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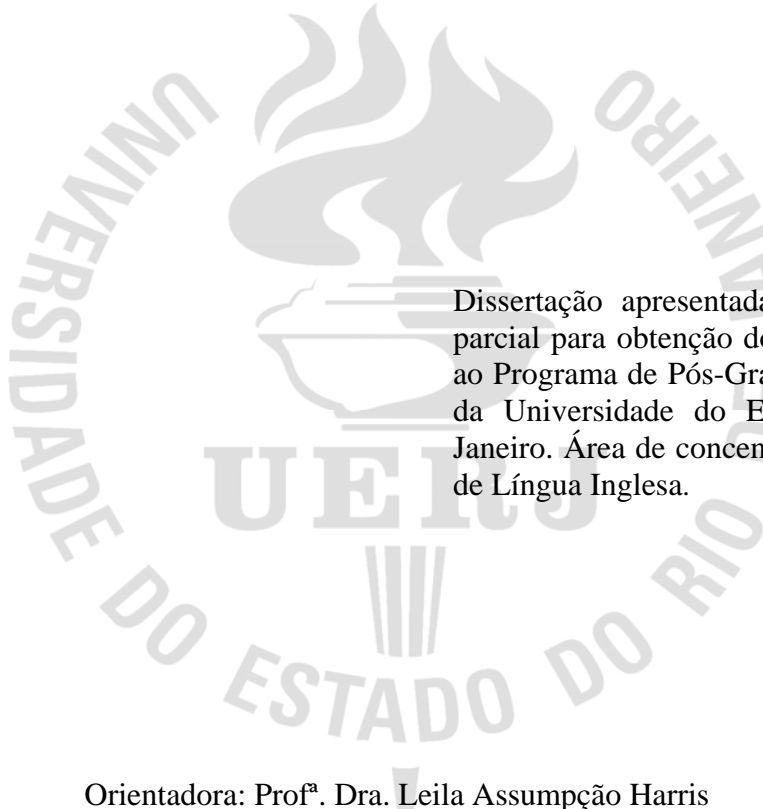
**Sandra Cisneros' autobiographical practices: the simple yet intricate art of
weaving *verdad* with *puro cuento***

Rio de Janeiro

2016

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Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Prof^a. Dra. Leila Assumpção Harris

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DEDICATÓRIA

A meus avós.

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To write is to ask questions.

Sandra Cisneros

RESUMO

CALAZANS, Mariana Cerino. *Sandra Cisneros' autobiographical practices: the simple yet intricate art of weaving *verdad* with *puro cuento**. 2016. 103 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2016.

Partindo de uma perspectiva histórica, o presente trabalho investiga o aparecimento e uso do gênero literário “autobiografia”, associado à emergência da modernidade e noção de subjetividade a ela atrelada. Questiono tal gênero do ponto de vista da crítica feminista pós-colonial e sugiro o termo “prática autobiográfica” como alternativa na análise da obra literária de Sandra Cisneros, escritora nascida em Chicago, nos Estados Unidos, mas de *background* mexicano. O foco da análise literária recai sobre seu mais recente romance, *Caramelo* (2002), e sobre sua obra poética dividida em dois livros, *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987) e *Loose Woman* (1994). A noção de autoficção se apresenta como uma possível chave de leitura para o romance. Já no que concerne aos poemas, aproxima-se a poética da autora com a questão da poesia confessional e sua herança cultural mexicana. A publicação mais recente da escritora, *A House of My Own* (2015), serve de pilar a esta dissertação, fornecendo grande parte do material biográfico, extremamente relevante para a discussão, do qual faço uso. Discuto, então, como a obra literária de Sandra Cisneros, na sua condição de autora Chicana, pode desestabilizar o gênero da autobiografia, na medida em que seus textos utilizam elementos autobiográficos, mas não pertencem ou não se enquadram ao gênero tradicional.

Palavras-chave: Autobiografia. Prática autobiográfica. Autoficção. Sandra Cisneros. Poesia.

ABSTRACT

CALAZANS, M.C. *Sandra Cisneros' autobiographical practices: the simple yet intricate art of weaving *verdad* with *puro cuento**. 2016. 103 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2016.

Adopting a historical perspective, the present work investigates the emergence and use of the literary genre “autobiography”, associated with modernity and its notion of subjectivity. I question the genre from the viewpoint of postcolonial feminist criticism, suggesting the term “autobiographical practice” as alternative. I intend to discuss the latter in the literary work of Sandra Cisneros, who was born in Chicago, in the United States, but who comes from a Mexican background. The focus of the literary analysis is on her most recent novel, *Caramelo* (2002), and her two books of poetry, *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987) and *Loose Woman* (1994). The notion of autofiction is brought up as a possible key to the reading to the novel. The analysis of the poems associates the author’s aesthetics to that of confessional poetry and to her cultural heritage. The writer’s latest publication, *A House of My Own* (2015), serves a cornerstone to my dissertation, since it provides most of the biographical material, extremely relevant to the present work, I make use of. This dissertation, then, discusses how Cisneros’ literature, given her condition as a Chicana author, can destabilize the genre of autobiography, to the extent that her texts at once utilize autobiographical elements, but do not belong to the traditional genre.

Keywords: Autobiography. Autobiographical practice, Autoficition, Sandra Cisneros. Poetry.

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INTRODUCTION

I celebrate myself, and sing myself

Walt Whitman

First and foremost, the interest in the power of narrative is what originally stimulates this work. To narrate is what potentially differentiates us, human beings, from other beings. I do not mean to suggest, with this affirmation, that humans are somehow superior for being able to narrate – the fallacy of human superiority has brought us to act in disapproving ways – I would just like to consider our narrative capacity as something remarkable and advantageous¹.

My dissertation will deal with a specific kind of narrative: self-narration, or, simply put, “the way we talk about ourselves”. Paul John Eakin, in his *Living Autobiographically*, questions the very idea of “talking about ourselves” for its tendency to “separate selfhood from the act of expressing it, to attribute an independent existence to the ‘ourselves’ we could be ‘talking about’”. Contrary to this idea, Eakin defends, as I do too, that “there is a mutually enhancing interplay between what we are and what we say we are.” (EAKIN, 2008, p. 2). In other words, we constitute our identity through discourse. Mentioning neurologist Oliver Sacks’ research, Eakin affirms that narrative is not only a literary form but part of the fabric of our lived experience and that there is an “extremely close and dynamic relation between narrative and identity.” Thus, when we enact our life narratives, we should not see narration as something apart from the object, that is, our selves (EAKIN, 2008, p. 2).

Leonor Arfuch, in *O Espaço Biográfico*, reinforces the centrality of narrative in the telling of life stories, highlighting, for her turn, that these stories, like art works, are subjected to certain compositional procedures, such as the predominant axis of temporality (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 111). For Arfuch, narratives or accounts do not only relate to the arrangement of facts, but to the structure of life itself and, as a consequence, of identity (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 112). Eakin develops a similar discussion concerning narratives as the structure of our lives, but instead of “narrative” he uses the word “autobiography”. He claims that autobiography is not “merely something we read in a book”, it “structures our living” (EAKIN, 2008, p. 4). The

¹ <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ilustrissima/127933-a-origem-das-historias.shtml>

critic argues, however, that even telling parts of our life stories everyday, we do not pay much attention to this process. Since we have been trained to narrate from a very early age, the process is somehow internalized (EAKIN, 2008, p. 4).

Even though self-narration is a rather naturalized act, recent criticism from different areas has been addressing the enormous amount of autobiographical production so as to problematize it. Indeed, life narratives are dominant in our times, as the critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note in their *Reading Autobiography*, a vast research that will accompany me throughout this work. For the two scholars, “in the first decade of the twenty-first century, most prominently in the West, autobiographical discourse has become ubiquitous.” (SMITH ; WATSON, 2010, p. 124).

Diana Klinger, another critic that has significantly contributed to the development of my thoughts, also discusses, in *Escritas de si, escritas do outro*, the omnipresence of autobiographical discourse in our days. According to her, the interest in the production and reception of life narratives is due to two main factors: 1) the growing exposure, via different media (reality shows, gossip websites and magazines, virtual platforms such as instagram, and social networks such as Facebook, to mention but a few), of intimate life or a “spectacularization² of the self”; and 2) the critique, or deconstruction of the subject – a disbelief in identity and subjectivity as a coherent, stable, and reliable entity that will be further discussed in the following chapter (KLINGER, 2012, p. 15-20).

Klinger also argues that with the advent of cultural studies and gender studies, criticism has been prone to reflect about the subject who writes (KLINGER, 2012, p. 13). This is a relevant remark concerning my central object of analysis here: the work of Sandra Cisneros, who addresses cultural as well as gender questions in her literature. Sandra Cisneros is a writer I came to know during my years as an undergraduate student at UERJ. I remember having heard her name and the name of her first novel, *The House On Mango Street* (1984), at the long corridors of the university and it called my attention for it sounded different from the authors and literary works we were most used to read. When it finally came the semester I was supposed to read it, I felt positively anxious.

² According to Oxford’s *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, the term “spectacularization” refers to a process of producing a representation in the form of a major spectacle. Available at: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100522310> Last access: February 26th.

At first what attracted me to her writing was her lyricism and the beautiful imagery she makes up with her English and Spanish words. As a lover of poetry, I found very interesting the way *The House On Mango Street* is composed. The term “novel” can barely account for what the work is. The words commonly used to refer to the different sections of the book are “sketches” or “vignettes”, but the term that best describes them is “lazy poems”, which is Cisneros’ own definition.

Being a member of professor Leila Assumpção Harris’ research group since my participation in *Iniciação Científica* in 2010, I was encouraged to read Cisneros’ most recent novel *Caramelo* (2002). Again, I found in the novel the same lyric tone that had interested me at first, but *Caramelo* also intrigued me because of the narrative strategies the author employed in it, especially in one part of the novel, as I will explore later on. My choice of *Caramelo* was also an affective one. Some of the characters and situations in the book bring me memories I greatly cherish, such as the family gatherings in my grandparent’s house, the family trips to the beach during vacations and the family habit of “telling healthy lies”. My grandparents were storytellers I enjoyed listening to very much and I wish I were able to tell their stories, as Celaya the protagonist/narrator of *Caramelo* does.

Thus, *Caramelo* is the main focus in my analysis of her fictional writing. I will also mention Cisneros’ debut novel, *The House On Mango Street*, throughout this work, but, since there is already plenty of critical material dealing with it, I have decided to center my discussion on the author’s latest novel. Opportunely, Cisneros released a non-fiction book in October of 2015 that helped me enormously not only in my reading of *Caramelo* but also in understanding the author both in relation to a more intimate dimension of her life, and to her literary project. This book’s title is *A House of My Own* and it is composed of photographs and forty-six texts of a variety of genres (though Cisneros is always crossing and blending textual genres), all preceded by a commentary of the author specially written for this publication. This book, I thank divine providence for that, became a cornerstone of my dissertation. A second focus of the present investigation is Cisneros’ poetic material: her two poetry books, *My Wicked Wicked Ways* and *Loose Woman*.

Because my work mentions the issue of confession (both Augustine’s and Rousseau’s and also Confessional Poetry), I will make my own. Having been brought up in an essentially middle-class environment, I have overlooked some extremely relevant elements in Cisneros’ literature. I mean, it is not that I had not noticed them, but I had not given them the attention

they deserved until very recently. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual subject I had never experienced the position of the Other – or I thought I had not – because even considering the condition of women, I have felt, from a very young age, that I could do whatever boys could, despite my parents telling me otherwise. My nationality (considering I am from a “peripheral” country) had not been something I had dwelled upon either.

Concluding my confession, my point is: even though Cisneros is one of the main figures of the Chicano movement, that did not catch my attention at first. I was interested in the literature she produced and, despite addressing her cultural and gender issues, I did not find them intellectually attractive. Only undergoing a process of maturation that has to do, partially, with the Master’s Course, I feel I could really understand the importance of her cultural hybridism and position as a woman. After the relief of the confession, we may now turn our attention to an outline of my argumentation’s development.

In Chapter 1, “Life Writing, history, criticism”, I will discuss the question of autobiography under a historical and critical perspective. I highlight the transitional period from the late Middle Ages to Early Modernity as crucial to the shift in human’s perception of subjectivity. Broadly speaking, one could argue that culture was undergoing a process of secularization (Renaissance, Humanism) and that led to a new vision of the world and humans’ relation to it. This emerging perception has to do with the notions of individuality, self-interest and production of objective knowledge, as I will further explain.

Literature – and even the very concept of literature – walked hand in hand with these transformations. I will mention Montaigne’s reflections about himself and his surroundings as a critical turn in the idea of subjectivity and individuality. However, it is only in Rousseau’s *Confessions* that the modern format of autobiography is established. In addition to Montaigne’s sharp sense of individuality, Rousseau brings in to his text the attempt of being sincere, honest, transparent – and that would be the model for autobiographers for a long period. Discussing Rousseau’s *Confessions*, I observe that the context of his writing was different from that of Montaigne’s. In the eighteenth century there exists a much more settled network of autobiographical discourses (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 114). Besides that, I also consider the emergence of a dichotomy: private *versus* public dimensions. It is important to mention this question to the extent that this dichotomy is exactly what motivates Rousseau’s writing. Also, I compare the latter’s *Confessions* to Augustine’s *Confessions*,

since Augustine's is considered to be, by some, the first book length autobiographical narrative in the West.

Indeed, Rousseau's work is central to the development of the first chapter. After discussing it, my arguments will take another direction. I mention the work of Nietzsche's as another main turn in the concept of subjectivity (he writes in the end of the nineteenth century). The philosopher's production was dedicated to criticize many of the foundations of Western thought, deconstructing the notion of a Cartesian subject: one that is coherent, stable, and able to produce objective, verifiable knowledge. Much of the philosophy developed in the following century was a response to Nietzsche's considerations. Thus, in our days, as I will argue, criticism is suspicious of the transparency Rousseau aimed at. Rather, critics (such as Eakin and Arfuch, mentioned in the beginning of this introduction) argue that the self is not translated in the text, but it is produced in the text, through discursive devices. The focus on linguistic aspects can be associated with the structuralist thought, to the extent it valued the text as a rather impersonal act.

Two essays are relevant to my discussion as well: Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's "What is an author?". I remark their importance in questioning the figure of the author as the original (or final) source of meaning. In the perspective of the present work, it is fundamental to claim that, ironically, while in the European and American context criticism would emphasize the linguistic aspect, weakening the figure of the author, in many other contexts, especially considering liberational movements of different strands, the issue of authority was starting to be reclaimed. The site of the speaker needed not to be disregarded, but problematized.

That is where I include postcolonial and feminist theory in my analysis. I take on the arguments of these two strands because they pose a different perspective, they produce a counter-hegemonic discourse. Their primary goal is to undermine the binary thinking that frameworks Western thought. By doing so, they provoke a dislocation in the notion of subjectivity, as Stuart Hall argues in "The Question of Cultural Identity" (2007). In my reading of Sandra Cisneros I do not work with these two theories separately, though. In my view, it is more profitable to criticize the *collusion* of patriarchal society with colonial organization (BAHRI, 2008, p. 201). A postcolonial feminist perspective, then, considers the question of the Third-World woman, or, the woman in the peripheries of the world.

On a first moment one could argue that postcolonial feminist theory is not appropriate to discuss Cisneros work for the obvious reason that she was born and used to live, until very recently, in the U.S. Nevertheless, as my reading of her works demonstrates, her identity is closely connected to her experience as a Chicana – a peripheral group in the dominant WASP population of the U.S. My argument concerning her work is that it can be read as an autobiographical practice, a term I borrow from Smith & Watson. Even though the two scholars use “autobiographical practice” (or act) quite often in their work, they do not provide a clear-cut definition of it. We learn they use the term in opposition to autobiography, the conventional genre, referring, in general, to works produced by marginalized subjects in the last decades of the twentieth century. But, what would be a practice/act? What the term actually casts light upon? Why my choice for it?

According to sociologist Rob Stones (2010, p.13), on an elementary level, the notion of action refers to human practices in general, that is, what we do. On a more complex level, however, actions are the practices of collective actors, of members of a group that share certain features such as gender, class, nationality, etc. As Stones argues, regardless of the group, collective actors possess the capacity to act: they have agency – the dynamic element which translates the potential capacity into concrete practice. I conclude thus, that the idea of action as a collective practice which carries, in itself, agency (or the capacity to change) necessarily implies a political dimension. Philosopher Hannah Arendt, discussing the question of action in *A Condição Humana* (2000), also points out the political dimension involved in it. For her, action concerns plurality – the fact that we are multiple and diverse – which, still with Arendt, is the condition of all political life (2000, p. 19).

In my view, the choice for using the term “autobiographical practice” is relevant for it emphasizes, through the connection between the notion of practice with the category of action, a political engagement that aims at change, or, as said, agency. In other words: I do not propose a new literary genre by using the term “autobiographical practice”. Rather, I believe it could be seen as a writing/reading possibility which is productive to the extent it highlights the idea of practice/action as a – non-conservative – political exercise. In the case of Cisneros’ work, as I intend to show throughout this research, the political aspect involves the questioning of the *status quo* concerning gender, social class, nationality, and the production of art.

Chapter 2, “Autofiction in/and prose narrative”, is dedicated to the investigation of *Caramelo*. Many of my ideas are supported Cisneros’ latest publication, *A House of My Own* (2015), as mentioned. Before dealing with the novel I provide some biographical information about the author and discuss briefly the Chicano movement and Chicano literature, for Cisneros is considered one of the main figures of both. Even though her relation to the movement seems obvious, since she is Mexican American, I argue that only through writing was she able to reflect, question and understand the otherness of her identity.

Despite pointing out many of the similarities between Celaya’s fictional life, the protagonist/narrator of *Caramelo*, and Cisneros’ real life, I remark that the most interesting similarity, for my dissertation, is the position both have as “authors” of stories. As we will see, I focus, primarily, on the second part of the novel, “When I Was Dirt” for its insightful and rich structure that leads me to consider the novel’s metafictional quality. In addition, I address the notion of autofiction as discussed by Diana Klinger (2012), thinking of it as a possible strategy in Cisneros’ autobiographical practice. Besides that, in Chapter 2, I consider the possibility of a non-fictional piece by Cisneros, a preface to the 25th anniversary edition of *The House On Mango Street* (2009), as also being autofiction, and I develop a discussion about the paratextual elements as a strategy of inscription of the author in the fabric of the narrative, especially in parts 1 and 3 of the novel.

In Chapter 3, “Poetry as autobiographical practice”, I deal with Cisneros’ poetry, using *My Wicked Wicked Ways* and *Loose Woman*, which was not such an easy task since there is not much material about it. I would like to think of this chapter as an attempt to provide a reading of the writer’s poems seeing them as a possible autobiographical practice. My central question in this chapter is: to what extent can Cisneros’ poetry be viewed as an autobiographical practice? For such a debate, I refer back to the origins of lyric poetry and to English Romanticism, researching the connections between the speaker in the poem (or lyric-I/poetic-I) and the author’s voice.

After analyzing many excerpts from Cisneros’ poems and exploring the issues they present – mainly the questioning of gender roles, cultural hybridism and sexuality – I bring up “Confessional Poetry” to the discussion, since its main feature is its open autobiographical engagement, with the disclosing of the author’s intimate issues such as family relationships, rape, sexuality, drugs, alcohol, etc. In my view, as I argue further in Chapter 3, Cisneros’ poetry cannot be considered Confessional because the latter seems rather specific in terms of

historical period and authorship. However, it is undeniable that Cisneros' uses a confessional strategy, not only in a self-interested way (which is something criticized in confessional poets), but also in a politically and socially engaged way.

In the context of a Master's Degree in the literatures written in the English language, I believe the space to study authors that do not belong to the hegemonic ideology in a certain country is fundamental. As Laura Pérez argues in her article "*El desorden*, Nationalism and Chicana/o Aesthetics", Chicano art can be a tool for destabilizing the established organizations, institutions and beliefs in the U.S. "for they embody that which is meant to be disembodied within the dominating symbolic order" (PEREZ, 1999, p. 19). Nowadays, we should not think of Chicano discourse as opposed to American discourse: we must acknowledge their relationship is a conflictive and ambiguous one, as I try to show in the reading of Cisneros poetic work.

It is important to highlight also that criticism should not victimize or use Chicano literature as a token, for it is the outstanding quality of works by minorities, such as Chicanas, that is forcing a space in American letters that had not existed before, as María Herrera-Sobek notes (1996, p. 1-2). In my view, these works have even the potential to subvert or transform the very criteria of what is considered outstanding. Hence, the inclusion in academia of studies concerning "non-mainstream"³ authors "opens up new dimensions for mainstream American literature, since it is through the constant infusion of new blood, new ideas, new visions and new perspectives that a national literature is able to continue vigorously flourishing." (HERRERA-SOBEK, 1996, p. 3).

Despite the advantage of enlarging the scope of American Literature, I would argue that the works by authors belonging to peripheral cultures invite critics to rethink the very concept of national literature and its implications. As Leila Harris notes, magazine editor Ruth Franklin considers that at the close of the first decade of the 21st century, American literature had gone "global", encompassing, thus, migrant or minority writers. The issue, however, is very complex, since even having more visibility, canonic standards still prevail (HARRIS, 2014, p. 342).

³ I use the term in relation to the cultural background of authors from minority groups, since in relation to commercial standards, Cisneros, for instance, is a best selling writer. *The House On Mango Street* has sold over 2 million copies, has been translated into various languages and is required reading in many middle schools, high schools, and universities across the U.S.

I would like to remark, finally, that my intellectual formation is deeply influenced by the field of Cultural Studies, which is a somewhat controversial area. Nevertheless, I also tried to make a close reading of the literary work, paying attention, particularly, to its structures, images and themes so that Cisneros' art would tell me, to the greatest extent possible, what to do with it – how to interpret it – avoiding the common mistake of forcing upon the literary work preexisting ideas and categories – a practice which, in my view, overshadows literature.

1 LIFE WRITING, HISTORY, CRITICISM

O que constitui a especificidade da autobiografia e – poderíamos acrescentar, sua *felicidade*, o fato de suscitar, através dos séculos, uma paixão ininterrupta?

