The Body as Borderland: Reconceptualization of the Body in Recent Chicana Literature

Angelika Köhler

Since the 1980s, when Chicana/o literature began to be recognized beyond the rather narrow borders of its ethnic community, male and female Mexican American writers have opted to discuss a variety of topics and themes, creating a multiplicity of artistic expressions and literary voices. Paying less attention to questions of cultural nationalism, they have focused more on the production of texts that explore individual Chicana/o experiences as a border culture, reinscribing the borderland image as one of the most highly ambivalent tropes of Mexican American fictional and non-fictional works (cf. Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek 285-312).

The image of the borderland goes beyond the description of the geographical conditions of Mexican American life; it refers primarily to the symbolic spaces in which Chicanas/os construct their hybrid identities. Thus, as Gloria Anzaldúa argues in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), "be[ing] a crossroads" (195) does not suggest a denial of differences, but rather promotes their enunciation; it calls for the exploration of highly diverse historical and contemporary cultural experiences. Border-consciousness focuses on an awareness of borders as non-restrictive, flexible markers of symbolic spaces that need to be challenged and constantly re-defined in the individual's permanent processes of self-positioning in terms of race, class, and gender. This concept of the borderland transcends the idea of an exclusively discursive construct, an open intersection of various, sometimes even controversial cultural semantics, and focuses instead on the interdependencies of the discursively constructed contexts with the acts and gestures of the human body as a multilayered carrier of cultural meaning. The moment of corporeality establishes interesting parallels between the image of the borderland and that of the body, as conceptualized among others by Judith Butler.

Speaking of gender performativity, Butler's idea of identity as a performative act implies that gender can never be nature or culture alone, but

will always result from the interdependency of these two concepts (cf. Butler 136). Butler's argument of the coexistence of the constructedness of the body and of the awareness of bodily expressions allows the body to be read as a borderland image. Similar to the borderland, "the body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 136). As much as the analysis of language provides access to "this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its 'interior' signification on its surface [that is, the] gendered bodies," which Butler refers to as the many "styles of the flesh" (139) in her critical reading of Beauvoir, the discursively created borderland images may be read as expressions—or "styles"—of self-positioning, thus of identity creation. Like Butler's "styles of the flesh" the styles of identity are never fully self-styled; they always have a history which conditions and limits their possibilities (cf. Butler 139). The gendered body is as performative as the moment of identity creation since both have "no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler 136). Since gender reality is constructed through sustained social performance, the body can be understood as an infinite borderland, a territory in which borders are constantly re-defined and re-arranged.

This interaction of the image of the borderland with the notion of the body as a carrier of meaning has frequently informed texts written by Chicana authors. In my paper, I want to reread Cherríe Moraga's 1992 two-act play *Heroes and Saints* and Ana Castillo's 1999 novel *Peel My Love Like an Onion* as examples of reconceptualizations of the body as borderland.

The protagonist of *Heroes and Saints* is Cerezita, "Little Cherrie," a young woman who was born without a body after her mother's exposure to pesticides during her pregnancy.[1] Although a rather high percentage of the farmworkers' children living in the small San Joaquin Valley town of McLaughlin suffer from cancer and bodily malformations and despite the efforts of some community members to call public attention to the serious situation of the inhabitants, Cerezita's mother keeps her daughter hidden from the world outside as much as possible. But the young woman revolts against her imprisonment and from the porch of her home she finally creates a powerful vision of her martyred homeland as "a thousand mini-crucifixions" (Moraga 134). Watching the vineyards, she compares the plants to crosses on "a regular cemetery. [...] The trunk of each of the

plants is a little gnarled body of Christ writhing in agony" (Moraga 134). Cerezita, the disembodied head who physically has no chance to build up a direct relationship to the soil her farmworker family and her neighbors work, succeeds in developing a powerful empathetic connection to the land and its spirit. As Moraga has pointed out in an interview, "[m]ost important about Cerezita is that she is a Mexican American woman who has great vision and who is imprisoned" (Ikas 163).

