

(Theorizing) Semiotic Landscapes: Autobiogeographical Spaces in *The Little School* and *The Latin Deli*

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Abstract: Recent theoretical developments within the broad field of life writing, especially as these developments pertain to the umbrella term of autobiogeography, serve as useful critical tools with which to reclaim place and identity in an era of the posthuman. To this end, the autobiogeographical spaces of *The Little School* and *The Latin Deli* are examined in terms of spatial anxiety and metonymic geography. Whereas spatial anxiety may signify a gendered experience for some, in *The Little School*, this concept conjures up tension for both men and women. Similarly, in *The Latin Deli*, semiosis also revolves around autobiogeographical spaces. Certain places tend to attach themselves to journeying bodies such that meaning becomes permanently tied to one's personal geography. Bodies move through space in Ortiz Cofer's narrative in ways that affirm their material referents rather than move beyond them.

The idea of autobiogeography recalls Gloria Anzaldúa's writings on identity and place in her foundational work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. This connection is highlighted for its relationship to the material referent, in contrast to Donna Haraway's cyborg as disembodied or imagined. The realm of the imaginary is evoked in response to the practice of isolating often urgent questions of power and privilege when theorizing about those on the ground.

Key Words: *The Little School*, *The Latin Deli*, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, autobiogeography, posthuman, Donna Haraway, testimonio, life writing

Resumen: Las teorías más recientes dentro del campo de la escritura de la vida, especialmente en cuanto a cómo se relacionan al término autobiografía, son instrumentos críticos con los cuales se puede reapropiar un sentido de lugar e identidad dentro de la época de lo poshumano. Con ese motivo, se examinan los espacios autobiográficos de *The Little School* y *The Latin Deli*, en términos de ansiedad espacial y geografía metonímica. Mientras que la ansiedad espacial puede denotar para algunos una experiencia basada en el género, en *The Little School*, este concepto evoca tensión, tanto para los hombres como para las mujeres. De la misma forma, en *The Latin Deli*, el semiosis también gira en torno a los espacios autobiográficos. Determinados lugares tienden a identificarse con los cuerpos en tránsito de tal forma que el sentido se vincula permanentemente a la geografía personal. Los cuerpos se mueven a través del espacio en la narrativa de Ortiz Cofer de maneras que, más que distanciarse de los mismos, afirman sus referents materiales. La idea de la autobiografía evoca las escrituras sobre identidad y lugar de Gloria Anzaldúa en su obra seminal, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Esta conexión se destaca por su relación con el referente material, en contraste con el cyborg de Donna Haraway, el que se ve como inmaterial o imaginado. El entorno de lo imaginario se evoca como respuesta a la práctica de aislar las cuestiones, muchas veces urgentes, de poder y privilegio, a la hora de formar teorías acerca de éstas en la vida real.

US Latina literature has captured the attention of the world reader in an era of posthuman and cyborg theories. Given the often foundational relationship between identity and place within Latina literature, recent post movements may unwittingly tend to decenter meaning making in ways that recall colonial and imperial projects. Drawing upon the Borderlands tradition, I reclaim this decentered relationship between identity and place in the following essay through an examination of autobiogeographical spaces *The Little School* and *The Latin Deli*, by Alicia Partnoy and Judith Ortiz Cofer, respectively. First, I describe a similar post trend in testimonio studies, a field also very much embedded in identity and place. Next, my essay positions Donna Haraway's work on the cyborg entity within the context of Latina critical theory. Following this discussion, I perform a close reading of semiotic landscapes in *The Little School* and *The Latin Deli* with autobiogeographical concepts

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borrowed from the interdisciplinary arena of life writing. A brief summary of main points closes the essay. I should note at the outset that I use the term Latina in a broad fashion. By Latina, I refer to female resident writers from Latin America or the United States with cultural heritages informed by contact eras and areas such as the Encounter and border zones.

This research dovetails well with similar scholarly developments on Latin American testimonio. Testimonio began to reach an international reading public just as literary critics began to declare its demise. The perhaps most famous pronouncement by testimonio scholar John Beverley that “. . . the moment of testimonio is over” (77) is indicative of the many charges regarding the demise of this entire subgenre. An earlier and related example may be found in Elzbieta Sklodowska's deconstruction of the presentation of truth within testimonial discourse (48-49). She notes that the directness of the oral testimony is often highlighted by the editor as an inherent strength. Yet, editors then will pad the presentation of testimonio with prologues, documentation, and the like in order to scientifically authenticate the speaking voice (49).