Leonor Arfuch

1.1 Life writing in historical perspective

This present chapter discusses the old human habit of life writing, focusing on the genre of autobiography, its history and the history of its criticism. Autobiographies, as we understand them today, are strictly connected to a western mindset. It is at once a product and a producer of modernity. In “Montaigne, Rousseau, Barthes”, Elizabeth Muylaert Duque-Estrada affirms that even though the first impulses for self-representation in writing, in the form known today, can be associated to the sixteenth century, it only became a systematic practice in the eighteenth century. As she argues, this will to write relates to the emergence of the humanist and renaissance culture, and perhaps the need for self-fashioning, following the period of the feudal system’s disintegration. This period marks the transition between two different conceptions of the world. From then on, cultural practices are going to become more and more secularized and people are going to live a less religiously oriented life (DUQUE-ESTRADA, 2009, p. 119).

Many factors have contributed to this change of perspective such as the Copernican revolution, the philosophy of Bacon and Descartes, the arrival and settling of Europeans in America and other new lands. That is, geographical and cultural limits were expanding and men were developing a new perception of themselves and their surroundings. This is extremely important in historicizing our discussion because these changes gave shape to a new subjectivity, embedded in what I call here “western mindset”. This new concept of subject and the concept of literature could not exist one without the other. As Diana Klinger puts it, in *Escritas de si, escritas do outro* (2012), “the modern concepts of individual and literature mutually imply the other: there is no form of modern literature without the

individual in the modern sense, but the latter does not exist without the former either.⁴” (KLINGER, 2012, p. 26).

Both Klinger and Duque-Estrada agree that in Montaigne’s *Essays* (1580) we can find the contours of modern life writing in terms of the notion of individuality. Klinger affirms that his writings, “devoid of doctrinal obedience in a world of growing secularization”, contribute to guarantee one’s right to express one’s personal experience in the world without making use of legitimized models. (KLINGER, 2012, p. 26). Duque-Estrada agrees that Montaigne escapes conventions. She says: “the *Essays* cannot be considered an autobiography in its traditional sense, that is, the one formulated after Rousseau’s *Confessions*” (DUQUE-ESTRADA, 2009, p. 122). This is so because in his work, Montaigne does not synthesize a biographical “I”. He writes about his life but does not create a chronological narrative that looks for his essence or ultimate truth and he does not establish a logical relationship for situations in his life. The critics here quoted mention Montaigne as a reference of an emerging subjectivity. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson also refer to him as someone who “shapes the terms of subjectivity”. They add that the *Essays* “comprise a sustained investigation into the conditions of knowledge that enabled his enunciation of an ‘I’ in the terms of the self-portrait formed of ever shifting perspectives.” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 108). Also, according to Klinger, Montaigne had the virtue of individuality – the epitome of the modern man – “to which Rousseau in his *Confessions* will add sincerity” (KLINGER, 2012, p. 26). So, actually Rousseau is the name regarded as the one who inaugurated the modern genre of autobiography.

Regarding his inaugurating status, Leonor Arfuch, in her *O Espaço Biográfico*, claims that

[I]t is in the eighteenth century – and, according to a certain consensus, after Rousseau’s *Confessions* – that the specificity of the autobiographical literary genres starts to be neatly outlined, in the tension between the quest for a private world [...] and its relation to the new social space (2010, p. 36).

In her comprehensive discussion, Arfuch adds that the variety of genres dealing with life narrative (diaries, letters, memoirs, autobiographies, confessions and so on) would, besides their literary value, create a space for self-inquiry, self-reflection, that is crucial to establish individualism as one of the main features of the Western mindset (2010, p. 36).

⁴ All translations in this work are mine, except when indicated otherwise in the bibliographical references.

The historical context of Rousseau's writing is different from Montaigne's. The former writes in the end of the eighteenth century, from 1765 to 1769, when, as it was mentioned, autobiographical writing is more part of a system. Smith and Watson say that in this century a "complex network of autobiographical discourses" flourishes, among which they highlight "the French encyclopedists, German Pietists, British diarists, American adventurers." (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 114). The critics also argue that by this century, "notions of self-interest, self-consciousness and self-knowledge informed the figure of the 'Enlightened individual' described by philosophers and social and political theorists" and that autobiographies as studies in self-interest "were sought by a growing reading public with access to affordable printed books" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 2), signaling a more settled network of autobiographical discourse attached, doubtlessly, to the growth of the bourgeoisie as a class.

In order to understand Rousseau's attempt in his *Confessions*, it is also important to observe that in the two centuries that separate Rousseau from Montaigne a consolidation of individuality and the spaces of intimacy, privacy and interiority of the self took place. At the same time, but in other direction, the seventeenth-century saw absolutist regimes impose a strict control of public spaces and social life, demanding that the individual adapt to new laws and respect his own convictions at once. This situation, then, configures a split: private sphere and public dimension. This division is an important feature of the constitution of modern subjectivity: people were caught between public, official norms and private desires and wishes. Modern subjectivity can be seen as resulting from a struggle or as a negotiation between these two spheres.

Another important aspect of Rousseau's context has to do with the opening and spreading of certain social spaces where intimacy could be shared. At first restricted to the spaces of mail correspondence or private diaries, intimacy will conquer other places. Duque-Estrada mentions the cafés and pubs, the literary salon and the press as new sites where opinions, judgments and preferences could be expressed. The critic points out that this was setting in which Rousseau lived. To an extent, it is *against* this new society that he writes his *Confessions*: against the unbearable perversion of the heart by society's part, against its incursion in the intimate areas of men.

Paradoxically, Rousseau's attempt in the text is also, in a sense, to gain the compassion of the public. That is, he writes against society while demanding that this same society accept the truth he offers and

trust the revelation of his intimate intentions. Thus, his autobiographical enterprise at once aims at the "other" and investigates the self. As Smith and Watson affirm, he describes himself as "a natural man, in solitary quest of lost innocence in a corrupted society." They add that in his work "confession becomes a method of self-justification and social indictment, as well as a medium for posing radical individuality." (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 115). Thus, Rousseau's writings are nurtured by the conflicts between the private and the public.

Rousseau's text is also a reference to the canonical *Confessions*, by Augustine, "the first book-length autobiographical narrative in the West" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 105). If both books have the same title and similar inaugurating status, the features they do not share are those which are relevant to our discussion. Augustine wrote around 397 C.E. and his book aims at showing how his conversion to Christianity saved him from a life of sin. During that time, when Catholicism was just spreading, religious dogmas were fundamental to the definition of the self and subjectivity, if not the main element in one's identity. That is, the way people experienced the world and wrote about this experience would reflect Christian doctrine. As Arfuch puts it, in a typical narrative of conversion, the account is oriented by the demonstration of divine truth against the doubts, ambiguities and ever-changing impressions of human life. (ARFUCH, 2010 p. 41). Klinger argues that Christianity constructed a concept of subjectivity based on resignation: "it is through resignation from the earthly world that subjectivity is forged in the face of an impersonal and omnipotent God." She goes on to say that Augustine's *Confessions* derives from this dogmatic requirement of presenting before God all your actions, thoughts and intentions (KLINGER, 2012, p. 25).

For the whole period of the Middle Ages, a thousand years, most autobiographical writing was done by religious men and it would follow the pattern of resignation and self-effacement before God, to whom one would confess all his true intentions and sentiments. No matter what, the person confessing would be considered guilty and the writing was seen as a way of purging the bad deeds as well as of transcending to the divine. As a "genre", then, confession was firmly settled by the eighteenth century, when Rousseau writes. Some differences need to be emphasized, though. To begin with, in his *Confessions*, he writes "confessing" not to some god in pursuit of conversion, but to a diverse "public" that rejects

him and evokes his hostility. (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 114). Moreover, only after the rupture that modernity brought, are men interested in seeing themselves as they are, away from any transcendental premise. And these two observations precisely characterize Rousseau's attempt in his *Confessions*: revealing to a secularized, corrupted society who he *really* is.

In our days, critics are wary of the notion of transparency as a main target of autobiographical narratives. The possibility of one being able to translate, in the sheet of paper, who he or she *actually* is, seems naïve at best. In the case of Rousseau's *Confessions*, because he feels that the emerging bourgeois society corrupts and damages that which comes spontaneously from the inner self of the individual, he wishes and believes that he will express himself clearly, with no masks. In his words:

I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself. Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen [...]⁵.

In the passage above, we can easily identify the sincerity and individuality mentioned before by Klinger. These words, however, have triggered a long discussion. For the purpose of this chapter, I will summarize the matter. The notion of the self as an essence, as the truth, can be, to a great extent, associated with the philosophy of Descartes. In his *Discourse on the Method* (1637), questioning himself about the possibilities and conditions of human knowledge, Descartes concludes that everything could be false, except for he himself who is at the moment thinking, reflecting: I think therefore I am. Thus, all Cartesian philosophy – and almost all Western thought – will be based on the belief that the “I” is a stable, fixed, coherent entity that “allows” us to know the world. This is crucial to the development of modern science and to the experience of the modern subject. Also, according to this tradition, “I” is an entity apart from nature, who sees in nature an object of study.

This is an important change – a real rupture – with the previous thought, much more based on scholastic doctrine. Moreover, Cartesian philosophy contributes to the placing of men in the center of discourse. From then on, men noticed their ability to handle nature and actually produce knowledge and not only “reveal God's knowledge”. This is such a relevant matter that it is a reference to the concept of, not only Enlightenment, but modernity itself. As

⁵ Available at: http://archive.org/stream/confessionsofjea01rousuoft/confessionsofjea01rousuoft_djvu.txt. Last access: February 20th, 2016.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht discusses, during the Middle Ages the “predominant self-image of men represented him as part of divine Creation, whose truth was beyond human understanding, or, in the best of cases, could be known by God’s revelation.” In contrast, he says, “the central displacement towards modernity relies on the fact that men would see themselves occupying the role of the one that produces knowledge.” (GUMBRECHT, 1998, p.12).

For Descartes, in order to have objective, universal, accurate knowledge we would have to get rid of our passions. That is, we would have to be neutral observers and actors. If this was a major turn concerning subjectivity, more recent criticism is suspicious of this modern self’s reliability and impartiality. Nietzsche was a name, in the late nineteenth century, dissonant with this philosophical tradition that intensively questioned and challenged Cartesian notions in the late nineteenth century. Most of his writings, if not all, were dedicated to fiercely deconstruct the philosophy western modernity is based upon. Viviane Mosé discusses Nietzsche’s thought in “O Sujeito Moderno”. She argues that the belief in truth and in the unity of volition bolsters the idea of subject, leading to the belief that one’s decision is a manifestation of a deep indivisible essence. (MOSÉ, 2005, p. 173).

However, for the German thinker, the self, the “I” is nothing but a will to truth. That is, the coherent, essentialist “I” is a fiction we make up so as to produce something we call truth. The self, for him, could never be the place from which we depart in order to investigate the world, if we are looking for an objective answer. We would have to inquire, firstly, about this “I” who speaks: the self is a product of many forces that can even go in opposite direction. The “I” is the consequence of a conflict, it is never stable, but trying somehow to find balance between these forces (MOSÉ, 2005, p. 173-176). The history of thought throughout the twentieth century is developed in response to Nietzsche’s critique, or deconstruction, of the (Cartesian) subject. It is important to emphasize, that when we talk about this deconstruction, we are dealing with 1) the questioning of consciousness as the first and primary source of assuredness; 2) the questioning of consciousness as transparent and identical to something, that is, of its self-determining power; 3) the questioning that all reality is the reality defined by consciousness, as Marilena Chauí points out in “A Destruição da Subjetividade na Filosofia Contemporânea (CHAUÍ, 1976, p. 31).

Smith and Watson are among the contemporary scholars who also criticize the Cartesian “I”. They frown upon and denounce the *ratio* of Enlightenment and how “scientific

knowledge gained preeminence”, overshadowing other types of knowledge and experiences in the world. Their critique also points out the superiority implied in Rousseau’s notion that he is like no other man in the world. In addition, they argue that for some people the author is considered the inaugurator of “modern autobiography, with his focus on childhood, retrospective chronology, radical individuality, and antagonistic relationship to both his readers and posterity.” For others, however, his discourse of selfishness and egotism privileges the male citizen and, as the two critics argue, inaugurates the traditional autobiography, which is now seen as a “suspect site of exclusionary practices.” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 115).

Here, I would like to emphasize that critics must not conclude, going for the easy way, that the essentialist discourse is “wrong” and its defenders, naïve. That assumption denotes the problem of not trying to contextualize this theory – essentialism – within its original “problem-space”, as David Scott brilliantly points out. Furthermore, disregarding essentialist discourse for its “will to truth”, “will to mastery”, but replacing it with another discourse, anti-essentialist, is, in fact, repeating an essentialist gesture. Thus, as Scott discusses, the most interesting approach would be to practice a *strategic criticism*, based on the attempt to reconstruct the questions that gave birth to a certain theory, instead of only worrying about its answers, assuming its questions are the same as ours nowadays (SCOTT, 1999, p. 5). The problem with Rousseau’s words quoted above, then, lies in the fact that we currently experience subjectivity differently. That is, after the deconstruction of the subject triggered by Nietzsche, our beliefs on the oneness of the self are strongly shaken.

Thus, the fundamentals of modern autobiography, established in *Confessions*, have been seriously questioned by criticism as well as by literature – in the form of new autobiographical practices, especially from the late twentieth century on. Since then, criticism presupposes there is no preexistent “I” who simply reports and narrates events of his/her life. Rather, we tend to believe that the “I” who tells the story is in a process of self-construction at the same time that the text is being produced. The narrator does not reproduce the subject via discourse but, instead, produces it via discourse. That perspective changes the stress from the figure of the writer to the linguistic, discursive activity. As Terry Eagleton puts it in the chapter concerning structuralism in his *Theory of Literature*, “the bourgeoisie strong belief that the individual subject was the source and origin of all meaning suffered a hard stroke: language was much less human’s product than humans were language’s product.” (EAGLETON, 2006, p. 161).

Two seminal essays are often closely associated with this shift in critical focus: Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?", both from the late 1960's. Regardless of their specific characteristics, the two essays, in the wake of the critique of the subject, signal vehemently a certain erasure of the figure of the author, or, to say the least, a decline, or fading, in the figure of the author as an authoritarian source of meaning. If the self is not a coherent, stable entity, how is it possible that the author may hold the final, or original, truth of a given work?

Interrogating the narrator's voice, Barthes begins his essay with the question "Who is speaking thus?" to conclude in the same introductory paragraph that we will never know whose voice is, in fact, speaking when the narrator tells the story because

writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing." (BARTHES, 1977, p. 142).

Foucault, for his turn, discusses the same issue but he does so in order to investigate the empty space left by the fading of the author. He fills the gap bringing about the idea of "author-function". Foucault creates this concept so as to refer to the complex net in which the category of author is enmeshed. That is, the name of the author should be regarded in relation to the many roles it may play and to other discourses, since it was not viewed as guarantee of meaning. Thus, both thinkers gave an extremely relevant contribution to endorse this critical shift. To the extent that it is "indifferent" to the individual and more interested in an analysis emphasizing the internal relationships of the linguistic signs, we could say that this is a *structuralist* perspective.

However, as Klinger, pondering further on the issue and quoting Denilson Lopes' remarks, the very names that had "killed" the author, Barthes and Foucault, in the sequence of their work left "each time more clues to [...] how to deal with the personal in writing without calling upon old biographisms" (2002 apud KLINGER, 2012, p. 31). Despite refusing the author, we remained curious about his/her life: we have not been convinced that fiction is necessarily an erasure of the writer's life. Indeed, in our times – of extreme exposure of the self via different media, of intimacy being publicly exhibited and of spectacularization of private situations – life writing is ubiquitous. This omnipresence derives, according to Smith and Watson (2010, p. 130), partially because of the "tenacious hold that the ideology of individualism has on Westerners."

In the present work, it is relevant to mention that the years that witnessed the fading of the figure of the author were precisely the same when many political independence movements were taking place throughout the world, especially in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. That is, the structuralist disregard for the author was a main notion in a Eurocentric context. The new forming nations, nevertheless, were just being able to try to speak for themselves, and then the author, his/her cultural, national, social, geographical and financial location mattered – it was necessary a problematization of the site of the speaker. As Mary Eagleton, from the perspective of feminist criticism, points out in the introduction to her book *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction* (2005), it is a “curious contradiction in intellectual history” that simultaneously to the death of the author as a “figure of origin, meaning and power” another group was looking for the “birth” of the author, in terms of a “reclamation of women’s literary history and exhortation to women to claim a voice” (EAGLETON, 2005, p. 3). A counter-hegemonic discourse (some may also call it poststructuralist) was starting to take shape, bringing the author back to the spot again.

1.2 Life writing, postcolonialism and feminist criticism

In order to characterize the postcolonial strand, it is relevant to observe the increasing flux of migrants from the second half of the twentieth century on: a movement that occurred especially from the peripheries of the West to its centers. This mass migrations and displacements have been described with the term “diaspora” and have been studied by different areas such as anthropology, geography and literary theorists, as Braziel and Mannur (2003, p. 4) point out in “Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Content in Diaspora Studies”. Many of the notions regarding diaspora studies underlie my analysis in the present work, since they question the binarisms “that circulated and found currency within colonial discourse” (BRAZIEL and MANNUR, 2003, p. 4). The field of cultural studies and postcolonialism theory, for example, emerged, partially, out of this context of migration in which individuals from the ex-colonies could have the opportunity to research, publish, study and teach in universities in the centers, though most of the migrants did travel to end up working in jobs the natives of the host countries would not take.

The term “postcolonialism” is rather controversial and will need further explanation. Many critics doubt its validity questioning if we are indeed in a “non- colonial” conjuncture, and they interrogate the meaning of the prefix “post”. Detractors of the term, such as Ella Shohat, may also argue that it is theoretically and politically ambiguous, as Stuart Hall, one of the main figures of cultural studies, mentions in his article “When was ‘the Post-colonial’? Thinking at the limit” (1996). Other critiques to the concept of postcolonial refer to its totalizing character; that is, to the fact that “it collapses different histories, temporalities and racial formations into the same universalizing category”, and denounce it as a concept that supposedly celebrates the so-called end of colonialism (HALL, 1996, p. 243).

Hall defends that such critics of the term build up their arguments, in part, based upon a certain nostalgia for clear-cut definitions, the binaries that Western thought have been working with since its origins: good and evil, light and dark, body and soul, oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized. For the scholar, postcolonialism “does not mean that there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ sides, no play of power, no hard political choices to be made.” But he asks us if we have not yet learned that political binaries do not stabilize the field, because they, the binaries, are not “given” but constructed as part of the play of power. Concerning the universalizing character of the term, Hall admits that we should, in fact, be careful to discriminate the different types of colonies, because we cannot look at countries such as Australia and India with the same lens. The most interesting way critics can use the term, for Hall, is one that will view its possibility to intellectually contribute to the discussion.

What the term *may* help us to do is to describe or characterize the shift in the global relations which marks the (necessarily uneven) transition from the age of Empires to the post-independence or post-decolonization moment. It may also help us [...] to identify what are the new relations and dispositions of power which are emerging in the new conjuncture. (HALL, 1996, p. 246).

The way the concept is used here is, in accordance with Hall, to mean at once a chronology and, most importantly, an epistemology – these two spheres cannot be separated.

David Scott adds an insightful explanation to the postcolonial discussion with two similar, but different, contexts. First, he talks about *anticolonialism*, which is related to the independence/nationalist movements, the struggle for sovereignty and for getting rid of the colonialist structure of material exploitation and profit. There was, in this context, a demand for an authentic relationship between “reality” and its representation, but the question of the

tools to use in order to create a legitimate representation was not yet “visible as *the* question of the moment” (SCOTT, 1999, p.8)

Postcolonialism's question, for its turn, was that of the attempt to decolonize the organized structure of authoritative knowledge that operated discursively to produce effects of Truth about the colonized. “Postcolonialism has been concerned principally with the decolonization of the West’s theory of the non-West.” (SCOTT, 1999, p. 9). That is, postcolonialism is what emerges to fill the lack of self-representation on the side of colonized peoples. It is a means of, to the greatest extent possible, building up a discursive apparatus that does not work only in favor of the ones already in power. Postcolonialism can thus be a tool for destabilizing European reason by deconstructing the binaries that grounded it. It is a counter-discourse: it does not mean to abolish, succeed or surpass colonial discourse, but it aims at criticizing it from the perspective of the ex-centric, problematizing Eurocentric, essentialist views.

According to Stuart Hall in *The Question of Cultural Identity*, there were five transformations in the second half of the twentieth century – a period he names “late modernity” – that also criticize and deeply destabilize European rationality, displacing modern subjectivity. These main ruptures are: 1) Althusser’s reading of Marx; 2) Lacan’s interpretation of Freud; 3) Derrida’s deconstruction of Saussure structuralism; 4) Foucault’s work on (disciplinary) powers; and 5) Feminism, both as theoretical criticism and as a social movement. (HALL, 2007, p. 606-611). For the purpose of my work, the focus will be on the latter.

Indeed, the second half of the twentieth-century witnessed a renewal of the feminist movement: the so-called second-wave feminism⁶. With its slogan “the personal is political”, this new wave would focus its claims on issues such as the dichotomy of the “private” and “public” dimensions, sexuality, family, domestic chores and workplace, bringing to the fore the debate of issues that were considered minor, thus questioning the authority of the “relevant” topics to be dwelled upon. Hall also affirms that the feminist movement of the sixties evolved from an interrogation of the social position of women to a discussion around the formation of identities as gendered and sexual. Moreover, second-wave feminists would challenge the notion that we all, men and women, “were part of the same identity” – Mankind

⁶ The historical perspective I take on considers the first-wave feminism to relate to the suffragettes movement in Britain in the turn to the twentieth century when women would advocate the right to vote in public elections.

– replacing it with *the question of sexual difference*. (HALL, 2007, p. 611). Despite being a fundamental rupture with modern knowledge discourse, the second-wave feminism took place mostly in the rich northern countries, especially in the U.S, and would not address emphatically issues concerning migrant, black or latino women.

It is in when postcolonial theory and feminist criticism meet each other that further interrogation of these two strands will be possible. Postcolonial feminists question at once both the overlooking of gender issues by the postcolonial agenda and the neglect by the Feminist movement of the racial, ethnical, national and social class aspects when addressing women's debates. As Elleke Boehmer discusses in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (2005),

Nationalist movements encouraged their members, who were mostly male, to assert themselves as agents of their history, as self-fashioning and in control. Women were not so encouraged. They were marginalized therefore both by nationalist political activity and by the rhetoric of nationalist address. (2005, p. 216).

