

Autobiographical Subjectivity in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing* and
Marjorie Agosín's *The Alphabet in My Hands*

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ABSTRACT

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SUBJECTIVITY IN JUDITH ORTIZ COFER'S *SILENT DANCING* AND MARJORIE AGOSÍN'S *THE ALPHABET IN MY HANDS*

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This thesis examines the construction of autobiographical subjectivity in two U.S. Latina autobiographies, Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990) and Marjorie Agosín's *The Alphabet in My Hands: A Writing Life* (2000). In a comparative way, this study follows Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's five-point classification of the constitutive processes of autobiographical subjectivity in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001); that is, experience, memory, embodiment, identity, and agency. This thesis identifies two culturally specific strategies of constructing subjectivity that enrich the U.S. Latina autobiographical tradition: the use of the Latin American storytelling tradition, and the emphasis on "poetic truth." The storytelling tradition shapes subjectivity in three ways: first, as a discursive pattern that forms the fragmented subject; second, as a discursive pattern that predicates Latina autobiographical subjectivity on female experience, embodiment, and identity; and that underwrites gender, sexuality, class, race, and

ethnicity discourses; third, as a tradition that conflates the collective and personal memories of the subject. As a specific Latina rhetorical strategy, “poetic truth” affects the construction of subjectivity in two ways: first, it validates the use of imagination and creativity in the representation of reality; second, it also serves as an empowering strategy. The second chapter establishes the theoretical framework of this study, situating U.S. Latina autobiography within the tradition of women’s writing and discussing the configuration of the specificity of Latina autobiographical subjectivity. The third chapter studies comparatively how the storytelling tradition operates at the nexus of female experience, embodiment, and identity in Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s texts. This analysis demonstrates that the major difference between their texts regarding the function of storytelling is in the autobiographical subjects’ identification of discourses that are central to female oppression. The subject in Ortiz Cofer uses storytelling to interrogate gender discourse, whereas Agosín’s subject employs the storytelling tradition to uncover inequality in power relations between classes. The fourth chapter explores how these texts incorporate personal and communal memories in the representation of the past. It demonstrates that the validation of “poetic truth,” as a combination of imagination, creativity, and emotions, disidentifies with traditional autobiographies by claiming the primacy of emotional and subjectively interpreted experiences in the construction of subjectivity. In both Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s texts the autobiographical subjects envision writing as a crucial tool for cultural survival, and also conceptualize the political and cultural roles of women as spokespersons for their respective ethnic communities.

1. Introduction

In her preface to *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, Judith Ortiz Cofer explains how she conceives writing about memory following Virginia Woolf's conceptualization of female autobiography: "[Woolf] accepts the fact that in writing about one's life, one often has to rely on that combination of memory, imagination, and strong emotion that may result in 'poetic truth'" (11). Drawing on Woolf's vision, Ortiz Cofer shows a new mode of autobiographical self-representation; imagination and a meticulous recollection of the past are treated as equally valid rhetorical strategies for autobiographical narrative. In a similar manner, Marjorie Agosín begins her *The Alphabet in My Hands: A Writing Life* with an acknowledgement that her autobiographical writing rests not solely on truth-telling but also on a creative exploration of the past: "Generous spirits accompanied me as I journeyed in the uncertain realm of memory and the passions of the imagination" (xv). By revealing her readiness to incorporate imagination into the narrative that supposedly reconstructs the lived past objectively, Agosín joins Ortiz Cofer's stance on recognizing the author's participation in the transformations of the traditional autobiographical genre. Blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, contemporary U.S. Latina autobiographical texts challenge the assumption of the traditional autobiographical genre that autobiographical writing should be referential to life and reconstruct the past

objectively. These texts transform the traditional female autobiographical narrative into one that is composed through a careful mediation between objective reality and a “poetic truth.” A new conceptualization of autobiographical writing by U.S. Latina authors calls for examining autobiographical subjectivity as conditioned not only by the lived reality but also by the author’s creative representation of that reality. *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990) by a Puerto Rican writer Judith Ortiz Cofer and *The Alphabet in My Hands: A Writing Life* (2000) by a Chilean American writer Marjorie Agosín are examples of U.S. Latina texts in which autobiographical subjectivity is composed of a series of experiences, lived and imagined, and of socio-cultural categories that condition the subject. The autobiographical subject is equally shaped by the narrative itself, which is interpreted as the discursive space where the formation of the subject takes place.

This thesis examines the rhetorical strategies that create autobiographical subjectivity in these texts. I argue that Ortiz Cofer and Agosín incorporate imagination as a valid component to represent reality, and as an empowering strategy in autobiographical texts. Autobiographical subjectivities in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* are a product of real cultural conditions and lived experiences. These experiences are conflated with the autobiographical subject’s perception of her self and her social reality through her imagination. The integration of imagination creates a distinctive U.S. Latina autobiographical tradition that continues the feminist canon. My study also focuses on how these writers envision their social roles and responsibilities as writers of the Latina community. I conduct research on their connections with the Latina

group and their careers as writers, by means of including interviews and other personal essays in my discussion. Along with scrutinizing the discursive construction of subjectivity in their works, this thesis demonstrates that gender, class, race, and ethnicity act as forces outside the text that shape autobiographical subjectivity. The analysis is limited to two representative works of two acclaimed Latina authors of different backgrounds: a Puerto Rican and a Chilean American.

In the second chapter of the thesis, I establish the theoretical framework and present the key theoretical concepts of this study. I define female autobiography as a distinct genre and establish a connection between the tradition of women's life writing and U.S. Latina autobiographical texts. Then, I examine scholarship on the construction of autobiographical subjectivity in the feminist autobiographical corpus and in U.S. Latina texts, defining the elements that shape autobiographical subjectivity. I base my critical discussion of subjectivity in Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's autobiographies on Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's comprehensive study *Reading Autobiography: a Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001). Smith and Watson delineate five constitutive process of subjectivity in life writing: experience, memory, embodiment, identity, and agency. I adopt their classification as an operational model for my examination of the configuration of subjectivities in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*. Then, I consider scholarship on U.S. Latina autobiographical writings to discern specific characteristics of these texts and their particular strategies of constructing autobiographical subjectivity. I analyze how literary criticism theorizes imagination and creativity as valid tools to represent reality in the U.S. Latina autobiographical tradition.

In the third chapter, I discuss how the storytelling tradition influences the configuration of the autobiographical subject in Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing* and Agosín's *The Alphabet in My Hands*. I explore the ways in which these two texts construct female autobiographical subjectivity through experience, embodiment, and identity. Both authors employ body discourse and the oral tradition to represent a particular subjectivity that is specific to female experience. In *Silent Dancing*, storytelling not only narrates but also embodies experience by creating discursive patterns, both traditional and alternative to male discourse, of how women feel about their body and sexuality. Ortiz Cofer's text demonstrates a strong relationship between the Puerto Rican female storytelling tradition and conceptualization of the female body as both a cultural construct and a social text. Agosín asserts her autobiographical self as a compound of Latin American, Jewish, and Latina identities that exist together in constant negotiation. Her autobiographical subjectivity is equally informed by the experience of racialization that is expressed through body discourse and the storytelling tradition. I explore the way that the female body in Agosín's narrative serves as a trope of embodying the experiences of racialization and ethnicization in the U.S.

In the fourth chapter, I analyze the construction of autobiographical subjectivity through the dialectic between truth-telling and fiction in the reconstruction of the past. I argue that incorporation of imagination and orientation toward representing a "poetic truth" rather than verisimilar reconstruction of the lived past point to assertion of agency by the narrators. By announcing explicitly that their representation rests on creativity and subjective interpretation of the past, Ortiz Cofer and Agosín implement a feminist

decolonizing practice of interrogating the discourse of patriarchy and narrating their own history. The fact that the authors theorize overtly about their writing process situates their work within a tradition of feminist rethinking of the traditional literary genres.

In the conclusion, I summarize all findings of the project. My comparative analysis will offer a theorization of the rhetorical strategies of constructing female autobiographical subjectivity. Besides identifying in what ways the authors incorporate creativity and fictive truth in their autobiographical writing, I also suggest future developments in U.S. Latina literature in terms of how Latina authors conceptualize autobiography, and possible critical approaches to the genre. It also locates U.S. Latina autobiographers globally, in connection with feminist literary traditions.

2. Defining Female Autobiography

The Female Autobiographical Tradition

Mapping the history of female autobiographical writing is imperative to delineating the groundwork and specific characteristics of the U.S. Latina autobiographical corpus. In my analysis, I situate U.S. Latina texts in a close connection with the female autobiographical canon, which has been defined quite recently as a distinct tradition of women's life writing. Female autobiographical writing marked its entrance into the literary world as an independent segment of literature only in 1980 with the publication of Estelle Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography: Essays and Criticism* (Stanley 89). A series of feminist anthologies on theory and criticism of women's autobiography that appeared in the next two decades generated an animated debate on the specificity of female life writing. The formation of the women's autobiographical corpus is coterminous with the estrangement of female authors from the traditional autobiographical genre that identifies the autobiographer as male. In the introduction to their influential critical anthology of works on women's autobiography *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out that the development of a women's autobiographical canon went along with a vigorous revision of the theories of genre (8). Critics revisited the body of theories already in place in the light of feminist, psychoanalytical, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and postmodern

theories attempting to reclaim the place of women's writing in the autobiographical canon. The primary difference between male and female narratives is in the structure: men's autobiographies are linear, continuous, and chronological while women's are fragmented, digressive, and discontinuous (Stanley 92). The traditional male autobiography asserts that the androcentric point of view is the only identity position that allows the right to interpret history and establish the truth. Thus, "both the self and history are overdetermined as "male" in the critical discussion of the autobiographical genre (Gilmore 35). The history of the traditional autobiography reveals that the genre emerged as a cultural discourse that secured the male-centered conception of selfhood and the definition of woman as the other in the patriarchal economy (*Poetics* 39). The patriarchy's fear of destabilizing the androcentric order of the genre either precluded women writers from entering the canon or demanded their appropriation of the male self. Effacing their true voices, female autobiographers had to negotiate the paternal narrative—the only available cultural discourse of autobiography (Smith, *Poetics* 19).