Yet, the appropriation of positivistic discourse may also offer a key strategy for the presentation of unrecognizable speaking subjects *vis-à-vis* dominant culture. Appropriating the weapons used by the oppressor—in this case scientific discourse—may be a crucial and calculated move. Chela Sandoval, in her now famous essay “New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed,” describes this complex appropriation process in terms of meta-ideologizing: “The operation of appropriating dominant ideological forms and using them whole in order to transform their meanings into a new, imposed, revolutionary concept” (376). For dominant culture to be able to hear subaltern voices—in spite of Spivak’s thoughts to the contrary—seems to me to be a revolutionary concept and represents, some may argue, one of the many crucial functions of testimonio narratives. Rigobera Menchú’s book about a bloody civil war in Guatemala helped to bring about international attention to her cause, for example. In sum, these on-the-ground issues, if you will, concerning power and privilege at times are bracketed off when speculating upon the *passé* status of testimonio. Given the often urgent poetics and politics inscribed within testimonio, parenthetical theorizing seems more an imperial and colonial practice than a liberating one. Indeed, these kinds of questions served as the impetus to the recent publication of a collection of scholarly essays, edited by Janis Breckenridge and I, that features an entirely new generation of scholarship on testimonio. *Pushing the Boundaries of Latin American Testimony: Meta-morphoses and Migrations* brings testimonio into the twenty-first century by examining contexts such as novel media, radio, comics, insile writing, and ecology.

Do posthuman theories, therefore, fall within the realm of what I am calling parenthetical theorizing (i.e., bracketing off the referent)? Perhaps most representative of posthuman theory is Donna Haraway’s cyborg. In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway defines her entity as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149). Haraway builds a complex case in favor of an alternative narrative of humanity: “Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (155). In order to overcome these criminal hierarchies, Haraway proposes new and entirely different explanations for our relationships with our bodies, with each other, and with our tools (181). In short, she promotes new ways of being human through her vision of a hybrid cyborg entity. In this way, she moves beyond the term of human as a supposedly natural concept such that we can speak instead of entirely constructed entities.

Haraway recognizes that the hierarchies just described are lived social relations and therefore she is not suggesting that we simply ignore the injustices they produce (152). Her cyborg liberation theory is both descriptive and prescriptive. She probes and describes these relations at length—especially as they pertain to women—and yet she also emphasizes the vision she has for a new kind of future where cyborg theory recasts what has been lived, how we are living, and how we will live.

She warns against being seduced by the hierarchical way of thinking that would reductively translate her theories into "man destroyed by machine or political action destroyed by the text" (153). Instead, she urges that we experience these new ways of being human with great joy, especially as that joy pertains to the skill of using a machine. Haraway writes that "[i]ntense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" (180). Although Haraway asks her readers to not be seduced by this hierarchical fear of machine over man, her unique couplings between human and machine do beg the following question: Given her emphasis on the melding of entirely disparate entities and on a physical reality comprised of tools, are these bodies connected at all to spaces and places?

Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa also writes of a hybrid entity of sorts, but her new *mestiza* is definitely not posthuman. In the preface of her widely read and cited book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa explains that the borderlands/la frontera does not necessarily have to pertain to the US Southwest because it also refers to a manifestation of the psychological, the sexual, and the spiritual realms (19). Her definition is based upon the idea of "two worlds merging" to form a third place, or "country" (19). In spite of the universality of this space, the borderlands/la frontera and the new *mestiza* can be traced without a doubt to the kind of material referent and human experience that seem hard to locate or pin down when reading Haraway.

My proposed idea of returning or repositioning should not be confused with critical projects that call for a more careful application of Anzaldúa's paradigm. Juan Velasco, in his insightful article "Automitografías," laments the abuse of the borderlands/la frontera model and cites a number of critical studies which reflect how its meanings have multiplied since the appearance of her work (316). What is of concern to me in this essay, however, is the hasty notion of moving beyond self, place, and space. A la Haraway, a disembodied subject who therefore takes up no space only exists in the theoretical imaginary. My meta-point therefore is to excavate and articulate semiotic landscapes regardless of post movements to the contrary. While I recognize Chela Sandoval's appreciation for cyborg theory, and agree wholeheartedly with her "New Sciences" essay in terms of political affinities by means of differential and oppositional methodologies, she clearly reads Haraway in a highly symbolic fashion, especially as this pertains to technology.