In relation to the feminist movement, Boehmer says that the critics, up until the late 1970's, would base their analysis and critique of power as though women from the metropolis and from the ex-colonies shared a common experience of oppression. In response to that, feminists from the Third-world had their "decisive intervention" with the insistence on the diversity and layeredness of women's experience.

Scholar Deepika Bahri, in her article "Feminism in/and postcolonialism" (2008) discusses the intertwining of these two theories, arguing primarily that "a postcolonial feminist perspective requires that one learn to read literary representations of women with attention both to the subject and the medium of representation", and also that one develop a "general critical literacy, that is, the capacity to read the *world* [...] with a critical eye." (BAHRI, 2008, p. 200). Thus, the issues concerning postcolonial feminism are related to the many ways of reading gender – denaturalizing the category of "woman". Bahri also reinforces the relevance of discussing the position of women today in association with the postcolonial thought: "under contemporary circumstances of globalization and the almost complete sway of capitalism world-wide, the condition of women has become a more urgent issue than ever. Gender issues are thus inseparable from the project of postcolonial criticism" (BAHRI, 2008, p. 201).

Between two extremes, of feminists who condemn postcolonial theory for bracketing gender issues and postcolonial critics who argue that feminism over-generalizes the case of the “Third-world woman”, Bahri emphasizes postcolonial feminist critique of the *collusion* of patriarchal organization and colonial practices, arguing that postcolonial feminism interrogates both postcolonial and feminist discourses while it is also subject to their critique and revision. (2008 p. 201-202).

All this debate around postcolonialism and feminism is crucial to understand and discuss subjectivity in our present days through the perspective we take on in this work. As I have been discussing, the concept of subject and subjectivity in modernity was pretty much attached to Cartesian notions. These notions meant to be universal when they were in fact local and biased. They applied mainly, if not only, to certain subjects in certain places, that is, white men in urban centers that belonged to the bourgeoisie. Throughout the centuries we can observe that there has been going on a process of displacement of this – essentialist – discourse. Returning to the matter of life writing itself, we could say that if the model of autobiography, initiated with Rousseau, responded and contributed to the creation of a certain notion of self, in our days, as this notion of subjectivity has changed – the subject has been displaced – new autobiographical practices will emerge responding to this shift as well as contributing for it to take place.

One of the main critics of autobiography in the twentieth century is Georges Gusdorf. His seminal essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” (1956) is, until our days, a text with which contemporary scholars dialogue. According to Smith and Watson, Gusdorf is regarded as a turning point delimiting the second surge of autobiography criticism, even though his work remained unknown to the Anglophone world until the 1970’s. As they argue, two significant changes occurred in this new critical approach: the autobiography was now addressed as seriously and rigorously as the novel, and the aspect of self-narrating became the focus as the distinctive hallmark of autobiography – rather than the “truth-value” or judging the quality of the life lived. (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 200).

Susan Stanford Friedman endorses the importance of Gusdorf for articulating theoretical foundations of a formerly marginalized genre, casting light upon it. She highlights his contributions, especially the “assertion that autobiographical selves are constructed through the process of writing and therefore cannot reproduce exactly the selves who lived”.

(FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 72). Nevertheless, Friedman confronts his belief in individualism as the precondition for autobiographical writing. Her argument is that

the individualistic concept of the autobiographical self that pervades Gusdorf's work raises serious theoretical problems for critics who recognize that the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, and many non-Western peoples. (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 72).

That is, adopting a postcolonial feminist approach, Friedman criticizes Western's notion of subjectivity, suggesting other perspectives. For her, the individualistic paradigm is not applicable to women, for whom the processes of subjectivity, of identity formation, of asking "who am I in the world?" are much more based on group identity, collectivity. It is not that women are not individuals – or that men do not experience community as an element of identity. What she argues is that a woman's process of individuation is more relational and aware of others. A factual example of that can be seen in that in a patriarchal organization of the world, women have to deal with the category of WOMAN, which is not established by women themselves, but by the other, the ones who are authorized to classify, name and create images and things. In such a situation, of lack or even impossibility of self-determination, only by union, by a sense of communion and collectivity, is transformation accomplished. Only together can women operate change and defy or resist oppression.

For Friedman, setting up individualism as the necessary precondition for the production of autobiographies is a "reflection of privilege": one that grants the right to a specific group of people to forget their condition in the world. That is, as a white, male, middle-class person, one does not have to think about his identity as much as a black woman, who is constantly reminded of her circumstances. A consequence of Gusdorf's criterion in establishing the conditions and limits of autobiography is that the individualistic notion excludes from the canon autobiographies written by women: "although Gusdorf [...] and many others have greatly advanced our understanding of autobiography, their related individualistic paradigm for the self have obscured the presence and significance of women's autobiography in literary tradition" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 74).

If, on the one hand, the conventional individualistic criterion hinders women from participating in the canon, on the other hand, as Friedman argues, "women's sense of collective identity [...] can also be a source of strength and transformation" (1998, p. 75). To support her argument, Friedman brings ideas of Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow. From the first she borrows the notion of solidarity as the means for women to recognize

themselves as a group and to be able to move beyond alienation, constructing an identity in which we find individualistic and collective processes co-existing, in tension. In the case of autobiographies, Friedman explains,

the self created in a woman's text is often not 'a teleological entity' an 'isolate being' utterly separate from all others [...] the self constructed in women's autobiographical writing is often based in, but not limited to, a group consciousness – an awareness of the meaning of the cultural category WOMAN for the patterns of women's individual identity. (1998, p. 76).

Chodorow has a more psychological approach, discussing familial bonds, especially the mother-daughter relationship, suggesting also that “the concept of isolate selfhood is inapplicable to women” (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 77).

What is specifically interesting for this work in Friedman's article is that she ends up reversing Gusdorf's proposition. If, for him, an individual, in an autobiographical text, has to oppose himself to others, the Rousseauian praxis, for Friedman, there is no opposition, no possibility of subject outside others, much less against others, but only *with* others “in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community” (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 79). My interest in this reversal lies in the fact that the analysis to be developed further on in this work, especially when I discuss poetry, will align to this notion of collectivity playing a major role in the autobiographical writing of women authors.

Another important aspect of Friedman's article I would like to point out and develop relates to the fact that, traditionally, and this tradition has to do, obviously, with the work of criticism, autobiographies are related to the male gender and, as we have just discussed, women were, most often, excluded from the canon of the genre. As Smith and Watson argue (2010, p. 203): “The gendering of the representative life as universal and therefore masculine meant that narratives by women were rarely examined”. In *Autobiographics*, Leigh Gilmore also highlights that “the near absence of women's self-representational texts from the critical histories that authorize autobiography indicates the extent to which the genre is [...] gendered as 'male'.” (GILMORE, 1995, p.1). However, it does not mean women have not been interested in writing about their lives. To mention but one example, Margery Kempe, a medieval mystic who told the story of her life to an amanuensis (a scribe), is known for having presented “a most remarkable story of one woman's life” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 105). Even though the narrative refers to her in the third-person and is only dictated, not written by her, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is considered by some as the first autobiography in the English language.

More recently, many women who have been engaging in self writing have gained prominence in literary circles – with the feminist reinterpretation of autobiography begun in 1980's (GILMORE, 1995, p. x) – as well as with the public in general. Nevertheless, this movement does not reproduce Rousseauian enshrined models of self writing: women writers are engaged in writing about their lives in new ways, concerning both thematic and formal aspects and challenging the male-dominant canon. However, Gilmore warns us, as Bahri also does, not to generalize female identity as if it were unitary and transhistorical. She claims that this is not an unproblematic subject and that one should question the idea of a female-shared experience, which would avoid a totalizing gesture. Gilmore also wonders, mentioning one of the main names in gender studies, Judith Butler, whether “the stability and coherence we attribute to the category ‘women’ for the purpose of grounding feminist politics and interpretation do not unwittingly participate in the regulation, reification and maintenance of hierarchical gender relations.” (GILMORE, 1995, p. xii-xiii).

The critic finds it more productive to consider gender as a crucial aspect in the representation of identity, that must be seen in relation to other aspects such as social class and race, for example. Women autobiographies, for Gilmore, then, can be a site of contestation of gender identity rather than a space for reiteration of the hegemonic discourse (GILMORE, 1995, p. xii). If autobiographies by women destabilize the genre, then critics must put in motion other tools, other readings to approach such works. In my dissertation, I refer to that kind of text as an autobiographical practice, or act, as opposed to autobiography, the Western genre associated to the essentialist discourse we have discussed.

Another very influential critic in the studies of autobiography is Philippe Lejeune. His famous work *The Autobiographical Pact* dates back to 1975, but has been revised in subsequent editions. Lejeune first defines autobiography as a “retrospective prose narrative done by a real person about his/her own existence, focusing on his/her individual history, particularly the history of his/her personality.” (LEJEUNE, 2009, p. 15). Nevertheless, he is aware of the problematic implications involving the possibility of the “I-narrator” telling his/her life. Thus, he concentrates his theory in the notion of the “autobiographical pact” – his most original contribution. For Lejeune, what sustains the status of autobiographies as such is the implied agreement between author and reader regarding identity: the name of the writer on the cover of the book, the narrator and the protagonist of the story must be the same. If, on the one hand, it is interesting that Lejeune dislocates the focus from the writer-text relationship,

granting the reader more value in the autobiographical dynamics; on the other hand, many scholars criticize his definition of autobiography.

Leigh Gilmore argues that the very elements that Lejeune rely on to theorize his “pact” are the most troubling in discussions around autobiography: reality, experience, truth. She claims that the “pact” perspective considers reality as a given, as simply “being there”, as though the autobiographical content is real *a priori*. Moreover, Gilmore discusses the matter of the premise, implied in the “pact”, that there is a fixed moment when the self is itself and can speak from a place in which it already has told the whole truth (GILMORE, 1995, p. 76-77). Leonor Arfuch discusses the problem of identity in the autobiographical pact as well. She raises pertinent questions such as: “how real is the person of the autobiographer in his/her text? To what extent can we talk about ‘identity’ between author, narrator and character? [...] What would be the moment of capture of one’s identity?” (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 53).

The critic also considers the impossibility of the identity between author and narrator due to many factors, all of them indicating a divergence between lived experience and artistic narrative. Precisely because of this disparity is that one should not have “truth-value” as criterion for analyzing an autobiography. It is not that we should read the text as a premeditated lie or that intersections between author and narrator do not exist; we should consider alternative ways of interpreting an autobiographical work. It is in this sense that Arfuch develops her concept of “biographical space” – not merely a repository of different models of life narratives; it is a space where many types of life writings coexist (autobiographies, memoirs, testimonials, diaries, travel notes, autofictions, novels, films, videos, etc), enabling one’s analysis to consider their respective specificities while also taking their relational dimension into account. This theoretical standpoint enables criticism to see, in a more complex dialogical way, the relevance of the production of such literary forms today (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 58-64).

My goal in this chapter, as claimed earlier, was to discuss the habit of self writing in one possible historical perspective. And this habit is, of course, closely connected to our sense, or our sentiment, of who we are – which is not a given, but historically constructed. As we have seen, there were certain dislocations that configure the period of Early and Late Modernity in relation to the notion of subject and subjectivity. In the period of transition from the feudal organization of the European world, the Middle Ages, to its Renaissance and the conception of Humanist thought, we observe a transformation in society that brought

Mankind to the center of discourse (the first dislocation). This change would forge and be forged by a new subjectivity, one that believed – or wanted to believe – in the rational capacity of the human race to detect true and false assertions and produce knowledge. With all the (negative) implications such a belief might have, I see this moment as a positive step towards a life directed to human kind, to our present – here and now – and not so much religiously oriented. It is not that religion is not, or should not be, a crucial element in human's identity. What I mean is that the pure fact of believing in ourselves as persons invested with some power, with agency, can be seen as an attempt to look at ourselves instead of only adoring images in a church, or only looking for spiritual enlightenment.

In the literary realm, we can find this discussion in the comparison of the two *Confessions*, by Augustine and by Rousseau. As mentioned, the first is pretty much oriented to God and aims at confessing the intimate intentions of its author so that he can be purged and transcend his soul to the divine. The latter has as its target public the average citizen, who, according to Rousseau belongs to a corrupted society, and its objective is a full revelation of the self as a means of self-justification and social indictment.

The fundamental problem with this paradigm shift during Early Modernity is that the Mankind that started to occupy the center stage was restricted to certain humans, as the post-structuralist and the postcolonial theory point out. This idea of human kind – which to an extent is also a bourgeois construct, as Duque-Estrada discusses (2009, p.134) – would not encompass, for example, women and natives of the lands that were being “discovered”, who had no access to the same rights as those of the white middle-class men. This exclusionary configuration has been changing lately, especially with the efforts and resistance of minority, peripheral groups, but also with movements that emerged in the centers where the exclusions are practiced. In this work, I highlight Nietzsche's deconstruction of the subject (the seed of the second dislocation) – that is, a radical critique of Western thought – as a major factor contributing to the development of a certain process of democratization and “inclusion” of subaltern individuals from the twentieth century on. With the disbelief, or wariness, in the subject as a source of objective truth, modern subjectivity suffers a great stroke and we see a movement that attempts to kill the author as an authoritarian figure of meaning.

Nevertheless, almost simultaneously to the killing of the author, independence/nationalist movements take place, and these new nations (the literature produced by them and its criticism), constituted by people craving for autonomy, voice and

self-determination, resurrect the author, not as the same authoritarian totalizing source of truth itself, but as someone who can relativize and criticize effects of Truth that were cast upon them as ex-centric subjects. In the case of women, especially women in the peripheries of the world, the return of the author is significantly relevant, since the site and position of the writer – one who is doubly or even triply marginalized – is imperative to a better understanding of the autobiographical act in question. Insightfully, Mary Eagleton claims that the opposition between these two standpoints needs to be problematized: the death of the author never meant the death of writing and, from many feminist positions the “birth” of the woman author never meant cultural dominance or ownership of meaning. Besides that, she argues that creative writers have been stimulated to write after Barthes’ essay rather than feeling stifled (EAGLETON, 2005 p.4). Thus, I observe that, for critics, the apparently opposite “theories” – death and birth of the author – can be regarded in a more complex way if put in dialogue.

Having discussed these central changes in human’s perception of the world and of themselves and its relation to the production of autobiographical texts, I believe the fundamentals upon which my analysis is based are clearly demonstrated. We may now proceed to the reading of the literary material, the most pleasant part.

2 AUTOFICTION IN/AND PROSE NARRATIVE

Tell me something, even if it's a lie.

Sandra Cisneros

2.1 An overview of Cisneros' biography and the Chicano Movement

In a dissertation dedicated to the study of life writing, especially new strategies of inscription of one's own life – what I refer to as autobiographical practices – it is crucial to investigate the author's real life as much as possible. While for some other studies it is perhaps enough to research the writer's life in what concerns solely the literary dimension, in my present analysis the more I know about Sandra Cisneros' biography, particularly if told by the author herself, the more profitable the result of my critical investment might be.

Sandra Cisneros is an author born in the city of Chicago in 1954. Despite being born in the U.S., she grew up in an essentially bicultural environment – her father was Mexican and her mother had Mexican parents. She is the only daughter in a family of seven children that moved back and forth from the U.S to Mexico due to lack of financial resources and her father's homesickness. Her first published book is the famous and acclaimed *The House on Mango Street* (1984). Since then, she has been publishing novels, collections of short stories, full-length poetry books, stories for children and, more recently, a compilation of autobiographical pieces of stories. All of her literature is permeated by code-switching: English is predominant, but she shifts to Spanish quite often and “naturally”. Ellen McCracken describes Cisneros' use of code-switching as unconventional: a playful experimentation. As the critic argues, Cisneros believes that speaking Spanish connects her to her father, to her other self and to her ancestors, while also directing her to her life work. (MCCRACKEN, 1999, p. 7). More recently, the author has also been engaging with other types of artwork, such as the installation she created, a Mexican altar at The National Museum of American History (Washington D.C), on the *Día de los Muertos*, in memory of her deceased mother, Elvira Cordero Cisneros.

Cisneros' work is, as a whole, highly autobiographical. The author, however, has never written an autobiography in the traditional sense. I believe her work is suitable for the discussion I undertake to the extent it concerns an autobiographical practice: the writer is engaged in telling the story of her life, even though she does so via non-conventional forms. In this present chapter, I aim at investigating the strategies Cisneros uses in order to deal with the autobiographical elements in her literature. It is relevant to mention that she was not raised in a background in which reading and writing, especially as an occupation, was stimulated. As a daughter of a Mexican⁷ father, she had always been encouraged and expected to follow the "right", that is, established, path for a woman: to get married to a proper man and live with the purpose of taking care of the household and of her children. But the things Cisneros aimed at and wished for, with all her might, were to have a house of hers so that she could have space and tranquility to pursue her career as a writer. Having fulfilled this wish, she challenged the norms set up for her, and we perceive that the house is a *topos* in her literature, meaning, among other things, the space she needed to explore and to be as many selves as she desires.

It is also important to mention that Cisneros is considered to be a key figure in Chicano literature. The use of the term Chicano is relatively recent and, though its original usage was derogatory, it has been appropriated by many Mexican descendants so as to denote cultural and political assertion. As Sonia Torres explains in *Nosotros in USA* (2001), the term gains use in the 1960's, when Chicano literature emerges, closely related to popular movements and the working class. Maria Ester Sanchez, in *Contemporary Chicana Poetry*, provides further information. As she puts it, Chicano literature emerges out of a generation's different perspective: one that would claim engagement in social, political and cultural spheres as well as a quest for self-awareness. This change of perspective in this generation is due to their perception of the social oppression that had conditioned their history and culture. Thus, this new generation set out to confront the consequences of such an oppression on the Mexican-Chicano communities. Their literary work would reflect, as well as motivate, this struggle. (SANCHEZ, 1985, p. 1).

In this context, the Chicano literary production had a nationalist tone, which can be viewed both as a romanticized position towards a mythical past, a mythical nation – Aztlán (the Southwest of the U.S) – and as a refusal to reenact "white" ideology. As Torres argues (2001, p. 22), "The Chicano population wanted to redefine itself in terms that would escape

⁷ Cisneros' father was a "typical", average, Mexican man: catholic, sexist and very protective.

the hegemonic white Anglo-saxon protestant representation the U.S. had made of them”. The dominant population pictured the Chicanos as lazy, ignorant, potential criminals and not trustworthy, and that is why this subaltern group needed to deconstruct this image, reconstructing with their own hands a new notion of what it is to be Chicano. The nationalist literature was built upon certain features they shared, such as the language (which was not English and not Spanish, but languages in between), their economical condition and the idea of the southwest of the U.S. as the “lost motherland” (TORRES, 2001, p. 22).

In a second phase, in the mid 70’s, the literary production criticized the preceding moment for its essentialist tendency in the construction of the Chicano identity. Strongly influenced by other revolutionary movements in the U.S., such as feminism, the new ethnography and the civil rights movement, Chicano literature would, from then on, focus no longer only on the male hero, but on diversity – sexual, regional and of gender (TORRES, 2001, p. 24). It is important, however, to mention a characteristic of the movement that has endured since its birth, which is its transnational, or international, dimension, not only with the evident relation to Mexico, but to other political movements in the Third-world, especially in Latin America, as Torres claims (2001, p. 24-25). Today the configuration of Chicano literature has to do with its reference to the Latino culture intertwined with the bilingual, bicultural reality of the Chicano experience. In this sense, contemporary Chicano literature breaks with tradition in order to both desacralize and recontextualize it (TORRES, 2001, p. 25-27).

Cisneros’ career commenced in 1984 with the publication of *The House On Mango Street*. This was a special year for Chicanas: it was the first time, as both Sonia Saldívar-Hull (2000) and Alvina Quintana (1996) mention, that the annual conference of the National Association of Chicano Studies, which had been taking place since 1972, had women as focus. The theme of the event was *Voces de la Mujer*, and the goal was to “address issues related to an emergent Chicana feminist movement”. (QUINTANA, 1996, p. 54). Significantly, Cisneros was one of the writers invited to the book reading and signing. By that time, the transformations that had begun in the 1970’s were consolidating. As Torres argues (2001, p.27), the increasing number of women authors was a major element in this consolidation, since new forms of representations came into existence with women’s voice. Other key factors were the growing number of Chicano scholars and critics and the emerging structure of new publishing houses focused on “alternative” texts, such as *Quinto Sol*, or *Arte*

Público Press publishers of U.S. Hispanic authors, the latter being the first to publish *The House On Mango Street*.

Cisneros' relation to the Chicano movement and literature seems obvious for her origins. However, the actual *relationship* of the author with being Chicana is less evident than one might assume. Scholar Paula M. L. Moya discusses the issue of being chicana, connecting to the term necessary political implications. She claims, dealing with her own position as a Chicana, that the term Mexican-American is rather descriptive, referring to someone whose actual nationality is American and may not even speak Spanish or connect to other cultural aspects originally Mexican. For her, a chicana is a “politically aware woman of Mexican heritage who is at least partially descended from the indigenous people of Mesoamerica and who was born and/ or raised in the United States.” (MOYA, 1997, p. 139). Moreover, she argues, what distinguishes a Chicana from a Mexican-American or Hispanic is “her recognition of her disadvantaged position in a hierarchically organized society arranged according to categories of class, race, gender, and sexuality; and her propensity to engage in political struggle aimed at subverting and changing those structures.” (MOYA, 1997, p. 139)⁸.

As Cisneros tells readers in her most recent book (2015, p. 42), *A House of My Own*, a collection of non-fiction pieces, she was once even “bullied by hardcore Chicano activists” who thought her writing was not Chicano enough. She claims that even though she grew up in a *barrio* in Chicago, she only gained awareness of the profoundly different circumstances of her life living in the U.S. when she attended “a graduate seminar on memory and the imagination” in the Iowa School for Writers, a very prestigious institution, at the age of twenty-two (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 126). She says that before this experience she “assumed the world was like Chicago, made up of people of many cultures and classes all living together”. She claims that it is not as though she had not felt her “otherness”, but she had not perceived it as deeply as after Iowa City.

