THE BILINGUAL MEMORY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ETHNIC NOVELS: UNTRANSLATABLE FEELINGS

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Abstract: *The juxtaposition between reality perceived in childhood and the impact of events experienced in adulthood reverberates strongly in autobiographical literature. In an essay called "Child Play", Gillian Brown studies childhood representations in literature and disassociates between "a child's reality" and "an adult's reality", stipulating that "a child's imagination differs from the reality which he experiences, as opposed to that perceived by adults" (2003: 16). In autobiographies, for adult narrators, memory is based on reality drawn from childhood memories, but this is disrupted by possibly repressed traumatic experiences. In the case of an autobiographical novel, the narrator illustrates either dispersed or explicitly personal events, based on the outcome of the aforementioned juxtaposition. If a third element appears that amplifies the ambiguity of the narrative, there is another dimension of comprehension and analysis to the text. For example, a bilingual narrator can construct the illusion of a double identity, both textual and metatextual. Thus, in order to interpret the peculiarities of the bilingual narrators, I base my explanations within literary, sociological, and psychological paradigms. In this paper, I explain and elaborate a few notions on elements applied in the narrative discourse identified in two semi-autobiographic Ethnic American novels, written by Chicana writers, Sandra Cisneros, and Gloria Anzaldúa. I cross-reference that with theories based on psychiatric studies aimed at the cognitive processes of the bilingual self. My study explores the discrepancies between the self-accessed memories in the native language and the adopted language to measure the intensity of autobiographical discourse.*

Keywords: *Bilingualism; American Literature; Chicana Literature; Autobiographies*.

Introduction

Autobiographical literature frequently explores the contrast between childhood perception and the way memory is reconstructed in adulthood. The choice to situate autobiography in childhood is not incidental but strategic: as C.L. Innes notes, postcolonial writers often draw on childhood to recover pre-colonial cultural memory and "a more innocent world prior to colonialism" (2007: 56). In this sense, the vulnerability of the child diarist becomes a vehicle for both authenticity and critique, as their perspective unsettles adult assumptions embedded in hegemonic discourse. French professor and essayist, Philippe Lejeune claims in *The Autobiographical Pact* that "The story of a life most often begins with the evocation of childhood, which is both the first object of memory and the foundation of identity." (1975/1988: 33).

To understand how childhood experiences are managed in adulthood, Gillian Brown argues in *Child Play* (2003) that this distinction highlights how

a child's understanding of life experiences differs from an adult's retrospective interpretation of past events. In semi-autobiographical Ethnic American literature, mostly written by the generation of hyphenated American writers, this complexity is seen under a microscopic view. This is further amplified by the tendency for these writers to use bilingual narration, where language itself becomes a conduit for fragmented identity and memory.

In this paper, I examine the role of memory within bilingual narratives by analyzing two Chicana writers, i.e. what is categorized as Mexican American writers in the latest encyclopedia, Ethnic American Literature: An Encyclopedia for Students, edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson (2015). These writers are Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa. The two works that form the basis of my analysis are *Caramelo* (2002) and *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987).). By situating these works within a literary paradigm, I explore how bilingualism affects the autobiographical act, by influencing self-accessed memories and shaping narrative identity.

Ethnic American writers that emerge in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement are frequently approached through the lens of postcolonial theory because their work engages with the issue of the loss or ambiguity of identity. Much like postcolonial writers, they speak about the struggle in the face of legacies of systemic oppression, the silencing of marginalized voices, and the negotiation of cultural hybridity within a dominant culture that seeks to assimilate or erase difference. Sandra Cisneros, for instance, uses the bilingual texture of *Caramelo* to weave memory, heritage, and migration into a narrative that resists monolingual and monocultural frameworks, thereby asserting the persistence of Chicana identity within U.S. hegemony. Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* redefines the U.S.–Mexico border as a site of cultural and linguistic struggle, where the mestiza consciousness arises as a form of resistance to imposed binaries. In this way, their texts embody what postcolonial theory describes as writing "back" to empire, except in this case the "empire" is internal: the U.S. as both colonizer and home.

The first section of this paper deals with the fluid and often selective nature of recollection in autobiographical texts, with a specific focus on works that challenge the definition of autobiography. I analyze the definition by explaining how memory is shaped by linguistic and cultural factors, particularly in narratives that oscillate between childhood and adult perspectives. situates bilingual autobiographical novels within the broader landscape of American literary tradition, arguing that ethnic American writers redefine the national literary canon through their hybridized forms of storytelling. Thus, "Spanglish Literature" explores how code-switching and linguistic hybridity serve as narrative strategies that reflect cultural negotiation and identity formation. By interweaving Spanish and English, authors like

Cisneros and Anzaldúa not only authenticate the bilingual experience but also challenge monolingual literary norms.

The second section examines how bilingual narrators construct and access memory differently depending on whether they recall experiences in their native or adopted language. Drawing from psychiatric studies on cognitive processing, I assess how bilingual memory operates within the framework of self-representation. The third section contextualizes these findings within broader theories of life writing, emphasizing how memory functions as both a personal and collective construct in ethnic American narratives.

The last section, "*Speaking from the Borderlands: Identity, Resistance, and the Political Self*", examines how the bilingual narrator, positioned at the threshold of languages and cultures, constructs a politicized self that resists linguistic imperialism. he practice of writing in two languages transcends the realm of personal expression; it constitutes an inherently political act. In the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros, bilingualism is not merely a stylistic choice but a mode of resistance to cultural erasure and linguistic domination. Anzaldúa's theorization of *mestiza consciousness* and Cisneros's articulation of an urban Chicana subjectivity both demonstrate how language mediates struggles over belonging, identity, and power. Read through the lenses of queer theory and decolonial feminism, their texts illuminate the ways in which linguistic hybridity unsettles the binaries of assimilation and exclusion. As Butler (1993) reminds us, identity is never static but continuously produced through reiterative acts of language. Code-switching and hybrid literary experimentation thus become strategies through which Anzaldúa and Cisneros claim agency, contesting monolingual and monocultural norms.