The focus of emerging critical discussions of female autobiography stays on the theory and praxis of women's self-representation and writing of the female self into history. In her prominent essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," Susan Stanford Friedman observes that the concept of individuality based on the assumption that the self is a fixed, discrete, and stable entity has served as an organizing principle of autobiography (72-3). Historically, predicated on the self as a privileged, "isolated being," individualism discarded women and minorities' life writing from the genre for their interest in collective identities:

The cultural categories MAN, WHITE, CHRISTIAN, and HETEROSEXUAL in Western societies, for example, are as significant for a man of the dominant group as they are for a woman at the margins of culture. Isolated individualism is an illusion. It is also the privilege of power. A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. He can think of himself as an “individual.” Women and minorities, reminded at every turn in the great hall of mirrors of their sex and color, have no such luxury [...] The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition of autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism. (75)

Stanford Friedman ascertains that female autobiographers paved their way into the genre by taking control over representation. I borrow my definition of the act of representing from Jeanne Perreault who defines it as “to speak for, to speak about, and, most troublingly, to speak as” (6). Asserting the power of self-representation enables women writers to inscribe a new history of women as a category into autobiography, thus validating a gendered group identity, or what Stanford Friedman calls a “group consciousness” (76). This process goes hand in hand with the creation of the female self alternative to the cultural category woman that is essentialized by the androcentric discourse. This female self is built upon shared female experience, which the patriarchy made invisible. The access to representation allows women autobiographers to craft a narrative of female experience that warrants the creation of women’s history, which is

“the project of refuting male experience as the norm” (E. Pérez xiv). Along with women’s becoming legitimate subjects of their own history, the access to representation converts the female self into a political subject. Defining the meaning of representation in culture, Judith Butler delivers that “representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects” (“Subjects” 341). Thus, women’s representation is imperative not only to write female autobiographical narratives but also to contest and rupture the category, “women,” as a marginalized political entity in the patriarchal discourse. Gaining the power of self-representation in conjunction with creating a female narrative of history has buttressed the emergence of women’s autobiography as a distinct canon.

This cursory look at the history of female autobiography demonstrates that the development of women’s autobiography is corollary to interrogating and refuting the traditional male autobiographical discourse. Fighting back the invisibility and marginalization of the female experience, and introducing a new vision of the self along with a burgeoning critical discussion of the specificity of women’s writing built a premise for theorizing the female autobiographical subject. This theorization of the female self is valuable for my discussion of U.S. Latina autobiographical writing. As I have mentioned before, U.S. Latina texts and female autobiography display a set of commonalities, which I will refer to later in this chapter. Both Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s autobiographies reveal that the authors acknowledge the legacy of female life writing and share other female writers’ plight for inscribing a truly female self into their texts.

Particularly, I base my examination of subjectivity in these two texts on feminist critics' works on the female autobiographical canon.

Subjectivity in Female Autobiography

As a way to resist the paternal narrative of male autobiography that silenced the female voice, women authors have generated a writing subject who speaks as, for, and about women. In her examination of feminist theories of subjectivity in *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (1996), Kim Worthington postulates a conceptualization of female subjects as discursive agents who are not merely subjects to a certain discourse but are productive discursive agents within the same discourse as well. The author adds that apart from constituting the subject, language can challenge and subvert the discourse that shapes the subject, for "creative language use is a condition of our partial self-determination as subjects of/in discourse" (114). The emphasis on the creative exploration of language reveals feminists' primary strategy, to borrow Julia Kristeva's definition, of constructing the "speaking subject." The production of the speaking subject happens within the discourse of patriarchy, for the female author finds herself circumscribed by the language of traditional male autobiography. Hence, the text converts into a site of contesting feminine subjectivity and appropriating linguistic tools for constructing the female self. Therefore, the key concern of a female autobiographical tradition is the construction of the female subject; that is, in fact, an "act of rebellion" against a male author (Stanley 92).

Following Liz Stanley, I use the term “autobiographical subject” interchangeably with “autobiographical self” to refer to the subject who creates the text. Along with writing the text, the autobiographical subject is involved actively in the narrative. Her selfhood emerges as the narrative unfolds. It is shaped by the process of creating the narrative. The speaking subject in female autobiographical narrative is not a fixed notion; it is constructed discursively (J. Scott 66). The discursive nature of the subject attests to her connection with the text. Charting the history of the theory of subjectivity from classical to postmodern thought, Donald E. Hall concludes that the study of subjectivity is in fact the examination of the “self” as a text (5). In this light, autobiographical writing becomes a strategy of self-representation that uses the discursive plane of the narrative to inscribe the author’s selfhood into the text. Thus, the relationship between writing as linguistic exercise and narrative as continuity of the self in time and space is fundamental for delineating subjectivity.

In contrast to a male author, a woman writer produces her autobiographical enunciation not only in terms of constructing a coherent self but also of enacting her gender, race, and ethnicity along new lines. Analyzing the configuration of the subject in female life writing, Susan Stanford Friedman reminds us about the asymmetry of power relations that condition the female autobiographical subject. Unequal power relations do not let the female self forget about her condition as gendered and racialized subject (75). Finding herself interpellated in various discourses at once, the female subject is unable to constitute a unitary self, for “there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy” (J.

Scott 66). Experiencing the effect of manifold discourses, the subject remains in a perpetual state of becoming and negotiating discourses.

Women writers' engagement with patriarchal discourses along with their search of alternative discourses reveals that female autobiography not only shapes a distinct female self but also, giving it a political charge, converts that self into a feminist one. Interested in the construction of feminist subjectivity in *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autobiography* (1995), Jeanne Perreault concludes that the feminist inscription of the self transforms the body of the writing "I" into a site and material for the formation of subjectivity (2). Perreault coins this type of feminist writing as "autography"—writing aimed at bringing "into being a "self" that the writer names "I," but whose parameters and boundaries resist the nomadic" (2). "Autography," which includes autobiography, memoirs, life writing, etc., converts into an "emancipatory project" of writing the individual "I" of the writing autobiographical subject into the collective "we" of the feminist movement (2). The moment of inscribing a contiguous self into a text is viewed by the scholar as the core of the "autography," for it allows us to distinguish the process of constructing the sign of "I" and selfhood of the feminist writer. Perreault's criticism puts forth that the female autobiographical subject evolves into a feminist subject through a self-conscious discursive act of inscribing the self into the collective feminist "I."

The concept of performativity is yet another conception of the autobiographical self proposed by feminist critics. Building on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Sidonie Smith postulates that the female autobiographical self is constituted through performative acts of storytelling, for "autobiographical storytelling is always a

performative occasion” (“Performativity” 109). Autobiographical telling creates the subject through reiteration, since “[t]he history of an autobiographical subject is the history of recitations of the self” (“Performativity” 111). Butler defines performativity as “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (*Bodies* 368). Thus, according to Smith and Watson, autobiographical storytelling “enacts the ‘self’ that it claims has given rise to an ‘I,’” which is “fragmented, provisional, multiple, in process” (*Interfaces* 9).

In my analysis of Agosín’s and Ortiz Cofer’s texts, I look at autobiographical writing as a discursive process of constructing subjectivity. I also take into account the performative nature of the subject in my discussion of the effects of autobiographical telling on the narrating self. To define subjectivity, I use Julia Kristeva’s concept of “subject-in-process” that is an unfixed, subversive writing subject because it is shaped by dialectic between the symbolic order and the semiotic (Kristeva 24). The opposition between the symbolic and the semiotic defines the feminist struggle to create feminine subjectivities that are alternative to the patriarchal system of signification. Therefore, female writing in particular, as a creative act continuous in time, can be interpreted as a woman writer’s process of becoming as a speaking subject.

The instability of the discursive female subject indicates that subjectivity is constantly in a process of formation. Following Julia Kristeva’s concept of “subject-in-process,” I understand female autobiographical subjectivity as the female autobiographical subject’s conceptualization of selfhood through a reflexive, creative, and selective articulation of experiences, beliefs, social and political forces, and cultural

conditions. This articulation takes place through the inspection of both personal and collective stories as well as the social location from which the autobiographical subject asserts her authorial voice.

The groundwork of my discussion of the modes of the construction of subjectivity is Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's compelling study *Reading Autobiography: a Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001). In their book, the scholars define five primary constitutive processes of autobiographical subjectivity: experience, embodiment, memory, identity, and agency (15-6). I find their book to be the most comprehensive study of not only the elements that shape subjectivity but also of critical approximations to analyze autobiography. Moreover, I consider Smith and Watson's model of analysis as the most complete framework for critical inquiry about autobiographical subjectivity. It synthesizes various, often discrete, studies on autobiographical writing, including those written by Smith and Watson, discerning the key processes that configure subjectivity. For instance, it incorporates Smith's revised excerpts from her earlier books on female subjectivity, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography; Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987) and *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (1993), fleshing out explicitly the constitutive elements of subjectivity that she singled out in her previous analyses. From an array of examined studies written by various scholars of the autobiographical genre, I conclude that *Reading Autobiography* encompasses all of the elements that appear in various works as oftentimes isolated processes constituting subjectivity. For example, in her book *The Auto/Biographical I*, Liz Stanley scrutinizes the autobiographical self

mainly through the dialectic between truth and fiction in the reconstruction of memory. However, she overlooks other important constitutive processes of subjectivity, such as experience, identity, embodiment, and agency. The body of the secondary texts on life narratives that I surveyed and analyzed briefly for this project suggests that Smith and Watson offer a classification of constitutive processes of subjectivity that attempts to cater for various theories of the subject and of the autobiographical genre. Although Smith and Watson do not work out guidelines specifically for women's texts, I use their classification of the processes that shape the autobiographical subject as an operational framework for my analysis of the construction of subjectivity in Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's texts.

Experience

Experience is constitutive of the autobiographical subject. Smith and Watson argue that autobiographical subjects do not exist a priori to their narrative because they know themselves as subjects only in relation to their experiences (*Interfaces* 10). Well-known feminist scholar Teresa de Lauretis offers a valuable definition of experience as a process: "Through that process [experience] one places oneself or is placed in social reality, as so perceives and comprehends as subjective...those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. The process is continuous, its achievement unending or daily renewed" (159). Hence, experience constitutes the self, for the subject conceptualizes her selfhood through multiple relations with the world (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 25).

As I will demonstrate in the third chapter in my analysis of Ortiz Cofer's autobiography, female experience is transmitted through the process of storytelling. Likewise, I will argue that Agosin internalizes female experience through the stories that circulate in her family. The nexus between experience and autobiographical storytelling is situated in language. Experience and storytelling emerge in a linguistic event; therefore, both of them are discursive. By the same token, the subject constitutes herself through narrating her experience. Smith warns that "[t]here is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of narrating" ("Performativity" 108). Discussing the embeddedness of experience in social reality, Joan Scott stipulates that experience is narrated through a linguistic event, which is, in its turn, restricted by a repertoire of shared meanings (66). The construction of experience occurs within the confinement of an established discourse that defines what experiences are meaningful and worth narrating about. Hence, telling the story of the self is an act of bringing together a gamut of selected and socially meaningful experiences that constitute the speaking subject.