This is an important issue if we are to consider that – despite the overcoming of its initially nostalgic and nationalist tone – Chicano literature is, more often than not, politically engaged. Mexican-American scholar Ramon Saldívar, researcher of Chicano literature, claims we should read this specific literary production “as a group of works that intentionally exploit their peripheral status to and exclusion from the body of works that we might call majority

⁸ In spite of agreeing with Moya's argument that the designation “Mexican-American” does not imply political consciousness, unlike the term Chicano/a, for the purpose of avoiding repetition, in this dissertation I will use both terms interchangeably.

literature.”⁹ Cisneros, then, is only able to develop her own voice in this situation of crisis – facing her position as a “marginal” subject and discovering/inventing a Chicana identity. After being confronted with classmates from a different background, to whom the house as described and discussed by Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1958) was normal, Cisneros argues that she could not recognize the “house of memory” Bachelard and her fellow classmates could. She argues:

Then it occurred to me that none of the books in this class, in any of my classes, in all the years of my education had ever discussed a house like mine. Not in books, in magazines or film. My classmates had come from a real house, real neighborhoods, ones they could point to, but what did I know? (2015, p. 127).

Thus, Cisneros political awareness will emerge with her search for her own voice.

I asked myself what I could write about that my classmates couldn’t. I didn’t know what I wanted exactly, but I did have enough sense to know what I didn’t. I didn’t want to sound like my classmates; I didn’t want to keep imitating the writers I’d be reading. Their voices were right for them but not for me. Instead, I searched for the ugliest subjects I could find, the most unpoetic [...]. It was a quiet revolution, a reaction taken to extremes maybe, but it was out of this negative experience that I found something positive: my own voice. (2015, p. 127-8).

Through this process of anti-academic, anti-conventional writing, Cisneros believes she was able to *name* her otherness, which was, up until then, only felt. As she claims: “Once I could name it, I wasn’t ashamed or silent. I could speak up and celebrate my otherness as a woman, a working-class person, an American of Mexican descent.” (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 128). Reading this declaration, it is possible to see that the discovery or, rather, the creation of her own voice is strictly connected to Cisneros’ acute awareness of her circumstance as a peripheral subject in the U.S. culture. Indeed, the acquiring of voice is a really relevant process in the construction of identity of subaltern groups, or minorities such as women. In “Towards a Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice”, by Susan Lanser, there is an interesting discussion of “voice” in terms both of narratology studies and of feminist perspective. She argues that when feminists talk about voice, it has to do with the assertion of a “woman-centered” point of view and, within the realm of literature, the exploration of women’s writings may challenge the categories and postulates of the canon, which is “relentlessly if not intentionally” man-made (LANSER, 1992, p. 4-6).

Also, we can relate Cisneros’ process of acquiring voice to the second phase of Chicano literature previously discussed: a moment of increase in the number of women writers, in which new forms of representations were being thought of, imagined, produced –

⁹ Available at: <http://www.uhu.es/antonia.dominguez/latinas/saldivar.pdf> Last access: February 17th, 2016.

not only regarding content, but also formal aspects of literature. While Lanser (1992, p. 4) points out that the finding of a voice may or may not be represented textually, which is an interesting observation, Quintana praises Cisneros for the innovative form of her debut novel, *The House On Mango Street*. She asserts that “only Sandra Cisneros’s *Mango Street* defied the poetic form previously privileged by many chicana writers.” (QUINTANA, 1996, p. 55). Besides considering Cisneros’ acquiring of voice in respect to her condition as a woman and in the context of the Chicana literary production, I would argue that this a fundamental element in the establishment of her position as a major author in today’s American literary scenario, since “voice” is a preoccupation of every writer¹⁰.

Precisely in the intersection between Cisneros’ literary production and her “real life”, lies the main focus of this chapter, and of the dissertation as a whole. In other words: the crossing of literature with the author’s real life, or the boundaries, interchanges, and strategies concerning the tense subject of the autobiographical narrative.

2.2 Autobiographical engagement in *Caramelo*

The main object of this chapter is the novel *Caramelo* (2002), which took the writer many years to complete (a decade, as she says in the novel’s Acknowledgements). It is an epic-long novel narrated mostly by Celaya, or Lala. It tells the story of her family since her paternal grandmother’s childhood in the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. It is a highly autobiographical novel that also intertwines with genres such as the Bildungsroman – Celaya goes from childhood to young adulthood – and the travel narrative, since the plot develops through the protagonist’s family journeys to and from Mexico. Concerning the structure, the novel is divided into three parts that do not follow a linear chronology: “Recuerdo de Acapulco”, “When I Was Dirt” and “The Eagle and the Serpent, or My Mother and My Father”. The novel also includes more than a hundred footnotes and other paratextual elements such as epigraphs, epilogues and others. The use of these elements is really relevant

¹⁰ Jay Parini considers the matter of voice in literature in the chapter “The Personal Voice”, in his *Why Poetry Matters*. He affirms: “One hears a lot about voice in literary circles, where everyone apparently seeks this valuable commodity, panned for like gold in mountain springs by would-be poets (as well as novelists and others with aspiration to literary quality.” (2008, p. 44). The famous work by Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), discusses the issue of voice and influence of tradition.

not only within the plot of novel, but also to the extent they function as a destabilizing device, as I will discuss later on.

It is interesting to observe that the title of the novel is a reference to the color of a specific *rebozo*, a typical Mexican¹¹ shawl, inherited by Lala's grandmother from her parents who were *reboceros* from a region famous for it. Soledad, the grandmother, lost her mother right after she was born and was not able to learn how to make the intricate patterns of a fine *rebozo*. She would, throughout her life, unweave and weave back again *caramelo rebozo* (her mother died before finishing it) – which can be seen as a reference to the procedure of writing a text, a weaving of parts together. Weaving and sewing, fabric, texture, text: interestingly, Soledad, who cannot weave, asks her granddaughter to write down her life story.

Alongside *Caramelo*, Cisneros' most recent publication, the aforementioned *A House of My Own* will also be extremely significant for the discussion around the author's autobiographical writing. Here, we cannot forget to mention the reference to Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own", the path-breaking essay in defense at once of a room women should have to be able to write and of more space for women in a literary world dominated by men. Returning to Cisneros, *A House Of My Own's* subtitle is "Stories from My Life" and it encompasses very diverse genres of texts from different moments of Cisneros' life, such as the prefaces for the tenth and the twenty-fifth anniversaries of *The House on Mango Street*; talks and speeches she gave at events like the International Women's Day; letters, reflections about trips, family members and fellow artists; and episodes that make up a good story, as the brief encounter with her idol Astor Piazzolla. Very explanatory, all of the pieces are introduced by Cisneros' commentary on the context of that specific work. This new book provides plenty of material for establishing a dialogue that goes beyond speculation with her fictional (and poetic) work.

I would like to start my analysis of the novel with the first piece of narration by Lala. In a kind of sketch in Part 1, but even before Chapter 1, she describes an old picture: "We're all little in the photograph above Father's bed. [...] Here the Acapulco waters lapping just behind us. The little kids, Lolo and Memo, [...] The Awful Grandmother holding them [...] Mother seated as far from her as politely possible [...]" (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 3). This

¹¹ Cisneros warns us in a footnote that, despite being considered Mexican, rebozos are, "like all mestizos" from everywhere. This long fringed shawls root's travelled the world, from China through Spain, to meet the Indian habit of carrying babies in pieces of cloths. The rebozo can be then, a metaphor, for origins, which are never pure (2002, p. 96).

description introduces to the readers, already in the second paragraph, all the main characters in the novel: Celaya's family. What is most interesting about this description, however, is the fact that Lala, the narrator is not in the photo. She says:

I'm not here. They've forgotten about me when the photographer walking along the beach proposes a portrait. [...] They won't realize I'm missing until the photographer delivers the portrait [...]. Then everyone realizes the portrait is incomplete. It's as if I didn't exist. It's as if I'm the photographer walking along the beach with the tripod camera on my shoulder asking – *¿Un recuerdo? A souvenir? A memory?* (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 4).

This passage can be interpreted in two levels: one considering the context of the novel and the other in relation Celaya's position as narrator. Regarding the novel, the fact that Celaya was forgotten and was alone somewhere else when the picture was taken indicates, since the very beginning of the narrative, the sentiment of isolation and loneliness that the reader associates to the character of Lala. Considering Celaya as the narrator, we can interpret her absence in the portrait in relation to her identification with the photographer, that is, she is the one who has the ability and the means to "fix a representation".

Susan Sontag, in "The Image-world", claims that "through being photographed, something becomes part of a system of information, fitted into schemes of classification and storage" and that the "photographic exploration [...] provid[es] possibilities of control that could not even be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information: writing." (SONTAG, 2004, p. 82). From Sontag's observations, I suggest that Celaya's sentiment of being the photographer, or *like* the photographer, renders her aware, at least to an extent, of her position as the one in control, the one with the power and authorization to tell the story, even though her media provides, as Sontag remarks, fewer possibilities of control if compared to photography. Anyhow, I would like to highlight the narrator's awareness of her position as such, which will be topic of one of the main discussions of this work.

There are uncountable "similarities" between the story(ies) told in *Caramelo* and Cisneros' real life. Most importantly, Celaya is, as her creator, the only daughter in a family of seven children, born from a mother who is the daughter of a Mexican family settled in Chicago and a Mexican father who became an American citizen after fighting in the U.S. army during the Second World War. Cisneros' and Celaya's father have the same job as an upholsterer and their mothers are fond of museums, operas, literature, street markets and gardening. In this context, Lala feels rather isolated: despite living in a crowded house, she has no one to really share her intimate feelings with. That is why, as Cisneros, she daydreams

about having a beautiful, calm house, where she may set up her own rules – and also break them, if so she wishes. Another important “common feature” between Cisneros’ real life and Celaya’s fictional life is the constant moving due to lack of financial resources, which intensifies a sense of instability and a craving for her own space in the novel’s protagonist/narrator.

There are stories that are “duplicated” and found both in the fictional and non-fictional work. In Part 3 of *Caramelo*, Lala narrates, in the chapter “God Gives Almonds”, the day when her father, Inocencio Reyes, goes with her to a Catholic school in San Antonio, just after they moved there, to plead for the priest to give them a tuition break, since they are a family of nine. “Each time we move to a new neighborhood, Father and I have to call on the priest.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 318). What somehow bothers Celaya is that her father always says he has “seven sons” even though he actually has six sons and one daughter. She notices that this is due to a poor translation from Spanish: the word *hijos* means both “sons” and “children”. “I have seven sons, Father says. (...) Father means children, not simply boys, but I don’t think Father Ginter understands.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 319).

In the non-fictional piece “Only Daughter” of 1989, in *A House of My Own*, Cisneros tells the reader that after moving many times in and out of town there always came another Catholic school. “Each time, my father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast, ‘I have seven sons’.” (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 93) She then explains what is only implicit in Celaya’s narrative.

He meant *siete hijos*, seven children, but he translated it as ‘sons’. ‘I have seven sons’ he would say to anyone who would listen. (...). My papa. He didn’t mean anything by that mistranslation, I’m sure. But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I’d tug my father’s sleeve and whisper, ‘Not seven sons. Six! And one daughter’. (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 93-94).

Despite making use of the same material, we perceive Cisneros employs different strategies in them. While in the novel she reconstructs one precise day when Celaya and her father go to a Catholic school – and this reconstruction implies the fictional strategies of describing a setting, the characters involved, their thoughts, feelings and attitudes – in the non-fictional text the author mentions the episode in a more general manner, not building up a specific scene. These are, perhaps, strategies that grant her non-fictional text more “reliability” and her fictional piece more “creativity”, terms associated respectively with a true account and a fictive one. However, as we will discuss later on, in Cisneros’ aesthetics

these two spheres, or, maybe, genres, are not polarized but, rather, are under constant interaction.

Even episodes that are really intimate and, supposedly, a secret for some of the family members were used as raw material by the author. In Part 1 of *Caramelo*, Celaya's family travels south to Mexico City to spend vacations in their paternal grandparents' house. Lala, who is about ten years old, is enthralled with a girl named Candelaria, the washerwoman's daughter. The special attraction is due to her unique beauty, her *caramelo* skin: "The girl Candelaria has a skin bright as a copper *veinte centavos* coin after you've sucked it. (...) Not like anybody. Smooth as a peanut butter, deep as burnt-milk candy." (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 34). Although Candelaria is Celaya's favorite playmate, they are forbidden to continue playing together, apparently because the washerwoman's daughter is not civilized enough. On the family trip from Mexico City to Acapulco, though, Candelaria is invited (to help take care of the younger children) and the two girls share other happy moments together. Because Candelaria almost drowns in the ocean, she is sent back to Mexico City by bus before the trip is over. Later on in the narrative, there is a scene in which Zoila, Celaya's mother, loses her temper because of a certain "truth" she was told by Soledad, her mother-in-law. This moment of the narrative suggests Candelaria might be Inocencio's daughter out of wedlock – what they, Inocencio and his parents, assume as an "accident" that took place even before he met Zoila.

Reading "Natural Daughter", that was written after the publication of *Caramelo* and published just now in *A House of My Own*, we get to know that the "illegitimate daughter issue" is not limited to the fictional world. According to Cisneros autobiographical account, she came to know about it in 1995 while her father was hospitalized due to a heart surgery. Her mother told her he had already had a daughter, before all of Cisneros' brothers were born, with *las muchachas* that worked for her grandmother (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 247). Cisneros' mother tells her that her half-sister is a girl she used to play with when they were visiting Mexico and assumes Cisneros will not remember her. But she does. And she decided, as we have seen, to actually use this family secret in the novel. "I thought a lot about this sister while I wrote *Caramelo*. After my father died, I hesitated with whether to exploit this family secret as raw material for my story." (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 247). Because Cisneros is really aware of the "truth quality" of her novel, she admits she thought that after *Caramelo*, her "family would be forced to sit down and talk" (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 247). The fact that a family secret is revealed and exposed relates to one of the tendencies of life narratives and the

tradition of confession: disclosing a (shocking) personal “truth” so as to attribute value to that text, in a certain sense.

The most interesting circumstance about Cisneros’ use of this situation, however, is what she finds out when she finally has the chance to talk to her father’s sister, aunt Baby Doll, the one everybody suggested she to talk to. Cisneros’ aunt denies the story is true and uses lots of arguments to prove so. When Cisneros mentions that she remembers the girl’s face, and that she looked just like her father, aunt Baby Doll answers: ““What are you saying! She didn’t look like your father! She went with us to Acapulco. You have photos of her.”” (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 262). To Cisneros’ surprise, in the real trip to Acapulco her family took in 1964, the supposed illegitimate daughter had actually gone with them. The writer thought she had invented that in the novel. “In *Caramelo* I invented just this scenario. I thought I made up several parts of my novel, but later someone tells me that this, and other things too, really happened. The things I think I imagine are true, and the things I remember as truly happening...?” (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 262).

This simple “memory issue” opens up a whole strand of analysis about the status of memory in our days. That is not the exact focus of this dissertation, but it is worth mentioning that recent studies on this topic, from different areas, have changed the way we consider memory and the act of remembering. Basically, the current viewpoint regards memory not as repository of events – a drawer one opens and finds their keepings safe. Rather, memory is considered dynamic and malleable: it is reconstructed constantly. Regarding life narratives, specifically, Smith and Watson explore the question of memory throughout their *Reading Autobiography*. They highlight that remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present, and also that “The process is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering.” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 22). The objective of this very brief discussion is to call attention to Cisneros’ position as an author who does not claim to hold the true, verifiable memory. Rather, she highlights how “truth” can be a complicated and not so reliable a key to read her work. She exposes the process of writing an autobiographical account as frail. That is, when she admits and publishes that she thought she was inventing a story when the story actually had happened, she is evidently showing her “failure” in remembering accurately, which may call into question the reliability of her non-fictional texts”, in *A House of My Own*, at least the ones which are “memoir-like”.

We could assume that the list (which could go on for pages) of events and circumstances that are common to both the author and the character provides ample evidence that the writer draws inspiration from situations of her life. This is so. Even Cisneros admits that in the text “Straw into Gold” (2015, p. 73), a lecture she gave in 1987 now published in *A House of My Own*. She says that her father’s stories not told in *The House on Mango Street* would surface in *Caramelo*, which, by the way, is dedicated to him: “Para ti, Papá” (2002, non-numbered page). Nevertheless, our aim here is not to make a list of similarities that would prove Cisneros actually wrote the story of her life in *Caramelo*. The story narrated by Celaya is the story of Cisneros’ family – to a certain extent. Rather, it is one possible story of the Cisneros family, as seen by the author and undergone a process of fictionalization. Thus, *Caramelo* can be viewed and analyzed as an autobiographical practice, which does not claim to be fact, but to be a kind fiction that could inadvertently stumble on the truth (CISNEROS, 2002, non-numbered page). More interestingly, the aim of this work is to discuss the strategies the author uses in order to deal with autobiographical narrative and fiction, the implications it has on the literary genres at work, and the possible effects of this type of writing in the current dynamics of literature.

As the critic Leonor Arfuch insightfully argues (2010 p. 73), “it is not so much the ‘content’ of the story itself – the collection of events, moments, attitudes – but, precisely the strategies – of fictionalization and self-representation that matter. [...] It is the self-reflective quality, the path of the narration, that will be, after all, *significant*.” In other words, it is the “how” of Cisneros procedures that is our main issue, not the “what” she is talking about. We turn our attention now to what I believe to be the analysis with more purchase to this dissertation.

2.3 “When I Was Dirt”: the possibility of autofiction

In Part 2, “When I Was Dirt”, Cisneros makes up a very interesting scene that structures the whole of this section. It is not a continuation of Part 1, “Recuerdo de Acapulco”, which ends somewhat abruptly, and it is not necessarily a bridge to Part 3, “the Eagle and the Serpent, or My Mother and My Father”. Part 2 concerns, as the title indicates, the times before Celaya was born. There are at least two different layers constituting “When I

Was Dirt”. The base scene, the structure, has Celaya writing the story of her “Awful Grandmother” while the grandmother herself actively observes the narration, which ends up being a delicate situation since the two have to constantly negotiate the “truth” or the version to become official. The second layer is the story itself being told, more than often by Celaya, but sometimes also through Soledad’s direct speech. The two layers coexist, but we, as readers, tend to embark in the narration of Soledad’s life and to a certain extent forget about the underlying scene. The latter comes to the surface mostly with the grandmother’s voice, which is marked textually by imprint in bold.

While in Parts 1 and 3 we have an idea of Lala’s age and are able to locate them in a linear chronology, Part 2 takes place in a dislocated spatiality/temporality – we know the setting of the plot of Soledad’s life but we cannot know when and where the base scene happens. That is one of the reasons why what stands out in this specific section of the novel is not so much its autobiographical engagement in content but in its formal aspect. I would like to think of “When I Was Dirt” as having a metafictional quality. According to the definition of metafiction by the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, it describes “a kind of fiction that openly comments on its own fictional status¹²”. The discussion around this issue will be further explored.

The base scene described above configures the most profitable “similarity” between author and character/narrator: they both occupy the position of the author engaged in life writing. The narrator of the novel, before undertaking the task of telling her grandmother’s life story, declares the following: “When I was dirt is when these stories begin. Before my time. Here is how I heard them or didn’t hear them. Here is how I imagine the stories happened, then.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 89). Since these words are within the fictional realm of the novel, we read them as Celaya’s, but they are not quite different from Cisneros’ “Disclaimer”, one of the paratextual pieces mentioned earlier, that works as a sort of preface to the novel: “I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*.” (CISNEROS, 2002, non-numbered page). The positions of Celaya and Cisneros relate to the issue of the anti-essentialist discourse discussed in the previous chapter: the critique/deconstruction of the subject and its development.

¹² Available at: http://msdarlingsenglish.oxford_dictionary_of_literary_terms.pdf Last access: February 17th, 2016.

The deconstruction of the subject refuses the Western/Cartesian notion of individuals as having an “essence” that is stable and unproblematic: the “I”. The existence of this “I” is, in an essentialist view, what would allow each and everyone to know the world, as though knowing was somehow a “natural, pure, neutral” activity. Critics of essentialism doubt that the self is a stable, unprejudiced entity that is simply able to know the world. They interrogate the means of production of this knowledge (as well as the relation it has with discourse and power) and the possibility of postulating an “I” as an unbiased entity, exempt of inquiry and questioning.

Cisneros’ and Celaya’s positions, respectively as author and narrator, in a sense, endorse the critique of the essentialist subject. Their discourses, even though they are “the owners” of the story, show awareness of and express very clearly the fact that their narratives are not “true” accounts of events. That is, their implicit premise is that they are not subjects able to know and narrate reality in a manner which is exempt of their specific biases, passions, points of view. Thus, in their narratives there is room for doubts, interrogations, inquiries: showing simultaneously the limitations and the power of the author as a reliable figure. If reliability has to do with an objective reference to the “external” world, it is relativized. In other words, they are “suspicious writers” and warn the reader about that. Complementing the “Disclaimer”, Cisneros says: “To write is to ask questions. It doesn’t matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern [...]” (2002, non-numbered page). If, in our days, to write is to ask questions, that indicates a significant change from the Rousseauian mentality of providing answers to his accusers and from the nineteenth century perspective regarding the function of literature. In the century of the novel, the purpose of literature was, besides entertaining, to instruct, to provide questions – and answers – for the ever-growing group of bourgeois readers. That is, a new code of behavior, an ethics. The literature produced by Cisneros, on the other hand, is not concerned with didactic goals (although one can learn from it), but with the intrinsic value of telling a good story, which means, in her aesthetics, to be at once dense and light, lyrical and unpoetic, reflexive and entertaining.

Besides the problematization around the issue of life writing in the introduction to “When I Was Dirt”, there is yet another tension in the second part of *Caramelo*: the metafictional dialogues between granddaughter and grandmother. While Lala tries to tell the story, Soledad constantly interrupts her, especially when she is not pleased with the

developing of her own story, as we can see in the following example. Celaya begins the narrative of Soledad's childhood locating it far back in time. "But this story is from the time of before. Before my Awful Grandmother became awful, before she became my father's mother." She goes on and asks: "Is there anyone alive who remembers the Awful Grandmother when she was a child? [...] It was such a long, long time ago." To the immediate reaction of Soledad: "*Que exagerada eres!* It wasn't that long ago!". The dialogue continues: "I have to exaggerate. It's just for the sake of the story. I need details. You never tell me anything." (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 91-92).

