



**FORMS OF HYBRID IDENTITY AND FIRST PERSON
NARRATIVES**

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ABSTRACT

This research paper has two axes of analysis: the protagonists' construction of a hybrid identity, and the choice of a hybrid genre by the authors to reflect the identity of the protagonists who narrate their life stories. *The House on Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros shows how Esperanza Cordero fights to accept her identity as a Mexican-American woman. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel* (1994) by Edwidge Danticat, Sophie, Haitian-American, tries to adapt herself to a new culture and traditions without leaving aside the culture and traditions passed on by her mother. Finally, in *The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1981) by Maxine Hong Kingston, its protagonist, a Chinese-American woman attempts to understand her true identity living in a culture which wants to erase her Chinese traditions. The three protagonists construct hybrid identities and can only accept them when they accept their interculturality and can ride on two cultures. At the same time, the three female protagonists tell their life stories in an attempt to build their identities and to make sense of their present. The construction of their hybrid identities is manifested in the choice of a hybrid genre, a mixture of the genres of the autobiography, the novel, and the autofiction. The three novels of the corpus transform, in a way, the autofiction by borrowing some elements of the autobiography and the novel; the choice of this hybrid genre can be considered a narrative strategy to reflect the hybrid identities of the protagonists.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	6
First section	
Forms of identity: hybridity and interculturality	
Theory	9
Stuart Hall and cultural identity	10
Madan Sarup and identity	13
García Canclini and the hybridization processes	16
Gloria Anzaldúa and the <i>New Mestiza</i>	17
Analysis	
Chapter I: <i>The House on Mango Street</i> by Sandra Cisneros	21
Chapter II: <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel</i> by Edwidge Danticat	28
Chapter III: <i>The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts</i> by Maxine Hong Kingston	34
Chapter IV: A comparative analysis of the construction of identity: Esperanza, Sophie and Maxine	39
Second section	
Blurred borders: autobiographies, autobiographical novels, fictional autobiographies, and autofiction	
Theory	42
Philippe Lejeune and the autobiography	45
Dobrovsky and autobiography/autofiction	50
Manuel Alberca and the narratives of the self	52
Analysis	
Chapter I: Sandra Cisneros and <i>The House on Mango Street</i>	61
Chapter II: Edwidge Danticat and <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel</i>	68
Chapter III: Maxine Hong Kingston and <i>The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts</i>	73

Chapter IV: A comparative analysis of the narrative strategies used by Sandra Cisneros, Edwidge Danticat and Maxine Hong Kingston.	79
Conclusions	83
Works cited	87
Works consulted	91

INTRODUCTION

As part of a research group, I read for the first time *The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston and I was captivated by the way the protagonist built her hybrid identity by narrating her life story. Together with the above mentioned text, and driven by curiosity about other authors of double nationality, I read a text by Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, where I could see how the female protagonist dealt with the issue of being born into two cultures. Then, I read Edwidge Danticat, who, as a Caribbean-American writer, dealt with the same experience of growing up with a hyphenated nationality in *Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel*. Since then, I have become particularly interested in women writers with hyphenated nationalities whose female characters tell their life stories in an attempt to come to terms with their hybrid identities. These characters, similarly to the authors of the novels, try to find equilibrium between their cultures of origin and the American society that demands them to behave as fully Americans. What called my attention was that the three texts shared many similarities; the three were narrated in first person singular and the three dealt with the protagonists' hybrid identities and their attempt at trying to adapt themselves to life in the United States without leaving aside their cultures of origin. Another similarity the three texts shared was the choice of a hybrid genre which combined elements of the autobiography, the novel, and the autofiction.

My aim in this study is to explore the above mentioned texts and analyze the relation between the construction of the female narrators' hybrid identities and the narrativization of their life stories, and more specifically, to study the choice made by the authors of a hybrid genre to reflect the hybrid identities of the characters of the novels, and to a certain extent that of themselves.

This paper attempts to explore the way the female protagonists of the novels of the corpus build their identities by telling their life stories. The questions that arise are: In which ways do the protagonists of the novels construct their hybrid identities? Is it by narrating their life stories that they can come to terms with their hybrid identities? Why do the authors choose to tell the protagonists' life stories using a first person narrator? How is the hybrid identity of the protagonists reflected in the choice of a hybrid genre?

This paper will be organized according to two axes of research: firstly, the concept of identity and hybridity will be analyzed in relation to the way the protagonists of the novels under analysis build their identities and accept their hybridity. Secondly, the hybridization of the genres of the autobiography, the novel, and the autofiction will be explored as a narrative strategy chosen by the authors to reflect their characters' own hybridity.

To approach the issue of identity, I will discuss identity from a non-essentialist point of view, as a process which is never completed. I will develop Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity and the black diaspora, Madan Sarup's discussion of identity in relation to the experience of Indian immigrants, Garcia Canclini's hybridization processes and the concept of interculturality as an enriching experience, and finally, Gloria Anzaldúa's *New Mestiza* regarding the *chicana* woman. My contention is that although the authors above mentioned approach the concept of identity from different ethnic identities, I believe that their discussions are relevant to describe the experience all subjects of double nationality have when they try to adapt themselves to life in America. After this theoretical discussion, each text will be explored individually to finally establish the connections as regards similarities and differences among them.

The second part of this study will concentrate on the discussion of the hybrid genre chosen by the authors of the texts under analysis. I will start by establishing the differences between autobiography, autobiographical novels, fictional autobiographies and autofiction to see how the different genres mix to give way to a hybrid genre. For that, I will develop Philippe Lejeune's theory of autobiography, Serge Doubrovsky's discussion of autobiography and autofiction, and finally, Manuel Alberca's definition of autofiction. As from there, each text will be approached separately and then a comparative analysis of the three novels will be carried out.

Finally, the relation between the theme of the texts and the hybrid genre chosen by the authors will be explored to see how the narrative strategies used reflect the protagonists' hybrid identities, and to a certain extent, that of the authors.

As regards the methodology to be used, the texts will be approached from a comparative point of view, not only as regards the thematic aspects but also as regards the narrative strategies used. The three novels share the same thematic concern: the construction of identity and the protagonists' acceptance of their hybrid identities. As to the narrative strategies, the three novels are written using a first person narrator who

tells her life story. The texts will be analyzed from a postcolonial point of view as regards the concepts of identity and hybridity taking into account that protagonists of the novels are women who belong to ethnic minorities in the United States, “internal colonies” which depart from the mainstream culture.

FIRST SECTION

FORMS OF IDENTITY: HYBRIDITY AND INTERCULTURALITY

The topic of identity has been discussed especially in the last decades of the XX century, and in particular in relation to minorities. A lot has been said and it is being said about identity in terms of nationality, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, and community. The concept of identity raises questions about how individuals fit in society and how identity gives us an idea of who we are and how we relate to others.

Is identity fixed? Can we find a “true” identity? Are there alternatives to the binary opposition between essentialist and non-essentialist views on identity? On the one hand, there are scholars who support the idea that identity is fixed and trans-historical, and, on the other hand, other theorists express that identity is fluid and contingent. The concept of cultural identity had its origins in the 50’s in the United States when scientists were trying to give an answer to the problems of integration of the immigrants. This approach considered the cultural identity of an individual as a determining factor in his behaviour. Identity was seen as being fixed, rooted in kinship and in a shared history; thus, in order to assert an identity position, it was necessary to take into account bonds of kinship and a shared history. In other words, identity would be prior to the individual and if the individual did not adhere to it, he became an outcast. Therefore, identity was considered an innate condition of the individual and it was defined in a stable and definite way. The risk of adhering to this conception of identity is that identity would be a synonym of race.

This essentialist view is challenged later by those who believe that identity is not a static, fixed phenomenon but a dynamic process where identity is constructed and reconstructed always in relation to the other. Differently from the supporters of a cultural identity which originates in unconscious processes, this view supports that identity originates in a conscious idea of belonging. I approach this study from the concept that identity is constructed as it is manifested in the female protagonists of the texts I have chosen to analyze. I am especially interested in Stuart Hall’s discussion of this concept in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (Rutherford: 1990) in which he refers to identity as a process which is never completed and it is always formed in a particular historical context; identity as becoming and fluid. I also find Madan Sarup relevant to the study of the construction of identity and of the experience many immigrants have when migrating to other lands. The same as Hall, in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996), he discusses identity as a process, as a consequence of the interaction between people, institutions and practices. Although he deals mainly with the Indian immigrant experience, I believe this can also be applied to immigrants of

other nationalities, such as Mexican-Americans and Chinese-Americans. García Canclini in *Culturas Híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (2001) discusses the concept of multiculturalism and interculturalism which I find particularly interesting because it explains how an individual can build his identity in the interculturalism in which he lives. Finally, from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. (1999) I will especially concentrate on her discussion of identity and hybridity and how women with hyphenated nationalities construct their hybrid identities.

Taking into account these studies, this work aims at analyzing the construction of identity in the main characters of the three novels that constitute my corpus of study. *The House on Mango Street* (1981) by Sandra Cisneros shows how the main protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, struggles to accept her identity as a Mexican-American woman. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel* (1994) by Edwidge Danticat, Sophie tries to adapt to the new culture and new traditions without giving up the ones passed on to her by her mother. Finally, in *The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1981) by Maxine Hong Kingston, the protagonist, a Chinese-American woman, tries to understand her true identity living in a culture that wants her to erase her Chinese traditions. The three protagonists will build their hybrid identities and will come to terms with them while they learn to accept this interculturalism and can ride on different cultures.

Stuart Hall and Cultural identity

Among those who question the innate view of identity, Stuart Hall states that identity is formed in particular historical circumstances and as such it is always in a process of construction. Departing from Hall's study, I will first refer to the process of identity construction and how identity is constantly reproduced through difference and transformation.

Stuart Hall questions some aspects of what is understood by cultural identity and he celebrates the heterogeneity and the diversity of those identities that are built and reproduced constantly through difference and transformation. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990) he focuses on the question of what is meant by cultural identity, taking as his departing point the example of black diaspora identities and the empirical vehicle of cinematic representation. He explains that it is essential to bear in mind the enunciator, which in turns, is the enunciated as well, because "we all write and speak

from a particular time and place, from a history and a culture which is specific” (222); in other words, the subject always speaks in context, from a certain historical and cultural position. He also proposes two different ways of defining cultural identity which I find especially useful for the analysis of my corpus. The first conception defines cultural identity in terms of what we are because of a shared culture and history. There is an underlying essence shared by the people which reflects the shared cultural codes and historical experiences that make us be “one people”. Although Stuart Hall is mainly thinking in terms of the Caribbean or black diaspora experience, I believe that it could be argued that the identity of other postcolonial groups is constructed in the same way. This conception of cultural identity is still very important in postcolonial struggles and it has to do with re-discovering one’s identity. The second conception of identity sees cultural identity as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (225). Stuart Hall acknowledges “the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery” which is implied in the new forms of visual and cinematic representation. He believes that although cultural identities have to do with something that already exists, they also have a history, and they have become what they are because they have been transformed. Thus, cultural identity has to do not only with recovering the past but also with the future. Consequently, when we think of cultural identity we should not think of identity as a completed process but we should think of identity as a “‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). This identity is constructed through a dialogue with the past as well as with the present:

It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. (226)

Stuart Hall goes on to state that Caribbean identities have to be considered in terms of two axes, that of similarity and continuity which has to do with a “matter of being” and the axe of difference and rupture which has to do with a “matter of becoming.” I depart from this concept for the analysis of the way the female protagonists of my corpus try to come to terms with their identities. Even though they are not Caribbean, they will manage to construct their identities by establishing a dialogue between the two axes Stuart Hall mentions when he says that identities have to be considered in terms of this dialogue because the former gives some sense of the continuity with the past while the

latter, the experience of profound discontinuity. Halls adds that together with this sense of continuity comes the idea of difference, because the boundaries of difference are continually re-located according to different points of reference. He also explains how this play of difference acts within identity by referring to Jacques Derrida's theory on *différance* and *différance* and how it can make us rethink the positionings and repositionings of Caribbean cultural identities in relation to at least three presences: the African presence, the European presence and the American presence¹. He claims that the African presence is the place of the repressed, the silenced experience of slavery and that everyone in the Caribbean must come to terms, sooner or later, with this presence. The second presence, the presence of Europe, introduces the question of power and consequently, the issue of exclusion, imposition, and expropriation of the Caribbeans. The third one, the American presence, has to do with place and territory more than with power; it is the "empty" land which serves as a meeting point for the different immigrants; "The New World is the third term – the primal scene – where the fateful/fatal encounter was staged between Africa and the West" (234). Stuart Hall concludes by expressing that "this 'New World' presence is itself the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference" (235). He also explains what he means by the Caribbean diaspora: it is not the concept associated with imperialistic forms of 'ethnicity' but the experience which recognizes a necessary heterogeneity and diversity which imply a conception of identity that has to do with hybridity. He defines identities as "those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (235). In a way, what Stuart Hall is stressing is the fluidity of identity and identity as becoming.

In "Who needs identity" published in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996) Hall acknowledges that "...identities are never unified and, in late modern times, they are increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (qtd in du Gay 17); in other words, identities are built through difference and through the relation to the Other. Hall also argues that identities are constructed within discourse because they are produced in "specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (17). He adds

¹ I am particularly interested in the American presence Hall mentions, since the three protagonists of the novels analyzed need to build their hybrid identities in a new land where the different cultures they belong to interact with one another.

that they are not only constructed in an act of power as Laclau states but also in an act of exclusion, because it is in relation to the Other and to what it lacks that identity can be constructed. Stuart Hall explains that he uses the term identity to indicate the meeting point, “the point of suture” (19) between the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’ us as subjects of particular discourses and the processes which produce subjectivities which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’ (19). In this way, identities are the result of a process of articulation of the subject into discourse. Identities are the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always knowing that they are representations, and that those representations are constructed across a division from the place of the Other (19). I agree with Stuart Hall that there is no identity outside representation, that is to say, outside the narrativization of the self. This non-essentialist conception of identity is quite appropriate for the current contemporary fragmentation which can also be seen in the texts under analysis.

Madan Sarup and Identity

In the same way that Stuart Hall writes about identity and analyzes it in relation to the Caribbean, Madan Sarup does so in relation to the Indian immigrant. In *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996) Sarup states that “identity is a construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people and that, because the range of human behaviour is so wide, groups maintain boundaries to limit the type of behaviour within a defined cultural territory” (11). In a similar way to Stuart Hall, he believes that any study of identity has to be placed in time and space because our identities are constructed, to some extent, by social structures which sometimes act as constraints that determine the way in which we act or think (40).

I am particularly interested in his discussion of the meaning of home, the journey and the border for the Indian immigrant because I can see coincidences in the experience of other immigrants when trying to combine the culture their parents have passed on them with the new customs and beliefs of the American culture. Madan Sarup agrees with Stuart Hall when he states that identity is a key concept now-a-days which has to be thought in terms of fragmentation, contradiction, and ambiguity; it is not a transparent concept. This leads to the increasing interest of researchers who attempt to define home and place and how individuals represent themselves. For Madan Sarup “the concept of home seems to be tied to the notion of identity - the story we tell

of ourselves and which is also the story that others tell of us” (3). He also believes that identities are “not free floating, they are limited by borders and boundaries” (3). These boundaries vary according to the geographical region, political ideas, religious beliefs, language, or cultural traditions. The borders can also be seen as barriers when they stand for exclusion or as places of communication and exchange because they are always ambivalent. This close relation between home and identity suggested by Sarup throws light on many of the arguments I am trying to make in this study. The three protagonists of the novel find it hard to define where home is; is it the place their parents dream of going back to? Is it the place where their roots are? Is it the country where they have been born? In trying to find an answer to these questions they come to accept their own hybrid identities.

Sarup points out that “identity can be displaced: it can be hybrid or multiple. It can be constituted through community: family, region, the nation state” (1). It is very often assumed that “a sense of place and belonging gives a person stability. But what makes a place home? Is it wherever your family is, where you have been brought up? The children of many migrants are not sure where they belong” (1). Although Sarup discusses this in connection with the Indian experience I believe that many minority groups face the same problems when they live in the border of two cultures. Some people in these groups do not feel at home where they live and cannot stop thinking of their roots; others feel torn between two different cultures: language, religion, and customs:

One often hears the remark ‘They have one foot in each camp’. These may be migrants who do not want to give up their own culture or assimilate with the new group. The borderline is always ambivalent; sometimes it is seen as an inherent part of the inside, at other times it is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness outside (7).

Furthermore, the concept of identity and narrative Madan Sarup discusses is useful to my discussion of how identity is constructed through the narration of our life story because the three female protagonists of my corpus will narrate their life stories in an attempt to accept their hybrid identities. He refers to the concept of identity and narrative when he expresses that “when asked about our identity, we start thinking of our life-story: we construct our identity at the same time as we tell our life-story” (15). In a way, life-story telling constructs the subjectivities of women and men. Sarup believes that the social dynamics of class, nation, ‘race’, ethnicity, gender and religion

all get into the narrative because when they unfold, we construct our story and hence, our identity. This process of identity-construction begins with identification because men and women are not born with an identity; they have to identify to get one: “It is by means of a series of identifications that identity is constituted” (30). Likewise, Stuart Hall in “Who Needs Identity?” says that “identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (16).

The importance of the relation between the past and the present in the construction and negotiation of identity is essential when analyzing the way the protagonists of the novels studied build their hybrid identities. Sarup believes that “it is through recollections of the past that people represent themselves to themselves” (40): “The past does not exist except in the sense that we have to interpret past events and, in so doing, create history, identity and ourselves” (46). He adds that when writing about identity all the social dynamics should be considered because identity is the result of all those dynamics that operate upon the individual at the same time. The relationship between the past and the present is sometimes ambivalent because other dynamics should be taken into account as well.