Experience is embedded in the discursive, and, consequently, in narrative that makes meaning out of lived, felt, and experienced material reality of the subject. Talking more specifically about the production of female experience in *Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (1991), Sally Robinson elucidates that female experience is "a process, not a product" (13). Robinson asserts that experience is present in adjacency with discursive systems that direct the narrative: "'Female experience' never exists in isolation from discursive and social constraints, but, rather,

unfolds precisely through women's engagement in discourses and social systems—many of which, in patriarchal culture, seek to devalue and silence women's worlds and women's words" (13). Therefore, female experience is one of the fundamental elements of configuring the female autobiographical subject. Writing about specific female experiences, a female autobiographer enters the discursive realm that exists in contrast to male experience; thus, inscribing female experience in the text, she enables the formation of a truly female subjectivity.

Embodiment

Smith and Watson describe embodiment as a process that inscribes the subject's knowledge upon the material surface of her body (*Autobiography* 37). These scholars emphasize that "subjectivity is impossible unless the subject recognizes her location in the materiality of an ever-present body" (*Autobiography* 38). In her essay "Identity's Body," Smith writes persuasively that "subjectivity is the elaborate residue of the border politics of the body since bodies locate us topographically, temporally, socioculturally as well as linguistically in a series of transcodings alongs [sic] multiple axes of meaning" (267). In other words, the body is a "site of autobiographical knowledge" and "a textual surface" upon which the subject's life is inscribed (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 37). People are able to perceive the material world, internalize cultural scripts, and retrieve memories because they experience life as material bodies. Approaching embodiment from the perspective of social constructivism, Smith interprets autobiographical storytelling as a link between the brain system and the anatomical body

(“Material Selves” 93). The scholar concludes that since the body as a neurochemical system participates in the reproduction of knowledge about memories, it partakes directly in the embodiment of memories in autobiography. This point is particularly useful in my analysis of the female storytelling tradition in *Silent Dancing*. I look at how autobiographical storytelling emerges out of the memories and emotions attached to the body of the narrating “I.” I examine the way the autobiographical subject examines the past through the multiple social and cultural meanings attached to the female body.

Apart from inscribing the past in autobiographical narrative, the body serves as a site of identity formation. In his study of the autobiographical self *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1985), John Paul Eakin indicates that “our lives in and as bodies profoundly shape our sense of identity” (xi). The cultural meaning of the body regulates how the autobiographical subject perceives herself because the body of the female autobiographer constructs her gender, ethnic, and racial identity. Reminding us about the mind/body dualism that links the self and identity with male consciousness, Shirley Neuman points out that the disembodiment of the female self has been historically a prevailing strategy of autobiography (138). The woman writer had to write out her body because the corporeal as well as femininity were devalued in a so-called male life writing. The move of feminist critics such as Smith and Neuman to reconceptualize the relationship between the body and female subjectivity points out that the body is the primary source for women writers to experience who they are in relation to their sociocultural reality.

Cultural perceptions of the body regiment the types of narratives that a particular person can tell (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 39). Equally, the body as a locus of identity follows cultural discourses that dictate how bodies should be represented and made meaningful, with particular aspects of the body coded as visible or invisible, normative or non-normative. Various politics of representation of the body demonstrates that subjectivity engages public value of the body in relation to power. Thus, the body also emerges as the sociopolitical body that is “a set of cultural attitudes and codes attached to the public meanings of bodies that underwrites relationships of power” (Smith and Watson, *Interfaces* 10). In my analysis of Agosín’s and Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographies, I examine how the representation of the body shapes the subject’s conceptualization of selfhood. I also discuss how the female body serves as a site of knowledge production and negotiation of clashing cultural norms in these texts.

Memory

Memory is the second constitutive process of autobiographical subjectivity according to Smith and Watson’s classification. Memory is both “source and authenticator” of the experiential past of the autobiographical subject (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 16). The act of remembering is always a recreation and hence a subjective interpretation of autobiographical acts. Remembering is performed according to certain collective forms of cultural meaning-making, which defines memory as contextual and dependent on discursive patterns that guide the ways personal stories are told. In his essay “Rethinking the Fictive, Reclaiming the Real: Autobiography, Narrative Time, and the

Burden of Truth,” Mark Freeman addresses the cause of a problematical relationship between memory and autobiographical writing: “[T]he fact that portions of our stories are hearsay, which comes from others; the autobiographer inevitably makes use of prevailing literary conventions; the fact that these conventions are themselves inseparable from prevailing cultural scripts, from the folk-psychological canon [...] from which we draw in seeking to make sense of our lives” (117). In a similar key, Smith and Watson conceive of memory as historical and material entity (*Interfaces* 9). Taken together, Smith’s, Watson’s, and Freeman’s assertions about inherent flaws of memory reveal that memories used by the autobiographer are not only second-hand, but they are also culturally, historically, and linguistically conditioned.

This initial unreliability of memory denotes that autobiographical self-representation is by definition a fusion of fiction and the historical truth. Further, Smith and Watson remind us that the fact that memory is embedded in the context attests to the political nature of remembering (*Autobiography* 18). Thus autobiographical subjectivity is contingent upon what is remembered and what facts are silenced or voiced due to ideological constraints or certain political overtones that the narrating self is restrained by. The autobiographical subject’s engagement in the politics of remembering is symptomatic of the cultural production of knowledge about the past (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 19). Thus, deciding what is to be narrated and what episodes of the past are to be omitted, women autobiographers gain the control over representation. To repeat Butler’s definition of representation, the politics of remembering allows the female self to

become a political subject and, perhaps, to enact her own feminist ideology of representation.

The problem of self-representation and its referentiality to the true historical self poses the question of fiction and truth in autobiographical writing. The initial non-referentiality of the narrated past to the lived past indicates that autobiographical subjectivity is shaped by a creative representation of the lived reality of the autobiographical subject. Well-known studies that examine feminist self-representation in first-person narratives, Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (1994) and Liz Stanley's *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Autobiography* (1992), are the basis for my discussion of the confluences between truth and fiction in this thesis. Gilmore notes that "lived experience is shaped, revised, constrained, and transformed by representation" (85). Joining Gilmore's stance, Stanley underscores that the autobiographical self is, in fact, an interpretation of the historical self according to cultural conventions (62). The emphasis of both scholars on the autobiographical self's politics of representation and compulsory adherence to existing cultural forms indicates that the past is always rearranged according to the norms of a certain discourse. Furthermore, memory is selective and limited, and its reconstruction is inevitably partial; therefore, it can produce only those "authorized *fictions*" of the past that the autobiographical self chooses to bring into being (Stanley 128-9).

I have included this discussion of memory to demonstrate that facticity and ficticity are intrinsically connected in autobiographical narrative. They are contingent

upon the politics of representation and ideologies of the autobiographical self. I will return to this question later in my analysis of creative reconstruction of the lived past in U.S. Latina texts. Particularly, I will inspect how Agosin and Ortiz Cofer incorporate creativity and imagination in their representation of the lived reality that, strictly speaking, does not adhere rigorously to the representation of facticity of the past. The analysis of memory in these two texts will also serve to delineate a specific Latina autobiographical subjectivity predicated on the “truth-fiction” discourse. Further, the memory discourse will be useful to examine how Ortiz Cofer and Agosin envision the role of imagination in the writing of life narrative, and how their emphasis on “poetic truth” influences the tradition of U.S. Latina autobiography.

Identity

The subject’s embodiment serves to locate identity in the discussion of the construction of autobiographical subjectivity. Since the subject recognizes her subjectivity through materiality of her body, the autobiographical self needs to predicate that recognition upon her relation to collectivities. By identifying or distinguishing from collectivities, the autobiographical subject constructs a subjectivity that is discursive, provisional, unfixed, and intersectional (Smith and Watson, *Interfaces* 10). Like experience, identity is constructed through and by language. By choosing a particular linguistic repertoire to describe autobiographical acts, the subject creates an identity, or a “subject positioning” (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 32). Equally, finding herself

amidst discourses, the autobiographical self selects identifications and differences assigned to identities that exist within those discourses.

Along with being discursive, cultural identity is also historical due to being situated in concrete temporal and spatial coordinates. Since identity is immediately connected to the historical context, it effects autobiographical storytelling in the way that it fleshes out or conceals certain identifications and experiences of the speaking subject in a given time period (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 35). Smith and Watson talk about “identity vectors” as a set of multiply constructed identities, oftentimes conflicting and opposing each other, available to the autobiographical subject (*Autobiography* 36). Identity vectors are subjected to modifications and changes due to political and ideological changes. They are also indicative of identities being intersectional (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 36). The autobiographer may be a woman, a woman of color, an ethnic woman, etc.—multiple identities that the autobiographical self puts on are not necessarily reduced to a common denominator; they rather exist in intersecting planes, allowing the subject to speak from various positions. Understanding of the manifold identities of the autobiographical subject as intersectional is valuable for my discussion of the autobiographical self in Agosin’s *Alphabet*. The autobiographical self in this text is constructed as a Jewish, Chilean, Chilean American, Latina woman, and a woman of color. The concept of intersectional identities connects with Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographical self as well. As I will discuss in the third chapter, Ortiz Cofer constructs her subjectivity and the autobiographical voice at the intersection of gendered, ethnic, colonial, and postcolonial subject positioning.

Agency

Smith and Watson call agency as “transformative dimension” of autobiographical subjectivity (*Autobiography* 49). Since the construction of subjectivity occurs discursively through manipulation of experience, embodiment, memory, and identity, the autobiographical subject also takes charge of the discursive processes that shape her selfhood and self-knowledge. Thus, agency is understood as control over the self-representation that the subject produces about herself (Smith and Watson, *Interfaces* 10). It is also an ability to interrogate, rupture, or challenge the discourses of autobiographical representation already in place. Agency opens a possibility for subjects to “write back to the cultural stories that have scripted them as particular kinds of subjects” (Smith and Watson, *Interfaces* 10).

Maneuvering across discourses of the self, fiction, imagination, and truth, a female writer acquires performative agency, and the power to challenge both the traditional autobiographical genre and the hegemonic discourse of institutionalized truth. Sally Robinson elucidates that women’s self-representation is characterized by two key trends: “simultaneously *against* normative constructions of Woman that are continually produced by hegemonic discourses and social practices, and *toward* new forms of representation that disrupt those normative constructions” (11). The move toward the production of original forms that dismantle the institutionalized order reveals the project of contemporary female autobiographical writing to initiate an alternative discourse of the self, where a fictitious self will be as valid as the one rewritten from history. The urge to generate that alternative discourse is further explicated by the need to find

representational modes that are properly female, or more radically, feminist. As I will demonstrate in the fourth chapter, Robinson's argument is valuable to examine the relationship between truth and fiction in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*. I will look at how the autobiographers use the confluence of facticity and creativity in the reconstruction of the lived reality to introduce their new perspective on self-representation.