Right after Celaya's complaint about the lack of details given, Soledad shows awareness of the process of writing and its inventive drive. She answers, "And if I told you everything, what would there be for you to do, eh? I tell you just enough..." (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 92). In addition, the character has a kind of motto that, besides being an instruction from her father on how to dye a black *rebozo*, also, intends, in a sense, to show Celaya the limits for fantasy, invention: "Just enough, but not too much." (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 92). The atmosphere of the scene is rather tense: Celaya asks "let me go on with the story", provoking Soledad's rude reaction, "And who's stopping you?" (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 92). The tension will gradually increase and lead to a clear confrontation between the two "owners" of the story.

Celaya describes a building where her grandmother lived during her first years as a rather charming place. "In rosy pastels it seemed to rise like a dream of a more charming time...". Soledad interrupts abruptly. "It was never rosy, and it certainly wasn't charming. It was smelly, dank, noisy, hot, and filled with vermin." The narrator is bothered by the Awful Grandmother's behavior. She asks, "Who is telling this story, you or me?" (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 97). Although Soledad admits her granddaughter is the one in charge, the interruptions never end. It is curious to observe Soledad's dubious behavior. The ambiguity seems to dwell on the fact that her consciousness about literary procedures will lead her both to stimulate and discourage Celaya's creation. Soledad at once enjoys and is bothered with her granddaughter's narrative. She makes comments such as "How you exaggerate! Where you get these ridiculous ideas from is beyond me." (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 98), but at times she also exclaims "Exactly!" (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 94, 98).

When Soledad is entertained with the story and is able to let go of her critical eye, she adds commentaries that actually contribute to Celaya's literary creation, as when she suggests

titles for a specific period of her life: “So this part of the story if it were a *fotonovela* or *telenovela* could be called *Solamente Soledad* or *Sola en el mundo*, or *I’m not to blame*, or *What an Historia I’ve lived*. (2002, p. 95); or as when she helps in the description of the atmosphere of a place, “That gave the building a bit of a dreary feeling” (2002, p. 97); and yet when she wants to add to the climate of the story, “If this were a movie, a few notes of a song would follow here, something romantic and tender and innocent on the piano [...]” (2002, p. 104).

Another moment of contradiction in Soledad’s character is right after Celaya’s description of the place where her Little Grandfather, or Narciso, used to live with his parents as a young man. Celaya’s story is rich with historical references, and she mentions that their place had been a friars’ monastery once. Soledad endorses this reference:

The very ones who directed the Santa Inquisición in the time of the colony. No, it’s true, I swear to you. May the Devil come and yank my feet if I’m lying. Ask around if you don’t believe me. And before it was a monastery, it was an Aztec Temple. They say the building stones came from that original building. Look how the walls are a meter thick after all. It might be true. Just as the stories of some *pobre* buried inside of them might be true too. Well, who knows, that’s what they say. But I don’t like to tell stories. (2002, p. 112).

The contradiction¹³ lies on the fact Soledad claims she does not like to tell stories when that is exactly what she is doing. Precisely two chapters after this declaration, the roles both characters were occupying in “When I Was Dirt” are swapped. Despite saying she does not like to tell stories, Soledad commands the narrative in a chapter that sums up her life. When Soledad is the narrator, Celaya makes few and brief comments, only one regarding the matter of narration itself: “You’re getting ahead of the story, Grandmother” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 120).

There is a pause in Soledad’s life story so that Celaya also narrates her grandfather’s life: differently from Soledad, a half orphan who was abandoned by her father and grew up with other sixteen children in an aunt’s house, Narciso had been an only child with a middle-class upbringing. After many chapters with the lens on Narciso’s past, Celaya asks the Awful Grandmother her opinion about the story, “Well, how do you like it so far?”, Soledad answers, “Some parts not so good. But not so terrible either. Go on, go on.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 155). Again, Celaya is troubled by the difficulty of narrating satisfactorily, at least to Soledad’s standards, and remarks:

¹³ By no means, do I intend to make a negative moral judgement of the character. It is the other way around: the contradiction enriches the personality of Soledad and, as a consequence, the novel.

Honest to God, there's no pleasing you. Look, if I would've known telling this story would be this much, I wouldn't have bothered. What a whole lot of *lata*. Nothing but trouble from start to finish. I should've guessed it. A tangled string, I'm not lying. So what was I telling you? (2002, p. 155).

As the narration goes on, Soledad makes many other interventions, positive – that is, contributing to build up the narrative in terms of setting, characterization of people, feelings, historical references, etc – and also negative. Some of her interruptions are: “Why do you constantly have to impose your filthy politics? Can't you just tell the facts?” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 156), “Don't you think we need a love scene here of Narciso and I together?” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 170), “Celaya, why are you so cruel with me? You love to make me suffer. [...] All I want was a little understanding, but I see I was asking for too much” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 172). “Lies, lies. Nothing but lies from beginning to end. I don't know why I trusted you with my beautiful story.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 188). Finally, after one more disagreement about the development of the story, Soledad decides to leave Celaya alone with the enterprise: “I'm never going to tell you anything again. From here on, you're on your own.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 205). And so she leaves only to reappear, from then on, as Celaya's character.

My interest while discussing the character of Soledad was to highlight her ambiguous behavior in relation to the narrative so as to observe its specular effect: one that mirrors and exposes the moment of literary artifice. I now would like to focus on Celaya's attitude as the narrator of “When I Was Dirt”. It should be clear that there is slight difference between her position in Part 2 and the other two sections of *Caramelo*. This difference is due to the structure Cisneros constructed for Part 2: the scene with the Awful Grandmother and the constant negotiation about the narration of her story. In other words, because the narration in this part has to face the obstacle set by Soledad, the writing processes are, in a certain sense, more open, as if Cisneros wants to hint at, or perhaps call our attention, to possible literary strategies. As we have seen, this is evident in the dialogues between the two characters, dealing with the story to be told, but it is possible to perceive this openness in some of Celaya's remarks as well.

The first and most significant of Celaya's observations about the narrative she undertakes is in the “introduction of sorts” discussed earlier. Nevertheless, I would like to remark the particular sentence “Here is how I heard them or didn't hear them.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 89), for it is an epitome of Celaya's position as narrator, synthesizing the conflicts between her and her grandmother as well. We shall direct our attention now to the other

pieces of metatextual commentaries by the narrator. In the beginning of the story, Lala does not know the name of a street where her grandmother used to live. Instead of omitting it, she says “No one is still alive who remembers where this building stood exactly, but let’s *assume* it was the street of the Lost Child, since that would suit our story to perfection.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 97; my italics).

A bit after, she says that a following part of the story will be “A perfect opportunity for humor, song, and, curiously enough, cheer.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 98). In a footnote, some pages ahead, she justifies going more minutely into her paternal great-grandmother’s life: “Because a life contains multitudes of stories and not a single strand explains precisely the who of who one is, we have to examine the complicated loops that allowed Regina to become la Señora Reyes.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 115). In another footnote, Lala “confesses” that the words she uses as being said by Regina Reyes are actually from “the great Mexican photographer”, Lola Alvarez Bravo, but she “loved them so much” she had to borrow them (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 117).

As mentioned, there is a chapter which is not narrated by Celaya, but by Soledad. Right after that, when Celaya resumes her narration, her first words are: “What was going through your head, Grandmother? You don’t remember or you don’t want to remember the details, and for a story to be believable you have to have details.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 124). She goes on and tells the story of the Mexican Revolution, as she imagines Soledad has witnessed. “You could’ve said – I remember every building, avenue, plaza [...]. (2002, p. 124). It goes on until she realizes she is telling too much for that point of the story and adverts: “But now *I’m* getting ahead of the story.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 125). In the description of Soledad and Narciso’s wedding, the narrator openly shows her fictionalization:

church bells did ring exuberantly on the morning of Soledad and Narciso’s wedding , although only in the imagination, because church weddings were strictly prohibited in the years following the war [...] So let us imagine the bells, and imagine the *mariachis*, and imagine a beautiful reception that never happened [...] (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 167).

A similar attitude is perceived when Celaya makes a “weather mistake” describing a day as windy in the rainy season – a time, according to Soledad, when there is no wind in that specific location. When Soledad warns her about this mistake, she does not correct it: “Just for poetic purposes, we’ll allow the wind to arrive in this scene. It suits the story better.”

(CISNEROS, 2002. p. 171). Finally, there are two other remarks by the narrator I would like to include in my *corpus* here. The first is in response to her Awful Grandmother's accusation that she is telling "nothing but lies": "They're not lies, they're healthy lies. So as to fill in the gaps. You're just going to have to trust me." (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 188). And the last one is her first reaction after Soledad decides to abandon her in the task of telling her story. "The less you tell me, the more I'll have to imagine." (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 205).

All of these utterances have in common their metatextual value. By metatextual I mean that the text refers to itself. Since we are dealing with an autobiographical practice that claims to be, above all, a fictional work, we could think of it as having a metafictional quality, as I mentioned before. That is, it is not any kind of text that makes comments about itself, it only concerns a fictional text that discusses its own strategies as fiction, bringing to the fore many of the possible elements (its cement, bricks, and shovel) to construct a fictional world. The metafictional quality is, as Linda Hutcheon argues in "Postmodern Paratextuality and History"¹⁴ a predominant feature when we talk about postmodern fiction¹⁵.

"When I Was Dirt" becomes even more interesting when we get to know, in the Acknowledgements at the end, that Cisneros had been through a similar situation while writing *Caramelo*. She thanks her father's cousin, Enrique Arteaga Cisneros, for contributing to the creation of Part 2. Apparently, she used his writings to make up the world of "When I Was Dirt", establishing with him a dialogue, a negotiation that, to an extent, mirrors the negotiation of the fictional scene between Celaya and Soledad. Clearly, we notice that Cisneros leaves, in *Caramelo*, the door ajar for readers to spy on her literary procedures. The tension between fact and fiction, memory, history and invention that both Cisneros and Celaya play with is rather productive and can be considered the setting of rules of a game that we, readers, and they, author and narrator are playing together, as I will discuss in the next pages.

In *Escritas de si, escritas do outro: o retorno do autor e a virada etnográfica*, Diana Klinger develops her ideas of contemporary life writing based on the concepts of autofiction and performance. Her work can greatly contribute to the discussion of Cisneros' literature, specifically the two pieces – *Caramelo* and *A House of My Own* – I deal with in the present

¹⁴ Available at <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/9477/1/TSpace0031.pdf> Last access: February 17th, 2016.

¹⁵ For Hutcheon, be it in literature or in any other form of expression, postmodernism uses and abuses, install and then subverts the very (Eurocentric) concepts it challenges (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 243).

chapter. The term *autofiction* was coined in 1977 by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in an attempt to account for his own book *Fils*. The use of the term is recent but would open up a long a discussion, which is out of our scope. For the aim of this analysis, the main points Klinger develops are “just enough”.

The first problem we should address in defining autofiction has to do with an old dichotomy: fact *versus* fiction. As the critic points out:

The “autobiographical constellation” is surrounded by a certain polemic that involves the questions of the genres, since it moves between two extremes: from the awareness that – to a certain extent – all literary work is autobiographical to the fact that a “pure” autobiography does not exist. (KLINGER, 2012, p. 34).

Thus, facing the impossibility to distinguish clearly between autobiography and fiction, Klinger takes on Leonor Arfuch’s position in her *O espaço biográfico*. According to Arfuch, the matter is not so much about separating what is actually lived experience from what is invented. The extreme opposite is also not valid: it is not that autobiographies and fictions are entirely the same, but:

(T)he problem moves to the “autobiographical space”, constituted by *biographical value*. It is in this space that the reader will be able to integrate the diverse focalizations deriving from the referential and the fictional register in a compatible system of beliefs, and where he or she can play the “games of miscomprehension, the traps, the masks, the decoding of the developments of the story [...]” (ARFUCH, 2010, p. 56).

Moreover, Klinger argues that the position of the author in autofiction has to do with a “provocation, in the form of a *game* that plays with the notion of *real subject*.” (2012, p. 40; her italics). In addition to this “game quality”, she defends that, in the wake of the critique of the subject, the category of autofiction implies a “questioning of the notions of *truth* and *subject*” (KLINGER, 2012, p. 42). She goes on: “In the autofiction, the relationship of the account to a ‘previous’ truth” is not so interesting, and continues, quoting Christopher Lasch, “the author today speaks with his/her own voice, but warns the reader not to trust his/her version of the truth.” (1983 apud KLINGER, 2012, p. 45). Klinger adds that the autofiction is a “machine that produces myths of/about the author that works [...] in those moments of the narrative in which the author introduces in the story a reference to the act of writing (2012, p. 46). Finally, the critic joins the idea of autofiction with the concept of performance.

Autofictions take part in the creation of the *myth* of the writer, a figure that is situated in the interstice *between* the “lie” and the “confession”. The notion of the account as creation of subjectivity, from a manifest ambivalence in what concerns a truth previous to the text, allows us to think of [...] autofiction as a performance of the author. (2012, p. 46).

For Klinger, this notion of performance concerns a dramatization of the self. In the case of autofiction, a dramatization of the figure of the author. She adds that the art of performance will not only be a radical exposure of the speaker, but also of the place from where he or she speaks, of the intimate rituals: it will be a staging of autobiographical situations (KLINGER, 2012, p. 51). Moreover, the critic argues that “the autofictional work is also linked to the art of performance to the extent that both are presented as unfinished, improvised, *work in progress*, as if the reader watched ‘live’ the process of writing.” (KLINGER, 2012, p. 51), which is exactly the experience we have while reading “When I Was Dirt”.

To sum up, the dynamics of self writing today, as Klinger sees it, can be associated to the concept of autofiction. In her understanding, autofictional writing has a “game quality” in the way it deals with fact/autobiography and fiction/invention, eliminating the *versus* status and somehow enjoying the difficulty in establishing such a distinction. Another really important aspect of autofictional writing for Klinger is the idea of performance, as it concerns a dramatized exposure of the writer.

The ideas discussed by Klinger certainly enrich our analysis of *Caramelo*. We can read Cisneros’ novel as an autofictional work, in the terms explored by the critic. Regarding the “game aspect”, we notice that Cisneros does not endorse a dichotomized perspective of fact/fiction, but *plays* with it – as we have seen in *Caramelo*’s “preface of sorts” as well as in the introduction to “When I Was Dirt” by Celaya. As Arfuch argues, it is a matter of a biographical space, not a biographical truth, where reader and writer play the games of miscomprehension, the traps, the masks, the decoding of the developments of the story. In addition, other main elements in autofiction, such as warning the reader not to trust the narrative, and the reference to the process of writing, are tools Cisneros explicitly makes use of and that we could consider as the very basis of her literary process in *Caramelo*.

Regarding the matter of performance, constitutive of autofiction, there is a lot in *Caramelo* to be thought of, in different aspects. First, in a more superficial level, we can think of Celaya as a dramatized figure of Cisneros: for the countless similarities between the two and, most importantly, for the fact that Cisneros puts Celaya in the position of a writer as well. Secondly, if performance is a “radical exposure” of “intimate rituals”, a “staging of autobiographical situations”, there is surely room for interpreting the structure of “When I Was Dirt” in the terms of performance, since Cisneros is exposing herself doubly: in what she

uses of “family stories material” and in opening the process of writing through the base scene: both through the dialogues between the narrator and her grandmother and through Celaya’s metatextual remarks, in the middle of the narration, about the fictionalizing process of her writing.

2.4 “A House of My Own”: (Auto)Fiction in non-fiction

Performance is also a key notion for reading of the preface Cisneros wrote to the 2009 edition to her most famous book, *The House on Mango Street*. This 25th anniversary edition contains a preface titled “A House of My Own¹⁶”. In this text, which is dedicated to her just deceased mother, Cisneros is, once again, disclosing her private life and, most importantly, the circumstances of her writing, which will, of course, add to the reading of the novel that follows the preface.

Before the text itself, there is a picture of a younger Cisneros at her desk (probably in her late twenties or early thirties) with a serious but light stare at us (or the camera). Because the preface is supposed to be outside the fictional limits, we tend to read it autobiographically – as if it is true. Cisneros, however, wrote it in a not so different tone from that of her fictional work, referring to herself both in first and third person: “The young woman on the photograph” (CISNEROS, 2009, p. xi), “As a girl, she dreamed about having a silent home” (2009, p. xii), “The daughter” (2009, p. xiii), “The woman I am in the photo” (2009, p. xv), “The woman I once was” (2009, p. xvi), “I write [...]” (2009, p. xix). Starting almost every paragraph with self reference, she tells a bit of the story of her young adulthood and trying to make it as a writer. We learn about her familial bonds, her professional and educational experiences, her literary influences and the space, or rather, the role, writing has in her life and in the construction of her subjectivity. I would like to argue that, although the limits between autobiography and fiction seem to be set in the 2009 edition of *The House on Mango Street* – “A House of My Own” would be “true” and the novel itself fiction – this preface can

¹⁶ This reformulation of Virginia Woolf’s title to her fundamental essay “A Room of One’s Own”, appears originally in Cisneros as a vignette close to the end of *The House On Mango Street*. More recently, the author has used the expression “A House of My Own” as a preface to the 2009 edition of her first novel and as the title of her latest book, *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life*, which also contains the preface mentioned.

also be considered an autofictional work (as, perhaps, the whole of *A House of My Own*), to the extent that it can be aligned to Klinger's notion of performance that I take on here .

Before discussing the notion of performance, I would like to consider Smith and Watson's proposal of complicating the "autobiographical 'I' beyond the 'I'-then and the 'I'-now framework" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 72). For them, the assumption that there is a stable "I" fixed in the present and that there is an "I" in the past who is spoken about is "too limited an understanding of life narrative" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 71). Complicating but still trying to keep it simple, the two critics divide the "I's into four categories. 1) The "real" or historical "I"; 2) the narrating "I"; 3) the narrated "I"; and 4) the ideological "I". To our interest, it will be relevant to discuss the narrating and the narrated "I's. Smith and Watson define the narrating "I" as a "persona of the historical person who wants to tell, or is coerced into telling, a story about the self." Also, it "calls forth only that part of the experiential history linked to the story he is telling." (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 72). While the narrating "I" is the agent of discourse, Smith and Watson argue that the "narrated 'I' is the object 'I', the protagonist of the narrative, the version of the self that the narrating 'I' chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader. (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 73).

After setting the classifications, the two critics admit that such a schematic division of autobiographical narration is "not sufficient when reading a particular autobiographical work" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 73), so they provide a more complete discussion. The point that contributes the most to our discussion of Cisneros' preface "A House of My Own" is that

the narrating 'I' is an effect composed of multiple voices, a heteroglossia attached to multiple and mobile subject positions, because the narrating 'I' is neither unified or stable. It is split, fragmented, provisional, multiple, a subject always in the process of coming together and of dispersing. (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 74).

The multiplicity, fragmentation, mobility Smith and Watson talk about is entangled in what Klinger calls "critique of the subject". The belief that there is not a single, fixed, stable subjectivity is, as we have discussed earlier, the point of rupture with a modern mindset, thus, with the possibility of a type of narration that emanates from one single voice and whose object is somehow being reproduced and not produced via linguistic operations. It enriches our analysis to think of Cisneros' reflections in 2009 of herself during the writing of *The House On Mango Street* in the terms Smith and Watson provide, complicating the act of remembrance and writing, hence, questioning the reading of a supposedly non-fictional text as

a “true” account. Obviously, I do not mean to say that Cisneros’ text is false. Rather, I aim at calling attention to its discursive construction.

Concerning the notion of performance, the preface provides plenty of material:

The woman I once was wrote the first three stories of *House* in a weekend in Iowa. [...] The young woman in the photo is modeling her book-in-progress after *Dream Tigers* by Jorge Luis Borges [...] She *doesn't* want to write a book that a reader won't understand and would feel ashamed for not understanding. She thinks stories are about beauty. [...] She has in mind a book that can be opened at any page and will still make sense to the reader [...] She experiments, creating a text that is as succinct and flexible as poetry, snapping sentences into fragments [...] abandoning quotation marks to streamline the typography and make the page as simple and readable as possible. So that the sentences [...] can be read in more ways than one. (CISNEROS, 2009, xvi-xvii).

Performance, as we have been discussing here, relates to a dramatization of the figure of the author as well as to a disclosure of the writing strategies and the author’s intimate rituals. In the excerpt above, these two aspects of performance are evident. That is, this preface can be considered autofiction to the extent it “at once exhibits and questions the subject [...] exposes subjectivity and writing as *processes under construction*” (KLINGER, 2012, p. 51). Thus, I believe autofiction is an interesting concept to deal both with fictional and non-fictional texts, since the limits between fact and truth are precisely what is at stake in the use of the term.

2.5 *Pilón*: The analysis of paratextual elements in *Caramelo*

If the second part of *Caramelo* is, as I argued, in a sense detached from the whole of the novel – for its alienation in spatial/temporal terms deriving from its two-scene-at-the-same-time structure – parts one and three, “Recuerdo de Acapulco” and “The Eagle and the Serpent, or My Mother and My Father”, are more conventional in terms of plot so that we can perceive the narrator’s coming of age. For this reason, I believe the “game quality” and the notion of performance are not suitable here. Nevertheless, another aspect stands out in Part 1 and Part 3: the use of paratextual elements. As I said earlier, there are more than a hundred footnotes in the novel as well as many epigraphs to the different chapters, the Disclaimer already quoted, a Chronology at the end of the book, and a *Pilón* – the name of the something

extra the grocer gives someone so as to thank the person for the patronage (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 433).

I would like to claim that some of these paratexts have a double function. As Hutcheon defends concerning footnotes, “The reader's linear reading is disrupted by the presence of a lower text on the same page, and this hermeneutic disruption calls attention to the footnote's very doubled or dialogic form¹⁷”. If, for Hutcheon, the double or dialogic form regards, respectively, the footnote's reference to the plot and to the real, “historical” world, I would like to consider their double function, as the critic, in relation to the plot, but also, to the fact that *Caramelo* is a novel. In other words, some of these elements are metafictional and their presence breaks, to an extent, our sequential reading of the story. In this sense, they are similar to the metafictional ruptures brought by Celaya and Soledad's negotiation in Part 2.