Yet the protagonist is not only physically locked up in her room due to her bodily deformity; she is also exposed to a spiritual imprisonment by her family's and her friends' concepts of life that make her suffer even worse. First, there are her relatives: her mother, Dolores, interprets her daughter's malformations as a Divine sign of punishment for her husband's lack of responsibility (he finally abandons his family). Her brother Mario, a "sometimes-student," wants to make something out of his life by leaving for the city, but the fear of his coming out prevents him from gaining agency until the very last moment of his life. And Yolanda, Cerezita's hairdresser sister and a young mother, who has decided to meet the traditional female image, cannot perform her role because her baby daughter dies and she gives herself up to mourning. Second, there are her friends: Amparo Manríquez, who "adopted" (Moraga 90) a neighbor's child after her own marriage remained childless, develops into a political activist and organizes demonstrations which are supposed to inform the public about the lethal effects of being forced to live in an environmentally polluted area, but brutally beaten up by the police, she is "cut out [her] spleen" (Moraga 135) which might either refer to the body organ or to the violent anger she feels about her people's entrapment, or to both suggesting another ambivalent expression of vulnerability and victimization. Last not least, there is Father Juan, the priest, who appears to be open-minded and therefore becomes a confidant to Cerezita, yet whose inflexible understanding of clerical responsibilities makes him ultimately betray his friendship with the young woman.

In comparison to Cerezita, all her relatives and friends are "fully dimensional"[2] since they consist of body and mind, but this completeness has not enabled them to perceive their environment in its totality, to create multidimensional images of what is going on around them. On the contrary, experiencing their relocation to the margins of the American social system has made them passively confirm the dominant patterns of Western thinking which organize life along "a whole range of normative binaries that are used to characterize embodiment—male/female,

health/ill-health, heterosexual/homosexual, white/[non-white] and so on" (Shildrick 9). Cerezita's relatives and friends define themselves predominantly in terms of their bodies, i.e. in terms of their biological sex. Their states of being are therefore marked by a faked completeness because following Occidental traditions, "the body occupies the place of the excluded other" (Shildrick 2). Any attempts to understand the socio-cultural processes that determine their and their community members' existences must necessarily be marked by a one-dimensionality which cuts back their flexibility and limits their capacities for self-protection and self-defense, respectively, thus reducing them to losers in the daily struggle for survival. Their physical completeness has made them blind to the complexities that shape their lives. Unable to realize the powers of sexism and racism, they are exposed to a gradual mental destruction, a process in which they ultimately position themselves as victims even though they refuse to acknowledge this condition. Still, they are incapable of creating any visionary idea or concept that could provide them with counterimages to the hopelessness of their daily experiences.

Only Cerezita, the disembodied head, who is physically not prepared to be "fully dimensional" (Ikas 163), sees "it all" (Moraga 134). She perceives truths which the others are unable to recognize. Her spiritual vision compensates her for her bodily insufficiency. As Moraga points out, the protagonist "is completely physically disabled from being able to speak the truth" (Ikas 163), but it is due to this insufficiency that she succeeds in redefining her homeland beyond the binary pattern of power versus powerlessness, as a borderland of heroes and saints where Christ is crucified. In her vision, this Biblical image balances the people's daily experiences of despair and pain with notions of hope and salvation. Since Cerezita cannot be defined by her body, she is considered as a non-entity and therefore excluded from the cultural system into which she was born (and, ironically, this exclusion is intensified by her mother who eagerly keeps her hidden from the public). The young woman is pushed into a space of invisibility with which she cannot identify due to her lack of a female body. Still, as a non-entity, Cerezita also cannot play a fixed social role defined on the basis of the female body, which gives her the freedom to trespass the binary order. The protagonist actually has no other choice than to use her mental powers to reposition herself in the cultural system. With the help of language, Cerezita defends her right to live as a human being and finally reclaims her identity on the discursive level of her vision. Although she physically remains a disembodied head, her

identity as a thinking subject is not realized as a pure mind, "an incorporeal abstraction" (Shildrick 1) in the sense of the Western intellectual tradition, but rather it is grounded in the physical experience of her exclusion from the outside world. Not the formal possession of a body enables a human being to position him- or herself in life, but as Cerecita argues in the following passage, the individual's mental awareness of the body as an instrument to act out—to perform—and thus to construct one's identity:

