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The paper that I am about to present is part of a larger project in which I compared two novels, *Caramelo* and *Middlesex,* by Sandra Cisneros and Jeffrey Eugenides. To my knowledge, a comparative study of the two novels has never been done before. My point here is to make use of Cross-ethnic studies alongside queer theory as a powerful tool outside of what we usually think of as "queer" literature, look at convergences between those two novels where they have been overlooked before. The section of the study that I will be focusing on today is: **Queering time in story-telling: subverting esthetic and gender labels in Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo* and Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex.***

I will start with a quote from the poem "To live in the Borderlands means you" by Gloria Anzaldúa:*"... forerunner of a new race,/ half and half – both woman and man, neither – /a new gender."*

Published on the same year, *Caramelo* and *Middlesex* address the issue of America's anxiety with national identity, and more specifically its ethnic identity. *Caramelo* takes us on a trip between Mexico and Chicago, while *Middlesex* takes the reader on a "rollercoaster ride" from the mountains of Asia Minor to Detroit. But geographical borders are not the only ones to be crossed: gender boundaries are also challenged in the two novels. Going along the postmodern concern of truth-value in any kind of narrative, be it historical, biographical or fictional, these two novels presented as "memoirs" joyfully blend, in their own idiosyncratic ways, historical facts, family history and anecdotes, and fictionalized narratives**.** Presenting an exhaustive analysis of all the similarities that arise between the two novels would be an impossible task in this rather short presentation; I would argue that these are not coincidences,

but a sign of the common concerns between writers of ethnic minorities in the United States. I would like to focus our attention today on the question of how and by whom history **and** stories are written. We will see how the value of truth in story telling and fiction is subjected to a relative judgment, and how the very genre of the two novels, presented as memoirs, subverts traditional labels. I will argue that this subversion closely follows the question of gender borders as well.

The larger theoretical frame that I used for this comparative study is what Gloria Anzaldúa, in her seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera* named "la facultad"; enables its bearer to transcend hardships and transform them into an aesthetic and ethic object, one that militates against binary oppressions: native/foreigner, white/ethnic, male/female, heteronormative/counternormative, etc. I propose to read Anzaldua's theory of "la facultad" in conjunction with Derrida's "différance" which also claims the right for what I would call a third space. They open a world of possibility that may think gender, sex and sexuality in new ways that don't rely on the usual binaries that the states and laws impose on their subjects. They propose a space for dissident identities to exist within the realm of power, instead of being eternal rejects. "La différance" operates in-between the sensory and the perceivable; it expresses itself neither in speech nor in writing (Derrida 5), but in what we could conceive as story-telling. Both *Caramelo* and *Middlesex* hover in between those concepts while claiming (whether explicitly or not) to use story-telling. The indecisiveness of these categories will thus resist an essentialist politics and evade a simple binary in matters of national identity, literary genre, gender and sexual identity, to name but a few.

Right from the epigraph of *Caramelo*, Cisneros warns us against the fallacy of the research of the truth in a novel that is partly autobiographical. An authorial disclaimer welcomes the reader: there is a "family tradition of telling healthy lies" (1). The stories are thus protected from any claim of truth to be found in the novel, while it relies on narratives

that are indissoluble from the author's life facts. Story-telling seems more important than biographical elements: "Cuéntame algo, aunque sea une mentira" (epigraph). The values of exaggeration and invention are promoted instead of claiming to tell the "truth". The incipit is here used in a transgressive way, if we are to follow the rules of "autobiography". Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in what seems to be one of the founding works of autobiography, writes in the incipit of *Confessions*: "I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself." (*Confessions*, Book 1). To justify any small deviance from the truth, because of some failings of his memory, he writes: "if I have sometimes introduced superfluous ornament, it was merely to occupy a void occasioned by defect of memory: I may have supposed that certain, which I only knew to be probable, but have never asserted as truth, a conscious falsehood". Here our author, Sandra Cisneros, reinvents the rules of autobiography by claiming the right to lies as a helpful tool.

With this freedom, the writer is able to construct a narrative that is not limited by the constrictions of space and time, as the author navigates periods and places that she obviously couldn't have been part of. This is framed and emphasized as the author herself introduces an event with "When I was dirt" (89). The story that will be described takes place before she was born. Her first memory of existence is of dust swirling around in a house, and her jumping over a corn broom – but then she sees herself as a speck of dust. Similarly, Cal narrates part of his family's history that he couldn't have lived himself since it happened way before he was born. The first family story that Cal narrates is a description of his grandmother predicting the sex of the child to be born soon, who happens to be the narrator himself. "Three months before I was born, in the aftermath of one of our elaborate Sunday dinners, my grandmother Desdemona Stephanides ordered my brother to get her silkworm box" (4). The very use of the pronoun "our" seems to include the narrator himself, though he wasn't born yet. But Cal points out to the artifice of the autobiography, especially when it purports to tell the truth