There is a very important issue about *Caramelo* I have not mentioned so far: its subtitle. We do not see it on the cover, but it is in the title page: *Caramelo*, or Puro Cuento. Added to that, after the Contents, there is, both in Spanish and in English (each in a different page), an epigraph to the novel (the authorship is not mentioned): “Tell me a story, even if it's a lie.” (CISNEROS, 2002, non-numbered page). In relation to the novel, we could certainly associate these two elements with the fact that, Celaya tells us many times, in the Reyes' family the habit of telling “healthy” lies is common. As Lala's Little Grandfather tells her in Part 1, a healthy lie is sometimes useful so as to avoid trouble. Interestingly, right after that he tells her the story of the twin volcanoes in Mexico, obviously inventing part of the myth – so as to avoid the trouble by acknowledging that he does not know or remember the “exact” story. (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 56-57). Also, in many different parts of the novel Lala's father tells a story from his life, referred to as “cuentos”. At one point Celaya asks him, “Tell more *cuentos* of your life, Father, go on.”, and Inocencio answers, “But I keep telling you, they are not *cuentos*, Lala, they're true. They're *historias*. Celaya does not understand and questions: “What's the difference between “*un cuento*” and “*una historia*?””. Her father answers, cunningly, “that's a different kind of lie.” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 247).

Besides the relation to the Reyes' family issue, the fact that the subtitle and the epigraph are located previous to the fictional narrative, and we read them before embarking in the narration, complicates the matter. We can perceive them as a possible hint to the readers:

¹⁷ Available at <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/9477/1/TSpace0031.pdf> Last access February 18th, 2016.

an indication of a way to read the novel – as if it is nothing but mere invention – even with all the associations and similarities one may find between the author’s biography and the story told by Celaya. Anyhow, the content of these two paratextual pieces points to the same direction: valuing the narration for its own sake and not for its “truth quality”, which endorses the points I have been defending about Cisneros’ aesthetics until now. However, having access to the information the author provides in *A House of My Own*¹⁸, we tend to question the suggested way for reading. How can we read the story as “*puro cuento*” when the author tells us that she thought her family would “be forced to sit down and talk” (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 247) after the publication of the novel?

Considering the footnotes in *Caramelo*, the majority of them function as explanations, further reading or clarification of something mentioned in the novel: a song or a singer, an artist, a place, a comic book and so on. What I would like to highlight is the fact that, despite the fact that footnotes are already attributed to the author, and not to the narrator, Cisneros inserts herself, in varying degrees and in different ways, in some of these footnotes: ranging from an implicit opinion to the use of the pronoun “I”, hence breaking the linear reading of the fictional narrative.

Here are some instances of such a strategy. In a footnote right in the beginning of the novel, she talks about a process of gentrification a place mentioned in a previous passage has undergone. She begins with “While I was writing this book [...]” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 9). In a footnote about *Café Tacuba* she says she always order the same thing when she goes there: the *tamales* and hot chocolate (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 275). In another footnote, about the importance of the *telenovelas* to the Mexican culture, she says: “but I would argue that the *telenovelas* [...]” (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 409). In addition to the use of the personal pronoun, in some other instances (CISNEROS, 2002, p. 307, 335), the footnotes tell a story of her parents in which, again, she inserts “true” accounts from her private life, and we can see the similarity between Celaya’s parents and Cisneros’ parents.

In conclusion of my investigation in this chapter, there is still a point I would like to discuss. In my analysis so far we have observed Cisneros’ writings as an autobiographical practice. Concerning the novel *Caramelo* I have remarked the countless similarities between the author’s biography and the story told by the protagonist narrator. For this part of my

¹⁸ I refer especially to Cisneros use her father’s stories in *Caramelo* as well as to the fact that she thought that after the publication of the novel her family would be forced to sit down and talk (CISNEROS, 2015, P. 73, 247).

reading, *A House of My Own*, the writer's latest release, was crucial, to the extent it provides plenty of biographical material through the direct voice of the author. These numerous similarities are a point of departure. What I consider to be the most interesting and profitable "coincidence", however, is the position of the narrator in Part 2 in the tense situation of telling her Awful Grandmother's life story while being observed and censored by her. Because the two have to be in constant negotiation of the version of the story to become official, I believe the narrative is somewhat more open, and the very literary processes, strategies and techniques are exposed.

Precisely at this point, I considered the novel as autofiction in the terms the critic Diana Klinger discusses. That is, I remarked the "game quality" we perceive, for example, when the narrator warns the reader not to trust her. Also, the notion of performance is valuable for my analysis for it accounts for Cisneros' strategy of exposing herself and her "writing rituals". When dealing with performance, I found it productive to demonstrate how it can also operate in a non-fictional text: the preface to the 25th anniversary edition of the author's debut novel *The House On Mango Street*, problematizing the frontiers between fictional and non-fictional works by Cisneros'.

Returning to my main object, *Caramelo*, I discuss Parts 1 and 3 as having different strategies in respect to the autobiographical engagement. As argued, the aspects of autofiction that may enhance the reading of Part 2 are not appropriate to the initial and final sections of the novel. Rather, I believe that the particular use of some of the paratextual elements deserves attention for they both destabilize the status not only of the narrator (such as in the subtitle and in the epigraph of the novel) but problematize the tendency of reading the novel looking for identifications between the story and the author's biography. If, on the one hand, the writer tells us to read the novel as "*puro cuento*", on the other hand, she acknowledges, in *A House of My Own*, the stories were borrowed from real situations.

My final considerations about *Caramelo* regard the use of footnotes which I believe have a metafictional function, in the sense that Cisneros uses them so as to remind us that "we are reading a text", calling attention to her writing strategies. The last point I would like to make, considering all I have discussed, is that, in my view, the autobiographical practice Cisneros is engaged in indicates a return to the figure of the author, as I have discussed in the previous chapter. That is, opening up her artistic procedures, showing the literary artifice in the texture of her work, can be a means of reinscribing the figure of the author as fundamental

to the work of art – not as an authoritative source, but as someone who questions and problematizes the issue of a stable, essentialist identity as well as the dynamics of production and reception of the literary object. As Klinger argues, the return of the author does not oppose the critique of the subject, the crisis in representation: it continues the deconstruction, showing the fragmentation and inaccessibility of the subject (KLINGER, 2012, p. 35).

In criticism concerned with autobiographical texts, prose narratives are the most frequent objects of investigation. I will now swerve to another direction and will engage in the reading of Cisneros' poetry. Since it is a path not usually taken, I believe the work of recognizing the field and constructing the trail will be mandatory. Besides that, my attempt is to see to what extent we can also think of her poetry as an autobiographical practice.

3 POETRY AS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PRACTICE: A POSSIBLE APPROACH

O poeta é um fingidor.
 Finge tão completamente
 Que chega a fingir que é dor
 A dor que deveras sente.
Fernando Pessoa

3.1 Lyric poetry and the question of the speaker

The relationship between life writing and criticism has not always been a positive one. I believe the most appropriate relationship that there can be between literary material and criticism is one whose aim is to be more productive than judgmental. That is, criticism and its objects may well walk along towards a significant “complementation”. Critical texts can make use of artistic/literary strategies, and literature can also gain from critical readings and insights. For some time, literary criticism considered life writing as a minor genre, for it supposedly deals with “real life”, thus not being what we commonly understand as literature – fiction. Before the ruptures in the beginning of the twentieth century brought by Modernism and New Criticism (to remain in the Anglophone territory) literary criticism was mostly concerned in researching the life writings of an author so as to link them to his/her literary (fictional) work, looking for the work’s meaning. Afterwards, most, if not all, material regarding the author’s life would be seen as “unnecessary” to the literary dynamics.

As Diane Wood Middlebrook remarks in her chapter “What Was Confessional Poetry?” in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, in the first half of the twentieth century “Modernist aesthetic values held strong in academic criticism” as well as New Criticism’s approach to literary works. The latter’s main tenet was that valid interpretations had to avoid the Intentional Fallacy, the search for presumed intentions of the author. Its main objective was to arrive at a “correct” or “universal” interpretation by means of approaching the poem as an “ahistorical, self-enclosed system, an object made of language.” (MIDDLEBROOK, 1993, p. 634). Diana Klinger mentions this fact, claiming that the critical strands that sustained a notion of literature as an impersonal act, as a text/language based

activity, would not take into account any relation exterior to the text, marginalizing texts that refer to reality and considering them “minor genres”, for being “reality genres”, that is, genres in the frontier between the literary and the non-literary. (2012, p. 28).

Smith and Watson also mention that a turning point that marks the second surge of autobiography’s criticism is precisely “the application of a rigorous critical analysis to autobiographical narration that parallels in intent and seriousness that addressed to the novel, poetry and drama”. The critics point out that first-wave critics, more concerned with the *bios* (the life told in the book itself), understood autobiography as a “subcategory of the biography of great lives and acted as moralists of sorts” (2010, p. 200). I believe that the fact that some critical currents dealt with autobiography’s relationship to reality as a given, not problematizing its status of a “true account” is another element contributing to the lack of attention to this genre. Again, with the changes related to our perception of subjectivity taking place throughout the twentieth century until our days, critics are looking at life narratives more carefully.

This increased attention really enriches the field of studies so that our view of life writing technologies is broadened. Besides the somewhat evident fact that all writing is, to an extent, autobiographical, in the sense that it will usually provide some kind of “information” about the author, life narrative studies encompass today traditional autobiographies, autobiographical practices (autofiction, autobiographical novels), memoirs, letters, testimonials, diaries, travel notes etc. as well as life depictions in different media, such as the audiovisual ones. Nevertheless, even with the enlargement of the field, in terms both of production and of critical reading, the genre of poetry remains pretty much left aside and “needs further study” , as Smith and Watson state (2010, p. 277). Paul de Man, in “Autobiography as De-Facement” briefly questions this void in life writing studies:

Can autobiography be written in verse? Even some of the most recent theoreticians of autobiography categorically deny the possibility though without giving reasons why this is so. Thus it becomes irrelevant to consider Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* within the context of autobiography, an exclusion anyone working in the English tradition will find hard to condone. (DE MAN, 1984, p. 68).

I would like, in this chapter, to turn my attention to Sandra Cisneros’ poetic work and the possible autobiographical strategies she employs in writing her poems. Since this is not a subject that has been greatly explored, my primary intention in this dissertation is to map the field – and all mapping involves referencing – and extract some observations that might contribute to the reading of Cisneros’ poetry.

First, I would like to discuss some notions regarding poetry itself. The earliest surviving study on poetry and on literary theory is Aristotle's *Poetics*. In this seminal book, Aristotle divides poetry into three different categories: epic, drama and lyric. Lyric poetry owes its name to the lyre, the stringed musical instrument. This kind of poetry was supposed to be sung in harmony with the lyre and its main themes regarded the speaker's feelings, state of mind and personal views. Surely, love was a recurrent topic: love lost and love found, love's pain and joy. Contrary to the epic poem, in which the speaker, or narrator, is, to a great extent, hidden, and the characters' psychology is not deeply explored, in the lyric poems "intimacy" surfaces, denoting the existence of an inner dimension of the subject. It is worth mentioning that in Ancient Greece a given poetic form was inexorably attached to its thematic feature. Thus, lyric poetry relates at once to a specific content and to a fixed metrical structure. The formal aspect has changed over the times, along with particular literary movements, but the characteristic of the poet expressing his/her personal voice in what concerns, mainly, his feelings and impressions of the world remained as distinctive factor attributed to lyric poetry¹⁹.

I mention lyric poetry is because of its inherent connection to the intimate sphere of the speaker. It is, in a way, poetry about the self who writes. As Smith and Watson note, "It may appear that all lyric poetry is life writing in that the speaker of the lyric inscribes a subjective self as he or she explores emotions, vision, and intellectual states" (2010, p. 277). There is, indeed, a complex discussion regarding the coincidence or non-coincidence of the poet with the speaker (poetic-I, or lyric -I). However, at least after Romanticism, we tend to read poetry as though the speaker's voice is indeed the author's. Hence, lyric poetry is the poetic genre which is closest to having an autobiographical tone. We must analyze the issue further.

The beginning of English Romanticism is often associated with the publication of *The Lyric Ballads*, by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798. In the second edition, published in 1800, besides the poems themselves, the book contained a very important text: the famous extended preface with its manifest-like quality. In this text, Wordsworth announces and defends his "style of poetry" as something original and controversial, setting himself in opposition to the literary *ancien régime* – those writers (such as Dryden and Pope) who, in his view, imposed artificial conventions on poetry that distorted

¹⁹ Available at <http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/1320AncLit/chapters/05lyric.htm>. Last access: February 16th, 2016.

its free and natural development. (ABRAMS, 1986, p.5). I would argue that even in our days, most of what we associate to the figure of the poet and of the artist derive from Wordsworth's theory. We are, as Terry Eagleton claims, post-romantic subjects, in the sense that we are a product of it and not exactly over it. (2006, p. 27).

The most important contributions of the romantic revolution are related to a turn in perspective regarding what was considered poetry. For my purpose here, I highlight the shift from understanding poetry as an essentially technical activity to perceiving it as a more spontaneous one. Before the romantic revolution, during the neoclassical period, (around 1660) what was considered good poetry in England was written in order to praise a prominent public figure such as a saint, a king or queen or to celebrate a festivity. Such poems were written only by poets who had assimilated classical precedents and were aware of the rules governing the kind of poetry they were engaged in. That is, to be a poet it was crucial to assimilate a certain tradition (even Shakespeare's sonnets were, most likely, left aside, becoming popular again thanks to the influence of romantic poets). For Wordsworth, nevertheless, "all good poetry was the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" originated from "emotion recollected in tranquility".

In spite of the long debate about the extent to which "spontaneous" is a legitimate or appropriate term to describe poetic composition, the fact that romantic poetry is more concerned with what the individual can express about his/her personal views is undeniable. (1986, p. 7). If neoclassical poets were somehow concealed in their verses – in the intricate syntax, in the elaborate figures of speech, in the solemn vocabulary and in their impersonal themes, romantic lyric poems would usually be written in the first person, with its author's impressions as the main subject-matter. Then, Wordsworth, along with other poets inaugurated a new form of poetry that reached so many readers and became so popular that we, post-romantics, tend to think of poetry, primarily, as romantic poetry and that is why, I believe, we frequently read a poem in the first person as if the speaker is the author, which might and might not be the case.

To what extent is it possible to make the association speaker-author in Cisneros' poems? In this chapter I will deal with this issue in two of her books of poetry²⁰: *My Wicked Wicked Ways* and *Loose Woman*, respectively published in 1987 and 1994. Before entering

²⁰ Cisneros' first published book of poetry is actually a chapbook containing seven poems called *Bad Boys* (1980).

the discussion of the poems themselves, it is important to mention the poetic quality of her work as a whole, for it is one of the most remarkable and distinctive features of her writings in general. No matter the genre of text we read by Cisneros, many of the characteristics traditionally connected with poetry stand out, such as rhythm, rhymes and alliteration, metaphors and metonyms, imagery that condenses a thought or a state of being and the lyric quality of all of her narrators. Evidently, Cisneros is aware of this quality in her writings, having already referred to *The House On Mango Street* as composed of “lazy poems”²¹: stories that could have been developed into a poem but instead inhabit a gray area between prose and poetry.

The first thing I would like to call attention to in the books here analyzed is their titles. Both *My Wicked Wicked Ways* and *Loose Woman* indicate a degree of non-belonging, of not fitting in “appropriate” roles. We can certainly think about this issue not only in relation to the theme of love and sex, found almost everywhere in her poetry but also in relation to her decision to be a writer and face many obstacles imposed by her specific cultural background as a Mexican-American woman. This conflict is brought to the fore in the introduction by Maria Ester Sanchez to *Chicana Contemporary Poetry*. Sanchez’s discussion is really relevant if one keeps in mind the double marginalization characteristic of individuals like Cisneros. The critic argues that from the mid sixties to the eighties²² Chicanas “found themselves in the juncture of two parallel, and for them seemingly contradictory, movements in the United States” (SANCHEZ, 1985, p. 4). She continues:

Sharing common needs and objectives with Chicanos, Chicanas desired to affirm their commitment to the struggle against racism and to the political goals of La Raza. Their Mexican-Chicano communities, however, imposed upon them as women certain cultural constraints. [...] Like Chicanos, Chicanas experienced racial discrimination in the larger society, like white women, they also experienced sexual discrimination. Chicanas thus had reasons to identify with both communities. [...] Significantly, this double identification was characterized by a double ambivalence. (SANCHEZ, 1985, p. 4, 5).

As I will emphasize in the analysis of Cisneros’ poems, her condition and her awareness of such a condition will greatly inform her poetic writing. In addition to her situation as a Chicana, I would argue that the fact that she is a writer adds up another layer of “non-belonging”, since, as discussed before, from Romanticism to our days, being an artist

²¹ Available at:

<http://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/166122/Cisneros%2c%20Sandra.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> Last access: February 21st, 2016.

²² That is not the period Cisneros published her poetry, but these are the years of her teens and early adulthood (she was born in 1954).

means, more often than not, to be seen as an outcast – especially if one is a Chicana writing in and at the margins of the WASP tradition. Cisneros’ poetry, then, also shows awareness of her choice of being an artist as an element in her “wicked” identity.

3.2 *My Wicked Wicked Ways*

My Wicked Wicked Ways is originally divided into four parts²³: “1200 South/ 2100 West”, “My Wicked Wicked Ways”, “Other Countries” and “The Rodrigo Poems”. The separation of these sections as such seems to me to have followed a thematic criterion more than a chronological one. Thus, I would argue that each of the four sections tends to discuss one specific topic more substantially than the others. Another possible interpretation is that the four parts are not randomly ordered, but, to an extent, develop into the other as we observe the speaker’s process of maturation. I should also mention that Cisneros does not follow any fixed metric pattern. Usually she writes free verses, which, nonetheless, show her preoccupation with “poetic” features such as internal rhymes and alliterations.

In the first section, Cisneros’ speaker does not necessarily imply self-referentiality, so that the author opens ways for us to read these specific poems as if they were stories she “appropriated” from someone. That is, even though there is an “I” speaking from a very personal point of view, the story told is not always about this “I”. The title “1200 South/ 2100 West” refers to geographical coordinates that seem to establish the frontiers of a neighborhood. The similarity with *The House On Mango Street* (the novel revolves around the residents of Mango Street) goes farther.

In *A House of My Own* we come to know that the vignettes that constitute Cisneros’ debut novel were fictionalized versions of many true stories the author heard from her high school dropout students while teaching in the Chicano community (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 130, 134). She says that the two halves of her life were at odds with each other – the half that wanted to roll up the sleeves and do something for the community, and the half that wanted to retreat to the kitchen and write. She decides to write anyway, even considering, at that time,

²³ When the book got republished by a larger publishing house (1992), Cisneros wrote also a preface for it in verse that is also available in *A House of My Own*.

that it could not save anyone's life but her own (CISNEROS, 2015 p, 130). The most relevant fact for my investigation, however, is that she wrote both books, *The House On Mango Street* and *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, at the same time – during her twenties – which leads me to consider that the stories that fed and nurtured these two different works were probably the same. This possibility gains strength by simply noticing that even names of characters, like Rachel and Lucy, are repeated in both of Cisneros' books.

My point about this section is, thus, that its poems are the “not lazy poems” the author wrote about the material she had in her hands back at the time. “1200 South/ 2100 West” is the least autobiographical part of *My Wicked Wicked Ways* to the extent that we cannot even argue that its speaker and the author are the same, since the lyric-I seems to be a child. I assume the voice is one in the whole of this specific section for its coherence from beginning to end and for its similarity with Cisneros' best known narrator, Esperanza, from *The House On Mango Street*. Some excerpts from the poem might contribute to my argumentation.

The very first poem, “Velorio”, develops while the poetic-I remembers situations with the sisters Rachel and Lucy (characters from the author's first novel, as mentioned). “You laughing Lucy / and she calls us in / your mother” (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 3). The verses in the poem “Arturo Burro” sound like a children's song: “Jacinto el pinto / Maria tortilla / Augustín es zonzo”. (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 8). There is a poem dedicated to Kiki, probably Cisneros' older brother Henry, in which the poetic-I remembers the hot dogs they used to buy together after school. (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 10). The mother and father figures are present in many poems of this part, usually representing authority.

The second part, homonymous to the book, brings a change in the speaker's attitude and the author leaves behind the naïve voice of the first chapter. The epigraph sets the tone: “Isn't a bad girl almost like a boy?” (2009, p. 21). The notion that being a boy has plenty of advantages in relation to being a girl is present in many of Cisneros' works. In the vignette “Beautiful and Cruel”, in *The House On Mango Street* (which, by the way, is dedicated “To the women”), for instance, the narrator, Esperanza, states that she will not follow the most common model in her neighborhood, that of women leaving the parents' house because of pregnancy. Furthermore, she is determined to “leave the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate”, adding that she has begun her own quiet war. (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 89). Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that the author considers men superior – it is clear her desire to be like a man has to do with her wish for self-

determination and freedom. Thus, it can be felt, since Cisneros' first book that her literature is strictly connected to the author's clear awareness of gender issues.

"My Wicked Wicked Ways" will explore, then, a dimension of subjectivity that relates to the development of one's consciousness as a woman, even though only the sixth among the eleven poems has a title that indicates so: "I the Woman" (2009, p. 29). In this part, the autobiographical element is clear and an association between poetic-I and writer is naturally established, particularly if the reader has access to information about Cisneros real life. In the poem "My Wicked Wicked Ways", the first in part two, the speaker deals with her family issues. The poem begins like a description of a portrait: "This is my father. / See? He is young. [...] Here is my mother / She is not crying." (2009, p. 23). In the last stanza, the speaker refers to herself "This is me she is carrying. [...] She does not know / I will turn out bad." (2009, p. 24).

The second poem reinforces the possibility of an autobiographical reading of the second section. Its title, "Six Brothers", is an evident reference to Cisneros' family. Here, again, she mentions the problem of not choosing the path her family expected of her, as her father thought she could have gotten a job as a reporting weather. In the third stanza, the speaker claims her father had planned the professional careers for everyone.