Although agency presumes the autobiographical self's freedom to create a textual self, this choice is nevertheless conditioned by social structures, cultural scripts, and discursive systems in which the subject operates. Joan Scott makes a provision that, insofar as a possibility for subjects to act against the dominant discourse is considered, they are not "autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them" (66). Scott's preemptive intervention saves us from a naïve believe that agency is an easily achievable goal accomplished through the access to representation.

In his comprehensive study of subjectivity, Donald E. Hall underscores that the recent proliferation of female subjectivities does not indicate a bold manifestation of agency. Rather, women's subjectivity should be understood as "the *possibility* of agency in processes of *self*-construction or re-construction" (99). The accent on "process" draws attention to Kristeva's "subject-in-process." Her concept is useful for delineating the female subject, including for my discussion of the subject of U.S. Latina autobiography. By continually positioning the subject in the process of making and remaking herself, Kristeva finds the possibility of the "recovery of pre-linguistic disruptions and alternative

systems of meanings” to constitute the “subject-in-process” (Hall 99). Examining agency through the lens of poststructuralist theory in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1997), Chris Weedon claims:

Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available. (121).

Weedon’s speculation demonstrates that although the subject is embedded in discursive fields, she can use contesting identities and even oppressive practices for her own ends. In female autobiography, the subject’s capacity of agency manifests through different modes of representation, which are often experimental and innovative. Smith and Watson conclude that postcolonial writing exemplifies the politics of agency because it serves “as a tactic of intervention in colonial repression” (*Autobiography* 45). Agency works on multiple levels in female autobiography: from altering internalized narratives that the subject would otherwise reproduce without thinking to gaining access to cultural scripts that have been unavailable to her before (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 45).

Likewise, agency configures the subject who is conscious of multiple ideologies and oppressions that she is subjected to. Realizing the multiplicity of forces acting on her, the

subject inspires new narrative strategies that will challenge the cultural script of self given to her.

The abovementioned discussion of agency serves as a framework for my examination of the ways Agosin and Ortiz Cofer assert control over self-representation in their narratives. I will elaborate later on how these writers' strategies to gain agency are related to representational practices in other female autobiographies. Moreover, I will examine the nexus of memory and agency in the construction of the subject in Agosin and Ortiz Cofer's texts to see how the writers transform the U.S. Latina autobiographical tradition.

U.S. Latina Autobiography and Its Subject

This far I have attempted to provide a general framework that can serve as a foundation for my analysis of the specificity of the construction of female autobiographical subjectivity in U.S. Latina texts. Taking the discussion of the female autobiographical tradition as a point of departure, I delineate specific characteristics of U.S. Latina texts as well as of autobiographical subjectivity presented in this type of writing.

In the last two decades Latina autobiographical publications have proliferated. These texts demonstrate that Latina authors of various ethnic groups attempt to depict their distinctive ethnic and gendered experiences in the U.S. diverse cultural landscape: for example, *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (1983) by Chicana Cherríe Moraga; *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) by Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa;

Getting Home Alive (1986) by Puerto Rican Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales; *Silent Dancing* (1990) by Puerto Rican Ortiz Cofer; *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1994) and *Almost a Woman* (1998) by Puerto Rican Esmeralda Santiago; *House of Houses* (1997) by Mexican American Pat Mora; *The Alphabet in My Hands* (2000) by Chilean American Marjorie Agosín; and *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood* (2001) by Peruvian American Marie Araña, to name a few. In their epistolary autobiography *Amigas: Letters of Friendship and Exile* (2001), Marjorie Agosín and Emma Sepúlveda reflect upon their disquieting condition as Chilean exiles and Latina immigrants in the U.S. The authors include their correspondence, which is seemingly factual. However, Agosín and Sepúlveda edit and rewrite substantial portions of it to lay emphasis precisely on their experiences. “It is not our intention to reveal every intimate detail of our lives,” writes Agosín in the introduction, “but rather to permit the reader to view specifics that profoundly shaped our experience ...for us the experience that unites us and that we want to share with you is the experience of exile...” (xi). Agosín’s and Sepúlveda’s rhetorical strategy to organize their autobiography around the formative events and specific sociopolitical conditions signifies that Latina authors attempt to construct their autobiographical subjectivities through their distinct experiences and their particular social location.

Writing about their specific experiences, Latinas try to make the form of their writing distinct by blending genres and media as well. Latina authors challenge the traditional autobiographical form by combining visual art and literary text. In their *Imaginary Parents: A Family Autobiography* (1996), Chicana sisters Shelia Ortiz Taylor

and Sandra Ortiz Taylor use images and installations along with narrative. The pictographic text evokes the memories of the family's life with the help of familiar that Sandra Ortiz Taylor arranges into mini-installations to illustrate her sister's narrative. The fact that authors experiment with different media and evoke new significations of the family's belongings attests to the creation of "a space where their own subjectivities can play more freely" (L. Pérez 228) because the authors contest the meaning of their childhood memories by inspecting them from the adult's perspective. In a similar manner, in her autobiography *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), Chicana writer Norma Elia Cantú brings together narrative and the images from the family album to tell the story of her family. She plays with captions, sometimes giving misleading commentary on the photos, and edits images to put on multiple identities—from Mexican, border, and Chicana to North American. By doing so, Cantú writes a new history of the self that is to a great extent against the official narrative of the history of Mexican-Americans living on the U.S.-Mexico border. This history is also fictitious, for the autobiographer acknowledges that she mixes creative expression with the lived experience. Velasco calls this manipulation of facts and fiction in autobiographies of the border the act of rewriting the Western autobiographical total self (321-2).

Imaginary Parents and *Canícula* demonstrate that U.S. Latina texts share with the female autobiographical canon a discontinuous, unstable subject who creates a nonlinear, fragmented, rejecting the "bildungsroman" paradigm, and not abiding to the true representation of the self narratives. Examining the autobiographical subject and the modes of its representation, Sobeira Latorre observes that contemporary Latina

autobiography moves beyond the discourse of “truth-telling,” uniting fiction and non-fiction in the process of creating self-written memory (6). For instance, in the beginning of her book, Cantú speculates on the definition of the genre of her work. She calls *Canícula* “fictional autobiography,” “ethnography,” and even “fictional autobioethnography.” Cantú justifies her confusion with classifying her work by referring to Pat Mora’s claim that “life en la frontera is raw truth, and stories of such life, fictitious as they may be, are even truer than true” (xi). Moreover, writing about memory—which is the groundwork of the traditional autobiographical genre—is a problematic endeavor, since it is a project of conflating memory, imagination, and sometimes a conscious misrepresentation of the past. Thus, the subjectivity assembled in autobiographical writing becomes a synthesized self of the author who remembers and has the agency to create, hence manipulate, the text and the self that is “made” through the acts of remembering and writing that very text. In Latina texts, incorporating imagination in the recollection of the past becomes a primary strategy of accessing control over self-representation. Likewise, it is a way to inscribe the discursive selves that they envision as “true” representations of their selfhoods.

Living in bicultural environment, U.S. Latina writers employ autobiography to negotiate the tension between cultures, Hispanic and North American, and to build a hybrid mode of being—a Latina subjectivity that conflates the ethnic heritage and the U.S. culture. Gloria Anzaldúa’s frequently cited autobiographical essay in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) manifests a new type of subjectivity that is constituted by the “New Mestiza” identity. The “New Mestiza” combines Indian, borderland,

Mexican, U.S., and queer identities. Anzaldúa claims that these identities may exist in contradiction with each other. Anzaldúa analyzes how the cultural, gender, and sexual divide forced her to choose between cultures, but the “New Mestiza” subjectivity now allows her to come to terms with her multiple cultural, sexual, and gender identities, without privileging one over the other. Writing her personal autobiography, Anzaldúa addresses the community of “new mestizas,” women of color, who find themselves in similar conditions of sexual oppression and cultural marginalization (Torres 280). Smith and Watson highlight that the impact of Anzaldúa’s new subjectivity on women of color is in enabling them to “reshape the paradigms and politics of identity in narrative” (*Reader* 25).

In a similar key, in her autobiography *Loving in the War Years*, Cherríe Moraga recognizes her marginal and contradictory position in the U.S. society and “transform[s] difference into a source of power” (Torres 278). Her autobiographical subjectivity thus gives impetus for other women of color who share Moraga’s identity politics. This indicates that Latina texts bring together personal and collective experiences and identities to create a new autobiographical subjectivity that takes into consideration manifold marginalities of the Latina subject—of ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and political and cultural status. The subjectivity built on the premises of conflating cultural identities and redefined gender expectations needs to be incessantly performed and validated in a writing act that aspires to be endorsed by the community. Building her argument on the theory of gender difference, Latorre concludes that fragmentation, discontinuity, inter-dependence, identification, and community are central elements for

the construction of a woman's identity that make them recurring components of woman's writing (10). These traits of female writing are found in Latina autobiographical writing in the interest of defining the self that is composed of fragmented, punctuated, disjointed cultural identities and reaching for the community in affirmation of that compound self.

The specificity of the Latina autobiographical tradition also stems the fact that Latina authors create their textual subjectivity from a dual position: as women and as ethnic subjects. In her essay "The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies" (1998), Lourdes Torres observes that Latina authors subvert the constraints of both U.S. Latino and Anglo patriarchal cultures to produce new autobiographical narratives that embrace multiple identities and differences. By incorporating various genres, fragmenting the text, and switching between English and Spanish, U.S. Latina writers project their manifold identities into writing. Likewise, they manifest that there is not a discourse that is adequate enough to articulate the many contradictory aspects of their identities. Torres argues that "extratextual conditions" such as class, gender, language, ethnic, and sexual oppression need to be considered in any analysis of the forces that construct the female autobiographical subject. Torres draws a line between black and Latina autobiographers to rationalize the impetus of women of color to create a collective subject instead of constructing a "monolithic self" (278). Along with refuting the universal male self, Anzaldúa's and Moraga's autobiographies demonstrate that Latina texts contest the universal female subject by putting forth the need to include multiple differences in the configuration of female subjectivity. Therefore, women of color conceive their writings as both a theorization of their

experiences and articulation of identity politics that seeks to subvert and demolish the symbolic order. This approximation to textual analysis is useful for my discussion of the subject who asserts the collective voice in both *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*. I will argue that their shift from the personal to the collective self happens as a result of their taking over new subject positions as ethnic subjects and racialized subjects.