I am particularly interested in the concept of identity construction through language acquisition that Madan Sarup holds because this can be easily seen in the experience of the three protagonists of the novels under analysis. He considers that identity is constructed in and through language, as post-structuralists would argue, because “It is through the acquisition of language that we become human and social beings: the words we speak situate us in our gender and our class. Through language, we come to ‘know’ who we are” (46). He also adds that identity construction is always within representation and that “All identities, whether based on class, ethnicity, religion or nation, are social constructions” (48).

The same as Stuart Hall he takes up the concept by Derrida when he states that identity can only be understood in and through difference. One’s identity is defined against the Other. What is more, very often a sense of difference can strengthen the solidarity of a minority group, especially if it feels threatened by the dominant group (47).

García Canclini and the hybridization processes

Similarly to Stuart Hall and Madan Sarup, García Canclini in *Culturas Híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (2001) celebrates the hybrid identity when he says that the hybridization processes make it possible for the “multiculturalism”² to become “interculturality.”³ This concept of interculturality will bring light on the discussion of how the protagonists can accept their hyphenated identities by learning to live between two cultures and by being able to establish a dialogue between them.

García Canclini defines hybridization as “those socio-cultural processes in which structures and discreet practices, which existed in separate form, are combined to give origin to new structures, practices and objects” (14). He claims that the object of study should not be the hybridity but the hybridization processes because these new practices and structures neither happen in a planned way nor are they the unforeseen results of migratory, touristic or economic exchange processes; very often hybridization arises from the individual and collective creativity. The fact that he concentrates on the process of hybridization rather than on hybridity will contribute to my analysis of the processes the female protagonists of the novels under study undergo to accept their hybrid identities. What is more, all these processes make the concept of hybridity rather relative. If identity is defined by a process of selection of features (language, traditions, and certain stereotyped behaviors) these practices may be isolated from the history of mixtures in which they were formed. That is why he proposes to move the study of identity to the heterogeneity and intercultural hybridization (17). I agree with García Canclini when he objects to the idea that the concept of hybridization may mean easy integration and fusion of cultures, because I believe there are contradictions and features that do not lend themselves to hybridization.

What is more, he claims that since it is possible to get into and to get out of the processes of hybridization, to be excluded or to be subordinated, then it is also possible

² All translations from the texts in Spanish are my own.

³ Multiculturalism implies that all cultures and civilizations are of equal value and should be treated and promoted equally within the same nation. Bhabha observes that “Discourses of ‘multiculturalism’, for example, function conflictually: they are strategies by which the dominant social formation seeks to control minorities but their acknowledgement of cultural differences also opens up spaces of resistance which are negotiated somewhere ‘in-between’ the conscious and unconscious levels” (Moore-Gilbert 451). Interculturality goes even further because it refers to the existence of a relation between people who belong to various cultural groups and it encourages interaction between these communities living in the same country. Furthermore, interculturality implies the production of novel cultural forms and practices through the merging of previously separate cultures leading to cultural enrichment.

to understand the diverse positions of the individuals as regards intercultural relations. Thus, the processes of hybridization can be studied in relation to the lack of equality among the cultures as well as to asymmetries in power and prestige.

He adds that hybridization takes place in specific historical and social conditions, in systems of production and consumption which sometimes work as coercions, as it can be seen in many immigrants. He also points out that the big cities also condition the hybridization processes; it is in these cities that hybridization encourages more conflicts and more artistic creativity (22). García Canclini also states that the globalization processes accentuate the interculturality blurring national frontiers and borders. This idea that borders affect and influence the life of immigrants is also developed by Gloria Anzaldúa when she examines the condition of *Chicanos* in white American society.

Gloria Anzaldúa and the *New Mestiza*

Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (1999) studies the Mexican immigrants in America and their cultural identity paying special attention to women. I hold that on the basis of her studies of the Mexican-American woman many conclusions can be reached as regards the women with hyphenated nationalities living in the USA in general. She gives a view into a life of alienation and isolation of individuals living in the borderlands between cultures. Anzaldúa addresses many cultural issues, from religion to sexuality to immigration but she is mainly concerned with articulating what she calls a "new *mestiza* consciousness," an identity which is characterized by hybridity, flexibility, and plurality. When she speaks about the *mestiza* she says that the new *mestiza* learns to cope

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- nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (101)

Anzaldúa celebrates hybridity when she expresses that "the future depends on breaking down the paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures" (102) or living in "interculturality" as García Canclini would express. The *mestiza* finds it hard to differentiate between what is inherited, acquired, or imposed (104). By accepting the

duality in which she is immersed she “strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity.” (104).

In a similar way to García Canclini, Gloria Anzaldúa makes reference to the importance of borders when she speaks of borderlands. In the preface to the First Edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* she refers to borderlands as “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (18). In the chapter “The Homeland, Aztlán”, Gloria Anzaldúa expresses that

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (25)

This border gives the *mestizos* a hybrid genealogy because it extrapolates them as both native to the Americans but at the same time with a non-Western identity. When referring to the *mestiza*, Anzaldúa remarks that she feels alienated from her mother culture and “alien” in the dominant culture; “Petrieved, she can’t respond, her face caught between the *intersticios*, the spaces between the different words she inhabits” (42). However, whenever the *mestiza* is faced with the choice of being the victim or the strong one, she chooses to be in control and to resist acculturation. She chooses to live on her own but not losing touch with her origins: “I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry “home” on my back” (43).

Anzaldúa also points to the tradition of male dominance within the Mexican community and how the traditional culture works against women; “Culture is made by those in power - men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them” (38). She takes up the figure of Malintzín, La Llorona, and the Virgin of Guadalupe and re writes them to reclaim a ground for female historical presence. By reclaiming and re-conceptualizing Malintzín, Anzaldúa contests her place in the Mexican mythology as the fallen Eve and she claims the Chicano mythical homeland of Aztlán. When she refers to the Virgin of Guadalupe, she explains that she is the most powerful image of the Chicano/*mexicano* because in a way, she synthesizes the religion and the culture of two races:

La *Virgen de Guadalupe* is the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-*mexicanos*, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess.

La gente Chicano tiene tres madres. All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la chingada* (*Malinche*), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *La Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two. (52)

As regards *La Llorona*, the woman who weeps for her lost or murdered children, she was considered another part of the Virgin Mary/whore dyad. Anzaldúa presents her in a new light, as the deity who presided over women in childbirth giving her a central position in tradition. By re-writing the stories of *La Llorona* and the *Virgen of Guadalupe*, Gloria Anzaldúa redefines cultural identity through gender and sexuality.

Similarly to Stuart Hall, Gloria Anzaldúa argues that language does play an important role in the construction of identity and she explains how the dominant group enforces domination through language. Since childhood *chicanas* are said that their language is wrong: they are not allowed to use Spanish at school, but at the same time, their parents keep addressing them in Spanish. When they speak with Mexican people they are said to speak poor Spanish and with an American accent. Anzaldúa points out that a low estimation of one's language leads to low self-esteem because "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity- I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (81):

Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity - we don't identify with the Anglo-American culture values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicaness or Angloness. (85)

How does Anzaldúa understand hybrid identities? In "An interview with María Henríquez Betancor" (1995) she expresses that "identity is an arrangement or series of clusters, stacking or layering of selves, horizontal and vertical layers, the geography of selves made up of the different communities you inhabit" (Keating 238). She argues that hybrid identities are the intersection of different cultural backgrounds, and its equal acceptance. Anzaldúa celebrates this ethnic diversity because she contends that it gives the new *mestiza* a rich background that links her to different cultures and histories. By living into different cultures, the *mestiza* develops a synergy of them and she acquires a richer identity.

It is my contention that what Gloria Anzaldúa believes for the new *mestiza* can also be extended to other women who have a hyphenated nationality. They also have to

learn to live between two cultures; their culture of origin and the culture of the place where they live. As Hall suggests, the new conception of the non-unitary self, or *mestiza* consciousness, as Anzaldúa defines it, allows for a politics of articulation, not of essential unity or correspondence, but of 'unities-in-difference'.

Having established the way identity will be approached, I will proceed to the analysis of the three texts of my corpus.

Chapter I

The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

“I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture - *una cultura mestiza* - with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.”

(*Borderlands/ La Frontera*)

Sandra Cisneros' novel *The House on Mango Street* tells the story of Esperanza Cordero and of her self-empowerment to overcome obstacles of poverty, gender, and race that do not let her accept her identity as a Mexican-American woman. The story is told by Esperanza herself through a series of vignettes about her family, about her life on Mango Street, her neighbours' lives and, especially, about her dreams and aspirations. In order to discuss the process Esperanza Cordero undergoes trying to construct her own hybrid identity several social dynamics, such as nation, gender and religion, should be taken into account.

Esperanza is the child of immigrants and as such, she is not sure where she belongs. She struggles to find a way out to the limits imposed by her double identity and thus, come to terms with her own hybrid identity by becoming a writer. To highlight the concept of the construction of identity, I find it useful to refer to the effects of the social dynamic of nation, as expressed by Madan Sarup in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996) and Ana Castillo in *Massacre of the Dreamers. Essays in Xicanisma* (1994).

As regards the first social dynamic, that of nation, Esperanza's hyphenated nationality makes it difficult for her to find her true self. She attempts to get a space in an alien culture that has limited and marginalized her life and culture. “The concept of home”, as Madan Sarup says, “is tied to the notion of identity” (3), and as Castillo states the *xicana* is a “countryless woman” (21) because as a *mestiza* she is treated as a second class citizen; she is commonly perceived as a foreigner not only in the U.S but

also in Mexico (21). Benjamin Alire Sáenz makes it clear in his essay "In the Borderlands of Chicano Identity, there are Only Fragments" that identities do not travel well. They do not work well abroad, among others; and home, too, is always foreign, always on the other side of the border (Michaelsen and Johnson 20). Esperanza feels torn between two cultures; she associates the *barrio* where she lives with Mexico and shame, but at the same time, the *barrio* means the bonds of family and heritage; it protects her and gives her security; yet, it enslaves her. She feels secure by being surrounded by people of her own race: "All brown around, we are safe" (28). The *barrio* works as an extended family that helps to keep the bonds to her ancestral origin; she is greeted by all neighbours and she knows them all. Most of her neighbours are immigrants as well: Carlos, Memé or Juan, Rosa Vargas, Marin and Alicia. But it is also the *barrio* the place she needs to leave in order to come to terms with her hybrid identity. Living in the *Latino barrio* fills Esperanza with shame and disappointment; she wants to leave the place where she feels discriminated, the place where she feels she "never belonged here anyway" (83). It is also in the *barrio* where Esperanza is reminded of the position women have in the Mexican culture; that is why for Esperanza home also means shame and submission. The *barrio* is pictured as decayed, full of immigrants, and overcrowded with houses falling apart. In many vignettes, Esperanza points to the poor living conditions of the place: "She couldn't see the ceilings dusty with flies, the ugly maroon walls, the bottles and sticky spoons" (60). Esperanza can see the prejudices against her race and is acutely aware of being part of a racial and economic group that dooms a neighborhood to "getting bad" for example when she speaks of Cathy, Queen of Cats and says that they will move: "In the meantime they'll just have to move a little further north from Mango Street, a little further away every time people like us keep moving in" (13). Esperanza feels like the unwanted element in society; what's more, she is aware of her differences: she is not like the other girls she meets at school. Her shame and longing to escape from her place in her community are evident in the humiliation she feels when pointing out her house:

And then she made me stand up on a box of books and point. That one? She said pointing to a row of ugly three flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into. Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn't my house and started to cry (45).

Esperanza's dream of a house of her own represents an escape from the *barrio*, a rejection of the domestic drudgery of "home," a solitary space for her creativity. At the

same time that she craves for a home and thinks about her ancestral home, she does not have clear memories of Mexico:

One day we were passing a house that looked, in my mind, like houses I had seen in Mexico. I don't know why. There was nothing about the house that looked exactly like the houses I remembered. I'm not even sure why I thought it, but it seemed to feel right. (17-18)

It is only through the experiences of the other Mexican-Americans and her family that she gets to know about Mexico. Her life in the *barrio* makes her feel as if she did not have a home and she will try to find her roots to be able to accept her hybrid identity. In the end, Esperanza comes to realize she cannot deny her heritage, and she embraces the community where she lives and promises to come back for "those who cannot leave" (110).

Language also plays an important role in her self-definition; being Mexican-American also means having two languages and switching linguistic codes quite often. As Madan Sarup says "Through language we come to 'know' who we are"; "it is through the acquisition of language that we become human and social beings: the words we speak situate us in our gender and class" (46). Gloria Anzaldúa also refers to how ethnic identity is akin to linguistic identity; until one can take pride in one's language, one cannot take pride in oneself. When *chicano* children are told that their language is wrong, their sense of self is diminished (80-81). Castillo argues that the way we use language can limit the way we see ourselves by "perpetuating learned concepts of who we are and how we should live" (15).

Esperanza also encounters boundaries between her English and Spanish speaking worlds; she sees contradiction as regards the language she is supposed to use; on the one hand, the kids of immigrants are supposed to speak good English, but on the other hand, their mothers refuse to speak it as a form of refusal to assimilate themselves to a culture they do not belong. Mamacita cannot stand her child speaking in English and she gets angry when he sings the Pepsi commercial he heard on TV: "No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears" (78). Esperanza is also aware that her name in English does not mean the same as in Spanish. "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver..." (11). In Spanish, her name means many things: hope, sadness, waiting; she would like to baptize herself

under a new name and then be able to re-create her identity. When Esperanza analyses her name she recognizes that it is part of her *Chicano* heritage, because her name has been passed down from generation to generation. She has been called after her grandmother and she admires her strength and determination. However, she does not want to inherit her place of submission: “I have inherited her name but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window” (11).

As Madan Sarup, Ana Castillo and Gloria Anzaldúa argue, language plays a key role in the acceptance of her hybrid identity. It is not until Esperanza finds a language to express herself that she can come to terms with her hyphenated identity. By the end of the novel the intersection of her different cultures gives rise to a cascade of words, words that empower and liberate her; “The word, the image and the feeling have a palpable energy, a kind of power. *Con imágenes domo mi miedo, cruzo los abismos que tengo por dentro*” (Anzaldúa 93)

The second social dynamic Madan Sarup introduces is that of gender. As a Mexican-American woman, Esperanza also has a role to play in her family and in society, which she finds it difficult to escape from. Gloria Anzaldúa states that:

The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn’t renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. (39)

The social role assigned to the *Chicana* is that of serving the man and being first and foremost a daughter, a mother, and a wife. Esperanza will try to liberate herself from gender-based norms.

Esperanza can also experience the duality of her upbringing; her parents want to raise her as a Mexican woman but society in America expects her to behave like an American. She is an adolescent searching for her identity who, like any other Mexican-American girl, feels divided between dissimilar cultures. She is aware of the position women are expected to fulfill in the Mexican culture, even though they are living in America: “the Mexicans don’t like their women strong” (10). As Esperanza reflects on her identity she starts to think about other women in her neighborhood: she thinks about their isolation and longing for Mexico while their husbands and children seem to be immersed in the context of the new country. Rosa Vargas has many kids and no

husband to help her with them; Alicia wants to study at university but her father believes that a woman's place is to serve her father; Mamacita is homesick and feels despair when her kids speak in English; all of them sit all day by the window dreaming about Mexico and their old lives. Esperanza rebels against the conventions on female behaviour; she knows she is not beautiful and she does not believe in escaping through marriage. She is determined to have her own way, for example when she says "I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am the one that leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (89). She wants to free herself from the position she is expected to fulfill:

Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow. My pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem (108).

She speaks of her cultural identity metaphorically as her home. Esperanza sees a way out; she will not be like the other women portrayed in the novel; she will leave the neighborhood to find herself and come back to help those "she left behind" (110). Esperanza dreams of freedom and of reunion because she will leave Mango street, "the house I belong but do not belong to" (110) but she won't forget who she is or where she came from.

In the chapter "Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan" Anzaldúa refers to the role women play in the transmission of gender roles and how culture forms our beliefs. Although she admits that "culture is made by those in power-men" (38) because they make the rules and laws, it is the women who transmit them. It is the figure of the mother that exerts a strong influence on *Chicano* women and through them, culture gives *Chicano* women mixed messages. Esperanza's mother stands for the one who has kept the traditional values of the ancestral culture and has passed on the gender roles to the members of the family: For Esperanza, the mother is also a pivotal figure and a source of support and influence. There is one vignette dedicated exclusively to her mother, "A Smart Cookie", in which we get to know about her love for music and her dreams to be different. She encourages Esperanza to study hard so as to make her dreams come true not as she did. At the same time, the mother figure is contradictory because it also stands for the woman Esperanza does not want to become. Esperanza wishes to have a room of her own to be socially and economically independent; independent so as to be free to create. Esperanza dreams about living

alone where she does not have to act as she is expected by her mother and the community of the *barrio*:

There'd be no nosy neighbors watching, no motorcycles and cars, no sheets and towels and laundry... You could close your eyes and you wouldn't have to worry what people said because you like to dream and dream. And no one could yell at you if they saw you out in the dark leaning against a car, leaning against somebody without someone thinking you are bad, without somebody saying it was wrong, without the whole world waiting for you to make a mistake when all you wanted, all you wanted Sally, was to love and to love and to love, and no one could call that crazy (83).