Through this interdisciplinary analysis, I attempt to demonstrate that bilingual autobiographical novels such as Chicana writings disrupt conventional memory structures that offer a unique insight into the intersections of language, identity, and cultural heritage in American literature.

Languages of Memory, Fragments of the Self

In the landscape of autobiographical ethnic literature, language does not merely convey memory—it shapes it. For bilingual narrators, especially in Chicana literature, memory is filtered through a prism of linguistic and cultural duality. Autobiography has long been regarded as a privileged site for examining the human condition in its full complexity. As Wilhelm Dilthey already emphasized in the early twentieth century, life writing provides not merely a chronicle of past events but a hermeneutic process through which the

meaning of lived experience is reconstructed and reinterpreted (Dilthey, 1927/1989). To engage in autobiography is, therefore, to traverse the boundaries of time, weaving together fragments of memory in order to produce a coherent—though not necessarily unified—account of the self.

Contemporary narrative inquiry continues to put emphasis on this function of autobiography as an interpretive reconstruction that does not only ask "what happened?", but "what does it mean now?" (Bruner, 2001). Yet autobiography is never a purely individual endeavor; it is embedded within broader cultural and historical frameworks. Its value for the human sciences stems from its ontological wholeness, that is, its ability to encompass the full scope of a life as it unfolds within time, culture, and relational contexts (McAdams, 1993).

Unlike experimental methods that often abstract human behavior from lived environments, autobiographical texts represent the encultured and situated dimensions of identity. They not only reflect personal memory but also serve as vessels for cultural meaning, where lives are narrated through the languages, traditions, and expectations of a community.

This brings autobiography into close dialogue with the concept of cultural memory. As Jan Assmann (2011) argues, memory is always structured by a dynamic interplay of remembering and forgetting. Cultural memory, in particular, operates not on a simple binary between what is preserved and what is lost but rather in a triadic system that includes an intermediary "latency," where information is stored in archives, libraries, or monuments and may resurface into active recollection when required. In this sense, autobiographical writing can be understood as one mode of activating memory from latency into presence, drawing forgotten or overlooked experiences back into the realm of cultural discourse.

Autobiography and cultural memory intersect as twin modalities of narrativity: the former emphasizes the interpretive reconstruction of one's life, while the latter highlights the mechanisms through which societies preserve, transform, and transmit meaning across generations. Both provide a framework for understanding how the self is constituted not only through personal reflection but also through its indelible human imprint in cultural archives and traditions. This highlights the idiosyncrasies of human memory. Such perspective is especially significant for the study of the hyphenated-American writers. For Chicana writings, the narratives negotiate with both personal memory and cultural archives to construct identities that challenge dominant norms of language and identity

Cultural memory distinguishes between "active" memory—the consciously maintained narratives, rituals, and monuments through which communities orient themselves—and "archival" memory, which contains vast reservoirs of knowledge accessible only through specialized mediation

(Assmann, 2011: 221–223). Autobiography operates at the threshold of the two. On one hand, it contributes to active memory by transmitting stories that circulate within families, communities, or literary canons; on the other, it also retrieves and interprets elements from the archival dimension of personal or collective history that might otherwise remain latent. The autobiographical narrator thus becomes both a custodian and a re-interpreter of memory that negotiates what is remembered, what is silenced, and what is reconfigured for future generations.

So, autobiography is not merely a self-referential act but a cultural practice with political and epistemological implications. It embodies what Ricoeur (1991) calls the "narrative identity" of the subject, formed in dialogue with both temporal continuity and cultural frameworks of remembrance. By situating the self within a wider matrix of memory practices, autobiography cannot separate personal life from collective history. The narrating subject does not only testify to a private past but also participates in the cultural work of preserving, revising, and sometimes resisting the dominant scripts of memory.

Karen Ferreira-Meyers asks several questions about autobiographies that should be taken into consideration when one studies writers that are defined as *ethnic.* One question is related to distinguishing fact from fiction in autofiction. She argues that the distinction between autobiography and fiction is not a binary but rather a spectrum: one cannot precisely quantify how much fiction is embedded within an autobiographical text, nor how autobiographical a fictional work may be. (2015: 136) In Anglophone literary studies, two concepts closely related to autofiction have gained attention: *faction*—a portmanteau of "fact" and "fiction"—and the autobiographical novel. The latter term is more commonly used to designate narratives that draw substantially on the author's life but do not adhere to the conventional "autobiographical pact" characteristic of traditional, contractual autobiography. In American literary criticism, terms such as *surfiction* or *factual fiction* are often mobilized to describe such narratives (Schmitt, 2010: 123).

The *non-fiction novel* constitutes a loosely defined, flexible genre that blends historical fact with fictionalized elaborations. Typically, it depicts real historical figures and events while employing literary techniques associated with fiction to construct a coherent narrative. In the Anglophone literary world, texts of this sort have existed for centuries and are frequently labeled as *faction*. While faction shares certain affinities with autofiction—particularly in its blending of truth and invention—the texts traditionally categorized as faction tend to align more closely with fictionalized historical narratives.

Fact and fiction are entangled, sometimes to the point of obscuring historical accuracy, thereby limiting the educational or epistemic value of the narrative. Here lies both the similarity and divergence between faction and autofiction: while both genres destabilize the boundary between truth and invention, autofiction operates primarily in a literary and often autobiographical register, rather than a historical one.