Then, there's us –
 Seven ways to make the name or break it.
 Our father has it planned:
 oldest, you're a doctor,
 second, administration,
 me, he shrugs, you should've been a reporting weather
 next, musician,
 athlete,
 genius,
 and youngest – well,
 you'll take the business over. (2009, p. 25).

Similarly to the previous poem, this one ends with the speaker's feeling of being dissonant with certain expectations, but this time, I believe, revealing an identification with

her youngest brother (Cisneros was closer to her youngest brother): “Except for you, little one-winged, / finding it difficult as me / to keep the good name clean.” (2009, p. 26). Because this poem discusses the matter of choosing jobs, I believe it endorses my suggestion that Cisneros feels she is “wicked” not only for her position as Mexican-American and as a woman, but also for having opted to be an artist, as I argued earlier.

In the sequence, we find poems that have WOMAN as central topic. Two of them are dedicated to women other than the speaker: “Mariela” and “Josie Bliss”. The reference to other women is fundamental if we consider Friedman’s ideas discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. For Friedman, unlike the construction of the male identity, women’s processes of subjectivity are much more relational. Thus, according to the scholar, individuality is an exclusionary parameter when dealing with autobiographical texts produced by women (1998, p. 74). As a consequence, we can read “Mariela” and “Josie Bliss” as autobiographical practices, even though the speaker does not say “I” in these poems. Their theme also contributes to this interpretation: they are poems about violence against and erasure of women, bringing to the fore a shared experience among women from different backgrounds.

“Mariela”, a short poem about rape, seems to be addressed to her, Mariela, yet cunningly Cisneros uses the pronoun “you”: “One day you will forget his bitter smell / and one day you will forget your shame.” (2009, p.27), which makes the addressee more universal, meaning, perhaps, that any woman could identify the “you” as “me”. The case of “Josie Bliss” is very interesting for it deals with a phantasmagoric figure. Josie Bliss is known as the poet Pablo Neruda’s lover while he was a consul in Burma. He dedicated many poems to her, though her existence as a real person has not yet been proved. In Cisneros’ work Josie Bliss gains voice – she is the speaker in the poem. Regardless of the verses’ content (it is a rather hermetic poem that, apparently, deals with Josie Bliss’ jealousy), its existence matters for the very fact that the lover who was the exoticized object of poetry is, in *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, the one who speaks. It could be argued that in these two poems the self-referential lyric-I steps aside for a moment, while placing other women center stage. On the other hand, as I argued above, the relation to other women, the sense of belonging to a community and of sharing feelings, fears and anxieties are crucial to the development of a woman’s subjectivity. Thus, in a sense, these two poems are also about Cisneros’, given the notion that the processes of identity are gendered.

It is very interesting that right after the apparent “omission” of the author, she comes back in a quite strong manner in “I the Woman”. This poem is constituted by a series of images – metaphors the speaker creates so as to affirm herself as a subject. Leigh Gilmore develops an insightful discussion concerning the use of metaphors and metonyms in relation to autobiographical discourses. For the critic, metaphors establish a relationship of immediate identity between two elements whereas metonyms depend on the reiteration of discourse in order for people to start considering one element as representing the other. She argues that,

Metaphor depends for meaning upon a relation of identity, and although it may be sustained in a text, the rightness of the relation depends upon its being grasped in an instant. Metonymy, however, depends upon a sustained patterning for meaning and therefore extends temporally in a way metaphor does not. The king, in other words, must wear the crown often enough for the crown to stand in metonymic relation to the king and kinship (GILMORE, 1995, p. 69).

From that point, Gilmore makes up her argument that metaphors, for the reason explained above, could be linked to essentialist discourse – which considers identity as a fixed, stable object. She adds that “A metaphor does not depend on a real situation for meaning; rather, it isolates an ideal and draws an analogy between essences [...]”. (1995, p.78). Interestingly, Gilmore links metaphor to traditional (male) autobiographies and metonymy to the reconfiguration of autobiography women authors have been engaged in (what I call in this dissertation autobiographical practices). Unlike metaphors, she argues, “a metonym has meaning in context, as when feminists contend that women autobiographers represent the self in relation to others.” (1995, p. 78), which reinforces Friedman’s ideas concerning the matter of a relational process of identity for women, as opposed to Gusdorf claim that “the autobiographical self derives its meaning outside the community and in relation to a higher self”. (GILMORE, 1995, p. 78-79).

I advance Gilmore’s argument here for its potential contradiction to what Cisneros does in “I the Woman”. I described the poem as a series of metaphors whose goal is to account for the speaker’s identity. If metaphors imply or relate to a notion of essentialism and the Western tradition, then, Cisneros’ project is not really a counter-hegemonic one, as I have been trying to argue. Nonetheless, if we pay close attention to the images she conveys in her verses, we might think otherwise. The poetic-I represents herself as

the fault

the back street

the weakness

that's me
 [...]

The poor excuse
 I am she
 I'm dark
 in the veins
 I'm intoxicant
 [...]

I'm lightbeam
 no stopping me

I am
 your temporary thing
 your own mad dancing

I am
 a live
 wildness
 [...]

the black smoke
 in your
 clothes
 and in
 your mouth (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 29-30).

A first reading of these verses already indicates Cisneros' search for the unpoetic. This fact alone, however, is not enough to justify the author's poetic engagement in a counter-hegemonic discourse, since this type of search is somewhat embedded in hegemonic discourse: that is one of the main tenets of Romanticism (which from feminist perspective is still a conservative movement). I consider the search for these "negative" images as mere, but relevant, signaling of Cisneros' philosophical/aesthetic inclinations in considering herself as a

woman. The most important aspect to be emphasized, though, lies, in my interpretation, in the quality of some – not all – of these metaphors.

The use of terms such as “lightbeam”, “temporary thing”, “mad dancing”, “smoke”, “live wildness” and “fault” all point towards a semantic field of imprecision: these words convey images associated to something – in this specific case someone: the self who speaks – elusive, fleeting, ungraspable. My point is that if, on the one hand, she uses metaphors and, according to Gilmore, that implies a use of traditional hegemonic reasoning based on the notion of identity as stable; on the other hand, the images such metaphors convey unsettle Gilmore’s argument, in my view, for they denote precisely the opposite of stability: they “lack” materiality and fixity; they are travelling waves such as in “lightbeam”, not fixed in time as in “temporary thing”, deprived of intelligible rhythm and in constant moving as in “mad dancing”, loose in the air and somewhat lysergic as in “smoke”, not civilized like a ever-growing forest as in “live wildness” and a failure, a whole, a gap as in “fault”.

Again, it could be argued that the metaphorical space associated with women in our patriarchal regime has always been one of mystery, of imprecision, of the unknown and as consequence not reliable and possibly even treacherous and insidious, which marginalizes women and privileges a certain notion of subject and knowledge. Nevertheless, I believe we can make Friedman’s move here in positivizing women’s condition as marginal. That is a fundamental step. Thus, in Cisneros’ most self-determining poem in the section “My Wicked Wicked Ways”, in spite of the speaker’s use of metaphors that could for themselves indicate an essentialist interpretation, I would claim the author makes a very intelligent choice regarding the main images she uses so as to “define” herself. I use define between quotation marks because perhaps the demand for definition has more to do with the reader’s anxiety for it than with the speaker/author’s objectives. However, even if there is a true attempt in defining, as the title “I the Woman” suggests, this definition comes in very elusive imagery, which, as I argued, can work as a destabilizing device that, indeed, provokes and counter argues hegemonic discourses and practices, since a fleeting subject is harder to grasp for enlightened logic.

I would also argue that these images the speaker/author makes up to conjure up her identity contribute to her project of “wickedness”. The discussion on the poems below, still in the second part of the book, reinforces my point. In “The Poet Reflects on Her Solitary Fate” (a very wordsworthian title, I shall say) she dwells upon her choice of going against the path

prescribed by her cultural context and, for the first time explicitly in her poetry, she makes reference to the act of writing poems – a step that endorses interpreting the speaker as the author.

She lives alone now.
Has abandoned the brother,
the rooms of fathers
and many mothers.

They have left her
to her own device.

[...]

The stray lovers
have gone home.

[...]

She must write poems. (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 37).

Some excerpts from “His Story” also deserve to be considered. This poem is special for it contains the name Sandra Cisneros in a stanza next to the end, which, at least temporarily and in the context of this particular piece, resolves the issue of whether it is “correct” to identify the speaker with the author in Cisneros’ poetry. Even though the title announces a story from a male figure, that we discover to be Cisneros’ father soon in the second line, the poem actually deals mainly with the author’s wickedness for not fitting in, but also with the awareness of women’s social place.

An only daughter
whom no one came for
and no one chased away.

[...]

For instance,

my father explains,

in the Mexican papers

a girl with both my names was arrested for audacious crimes

that began by disobeying fathers.

Also, and here he pauses,
 the Cubano who sells him shoes
 says he too knew a Sandra Cisneros
 who was three times cursed a widow.

You see.

An unlucky fate is mine
 to be born a woman in a family of men

Six sons, my father groans,

all home.

And one female,

gone. (CISNEROS, 2009, P. 38-39).

These two poems close section two of the book and summarize the more relevant issues discussed in this part. Unlike “1200 South/ 2100 West”, that even dealing with topics such as rape, does so in a more naïve manner, with its predominant child-like speaker that makes it more difficult to read the poetic-I and the author as identical, “My Wicked Wicked Ways” is evidently more invested with autobiographical information. The theme of being wicked is clearly the most relevant question of this work as a whole (it is present throughout the book, not only in its title and in the titles of a chapter and a poem, but also in many other poems) and it is more deeply explored in the second part. I suggest, thus, that this part is fundamental for the understanding of Cisneros’ poetics – one that is produced through the perspective of the margins, as her awareness of being a Mexican-American woman writer shows.

Cisneros’ awareness of women’s conditions becomes more acute and sharp in the parts of the book that follow. I remark here again that the organization of the work as a whole does not necessarily seem to follow a chronological order, so that there is no way to know if they were written before or after the pieces in the other sections. All we know is that the work

contained in the author's debut poetry book was written during her twenties – a period crucial to her understanding of her place in the world:

The twenties are a difficult decade for any woman, but I'd felt they were especially so for me. I was living alone; not unusual for a white woman, but a rare thing for a Mexican American daughter who had left her father's house with neither husband nor child. Rather, I'd fled my parent's home with poetry as my excuse. (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 134).

Chapter 3, "Other Countries" concerns the poet's travel around Europe. The fact that she was abroad is explicit in almost all of the titles in this section. In *A House of My Own*, Cisneros talks about the first trips she took out of the American continent. She went to an island in Greece, Hydra, in the autumn of 1982, where she finished *The House On Mango Street*, and from there to many other European countries. This period of her life as a traveler was a very significant experience that influenced her writing. She says that after her college graduation she had jobs in which she gave away her time to many people, but not to her writing. "I wanted to be a writer, but I had no idea how to go about this except to travel. Where did I get this idea? Well, for one, the movies. [...] And then there were the biographies of well-known (male) writers behaving badly." (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 11). She adds that, by that epoch, she knew very little about how women writers lived and even less – or nothing – about working-class writers, even though she took a writer's workshop. She also admits that, at first, she wanted to choose a destination that would impress and please her "Chicago nemesis" and decided for South America. On a second thought she considered it too dangerous, in her words, "overwhelming for a woman who'd never traveled alone outside of the States". She set off for Greece, then, because she had recently met a friend of Greek descent who was also a writer and invited her to Athens, but Hydra, as she was told, housed many artists. (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 12-13).

Thus, we perceive the context of the writing of the poems grouped in "Other Countries" as one of a deep, yet lively, research and attempt to understand her position. This direct autobiographical information provided by her most recent publication helps us to assert that these poems are highly autobiographical. But we shall observe Cisneros' strategies in terms of the speaker in the poetic pieces. In this third part of the book, the poems could be broadly described as "paintings" and "love affairs". They are not mutually exclusive, but ends of a continuum that range from more impersonal to more personal. The ones closer to the "paintings" extreme consist mostly of descriptions of scenes, landscapes, objects that are somewhat banal, but, perhaps for being in foreign context, caught the author's attention. So,

Cisneros writes about peaches, episodes of heavy rain and of fire in Hydra, French couples, and walking along the Seine river (respectively, “Peaches – Six in a Tin Bowl, Sarajevo”, “Hydra Coming Down in Rain” and “Hydra Night – House on Fire”, “Ladies, South of France – Vence”, “December 24th, Paris – Notre-Dame”).

Although, many observations could be made about this “group” of poems, for my discussion in this chapter, the ones closer to the “love affairs” end will be my focus. This is so because in these poems the speaker is not “hidden” but is always saying “I”, and this “I”, I would say, is taking the liberty to experiment in what concerns love, sex and gender roles. Thus, as we will perceive in the excerpts that follow, in “Other Countries” the sexual aspect of Cisneros’ wickedness is more clearly “put to practice”. The first poem dealing with this issue already shows the poet’s stance when in situations involving a certain sexual tension. In “Beautiful Man – France”, she describes an attractive man she saw one day at a café. Only having seen him from the distance, she wants to get closer to actually check his handsomeness, “[I] go to see for myself” (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 47). The situation evolves to a real approach.

Do you speak English?

I say to the beautiful man.

A little, the beautiful man says to me.

You are beautiful, I say,

No two ways about it.

He says beautifully, *Merci*. (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 47).

Many of the poems are dedicated to men she encountered on her destinations: brief and longer encounters. She writes about a vendor at a market in “Postcard to the Lace Man – The Old Market, Antibes”, whose name she does not even remember but probably with whom she engaged in a conversation. From him, the speaker claims, just remembering will be enough: “a pretty memory and enough / for me” (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 48). On the following page, there is another poem dedicated to a meeting she had, “Letter to Jahn Franco – Venice”. In these verses, however, the resigned speaker of “Beautiful Man – France” becomes rather critical and puts forth some questions regarding gender roles. The poetic-I lets us know she refused a love/sexual situation with Jahn Franco, disappointing him. “So I let you down. / Didn’t give in and fall / under the spell of a bona fide [...]” (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 49). In the

next stanza, we perceive the speaker is bothered by her “friend’s” utterance when they said goodbye at the railway station:

[...]

you said you felt as if
 you’d bought an ice cream cone
 and it had fallen to the ground
 before you had a chance to taste it.

Bought.

Always that metaphor somehow or other.

And what was I
 except an item not for sale.

[...]

After all, a man invests his time,
 his money even,
 though this was fifty-fifty.

I owed nothing.

[...]

what does a woman owe a man,
 and isn’t it freedom you believe in?

Even the freedom to say no? (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 49-50).

In comparison to “Beautiful Man – France”, in which it could be argued that the speaker had an attitude, in conventional terms, more related to the masculine universe (she was the one who approached him), in the poem just transcribed she does not have a “masculine attitude”, again in conventional terms (she turned down a sexual relationship). In other words, in “Beautiful Man – France” she is able to stand up and approach an interesting man, as men are encouraged to do with women. On the other hand, in “Letter to Jahn Franco – Venice” she does not feel the need to take advantage of every possible love/sexual relationship she might have, as men are often encouraged to do. There is no fixed manual to follow, the author is engaged with experiencing life. There are still some other verses

dedicated to other men: “To Cesare, Goodbye”, “Ass (for David)”, “Trieste – Ciao to Italy”, “One Last Poem for Richard” (that does not seem to be someone she met on her travel, but someone with whom she had had a long and painful relationship) and last but not least, “For a Southern Man”.

One last point I would like to make about the relevance of this experience in Cisneros’ research about herself is that, it seems, the author starts to see, or to create, an image of herself as a lonely person. Of course she has felt isolated and non-belonging during her upbringing, as she comments many, many times in *A House of My Own* and as the reading of *Caramelo*²⁴ may suggest. This feeling, however, has never indicated, in my perspective, that she would be alone in the “love dimension”. Reading “Other Countries” we start to get some hints of what will be more deeply looked into in part four, “The Rodrigo Poems” and in *Loose Woman*. It seems as though the more confident and self-determining the speaker/author gets, the less space is left for someone else: someone the idea of romantic love puts in the center of the world. Thus, the speaker begins to realize the following:

[...]

I think true nature rises
when the body dances.
perhaps that’s why I never
have one partner,
prefer to dance alone. (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 50).

And:

Bill, I don’t do laundry
and I don’t believe in love.

[...]

I’ve learned two things.
To let go
clean as a kite string.
And never to wash men’s clothes.

²⁴ The reading of *Caramelo* as an autofictional work, as I propose in the previous chapter, allows us to think of the narrator/protagonist Celaya as a fictionalized version of the author.

These are my rules.

I want to learn to say
see you next Tuesday.

Then drive away.

[...]

The rearview empty of regrets.

Though now and then

There are exceptions. (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 64).

The “exceptions now and then” can be seen as a hint to the reading of the subsequent section: part four is thoroughly dedicated to the subject of love/sexual relationships. The theme of sexuality is present throughout the whole of *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, as I argued previously, but in the following section Cisneros really plunges into it, fully exploring love lost and love found, love’s pain and joy. The title, “The Rodrigo Poems” would suggest that these poems concern one specific man. Reading the verses, however, there is no indication they are all about Rodrigo (actually only four among the twenty poems refer explicitly to Rodrigo). Another important aspect of part four concerns the speaker’s maturity. If a research of the self, an experiment with the liberty of being abroad underlies the verses in the previous chapter, “Other Countries”, now, in “The Rodrigo Poems”, the speaker is more settled, but we continue to see how the issue of wickedness is a determining factor to the author’s identity.

The first poem “A woman cutting celery” already sets the tone of the chapter. It describes a scene of a woman awaiting the return of her partner while cutting the vegetable. As she listens to car doors slamming and people coming and going at the street with no evidence the one she waits for will arrive, the cutting of the celery gets more anxious and “savage”. “A car door slams. / But he does not come home. / This is how the story begins.” (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 69-70). Although in the opening verses what we read is a description of a scene, we perceive the speaker’s stance in putting forth the matter of gender roles: criticizing the position of women, who, like Penelope, are socially circumscribed to the domestic realm of life and, importantly, forever waiting. The other poems, however, are radically more personal and intimate, with the speaker more than often being self-referential, if not through the use of “I”, through the use of “mine”, “we”, “ours” and other terms that indicate its presence.

Wickedness as a major element in the author's construction of her poetic identity gains force in "The Rodrigo Poems" and, as I will discuss, creates a bridge between *My Wicked Wicked Ways* and *Loose Woman*. The speaker frequently refers to her "vicious" behavior: she is not the wife, but the lover; she is not fit for motherhood; she commits sins the average women would be ashamed of. The poem "For All Tuesday Travelers" discusses this circumstance:

I am the middle-of-the-week-wife.

The back door sneak.

I wake the next-door neighbors

who wonder at who arrives so late,

departs so early.

Who yearn to know

the luxury delivered.

Love that come and goes

without the ache

without the labor.

It is a good life.

I would not trade it

for another wife's.

[...] (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 77).

In some other excerpts, we can observe the speaker's conduct "against the norms". In a poem called "Beatrice", an ironic reference to the character in Dante's *Divine Comedy* who is the incarnation of beatific love, the poetic-I asks to be kissed and says of herself "I am an odd geometry / of elbows and skin, / a lopsided symmetry of sin and virtue" (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 82). In "The So-and-So's", the first verse claims: "Your other women are well-behaved." (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 86), implying misbehavior from the part of the speaker. In "*Amé, Amo, Amaré*", the poetic-I narrates an episode when her partner told her he did not love her but still undressed her because "it was time", even though he loved his wife: "A wife, a

wife, a wife / a woman you love and who loves you / all your life.”(CISNEROS, 2009, p. 94 - 95). The last stanza of this poem is crucial to my discussion:

The moon winks.

I'm a simp I think

But I'm wrong.

I know what I am. (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 97).

We can perceive that the many marginal positions Cisneros occupies are not due to lack of self-determination. Instead, in *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, the speaker is rather engaged in a project of self-research and self-awareness and takes advantage of her peripheral circumstance, which enables her to speak up for herself and pursue her own paths, in her art and in her life in general.

3.3 *Loose Woman*

Turning now our attention to *Loose Woman*, the theme of a wicked, vicious, behavior is, as mentioned, still a central topic. The title of this collection of poetry could be seen as a reiteration and corroboration of the title *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, since the adjective “loose” might infer someone whose morals and conduct are not virtuous. *Loose Woman*, thus, can be considered a reaffirmation of the author’s identity as an outcast. If, on the previously analyzed book, the four-part division guided my reading, now I will not regard the separation into three chapters as a significant factor. This choice is due to the fact that the three parts in *Loose Woman* do not represent a fundamental change one from the other. As we see, all of the sections have the word “heart” in their names: “Little Clown, My Heart”, “The Heart Rounds Up the Usual Suspects” and “Heart, My Lovely Hobo”, which already indicates that Cisneros will continue to discuss love, lyric poetry’s subject-matter *par excellence*.

I would argue Cisneros’ poetics “comes of age” in *Loose Woman* and the difference from this book to the previous one is more a matter of intensity than of content. That is, most of the verses in *Loose Woman* explore topics that were suggested in *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, but they do it in a more open, or aware, manner. The theme of sexuality, for example, that appears more intensely in the last half of *My Wicked Wicked Ways* is now going to be not only

ubiquitous, but less subtle and more explicit, as the mere title of a poem such as “I Am So In Love I Grow a New Hymen” might suggest. In fact, sexuality in this book is discussed in a much more material aspect, given the many times the author refers to the body, or body parts. In “Something Like Rivers Ran”, the speaker talks about the effects of a love encounter using “corporeal” term such as: “the flesh of the wrists”, “the stone of the lungs”, “the grief of the hands”, “dissolved knee into knee / belly into belly / an alphabet of limbs” (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 19). In “Christ You Delight Me”, “En Route to My Lover I Am Detained by Too Many Cities and Human Frailty” and “Poem for a Non-Believer” the poetic-I has no shame whatsoever in expressing her sexual desire, again building in the verses a vivid image of the body. In the first poem she says “My hands still on the hilt / Of that excalibur of hip”, referring to her partner’s sexual organ, and referring to her own:

[...] I have to hunker
 My cunt close to the earth,
 This little pendulum of mine
 Ringing, ringing, ringing. (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 25).