Closely related to the second social dynamic of gender stated by Madan Sarup is the issue of religion. Ana Castillo argues that when discussing the issue of identity of the *mestiza*/Mexican Amerindian woman⁴, gender and sexuality should be included together with the social dilemmas related to class and race. The *Xicana* and her spirituality have been defined by the Indian traditions and the Catholic religion. She believes that to find her true identity the *Xicana* must reclaim her indigenous blood ties as the only way to fully accept herself as an individual (6). As to the Catholic religion, Castillo argues that it has shaped the *chicana*'s identity by forcing her to believe that women "only existed to serve man under the guise of serving a Father God" (13). What is more, her spirituality has been subverted by institutionalized religious customs through the repression of her sexuality. Castillo states that the Catholic religion has imposed a dual model, virgin/ whore, on the *chicana* woman and because of that, the only choices offered are that of being a mother as portrayed by the Virgin of Guadalupe or being a whore in the figure of Malintzin (116). It is only through a process of *concientización* (9) that the *chicana* becomes aware of her interdependency rooted in the Indian, Mexican and American culture and tradition.

In *The Massacre of the Dreamers. Essays in Xicanisma*. Castillo states that

IN MODERN MAN'S SCHEMA WOMAN MUST CHOOSE between one of two polarized roles, that of a mother as portrayed by the Virgin Mary vs. that of whore/traitor as Eve. These two roles were revisited upon Mexicans in the figures of La Virgen de Guadalupe and Malintzín (116).

⁴ In the introduction to *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo states that she has chosen to use the term Mexic Amerindian to assert their indigenous blood and the source of their spirituality. However, she also uses the term *mestiza* interchangeably because it is the term that has been used among Mexican intellectuals. When discussing Mexican culture and traditions she uses *mejicana* for both nationals and women born in the U.S. Finally, she uses the term "Xicanism" to refer to the concept of *Chicana* feminism.

Esperanza identifies herself neither with the virgin of Guadalupe nor with Malintzín. She does not plan to become the perfect wife, submissive to the desires of the man, nor use her body to get the freedom she wishes so much. She is aware of the way other Mexican-American women make themselves slaves of the man to escape from the *barrio* just to be prisoners of another house and they long for the freedom and life they will never have. Like Sally did, but “she did it to escape” (101).

To conclude, living in America fills Esperanza with the need to find a way to construct her identity and she can do it in spite of the difficulties she finds. She begins the story talking about her family house and her identity within the family; at the end having reflected on her relationship with her family and others in the community she is able to define her cultural identity for herself. She comes to terms with the contradictions brought about by being a Mexican-American woman in America. By deciding to become a writer she chooses the fourth choice given by Anzaldúa, that of becoming an independent woman by leaving Chicago.

Esperanza retains “distinct characteristics” from the cultures of origin but at the same time forms “something new.”⁵ This hybrid identity has enabled her to overcome her sense of dislocation and to find her true identity in America. She can accept her hybrid identity by “developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” as Gloria Anzaldúa states in the chapter “La Conciencia de la Mestiza. Towards a New Consciousness” in *Borderland/ La Frontera* (101).

⁵ Here I am making reference to Bhabha’s concept of hybridization when he says that hybridization is the “process whereby two cultures retain their distinct characteristics and yet form something new” (163)

Chapter II

Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel. by Edwidge Danticat

“My greatest hope is that mine becomes one voice in a giant chorus that is trying to understand and express artistically what it's like to be a Haitian immigrant in the United States.”
(Danticat)

Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel by Danticat tells the story of Sophie who leaves Haiti to go and live with her mother in Brooklyn. Sophie was born in Haiti and was brought up by her grandmother Ife and her Aunt Attie when her mother Martine left the island to go to the United States to try to forget her traumatic rape by a Macoute. When Martine sends for her, Sophie, twelve years old, leaves Haiti to join her in Brooklyn. Sophie struggles to find a sense of home in Brooklyn, and to take control of her life. She finds it very difficult to feel at home in the United States because she faces two conflicts, her relationship with her mother and a past which she does not totally know, and her adaptation to an alien culture that marginalizes her.

To discuss the way Sophie builds her bicultural identity, I will also refer to the effects of the social dynamic of nation (as expressed by Madan Sarup in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996) and to the role played by memory in the construction of identity as argued by Andre Leroi- Gourhan, Merleu-Ponty and Liliane Weissberg.

The dynamic of nation, as presented by Madan Sarup, is seen in the way that Sophie, the same as Esperanza, feels torn between two cultures; she has to fight against the contradiction that, having been raised as a Haitian girl in La Nouvelle Dame Marie, Martine expects her to behave as a Haitian girl in Brooklyn. She also has to cope with the expectations of the American society and her ability to adapt to the new culture and to adopt the new ways and customs.

Sophie feels discriminated not only because she looks different from the American children but also because she lives in a marginal neighbourhood where there is poverty all around and you might trip over “a man sleeping under a blanket of

newspapers” (43). She also feels discriminated because of the prejudices Americans hold against Haitians when they are accused “of having HBO – Haitian Body Odor” (51) or AIDS “because they had heard on television that only the “Four Hs” got AIDS – Heroin addicts, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals and Haitians” (51).

As Stuart Hall and Madan Sarup argue, language does play an important role in the construction of identity. Sophie feels she has never left Haiti; when she arrives in New York, her mother registers her in the Maranatha Bilingual Institution and all the lessons are in French. She remembers her first words in English as “rocks falling in a stream” (66) and words that looked similar to French but were pronounced differently: “*nationality, alien, race, enemy, date, present*. These words gave me a context for the rest that I did not understand” (66). Even though Martine registers her in a bilingual institution she expects her to speak perfect English because she understands how important it is for Sophie to “learn English quickly” (51); in that way American students would not make fun of her. Despite Sophie’s efforts, she feels lonely and different from the children of her same age; “I was tired of having people detect my accent. I wanted to sound completely American...” (69).

As regards gender and the role Haitian young women were expected to fulfill, Haitian girls experience the same contradictions as the Mexican-Americans. Mothers also function as transmitters of culture and traditions which influence children in their identity construction. As expressed above, I strongly believe that what Anzaldúa argues in relation to the *chicano* woman can also be seen in the experience of other immigrants trying to start a new life in America. It is also the women in the Haitian tradition the ones that pass on cultural traditions and beliefs to younger generations. Martine transmits to Sophie not only the traditions of her birth town but also painful cultural practices as a way to keep her close to her roots. Martine explains to Sophie that those virginity testing practices that she carries out on her are something all mothers are supposed to do because they are responsible for the honour of the family;

When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside (...) The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure. (60-61)

The contradiction lies in the fact that Martine wants to raise Sophie as if they were still living in La Nouvelle Dame Marie and in doing so she does not let her fully integrate in the new country. Sophie is not allowed to have a boyfriend until she is eighteen, a

custom which is out of place in America. On the other hand, Martine wants Sophie to have the same opportunities as any other young girl in America; she wants her to learn the language and to study to become a doctor. Martine's memory of her childhood and the customs of her home town do not let her see that life in America is different and that her daughter needs to be raised in a different way to be able to cope with a new life in an unknown environment.

The role of memory in relation to the construction of identity has been much discussed in the last decades of the century. Remembering and remaking the past help the individual accept the present and build a sense of self. It is through the recollections of the past that he can represent himself and come to terms with his own present: memory as well as identity is constructed socially. Memory plays a significant role in this novel and especially in the way Sophie tries to adapt herself to the new country. Andre Leroi-Gourhan in *La memoire et les rythmes* refers to three types of memory: specific, ethnic and artificial. He defines ethnic memory as a "memory which ensures the reproduction of behaviours in human societies" (qtd in Le Goff 53). One of the cultural practices which is passed on from generation to generation in Haiti is that of virginity testing. In Haiti, virginity is highly praised because the conduct of a young woman can affect the reputation of the whole family. Being "chaste" is associated with social mobility as well, because it is through marriage that freedom of poverty can be achieved. When Martine is raped she has to leave Haiti in the hope of being able to start a new life in New York, since nobody would marry her in her home town after she had been deflowered. Martine cannot forget her rape by a Macoute and flees Haiti for America to escape the memory and place that reminds her of this violation; she cannot face the shame and the trauma of the sexual abuse she suffered. However, her trauma travels with her and has repercussions on the new life she tries to start in New York and on her daughter. Merleu-Ponty expresses that "a person can have trauma which can sometimes lead to a fixation. An incident which occurred in the past can become a true present. There is stagnation of time, a dread, a fear that chokes the subject. The traumatic experience becomes a style of being" (qtd in Sarup 38). This is what happens to Martine; the memory of the rape haunts her in nightmares and she even reaches the point of hurting herself if Sophie does not wake her up. These nightmares, as if they were customs, are also "passed on through generations like heirlooms" (*Breath* 234). Once Sophie gets married she starts having those same nightmares and cannot even tolerate her husband touching her.

Sarup also states that “an important aspect to the construction and negotiation of identity is the past-present relation and its reconciliation” because “it is through recollections of the past that people represent themselves to themselves” (40). Sophie is haunted by memory, the same as her mother, but differently from Martine, she needs to remember to be able to accept herself as a healthy person. Before she can become free she has to accept her Haitian heritage and past and live her life fully as a Haitian-American. When Sophie goes back to La Nouvelle Dame Marie and the taxi driver compliments her on her Creole she says proudly she was born there. She also explains to him that she has come back because she “needs to remember” (95). Sophie’s visit to the cane fields helps her confront her mother’s past and understand the way tradition works in the acceptance of painful events. She feels better when she revisits the scene of her mother’s rape and acknowledges that she has been liberated from the burden she has carried for so long; “I could not explain to him [Joseph] that it was like breaking manacles, an act of freedom” (130). Remembering and being able to come to terms with her past will take Sophie a long time; “It took me twelve years to piece together my mother’s entire story. By then, it was already too late” (61).

Liliane Weissberg in the introduction to *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity* (Ben-Amos and Weissberg: 1999) states that “Memory” is “needed not simply to understand the past”; it has “to relate to who one” is “in the present” (10). After the first virginity test, Sophie understands that “*There are secrets you cannot keep*” (85) and she will fight to reveal those secrets and give her daughter Brigitte Ife a better and healthier life. When she goes back to Haiti to bury her mother, she realizes that the testing was painful for Martine too and that doing what she had to do as a Haitian woman “My mother was as brave as stars at dawn” (234). It is only by the end of the novel when she confronts her mother’s memories that she can let go of the past and start a new life.

Closely connected to the figure of the mother is the function story telling has in the building of Sophie’s bicultural identity. It is through storytelling that Sophie is aware of the traditions of her home town and that will determine her acceptance or rejection of the culture of origin. Whenever Sophie is tested by her mother, Martine would tell her the story of the *Marassas* to explain to her how important the bond between mothers and daughters is;

The *Marassas* were two inseparable lovers. They were the same person duplicated in two. They looked the same, walked the same. When they

laughed, they even laughed the same and when they cried, their tears were identical. When one went to the stream, the other rushed under the water to get a better look (...). The love between a mother and a daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for a man who you didn't know the year before. You and I we could be like *Marassas*. (85)

The suffering and trauma inflicted by the testing is seen in the tale Sophie retells when she decides to break her hymen to stop the traditional practice. She tells the story of a woman who could not stop bleeding for twelve long years so she decided to see Erzulie who explained to her that if she wanted to stop bleeding she had to give up the right to be a woman and she had to choose what she wanted to become. After thinking about the animals she knew, she decided to become a butterfly which meant to be free. By breaking her hymen Sophie frees herself from traditional practices but she is still enslaved by the traumatic remembrances of her mother's rape and testings, thus, not being able to accept her own body as a woman. Sophie's bulimia can be seen as the outward expression of hurting cultural practices concealed in her body as well. Tante Atie would also teach her to put up with suffering when she tells her the story of "a group of people in Guinea who carry the sky on their heads" (25) because God considers them strong enough to put up with suffering. All Sophie's life is marked by the stories she is told by her Tante Atie, her mother and her grandmother Ife. Grandma Ife explains the paradox that some customs may cause anguish to women but they also give them strength to survive when she explains to Sophie, after Martine has been buried, that "There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will always hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale she will ask you this question: 'Ou libéré?' Are you free my daughter?" (234). Storytelling serves as the basis of cultural practices which keep in force her ancestral culture.

Religion is also a key issue in Sophie's coming to term with her identity. The official religion in Haiti is Catholicism and this sets models women have to follow to be considered good women. Sex within marriage is good, contrary to extramarital sex; unrespectable sex is associated to prostitution or adultery. The virginity testing has to do with keeping girls chaste until they get married. It is not only a religious issue but it is related to the respect of the family since marriage is considered to consolidate women's class position. In the same way *Chicano* women are expected to fulfill a role in the Mexican-American society, Sophie, as a Haitian-American woman also struggles to liberate herself from the Haitian tradition of the ten fingers which Tante Atie tells her about;

According to Tante Atie, each finger had a purpose. It was the way she had been taught to prepare herself to become a woman. Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing. (...) Sometimes she even wished she had six fingers on each hand so she could have two left for herself. (151)

She challenges the traditional women's roles and leaves her husband with her daughter without any explanation.

To conclude, being able to break away from those cultural practices and accept the present reality is what frees the individual to reread his past in relation to his present: Sophie, in a way, re-appropriates her past so as to transform her understanding of herself. By the end of the novel she has come to understand her mother's trauma and to break away with the hurting tradition. She has learnt to accept her past and live with her memories in the present; now, she is free to start afresh for herself and her daughter.

It is also through coming to terms with her present reality and through liberating herself from hurtful cultural practices that she can accept her new hybrid identity. Sophie learns to adapt herself to the new culture without forgetting her Haitian roots; furthermore, she is able to establish a dialogue between the two cultures and countries that make her a Haitian-American woman. Her experience empowers her to become independent and to accept that she comes from a place "where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head" (234).

Chapter III

***The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston.**

I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so large that there is room for paradoxes. (*The Woman Warrior*)

The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts tells the story of five women, No-name Aunt, Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid and Maxine. Maxine, the narrator, was born in the United States and lives in Oakland, California in the 1950's. By telling the stories of other women in the family she interweaves her own story of adaptation and search of identity. Maxine finds it difficult to define her identity in the place and culture where she lives because she feels torn between two cultures, the Chinese culture of her parents and the culture of the place where she has been born and where she lives. In order to analyze the way Maxine comes to accept her hybrid identity, I will draw on the concepts of the social dynamics presented by Madan Sarup, on Stuart Hall's and Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of identity in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" and in *Borderland /La Frontera* respectively.

Sarup first refers to the concept of nation in relation to that of identity when he says that any study of identity has to be placed in time and space because our identities are constructed, to some extent, by social structures which sometimes act as constraints that determine the way in which we act or think (40). Very much linked to this is the difference Stuart Hall suggests in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" when he talks about cultural identity in terms of "being" and "becoming" (225). The same as Sarup he emphasizes identity as a process of construction, of becoming. It is in Chinatown that Maxine has to construe her identity in terms of a shared culture and history. Her cultural identity has to do with being "Chinese" and the traditions passed on her by what her parents tell her about China. But at the same time, Maxine's cultural identity has to do with becoming since she will construct her identity by taking elements from both cultures. She experiences the contradiction of wanting to go back to China to look for

her roots but at the same time she is afraid of going there “where the ghosts took shapes nothing like our own” (93). For her parents “home” means China while for her she is still trying to figure out what home is. For Maxine, Chinatown is inhabited by ghosts that do not let her distinguish the real world from the imaginary one. Whenever she describes America she refers to the ghosts that inhabit it; whatever is strange compared to what she has learned at home becomes a ghost, and because of this, she has to decide which ghosts to embrace and which ones to exorcise and the only way of doing this is by leaving the neighbourhood. By re-discovering her identity, Maxine can accept not only her own history but also what she can become because she has established a dialogue between the two cultures and has been transformed in the process.

The second social dynamic as suggested by Sarup is the link between language and identity construction. The same as Stuart Hall and Gloria Anzaldúa, he believes that the language we speak plays a significant role in the construction of identity. Maxine, similarly to Esperanza and Sophie, experiences the contradiction of having to handle two different tongues: Chinese at home and at the Chinese school in the afternoon, and English at the American school and with the rest of her classmates. She questions her mother because she did not teach her English, “‘Why didn’t you teach me English?’ ‘You like having me beaten at school, don’t you?’” (48). Furthermore, she is aware of the tradition of silence which has been imposed not just by the dominant English speaking culture but by her family as well. She remembers the first time she went to Kindergarten and had to speak English and how she became voiceless. She did not speak for the first three years at school and speaking meant pain for her and she became silent; but then, silence was misery and she understood that “the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (150). At the Chinese school in the afternoon, she could see the difference between the American and the Chinese way of speaking since girls there were not mute but yelled during recess. In the end, Maxine realizes that she has to invent “an American-feminine speaking personality” (155) to be able to fit into the American society. Chinese women walk with their backs bent and have strong and bossy voices, on the other hand, American women are supposed to walk erect and speak in an inaudible voice; “We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine (...) Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering. We invented an American feminine speaking personality...” (155). Learning the language and switching linguistic codes gives eventually a voice to Maxine. The same

as Esperanza and Sophie, she acquires a voice when she can relate to others in English and when she becomes confident in using the language.