Looking at Latina autobiographical writing from a postcolonial and feminist perspective, the inclusion of the collective “we” in the narrative of the autobiographical “I” is interpreted as a strategy to create a distinctive political and communal voice that is able to struggle against the marginalization of women of color in the mainstream culture. Velasco alleges that the collective voice of Anzaldúa’s autobiography is indicative of her new self that discovers “the liberatory potential of writing” (322-3). Anzaldúa’s work is significant for the U.S. Latina tradition, for it sets the pattern of constructing a Latina subjectivity predicated upon collective experiences. In the fourth chapter of this thesis, I compare the construction of subjectivity in Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s texts in terms of their investment in the politics of collective identification and their use of writing as a tool to tell the experience of their community. My analysis draws on Caren Kaplan’s study of the significance of autobiographical narratives written by women of color. In her essay “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects” (1998), Kaplan defines “cultural autobiography” as a type of female writing that offers a nexus between the personal and the universal as well as between individual stories and social history, highlighting the primacy of writing for cultural and personal survival.

A relevant aspect to discern specific characteristics of the Latina tradition is the inspection of rhetorical strategies that are specific to the construction of autobiographical subjectivities in U.S. Latina texts. The act of writing about their own lives by revising collective memory is inspected as a discursive practice of gathering and interpreting various experiences and sociocultural conditions that shape the autobiographical self. In my study, I examine how Ortiz Cofer and Agosín conceive of the cultural and political role associated with writing about memory in the U.S. Latina community.

Examining the cultural significance of writing about memory for Agosín and Ortiz Cofer, I use feminist conceptualizations of cultural survival and history in correlation with ethnic writing. Cultural survival is achieved through a narrative of collective memories, which arises out of communal conceptions of the past and the residue of the past carried by the narrating “I.” Asserting their voice as speakers for the community, Latina writers give new definitions of collective history through the reenactment of their subjectivity along the lines of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Exploring the theme of memory in Anzaldúa’s autobiographical writing, Nancy Peterson indicates that the reconstruction of historical knowledge “involves a continual deconstruction and (re)construction of historical knowledges/narratives already in place” (183). The scholar extrapolates that the continuous process of doing and undoing history that is at work while writing to the community is part of Latina writers’ politics to avoid silence and isolation. By focusing on the historicity of the subject, U.S. Latina autobiographers validate themselves as spokespersons that have the responsibility to transmit collective memory and therefore resist cultural extinction. Commenting on how

the narrative of the community produces literary meaning in works by Latina authors, Amrita Das summarizes that “[a] narrative, aspiring to be part of the collective, needs to transform lived or true-to-life experiences into a meaningful continuity” (18). The result of this transformation in Latina autobiography is a collective narrative that is accepted and commemorated by the community as its shared memory. Calling for a collective voice, Latina autobiographical writings offer an alternative vision of personal and collective stories in order to create a discourse that is genuinely feminine and Latina.

Turning to the category of the collective, Latina autobiographies go beyond the limits of personal stories to launch what Smith calls the “emancipatory practice” (*Subjectivity* 156) of exposing female oppression and rejecting the essentialization of the female body and female sexuality. In her book *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (1993), Smith recognizes the place of autobiographical writing in turning the corporeal into metaphysical subjectivity. In my analysis of the relationship between the body and subjectivity in Ortiz Cofer’s autobiography, I will apply Smith’s study on writing of the female body. Perceived as a locus of cultural meanings, the body becomes an emancipatory discursive sign that is no longer controlled by the male traditional discourse. Thus, writing the body is viewed as a practice of bringing the cultural signification of the female body into the history of the community. Composing their works in the First World, U.S. Latina authors further stress the significance of the body as a site of experience and as the site where cultural differences are inscribed.

The category of the collective is indicative of U.S. Latina writers' propensity to construct female bonds and to predicate autobiographical subjectivity upon collective female experience. Situating Latina writers in a dialogue with African-American female authors, Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta Sternbach argue that commemorating the matriarchal heritage, Latina texts reconstruct "the traditional patriarchal family...[by] replacing it with a woman-headed and woman-populated household" (12). Latorre goes on to claim that "the matrilineal legacy is often used as a way to criticize the particular views of a culture (be it Puerto Rican, Mexican, etc.) in regards to gender roles and sexual differences" (28). *Las mamas: Favorite Latino Authors Remember Their Mothers* (2000), an anthology of autobiographical essays edited by Esmeralda Santiago and Joie Davidow, evinces Latina writers' enthusiastic reflection on the importance of ties with their mothers (Henríquez-Betancor 349). In spite of social and cultural differences and a generational divide, these authors acknowledge that their mothers' legacies are vital for their formation as adults and as writers. This theme of a continuum of female experience will surface in my analysis of Ortiz Cofer and Agosín's storytelling tradition that does not only serves to internalize the tradition notion of the female body but also attempts to re-signify its meaning with the help of finding female counterstrategies of enacting culturally determined female experience.

The tension between the discourses of objective and fictionalized truths in autobiographical texts calls to consider how women writers use creative representation of the lived reality to transfigure the autobiographical genre. I follow Leigh Gilmore's assertion—expressed in *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-*

Representation—that by resisting determined, institutionalized “truth,” the female autobiographer creates original fictionalized representations of the self that subvert the “truth” that is given to her by patriarchal institutions. Latorre considers this rhetorical strategy a “poetic truth” that breaks away from the tenet of self-writing as a synonym of reconstructing the historical true self (7). Considering Anzaldúa’s and Moraga’s texts, Torres points out that Latina autobiography brings together myth and reality (277). The strategy of blending the lived and the imagined allows Latina authors to construct fragmented selves that are shaped by both creativity and a painstaking recollection of the past. Manipulation of truth and identity in female writing demonstrates a practice of conceptualizing and validating one’s own subjectivity in writing. I pay particular attention to this point, since both Ortiz Cofer and Agosín favor the notion of “poetic truth” while they perform scrupulous excavation of memories in their representation of the lived reality.

To discuss the inclusion of imagination as a valid tool to represent reality by U.S. Latina authors, I turn to Liz Stanley’s commentary of how fictive authorial truth should be treated in relation to the subject’s idea of the self. As I have mentioned earlier in my discussion of the role of memory in the construction of autobiographical subjectivity, Stanley asserts that the initial lack of referentiality of the autobiographical representation of the past explains that the author’s creative elaboration of objective reality is always in place. The autobiographical subject has to recur to fictive devices to construct a coherent narrative of the self in the past through the production of “authorized *fictions*” (129). In her understanding, any autobiographical narrative is fictional and non-referential to the

lived reality due to the selective nature of memory, which precludes a holistic representation of the past. Taking into account the connection between fictionalization and autobiography, this genre can be treated as a realist narrative relying heavily upon the autobiographical subject's creative talent, selective memory, and ideological stand in the construction of both her story and her self. I will use this epistemological standpoint later in my examination of how creativity and imagination work in Agosín's and Ortiz Cofer's autobiographies.

Incorporating the poetics of space in writing about the female body is another strategy to construct autobiographical subjectivity in U.S. Latina texts. The spatial coordinates are essential for the configuration of subjectivity, since identity exists in relation to spatial dimension (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 49). The poetics of space emerges later in my analysis of the significance of space in the production of identities and embodiment in Ortiz Cofer and Agosín. In this regard, Smith points out the connection between the body and the metaphor of "being home" (128). The metaphorization of the body as space where the self is embodied has two immediate consequences: first, it implies that the body is home for the autobiographical subject where a stable, coherent identity is cemented; second, the experience of 'not being home' in one's own body allows for an inspection of the discrepancy between the subject and her cultural identity. A lesson that U.S. Latina writers draw from the feeling of homelessness inside the body, to cite Martin and Mohanty, "is a matter of realizing that home was illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (196). Once

“homelessness” is realized, a U.S. Latina autobiographer aims to recover a history of gender, race, and ethnic marginalization and oppression as well as erasure of differences in order to overcome alienation from her own body.

The theme of space is also connected with the inscription of social location of the autobiographical self in the text. In her careful inspection of spatial imagery in Chicana writing in *Battlegrounds and Crossroads: Social and Imaginary Space in Writings by Chicanas* (2003), María Antónia Oliver-Rotger indicates two possible readings of space. First, social and familiar spaces are interpreted as “battlegrounds” where reflections on diverse, changing social and power relations are both reinforced and queried (17). Second, women writings go beyond the division of space that reaffirms power relations and social differences on the base of class, gender, race, and sexual identities. Chicana writers react to a “multiplicity of communal struggles” and create new hybrid subjectivities in response to a project of remapping social and cultural space along new axes of power relations (18). Pat Mora’s autobiography *House of Houses* exemplifies this tendency to contest the division of space in terms of the distribution of power in the ethnic community. Mora’s trope of the house, situated in the U.S.-Mexican border, symbolizes multiple lines of oppression that effect Chicana women. Thus, a Latina writer envisions space as one of the defining categories for constructing female subjectivity. Since both Agosin and Ortiz Cofer feel the effects of displacement and immigrant living, the analysis of the poetics of space is critical for distinguishing how the subjects speaking from their particular social location conceptualize the asymmetry of power relations between their ethnic group and the dominant culture.

This brief survey of U.S. Latina autobiography and its subject is intended to highlight some peculiar traits of these texts to build a common ground between the female/feminist and U.S. Latina autobiographical subject. In my study, I have attempted to examine both common and specific characteristics of female autobiography, and U.S. Latina autobiographical writing. In the chapters that follow, my goal is to reveal that, although Ortiz Cofer and Agosín start from similar premises, established by the female autobiographical tradition, their texts offer innovative approaches to autobiographical writing that help to shape U.S. Latina life writings as a distinct tradition.

3. Telling Stories, Writing the Self: Subjectivity and Storytelling in

Silent Dancing and *The Alphabet in My Hands*

I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head. (Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* 109)

Yes. The body speaks in languages felt unread,
and you can only marvel
at the message, literate only in your own.
Awed by stories told by thighs and lips
or the ugliness of the littlest toe. (Cantú, "Reading the Body" 265)

In this chapter, the focus of my inquiry is the intersection of female experience, body and identity discourses in the construction of subjectivity in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*. As I have explained in the previous chapter, I treat embodiment, experience, and identity as discursive processes. My intention is to demonstrate that storytelling is at the nexus of these three constitutive processes of autobiographical subjectivity. The storytelling tradition serves to represent the female body as a sociocultural construct that underwrites the discourses of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, class, and race. Ortiz Cofer and Agosín explore the body of the narrating "I" as a site of clashing cultural messages and multiple oppressions.