> It wasn't your body I wanted. It was mine. All I wanted was for you to make me feel like I had a body because, the fact is, I don't. I was denied one. But for a few minutes, a few minutes before you started thinking, I felt myself full of fine flesh filled to the bones of my toes. [...] I miss myself.. Is that so hard to understand? [...] And I'm sick of all this goddamn dying. If I had your arms and legs, if I had your dick for chrissake, you know what I'd do? I'd burn this motherless town down and all the poisoned fields around it. I'd give healthy babies to each and every childless woman who wanted one and I'd even stick around to watch those babies grow up! [...] You're a waste of a body. (Moraga 144)

Unlike her relatives and friends who remain confined in binary concepts which organize their thinking along dualities rooted in the exclusion of the one or the other, Cerezita's magical-realist vision anticipates a universe based on multiple interactions. Imagining her homeland as a place for heroes and saints, she alludes to the ambiguities of her own and her people's existence: their apparently lost struggle with life, as materialized in the high death toll, is contextualized within the figure of Christ, the Biblical image of suffering and heroism, thus reconstructing this life as still worth being fought for:

> Inside the valley of my wound, there is a people. A miracle people. In this pueblito where the valley people live, the river runs red with blood; but they are not afraid because they are used to the color red. It is the same color as the river that runs through their veins, the same color as the sun setting into the sierras, the same color of the pool of liquid they were born into. They remember this in order to understand why their fields, like the rags of the wounded, have soaked up the color and still bear no fruit. No lovely red fruit that el pueblo could point to and say yes, for this we bleed, for this our eyes go red with rage and sadness. They tell themselves red is as necessary as bread. (Moraga 148)

Mexican Americans' strong belief in Catholicism should not be one-sidedly interpreted as an expression of defeat or submission. Religion operates on two levels; as institutionalized Church, Catholicism certainly functions as a political power mechanism that sets up hierarchies in which Mexican Americans form the Other in terms of ethnic origin and social position, but in Latino communities, Catholicism lives first and foremost as belief in the *Guadalupana*, even if it sometimes operates less as faith commitment than as culture. It provides them with a common crosscultural denominator that gives them a feeling of unity, of community, of collective identity. Their strong faith also acts as a means of empowerment in their daily struggles for survival and as a source of energy for self-defense, since the images of the Saints personify their believes in hope and salvation (cf. Stevens-Arroyo and Díaz-Stevens 257-89). The image of the crucified Christ symbolizes this interaction of heroism and sainthood that encourages Cerezita to claim the experience of the wholeness of her being—which she will never be able to do in physical terms—on a spiritual level as the personification of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Restoring the unity of body and mind, the young woman's vision carries holistic elements, but still, since she wants to reclaim her right to achieve her full humanity, she has no other choice than to overcome the binary dualities of the culture she is part of, but which denies her any participation for the very reason of lacking a body.

Moraga's play rewrites the image of the victimized Chicana. Constructing her female protagonist as a disembodied head, she makes Cerezita define her body as a "variable boundary" between her power for discursive self-construction and her awareness of physical exclusion, thus enabling her to overcome her imprisonment and to position herself in the borderland of her Mexican American experiences. Rewriting the body as a phenomenon "in process, never fixed or solid, but always multiple and fluid," the text demonstrates the creative potential of "the irreducible interplay of text and physicality" (Shildrick 6).

Ana Castillo's novel *Peel my Love Like an Onion* tells the story of Carmen la Coja Santos, who launches a rather successful career as a flamenco dancer in Chicago "despite the obstacle of a gimpy leg, the legacy of a childhood attack of polio" (Castillo n.p.). Her artistic success is accompanied first by an affair with Agustín, the married leader of the troupe, and later by a passionate one–year relationship with his godson Manolo, a highly talented dancer. When Carmen is no longer able to perform the flamenco due to her crippling disease, she begins a promising

second career as a singer. Castillo's story clearly recalls its literary predecessor, Prosper Mérimeé's 1845 novelette *Carmen*, which later provided the literary basis for George Bizet's famous opera. Although the protagonists of both texts are incarnations of a kind of devilish woman who follows the calls of her body and whose vitality and passion mock social conventions, the driving force of their restlessness is their search for identity. They want to realize their quest for love, but in one way or the other both fail. However, whereas Mérimeé's Carmen pays with her life for the revolt of her wild beauty, the Mexican American author's protagonist rewrites her physical disability as a moment of gain, as a symbol of her energy and her will to survive in a world that tries to exclude her because of her handicap. Castillo's work draws explicitly on the image of the body as a borderland by discussing the ambivalent interactions between physicality and language.