The second social dynamic that Madan Sarup discusses is that of gender. Gender and the roles assigned by different cultures are conditioned by space as well. As Stuart Hall argues identity has to be considered in context, from a particular time and space. It is also at the borders mentioned by Anzaldúa that the Chinese and American culture edge one another. Space limits Maxine's behaviour to already defined roles and to a position of a woman with a hyphenated nationality who does not fit completely in either culture; traditions are kept by the members of the community and in particular by her family which provide her with a sense of protection but at the same time act as a prison. It is in Chinatown where Maxine finds the security and solidarity to survive the racial and economic oppression of the new country, but it is also Chinatown the place she needs to leave in order to come to terms with her hybrid identity. At home and in Chinatown she is expected to behave like a Chinese woman. Her parents want to raise her as Chinese but society in America expects her to behave like an American. Maxine is aware of the fact that in the Chinese culture women are considered inferior to men since they are born: "There is a Chinese word for the female *I* - which is 'slave' (49) and she rebels against the models imposed on her; "Even now, unless I'm happy, I burn the food when I cook. I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot. I eat at other people's tables but won't invite them to mine, where the dishes are rotting" (49). Consequently, Maxine feels the inadequacy of traditional Chinese attitudes and values to the reality of contemporary American life. She feels she has to juggle between two cultures because on the one hand, she wants to be free but at the same time, she yearns for the protection of a man or husband:

No husband of mine will say, I could have been a drummer, but I had to think about the wife and the kids. You know how it is.? Nobody supports me at the expense of its own adventure. Then I get bitter: no one supports me; I am not loved enough to be supported. That I am not a burden has to compensate for the sad envy when I look at women loved enough to be supported. Even now *China wraps double binds around my feet.* (49) (my emphasis)

Like in the Mexican and Caribbean culture women are the ones who pass on traditions and gender roles to younger generations. The Chinese traditional values and beliefs are present in the nurturing figure of her mother, the No-name Aunt and Fa Mu Lan. Brave Orchid, Maxine's mother, is the family keeper of the Chinese traditions. The same as with Esperanza and with Sophie, the figure of the mother for Maxine is

very important; although she admires her and it is through her storytelling that she gets to know about the No-name Aunt and Fa Mu Lan, *Brave Orchid* is a reminder of the low position women hold in the Chinese culture. Maxine struggles to understand her family's expectations for Chinese-American daughters in the process of defining her own hybrid identity as a Chinese-American:

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? (13)

The No-name Aunt, who killed herself because she was denied by her own family, is also a strong influence on Maxine's struggle to define herself. Nobody is supposed to talk about the No-name Aunt as if she had not even existed when in fact "women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil" (14). Maxine looks up to her aunt because she "used a secret voice, a separate attentiveness"; she never gave away the man's name and she "crossed boundaries not delineated in space" (15). According to Maxine, she was punished for acting as if she could have a private life separate from the community. Through the acknowledgement of her No-name Aunt she reconstructs a woman who fights against customs and as a result gives birth to her own voice and identity.

Fa Mu Lan, the third role model mentioned, was a girl who took her father's place in battle. When Maxine was a child her mother would tell her stories about the woman warrior. Maxine remembers the contradictory message of her mother who brought her up to be "a wife and a slave" but who also taught her "the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan" (26). The Chinese swordswoman provides Maxine with a Chinese woman role model who is strong and brave and who is able to fight against submissiveness and discrimination as a Chinese-American woman. Sarup also argues that the past needs to be reconciled with the present as another step to the construction and negotiation of identity. (40) Mythology lies in the past and in the present of most Chinese and it is through rewriting the myths of Fa Mu Lan that Maxine can renegotiate her hybrid identity. She learns that she "would have to grow up to be a warrior woman" (26) and she does so by fighting against prejudices and imposed gender roles and by becoming a writer. It is in the acceptance of all the women that influence her that Maxine can ultimately break free and build her identity, with the strength of her No-name Aunt, the courage of the woman warrior, and the traditions passed on her by her mother

Very much related to the female models is the role of storytelling in Maxine's struggle to understand who she is. As Stuart Hall suggests in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), identity "is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (226). Maxine's mother would tell her stories night after night until she fell asleep and she would also listen to the adults telling stories; "We learned that if we failed we grew up to be wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen" (25). However, China is not only present in the realm of memory through the stories told by her mother but also in the neighbours that encourage old sayings and tales that enslave her to a female position from which she wants to free herself:

I did not plan ever to have a husband. I would show my mother and father and the nosey emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency... There is a Chinese word for the female *I*- which is slave. Break the women with their own tongues. (49)

In the end, Maxine can figure out "a way to fly" (90) between two continents, between two cultures. She has "learned to make her mind large as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (34). Her acceptance of this hybrid identity has enabled her to overcome her sense of displacement and to find her true identity in America.

Chapter IV

A comparative analysis of the construction of identity: Esperanza, Sophie and Maxine.

Esperanza, Sophie and Maxine eventually come to affirm their own hybrid identities. Factors such as nation, language, gender, and religion play a very important role in the definitions of who they are and where they stand in relation to their hyphenated nationalities. The three protagonists find it hard to live between different cultures and beliefs. Esperanza and Maxine are American born children who find it difficult to integrate both nationalities. Differently from them, Sophie has been born in Haiti but has to relocate in America. However, the three of them experience the same duality when trying to make sense of their hybrid identities; they have to fight against cultural traditions, customs and beliefs of their countries of origin that do not let them fully integrate in the new country. Eventually, they manage to establish a dialogue between the two cultures by looking back into their roots and finding a voice in writing, Esperanza and Maxine, and in storytelling, Sophie. The three female characters come to accept who they are by recovering the past and by reconciling it with the present. It is by becoming independent of criteria imposed by others that they can free themselves and overcome their feelings of fragmentation, contradiction, and ambiguity.

In the case of Esperanza and Maxine, space plays a key concept in their construction of identity. It is the spaces they inhabit that contain them but, at the same time, limit the way in which they can act. Esperanza needs to leave the *barrio* to become a writer and to find the freedom she cannot find there. She needs to liberate herself from the constraints of the Catholic religion and the cultural traditions passed on by the *latino* community in which she lives. The same happens to Maxine who has to leave Chinatown “in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing” (182). However, it is important to bear in mind that even though she leaves her parents’ home, she still lives among Chinese and Japanese but not among emigrants from her own village. She refuses “to shy her way anymore through our Chinatown, which tasks me with the old sayings and the stories” (53). Both, Esperanza and Maxine leave their neighbourhoods to be able to come back for those who cannot leave.

As regards Sophie, space is not as important as the role memory plays for her. Leaving New York has to do with being able to face the past, a past that haunts her, a past that belongs to Haiti. She leaves Brooklyn to go back to Haiti to seek solace and self-knowledge, to the place where her mother has been raped, in order to face the memories that do not let Martine come to terms with her present. She is limited not by the space she inhabits but by the dreams that haunt her and by the nightmares her mother suffers. Leaving Brooklyn to go back to Haiti to confront the past helps her to understand her present and accept her new home.

Although space plays a different role for Maxine and Sophie, both characters share the tradition of storytelling from their cultures of origins. Both have been marked by the stories their mothers, aunts or relatives have told them. Traditions and gender roles are passed from generation to generation through the stories they are told. It is through telling stories that Maxine can see a way out to her limitations. Re-writing the old legends and myths empowers Maxine and gives her strength to change what she does not like about her ancestral culture and to accept what cannot be changed. She learns to live with the contradictions of being both Chinese and American at the same time. Differently from Maxine, Sophie cannot see the way out in storytelling because these stories are used to keep on with practices that harm her physically and psychologically. It is only by the end of the novel that she can make sense of what those practices and tales mean for Haitian women and she decides not to pass those practices on her daughter but she knows she will tell her stories. Eventually, Sophie finds freedom in listening to stories, stories that she will pass on her daughter.

In the same way that Maxine profits out of the stories she has been told to start a new life as a writer, Esperanza leaves the *barrio* to become a writer and in that way to make sense of her hybrid identity. Closely connected to the idea of becoming a writer is Maxine's and Esperanza's wish to have a room of their own to be socially and economically independent; independent to be free to create. Maxine wishes to have a room of her own where she can liberate herself from the traditions that bind her to China and do not let her re-create her identity: "Not many women got to live out the daydream of women- to have a room, even a section of a room, that only gets messed up when she messes it up herself" (61). Likewise, Esperanza longs for the privacy of a house where she can free herself from the cultural ties of heritage and duty imposed by the Mexican community; "Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (108). Both protagonists find the freedom they are looking

for in writing since writing not only empowers them but it also helps them find a new voice for themselves and a voice for the voiceless women of their communities.

Esperanza and Maxine find themselves in their hybrid identities by the end of the novels. Esperanza begins the story talking about her family house and her identity within the family; at the end having reflected on her relationship with her family and others in the community, she is able to define her cultural identity for herself. She comes to terms with the contradictions brought about by being a Mexican-American woman in Chicago and she learns to develop “a tolerance for ambiguities” (Anzaldúa 101). In the case of Maxine, it is also by leaving Chinatown and her house that she can then live without ghosts. Esperanza, as well as Maxine, has retained “distinct characteristics” from the cultures of origin but at the same time have formed “something new” (Bhabha 163). This hybrid identity has enabled them to overcome their sense of dislocation and to find their true identities in America.

As Garcia Canclini states this process of hybridization does not mean easy integration and blending of cultures because there are features that do not lend themselves to hybridization. It is only after a long struggle within themselves and the world that surrounds them that the three protagonists of the novels under study can accept their hybridity without forgetting what cannot be blended. The three female characters resist social subjugation or exclusion and patriarchal systems which include religious myths of female purity and religious mores, and they liberate themselves from gender based norms. Their new found freedom is seen in the fact that they need to come back to the places they left to face the present stronger.

SECOND SECTION

**THE BLURRED BORDER BETWEEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES,
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS, FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, AND
AUTOFICTION**

We live in a period in which the autobiographical and biographical genre is at its very peak, together with personal narratives and the presence of the author in his fiction; all this seems to confirm that there is an introspective tendency in the current literary production or a trend towards first person narratives. There seems to be a need or urgency to add the story of our lives to the public record and to uncover the meaning of one's life to come to self consciousness. There is also a rapidly expanding literature of contemporary autobiography which has started to invade the field of fiction giving way to autobiographical fiction. This autobiographical fiction is a privileged site for thinking about identity formation and about knowledge that emerges from writing; writing as a practice of self-knowledge. Texts that have been invisible, although they have existed for centuries, are coming to light in the last decades of the XX century, such as journals, memoirs, diaries. All these have opened up a new kind of narrative for racial experiences, sexual identities, and ethnic cultures whose main characteristics are its hybridization and a mixture of genres, of which autofiction is one of the most representative examples of genres.

Critics have very often generalized the concepts of autobiography and fiction when they say that "All novels in a general sense are narratives of the self", "Every novel always has something of autobiography", or "All literature is autobiographical and all autobiography is fiction"; nevertheless, these generalizations do not help to understand this trend toward the narratives of the self but they focus more on determining what is real and what is imaginary.

More than opposing facts against imagination, I have been particularly interested in the way the protagonists of the novels of my corpus come to accept their hybrid identities through the narrativization of their life stories. I am mainly concerned with the process of identity formation through the act of writing.

Jerome Bruner argues that "every time issues of identity are dealt with and any other topic related to it, autobiographical memory, and narrative is needed. The stories we tell about ourselves and about others organize our sense of who we are, who the others are, and how we are expected to relate with others." (Brockmeier 10) So self-narration is the defining act of the human subject which is fundamental to the emergence and reality of that subject. Then, what role do self narration and writing one's story have in the construction of our identity? Paul John Eakin in *How our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999) argues that writing one's life story is part of a

process of identity formation and the act of narrating one's story plays a major part. He also expresses that

When it comes to autobiography, *narrative and identity* are so intimately linked that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other. Thus, narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience; while self - the self of autobiographical discourse - does not necessarily precede its constitution in narrative (100).

In fact, he is emphasizing that narrative is not merely an appropriate form for the expression of identity, it is an identity content. (100)

The protagonists of the novels under analysis tell their life stories in an attempt to construct their selves and to accept their present. To tell their stories they have chosen the genre of the novel as a means to express and to give shape to identity construction. The construction of their hybrid identities is also manifested in the choice of a hybrid genre, a mixture of the genre of the novel, the autobiography, and the autofiction. The three novels of my corpus transform the autofiction to a certain extent by borrowing some elements from the novel and the autobiography, as well as by transforming others from the autofiction. The choice of this hybrid genre can be considered a narrative strategy used to reflect the protagonists' own hybrid identities.

In order to see how this hybridization of the genre works, it is necessary to define and to delimit what is understood by memoir (as a subgenre of the autobiography), life stories, testimony, autobiography, and autofiction. My concern in establishing the differences between the different terms is to highlight how the authors of the novels of the corpus adopt a hybrid genre to reflect the characters' construction of their hybrid identities.

Memoirs have been traditionally defined as the story of the self. Some critics state that as a literary genre, a memoir forms a subclass of autobiography which is sometimes used interchangeably. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* defines memoir as "history or record composed from personal observation and experience." It also states the difference between autobiography and memoir when it says that a "memoir usually differs chiefly in the degree of emphasis placed on external events; whereas writers of autobiography are concerned primarily with themselves as subject matter, writers of memoir are usually persons who have played roles in, or have been close observers of,

historical events and whose main purpose is to describe or interpret the events.”⁶ José María Pozuelo Ivancos in *De La Autobiografía. Teorías y Estilos* (2006) expresses that memoirs do not tell about oneself, not even about oneself and the others, but about oneself in the others” (27).

As to “life story”, Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet in “Textualisation of the self and gender identity in the life-story” (Cosslett 61) defines it as “the product of a ritualized speech act, which results from the conjunction, in the 1970’s, of a genre, autobiography, with a new medium, the tape recorder, within the institutional framework of social sciences” (61-62). She argues that autobiography and life story are two neighbouring genres which come from the discourse of autobiography. However, she distinguishes one from the other in terms of their specific situations of production:

Autobiography is determined by the constraints of written communication, which is always deferred, and by particular literary conventions. As for the life-story, it is determined by an oral situation of communication, specified by an interview recorded on tape and by the embedding of the speech act in an institutional framework: the social sciences. (62)

She further explains that the presence of a tape recorder opens up the interaction to a wider audience, so the emphasis is on the social self, whereas autobiography stresses the inner self. Chanfrault-Duchet also argues that the main process in the life-story is the narrativization of the life experience and this takes the form of a life course because facts and events which are selected are organized within a path and marked out by rites of passage like birth, school, first love, first job, etc. (65) In this work I will use the term “life story” as a synonym of the narrativization of the self regardless of the oral quality Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet gives it.

Testimony is also a term commonly associated with autobiographical practices, and like memoirs, life-stories and confessional writing, is not easily differentiated from autobiography. Nevertheless, the main difference is that the term testimony has a legal and religious connotation that may not necessarily be present in the other terms; from the legal point of view “it connects first-person narration with truth telling” (Cosslett 9) and as from the religious point of view, “testifiers bear witness to their confessions or beliefs” (Cosslett 9).

The word “autobiography” was first used by Larousse in 1866 as “Life of an individual written by himself” (qtd in Lejeune 129) and he would oppose the

⁶ “**memoir.**” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 08 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/374349/memoir>>.

autobiography as a species of confession to the memoirs as “the telling of facts by a narrator which could be different from the narrator’s life” (qtd in Lejeune 129).

Thus, from the previous definitions, it can be easily inferred that the boundaries between the different types of first person narratives are not easy to establish; however, they all point to self narrations and the story of the self. To be able to understand the choice of a hybrid genre on the part of the authors under analysis it is necessary then to depart from what is understood by autobiography and autofiction to see how these texts move away from or get closer to these two genres to create a new alternative when writing the story of the self. It is also important to bear in mind the relationship between fiction and truth which is blurred at different points as well when we discuss the different concepts of autobiography and autofiction.

Philippe Lejeune and the autobiography

To be able to discuss the hybridization of the genre of the autobiography and the novel it is needed first to define what we understand by autobiography. For this, I will take as a starting point Lejeune’s studies on autobiography.

How can we distinguish between an autobiography and an autobiographical novel? Philippe Lejeune’s studies on the history of autobiography, which are the first to be published in this field in France in 1973, attempt at establishing the difference between one and the other. It is imperative to take into account that at that time, autobiography was not considered a genre by many critics, among them by Paul De Man⁷ and Avrom Fleishman. Nonetheless, Lejeune never doubted about the autobiography as a genre and he concentrated mainly on the problems of defining it and of constituting a corpus of texts.

What is then an autobiography? Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography in a well-known essay “The Autobiographical Pact” (1973) as “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is on his individual life and in particular, on the history of his personality” (50). This definition somehow delimits the scope of autobiography since it makes reference to elements belonging to four different categories:

⁷ In “Autobiography as De-Facement”, Paul de Man states that “Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighbouring or even incompatible genres, and perhaps most revealing of all, generic discussions, which can have such powerful heuristic value in the case of tragedy or of the novel, remain distressingly sterile when the autobiography is a stake” (920).

1. The language form:
 - a) narrative
 - b) written in prose
2. The theme: the personal life of somebody.
3. The situation of the author: the identity of the author points to a real person and to the narrator.
4. The narrator's position:
 - a. The identity of the narrator and the main character
 - b. It should be written retrospectively.

He adds that some of these elements are not present or partially fulfilled in other neighbouring genres such as memoirs, biographies, personal novels, autobiographical poems, diaries and self-portraits or essays. However, there are two elements that need to be found in the texts to be considered autobiographies. Points 3 and 4 are the main characteristics that differentiate the autobiography from the novel, because to have an autobiography the identity of the *author*, of the *narrator* and of the *main character* should be the same.

It is important to bear in mind that Lejeune dissociates the grammatical person⁸ from the identity of the narrator; thus, he will classify the autobiographies according to the type of grammatical person they use in the narrative, first, second and third person. I am mainly concerned with what he states as regards first person narrative since the novels under study all have first person narrators.

Lejeune states that the identity of the narrator and the character is indicated, in most cases, by the use of the first person singular (51-52). The name of the author should be identical to the name of the character who narrates the events in the first person⁹. Nevertheless, it may happen that the character's name is not mentioned in the text but we can assume it is the author because of paratextual references, such as the name of the author on the cover of the book or on the title page. Thus, the author is defined as a real person sociably responsible and as a discourse producer (Lejeune 61).