Echoing Anzaldúa's paradigm, multidisciplinary approaches to the realm of (self) life writing have also shown a keen interest in space and geography as they apply to identity. The neologism "autobiogeography" is representative of this trend. An on-line journal called *Reconstruction* devoted its summer 2002 issue to the topic "Autobiogeography: Considering Space and Identity."¹ The articles propose a plethora of names and terms—like Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* and Frederic Regard's idea of metonymic geography—but few of them really deal at

¹ See *Reconstruction* 2.3 (2002) at <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/023/TOC.htm>>, *passim*.

length with specificities of the body.² Although it is taking up space, the body in these virtual pages often appears as a disinterested and neutral entity. All of these articles, however, are more or less in agreement with the idea that “space matters.”

In the collection of critical essays *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, Kathleen Kirby’s article does, in fact, specify the “who” of the body. She scrutinizes Fredric Jameson’s essay, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in her article “Re: Mapping Subjectivity.” She does so by not only pointing out that Jameson’s “who” is male, but also by noting that he experiences space in a way that is different from Kirby’s sense of it. Referring to Jameson’s sense of disorientation in what he describes as a postmodern space in Los Angeles, Kirby writes: “One feature of his [Jameson’s] spatial anxiety may be the way this space makes his body become conscious to him, an occurrence that is unusual, as he is accustomed . . . to forget the body, to use orienting principles that allow him to erase his physicality (52). She states as well that there exists a “gender differential in spatial negotiation” (52) and that “orientation is not a generalizable project” (53).

Kirby’s essay provides a very useful theoretical framework for understanding autobiogeographical spaces in Alicia Partnoy’s narrative, *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance & Survival in Argentina*. Her idea of moving through space as a gendered experience could not be more true for Partnoy’s work, for reasons I explain below. An author, activist, and now a college professor in California, Partnoy’s brief narrative describes her three and one-half month imprisonment in a concentration camp, called La Escuelita, in Bahía Blanca in 1977. In operation during the military rule of General Jorge Rafael Videla, this horrific place is associated with a long list of disappeared people, some of whom were Partnoy’s companions. Amnesty International, one of the world’s leading human rights organizations, has confirmed a number of the cases of disappeared people at La Escuelita (A. Partnoy 124).

I’d like to take Kirby’s idea of “spatial anxiety” one step further through my analysis of *The Little School*. There is a sense in Kirby’s essay that if men would become more conscious of their bodies as situated in space, then they would also become more conscious of how men and women negotiate space differently. She provides the example of how women often will scan an unfamiliar territory for exits, blind corners, and darkened areas given the possibility of physical attack (Kirby 53). In other words, many women will immediately tend to orient themselves within space given their consciousness of their bodies whereas men are less likely to orient themselves in this particular way.

In *The Little School*, all prisoners, men and women alike, are acutely aware of their bodies and spatial positions because they are blindfolded. Their movements and actions are strictly monitored and regulated by the prison guards. The presence of the blindfold is, in fact, quite a unique feature of this testimonio-style narrative. As one of the defining characteristics of *The Little School*, the blindfold appears in the form of a small drawing at the beginning of each chapter and arguably results not only in bodily consciousness and spatial anxiety, but also results in the attention paid to discrete objects. The narrative is told predominantly through the perspective of having to peer out from underneath the ever-present fabric. All of the prisoners, regardless of their biological sex, were subject to this distorted perspective. Indeed, spatial and temporal facts are of great importance in *The Little School*. Partnoy provides a detailed drawing at the end of the book, for example, in which the various rooms of the concentration camp are sketched out with care. Additionally, she includes a series of descriptions,

² For information within this collection on the habitus, see Munt. For a discussion of metonymic geography, see Regard.

many of which are organized around the work shifts, sounds, and voices of the guards at *The Little School*.

Unlike in Kirby's analysis, however, this heightened sense of body and space only serves to further aggravate gender differentiation. Within the text itself, Partnoy describes how the abuse of women is quite different, in fact, than the abuse of men. Although embarrassed at times in ways which take advantage of traditional gender roles, the men are not sexually assaulted on a daily basis by the guards. The prison guards amuse themselves on one occasion by forcing two male prisoners, Hugo and an unnamed detainee, to wear a dress and a women's nightgown (A. Partnoy 51). The author, however, describes the hands that constantly molest her on her way to the bathroom (32), and the fact that a guard forces her to kiss him by holding a knife to her throat (98).