In the second poem I mentioned, the speaker describes her anxiety in being close to her lover after a long trip.

Hurry.
 What matters is to be
 inside the prayers of your body,
 beneath the wings of your eyes,
 the *chuparrosa* hummingbird being
 in the man flower of your
 sex. (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 26).

In the third poem, the lyric-I misses her lover and because he is absent she experiments with sexuality all by herself.

Because I miss
 you I run my hand
 along the flat of my thigh
 curve of the hip
 mango of the ass Imagine

it your hand across
 the thrum of ribs
 arpeggio of breasts
 collarbones you adore
 that I don't. (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 29).

As I intended to show in the excerpts above, sexuality becomes an extremely relevant theme in Cisneros' construction of her poetic identity. It is important not to forget the writer's specific cultural background when reading these poems, since Mexican/Catholic morals are in general less liberal than that of the U.S. The issue of biculturalism is also more deeply explored in the present book than in the previous one. In *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, the cultural conflicts are alluded to, but in *Loose Woman* they gain more relevance. In the poem "Old Maids", for instance, the speaker ironically tells us that she and her cousins are, at the age of thirty, too old to marry for Mexican standards and that their relatives suspect they could no longer marry "in white" (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 9). In the last stanzas we come to know the reason why they did not marry: the speaker claims they have studied marriages too long, lists names of aunts and *comadres*, and concludes that they were "lessons that served us well" (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 10). This conclusion in the last verse can be seen as a refusal, to a certain degree, of the traditional Mexican patterns, since the speaker considers the example set by women close to her as not to be followed.

On the other hand, in poems such as "Original Sin" and "*Dulzura*", the poetic-I has a different relationship to Mexican culture. In the first poem, we read an episode in which the speaker was worried for realizing, in a flight from Texas to Mexico City, she had not shaved her armpits – a huge offense a Mexican woman could not commit: "I only want to get rid of my underarm hair / quick before the plane touches down". She manages to do so and is finally relieved to be able to hug her family in the airport with arms wide open. "I open my arms wide armpits clean / as a newborn's soul [...]" (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 8). This poem shows an interesting behavior: the ambiguity of a subject in the borderlands, both conforming to and refusing established cultural practices. In "*Dulzura*" the ambiguity is dissolved in the opening lines: "Make love to me in Spanish. / Not in that other tongue." (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 27). In this poem the speaker is not refusing Mexican culture, as she partly does in "Old Maids", nor is she in-between, as when her decision to shave or not depends on the place she is, but she is fully accepting and even asking to be treated like a Mexican.

The tension of living with/in both cultures and not belonging completely to any of them is never resolved in Cisneros' poetic work. If such knots were untied, perhaps her poetry would lose some of its power. Another conflicting issue in *Loose Woman* is that of the choice to be a writer, which, in her case, led her to live a rather "solitary" life. In other words, Cisneros chooses a literary career over a life dedicated to the household and the family. She seems to have no doubts about this choice, but, in her poetry, her wonderings of what it would have been like to have followed a prescribed model for a woman's life surface. In "Waiting for a Lover", the speaker is anxious for yet insecure about her lover's arrival: "And what if you don't arrive? / And what if you do? / I'm so afraid" (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 34). She goes on: "And what if you do like me? / And what if you do?" (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 34). In the last stanza we realize that her waiting is not for someone to arrive at that day or night. It is a life-long expectation. "Listen – cars roar by. All night / I'm waiting for the one that stops. / All my life. Listen – (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 35). The longing for someone is also evident in "Bay Poem from Berkeley" in which the lyric-I describes her feeling after waking up alone. She says:

This weight
on the other side of the bed
is only books, not you. What
I said I loved more than you.
True.

Though these mornings
I wish books loved back. (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 40).

In spite of the desire to love and to be loved, the choice for a literary career – which for the author excludes the possibility of a family centered life – is reinforced in a great number of poems from beginning to end in *Loose Woman*. "Extreme Unction" is also a poem in which the speaker dwells upon the question of marriage. She says she would have liked "to live with one" before she turned complete, and she wonders how it would have been to have "bellyed / his child" (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 12). In the conclusion of the poem, however, she says "Husband. / Balm for the occasional / itch. But I'm a witch now" and asserts "Wife makes me wince." (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 13). More than once the writer refers to herself as a witch, a figure she associates with Mexican spirituality. In "Night Madness Poem", the poetic-I describes herself as "the crazy lady they warned you about. / The she of rumor talked

about – / and worse, who talks.”, and also as the one who has “the magic of words” and “the power to charm and kill at will”. (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 49-50).

Other two love poems are also, contradictorily, about the speaker’s loneliness as a contribution to her literature. “Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity” has six of its sevens stanzas about the happiness the speaker would feel if someone she addresses simply as “you” came back. In the last verses, though, it is implied that the love experience would serve to the purpose of writing, after this person left again. “So that when you leave / I’ll write poems.” (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 75). Also in “A Man in My Bed Like Cracker Crumbs”, the poetic-I is satisfied with being alone “House clean / I’m alone again. / Amen.” (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 96). “I Let Him Take Me” is a one-stanza poem, that will be entirely reproduced, about “him”:

I let him take me
 over the threshold and over
 the knee. I served and followed,
 harbored up my things
 and pilgrimed with him.
 They snickered at my choice
 when he took over
 and I
 vigiled that
 solitude,
 my life.
 I labored love,
 fierce stitched
 and fed him.
 Bedded and wifed him.
 He never disappointed,
 hurt, abandoned.
 Husband, love, my life –
 poem. (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 11).

If, as I have argued, the tension of living in-between cultures is never resolved, which enriches Cisneros’ work, her poetry demonstrates that her choice to pursue a literary career,

even if that meant going against her family and society expectations in general, is, to a great extent, a settled issue. In other words, I suggest that even though the figure of the wife, the husband, and the notion of marriage are ever-present in Cisneros' poetics, especially in *Loose Woman*, as representing a life she could have chosen, she is satisfied with them to the extent they serve her poetry: As the poem above indicates: husband, love, life – all equal poetry.

Thus, what we observe through her poetic work is that, personally, the author is aware of how important her decision to be an artist is to her constitution as a subject. Socially, however, she recognizes she does not fulfill what was expected of her and that is why she considers herself to be “wicked” or “loose”. The very last poem in *Loose Woman* is homonymous to the book and discusses precisely the question just mentioned. In the first part of this poem, the speaker defines herself with what “others” think of her, with social eyes: “They say I’m a beast. And feast on it [...]”, “They say I’m a bitch. / Or witch.”. She also uses terms such as “*macha*”, “hell on wheels”, “man-hating”, and “boogey-woman lesbian” to express what public opinion considers her. Interestingly, instead of denying these “accusations” and accounting for a true self, what would be a Rousseauian attitude, the speaker confirms the negative impressions, thus, possibly increasing her wickedness.

I like the itch I provoke.
 [...]
 I am the woman of myth and bullshit.
 [...]
 I built my house of ill repute.
 [...]
 By all accounts I am
 A danger to society.
 [...]
 I break laws
 Upset the natural order
 Anguish the Pope and make fathers cry.
 [...]
 I'm *la desesperada*, most wanted public enemy
 My picture grinning from the wall
 [...]

In other words, I'm anarchy. (CISNEROS, 1995, p. 112-115).

Here, I would like to emphasize my argumentation about Cisneros' poetic work. In sum, my reading of *My Wicked Wicked Ways* highlights the issue of a process of maturation of the speaker's voice throughout the four parts of the book. From "1200 South/ 2100 West", in which the speaker has a more naïve tone; through "My Wicked Wicked Ways" and "Other Countries" that present a speaker in search for and constructing the self, dealing, especially, with her condition as a woman questioning gender roles; to "The Rodrigo Poems" in which the poetic-I appears to be more self-aware and establishes the matter of love relationships as a main topic. This central theme pervades the whole of *Loose Woman*. The main difference, as I argued, is that love is explored, in the second book, in a more bodily manner, with an erotic nuance. Moreover, the speaker's questioning her condition as a woman, particularly as a *chicana* is more deeply explored. Underlying the poetry in both books is the notion the speaker projects of herself as being vicious, vile, crooked, wicked, loose. As I have argued, she represents herself as such due to her position as a peripheral subject: she is a Mexican American woman who decides not to live according to cultural, social and family expectations. Thus, I suggest, her poetry always denotes, in varying degrees, a sense of speaking from the margin.

Another target of my investigation was to observe the relationship speaker-author so as to verify the possibility of assuming there is an identification between the voice in the poem and the author's voice. As I argued, identifying the poetic-I with the author is really common after Romanticism, which was problematized in the Modernist movement, when poets like T.S Elliot defended poetry as an impersonal act. I believe that, to a great extent, the speaker in Cisneros' poems coincides with the author, which by no means is the only possible reading of her poetry. Since my object in this work is autobiographical practices, I remark the possibility of reading Cisneros' poetry as such. Identifying the speaker with the author is one step towards the possibility of viewing her poems as autobiographical, but to consider them autobiographical practices, besides this coincidence, their theme would also have to have a special relationship to truth, at least to "facts of the author's life", which leads me to consider confessional poetry.

3.4 The possibility of Confessional Poetry

Confessional Poetry emerges in the context of the Cold War (that followed World War II), which reorganized the lifestyle of Americans. The term “Confessional” was first applied, disapprovingly, to the American poet Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959), denoting a kind of poem that was autobiographically engaged – that is, it was a kind of poetry defined in terms of content, not technique. Once the label gained currency it applied to the work of other poets, mainly, W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Because the principal themes in confessional poetry are deeply personal, discussing intimate issues such as divorce, sexual infidelity and family relationships it was deemed, by many critics, as “impure art” and “unpleasantly egocentric”. Indeed, as a response to the legacy of Modernism, “it participated in the protest against Impersonality as a poetic value by reinstating an insistently autobiographical first person engaged in resistance to the pressure to conform.” (MIDDLEBROOK, 1993, 632-633). Another supposed shortcoming of confessional poetry was its ostensible alienation from political issues – especially because the 1960’s was an important decade in that aspect. However, as the Norton Anthology of American Literature²⁵ points out, this kind of poetry focuses on the distinctiveness of human experience: confessional poems do not aim at being representatives of a group, a culture, etc. I believe confessional poetry’s focus is *per se* a political stance.

Because Cisneros’ poetry is also highly personal, I believe there can be points of coincidence with confessional poetry. Even the author admits that in her poetry she deals, specifically, with issues that she thought should not be disclosed. In *A House of My Own* she claims that after publishing her first book of poetry she “felt a strange postpartum depression.” and explains why:

It seems to me the act of writing poetry is the opposite of publishing. So I made a vow to myself after that first book to choose *not* to publish poetry from then on. I’d say what I had to say publicly in fiction, but poems were to be written as though they could not be published in my lifetime. They came from such a personal place. It was the only way I could free myself to write/think with absolute freedom, without censorship. (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 99-100).

²⁵ Available at <http://wnorton.com/college/english/naal8/section/volE/overview.aspx> Last access: February 21st

Thus, Cisneros' poetics has definitely a connection with confessional poetry, that is, to the extent it says something that could be considered secret and not appropriate or worth telling except to a confidant. Here I would like to mention once again the *Confessions* by Augustine and also by Rousseau, so as to trace a parallel between the two authors and Cisneros. In the text by Augustine, as I have noted, his interlocutor is God, so that Augustine confesses his sin in order to be purged and redeemed – aiming at eternal life in heaven. In the case of Rousseau's *Confessions*, the narrative is addressed to a corrupted society, to whom the author is willing to show his true intentions and sentiments – aiming at social absolution. In the case of Cisneros, if we consider her poetry in its confessional aspect, it can be noticed that the poet does not pursue redemption or forgiveness – except ironically, perhaps. Instead, her confessions have to do with the expression of very intimate features of her subjectivity that, unlike Rousseau's, she claims to be wicked and loose.

I would like to emphasize that I am not affirming that Cisneros writes confessional poetry. The latter seems rather located in time and, importantly, is clearly attached to WASP middle-class preoccupations. Since Cisneros' works are not totally included²⁶ in this hegemonic tradition, I find it more profitable to think of her poetical writings, not as a continuation of confessional poetry, but as an appropriation of it: a use of a confessional strategy so as to insert the personal, intimate sphere of life in relation to her position as a marginal, ex-centric person.

As discussed in the first chapter, minority groups have been struggling, since the last decades of the twentieth century, for self-determination, for the possibility to tell their own versions of the story and, importantly, subverting the tools available to tell these stories. If, at the first moment, these emerging discourses would, to a degree, romanticize and universalize the identity of the group – be it women, Chicanos, African-Americans, etc – now, I believe, the peripheral voices encompass the nuanced experiences in the group, valuing diversity and the distinctiveness of each subject. That is precisely when the confessional strategy works best in Cisneros' poetry: valorizing the intimate, personal experience while also discussing social issues such as gender roles and cultural hybridism. Thus, in my attempt to “map the field” of Cisneros' poetry, I believe it lies in the intersection between the “self-interested”

²⁶ If we consider the formal aspects of her poetry, they do not represent a rupture with the traditional American poetry. On the other hand, despite being fairly known and widely acclaimed in the U.S., she is not in any of the main anthologies of American Poetry.

confessional poetry and the engagement in social and political issues that can no longer be overlooked.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Operação capaz de mudar o mundo, a atividade poética é revolucionária por natureza;
exercício espiritual, é um método de libertação interior.

Octavio Paz

In the closure of the present dissertation I would like to turn our attention to Sandra Cisneros' thoughts concerning the circumstances of our contemporary world. As she claims in one of the final texts in *A House of My Own*, "Epilogue: *Mi Casa Es Su Casa*",

We are living in the age of *susto*, fear, on both sides, on all sides, on all borders, across the globe. The paradox is this: fear unites us, fear divides us. In a post-9/11 United States, with so much vitriol allowed in the media toward people who look like me, I no longer feel at home at home. You shouldn't feel afraid in your house. (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 369).

In a recent interview²⁷, the author complements her contextualization of the post-9/11 era, arguing that "This is a world of surveillance and screening, security and panic" and she also adds that we have been losing our right to privacy, since technological apparatus may serve, among other things, to control and regulate our lives. In addition, Cisneros feels that the media is monopolized and, as a result, that there is no space for dissent. The discontent of living in a world of fear was probably augmented and sharpened after 9/11; the sentiment, nonetheless, existed before the attacks. In the last poem of *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, which was published way before 2001, this feeling is already addressed. In "*Tantas Cosas Asustan, Tantas*", which is fully in Spanish, the speaker lists things that scary her such as "Los muertos y los vivos", "pasos sobre un patio/ tanto con el silencio", "estar siempre sola/ o estar con alguien para siempre" (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 102).

I have considered Cisneros' claims about the present situation of our society so as to think of them in relation to the contemporary dynamics of life writing. Smith and Watson remark that the field of life writing is, indeed, burgeoning in our days and that it has become virtually intergalactic. They affirm that with the use of the internet and the emergence of online blogs, for example, "the discursive terms and audience expectations" that traditionally

²⁷ Available at <http://therumpus.net/2016/01/the-rumpus-interview-with-sandra-cisneros/> Last access: February 28th.

defined the field have been reshaped (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. ix), and add that “contemporary life writing has become a storehouse, a remarkably flexible set of discourses and practices for adapting voices, claiming citizenship [...]” (2010, p. 165). Still according to the two scholars, our interest in producing and consuming autobiographical accounts “derives in part from the tenacious hold that the ideology of individualism has on Westerners”, and they also claim that life stories in late capitalism have become ““hot commodities”” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 124 - 125).

I believe the relationship between the two configurations presented above – Cisneros’ world of fear and control and the ubiquity of life writing Smith and Watson discuss – can be further explored. Rather than creating an artificial link between the two thoughts, my attempt in putting them together is to provoke myself and the reader to think of their possible implications in one another. Would it be accurate to think of the coexistence of these two phenomena as contradictory, since the same mechanism that functions as social network, which is significantly attached to exposure (of intimacy) and to a certain narrativization of life²⁸, also serve as vigilant and controlling instruments? What are the connections between the development of these two situations into the present state and the European project of modernity? Is life writing a way to escape regulation and surveillance?

I do not yet have the answers to these questions and a debate about these issues is out of the scope of my dissertation, but these thoughts are the ones which I have been dwelling upon while writing my last pages. Perhaps they are material to trigger a future work. Nevertheless, even if they are, I do not think that providing answers is the best thing a reflective text can provide. Cisneros’ herself claims that “To write is to ask questions” (CISNEROS, 2002, non-numbered page). Thus, my conclusion in writing this dissertation is a metatextual one: that there is always, always more work, more research, more thinking to be done. I would like to point out two other aspects of Cisneros’ literature that I did not manage to encompass in my discussion and that I would like to develop in future research.

A book by Cisneros I have not yet mentioned and that denotes the versatility of her writing is *Have You Seen Marie?* (2012), a beautifully illustrated story (illustrations by Ester Hernández). It would also be very interesting to analyze this book through the perspective of

²⁸ I regard Facebook’s timeline (each personal profile) as a way of constructing a life narrative, since people post on their timelines various information about themselves. Interestingly, Facebook has been developing tools that, to an extent, confirm my idea: the social network reminds its users of the anniversary of past moments or posts and also makes a retrospective of the user’s year on Facebook every end of year.

autobiographical practices, since the narrator is, avowedly, Sandra Cisneros herself and the other characters are, it seems, real people. The narrative is about Cisneros and her friend Rosalind's search for the latter's cat, Marie. Her friend had come to visit and on the same day of her arrival, the cat ran away. Cisneros had been rather depressed with the recent death of her mother and having to get out of the house and walk, search and ask people about the cat helped her in the process of healing the pain and feeling less like an orphan in midlife. The story is followed by an Afterword that, to a great extent, enriches our reading, especially in what concerns autobiographical strategies.

The last point I would like to comment about Cisneros' work is the question of "the house as *topos*" within the realm of her writing (fiction, poetry, and non-fiction). It is quite evident that the image of a house is one that pervades the author's career from its beginning – curiously, her oldest as well as her most recent book have "house" as a main word in the title. In the beautiful vignette, close to the end of *The House On Mango Street*, "A House of My Own", Esperanza describes, in a very imagetic manner, the house she longs for. Since it is a short vignette, I will take the liberty to quote it entirely.

Not a flat. Not an apartment in the back. 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 after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (CISNEROS, 2009, p. 108).

Critic Julián Olivares (1996, p. 242) argues that, for Esperanza, the physical house is a "metaphor for the house of story-telling". He claims that in spite of feeling confined in the space of her (poor) house and *barrio*, the protagonist/narrator is able to encounter within them a "different sort of space, the space of writing" (OLIVARES, 1996, p. 241). I believe Olivares' idea of a "house of story-telling" can be considered in relation not only to the character, but to the author as well.

In Cisneros' latest publication, eight out of forty-six texts also refer to "house/home" in their titles, being the most recurrent term the writer uses. Interestingly, Cisneros' real house, for a long period of her life, was not a place where she felt comfortable – a characteristic that both the narrator/protagonist of *Caramelo* and of *The House On Mango Street*, Celaya and Esperanza, share with the author. Here is a brief description the writer gives of the house where she lived during her childhood:

My family lived upstairs for the most part, because noise travels down. Stairwells reeked of Pine-Sol from the Saturday scrubbing. We shared them with the tenants

downstairs: public zones no one thought to clean except us. We mopped them alright but not without the resentment for cleaning other people's filth. (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 127).

Thus, not feeling at home in her own house, she daydreamed about the ideal house for her and, as we can see, it has less to do with the physical space than with the possibilities a house of her own would offer. The author states that:

A house for me has been a lifelong dream. Owing one, having one, retreating to a space one can call one's own, where a radio or a TV isn't blaring, and someone isn't knocking on the other side of the door saying, "Come out of there!" A house for me is a space to decide whether I want to be sad and not turn on the lights [...] A house for me is this freedom to be. A house is about the safety to and privacy of doing what others might think odd. [...] Moving far away from my family was my way of creating a space I needed to create. (CISNEROS, 2015, p. 178).

I mention the question of the house because I would like to suggest that writing could also be seen as home. That is, it was certainly through the act of writing that Cisneros could afford a house. However, I believe that writing was not only the means to that end; writing itself housed the author, as if, with the creation of an imaginary space, it sheltered her. The issue of writing as a house/home is explored in the beautiful poem, by Emily Dickinson, "I Dwell in Possibility", in which the poet argues that "possibility", which can be interpreted as "poetry", is a house "More numerous of Windows – / Superior – for Doors" and that the resident of this house of poetry is "The spreading wide of my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise" (DICKINSON, 1986, p. 327). I believe that Dickinson's notion of poetry as a house of possibilities could be another key to the reading of Cisneros literary production. I would like to explore the issue further in a future work.

In the closure of the present dissertation, I would like to emphasize my choice for the term autobiographical practice as opposed to autobiography. As Smith and Watson argue, "many postmodern and postcolonial theorists contend that the term *autobiography* is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and *practices* of life writing not only in the West but around the globe" (2010, p. 3; my italics). I highlight the term practice (not only in the previous passage but throughout my work) because I consider it sheds light in a writing process that, engaged with political agency, utilizes autobiographical elements for non-traditional purposes, with different strategies. The mere avoiding of the term autobiography as a genre is relevant, since it "has not been a congenial genre for women's self-reflexivity", particularly for postcolonial women writers, "given its traditional associations with universal individualism and possessive masculinity" (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 129).

Thus, in my view, I hope to have been able to show how Cisneros' work can be addressed as an autobiographical practice, even though I analyzed her fictional and poetical texts. I believe the term "autobiography" can be seen as an umbrella term rather than a genre, which would be somewhat stable and limiting. The space of life writing is ever-changing, especially with the spreading of so many digital platforms. I do not think that people are only going to repeat traditional ways of talking about themselves in these new platforms. As a matter of fact, we have been witnessing how the digital world, as well as movements from the margins, are influencing our very notion of subjectivity and that will bring forth new ways of narrating our selves. This human habit or "passion", as Arfuch (2010, p. 51, 61) describes it, has endured, fascinated and also provoked and challenged us through so many centuries. Given Cisneros' use of autobiographical practice in her works, we may surmise that she shares that passion. And so do I.

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ANNEX A - Photograph of Sandra Cisneros' altar at the Smithsonian Museum