Lejeune also expresses that in those cases in which there is a fictional name for the narrator, even if the story told by him has similarities with the life of the author, it is

⁸ By "grammatical person" Lejeune means the person used in a privileged way throughout the narrative. (*El Pacto Autobiográfico y Otros Estudios* 55)

⁹ Gérard Genette refers to this type of association between narrator and character ($A = C$) as homodiegetic narrative; whereas, he calls heterodiegetic the dissociation between author and character ($A \neq C$). (*Fiction and Diction* 69-70)

evident that the produced text is not an autobiography; it is firstly just an assumed identity and only secondly, a similarity as regards the enunciation. He states that these texts belong to what is known as autobiographical fiction by defining it as “a fictional text in which the reader might be right to suspect, considering the similarities that he believes to see, that there is a shared identity between the author and the *character*, in spite of the fact that the author has preferred to deny that identity, or at least, not to affirm it” (63). Therefore, if we bear in mind this definition, all personal narratives (those in which the narrator and character have the same identity) as well as impersonal narratives (those in which characters are designated in the third person) should be considered autobiographical novels according to Lejeune.

Therefore, the great importance he gives to the identical identity of the author, the narrator, and the character of the text. Lejeune states that this identity can be established in two ways: implicitly or explicitly. Implicitly by the use of titles that undoubtedly lead the reader to associate the first person narrator with the name of the author (for example with titles such as *The Story of my Life, Autobiography*) or when the narrator assumes the compromise to behave as if he were the author at the beginning of the section; in that way, the reader does not doubt that the first person “I” refers to the name that appears on the title page, even when the name is not repeated later in the text. On the other hand, the identity can also be established explicitly when the name of the character-narrator coincides with the name of the author on the title page. Regardless the way in which it is done, the identity needs to be established at the beginning of the text because this will hint to either an autobiographical or a novelistic pact. These two types of pacts defined by Lejeune are very important for the understanding of the hybridization of the genre that we can observe in the corpus of this study, since there is ambiguity as to the type of pact established by the authors at the beginning of the texts and the way they oscillate from one to the other during the narrative.

Lejeune refers to the autobiographical pact as a pact which implies that the author, the narrator, and the character have the same identity and that the author of the autobiography promises explicitly to tell the truth or his truth and the reader to accept the veracity of the telling (65). The autobiographical pact suggests a double compromise: The *principle of identity* in which the author, the narrator, and the protagonist have the same identity and a *pact of referentiality*, which takes place in an external referentiality, by which what the text tells is believed to be true.

In the same way that Lejeune talks about the autobiographical pact, he also describes the *novelistic pact* to which he attributes two characteristics: the *explicit no identity* (the author and the character do not have the same name) and the *attestation of the fiction* (nowadays the subtitle of novel works like this) (66).¹⁰ Taking all these into account, Lejeune draws a chart following two main criteria: the relationship between the name of the character and the name of the author on the one hand, and the nature of the pact established by the author, on the other hand. For each of these criteria there are three possible situations: the character 1) has a different name from the author, 2) does not have a name, 3) has the same name as the author; in these cases, the pact is respectively 1) novelistic, 2) there is no pact, 3) autobiographical. By articulating these two criteria we get nine theoretical combinations, from which only seven are possible since it is impossible to have a character and author who have the same identity and a novelistic pact, or a different name between character and author and an autobiographical pact (67).

Pact	Character's name		Author's name	
	≠	=	≠	=
Novelistic	1a Novel	2a Novel		
= 0	1b Novel	2b Indeterminat	3b Autobiograp	
Autobiograp		2c Autobiograp	3c Autobiograp	

As a result, for Lejeune autobiographies are 2c, 3b, and 3c, whereas, 1a, 2a and 1b should be read as novels, and as regards 2b it is our decision how we read them. For him, the chart evidences the essential; what defines the autobiography for the reader is a contract of identity sealed by a proper name” (72).

¹⁰ Gérard Genette argues that a rigorous identification (A = N) defines autobiography; conversely, their dissociation (A ≠ N) defines fiction. (*Fiction and Diction* 70) Thus, Genette is also making reference to the type of reading pact established. In the first case, the author assumes full responsibility for the assertions of his narrative and grants no autonomy to the narrator; in the second case, the narrative veracity is not assumed by the author since at no point does he promise to tell the truth.

In 1982, Philippe Lejeune publishes “The Autobiographical Pact (bis)” in which he expands the chart he had presented at the time of the first publication. In that article he develops the idea of the identity of the author, narrator and protagonist when he expresses that “the name of the character can be the same as the author and different from the author at the same time: same initials, different names; same names but different surnames even if it is only a letter” (135). He also expresses that a book can be presented as a novel in the subtitle and as an autobiography in the back cover (135). Consequently, he acknowledges that the classification he proposed in “The Autobiographical Pact” (1973) is not totally complete since there should have had sixteen divisions and not nine as he suggested at that time. However, he does not give it too much importance because he believes that so many classifications would be confusing, but he acknowledges Serge Doubrovsky’s attempt at filling in the empty spaces left in the chart by combining the novelistic pact and the use of his own name in his novel *Fils* (1977), which he believes is a form of “autofiction”.

Paul De Man deconstructs the autobiographical “I” in the essay he writes about autobiography “Autobiography and De-Facement” in 1979 when he reacts against the attempts at establishing a difference between autobiography and fiction. He suggests that faced with a referentiality that is supposed to be the life of the author, which is narrated in the text, it would be better to say that it is the text the one that produces the life:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all aspects by the resources of this medium? (920)

Thus, what De Man is doing is not only affirming the fictionality of the autobiography but also challenging the opposition between autobiography and fiction since he expresses “it is not an either/ or polarity but is undecidable” (921.)

In “Autobiography, Novel and Name” (1984) Lejeune goes further in trying to establish the differences between the autobiography and the autobiographical novel. He sets to answer the question of the role proper names, in particular the name of the author, play in the reader’s perception of the genre to which the text belongs and consequently, the choice he makes regarding how to read it. In trying to give an answer to the question posed, he expresses that the “reading pact” of a book does not depend

only on the indications given on the book but also on information divulged in a parallel form with the publication of the book: interviews to the author and publicity” (153). The absence of the subtitle “novel,” together with other details (the name of the collection, the title itself, the text on the back part of the book, the preface, and the use of proper names) signals the autobiographical compromise of the author (155).

Doubrovsky and autobiography/ autofiction

From Lejeune’s discussion on autobiography other authors say they are filling in the empty spaces left by him and several classifications arise from the definition of autobiography; among those, the concept of autofiction argued by Doubrovsky. His concept of autofiction is particularly relevant for this present study because the texts of my corpus play with the vague borders between autobiographies and novels, and to a certain extent, they get closer to the autofictional genre as defined by Doubrovsky.

Doubrovsky coined the term “autofiction” in 1977 to define his own work, *Fils*, which combines characteristics of fiction and autobiography. In the jacket blurb of his novel *Fils* he defines autofiction as “fiction of events and of facts strictly real” (qtd in Alberca 147). Doubrovsky expresses that “the autofiction is the fiction that as a writer I decided to give to myself, by incorporating into it, in a full sense, the experience of analysis, not only as regards the theme but also in the production of the text” (qtd in Robin 44). Doubrovsky also states that autofiction is above all fiction, thus, the narrated subject is a fictional subject. Furthermore, he defines autofiction in his essay “Les humbles, qui n’ont pas droit à l’histoire, ont droit au roman” as

False fiction which is the story of a true life; by the motion of its writing the text is instantly expelled from the patented register of the real. Thus, neither autobiography nor novel in the strict sense, it operates in a no-man’s land, in a ceaseless cross-reference, in a space which is impossible and elusive everywhere but in the operation of the text itself. (qtd by Thomas Spear in “Celine and ‘autofictional’ first person narration” 357)

So how real is the account we make of our life story? If an autobiographical pact is established at the beginning of the text, how sure can we be that the story told retrospectively is true or is just what is remembered? Doubrovsky, in an interview with Roger Celestine on March 5, 1997 in Paris, emphasizes the role memory plays in the narrativization of life stories.

Memory itself is fictive, is fictitious; memory itself may harbor *screened memories*. We have learnt that sincerity, which was the old regulating principle of autobiography, is not enough. The meaning of one's life in certain ways escapes us, so we have to reinvent it in our writing, and that is what I personally call *autofiction*. (Sites, 400)

It is difficult to attest to the truth of the narrative when many of the events which are told rely on the narrator's memory as well as on the narrator's selection of what to tell. Doubrovsky then suggests a new genre which is a combination of autobiography and fiction in which he uses the reading pacts proposed by Lejeune in an ambiguous way. He explains that autofiction is a fiction but nevertheless the story of a real life; consequently, autofiction operates in between the two, autobiography and fiction in the sense that it is difficult to draw the line between what is real and what is fictitious.

Autofiction

After Doubrovsky coined the term autofiction, many other critics have attempted to define it in more detail. Jacques Lecarme questions Doubrovsky's affirmation that his novel *Fils* is an example of autofiction and consequently a new genre, since this last one, according to Lecarme, has already been explored along the twentieth century. However, Lecarme agrees with Doubrovsky that autofictions are fictitious stories, not as serious as the autobiographies, in which there is dissociation between author and narrator. In short, he defines autofiction as "a very simple dispositive; be it a story, whose author, narrator and protagonist share the same nominal identity and whose generic classification indicates that it is a novel" (qtd in Alberca 151). However, we should be careful not to classify a text as autofiction taking only those elements into consideration, since the generic classification of the text as "novel" may be the result of the editorial's interests or marketing objectives.

Vincent Colonna gives, according to Alberca, a more intuitive definition of autofiction when he expresses that autofiction is the "most elementary and most spontaneous mechanism to produce fictions" (qtd in Alberca 128), and when he states that "autofiction is a literary work by means of which a writer invents a personality and an existence of his own, keeping his real identity (his real name)" (qtd in Alberca 151-152). Colonna distinguishes three main functions of autofiction: a referential biographical function, in which the imaginary is reduced to the minimum because there is the intention to tell the truth, close to the proper autobiography; the reflexive-

speculative function of the author in a fictitious story with a parodist humorous aim; and a figurative function which is the one Colonna gives more importance and which fits better in his concept of autofiction. In this last classification, the author, as the center or hero of the story, changes his real existence into an unreal life, indifferent to autobiographical verisimilitude. (Alberca 152). Both, Doubrovsky and Colonna, agree that one of the essential elements of autofiction is the identical nominal identity between author, narrator, and character.

In *Fiction and Diction* (1993), Gérard Genette distinguishes between fictional narratives and factual narratives. In the first case, it is assumed that the narrative content is authentically fictional because there is no shared nominal identity between author and narrator, whereas, in the second case, it is a veiled autobiography because the author and the narrator have the same nominal identity. Genette will call autofiction the fictional narrative and not the factual one (77). Thus, for Genette, autofiction implies a homodiegetic fictional story. What's more, he refers to the ambiguous reading pact proposed by autofiction when he expresses that "I, the author, am going to tell you a story of which I am the hero but which never happened to me" ($A \neq N$, $A = C$, $N = C$) (76-77). Genette finds it very difficult to defend the shared nominal identity of author and narrator in a fictional narrative; however, this is what Alberca takes as one of the main characteristics of autofiction; since it shows at the same time that it dissociates the identity of the author and the narrator.

Marie Darrieusecq tries to define autofiction from the point of view of the novelistic pact. Contrary to Doubrovsky's, Colonna's and Alberca's beliefs, she argues that autofiction subverts the principle of no nominal identification between author and narrator; thus, it is not a variant of the autobiography but a subversive variant of the first person novel (Alberca 154). She also believes that there are no impediments for this practice and this is what makes autofiction become a novel and not an autobiography because the identity of the autobiographical pact becomes fiction.

Manuel Alberca and the narratives of the self

Manuel Albarca agrees with Doubrovsky's discussion of autofiction and goes further to show that between the autobiographical pact and the novelistic pact there is a large repertoire of tales that belong to neither reading pact. In the same way as Doubrovsky, Manuel Alberca affirms that autofiction is the result of a process of hybridization of two pre-existent genres, first person novels and autobiographies. He

defines autofiction in *El Pacto Ambiguo. De la novela autobiográfica a la autoficción* (2007) as “a novel or tale which presents itself as fictitious, whose narrator and protagonist have the same name as the author.” (158). He also states that “autofictions have as foundation the visible or recognizable identical identity of the author, narrator, and character of the tale” (31). Alberca believes that autofiction draws an autobiographical and fictional space where the borders between what is real and what is invented are blurred. One of the most characteristic traces of autofiction is its ambiguity, which can be spontaneous or calculated, since it insinuates in a confusing and contradictory manner that the character and the author are and are not the same person. Alberca argues that in spite of the fact that the author and the character are and are not the same person, there is no formal autobiographical explanation every time that the real is presented with a camouflage of fictionality or with evident fictional elements (33). The text presents itself as real and fictitious at the same time. Thus, autofiction attempts at drawing a space of creation and invention in the interstice of the fictitious and the real, exactly at the point where both oppose and distinguish from each other: “By using authentic autobiographical data together with other invented data, the union of verifiable and unverifiable facts, the meeting of real persons with fictitious characters, the knowledge, the intuition or the suspicion of the reader as regards its veracity is stimulated” (49).

Likewise, Alberca expresses that in autofiction two types of ambiguity arise: the enunciative ambiguity and the ambiguity of the enunciated. It is this ambiguity I propose to analyze in the three novels of my corpus; the blending of factual information with invented facts and vice-versa. Because autofiction represents the breach of the autobiographical evidence when the real enters the field of the fictitious and the other way round, it makes the reader wonder about the established reading pact. When the fictitious gets into the realm of the real, the referential and enunciative instability of autofiction provokes a reading that oscillates between the fictitious and the autobiographical realm. Consequently, the reader is neither in the realm of the declared autobiography nor in the openly fictitious novel (51).

I am especially interested in the classification of the narratives of the self that Alberca makes, since the three novels which are the object of study of this work also use this narrative strategy. Alberca distinguishes three types of first person narratives which are very close to each other but which have a different ambiguous nature: the fictitious autobiography, the autobiographical novel and the autofiction. He classifies

them in a chart considering the nominal identity and the different reading pacts established (92).

The Ambiguous Pact
First person narratives

<i>Autobiographical novel</i> (closer to the autobiography) 1. <i>Identity</i> <i>principle</i> $A \neq N // A \neq C$ Fictitious nominal identity or anonymity: $N = C // N \neq C$ 2. <i>Reading</i> <i>proposal</i> <i>Fiction/ Fact</i> Hidden autobiography (false/ true)	<i>Autofiction</i> (equidistant between both pacts) 1. <i>Identity</i> <i>principle</i> $A = N = C$ Expressed nominal identity 2. <i>Reading</i> <i>proposal</i> <i>Fiction/ Fact</i> Transparent autobiography	<i>Fictitious autobiography</i> (closer to the novel) 1. <i>Identity</i> <i>principle</i> $A \neq N // A \neq C$ Fictitious nominal identity: $N = C // A =$ editor 2. <i>Reading</i> <i>proposal</i> <i>Fiction/ Fact</i> Simulated autobiography
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A= Author, N= Narrator, C= Character, = identical, \neq non identical

Alberca explains that the constitution of the different narratives is the result of the meeting of opposing elements in the same story. In the case of autofiction, the identical identity of the author, narrator/ protagonist is affirmed; whereas, it is suggested or insinuated indirectly or by camouflage in the other first person narratives, and at the same time, a fictional pact is proposed under the appearance of an autobiography or vice versa. The result is a hybrid story of opposing proposals, a mixture of the facts of the autobiography and the fiction of the novel (93).

The fictitious autobiography

For Alberca the fictitious autobiography presents the form of an autobiography under a fictional pact because the first person narrator's name does not coincide with the name printed on the title page, and sometimes these stories are presented under the label of novels. He summarizes how these texts work by explaining that the author attempts to create an imaginary world but makes use of an ambiguous type of discourse because 1) he adopts a first person narrative voice, who at the same time is a character in the story which pretends to be a real story, 2) he tells the life or a life episode, that is,

adopts the autobiographical form and 3) the author can ornament the life or characterization of his character with autobiographical elements of his own, which could be recognized only by those with a previous knowledge of his life. Thus, they are novels whose narrator, who is fictitious, tells retrospectively in the most usual autobiographical form, without giving any clues as regards his biographical intention in spite of its formal similarity to the autobiography (94). However, because of its usual presentation, the unequivocal and explicit authorship on the book cover, the distance between the identity of the author and the narrator/character clearly establish its fictionality. This kind of novels usually has a title which makes reference to the life, autobiography or memoirs and the indication of the narrator's/character's name.

The autobiographical novel

The autobiographical novel implies a knowledge of the author's biography to be able to determine how much autobiographical the story is. The most typical case is that of the novels told by an anonymous first person narrator who is also the protagonist of the novel. The lack of any paratextual references as regards the narrative genre makes it difficult to determine the reading pact proposed (100). Alberca states that when the protagonist of the novel has a proper name different from the author's, this accentuates the proper distance of the novel and it ratifies its fictitious character in spite of the fact that autobiographical elements of the author might be included in the text.

Manuel Alberca also suggests that the autobiographical novel organizes itself to a certain extent around a secret, shameful or not, personal or familiar and around its partial or total unveiling, whose latent presence structures the story and, to a certain extent, the life of its author (110). He defines the autobiographical novel as:

first of all, a novel, that is to say, a story that presents itself with a novelistic pact, according to which, the author can be identified neither with the narrator nor with the protagonist or the characters of the story. Thus, there is formal and pragmatic distance between them, ratified by the dissociation of the name since neither the narrator nor the characters of the autobiographical novel can have the same name as the author. (113)

Alberca further explains that to talk about autobiographical novels, apart from the dissociation between the author and the narrator, it is necessary, either from the writer's intention or the reader's expectations, to perceive the story and its protagonist or the characters as a projection, either ensconced and concealed, of the author's life and personality. However, that does not imply that the text is an autobiography; "The

autobiographical novel is a story which hides first to later show in disguise the relation between the empirical author's true biography and personality and the narrator's or protagonist's biography and personality" (113).