Autofiction has become a prominent feature of contemporary reading practices and literary criticism, yet its definition remains contested. Even within lexicographical sources, the term lacks stability: French dictionaries Larousse and Robert provide conflicting definitions. Criticism and scholarship have offered a plethora of alternative designations—postmodern autobiography (Sukenik), automythobiography (Claude Louis-Combet), circumfession (Jacques Derrida), egoliterature (Philippe Forest), biographical autofiction (Colonna), and autosociobiography (Annie Ernaux), among others—reflecting the concept's conceptual elasticity.

A central question in contemporary genre theory concerns how to classify emerging literary practices such as autofiction, particularly since traditional categories of the Self—autobiography, memoir, novel—cannot fully account for them. Two criteria have been repeatedly invoked to distinguish autofiction from related genres: first, an explicit claim to fiction, often signaled in the subtitle "novel," and second, the nominal identity of author, narrator, and protagonist. However, the final question should be whether these distinctions are essential for the analysis of Chicana writings.

These criteria expose the interplay between generic signals and onomastics in establishing an autofictional text, so they provide a useful lens through which to read Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2002). For example, For Cisneros, the process of writing her 2002 novel began in 1993 as a short-story tribute to her dying father, the project expanded over nine years into her first sustained engagement with historical discourse through fiction. As Cisneros herself explained, "in telling my father's story, I had to place him in time and history, and then I had to go back and look at how he became who he was. So, I had to invent my grandmother's story and how she became who she was" (qtd. in Suarez, 2005). Whereas earlier works such as *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek*—widely read by the public and extensively examined by critics—remain largely within the domestic sphere, *Caramelo* ambitiously addresses the roots of Chicana/o identity and culture.

Borderlands/La Frontera marked a paradigmatic shift. Cantú (2021) argues that Anzaldúa's book reshaped epistemological and ontological frameworks across multiple disciplines. Anzaldúa reconceptualizes the border not merely as a geographical or political line, but as a liminal space—both socio-political and cultural— that redefine identity. Her articulation of Nepantla, or the "third space," introduced a new lens to feminist theory, later

expanded by Chela Sandoval in *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) into the concepts of third-space criticism and differential consciousness. In addition, Anzaldúa's engagement with Spanish and Mexican vernacular and folk culture advances debates on mestizaje, reappropriating the term to articulate a hybrid identity and a notion of "spiritual mestizaje."

From a literary perspective, *Borderlands* constitutes an experimental form that defies conventional categorization. There is a balance between prose, poetry, theoretical discourse, and autobiographical reflection alongside Native American myths and legends. The prose sections—seven chapters in total—examine the history of Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border, migration and settlement patterns in the borderlands, Chicano/a mythology, and mestizo culture, to pinpoint personal memory within broader social and historical currents. The poetry sections—six segments containing thirty-eight poems—employ English, Spanish, and code-switching, traversing linguistic boundaries and exemplifying the performative nature of bilingualism. Moreover, through the framework of autohistoria, Anzaldúa innovates the autobiographical form by integrating cultural, social, and historical dimensions into personal narrative, demonstrating how memory is both individual and collective, and how bilingual expression serves as a medium for negotiating and preserving that memory.

Two Chicanas- One Trajectory

Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa are regarded as two of the most notable writers in the canon of Chicana letters, not only because of their literary innovation but also because of their active involvement in the refusal to accept the silences imposed by assimilationist pressures and the exclusions of U.S. mainstream culture.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa's (1942–2004) work is celebrated for its incisive and intimate writing that goes beyond genre or canon. The 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, co-edited with Cherríe Moraga, brought forth the political power of women-of-color writing as one of the first critical works that spoke from a position of authority on oppression, resistance, and everyday life. Anzaldúa challenged white feminist scholarship and her writings jumpstarted the idea of solidarity among women of color. According to Boyle and Stavans (2020), Gloria Anzaldúa is "a key player in transnational and postcolonial feminism". Her multilingual narratives and cross-genre style has become foundational in Latinx literature studies, particularly in discussions of hybridity and identity.

Writing from the intellectual and political aftershocks of the Chicano Movement and second-wave feminism, both, Cisneros and Anzaldúa became the faces of narratives that have popularized the text as personal testimony,

cultural critique, and linguistic experimentation. For them, the choice to write across English and Spanish is neither ornamental nor incidental; it is a deliberate strategy of survival and self-assertion, a refusal to submit to linguistic imperialism. Their works demonstrate how autobiography, conceived in an expanded sense, operates as a privileged medium for cultural memory, the negotiation of selfhood, and the enactment of political agency (Eakin, 1999; McAdams, 1993).

Sandra Cisneros narrates history through fiction in a way that surpasses the limitations of post-Enlightenment historiography. Her work exposes the constructed nature of all historical accounts, and it becomes an example of the interpellation between history and story. Rather than insisting on a single authoritative version, her stories open space for multiple perspectives, particularly those that had been unheard or silenced. This is of course not limited to Cisneros, but her work is one of the best examples of mixing Chicano popular culture—especially the telenovela—with collective mythology that validates a community often marginalized by dominant U.S. and Mexican narratives. In doing so, Cisneros not only reimagines historical participation for Chicanos but also contributes to the redefinition of American literature by vociferating with a different narrative.

Born in 1954 to a working-class Mexican American family in Chicago, Sandra Cisneros has consistently explored the tensions of living between two cultural worlds. *Caramelo* (2002), her multigenerational family novel, epitomizes this endeavor. While its surface structure resembles a saga that follows the Reyes family and their constant commute from Mexico and the United States, the text functions as a veiled autobiography, refracted through the perspective of the narrator Celaya, or Lala.