I will begin this inquiry by looking at the intervention of the storytelling tradition in the fragmentation of the structure and the subjects of the two autobiographies. In the second part of the chapter, I will analyze the effect of the storytelling tradition on autobiographical subjectivity in *Silent Dancing*. Then, I will move my discussion to the examination of storytelling in *The Alphabet in My Hands*. Concurrently, I will also analyze comparatively the effects of the storytelling tradition on the configuration of subjectivities in both texts.

The Fragmented Autobiographical Subject and Storytelling

Judith Ortiz Cofer composes her autobiography of a series of stories, poems, and essays organized in the form of vignettes. In *Silent Dancing*, the narrator recollects her childhood both in Puerto Rico and in Patterson, New York. A daughter of a Puerto Rican U.S. Navy soldier who tries to succeed in life by downplaying his ethnic descent, the narrator learns early in her life the advantage of passing for an American. However, living in the bicultural milieu, she reaffirms her cultural affiliation with the Puerto Rican community through local legends, gossip, folk tales, and quotidian rituals transmitted by Puerto Rican women. Unaccustomed to the lonely life on the mainland while waiting for her husband to return from long military trips, her mother would take her children back to the island. Long stays at the grandmother's house full of relatives allow the narrator to maintain a close cultural connection with Puerto Rico.

The years Ortiz Cofer lived in New Jersey exposed her to racial and ethnic prejudices toward Puerto Rican immigrants. In 1968, her family moved to Georgia,

where the writer lives now (Faymonville 132). Moving away from the Puerto Rican community did not stop Ortiz Cofer from telling her readers about the island. The distance from both the island and the barrio seems to sharpen her vision of the Puerto Rican immigrant experience that she embodies in her books. Her novel *The Line of the Sun* (1989), nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1990, tells poignantly about the Puerto Rican experience in the U.S. Today, Ortiz Cofer is the director of the creative writing program and the Regents' and Franklin professor of English at the University of Georgia (*Ortiz Cofer*).

The structure of Ortiz Cofer's autobiography mirrors the author's shuttling between the mainland and the island. *Silent Dancing* is not a linear coming-of-age narrative; it is fragmented, with frequent digressions and changes of setting and time. Rather than describing every detail of her childhood, the narrator moves from her memories attached to Puerto Rico to those linked to New Jersey in order to juxtapose the two environments. For example, in the section entitled "Tales Told under the Mango Tree," she contrasts the grandmother's loud house with a solitary apartment in the U.S. by shifting her evocation of childhood from one locale to the other. Ortiz Cofer shapes her autobiography in this manner to evoke her condition of "cultural schizophrenia"¹ (*Silent Dancing* 124). By blending the most significant events and impressions of

¹ The concept of "cultural schizophrenia" was introduced by Chicana critic Alicia Gaspar de Alba in her essay "Rights of Passage: From Cultural Schizophrenia to Border Consciousness in Cheech Marin's *Born in East L.A.*" in relation to Chicano/a identity. Gaspar de Alba defines "cultural schizophrenia" as "the presence of mutually contradictory or antagonistic beliefs, social norms, and material traits in any group whose racial, religious, or social components are a hybrid of two or more cultures (also known as *mestizaje*)" (199). Here Ortiz Cofer extends this concept to Latinos/as, particularly Puerto Ricans living in the U.S.

different periods of her childhood from both places, she evinces that the structure of the narrative of growing up between cultures directly reflects incongruence and intricacy of such a life. Likewise, the autobiography's emphasis on the storytelling tradition among the female members of her family reflects the leitmotif of Ortiz Cofer's professional and private life—telling and writing stories. To a large extent, a glance cast on the past in *Silent Dancing* is transformed into a search for the origins of the narrator's vocation as a writer, her copious imagination, and the roots of her cultural identity.

In a similar manner, Marjorie Agosín crafts her autobiography without following the linear structure of traditional autobiographical writing. *The Alphabet in My Hands* is composed of short stories and poems that form vignettes. A number of vignettes describe a remarkable event or person of the author's life. Some of the vignettes are dedicated to reflections on bright impressions of her childhood. The writer organizes her recollections in eight chapters, thus underlining the central themes that influenced the formation of her autobiographical selfhood: being Jewish, her childhood in Chile, exile, and imaginary returns are among them. Like Ortiz Cofer, Agosín dedicates a significant portion of her book to female figures. Mother, grandmothers, aunts, nannies, servants, writers, and teachers appear in a gallery of female characters in the chapters "Being Jewish," "The Women," and "The Guardians of Childhood." Conducting a scrupulous inspection of her self, the autobiographical narrator underscores that she discovered her Latina identity through the stories told by Latin American, Indian, and Latina women.

The Alphabet in My Hands is also divided into two parts: one tells about Agosín's life in Chile, and the second, about exile to the Northern hemisphere. In a sense, the

structure of the book parallels the author's life in the way it foregrounds her emotional split between the motherland and her adopted country. In 1973, fearing the Pinochet regime, Agosín's family fled to the United States. Writing about Chile, the author expresses her fascination with the country and constantly evokes her condition of exile. Openly rejecting the paradigm of transculturation, which is a usual pattern of life for immigrants, she writes: "For me, life between cultures was no life at all" (144). Exile opens a new dimension of the speaker's identity in *The Alphabet in My Hands*: she identifies herself as a Latina and as a woman of color. The narrator takes the advantage of her privileged position as a faculty member at Wellesley College and as a writer to voice her political stance as a woman of color, a Jew, a Latina, and a Chilean.

Living in North America, Agosín began to write about Latin America with vigor, telling about her immigrant experience as a Latina and a Jew. Having overcome cultural and psychological confusion of the early years of exile, she managed to become a prolific poet, writer, critic, human rights and feminist activist, and educator of the U.S. academe. At present Agosín is a Professor of Spanish and Chair of the Spanish Department at Wellesley College, Massachusetts. Her literary work is concerned with giving voice to the women whose family members disappeared during the decades of dictatorships in Latin America countries, to the victims of the Holocaust, and to all women who witnessed war and genocide (*Marjorie Agosín*). Agosín was awarded a United Nations Leadership Award for Human Rights for her life-long dedication to speak for the plight of women in Third World countries.

In my discussion of Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's texts, I look at the stories of the authors' lives as a point of reference for my analysis. By taking the authors' lives into consideration, I include in my analysis of the texts what Lourdes Torres calls the "extratextual conditions" that "shaped the 'self' who produced the text" (277). In the next section of this chapter, I argue that the configuration of both texts and the autobiographical subjects in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* directly reflects the authors' experience of cultural confusion as well as the fissures of their identities that emerge as a result of living between two cultures. In my comparative analysis of the autobiographies, I turn to the authors' backgrounds to explain some of the differences and commonalities between the two texts, such as Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's different interpretations of the factors constituting female oppression as a result of their belonging to distinct classes in Latin America. Likewise, I refer to Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's reflections on the role of storytelling in their lives as expressed in their interviews to support my argument that the construction of the subjects in these two texts is influenced by the Latin American oral tradition.

In *Silent Dancing*, storytelling as a discursive pattern extends its influence on autobiographical subjectivity through the form of narrative. As I have mentioned above, Ortiz Cofer's autobiography is fragmented. I read this specificity of the text's structure not solely as a legacy of the female autobiographical tradition but also as a cultural characteristic of Latina writing. Following the pattern of the Puerto Rican oral tradition, *Silent Dancing* delivers narrative in a set of *cuentos*, or stories. Each vignette turns to be a story, which sometimes deviates significantly from the autobiographer's lived reality.

Before I begin my discussion of the oral tradition, it is necessary to make a brief remark about Ortiz Cofer's understanding of storytelling. In the opening vignette "Casa," Ortiz Cofer discerns two types of stories told in her family: first, "real-life stories" adorned with dramatic details; second, *cuentos*, "the morality and cautionary tales", or fables (15). The writer's foremost interest is *cuentos*, for, as I will argue later, these stories have become her epistemic ground for experiencing life. Each *cuento* is a complete story, with a poem at the end serving as a sort of coda. In a sense, *Silent Dancing* mimics the oral tradition in the way it recounts the author's childhood events as a mixture of stories the narrator heard from the female members of her family and the stories about the events that she participated in. By favoring this form of narration, the autobiographical subject underscores that the fragmentation of her narrative stems from the Puerto Rican discursive pattern that is typically female. Therefore, the construction of autobiographical subjectivity is influenced by storytelling as a specific Latin American cultural tradition.

Ortiz Cofer dedicates a significant part of *Silent Dancing* to *cuentos* that are a part of the local lore. This gesture indicates that the autobiographical subject in this text is shaped by the oral tradition as a source of transmitting folk experience. Remarkably, when the autobiographical self tells the stories of her life in the U.S., she maintains the narrative style of *cuento*. For example, in the vignette "Silent dancing," the narrator's mother recollects the story of the cousin, nicknamed La Gringa, in a type of *cuento*. The life of La Gringa resembles a typical cautionary tale told by adult women in Puerto Rico to educate their daughters about the dangers of relationships with men. This time the *cuento* is about the lot of a young girl who unsuccessfully aspires to live up to the ideal of

an American emancipated woman. She rejects her Hispanic heritage and tries to pass for an American. However, this story of cultural assimilation ends up ironically with the girl accepting the role of a traditional submissive female:

Your *prima* is pregnant by that man she's been sneaking around with...
Soon after she put something long and pointy into her pretty self, thinking maybe she could get rid of the problem before breakfast and still make it to her first class at the high school...And guess where your cousin ended up? She was sent to a village to Puerto Rico to live with a relative on her mother's side: a place so far away from civilization that you have to ride a mule to reach it. A real change in scenery. She found a man there. Women like that cannot live without male company. But believe me, the men in Puerto Rico now how to put a saddle on a woman like her. *La Gringa*, they call her. ha, ha, ha. *La Gringa* is what she always wanted to be... (96-7)

The rhetorical choice to use the Puerto Rican storytelling pattern to tell *La Gringa's* story points to the narrator's intention to maintain her connection with the Puerto Rican culture through the oral tradition. I also interpret it as a strategy to articulate her Puerto Rican identity. Since identities are constructed through experiences and discourses that surround the autobiographical subject (Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 34), the narrator's language expresses her cultural identification. The autobiographical self manifests that the standpoint for both her experiencing and narrating life is rooted in the oral tradition that she learned from the women in her family. Further, this is a strategy

to demonstrate that since the ways to recount female lives are similar for both American and Puerto Rican contexts, female experience from the island and mainland form a continuum of shared female knowledge. La Gringa's story demonstrates that the girl's dreams of American life are ruined because she yields to the call of her sexual desire. The same moral is in the Puerto Rican *cuento* of María la Loca that I will discuss in detail later in this chapter. Moreover, the autobiographical subject demonstrates that she remembers her American experience and makes meaning of it by using a Puerto Rican model of sharing female experience—storytelling. This is a sign of the subject's intention to apply her Puerto Rican model of seeing and interpreting the world through the oral tradition to her American experience.