Autofiction

Manuel Alberca takes Serge Doubrovsky's definition of autofiction and explains that the term gives way to two possibilities of interpretation: on the one hand, the term could imply an autobiography *sensu lato* with the form and style of a novel. On the other hand, it could point to a fictional text (first person narrative) in which the author becomes the protagonist of a totally invented story (126). Both interpretations are possible and that results in the ambiguity characteristic of autofiction. Autofiction is not another autobiographical novel, but a fictitious and/or autobiographical proposal which is more transparent and ambiguous than the autobiography. For Alberca "the autofiction novelist is a fabulist of his own life" (128), consequently, autofiction presents itself as a novel, but as a novel that simulates or pretends to be an autobiographical story with so much transparency and clarity that the reader may suspect that it is a pseudo-novel or a pseudo-autobiography (128). Its transparency is the result of a narrator and /or protagonist with the same identity, either implicit or explicit, as the author that precedes the title page.

Alberca attempts to give a definition of autofiction when he states that the term should be limited to those stories that present themselves as clear "novels", that is to say, as fictional texts and that, at the same time, claim textually an autobiographical appearance, this ratified by the same identity of the author, narrator and protagonist. He defines then autofiction as "a novel or story that is presented as fictional, whose narrator and protagonist have the same name as the author" (158).

Among the most important characteristics mentioned by Manuel Alberca we can refer to:

The identical nominal identity between character and author

The nominal identity of the character and author coincides, and it provokes a change in the readers' expectations. Alberca believes that contrary to what autofiction may pretend to tell, an autobiographical story, it may tell a pseudo-biography or an autobiography in the form of a novel. He believes that the autofiction novelist affirms

and contradicts himself at the same time.¹¹ Thus, autofiction may simulate that a novel is an autobiography without being one or may camouflage an autobiographical story under the name of novel. This may confuse the reader as regards the kind of pact established for its reading. The novelistic pact proposed for its reading will be determined by the generic denomination that precedes the text, and the autobiographical pact, by the use of the same proper name of the author by the narrator-character. This nominal identity contributes to increasing the confusion and the readers' expectations. Thus, the most outstanding trait of autofiction is the ambiguous relation established between the two reading pacts, the autobiographical pact and the novelistic pact, without belonging properly to any of the two. The reading of autofiction proposes a reading of the text which alternates between the novel and the autobiography. At times, it might tend to the novel disregarding the nominal identity of the author and the narrator; some other times, it might tend to the autobiography ignoring the title of the novel on the title page.

For Alberca, autofiction is in a symmetric equidistant distance as regards the novel and the autobiography, which makes it even more disconcerting and transgressive than the other first person narratives. It is characteristic of the autofiction to take elements from the two neighbouring types of stories, the autobiographical novel, and the fictitious autobiography.

The same as Lejeune, who argued that there are two ways of corroborating the identity of the author and the narrator, this is either explicitly or implicitly made evident, Alberca believes that autofiction offers the same two possibilities; however, he estates that the same identity of author, narrator and character is the only essential element of autofiction (237-238). Without this reference, the ambiguous meaning of these novels could not be perceived. Nevertheless, Alberca acknowledges that in some cases, it is the evident biographical references of the author that make up for the explicit nomination. That is to say, the author may not have the same name as the protagonist in the story; however, the lack of a proper name can be substituted by a series of personal data which coincide with data of the author. It may also happen that the proper name of the narrator-protagonist were different from the author but the novel has paratextual marks (title page, back page, flap, prologue, publicity interviews, etc.) in which the

¹¹ Gérard Genette says autofiction should be understood as a story in which the author warns the reader that "he, the author, will tell him a story, whose protagonist is him, but the story never happened to him. (*Fiction and Diction* 7)

author admits how much of himself is in the fictional character.¹² For Alberca there are two types of ambiguity; paratextual ambiguity and textual ambiguity. As regards paratextual ambiguity, he states that this ambiguity originates when the autobiographical story is classified as a novel, either on the title page, back page, flap, and prologue, or in publicity interviews. However, very soon the reader discovers that this is only a label and identifies the text with an autobiography; consequently, the ambiguity is ephemeral. As regards textual ambiguity, Alberca expresses that this narrative ambiguity (177-8) is the result of:

- 1- Facts, characters and data which are undoubtedly autobiographical (such as the proper name of the character, of relatives, friends, place, and date of birth, etc) and they can be ratified effectively outside the text.
- 2- Others, which look as if they were invented or real, pseudo-autobiographical or autobiographical but which cannot be clarified by the reader.
- 3- A type of facts or characters undoubtedly fictional and even strongly unreal which when mixed up with or in overlapping with biographically ratified data, the reader cannot assign to the author.

The combination and mixture of these three types of ambiguity become the most important characteristic of autofiction. This narrative choice gives the author freedom to imagine what his life was like or could have been like, fantasize about his life in the future or invent events and incidents that are perceived as impossible of having been lived by the author.

Alberca also agrees with Lejeune that the identical identity should not be confused with likeness or resemblance; that is why he believes that the nominal identity of the author must coincide with that of the character and narrator as a fundamental premise for autofiction. He states that autofiction contravenes the autobiographical norm since it introduces the principle of nominal identity in a tale of fiction (224). The character of the novel may look like the author physically, socially, ideologically but this is not enough to say that that character *is* the author. Likeness may have different degrees but identity may take place or not (224).

The “I” of autofictions corresponds totally neither to the compromised “I” of the autobiographies nor to the disconnected “I” of the novels (205). The “I” of autofiction

¹² Gérard Genette expresses that these paratextual marks protect the reader from any misunderstanding. (*Fiction and Diction* 79). This, in fact, according to Alberca, is the characteristic ambiguity of autofiction, because even though the paratext may point to a fictional text, there are other marks that may lead the reader to consider the story as factual.

knows and simulates its limits and it is aware of, or pretends, that its identity is incomplete and it exploits this ambiguity. Consequently, this ambiguity affects not only the content of the story and its reading but it also affects its enunciator, the “I” in the text. However, Alberca points out that in the case of autobiographical novels, the disguise of the author makes the reader become suspicious; whereas, in the case of autofiction the identity of the author and the narrator is so transparent that the disguise may go unnoticed. In short, as Manuel Alberca states “the autofictional “I” is a real and an unreal “I”, a rejected and wished “I”, an autobiographical and a fictional “I”” (207).

Paratextual references

Autofictions often insert brief prologues or notes before the story giving instructions on how to read the text, or they have comments on the back cover which invite, warn, or admonish the reader on how the book should be read. However, these indications, more than to guide, seem to be oriented to intensify the indefiniteness of the genre” (256).

The reading pact

Autofictions are characterized by a close relation between the two literary pacts, the novelistic and the autobiographical pact, without belonging to any of the two completely.

Taking as a starting point the theoretical frame discussed above, it is my intention to show how the three texts under study propose an ambiguous reading pact which belongs neither to the autobiography nor to the novel. None of the three texts, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, *Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel* by Edwidge Danticat or *The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston could be considered autobiographies or autofictions since their protagonists, despite their similarities with their authors, are never identified in the text by the name of the authors. According to Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, what defines an autobiography for the reader is a contract of identity sealed by a proper name” (Lejeune 72), that is, the author, the character, and the narrator should share the same nominal identity. Thus, none of the texts under analysis could be considered autobiographies since there is no identification between author, character, and narrator. If we consider Manuel Alberca’s definition of autofiction as “a novel or story that is presented as fictional, whose narrator and protagonist have the same name as the author” (158), the novels could not be classified as autofiction either, because Alberca

states that one of the quintessential characteristics of autofiction is the identical nominal identity of the author, character and narrator. However, they could be considered autofictional as from the ambiguous reading pact that they propose taking into account the paratextual references of the texts. It is also in the autofiction that it is evident the hybridity of the two genres, that of the novel and of the autobiography.

My contention is that the three authors choose a hybrid form between autobiography, novel and autofiction to have freedom to write about their own experiences, as Mary Kay Miller says, “to write in the first person without necessarily implicating themselves in the text” (qtd by Thomas Spears in “Autofiction and National Identity” 101) and to universalize their experiences as women with hyphenated nationalities. The three texts mix memories and fabrication, in which real events are mingled with imaginary ones making the reader oscillate between an autobiographical and novelistic reading pact.

Chapter I

Sandra Cisneros and *The House on Mango Street*

Carolyn G. Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988) says that

There are four ways to write a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously and without recognizing or naming the process... (qtd in *Women, Autobiography, Theory. A Reader* 3)

I believe there is a fifth way to write a woman's life which is a combination of the genres of fiction, autobiography and autofiction and this is my contention in this study. *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros is a clear example of a hybridized genre that results from the mixture of elements which are proper to the autobiography, the novel, and the autofiction. The different elements will combine and will produce a reading pact that oscillates between an autobiographical pact and a novelistic pact, where the reader is invited to read it as a fictional story and at the same time, as a true story.

In *The House on Mango Street*, the shared identity of the author and the character is not established explicitly, since the name of the character who is narrating her life is Esperanza Cordero. However, it is not until the fourth vignette entitled "My Name" that the reader gets to know that the first person narrator is called Esperanza. That means that when he starts reading the novel he might assume that the name on the title page which corresponds to the author is the same name of the character-narrator who tells the story. Thus, according to Lejeune and to Alberca, this non-explicit identity between author, narrator, and character would establish an autobiographical reading pact, at least, until the reader comes to the fourth vignette, "My Name." When he gets to know that the narrator-character is Esperanza Cordero, the author, Cisneros goes further away from the narrator-character, but at the same time gets closer to it because, although there is no nominal identification, he can still find similarities between the narrator-character's life and the author's. This suggests an ambiguous reading pact in which the reader oscillates between interpreting the text as fiction or as fact.

From the theoretical discussion of the previous section we know that Lejeune, when speaking about the different reading pacts, also states that the type of reading pact established for a text “does not depend only on the indications given on the book but also on information divulged in a parallel form with the publication of the book: interviews to the author and publicity” (153). Alberca agrees with Lejeune on this, when he expresses that sometimes it is the paratextual marks of the book which hint to an autobiographical pact despite the non-implicit identical nomination of author, character, and narrator. Thus, although there is no identical nominal identity between the author and the character of *The House on Mango Street*, we can still infer that Esperanza Cordero *is* and *is not* Sandra Cisneros taking us back to the ambiguous reading pact proposed by autofiction. That is to say, *The House on Mango Street* is undoubtedly fictional and as such, it enjoys absolute freedom at the same time that it establishes an ambiguous relation between the two reading pacts because of its lack of clear boundaries. The ambiguity arises partly from the fact that the text is presented as a novel since there are no subtitles that point to “autobiography” or to “the story of my life,” that is, the text presents itself as fiction.

By reading the novel by Cisneros the reader can find many personal details from Esperanza’s life that coincide with events from the author’s life. When reading the text one cannot but feel the author’s personality has melted into that of her protagonist telling about the difficulties of being born into two cultures. Sandra Cisneros, the same as Esperanza Cordero, was born in Chicago to a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. On many occasions, she has referred to the duality of her upbringing in the United States as a child with a hyphenated identity. When Sandra Cisneros speaks about her childhood she remembers that she was the only daughter and that her brothers attempted to control her and wanted her to assume a traditional female role. Similarly, Esperanza, the character in the novel, experiences the same duality as Sandra Cisneros in her life. Esperanza has been raised as a Mexican girl and as such, she is presumed to fulfill the gender roles for women in a Mexican family; she is expected to behave as the good daughter who lives first to serve her father and then her mother. Nevertheless, she attends an American school at the same time that she is supposed to behave like other American kids and to speak only English.

We might wonder then, why does Cisneros build a character of herself according to her needs and wishes? One possible answer is that Cisneros uses her protagonist Esperanza to advance her own ideas about the position of Mexican-American women in

the American society as well as in a Mexican-American home. By writing her own life she is giving a voice to women who have been double marginalized in their condition of women and of subjects with hyphenated nationalities, not only in America but also in Mexico.

Sandra Cisneros also encountered the same loneliness that Esperanza lives through her childhood because of the many times her family moved between the United States and Mexico. In an article which appeared in the magazine *Publishers Weekly* she said:

The moving back and forth, the new schools, were very upsetting to me as a child. They caused me to be very introverted and shy. I do not remember making friends easily, and I was terribly self-conscious due to the cruelty of the nuns, who were majestic at making one feel little. Because we moved so much, and always in neighborhoods that appeared like France after World War II--empty lots and burned-out buildings--I retreated inside myself. (Sagel 74)

Similarly in the novel, when Esperanza is asked by the nun to point at her house, she writes:

And then she made me stand up on a box of books and point. That one? She said pointing to a row of ugly three-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into. Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn't my house and started to cry. I always cry when nuns yell at me, even if they are not yelling. (45)

There are other aspects of Cisneros' life which are also revealed in the novel. She attended the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop in the late '70s. It was then during a seminar discussion of archetypal memories in Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* that she realized she felt homeless,

Everyone seemed to have some communal knowledge which I did not have--and then I realized that the metaphor of the house was totally wrong for me. Suddenly I was homeless. There were no attics and cellars and crannies. I had no such house in my memories. As a child I had read of such things in books, and my family had promised such a house, but the best they could do was offer the miserable bungalow I was embarrassed with all my life. (Sagel 75)

Esperanza Cordero also feels homeless every time she is ashamed of pointing at her house: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it" (5). It is also at the Iowa's workshop that Cisneros realized she could write from the difference;

when we were in seminar, and I was so intimidated when we were talking about houses and I realized I didn't have a house like my class-mates. But instead of that causing me to run out of the room and quit graduate school in terror because I was a working-class person with very privileged classmates, it caused me eventually to become angry and to write from that place of difference. (Elliott 2)

From her words we can infer that by writing from that “place of difference” Cisneros is also making a political statement; she is bringing the immigrant story from the margins to the center and in that way, she is trying to make the difference.

The ambiguous reading pact proposed by the text is also reinforced through paratextual references. In an interview carried out to Cisneros by *Mambiance. A Magazine of Art and Literature* when asked how much of *The House on Mango Street* was based on her own life, she said:

The setting is factual. The sense of shame is factual. But many of the characters I gathered from different times and places. When I began the book, it was more of a memoir. But when I finished it, it became fiction because I started adding students from my classroom into it - I was a teacher of high school dropouts - and placing them into the neighborhood from my past. I was mixing up people from different times in my life.

It is this mixture of facts and fiction, typical of autofictional narratives, which makes the reader waver between reading them as autobiographies or as fiction. The author fosters the same ambiguity when in the interview by Robert Birnbaum in 2002, talking about her second novel *Caramelo* and its truthfulness, she expresses:

I actually wanted to admit that characters were based on real people. But I wanted to also say and be truthful that it's based on real people but it isn't autobiography. Many books that you read, they have those disclaimers that say that, "None of the events and none of the people are based on real life and so on..." Well, I don't believe that. I think that as human beings many people touch us, especially people we love the most and we can't help but do character sketches when we go to our art. (3)

The author somehow disclaims the truthfulness of the novel but at the same time admits that it is difficult to separate the real from the fictitious in the fiction she writes:

Interviewer: What would you have others understand about Sandra Cisneros?

Cisneros: A lot of people mistake the persona that I create in poetry and fiction with me. A lot of people claim to know me who don't really know me. They know the work, or they know the persona in the work, and they confuse that with me, the writer. They don't realize that the persona is also a creation and a fabrication, a composite of my friends and myself all pasted together. (Elliott 10)

Wallace Martin in *Recent Theories of Narrative* (1986) expresses that “In some cases, the autobiographer does not set out to describe a self he or she already knows but to discover one that, despite its changes, has been implicit from the beginning, awaiting an act of self- recognition that will draw all the past together in the “I” of the present” (76). Closely connected to the type of discourse chosen is the relation that can be established between narrative and the construction of the self. Sandra Cisneros adopts a first person narrative voice, who, at the same time, is a character in the story which pretends to be a real story. In *Narrative and the Self* (1991) Kerby states that the “self is the product of ‘signifying practices’, especially ‘narrative constructions or stories” (qtd in Eakin 21). Kerby also agrees with Jerome Bruner when he says that self-narration is the defining act of the human subject, an act which is not only descriptive of the self but “*fundamental to the emergence of that subject*” (qtd in Eakin 21). It is through narrating the story of their lives that Esperanza Cordero and Sandra Cisneros define themselves as women with double nationalities. As Madan Sarup states “we construct our identity at the same time we tell our life story. I want to underline the transformative power of telling one’s story” (Sarup 15), it is through writing and telling stories that both Cisneros and Esperanza will be able to define themselves:

The only reason we write—well, the only reason why I write; maybe I shouldn't generalize—is so that I can find out something about myself. Writers have this narcissistic obsession about how we got to be who we are. I have to understand my ancestors—my father, his mother and her mother—to understand who I am. (Elliott 4)

By the end of the novel Esperanza chooses to leave the neighbourhood to become independent and to be a writer. She finds in writing the freedom to re-invent herself as a Mexican-American woman:

I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong [...] I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free. (*The House on Mango Street* 100-110)

She also knows she can write from a place of difference the same as Cisneros:

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here for ever. One day I will go away.