Lala's journeys between Chicago, San Antonio, and Mexico City dramatize the entanglement of identity with geography, migration, and memory. Central to the novel is the recurring motif of the rebozo—a caramel-colored shawl—which comes to symbolize narrative itself: a woven fabric of voices, silences, and memories. Through this metaphor, Cisneros demonstrates that storytelling is never neutral but always selective, or at least partial, and interpretive. In the novel, the history or past of a family is a metaphor for historical fragments. Cisneros finds her personal voice in the life story told through Lala's voice. Thus, the writer blurs the distinction between fiction and autobiography. *Caramelo* thus becomes a fictionalized self-narrative, one in which the author's personal history resonates as part of the collective memory of the Chicana (Cisneros, 2002).

Gloria Anzaldúa writes very little about her childhood in the Río Grande Valley of South Texas, but she develops her work within a radically hybrid form of writing that fuses poetry, theory, and memoir. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) is a synthesis of the three. Anzaldúa tells

the story of her life at the borders of the U.S. and Mexico. She uses mythology, history, critical theory and spiritual reflection, but also makes language itself a performance act. She furthermore creates this literary experience she names the "mestiza consciousness" (Anzaldúa, 1987). This is where English collides with Spanish, Spanglish, and Nahuatl to dramatize the unsettledness of border identities

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza is an autobiographical work because it is first of all a retelling of Anzaldúa's experiences. She writes about agricultural labor, systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, and chronic illness.

> When I create stories in my head, that is, allow the voices and scenes to be projected in the inner screen of my mind, I "trance." I used to think I was going crazy or that I was having hallucinations. But now I realize it is my job, my calling, to traffic in images. Some of these film-like narratives I write down; most are lost, forgotten. When I don't write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I do write. I can't stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make "sense" of them, and once they have "meaning" they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy.
>
> (Anzaldúa, 1987: 78)

These fragments are not offered as mere confessional episodes but as emblematic of broader Chicana and queer conditions. By centering her body and memory in the narrative, Anzaldúa shows how the self emerges through its location in history, culture, and geography. In doing so, she transforms autobiography into a radically experimental practice, dismantling conventional boundaries between life-writing, poetry, and theoretical discourse.

Although formally divergent—Cisneros leans toward the expansive family novel and Anzaldúa toward theoretical-poetic hybridization—*Caramelo* and *Borderlands* both serve as examples of autobiography as a mode of cultural and political intervention. But this autobiography is reimagined. Thus, rather than recounting a chronological life, each text reconstructs experience in light of broader histories of migration, colonialism, and cultural survival.

Cisneros, through the voice of Celaya- or Lala- rewrites her family's migrations as a lens for Chicana identity, with which the individual within is embedded in the transnational flow of memory. Anzaldúa, through fragmentary testimonios, situates the self as the border itself: fractured, unstable, yet generative. Both works are examples of the deconstruction of the autobiography, by constantly destabilizing the self. Since the text is a hybrid,

there are a lot of contradictions. This fluidity however helps define the features of Chicana subjectivity.

In *Caramelo*, Cisneros creates a layered narrative voice that oscillates between the fictional perspective of Celaya "Lala" Reyes and the underlying presence of the author herself. At certain moments, the reader senses Cisneros speaking directly through Lala, particularly when she pauses to comment on memory, storytelling, or the selective nature of recollection. Yet, this narrative intimacy is deliberately destabilized by the narrator's admission of uncertainty or incompleteness—acknowledging that family memories are partial, contested, or reshaped over time. In this way, reader can perceive Cisneros's own voice, yet the veracity of the events is always provisional.

Similarly, Anzaldúa's novel features a hybrid narrative voice. Her story of growing up in South Texas amalgamates with mythic, historical, and linguistic interpolations. This allows the reader to recognize Anzaldúa speaking directly. The narrative presence is signaled by consciousness and subjectivity that mark it with the unmistakable cadence of her bilingual, mestiza voice. Yet, as in *Caramelo*, this immediacy is undercut by the deliberate fragmentation and polyvocality of the text. Readers are constantly reminded that what they encounter is a mediated perspective, one shaped by memory, trauma, and cultural negotiation. The interplay between authorial presence and narrative uncertainty emphasizes the epistemic limits of this kind of autobiography.

Two Tongues, One Memory: Bilingualism and Narrative Fragmentation

Bilingual childhoods, as Walburga von Raffler-Engel observes, are characterized by a complex negotiation between languages: "while the child is able to translate from one language to the other, it is difficult for him/her to easily find the equivalent for sets of words […] unless they have a personal meaning to them" (von Raffler-Engel 1965: 1970). This difficulty is not merely linguistic but deeply tied to the cultural and emotional resonance of words, which carry personal and collective memory.

In Chicana literature, this phenomenon is vividly illustrated in Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo*, where Lala's childhood recollections are deeply interwoven with Spanish phrases that evoke familial intimacy, such as the reproach of a mother or the affectionate teasing of cousins. The English equivalents, in contrast, often fail to capture the nuance and emotional weight, demonstrating how language functions as both a cognitive and affective archive. Similarly, in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the speaker's code-switching between English and Spanish conveys experiences that cannot be fully articulated in a single language: "The devaluation of the peso and Mexico's dependency on the U.S. have brought on what the Mexicans

call la crisis. No hay trabajo." (Anzaldúa 1987: 24). Here, bilingual memory becomes a site of identity formation, where words are inseparable from life experiences and cultural belonging. Thus translation is not purely semantic but profoundly personal.

