold that the exercise of writing one's autobiography fulfills a desire of "coming to knowledge of the self" (Benstock 1139). We can ascertain that the desire, the impulse was so great that these four not only wrote, but saw to it that their work was published. A discussion of their various strategies to get the work published and the cost involved is outside the purview of this paper. Suffice it to say that in the very act of writing (and publishing) these authors have established themselves as agents in a social drama that continues to develop as life on the border shifts and changes with the hegemonic forces of two nation states that constantly clash and meet.



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