The significance of the storytelling tradition for the autobiographical self is also evident from the emphasis that the narrator lays on *cuentos* as recurring topics of her writing: "...and they told *cuentos*," recounts the narrating I, "stories that became part of my subconscious as I grew up in two worlds, the tropical island and the cold city, and which would later surface in my dreams and in my poetry" (15). The narrator chooses the childhood memories because that period of her life is saturated with stories that shaped her outlook with respect to gender norms and sexuality. By favoring this period of her life, she also stresses the significance of storytelling in the construction of autobiographical subjectivity in *Silent Dancing*. The autobiographical self's narrative strategy to tell the stories she heard in her childhood and to evoke them in her description of the American life is indicative of her specific autobiographical subjectivity. The author manifests that the speaking subject of her autobiography predicates her selfhood not

merely upon verifiable events but also upon fictional stories. These imagined stories are no less valuable for the construction of the autobiographical subject than the veracity of the events of her life.

Like Ortiz Cofer, Agosín displays predilection for the Latin American oral tradition. *The Alphabet in My Hands* organizes narrative in vignettes. Each vignette is dedicated to a particular experience or story that left an imprint on the autobiographical self: from recollections of remarkable and trivial incidents to dear people and insignificant object of household to momentous events and fleeting impressions to the stories of the local lore. Some vignettes are miniature in size, such as “A Bit of Luck,” “Tamara,” or “To Breathe,” but their importance does not diminish because of it. Agosín creates a small story out of each memory, making it a lesson of her life. By giving titles to vignettes and writing memories as separate entries, the autobiographer hints at how her text should be read. *The Alphabet in My Hands* is a collection, a “basket” of memories, not a consistent linear narrative. Hence the memories are intersectional; they do not form a unified selfhood of the autobiographical narrator. Instead, a collection of memories can define the narrator’s discrete identities, without any of them prevailing. For instance, in “Delfina” and “Souls,” the narrating “I” reveals her emotional connection with an Indian servant. The bond between the narrator and the Indian woman turns into an identificatory move on the part of the autobiographical subject. The narrator displays that her experience of alienation as a Jew creates a common praxeological ground for her identification with a marginalized Indian woman:

All that I am and will not be I owe to her...Now we recognize one another. I am a Jewish girl, a stranger to every hour and table. She is an Indian nana, alone, occupying dark rooms in the dark space of prejudice. Her hand is warmed by mine. She says to me, “Niña, let’s take advantage of this sun of love to continue shelling peas. (82-3)

Claiming an Indian identity position does not nevertheless impede the autobiographical subject from recognizing other identities, for example, of Jewish women—Omama Helena, Grandmother Raquel, or Ann Frank. In “Grandmother’s Shoes,” the autobiographical subject remembers the story of her grandmother Raquel who collected shoes “full of stories” and saved them as the only reminder of her life in Odessa (63). The nostalgia of this vignette evokes the narrator’s exile identity, in which telling stories about her Jewish foremother is by far the only way to maintain her Jewish identity. Contemplating the meaning of various experiences, collecting rather than picking out memories, the speaking subject creates an assortment of stories and recollections as an underpinning for autobiographical subjectivity.

The pervasive trope of the alphabet introduced in the opening poem “The Alphabet” suggests the politics of reading the autobiography. The poem draws a line of comparison between life writing and language; the first conjured up as a set of memories, and the second, as a collection of words:

Beyond
the momentary
light

you were there, word,
aroma,
dominion of memory.
I dreamed of inventing
your cadences,
rhythms tinged blue,
like the color of certain replete
dreams.
I dreamed of the two of us,
and the alphabet burned with love.
At last I felt in my language,
secret, women signs,
the illuminated manuscript
like the nights of the Jaguar. (1)

Writing the book of memories is analogous to inventing an alphabet of a poetic language. Thus, each vignette as a fragment of the past is a letter of this invented alphabet. It is also a fragment of autobiographical subjectivity. Serving as a base of language, Agosín's alphabet symbolizes a set of core memories, or letters that can form a variety of impression of the past, or words. The trope of the alphabet literally stands for the politics of reading the autobiography: a variety of the sketches of memories can be employed to assemble different identities and experiences that constitute the "manuscript" of the autobiographical self. The narrator indicates that the only possible form of talking about

the past is by assembling a new language that reflects the cracks of memory: “I feel the presence of what we were, of what, as foreigners, we left behind. I feel it as if in a language of fragments and dreams” (135). The construction of subjectivities for the autobiographical self is thus a matter of compiling fragmented memories to form the “cadences” of meanings out of the lived past.

The structures of *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* demonstrate that these texts follow the female autobiographical tradition of constructing a fragmented subject. To invoke Lourdes Torres, like any autobiographer, Latina authors shape their narratives in a manner that it mirrors the content of these narratives, the goal of which is “the question of identity and the representation of the self” (277). However, Torres adds that the specificity of Latina writing is in that the structure of these texts is “complicated by the problematic of the fragmented, multiple identity” (277). In my reading of *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*, I argue that the autobiographical subjects in these texts are shaped by manifold identities, both personal and collective, and discourses that preclude them from articulating a stable self. Presenting their narratives in vignettes, Agosín and Ortiz Cofer seem to avoid giving a holistic picture of their autobiographical lives and selves. Instead of writing about consecutive events, thus tracing the unified selves in the making, the authors choose to focus on separate events in each vignette, living space for silences and omissions. As Silvia Berger remarks about another autobiographical text by Agosín, *A Cross and a Star: Memories of a Jewish Girl in Chile* (1995), the Chilean writer rejects the chronological order because she considers her writing as a quest (36). This comment is pertinent to *The Alphabet in My Hands* and

Silent Dancing. Both texts are engaged in the search of their cultural roots and identifications. They underscore selective, frequently detached and conflicting memories as well as strong emotions that have impacted their autobiographical selves. This writing strategy points to the fact that the authors parallel the organization of their texts to the way they conceive of their selves—as negotiated among many identities and as socially situated in multiple cultures. Moreover, imitating the discursive pattern of the Latin American storytelling tradition in the structure of these two texts, the autobiographical selves shape their subjectivities through memories articulated as a collection of distinct narratives, or stories. This observation is especially significant when applied to my analysis of experience, embodiment, and identity as discursive processes that shape autobiographical subjectivity in these texts.

Retelling Stories, Rewriting Female Experience, Embodiment, and Identity in *Silent Dancing*

Storytelling emerges as a discursive element of the narrative intended to highlight the female experience in *Silent Dancing*. In the vignette “Casa,” the narrator describes the ritual of the women of the family of telling stories during the hour of “*café con leche*” (14). Being repeated over and over again, these stories are not actually intended to share new information but rather to reiterate narratives of Puerto Rican womanhood. Along with being a ceremony that fosters exchange of female experiences, telling stories serves to teach adult women and young girls “what it was like to be a woman, more specifically, a Puerto Rican woman” (14). *Silent Dancing* accentuates two *cuentos* that represent

opposing female experiences: the story of María Sabida and María la Loca. These *cuentos* exemplify storytelling as the interpretive schemata of autobiographical experience.

In “Casa”, a didactic story about María la Loca told by Mamá, the narrator’s grandmother, is intended to be overheard by the young girls in the family. Educating them about the dangers of adulthood, elder women, simultaneously, underwrite the discourse of female sexuality in María la Loca’s tale. The *cuento* is about a beautiful girl María abandoned at the altar by a groom. Having given in to her passion for a *macho*, the girl ruins her life and turns crazy from grief. María loses her beauty and become a solitary town character. The grandmother’s moral of the story is that untamed passion, making the female body an easy prey for a man, leads to disastrous consequences for young girls. If “a woman... allowed love to defeat her,” she loses her status as a “decent” woman, which for Mamá equals “smart” (20). An unspoken lesson of the story is that a woman should not give sexual pleasure to a man for free; instead, a man should pay a woman with “a legal contract” that is marriage (16). The story has yet another connotation: its moral is directed to the narrator’s young Aunt Laura whose fiancé left for the U.S. to save money for their wedding. In this context, the fable functions as an example of undesirable conduct for a woman. Mamá employs the *cuento* to warn her daughter about two things: the need of “a legal contract” for a woman and the importance of controlling sexuality in order not to be defeated by a man. Phillipa Kafka suggests that the story of the “ostracized and declassed” María la Loca elaborates on the cultural

concept of “defeat” (5). A woman defeated by love is thus labeled as the one who openly revealed her sexual desire for a man. Kafka expounds:

Wanting sex, having sex, and enjoying sex with a man is considered a “defeat” in the life-and-death battle of a female struggling to achieve the lofty goal and status of marriage. Indeed, the institution is depicted as some kind of heaven on earth, precisely in order to motivate girls into conformity with the constraints connected with it. (5)

In the vignette “Quinceañera,” the narrator elucidates on Mamá’s perception of a female’s social role: “It was not that Mamá endorsed marriage as the only choice for women; it was all she had been brought up to expect for herself, her daughters, and now, her granddaughters. If you did not get married, you became a nun, or you entered ‘la vida’ as a prostitute” (141). As limited choices available to a woman show, marriage is the only practical means for earning a social status for a woman. Kafka contends that the cultural role of stories and mothers telling them is to be “gatekeepers” to prevent daughters from breaking the rules of patriarchy (3). Therefore, serving as what Vélez coins the “monitors of culture” (9), female storytelling tradition guards the values that oppress women. Juxtaposing defeat to marriage, the oral tradition in *Silent Dancing* works to propagate marriage as the ultimate goal of woman’s life in the traditional society. Consequently, the stories of adult women serve to guard the gender hierarchy in the Puerto Rican androcentric society.

However, in my analysis of *Silent Dancing*, I disagree with Kafka’s one-sided reading of the function of storytelling. Although there is a grain of truth in her claim that

foremothers' stories protect the hegemony, storytelling works to educate women about how to gain power within the patriarchal dominion. I interpret María la Loca's story not merely as a narrative internalizing the idea of traditional Puerto Rican womanhood but also as a strategy to pass down clandestine female knowledge of survival in androcentric culture. As a negative example, María la Loca's *cuento* teaches that a woman should restrain her sexuality in order to gain currency in gender relations. This commonsensical knowledge reveals that women have to play by men's rules because they comprise a part of the men's world, but if women understand well enough the values of the patriarchal society, they can achieve some autonomy. By corresponding to the male values of womanhood, women place themselves on the equal footing with men. This gives them a relative autonomy and power in gender relations. Women learn to juggle with the male ideals of what is proper for a female: decency, restrained sexuality, purity, virginity. They use storytelling as a strategic tool to educate young girls about androcentric gender expectations to empower them.