Peel My Love Like an Onion is narrated by Carmen Santos, a forty-year-old Mexican American women from a rather poor Chicago neighborhood, whose life has been marked by an attack of polio when she was six years old. The non-linear structure of her recollections reveals "one transparent layer following the next" (Castillo n.p.)—similar to the skins of an onion—the multifacetted identities of a Chicana who redefines traditional notions of the body within the context of U.S.-American culture. Her narrative reconstructs the life of a woman who remembers herself as "Carmen la Coja, one-legged dancing queen" (Castillo 10), seemingly an oxymoron that links two contradictory tropes since the image of a dancer is traditionally connected with concepts of beauty, elegance and physical perfection, whereas la Coja conjures associations with notions of ugliness and bodily insufficiencies. And indeed, after her polio attack, Carmen's fate seemed settled: "When I recovered I was fine except for my left leg, which did not work anymore. I wore a brace and used crutches and was sent to a special school for cripples. That's what we were called then. We were cripples, retards, the deaf and dumb" (Castillo 12). From that moment onward, the young girl's life as a human being is determined by her body's insufficiency. Within the binary patterns of Western culture, this would already limit her possibilities, but as a Mexican American woman, being classified as not healthy, cements her a place at the margins—if not outside—of the American cultural system.

Only by chance and anticipating the risk of making her daughter a financial burden to her own life in case she should remain unmarried due to her disability, her mother sends her to school. But Carmen turns out to

be smart, and when she is personally confronted with a slogan that reminds her of the American credo, she wants to make it her own and take advantage of her chance: "Kids, you can do anything you want to do. Don't let anybody tell you different" (Castillo 13). Participating in a dance therapy, she not only gradually overcomes her feelings of inferiority caused by her physical deformity, but after five years of hard and intensive work she frees herself from her crutches and decides to become a professional dancer. Carmen has learned to perceive her body as something that is not static but open to change, whose development she can even influence with energy and diligence. Her body is a more complex phenomenon than its outer appearance is able to signify. The young woman gradually denies any attempts at reducing her personality to her physical condition. When she is introduced to Agustín, a successful Chicago flamenco dancer, she speaks out for herself and shows confidence in her achievements.

Carmen realizes her goal to become a professional flamenco dancer. The strongly rhythmical dance of flamenco, originally performed by Spanish gypsies, functions as the expression of her inner tensions and contradictions, articulating her desires, her sufferings, and her pleasures. Using her body in certain movements and figures, she determines the "language" of her body, thus reinscribing its meaning. In the performative act of dancing the flamenco, Carmen is able to create her multiple female selves. Like Cerezita in Moraga's play, she succeeds in rejecting the prejudices of the U.S.-American cultural system organized along patterns of duality. The protagonist becomes aware of the potential of her body to articulate herself—her multilayered identity as a crippled Mexican American female artist. Referring to herself as Carmen La Coja, she redefines her body as a borderland image from her awareness of the physical specifics of her body and the significances of her cultural experiences, which she translates into the language of her body. When the protagonist chooses the name Carmen La Coja for her career as a flamenco dancer, she addresses most explicitly the ambivalent interactions between physicality and language. She advertises and finally markets her body as a symbolic space in which physical conditions and discursive constructedness are in a permanent process of redefinition. But, however successfully the artist manages the professional part of her life, in her private relationships she is not able to overcome the traditional notions of the female body. In her affair with Agustín, Carmen must ultimately realize the inevitability of accepting the importance of her lover's marriage

and considers “a borrowed love” (Castillo 37) to be enough for her. The protagonist’s one-year relationship with Manolo seems to be controlled by physical desires. The young man demonstrates his power over her when he considers her body as something that belongs to him, thereby ending their relationship.