In spite of the presence of gender differentiation, however, the text erases these distinctions when it moves into the space of the torture room. In fact, one critic assumes that the person being tortured in a particularly horrific passage is Alicia Partnoy (Franco 111). Actually, the victim in this section, titled "Ruth's Father," is Partnoy's husband (A. Partnoy 93-95).³ Perhaps this kind of gender ambiguity has mislead some scholars to assert that the *The Little School* generates an "easy assumption that men and women suffer similarly" (Treacy 131). I don't think, however, that this is a defensible position. Partnoy instead resorts to images for her indictment. As she shifts back and forth between written words and images, she moves beyond not only the written codes of testimonio-style narratives, but also she genders the historical referent in ways that often are overlooked when reading her text.

This inclusion of artwork is yet another unique feature of *The Little School*. The Cleis Press edition features three primary artistic pieces and one smaller drawing of a blindfolded prisoner at the opening of each section.⁴ Painted by Partnoy's mother, Raquel Partnoy, these images cling to a definite historical referent. For example, the work's final illustration incorporates a representation of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, who wear the scarves that have become so symbolic of their movement (A. Partnoy 117). Raquel Partnoy's paintings narrate more fully what in the written text at times appear as gendered silences.

As just mentioned, one of the illustrations, *The Disappeared Children . . . Where?*, showcases the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. Floating above these faces is the sexless body of a baby, and at the top is another sexless face that appears to disintegrate under the weight of an impending death. The entire image is encased in a tree-like structure with chopped-off branches. Overwhelming the impact of the entire illustration are the Argentine mothers and grandmothers who have suffered over the disappearance and death of their children. The upward movement from the mothers at the roots, to the baby, and eventually to the young adult who slowly fades into a skeleton, creates a picture with a definite maternal point of view. Accordingly, the tree-like structure symbolizes women who give birth, just as the tree bears flowers or fruit. This tree, though, is more like a trunk since the missing branches perhaps represent the loss of the disappeared children.

³ Franco writes that "[u]nder torture, *she* reverts to childhood and hangs on to her identity by remembering a nonsense rhyme that she had once recited to her daughter" (emphasis added 111). Marta Bermúdez-Gallegos correctly identifies the voice in this section as the husband of the author and notes that it is "[e]l padre de su hija quien resiste la tortura hablándole mentalmente a la niña . . ." (471). Debra Castillo also refers to "the husband's torture" when commenting on this section (121).

⁴ The three primary pieces are *Blindfolded* (19), *Las manos resisten* (65), and *The Disappeared Children . . . Where?* (117). *Blindfolded* can be viewed in full color at <<http://www.artreview.com/photo/rapina-1/prev?context=user>>. *Las manos resisten* can be viewed in full color at <<http://rpartnoydialogos1.wordpress.com/las-manos-vencidas/>>.

However, *The Disappeared Children . . . Where?* does not focus solely upon the victims. Herein lies the subtle indictment of the patriarchy in the narrative. Embedded at each level within this representation of maternal loss are images of army boots. These boots convey the very significant fact that the ruthless state machine was run by men. Any other symbol, a weapon or a flag for example, would be more removed from the actual bodies who captured, abused, tortured, and murdered under this reign of terror. The body of the baby in the picture grows out of the boot at the base, which perhaps recalls the children born in prison who later were placed into military homes. Two boots stacked on top of each other crush the space reserved for the Madres at the bottom. The boots appear on both sides and at each of the three conceptual levels of the picture. Although the appearance of the victims in white foregrounds these figures, the darker boots unmistakably point to the key players who created a vicious system. Further, the images depict suffering women more often than suffering men.

Like the maternal sadness of the illustration just examined, *Las manos resisten* features two women, presumably Alicia Partnoy and María Elena Romero, being subjected to the suspicious gazes of the male guards at La Escuelita. The guards figuratively crush these women with the weight of their constant control and scrutiny in a way similar to the images of the boots from *The Disappeared Children . . . Where?*. These female faces convey an overwhelming sense of despondency which belies the minimalist way in which they are drawn.