François Grosjean elucidates the social and intentional aspects of bilingual speech. He claims that "borrowings and codeswitches are often conscious and intentional in conversations with other bilinguals, are either included in the interference category or are explained away as the product of sloppy language" (Grosjean 1985: 467-477). Both Cisneros and Anzaldúa leverage this strategic use of multiple languages to assert cultural authority and narrative voice. In *Caramelo*, Lala's narration frequently shifts between English and Spanish to signal shifts in intimacy, power, or cultural context, such as when describing family rituals or historical anecdotes. Similarly, Anzaldúa's hybrid language in *Borderlands* intentionally resists monolingual norms, blending Spanish, English, and Nahuatl to challenge linguistic hierarchies and to embody the borderland experience itself.

Bilingualism, as seen in the works of Cisneros and Anzaldúa, disrupts any linear narrative structure and reframes memory. Literary bilingualism—especially when paired with a marginalized ethnic identity—complicates the act of remembering and telling. As Anzaldúa writes, "I am my language" (1987: 81), to show that identity and expression are inextricably linked to linguistic multiplicity. Pavlenko (2006) argues that bilinguals often associate specific emotions and memories with one language more than another, influencing both how and what they remember. This section analyzes how linguistic duality reshapes autobiographical narrative structure, particularly through the alternation between English and Spanish and the use of cultural idioms and poetic code-switching.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover… As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 102). Here, identity is remembered and reassembled not through continuity, but contradiction. Her bilingualism becomes a terrain for surviving exclusion, allowing her to inhabit multiple selves at once.

The critical edition of *Borderlands* (Vivancos-Pérez & Cantú, 2021) explains this formative dimension by situating Anzaldúa's bilingual voice as an epistemological intervention. Cantú recalls that the text "voiced what had been silenced," that offers women of color and the queer community a discourse rooted in their own childhood experiences. Anzaldúa theorized writing as *autohistoria*—a life-writing practice that interlaces the intimate with the collective, the personal with the historical. By narrating her childhood

in a hybrid literary form, she demonstrates that autobiography is not a private confession but a cultural testimony. Language here is both memory and performance: every act of code-switching recalls the childhood moment of being forced to choose between tongues, while also refusing that imposed choice.

In this sense, *Borderlands* is also a book about childhood remembered in two languages. The fragments of personal history—working in the fields as a child, negotiating identity in the classroom, experiencing illness and marginalization—are always told through the prism of bilingualism. Anzaldúa thus teaches us that childhood cannot be narrated without attending to language, and that bilingual memory itself becomes a site of both vulnerability and empowerment.

Similarly, in Cisneros's *Caramelo*, the child narrator, Celaya, navigates the cultural weight of dual identities—Mexican and American—through bilingual memory fragments. As she recounts her family's migration stories, her voice is marked by switches in register and language, reflecting an emotional double consciousness. The narrative "remembers" in English, but aches in Spanish. This juxtaposition mirrors the psychological dissonance observed in bilingual cognition studies, where emotional recall often aligns with the language in which a memory was first encoded (Marian & Neisser, 2000).

Merleau-Ponty's distinction between "specialty of position" and "specialty of situation" suggests that space acquires meaning not through fixed geometry but through the body's lived relation to its environment (Merleau-Ponty 1995, 190–191). In *Caramelo*, this insight resonates with Celaya's childhood perspective, where homes, streets, and border crossings are not neutral backdrops but affective spaces charged with memory and belonging. Childhood itself becomes a kind of spatial practice: the world is measured not in abstract coordinates but in the immediacy of affective ties, family histories, and embodied experience.

This embodied perception of place is inseparable from bilingualism. Celaya's narration is textured by English and Spanish, where the rhythm of switching codes mirrors the tension between cultural landscapes. Just as Chicana/o literature has historically treated land and territory as contested sites of identity, *Caramelo* treats language as a landscape of belonging and estrangement. The bilingual voice anchors Celaya's sense of "home" across borders, even as it highlights her distance from both cultures. In this way, Cisneros reframes landscapes as mnemonic and linguistic frameworks: spaces where childhood perception fuses with bilingual narration to produce an identity that is at once intimate, fragmented, and historically situated.

The Sense of Nostalgia: Trauma, Language, and Memory Retrieval

The bilingual mind processes memory differently, especially when trauma is involved. Research in psycholinguistics suggests that traumatic memories are more accessible in the language in which the trauma was encoded (Schrauf & Rubin, 2000). In Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, the fragmentation of prose and insertion of poetry serve not only as aesthetic choices but also as mnemonic tools. Meanwhile, in *Caramelo*, Cisneros's novel echoes the disjointed yet vivid nature of childhood recollection. By applying psychological and sociolinguistic research one can show how both writers encode trauma in language-specific memory traces, complicating the process of narrative coherence.

Endel Tulving's distinction between episodic and semantic memory (1972) provides a crucial framework for understanding how bilingual subjects recall and narrate their childhoods. Episodic memories are tied to personal experience — moments situated in time and space, such as the feel of a grandmother's kitchen, the sound of lullabies, or the first day at school. Semantic memories, by contrast, refer to general knowledge: cultural rules, vocabulary, historical facts, or social codes that shape a community's shared understanding.

In bilingual childhoods, these two forms of memory intertwine in unique ways. Episodic memories often emerge through the sensory traces of two languages — a mother's scolding in Spanish, a teacher's praise in English — situating personal experiences within distinct cultural soundscapes. These memories are not neutral: they mark the sentiment of belonging, difference, and at times conflict. Semantic memories carry the weight of collective knowledge, such as proverbs, religious expressions, or civic narratives, that are learned in one language but later reinterpreted through another. This dynamic means that bilingual memory does not simply store experiences but constantly negotiates between linguistic and cultural codes.