As soon as Carmen’s polio-inflicted condition worsens at the age of thirty-six, her awareness of the body as a borderland is newly challenged. She has entered a “degeneration condition” (Castillo 109) with no hope for cure or rehabilitation and is finally forced to wear a leg brace again. As a result, the protagonist experiences uncertainties about her identity: she is afraid of losing control over the performative character of her concept of the body. But she counteracts the fears that her self-constructed image as Carmen la Coja could transform itself into the description of her physical condition. She starts a second successful career as a singer. Again her body functions as the medium to express herself—however this time her voice directly performs her discursive self-construction. Carmen’s body is now assigned a supporting function since her ultimate achievement goes beyond the physical: it is located in her ability to position herself in the act of speaking/singing. In terms of the borderland image of the body, this suggests that Carmen has successfully re-defined the symbolic spaces that constitute her personality; she is now able to reposition herself according to her changed physical condition. Although her audience is unaware of her handicap, she goes on performing as Carmen la Coja. The artist’s identity is shaped among other things by her experiences of coping with the reality of a physical disability—she has rearranged the borders between the diverse components of her self, but she will never deny the importance of her crippled leg on the formation of her personality.

The protagonist’s grown awareness of the interactions of the physical conditions of her body and her discursive reconstruction of its different “skins” finally make her rearrange her private relationships. Carmen has learned to appreciate her body as something valuable that is crucial to her concept of self. She finally reclaims her body also in the realms of love and sex by redefining it from an object of sexual desire to a subject that chooses in moments of sexual pleasure, an act in which her entire being participates:

> And when I don't want to see anyone I don't answer the telephone at all, pull the shades down tight, put on my own CD on the new stereo with six speakers around the apartment and just dance. I dance and dance and dance. (Castillo 213)

Carmen has ultimately gained control over her body and mind.

The two texts under consideration in this paper discuss the disabled female body, a highly challenging but still rather rare topic in fiction. Yet neither for Cherríe Moraga nor for Ana Castillo is the question of physical perfection or insufficiency of central importance. What really counts is their fictional protagonists' claim of the corporeality of their bodies as a prerequisite for their creation of their independent selves; Cerezita's vision and Carmen's artistic career are rooted in the concept of the unity of body and mind. Although their individual processes of identity construction take place in the realm of interacting discourses of various forms and contexts, the right and the power to claim their participation in these discourses grows from their awareness of the body as a physical entity (including their disabilities) and as a product of discursive constructions thus overcoming their experiences of exclusion. Negotiating the very physical conditions of their existence as they experience them in terms of race, class and gender, both Chicana protagonists construct their identities performatively in the acts of discursive self-formation. They rewrite the traditional Western notion of the body as a "being" within the concept of the borderland, a concept that transcends the limitations of thinking in binary patterns.

In *Heroes and Saints* and in *Peel My Love Like an Onion* the bodily lack turns out as a spiritual gain that ultimately translates itself into a bodily gain because the protagonists are able to realize themselves not as victims of a cultural system that operates on the basis of dualities which always suggests the exclusion of the Other, but as human beings who experience a creative relationship with their natural and cultural environments. Cerezita and Carmen are both women who move beyond learning to live with their handicap. Realizing the effects of their physical insufficiencies in contemporary U.S.-American society, they redefine their culturally assigned spaces of marginality by reclaiming their bodies as a borderland of symbolic spaces in which the physicality of the body constantly interacts with its discursive constructedness. It is therefore the moment of the female protagonists' performative self-positioning in the cultural system that defines their identity. Since this is an ongoing

process permanently exposed to change, neither Cerezita nor Carmen are able to identify a fixed position. As Mexican American women they have to cope with the multiple experiences of living in the borderland. Their bodies can be read as images of this borderland in which the spaces of the corporeal and the discursive are in a state of continuous re-construction.

Notes

[1] Moraga's play rewrites a central image of Luis Valdez's 1963 play *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, in which a bodyless head and a headless body are two characters belonging to the same family. See Huerta 141-50 and Herms 51-52.

[2] According to Moraga, Cerezita is not "fully dimensional" which allows for the conclusion that people with body and head can be referred to as fully dimensional. See Ikas 163.

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