about one's life, based on one's memory: "Of course, a narrator in my position (prefetal at the time) can't be entirely sure about this." (9) In *Caramelo*, the incipit of the novel presents us right away with a description of a photograph that is hanging above Lala's father bed. The narrator first identifies with the rest of the family members present on the picture, as she uses the inclusive pronoun "we": "We're all little in the photograph above Father's bed. We were little in Acapulco" (3). Lala, the narrator, then proceeds to describe all the family members present on the photograph, until she seems to realize, or at least ultimately discloses to the reader that she was not actually present when the photograph was taken: "I'm not here. They've forgotten about me when the photographer walking along the beach proposes a portrait, *un recuerdo*, a remembrance literally (…) 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?" (4). The narrator thus posits herself specifically as a recorder of her family's history, all the while claiming the text as a memoir, that is, of a record of her own life. But as she takes the position of the photographer as a recorder of facts, she recognizes the impossibility of being on the picture herself, thus creating a distance with her own memoirs – and therefore a doubt where the veracity of the facts recorded is concerned. Derrida's "différance" seems to be at play here where the narrator introduces a distance, a space, a form of temporization between her presence and her recording/writing of facts, while introducing the *polemos* aspect of the genre that she tackles: a refusal to conform to the rules of the genre by questioning the value of truth, and to confirm the veracity of her claims.

There are a number of layers that complicate the genre of these two novels. As first person narratives that are retrospective of the narrator's past life, the two novels are posited as memoirs at first. However, we do know that these are novels, fictionalized accounts of a fictional character's life – by this same character. These standards don't match with the "pacte

autobiographique" that Philippe Lejeune proposed, as the identity between author (Eugenides and Cisneros) and narrator (Cal and Lala) is not respected. However, the relationship between author and narrator is complicated by the similarities between them: Eugenides' family is of Greek ancestry, as his grandparents', like Cal's, emigrated from Greece to the US. The difference between Cisneros' narrator Lala and herself is even more troubling, as the author seems to recall precisely some elements of her childhood[1]. But more explicitly, both the author in the epigraph and the narrator of the memoirs question the truth-value of writing, and memoirs or autobiography. Lala as the narrator insists that she must imagine and fill in the blanks where other people's memory or what is recorded in history is failing. The fallibility of one's memory or one's perception is part of the pact between reader and narrator in an autobiography, as a proof of honesty. But what are we to do with a blatant recognition of lying? She also accepts, as part of story-telling the "healthy lies" that one must tell in order to keep the narration going. In this sense, the narrator breaches the conventional pact between reader and narrator where the narrator pledges to tell only the truth. But there is yet another layer intruding: the "pacte référentiel" should enable the reader to verify the veracity of events. Many historical events take place or are referred to during the narration (see notes in particular). The truth, as in the biography, is here displayed and almost brought as by a contract that historical narrative guarantees. However, this contract of objective truth is as soon as breached, through what I would call "gonzo[2]" history: the footnotes in *Caramelo* seem to cover a variety of genres. Footnotes are usually rare in novels, and they already complicate the genre of the novel and the memoir. They include documentary references to both historical events and cultural, sometimes laced with personal comments on these events or famous historical and cultural figures. The chronology of Mexican and U.S history at the end of the novel, functioning in the same mode, has been described as "wonderfully

[2] I refer here to the way Hunter S. Thompson's writings have been coined as "gonzo journalism", where he thwarted the supposed objectivity value of journalism.

idiosyncratic" by Robert Birnbaum. Both this "personal" chronology and the footnotes appear as an effort to rewrite history, as we have already seen, in a subversive and more inclusive way, thwarting the supposedly objective value of historiography.

The constant back and forth between periods – times when Lala "was only dirt", or Cal wasn't born – casts a serious doubt onto both the truth value of what is told – for it cannot be a memory of the narrator – and on the memoire as a genre. Lejeune reminds us that the autobiography is concerned with one's life and personality; then what do we make of the constant jumps inside the various characters in the family's consciousness? It seems that there is a constant thread that runs through the family – what is metonymized as the blood, the genes, the "memory" – that enables the narrator to almost embody each of these people in the family.

Elizabeth Freeman, in her book *Time Binds*, calls for a new reading of time that is queering the usual paradigm of history. "Queer time" calls for a complete reevaluation of the linear, event-oriented model that is imposed by the nation-state's temporal – and oppressive - organization. Indeed, both novels, although concerned by historical landmarks, rely more on a "history of the body". Sensual and sensory "events" mark the memory. Cisneros' opening pages are a remarkable synesthetic experience both for the author and the reader. The historian's eye could not be so concerned with such bodily implication into time and space. Freeman coins the term "erotohistoriography", and claims a right to "forging – in the sense of both making and counterfeiting history differently" (xi). "Queer time", she argues, "appears haunted"(x). In *Middlesex*, this haunting seems to be generational, but more specifically genetic. "Sing how it [the gene] passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family" (4). The haunting of the recessive gene of hermaphroditism is one that reminds the subject of a constant presence of familial heritage and of the bodies of the dead. The gene being inscribed in the body points to a continuity

between the world of the dead and the living, as a memory that is both intellectual and corporeal. I would argue that this haunting of the gene as present in the body challenges "chrononormativity", as coined by Elizabeth Freeman.