Friends and neighbours will say, what happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out. (110)

In choosing to tell their stories, both Sandra Cisneros and Esperanza Cordero will anchor their narratives to other people to whom they feel close. Nancy K. Miller in her essay “Public statements, private lives: Academic memoirs for the nineties” states that “One of the ways that women writers have coped with the anxiety of making a spectacle of ourselves has been to hook our “I” to another’s. In recent years, no doubt as an effect of feminism, the favourite other has been the mother” (19). Paul John Eakin in *How our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999) highlights the relational dimension in identity’s formation when he states that “all identity is relational”¹³ (43) and he describes a relational model of identity which is “developed collaborately with others, often family members” (57). This is the case of Sandra Cisneros whose mother was called Elvira Cordero Anguiano. Elvira Cordero was a voracious reader and a strong influence for Cisneros. She was dependent on her husband and she ensured her daughter would not suffer from the same disadvantages. When Cisneros was asked in an interview by *Mambiance. A Magazine of Art and Literature* whether she read a lot as a child she said “I read a lot. I was a great reader, because my mom made sure ... [of it] before we started school”. It was also her high school teacher the one who helped her write her poems about the Vietnam War. In the novel it is Aunt Lupe who encourages Esperanza to write and she tells her that writing will keep her free. Esperanza, the protagonist of the novel, has the surname of Cisneros’ mother, Cordero. Sandra Cisneros devotes a complete vignette to talk about Esperanza’s mother as a way to tell the story she does not want to repeat in her life. Although she admires her mother, she knows she wants a different future and by telling her mother’s story she is telling her own, her ambitions in life as well as her fears. In an interview given to the *Southwest Review* when asked about her mother she said:

She's very much the mother that is described in the story "A Smart Cookie"-- a woman who can speak two languages and fix the TV and draw, but doesn't know how to get downtown because she doesn't know which train to take. She's a woman of contradictions. (Satz 171)

In the same interview she added:

¹³ Eakin also suggests that “the definition of autobiography, and its history as well, must be stretched to reflect the kind of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed.” (43-44)

I think my mother is always going to be a voice in my stories. She's very much the persona I use in these stories and in the poems. It's her voice I hear when I sit down and begin a piece. (Satz 172)

It is also Esperanza's mother who will guide her to become a writer when she encourages her to study hard and take care of her own.

Why does Cisneros choose a hybrid genre to tell her life experience? It can be considered a narrative strategy to reflect her hybridity in terms of identity. Writing helps Cisneros come to terms with her hyphenated identity, in the same way that Esperanza, by the end of the novel, decides to leave the barrio to become a writer and to give a voice to the silenced women of her neighbourhood. By telling her life story, even if she does it through her fiction, Sandra Cisneros, eventually comes to terms with what means being a *chicano* woman in America. She interweaves her family history, her Mexican upbringing and the duality inherent in being raised as a Mexican in an American society that expects her to behave as hundred percent American. By adopting a fictitious name, she universalizes the experience of the immigrant in the United States. It is not only Esperanza Cordero that undergoes the duality of living in two cultures but the experience of many first generations born in America who try to fit in the new country.

To conclude, Sandra Cisneros' words in the interview given to the *Southwest Review* emphasize the ambiguous reading pact she proposes in her novel *The House on Mango Street* when she says:

Much of *Mango Street* I wrote on the blind, intuitively, and now when I read it out loud, it so much echoes my life that it's frightening. I did not intend it as autobiographical or as a mask for my own life, but it turns out that I'm living the fiction I created. (Satz 172)

Chapter II

Edwidge Danticat and *Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel*

The same as *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, *Breath Eyes, Memory. A Novel* by Edwidge Danticat proposes an ambiguous reading pact. This ambiguity can be perceived in the type of reading pact suggested by the title of the novel and the information divulged in a parallel way. As regards the title of the text, Danticat already establishes a novelistic reading pact in the title she gives to the novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel*. The denomination of novel in the title serves as an attestation of the fictionality of the text if we consider Genette's definition of fiction as "a type of narrative whose veracity is not seriously assumed by the author."¹⁴ By choosing to call it a novel, Danticat does not assume full responsibility for the assertions of her narrative. Besides, there is an explicit non identity between author and character since the author and the character do not have the same name; however, the boundaries between what is real and what is invented are increasingly blurred in Danticat's text which makes it difficult to decide how to read it. As Philippe Lejeune and Alberca have said, in trying to explain the role of proper names in connection to the choice the reader makes as regards how to read a text, sometimes the marketing strategies support or go against the type of reading pact proposed by the author since the reader can choose to read the text on the basis of either the indications given on the book or on information divulged in a parallel form with the publication of the book. Even if the novel has a fictional name for the narrator, it can be argued that Sophie Caco's life does have many similarities with Edwidge Danticat's experiences in Haiti and later in America. So once again, the ambiguity as regards the type of reading pact, proper of autofiction, characterizes this text by Danticat. Before *Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel* begins there is a short biography of the author that reads "Edwidge Danticat was born in Haiti in 1969 and raised by her aunt. She was reunited with her parents in the U.S at age 12" (unnumbered page). Once the reader starts the novel he gets to know that Sophie, the protagonist, was also born in Haiti and raised by her aunt Tatie, and

¹⁴ Gérard Genette in *Fiction and Diction* 70

that at the age of twelve she went to the U.S.A to live with her mother. It is at this point that the reader may suspect that Danticat has chosen to write about her experience under the guise of a fictional character. The reader also finds out that Sophie never met her father because he was a Macoutte who raped her mother. Although in real life, Danticat's father emigrated with Danticat's mother to America, we can see that both women, the writer and the fictional character, suffer from the same sense of displacement once they arrive in America. At 12, Danticat finally rejoined her parents in Brooklyn, but had to struggle to remake her family ties. She also had to learn English from scratch and endure epithets from public school classmates who mocked her as a "boat person" (Vitone 42).

Furthermore, in the "Afterword" of the novel, Danticat writes a letter to Sophie in which she thanks her for "the journey of healing- from here and back- that you and I have been through together, with every step wishing that both of our living and our dead will rest in peace" (236). Thus, it becomes evident that Edwidge Danticat, the same as Sophie, has needed to go on a journey to come to terms with her hybrid identity. Both have been born in Haiti and both find it difficult to adapt not only to the customs of the new country but also to their parents in the case of Danticat, and to her mother in the case of Sophie. Danticat as well as Sophie feels that her "home" is in Haiti in spite of the fact that Danticat acknowledges feeling "comfortable living in Brooklyn" (Samway 77).

It is through writing about the immigrant experience that Danticat tries to make sense of her life. When a young woman asked her why she focused so much on violence and other negative subjects about Haiti, Danticat answered "There are things about it that you can't make up", "It has a complicated and nuanced history. It fascinates me, and writing about it helps me to try to make sense of it." She also added that she writes "about those things that haunt me" (Valbrun 43).

Then, why has Danticat chosen to write her story in the first person singular using a fictional character? She probably assumes a fictional character as the speaker of the story to feel free to write about her own experience and about the horrors lived in Haiti without exposing herself. By telling her story she refuses to forget the Haitian past and what women suffered on the island.

Forgetting and remembering are closely linked to first person narratives; that is why, the role of memory in Caribbean literature should also be taken into account. Memory works as the act of witnessing the horrors of Haitian history, which is always

in danger of being forgotten. In an interview by Barsamian, Danticat, when asked about the meaning of the past in relation to Faulkner's quote "The past is never dead—it's not even past", agreed with the American writer when she answered that it is so:

Especially in the case of people who have migrated from other places. We try so hard to keep some aspects of the past with us and forget others, but often we don't get to choose. We try to keep the beautiful memories, but other things from the past creep up on us. The past is like the hair on our head. I moved to New York when I was twelve, but you always have this feeling that wherever you come from, you physically leave it, but it doesn't leave you. (Barsamian 2)

As long as we agree that the genre chosen by Danticat is a hybrid genre, a hybridization of the genre of the novel, the autobiography, and the autofiction, we can see how much of autofiction is present in the choice made by the author. Autofiction has to do with recovering the past through the use of personal and collective memories. Danticat is recollecting or "re-membling" her life by telling Sophie's story of adaptation in America. Doubrovsky also expressed that "Memory itself is fictive" (*Sites* 400), so how much of truth is present in Danticat's story? I personally believe that by choosing to tell her story, Danticat tries to recover the personal and collective memory of all the Haitian women in a narrative that mixes facts with fiction. As regards the characteristics proper of the autobiography, this choice of a hybrid genre becomes a useful way of resisting the realities of power, by presenting another view, another perspective of what it means to be an immigrant woman in America.

When Edwidge Danticat was asked how much of her book was autobiographical she said: "The book is more emotionally autobiographical than anything else. It's a collage of fictional and real-life events and people." (Interview: "A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat about *Breath, Eyes, Memory*") Somehow, Danticat's answer would support Doubrovsky's definition of autofiction as "fiction of events and of facts strictly real" (quoted in Robin 44). Is Danticat's text an example of autofiction? Or is it a mixture of fiction, autobiography and autofiction? The way she presents the text would make us believe that the story she is telling *happened* and *did not happen* to Danticat; that Sophie Caco *is* and *is not* Danticat at the same time.

Tightly interwoven to being Haitian is the role storytelling plays in growing up. Storytelling has a tradition in Haitian society and Danticat grew up in a family of story tellers. For her storytelling provides a link between the past and the present and the possibility of self inscription and subjectivity. It is also through storytelling that the

connections between members of the same community and women in particular are strengthened. In an interview Danticat recognizes the influence of storytelling in her life when she expresses

My soul was also fed by family from the time I was a girl. My aunts told lots of stories. My grandmothers too. They were strict and distant in others places in life, but in that way, they were very giving, and there was a closeness we shared in being told and telling a story that didn't exist anywhere else. (Collage 70)

As a Haitian she loves telling stories: "I was too shy to tell stories with my voice, but realized I could tell stories in this other way" ("Edwidge Danticat Writer" 66). In the case of Sophie, storytelling means being able to break the code of silence that has been her mother's legacy. Listening to stories passed by her Aunt Tatie and her mother helps Sophie to cope with a hurtful present or painful cultural practices, and telling the stories herself encourages Sophie to heal past experiences.

Alberca in *El pacto Ambiguo. De la novela autobiográfica a la autoficción* (2007) argues that many novelists understand their autofictional "I" as an invisible or transparent masque behind which they can hide since that fictitious identity which simulates to be real allows the author to speak about himself without being evaluated or judged (207). Danticat also makes references to the use of masks in connection to writing fiction when she says

Even when I think of writing fiction, it's being kind of a liar, a storyteller, a weaver, and there's that sense of how much of this is your life. The story is a way you unravel your life from behind a mask. But the idea of just putting on a mask in a big crowd where you can be anybody was always something that was interesting to me because sometimes when we're most shielded is when we are boldest. (...) So sometimes we mask ourselves to further reveal ourselves, and it's always been connected to me with being a writer: We tell lies to tell a greater truth. The story is a mask; the characters you create are masks. (Barsamian 4)

Then, why does Danticat choose to tell her story in a novel? It is my belief that Danticat also chooses to do so to break the silence of all immigrant women in the United States. By telling her story, Danticat is forging bonds among women by preserving the Haitian tradition and female identity. Differently from Esperanza from *The House on Mango Street* and the protagonist of *The Woman Warrior*, Sophie does not choose to become a writer but she knows she will tell stories to her child by listening to the stories of the past and incorporating them into her own life. She knows

that she will then pass them on to her daughter because she relies more on the spoken word than on the written word.

To conclude, we can say that Danticat's choice of this hybrid genre reveals a preoccupation with questions of identity, and belonging. Edwidge Danticat is voicing the erased subjectivity of women in the Caribbean. Probably Danticat has chosen to present the text as a novel as a way of universalizing her own experience. By choosing this hybrid genre to tell her story the protagonist somehow reflects the true personal search in the uncertainties and darkness of the self.

Chapter III:

Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*

The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts by Maxine Hong Kingston challenges the assumptions of the genre of the autobiography. As the title indicates, Kingston writes a memoir, understood as a subgenre of autobiography; however, she deconstructs the genre of the autobiography by intermingling facts and fiction through talking story and memory. Kingston defies traditional autobiographical conventions by using an innovative style when she incorporates myth, dreams, fiction, and reality to articulate the story of a first generation Chinese-American woman trying to come to terms with her hybrid identity. Her experiences in attempting to accept her identity as a Chinese-American take place both in the real world and the fictional one. These two worlds are so closely associated that it is difficult to set the line between what is true and what is fictional. This is emphasized by the protagonist herself when she says “Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice, the voice of the heroines in my sleep” (25). This overt ambiguity makes it hard for the reader who has to decide what is true and what is part of a dream.

The subtitle of the book, *Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, already sets up the kind of reading pact Kingston is proposing. Philippe Lejeune in *El Pacto Autobiográfico y otros Estudios* (1975) establishes the difference between autobiography and memoirs when he expresses that the autobiography is a kind of confession while the memoirs tell facts that may be foreign to the narrator (129). Furthermore, Pozuelo Ivancos in *De La Autobiografía, Teorías y Estilos* (2006) emphasizes the fact that memoirs do not tell about oneself but about oneself in relation to others (27). The protagonist of the novel is telling what she remembers about her aunts and her mother, and at points, she fuses herself in the text with the narrator. It is also worth mentioning that in the first two chapters of the text the narrator tells the stories her mother told her which do not refer to her own life. We might argue that the story of the No-name Aunt and the legend of the woman warrior might stand for what

the protagonist of the text feels in terms of the position Chinese women occupied in the past, and even the position Chinese-American women have now-a-days. In “No-name Woman”, the protagonist interweaves the story of her No-name Aunt with her own difficulties in growing up as a Chinese-American woman. That is the reason why it is difficult for the reader to trust a narrator that bases an account of her personal life on myths and legends. The same as in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, memory and remembering play a vital role in the narrative; when the protagonist tells the story of her aunts and mother, she is telling not the events as they really happened but as she remembers them. This, again, fosters ambiguity as regards the reading pact proposed by the author. The reader must be aware that he is reading what the protagonist remembers and not necessarily what really happened, so he should not be looking for factual truths. A case in point is the chapter "At the Western Palace," which is about her aunt, Moon Orchid. In this chapter, the autobiographical narrator disappears completely, replaced by an omniscient unidentified "author" who tells the story of another person from what she has heard about it. In addition, in the following chapter, “A Song for the Barbarian Reed Pipe”, the narrator admits that her brother actually told her very little so what the reader has just read in the previous chapter has been made up by her: “What my brother actually said was “I drove Mom and second Aunt to Los Angeles to see Aunt’s husband who’s got the other wife?” (147). It is Maxine the one who imagines what happened there: “His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs” (147), and the truth of the story is challenged by Maxine’s own declarations. Thus, the compromise of telling the truth that the autobiographer assumes according to Lejeune is shattered since the narrator admits she is making up the story rather than telling the truth.

Besides, there is no explicit identification between author, narrator, and character. Philippe Lejeune in “El Pacto Autobiográfico” (1973) argues that the identification between author, narrator, and character can be attested implicitly or explicitly in a text. Implicitly either when the title of the text takes the reader to the name of the author or when the narrator assumes the compromise with the reader to behave as if he were the author in such a way that the reader does not doubt about the shared identity of the author and narrator, even when the name is not repeated again in the text (65). As regards *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator never tells the reader her first name or surname. However, according to Lejeune, as it has been previously stated, it may happen that the character’s name is not mentioned in the text but the reader can

assume it is the author because of paratextual references (61). In this particular case, the whole text is written in first person singular; nonetheless, it is not until the last chapter that the protagonist fuses herself with the stories she is telling.

Another point to bear in mind is the crucial role storytelling plays in the Chinese culture. The story teller is the shaman or bard whose role is to initiate or heal a young person. During the narrator's childhood her mother talks-story, telling the children myths, legends, and family narratives. The protagonist comes to understand the empowering character of storytelling in her life when she expresses

At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story (...) I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village. I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. (25-26)

The narrator interweaves her mother's traditional legends and family narratives with her own additions and interpretations in an attempt to understand herself, her mother and her other female relatives, and Chinese and Chinese-American women in general. Maxine Hong Kingston begins her novel by telling the story of the "No Name Woman." She has been told this story by her mother, who by telling the story to her daughter has given the aunt a history that binds her to the protagonist of the novel. By rewriting her aunt's story, Maxine is giving her a voice, the voice she was denied when the community discriminated against her. In the second chapter of the novel, "White Tigers", the narrator retells the story of a legendary Chinese woman, Fa Mu Lan, who replaced her father in battle. The reader gets to know how Maxine heard of the story of the woman warrior through her mother and how important storytelling is in her ancestral culture: "When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen" (25). Kingston uses it as an old legend with roots in reality; but by telling it in the first person, she claims for herself all the mythical powers of Fa Mu Lan. It is through the telling of the story of the woman warrior that Kingston fuses her personal story with the heroine's story. However, she re-writes the legend of the woman warrior to adapt it to her own experiences as a Chinese-American woman. In the third chapter, "Shaman," the narrator recounts the story of her mother in China and she contrasts the past and the present when she compares her mother's life in China as a professional healer and her routine as a laundress in the United States. It is also in this

chapter that myth and reality are interwoven when Kingston talks about the ghosts that inhabit America and also associates her No-name Aunt with a ghost that haunts her and encourages her to become a woman warrior. It is in the last story the protagonist tells that she can identify herself with the myth, that of the poetess Ts'ai Yen. Ts'ai Yen lived in captivity and was able to write songs that even the Barbarians could understand in spite of not knowing the Chinese language. Maxine, like the poetess, needs to find a way to communicate with those who surround her; the poetess will take to singing, Maxine to writing. Storytelling represents a change in Maxine's own life because it is through storytelling that she acquires a voice and is able to re-write the Chinese myths that bind her to a position of a woman and immigrant which she does not like. Similarly, Maxine Hong Kingston attempts to define herself by talking story and she succeeds only when she re-writes the Chinese myths as her own, blending facts and fiction. In this way she can understand that she is both Chinese and American.