The depictions of the synecdochic boots, maternal grief, and captive women clearly function to denounce the masculine backbone of a repressive state. Given that Raquel Partnoy's artwork is so fundamental to her daughter's story, its narrative function cannot be overlooked. Thus, the text does in fact engender the space of the torture room and beyond through the inclusion of the artistic paintings. The spatial anxiety manifested in *The Little School* is not quite the same principle as the heightened body consciousness described in Kirby's essay. Rather, the different treatment of vulnerable bodies within this tightly controlled space is based on sex and gender, and as the space diminishes within the walls of the concentration camp, the gender differentiation increases. When the text moves into the torture room, the text seems to double back on itself and speak only of a neutral body. Yet, the artistic pieces throughout the text spin the narrative outward again so that it embraces a definite and gendered historical referent.

I turn now to discuss Judith Ortiz Cofer's book, *The Latin Deli*, in terms of place and identity as well. A much less urgent work than Partnoy's episodic book, Ortiz Cofer's narrative weaves together genres, spaces, and voices, thus producing a rich and multi-layered narrative. *The Latin Deli* describes her life as a young girl in Patterson, New Jersey, where she and her mother and father lived in a large housing complex called El Building. Born in Puerto Rico, Ortiz Cofer and her family moved to New Jersey first, and then later to Georgia. Ortiz Cofer continues to reside in Georgia, where she is an English professor.

When thinking about autobiogeographical spaces in general, and above mentioned metonymic geography in particular for this text, the more obvious association between El Building and the island comes immediately to mind. In El Building, bodies and lives are inscribed everywhere: "It was filled with the life energies of generations of other Island people: the stairs sagged from the weight of their burdens, and the walls had absorbed the smells of their food. El Building had become their country now" (Ortiz Cofer 93). The daily activity of cooking, a realm often reserved for women, pervades El Building to the degree where it was possible to guess "what each family in each apartment had had for dinner that evening" (116).

Just as bodies mark the building, the building points back to mark the body. In one particularly moving episode in *The Latin Deli*, the young protagonist, presumably Ortiz Cofer, shows up at the door of a young man upon whom she has a crush. His name is Eugene. Eugene's mother opens the door and asks if the girl lives in El Building. When the mother's fears are confirmed, she dismisses the girl abruptly, and moments later, even angrily: "He can't study with you. It's nothing personal. You understand" (14)?

The idea of one's personal geography or place clinging to the body is even more explicit in a later chapter called "The Myth of the Latina Women: I Just Met a Girl Named María." In reference to Pierre Bordieu's notion of the *habitus*, critic Lois McNay summarizes these kinds of connections between place and body. She writes that this intersection is where "the incorporation into the body of objective tendencies of the world is lived as seemingly natural physical and emotional dispositions" (McNay 38). Ortiz Cofer describes this concept in her particular case by writing that "you can leave the Island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you are a Latina . . . the Island travels with you" (148). The author goes on to describe how in Puerto Rico, young women dress in a way that reflects their tropical environment. She writes that "the natural environment was a riot of primary colors, where showing your skin was one way to keep cool as well as to look sexy" (150). She also emphasizes that "it is custom, however, not chromosomes, that leads us to choose scarlet over pale pink" (150).

Ortiz Cofer laments how women who move elsewhere must then suffer the consequences for the ways in which their dress imitates their previous environment. She remembers showing up for career day at her high school and feeling like a failure: "The way our teachers and classmates looked at us that day in school was just a taste of the culture clash that awaited us in the real world, where prospective employers and men on the street would often misinterpret our tight skirts and jingling bracelets as a come-on" (150). She provides two other examples of how the Island sticks to her body in these ways. In both cases, an unknown man dropped to his knees in front of her, in public, to sing songs like "María," "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina," and an obscene version of "La Bamba." Ortiz Cofer remembers too how she "suddenly became an 'exotic' woman" in college because the young men there dated her in order to practice being "worldly" (146). It was as if they were traveling to a distant land when they were in her presence.