Childhood is particularly significant in this framework because it is the period when both episodic and semantic memories are first consolidated. For bilingual children, the languages themselves can become markers of memory: a phrase recalled in Spanish might immediately summon an episodic scene from family life, while an English equivalent could trigger more abstract, semantic associations. This dual structure demonstrates how bilingual memory functions not only as a cognitive process but also as a cultural archive, where childhood experiences are encoded, retrieved, and reimagined across languages.

By applying Tulving's categories to bilingual childhood narratives allows us to see how memory is not only divided between experience and knowledge but also linguistically and culturally layered. In the works of

Cisneros and Anzaldúa, childhood recollections often straddle this threshold, presenting memory as both an intimate return to lived episodes and a broader reflection on cultural knowledge passed on in two tongues.

To this psychological model we can add Pierre Nora's concept of "educational memory," which he defines as a force that "binds the individual to a particular region or nation" (1996: 3). Childhood memory, especially for bilingual subjects, is not merely individual but situated within a cultural pedagogy: the stories told at home, the histories transmitted through schooling, and the landscapes inscribed with familial significance. Bilingual children thus grow up inhabiting two overlapping mnemonic systems—episodic memories shaped by personal experience in one or both languages, and semantic/educational memories that tie them to broader cultural or national narratives. This intersection of psychological and cultural memory reveals why childhood recollections in bilingual writers often oscillate between intimacy and collectivity. To remember in two languages is to carry within the self both the immediacy of lived experience and the symbolic weight of cultural belonging, a doubleness

In *Caramelo*, Cisneros illustrates how childhood memories are encoded in sensory-rich language and embedded within a bilingual cultural environment. The chaotic car ride, where "Aunty Licha mutters prayers under her breath —'Virgen Purísima, if we even make it to Laredo, even that, I'll say three rosaries'—while Uncle Fat-Face is fiddling with the luggage rack on top of the roof" exemplifies the intertwining of episodic and semantic memory (Cisneros 2002: 34). For a bilingual child, such recollections are filtered through two linguistic and cultural lenses; Spanish conveys intimacy, religious ritual, and familial authority, while English might frame the event as a neutral anecdote.

This serves as an example for Walburga von Raffler-Engel's claim that children often struggle to find direct equivalents between languages unless the words carry personal significance: "while the child is able to translate from one language to the other, it is difficult for him/her to easily find the equivalent for sets of words […] unless they have a personal meaning to them" (von Raffler-Engel 1965, 1970). The retelling of family tragedies, such as the story of Blanca's cousins killed near Chicago, shows how episodic memories are tied to culturally charged language, demonstrating that bilingual memory negotiates meaning across languages and experiences.

Cisneros' detailed description of Candelaria- her half-sister- and her skin further exemplifies how language functions as a repository of affective and cultural memory.

> The girl Candelaria has skin bright as a copper veinte centavos coin after you've sucked it. Not transparent as an ear like Aunty Light-Skin's. Not shark-belly pale

> like Father and the Grandmother. Not the red river-clay color of Mother and her family. Not the coffee-with-too-much-milk color like me, nor the fried-tortilla color of the washerwoman Amparo, her mother.
>
> (Cisneros 2002, 57).

By comparing skin tones to culturally resonant objects, Cisneros situates semantic knowledge within a tactile, visual, and culturally coded framework. This resonates with François Grosjean's observation that code-switching and linguistic borrowings are often intentional and meaningful in bilingual contexts, rather than "sloppy language" (Grosjean 1985: 467–477). The interplay of Spanish and English, the use of culturally specific imagery, and the layering of familial recollections reveal how bilingual children encode both the intimate and collective dimensions of experience, showing that bilingual memory operates as a dual archive preserving both personal and cultural knowledge.

Anzaldúa's poetic voice in the chapter entitled *That Dark Shining Thing* illustrates this "affective untranslatability." The speaker pleads, "I don't know how long I can keep naming that dark animal / coaxing it out of you, out of me / keep calling it good or woman-god / while everyone says no no no." (1987: 173) The "dark animal" is an unspeakable pain, a queer trauma, a divine terror—all at once. This image is emotionally saturated and culturally situated; it resists being paraphrased or translated into sanitized academic language. Instead, it must be felt, much like what Emily Apter terms the "untranslatable" in her theory of world literature (Apter, 2013).

For Gloria Anzaldúa, childhood memories are profoundly shaped by linguistic and cultural tension. She illustrates the duality of bilingual memory described by von Raffler-Engel and Grosjean. Anzaldúa recalls, "I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess — that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler" (Anzaldúa 1987: 23). This episodic memory captures the intimate consequences of bilingual experience through specific words and language that carry intense personal meaning, just as von Raffler-Engel claims (1965, 1970). The punishments and social corrections Anzaldúa endured illustrate how language is inseparable from power structures, shaping both individual memory and cultural identity. Here, bilingual childhood memory functions not only as a record of personal experience but also as a repository of cultural negotiation and emotional intensity.

The semantic dimension of bilingual memory is evident in Anzaldúa's reflections on her mother's insistence on English proficiency: "I want you to speak English. Pa' hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un 'accent,'" highlighting how knowledge, aspiration, and cultural capital are linguistically mediated (Anzaldúa 1987: 24). Grosjean's observation on "borrowings and codeswitches (Grosjean 1985, 467–477) illuminates the strategic nature of

Anzaldúa's bilingual expression. Her code-switching is not accidental but a deliberate reflection of her negotiation between the Spanish-speaking world of her family and the English-dominated school system. In this way, bilingual memory operates as a dual archive- a record of both the intimate episodes of childhood and the broader semantic knowledge of cultural belonging.