The ambiguity proper of autofiction is also present in this text. The mingling of real events with imaginary ones makes the reader oscillate between an autobiographical and a novelistic reading pact. This ambiguity is also fostered by paratextual references, such as the name of the author on the title page, the reviews on the back cover and interviews given by the author. In the back cover of the text a critic from the New York Times writes "*The Woman Warrior* has become a modern classic. Its brilliant and moving combination of fact, invention, and reinvention speaks to all." Sometimes, the category chosen by the publishers responds to marketing strategies as Kingston claims as regards her text. Although *The Woman Warrior* has been categorized as "autobiography" Kingston herself challenges it when she claims that even though her publishers placed the book under the category of "nonfiction," she had little to do with this:

The only correspondence I had with the published [sic] concerning the classification of my books was that he said that Non-fiction would be the most accurate category;[sic] Non-fiction is such a catch-all that even "poetry is considered non-fiction." (Elnaggar 169)

In another interview carried out by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Kingston expressed that

All my writing is different from all my other writing. I think the progression or the evolution is such that first *The Woman Warrior* is an I-book; it is very self-centered. I got that out of the way. It's very necessary, at least for me, to write that book in which I can establish who I am. As a writer, it seems to me that growth takes place when I can put it into words. If I can say who I am, if I can say what powers I want, then I can have them. That was the

function of *The Woman Warrior*, self-understanding, understanding myself in relation to my family, to my mother, my place in my community, in my society, and in the world. (Lim 158)

In the same way that Kingston admits that she had to write *The Woman Warrior* to be able to understand herself in relation to those close to her, the protagonist of the novel needs to become a writer to be able to talk story and in that way make sense of her hybrid identity in relation to the Chinese and American culture in which she is immersed.

The ambiguous reading pact is also fostered in an interview given by Kingston when she expressed that at the time she wrote *The Woman Warrior* her parents were still alive and they were both illegal immigrants, but she wanted to tell the story of their immigration. So what she did was to write fiction/non fiction so she could fool immigration into thinking whether she was making it up or really telling the truth. She also added that she had found a form where she could protect their identity but at the same time tell their story (Lewis 38). The form she found was a hybrid genre, a mixture of autobiographical and imagined facts, which gave her the freedom to write about herself without exposing herself or her family. In that way she could write about what she was undergoing as a child of illegal immigrants without endangering her family.

Storytelling is also part of the ambiguous reading pact proposed by Maxine Hong Kingston. Storytelling played a vital role in Kingston's own childhood since she grew up in a family of storytellers. When asked about her parent's influence in her career as a writer she says:

I was inspired by my mother and father from the very beginning. I think when I was in the uterus they'd be chanting and singing poems. Every night there were bedtime stories and the long telling of sagas and history and myth. My mother actually comes from a tradition of public storytellers. My grandfather would sit in the plaza in the town square, and he would talk or read a story every night. My mother inherited that, and she brought me and my brothers and sisters up that way. My father had memorized classical Chinese poetry and Confucius, and he would go around reciting that. (Lewis 38)

In talking story Maxine Hong Kingston re-appropriates the stories she was told as a child and reconciles the Chinese and American cultural heritages that inform her identity. She re-interprets myths and legends interweaving them with real facts and rewriting them from a feminist perspective, and she does so by incorporating a variety

of genres in her text. When asked about how conscious she was of genre when writing a book she admits the blending of fiction and non-fiction in her books:

SL: Are you conscious of genre when you are writing a book? Have you thought about why and how you have become a multi-genre author?

MHK: ...I think that *The Woman Warrior* is a mix of . . . it's got myth and nonfiction, autobiography. I am writing about people who have wild imaginations, so I also have to use fictional techniques, and I am mixing genres. (Lim 161)

We may posit the same questions we asked about the other two texts; why does Kingston choose to tell her life story without necessarily adhering to the autobiographical pact suggested by autobiographies? Why does she play with the reader by mixing true facts with myths, legends, and story telling? Is the first person narrator Maxine Hong Kingston?, or does Kingston use an unnamed narrator to disguise herself?. My belief is that *The Woman Warrior* departs from the traditional linear autobiography narrative structure and adopts a hybrid genre in the way she blends facts and fiction; and it is in this way that she ponders about and reflects part of what it means to be born into two cultures. In this particular case, each fictional story the protagonist tells is interwoven with her own reality, her experiences of living into two languages and of being raised with different expectations for women in different cultures. The myths that the protagonist re-writes and the true facts she interweaves to them contribute to explore her diverse cultural narratives that intervene in the construction of her own hybrid identity. The narrator's story *is* and *is not* Maxine Hong Kingston's story. It is also the story of so many immigrants that have to experience the same duality of being born into two cultures. Once more, the hybridity manifested in the text written by Kingston serves as a mirror of her own hybridity in terms of identity and the cultures in which she lives.

Chapter IV

A comparative analysis of the narrative strategies used by Sandra Cisneros, Edwidge Danticat and Maxine Hong Kingston.

The House on Mango Street, Breath, Eyes, Memory. A Novel and *The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* make use of a hybrid genre to mirror the protagonists' own hybrid identities. They borrow some elements from the novel and the autobiography, at the same time that they transform others from the autofiction. This narrative strategy fosters ambiguity as to the type of reading pact established by the authors at the beginning of the texts and the way it oscillates from one to the other during the narrative; the reader is invited to read the texts as fictional stories but at the same time as true stories. These texts get closer to the definition of autofiction because they play with the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality; nevertheless, it is important not to forget that the three texts are fictions and at the same time the stories of real lives. Although the novels under analysis share this ambiguous reading pact typical of autofiction, they do not fulfill the other elements proper of this genre such as the identification between author, narrator, and character which is considered by Alberca a quintessential requisite for a text to be characterized as autofictional. However, the three authors play with a possible identification making it hard for the reader to decide how to read the texts, especially if he has some knowledge of the authors' lives. The reader, then, might undertake the task of the detective and he will try to find similarities and coincidences between the author's life and the character's life or he will just enjoy this mixture of fantasy and facts.

In the case of *The Woman Warrior*, the protagonist is unnamed which, according to Lejeune, means that there is no reading pact established at the beginning of the text. As regards *The House on Mango Street* and *Breath, Eyes, Memories*, the protagonists' names are not identical to the authors' names; thus, in line with Lejeune, they point out to a novelistic pact. Nonetheless, this distinction between the absence of a pact or the presence of a novelistic pact is not that clear cut since the reader might assume that the unnamed protagonist of *The Woman Warrior* is Maxine Hong Kingston herself because

of the name on the title page, and that Esperanza Cordero is Sandra Cisneros because of the paratextual references.

Although the three novels set up an ambiguous reading pact they do so in different ways. Kingston does not choose to organize her text chronologically differently from Cisneros and Danticat. Probably she wants to reflect how the different cultural narratives intervene simultaneously in her experience as a woman with a hyphenated identity. Cisneros organizes her life story in terms of vignettes which do not necessarily follow chronologically since they can be read as separate episodes of Esperanza's life. In the case of the text by Danticat, even though the order of events is chronological, it is mainly based on the way memory works and in Sophie's attempt to reconcile the past with the present.

In the three cases, the paratextual references of the books point to an ambiguous reading pact, not only as regards the titles of the texts, but also as regards information divulged in parallel form in the marketing of the texts, such as the categories in which they are classified and the interviews given by the authors where they talk about the novels under study. Regarding Cisneros' and Danticat's texts, they both present themselves as novels, while the text by Kingston is presented as a memoir; nevertheless, paratextual references challenge the classification given in the titles of the texts.

Thus, we might say that the authors, in different degrees, refute the categories that classify their texts as novels and autobiography, and they encourage ambiguity as regards the way the texts should be read. It is interesting to notice that in the three novels the line between what is fact and what is fiction is blurred and that makes it even more difficult to classify them in one genre or the other. Cisneros, Danticat and Kingston draw on the autobiographical and fictional space at the same time, blurring in this way the boundaries between what is real and what is fictional. They weave true facts with invented facts and they sometimes base their personal accounts on stories of other members of the family or extended family. The three women writers anchor their narratives to other women's stories, be it their mothers or other influential women, like aunts and friends. Therefore, they are neither autobiographies, autofictions, nor novels; they are the result of a hybridization of genres which is manifested in a fictional text and in the narrative strategies used by the authors.

The three women write their life stories as a way to come to terms with their bicultural identities. By rewriting or retelling the stories they are suiting them to their

own needs, and the needs of other contemporary women. The protagonists take it as their responsibility to re-write or transmit the stories they listened to as children. It is through becoming a writer that Esperanza Cordero will fight against the gender roles imposed by her culture of origin and she will inscribe herself in new roles without forgetting her origins. The protagonist of *The Woman Warrior* also becomes a writer to have the freedom to re-write and re-create the myths that bind Chinese-American women to gender roles that enslave them. Sophie Caco does not become a writer but she becomes aware of her role as a story teller to break painful cultural practices that make her suffer as a Haitian immigrant. Both Kingston's and Danticat's protagonists become keepers of their ancestral cultures through storytelling but at the same time re-appropriate the stories they pass onto other generations to adapt them to the times and experiences women with hyphenated nationalities undergo. The three protagonists become empowered to give voice to the voiceless women who have experienced or are experiencing the duality of being born into two cultures, two languages, and two countries. Their stories embody the meeting of two worlds, different cultural expectations for women, and especially for women with hyphenated nationalities.

Why do these authors choose a hybrid genre to tell their life stories? Why do they choose to write first person narratives without subscribing to any of the traditional genres? I personally believe that these authors choose this hybrid genre to represent their own hybrid identities. In a way, the hybridity of the genre reflects their own hybridity in terms of identity and what it means to straddle two or more cultures. They also choose fictional characters to universalize their experience as women of double nationalities in the United States and what it means to be born into different cultures. The same as Maxine, the character, Kingston takes the freedom to translate or re-inscribe the Chinese myths and legends to forge new ones that can adapt to her reality and to the reality of other women who feel torn between two cultures, the Chinese and the American. In this way she can establish a meaningful relationship with their ancestral culture which is empowering to her life in the present American culture. Cisneros fights against the imposed gender roles assigned by her parents' culture and gives a voice to all the women who undergo her same experience as subjects with hyphenated nationalities. Finally, Danticat, by telling the story of what it means being an immigrant in America, breaks away with hurtful cultural practices that bind women to a position of submissiveness. The three authors show that writing their life stories

becomes then a challenge to tell what has not been told before and to understand what has not been explained before.

Conclusions

Identity as a process, as a construction can easily be seen in the way the three protagonists of the novels I have analyzed come to terms with their hybrid identities. By learning to ride on different cultures they are able to make sense of their interculturality as women with hyphenated identities. It is only by establishing a dialogue between the different cultural heritages that form them that they can make sense of what it is like to inhabit different worlds and different cultures. Esperanza, Sophie and Maxine manage to shed their old identities and to articulate a new sense of identity, an identity which comprises the different cultures they belong to and the different selves that make them up. It is only after a period of struggle with gender paradigms and discrimination that the three protagonists finally embrace their hyphenated identities.

Not only do they need to establish a dialogue with the different cultures they belong to but they also need to engage in a dialogue with the past and with the present. When looking for their roots they re-visit the past and they re-write or retell the stories and myths of their ancestral cultures to suit their present experience and their struggle against gender roles and discriminatory practices. Our three narrator protagonists unravel the past in order to reconcile it with the present. In the case of Maxine Hong Kingston's text, the past inhabits her present, and this is represented by the lack of time linearity in the text where she loops between past and present. In the case of Danticat's novel, we can see how the past haunts Sophie and somehow inhabits the present time in America as well. As regards, Esperanza, the past is reflected in the demands of her ancestral culture as regards gender roles. The three characters learn to live in the interculturality where they become flexible and plural; they can handle different cultures and they can learn from the ambiguity of being born into two or more worlds.

It is noteworthy that the three women construct their identities in an act of power and in an act of exclusion as regards the Other. The Other is the ancestral culture that sometimes binds them to gender roles they cannot accept, but the Other is also the American society that discriminates against them and marginalizes them. Their female identity narratives are marked by contestation because by accepting their hybrid identities Esperanza, Sophie and Maxine are also empowered to speak for other women who feel powerless.

The word home as defined by Sarup also acquires a new meaning for the three protagonists of the novels; it is neither necessarily the place where their parents have been born nor their birth towns either; it is the place where they feel comfortable juggling the different cultures that make up their identities. The three women need to leave their “homes” to be able to see reality from outside and make sense of the different cultural discourses that inhabit them. By leaving their homes they break down the constraints of parents and cultural bonds.

Strongly linked to language is the concept of home. It is through language that these women come to know who they are. After a period of confusion and discrimination, in the case of Esperanza and Sophie, and after a period of silence in the case of Maxine, they are able to find a voice and speak up; a voice they use to challenge imposed cultural traditions, role genders, and beliefs.

It is interesting to see how the three protagonists anchor their personal narratives to other women, especially to their mothers. They present their mothers and their relationships with them with complexity, because they mix love, admiration, and anger. At the same time, they recognize their deep and lasting impact upon their lives and their adaptation to their interculturality. Kingston tells the story of her mother instead of telling her own story; she places her story center stage while she remains at the borders, in this way, by understanding her mother’s choices she can make different choices in her life. It is only by the end of the novel that Maxine fuses her story to that of the other women. This is not the case in *The House on Mango Street* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in which mothers also play a vital role for the protagonists. Although Esperanza tells her own story, she does refer to her mother’s story as well when she devotes a complete vignette to talk about her. Sophie’s story is intertwined with the portrait of an entire family lineage, not only her mother but also her grandmother and aunt. The three protagonists of the novels under analysis assert the centrality of their relationships with their mothers in helping to shape their identities and their texts. It is the dynamics of mother/daughter interactions which play such a fundamental role in forming their sense of self and the narrative forms through which they represent their life stories.

Esperanza, Sophie, and Maxine try to reconcile their cultural heritage and the dilemma of being caught into two worlds with the emerging sense of themselves in America. They come to terms with their hybrid identities through the narrativization of their life stories. It is through telling their life stories that they can organize their sense of who they are. Telling about their lives becomes a synonym of self-experience where

they can acquire knowledge about themselves and about what others expect from them. Esperanza and Maxine find in writing a means to appropriate their own language and interculturality; for them writing stands for an act of self-creation because it is through the process of writing as a practice of self-examination that knowledge emerges. By writing their own life stories, they engage themselves in the desire to uncover the truth of their own identities. Sophie finds in storytelling the opportunity to break away with hurtful cultural practices but also the opportunity to keep those traditions that make her strong and free; furthermore, she is very aware of the creative power of storytelling because she can re-create old tales and legends and choose what stories to tell her daughter.

Why do Cisneros, Danticat and Kingston camouflage their experiences in a fictional text? Is it an aesthetic choice or a personal need to tell their stories without exposing themselves? I personally believe that by departing from the traditional genres, Cisneros, Danticat and Kingston challenge the establishment and what women and immigrants are supposed to write, and they show a concern for the search of an identity they can accept. They choose a hybrid genre to narrate their stories and to review life issues, such as growing up female and coming to voice. They use this genre to write themselves into history so other women by reading these fictional autobiographies can experience them as mirrors of their own unvoiced aspirations.

The most noteworthy characteristic of the hybrid genre they choose is the ambiguous reading pact they propose to the reader. The three authors suggest a novelistic reading pact which is overtly affirmed but constantly undermined through factual layers of information about their own lives. These authors' autofictional writings mix memories and fabrication and leave it to reader to decide what are the essential truths or realities within the text. This ambiguity is also the result of marketing strategies that show that authors have little control over how their published works will be read. What these authors are doing is challenging the opposition between autobiography and fiction.

Why do they adopt a hybrid genre? The three authors struggle to find a public self voice as minority writers. The hybridization of genres proves to be an appropriate means for the exploration of the self, or more precisely, for the acceptance of a hybrid identity in cultural contexts of time and space. It is the hyphenated identities of the authors which motivate their use of hybrid narrative forms because they contribute to represent fragmented, multiple identities. They try to find appropriate forms through

which to express a complex, multifaceted self fully, and the blurring of forms within genres seems to suggest the interlocking nature of the different layers and the various facets of their identities as bicultural women.

Why do Cisneros, Danticat and Kingston choose a first person narrator? It is my belief that they show a desire to leave the margins and write from the center, and not as the Other as Carmen Abrego once said that when someone asked her

“Why don’t you write in the third person?” My response was “I’ve never been a third person. I’ve always been me, the first person, so I don’t know what it’s like to be a third person. I can write from that experience. “I think that person was trying to put me in the margins; I don’t want to be put there any longer” (Keating 223)

Why do these authors disguise themselves under fictional characters if they are telling their life stories then? By disguising themselves under a fictional narrator, they break down the boundaries of genres mixing fiction with non-fiction, and in this way they give precedence more to the collective than to their individual story. In doing so, these authors are able to universalize their experience and to contribute to questions of national identity; their stories cross all borders because they are the universal immigrant stories which draw on the lives of immigrants.

What is more, by incorporating unspoken female experience in telling their own stories, women revise the roles they occupy and challenge their expected behaviour in society. Women gain a voice which is not simply empowering but also redefining as regards their hybrid identities. The three authors affirm a sense of solidarity with other women and call attention to these multiple identities that coexist in each of the women.

To conclude, in speaking their truth by telling their life stories, Cisneros, Danticat and Kingston challenge not only racist, gender, class paradigms but also the conventions of received modes of autobiographical writing.

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