Ortiz Cofer often reminds us in her narrative that all kinds of places and spaces are becoming less and less numerous in Patterson simply because the bodies there are multiplying. In reference to a brutal beating she received by a neighborhood girl named Lorraine, Ortiz Cofer clinically recreates the moment when everyone present simply stood back and watched: "No one intervened. To this crowd, it was one of many such violent scenes taking place among the adults and the children of people fighting over a rapidly shrinking territory" (134). As space shrinks, anxiety and tensions grow, and bodies become increasingly hostile towards one another. The world seems to be shrinking even on the domestic front too, where generations come into intense conflict with one another. Ortiz Cofer often clashed with her parents because she felt as if they were still living in Puerto Rico within their minds' eye. On one occasion, she confronts her mother by telling her to look out of the window of El Building and respond to whether she saw palm trees, sand, and water, or concrete (20). She "felt like an exile in the foreign country of my parents' house" (20).

There is a place, however, where the people can go and existentially travel to their homelands, where the outer and inner worlds seem to find a kind of temporary harmony, where the body can rest, and where the mind is refreshed by its

surroundings. This place is called the Latin Deli. Ortiz Cofer begins her book with a poem of the same name about this almost mythical place. In this poem, the author describes a kind of archetypal older Latina woman who owns a deli. Very much a mother figure, this “patroness of Exiles” has no age, an ample bosom, and plump arms” (3). Her patrons are drawn to her presence and to her many products from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, and other places. She is a good listener, a comforting speaker of Spanish, and a steady provider of what many remember as home. Whereas traveling to distant lands through the experience of another body was described by Ortiz Cofer as an exotic tourist experience for her boyfriends in college, here we are talking about a return, a complex coming-home of sorts.

Like El Building, the Latin Deli serves as a metonymic stand-in for the lands left behind, or the “closed ports,” as the poem refers to them (4). This is a place where a shopping list sounds like poetry, and where product labels are read out loud with as much nostalgia as one feels for their “lost lovers” (3). Everything seems better here, even if it might be a bit stale or more expensive than if purchased at the supermarket chain (3). A kind of existential borderland/frontera, the Latin Deli conjures up a world that is in-between. As a stand-in, it does not really function as a “there,” wherever that may be, nor does it evoke a “here,” because its patrons, paradoxically, are immersed during those visits in those closed ports that “now only exist in their hearts” (4). Both embodied and disembodied, and both oriented and disoriented, the patrons are drawn to the bittersweet experience created by the “Patroness of Exiles” and her store. An a-geographical identity community that is nonetheless very much grounded geographically.

To conclude, recent theoretical developments within the broad field of life writing, especially as these developments pertain to the umbrella term of autobiogeography, serve as useful critical tools with which to reposition place and identity in an era of the posthuman. To this end, the autobiogeographical spaces of *The Little School* and *The Latin Deli* were examined in terms of spatial anxiety and metonymic geography. Whereas spatial anxiety may signify a gendered experience for some, in *The Little School*, this concept conjures up tension for both men and women given the omnipresent blindfold that the prison guards forced the concentration camp detainees to wear. Further, gender differences are in fact aggravated, not leveled, by this tension given that women are more sexually abused than men in *The Little School*. As space diminishes to the confines of the torture room, however, the written text refers to neutral bodies, while the artwork continues to gender the historical referent of the Dirty War’s patriarchal military machine and its innocent victims.

Similarly, in *The Latin Deli*, semiosis also revolves around autobiogeographical spaces. Certain places tend to attach themselves to journeying bodies such that meaning becomes permanently tied to one’s personal geography. Whether an indicator of poverty, as in the case of El Building, or a tropical projection perceived as sexually charged, as in the case of the protagonist’s Island roots, bodies move through space in Ortiz Cofer’s narrative in ways that affirm their material referents rather than move beyond them. Even the borderlands/la frontera space of the Latin Deli store, both a-geographical and geographical all at once, creates identity-enhancing sojourns for its patrons during their visits there.

The idea of autobiogeography recalls Gloria Anzaldúa’s writings on identity and place in her foundational work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. This connection was highlighted for its relationship to the material referent, in contrast to Donna Haraway’s cyborg as disembodied or imagined. The realm of the imaginary also was evoked in response to the practice of isolating often urgent questions of power and privilege when theorizing about those on the ground. Parenthetical theorizing, as I describe it,

endeavors to push past what has already been articulated. I argue here that such movement at best may end up overlooking the fruitful dialogues continuing to take place within the multiple discursive fields of life writing. At worst, this dynamic may in fact function to suppress new voices and the potential impact of their stories upon a world reader.

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Recebido para publicação em 24-07-12; aceito em 28-08-12