In *Caramelo*, the dialogue taking place between the "awful grandmother" and Lala gives rise to a new type of narration. The grandmother is, at this point, dead, and her intervention in the medium of narration characterizes her as being part of the word of the undead, although she mingles with actual life as she discusses with Lala. Here, the ghost of the grandma is not so much as embodied through her ectoplasmic presence in the story itself, but her voice is heard at the extra-diegetic level, that is, the level of the narration. In invoking the grandmother's spirit to help her tell her story, our narrator deals with an alternate temporality in which it is not only memory, but the body or at least the voice itself that is the only guarantee of the survival of history. Cisneros could have disembodied this memory by, for instance, relying on letters or other documents that would have attested some of the facts that she recounts. However, we see how the authors distrusts written documentation, as she relies primarily on the medium of the embodied story-telling in the flesh or the voice of the grandmother speaking, whether dead or alive. The "ghost" of the grandmother is thus part of a queer temporality, not diegetically but in its handling of history – it actually embodies queer history itself, as the story-telling cannot but rely on the ghostly and a-temporal presence of the "awful grandmother" for it to be unraveled – the narrator has summoned the voice of narration from the dead, and engages in an anachronic dialogue with it to complete the story.

In the same vein of questioning linear, eschatological history, the rebirth of Calliope as Cal in *Middlesex* complicates the traditional, continuous temporality of birth, life and death. According to Elizabeth Freeman, "queer time generates a discontinuous history of its own" (xi). Although these events follow a linear pattern, the narrator's birth is performed twice, an event that defies the idea of a unique performance (of birth) and a unique individual. The

opening lines, “I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974” (3), demonstrate Kristeva’s idea that the individual is a transient being, in a perpetual state of renewal. One can be born twice, in different locations, even metaphorically: it is the circumstances that change the individual’s identity.

Francisco Collado-Rodríguez alluded to this dual experience of time that Cal has had due both to his genetic condition, and his upbringing as a girl and later choice to live as a man: “In her/him collide the patriarchal perspective that sees life in terms of historical progression and the matriarchal understanding of life in cyclical terms” (5). But even beyond a gender division of time sensibility, this experience is almost always linked to Cal’s ethnicity that is jutted against a US imperial linearity in time. He describes his Greek grandparents’ wedding thus: “Desdemona and Lefty circumambulated the captain, once, twice, and then again, spinning the cocoon of their life together. No patriarchal linearity here. We Greeks get married in circles, to impress upon ourselves the essential matrimonial facts: that you have to find variety in repetition; that to go forward you have to come back where you began” (68).

We couldn’t agree more with Freeman’s claim that “[t]hese and other works confront, on an affective register irreducible to traditional historical inquiry, what has been forgotten, abandoned, discredited, or otherwise effaced” (xiii). Sexual dissidents, “perverts” are “figures for and bearers of new corporeal sensations, including those of a certain counterpoint between now and then, and of occasional disruptions to the sped-up and hyperregulated time of industry” (7). These figures are a challenge to chrononormativity as they focus on the body erotic and they leave aside the possibility of reproduction, a necessary condition for the teleological accomplishment overseen by state institutions; Freeman calls it “time-as-productive”, with a main objective of the passing on of legacy from one generation to another. In *Middlesex*, the productive or generational is tackled by its narrator in a way that both

describes this logic as a familial narrative, and confirms it in the passing of the gene, at the same time that it debunks it in the body of Cal as a sterile intersex (because of this very gene) and his own tackling of history as a non-linear, repetitive and mythical time. Cal(liope)'s condition thwarts the historical narrative that usually presides over a woman's body: she will never have her period, will not be able to bear children and even with her decision to transition to a man, later on, Cal still bears the stigma of his intersexuality that prevents him from having a relationship that fits the heteronormative "household habitus", as Pierre Bourdieu calls it.

Surprisingly enough, *Caramelo* and *Middlesex* don't seem to have been the subject of a comparative study so far. Their many similar characteristics called for a comparative approach of the two fictive memoirs; and although their characters cross different geographical borders, their concerns dealing with memory, exclusion, sexuality, and gender to name but a few provide us with a new model of identity formation, precisely one that doesn't fit with exclusionary binaries and that calls for a hybrid, mobile and powerful new being, through modes of esthetic representations. This paper calls for the cross-ethnic study of fiction in the context of U.S American literature, where a large number of issues share a common ground, especially as it reevaluates gendered representations. Hybridity and the subject as in a state of constant progress find their place across a more diverse landscape than we would have expected, and reach an ever-growing audience.

And it is precisely this universality that the new being, the "forerunner of a new race (…) a new gender" (Anzaldúa 216) reaches out to.