This echoes the experiences of Lala in *Caramelo*. Sandra Cisneros, too, confronts the limitations of language to hold memory. The narrator repeatedly invokes calaveras (skulls), zarapes (shawls), and family dichos (sayings), refusing to translate them fully. These untranslated fragments serve not only as cultural markers but as emotional codes. The phrase Quien canta, sus males espanta ("Who sings, frightens away their woes") appears in a hallucinatory, trauma-laden passage. (Cisneros, 2002) The toad "sips the strength from my veins… I am a dried serpent skin," writes Cisneros (2002), thus evoking an emotional register that slips between myth, memory, and linguistic registers. The reader is meant to feel disoriented—linguistically and emotionally—as the narrator herself does.

Both Anzaldúa and Cisneros write through this affect in untranslatable language. They enact what Walter Benjamin calls the "afterlife of the original" (Benjamin, 1923). In translation—or attempted translation—some part of the original always lingers or is lost. This residue becomes the pulse of their autobiographical style. Thus, it is impossible to be authentic in narrating trauma or identity within a single linguistic code.

Untranslatable Feelings: Language Loss and the Affective Limit

The concept of "untranslatability" extends beyond linguistics into the realm of emotional expression. Certain feelings that might be characterized as specific to a culture—such as *vergüenza*, *duende*, or *tristeza*—seem to reject a direct translation, but they carry deep emotional resonance in their native form. Emily Apter (2013) argues that untranslatability reveals the political power embedded in language. In Cisneros's work, silences and ellipses mark the spaces where emotion cannot be verbalized in English. Anzaldúa uses poetic language and glossaries to preserve emotional intensity. However, she still allows English-speaking readers partial access. This section investigates how bilingual authors preserve emotional authenticity in the face of linguistic limitations.

Gloria Anzaldúa's poetic and fragmented style in *Borderlands/La Frontera* renders trauma not as a linear recollection but as an embodied presence. She writes, "I am the flesh you dig your fingernails into… I risk your sanity and mine" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 172). Here, trauma is not merely a subject—it is a relation, enacted and endured in both English and Spanish. The bilingual structure leads the way for pain to speak in the register it was first

inflicted. In this passage, Anzaldúa presents a bilingual, border-crossing consciousness. She illustrates the emotional and cultural dimensions of memory and identity. The speaker declares, "Yo soy un puente tendido del mundo gabacho al del mojado, lo pasado me estira pa' trás y lo presente pa' delante" (*I am a bridge stretched from the Anglo world to the Mexican world, the past pulls me backward and the present forward*) (Anzaldúa 1987: 102). Here, she evokes the liminal space a bilingual child inhabits—straddling languages, cultures, and histories. The metaphor of a bridge, linking worlds while being pulled simultaneously by past and present, embodies what Emily Apter terms the "untranslatable": feelings and experiences that cannot be fully expressed in one language. For a bilingual child, words alone cannot capture the full spectrum of affect associated with cultural belonging, familial expectation, and historical consciousness; Spanish may carry intimacy, lineage, and moral authority, while English may offer social mobility or formal recognition, yet neither can entirely encompass the genuine feeling of being between worlds. The metaphor "The skin of the earth is seamless. The sea cannot be fenced, el mar does not stop at borders" (Anzaldúa 1987, 102)—underlines that emotional and cultural experiences flow across boundaries that cannot be contained linguistically, thereby defying direct translation without loss of nuance.

From the perspective of a bilingual childhood, this untranslatability illuminates why memory and emotion are intertwined with language. Anzaldúa's depiction of Yemayá "blowing that wire fence down" (*to show the white man what she thought of his arrogance*) (Anzaldúa 1987: 102) enacts the defiance of imposed linguistic and cultural borders. It shows that the emotional force of these experiences exceeds what language can contain. Semantic memory—the culturally mediated knowledge of oppression and ancestry—is inseparable from episodic memory, the feeling of being situated in a bilingual, borderland space (Tulving, 1972). In this way, Anzaldúa exemplifies how bilingual childhood memory encodes untranslatable feelings because, for her, language is both a tool for expression and a limitation, capable of signaling a sense of belonging while leaving aspects of experience irreducible. Ultimately, she demonstrates that some childhood emotions are inextricably linked to the languages through which they are first felt.

Similarly, in *Caramelo*, the narrator's bilingual memories traverse multiple emotional registers. The use of Spanish often signals intimate or painful recollections.

> Everyone, everyone in La Villa, even the rooster, wakes to Pedro Infante's dark and velvety voice serenading the little morning of Father's birth. Estas son las mañanitas que cantaba el rey David, a las muchachas bonitas, se las cantamos aquí ... Because he was made to wake up early every day of his childhood, Father is terribly sleepy. (Cisneros, 2002: 56).

Spanish becomes the language of familial and cultural pain, while English often serves the narrative of self-invention and distance. The code-switching is not stylistic decoration but narrative necessity—demonstrating the split between private suffering and public articulation.

Psycholinguistic studies support this narrative bifurcation. Pavlenko (2006) argues that bilingual speakers may experience emotional detachment or reconfiguration when recounting another feeling in a second language. This psychological distancing can both hinder and facilitate storytelling. It also provides the idea of emotional safety, but illustrates the disconnection from the authenticity of memory.

In *Caramelo*, Cisneros highlights how bilingual childhood memory is deeply intertwined with observing her family. The narrator notes, "Here is Father squinting the same squint I always make when I'm photographed. He isn't acabado yet. He isn't finished, too many packs of cigarettes" (Cisneros 2002: 42). The Spanish word *acabado* (*finished, done for*) carries both literal and affective weight that English cannot fully replicate, signaling judgment, concern, and cultural perception of aging. Here, the bilingual phrasing encodes not only episodic memory—the visual detail of the father's expression—but also semantic and cultural memory. I could be a reflection of values about health or vitality.

The interactions in her family during the car ride further demonstrate the intentionality of codeswitching (Grosjean 1985: 467–477). When Aunty Licha mutters, "Cállate, vieja, you make me nervous," and Uncle Fat-Face fiddles with the luggage rack on top of the roof, (Cisneros 2002, 42) Cisneros illustrates how Spanish and English function simultaneously to convey emotion, authority, and cultural nuance. The children in the family witness and internalize these bilingual exchanges and this creates a layered mnemonic system in which episodic memories of gestures and dialogue are inseparable from the languages through which they are first experienced. Cisneros thus portrays bilingual memory not as a simple translation of experience, but as a dynamic, culturally and emotionally mediated archive.

Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa illustrate that bilingual childhood memory is not merely a repository of experiences but a complex archive where feelings themselves can be untranslatable. They reveal that bilingual childhood is a site where episodic experiences, semantic knowledge, and affective intensity converge to produce memories that are both personally intimate and culturally resonant.

Conclusion: Towards a Grammar of the Unspeakable

The autobiographical works of Cisneros and Anzaldúa reveal that bilingualism is more than a narrative technique—it is a site of memory

production, emotional survival, and identity negotiation. Their texts illustrate how memory, especially when filtered through shared cultural memory and even transgenerational trauma, cannot always be retrieved or expressed in a single language. By examining the interplay between language, memory, and identity, one can comprehend the intentionality of Chicana writers of embracing linguistic multiplicity as both a literary and political act. Bilingual memory, with all its untranslatable feelings, invites readers to dwell in the in-between spaces where the most authentic selves are forged.

The examination of bilingual autobiographical writing demonstrates that memory is never a transparent archive of the past, but an interpretive reconstruction mediated through language, culture, and power. It becomes evident that Dilthey's claim (1989) that autobiography is a hermeneutic endeavor reconstitutes the meaning of lived experience through narrative. It also demonstrates that McAdams (1993) rightfully says that the creation of "personal myths" reinterpret identity over time. Within the bilingual autobiographical text, this process becomes further complicated by the linguistic duality of the narrating subject, whose memories are filtered through distinct cultural and emotional registers. In Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, memory emerges not as a stable continuum but as a fragmented negotiation between English and Spanish, between the self of childhood and the self of adulthood, between personal testimony and cultural archive.

From a literary standpoint, these texts subvert the conventions of autobiography by embracing hybrid and non-linear forms. Cisneros's narrative fabric, symbolized by the *rebozo*, exemplifies the selective and interpretive nature of memory, where familial anecdotes and cultural fragments are interwoven into a testimonial mode that disrupts the boundary between fiction and autobiography. Anzaldúa's poetic narrative, in contrast dismantles monolingual and monocultural norms by staging identity as a perpetual crossing of borders. In both cases, autobiography becomes a locus where literary form, cultural survival, and political critique converge through the power of memory that begins with childhood recollections.

Psycholinguistic research provides a crucial framework for understanding this bilingual modulation of memory. Studies by Marian and Neisser (2000) and Pavlenko (2006) confirm that autobiographical recall is language-dependent. This insight elucidates Cisneros's oscillation between English narration and Spanish affect, as well as Anzaldúa's recourse to poetic fragmentation and code-switching as strategies of memory retrieval. As Schrauf and Rubin (2000) have shown, trauma in particular resists rearticulation in a second language, leading to the kind of "affective untranslatability" that saturates both *Caramelo* and *Borderlands*. Thus, bilingual life writing enacts at the cognitive level what Apter (2013) calls the

"politics of untranslatability," preserving the emotional intensity of cultural experience against the flattening tendencies of translation.

Equally important is the recognition that autobiography is not an isolated act of self-reflection but a cultural practice situated within broader frameworks of remembrance. Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory emphasizes the dialectic between active memory, which circulates within communities, and archival memory, otherwise dormant until reactivated. Cisneros and Anzaldúa position their texts at precisely this threshold. They reactivate suppressed memories and reinscribe them within the active memory of Chicana and Latinx communities. In doing so, they embody what Ricoeur (2004) terms "narrative identity," and situate the self not only within temporal continuity but also within collective traditions of remembering and forgetting.

Bilingual autobiography also functions as resistance to linguistic imperialism. Anzaldúa's theorization of the borderlands and Cisneros's articulation of Chicana identity affirm Butler's (1993) claim that identity is produced through reiterative acts of language. Code-switching and hybrid diction are not ornamental, they are constitutive, i.e. they contest the fiction of a unified, monolingual self and expose the cultural violence of assimilationist pressures. Benjamin's (1923) notion of translation is also relevant because Cisneros and Anzaldúa write in a manner that become signs of cultural survivance rather than deficiency.

To conclude, I reiterate that the bilingual autobiographical text produces what might be called a grammar of the unspeakable: a mode of writing that does not seek to resolve contradiction but inhabits it. The silences, ellipses, and untranslated expressions in these works mark the limits of language. They also preserve the affective charge of memory. Hybridity here is not fragmentation but the condition of authenticity, where the self is constituted precisely in the in-between spaces of linguistic multiplicity and cultural negotiation. By integrating literary theory, psycholinguistics, and cultural memory studies, this analysis underlines the idea that bilingual autobiography is a personal act of survival, a cultural archive, and a political intervention. Thus, in the works of Cisneros and Anzaldúa, bilingual memory is not simply remembered—it is enacted as resistance that ensure that untranslatable feelings continue to reverberate across generations.

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