The *cuento* about legendary María Sabida is another significant story that influences the discursive construction of female experience in *Silent Dancing*. The *cuento* of María Sabida is a kind of eclectic cultural adaptation of tales and legends.² María Sabida was a wise girl who outwitted the most notorious bandit of the island and

² The tale comes from colonial times and integrates the elements of European tales—Goldilocks and Little Red Riding Hood—and ancient Greek myths, such as the story of Odysseus (Kafka 16). It displays some elements of the plot of *The Odyssey* in the way María Sabida acts during her encounter with the bandit. The *cuento* draws on the episode when Odysseus outwits the goddess Calypso by winning her favor, instead of provoking her anger (Kafka 16). In her essay "The Woman Who Slept with One Eye Open: Notes on Being a Writer," Ortiz Cofer comments that the *cuentos* she heard in her childhood from the women of her family were not identical to the versions brought to the island by Spaniards, but those were the new versions "translated by time and by each generation's needs" (3).

conquered his heart. She got into the house of the bandit and added a sleeping powder to his meal so that he could not kill her. Wanting revenge on the girl who had outsmarted him, the bandit planned to marry her so that he could murder his bride on the wedding night. But María Sabida suspected that “she had not fully won the battle for this man’s heart” (*Silent Dancing* 73). The girl made a life-size doll of honey and put it on her nuptial bed. When the groom came, he stabbed the doll with a dagger. Her felt splashes of honey on his lips. Marveling at the sweetness of his bride, he regretted bitterly that he had killed her. At that moment María Sabida approached the bed and revealed her trick. From then on the bandit never plundered the island again. They had many children, but María Sabida always slept with one eye open.

As an antithesis to María la Loca, the folklore figure of María Sabida exemplifies female wisdom and power. The narrator accentuates that the empowering moral of María Sabida’s story is in her virtue of being “always alert and never...a victim” (*Silent Dancing* 76). Not being defeated by a man like María la Loca, María Sabida demonstrates that a woman can be on equal terms with men if she finds a strategy for acting in an intelligent way. The narrator’s grandmother praises the heroine of the *cuento* for being the wisest woman in her conduct with men: “María Sabida always slept with one eye open, and that is why she lived to be one hundred years old and wiser than any other woman on the island of Puerto Rico, and her name was even known in Spain” (*Silent Dancing* 74). However, María Sabida pays for the victory by having to be vigilant at all times because men would never forgive her the triumph she had. She had to sleep with one eye open because a powerful woman can never be totally safe in patriarchal

society. Staying alert is a strategy of survival for a woman who breaks gender norms. In contrast to the traditional female image of a submissive woman, this *cuento* offers an archetype of a “prevailing woman” who can subvert male control (*Silent Dancing* 76). Interestingly, the narrator observes that María Sabida is valuable for Mamá as a type of a “prevailing” woman. In her interpretation of lore, Mamá emerges once again as a woman who finds examples of female counterstrategies to gain power in gender relations. In one of her interviews, Ortiz Cofer reflects on the way Mamá used storytelling: “My grandmother told her stories to empower her daughters, to empower herself, and to make her days meaningful” (“Offering” 160-1). In *Silent Dancing*, the autobiographical narrator learns from her grandmother about female empowerment and the consequences of prevailing in the androcentric society for a female.

Remarkably, the autobiographical narrator chooses María Sabida as her childhood role model. She starts from the meaning that Mamá puts into the figure of María Sabida and goes on to add new hues to the character. The narrator makes herself the protagonist of her *cuento* about Sabida. In this tale, María Sabida is a smart little girl who saves her younger brother from death by bringing him the enchanted guavas from “the treacherous hill” (*Silent Dancing* 82). The girl uses her wit to save her brother and to make one guava into a wonder-working jelly that cured all childhood diseases. In this version of the *cuento*, one of Sabida’s traits is stubbornness, for she manages to make her parents listen to her ideas about how to cure her brother despite her young age. This new characteristic of the protagonist indicates that the narrator begins to reflect on the meanings of the tales that she heard. Likewise, she uses them as the foundation for her knowledge about female

roles in society. Like her grandmother, the autobiographical narrator understands that *cuentos*, as a part of the continuum of female knowledge, codify models of female behavior that allow a woman to gain some power in the patriarchy.³

The parables of María la Loca and María Sabida demonstrate that storytelling is the primary way of learning about cultural gender norms for a Puerto Rican girl coming of age. Numerous repetitions of this story, with variation of the man's name and the details of the plot line, show that it makes up a depository of female experiences that circulate from elder to younger generations of women. I understand storytelling in *Silent Dancing* as a two-fold discursive pattern of constructing female experience. First, storytelling serves as a strategic perpetuation of patriarchal values. The *cuentos* that women relate set the model of how women should conceive of their roles in the society. They demonstrate that the audience of these stories internalizes the prototypes of female behavior in relations with men. By listening to these stories, women learn how to make meaning of collective female experience thus preparing themselves to live in androcentric society.

³ Apart from her childhood efforts in *Silent Dancing*, Ortiz Cofer evokes María Sabida's story in her adult life. Writing about her career as a writer, she calls Sabida her *comadre* in the world of literature ("Woman" 4). The Catholic concept of *comadrazgo* means a sacred bond between two women, when one woman promises to be the mother of her *comadre's* child in the case of need (Ortiz Cofer, "Woman" 4). The writer stresses the significance of this bond with the folklore figure of María Sabida for her vocation: "So the woman who slept with one eye open intrigued me as a possible model in my formative years as a creative artist...she learnt how to use the power of words to conquer her fears; she knew that this was what gave men their aura of power...My comadre taught me how to defend my art, how to conquer the villain by my wits. If I should ever weaken my resolve, I will become María la Loca, who failed herself, who allowed herself to be left at the altar" ("Woman" 4). The importance of María Sabida's *cuento* is its being the foundation of female experience of surviving as a free woman as well as an artist in male dominated society. The writer converts the figure of María Sabida into the model of the woman who learns to speak publicly and affirms her voice in front of men. This signifies a victory for Ortiz Cofer. To some extent, Sabida's stubbornness from the writer's childhood made up tale in *Silent Dancing* transforms into Ortiz Cofer's courage and perseverance to speak and write as a grown-up writer.

Second, storytelling establishes a discursive pattern of constructing female experience with an awareness of women's oppression in the patriarchal culture. Its function is to transmit female counterstrategies of empowerment. Mamá's way of deciphering cultural constructs encoded in *cuentos* denotes her particular stand in respect to how gender expectations function in society. I do not propose that she intends to undermine the patriarchal order, but she is determined to claim the ground to form a female enclave in the male world. For instance, a "decent" woman is tantamount for her to a "smart" woman. The way Mamá interprets decency, a typical female trait, is a sign of her resignification of the traditional concepts in order to add them to the female arsenal. Accordingly, a female who behaves in a decent way does not simply conform to the established rules but, more importantly, utilizes those rules for her own ends. The narrator accentuates that Mamá knows that by playing the game of patriarchy a female can win back some territory, and this conduct is an indicator of a clever woman. The narrator underlines the significance of her grandmother's stories for conceptualizing her selfhood in childhood: "Her [Mamá's] stories were parables from which to glean the *Truth*" (*Silent Dancing* 18). That "truth" epitomizes, to borrow Frances R. Aparicio's definition, "organic feminist knowledge" (64). It is the "truth" about womanhood and the relations between men and women that the autobiographical "I" internalizes through the filter of her grandmother in Puerto Rican. Although contesting the "truth" of the grandmother's stories, the autobiographical self uses it to construct her subjectivity in the text. As the two functions of storytelling reveal, the *cuentos* shape autobiographical

subjectivity in the text through contesting discourses of female experience, both conforming and alternative to patriarchy.

Mamá's and the narrator's versions of María Sabida's tale in *Silent Dancing* reveal that telling stories about an exemplary woman is a way of transmitting knowledge about the female strategies of surviving in patriarchy. Storytelling as a female practice equally provides a space for discursive construction of female experience. Contrasting two antipodes, María la Loca and María Sabida, storytelling manifests the female conceptualization of the concepts of "decency," "a smart woman," and "a prevailing woman" as models of behavior for transgressing patriarchy. The autobiographical self's ability to interpret and to recreate María Sabida's parable demonstrates that she joins this discursive continuum of female knowledge. Presenting two version of the *cuento*—Mamá's and her own—the narrator literally embodies her knowledge gained from elder women in the body of the character, thus converting María Sabida into the site of conflicting messages of feminism and patriarchy.

In *Silent Dancing* experience is in not merely transmitted in *cuento*. The very act of telling a story also constitutes the experience of being a Puerto Rican woman. The structure of the autobiography as a set of punctuated recollections in the form of *cuentos* demonstrates that the narrator recurs to "the frame of storytelling for her conception of her life as a narrative at once performed and awaited to be written" (Davis 151). The performative nature of storytelling is closely associated with the poetics of female space in the autobiography. Recalling Oliver-Rotger's interpretation of space, Ortiz Cofer's text employs storytelling in the construction of the "social space" of home (17). The house of

the narrator's grandmother, *casa*, is the place of the daily ritual of *café con leche* "to tell stories for the hundredth time" (*Silent Dancing* 14). Like drinking tea, telling stories is both a ritual and a performance of the Puerto Rican female identity. As if reminding that *cuento* is a part of the female realm, storytelling is performed "in the afternoon when the men are still at work and the boys had gone to play serious baseball in the park" (*Silent Dancing* 19). The autobiographical narrator comments on the exclusiveness of the storytelling ceremony: "Then Mamá's house belonged only to us women" (*Silent Dancing* 19). *Casa* is a truly female space, where even furniture, including Mamá's "intricately carved rocker that had passed down to Mamá at the death of her mother," signifies the matrilineal legacy (*Silent Dancing* 14). As female "social space", the house symbolizes women's "speculative reflection upon ... masculinity and femininity" (Oliver-Rotger 17). It is the space of *casa* that inscribes difference between genders: women are taught about gender relations during the ceremony in the house while men are barred from that knowledge transmitted in the female space.⁴

As the narrator's version of the story of María Sabida in *Silent Dancing* demonstrates, the grandmother's house becomes the site where the autobiographical self acquires her first experience of using storytelling as an empowering tool for her as a woman. Examining her childhood from the social location in the U.S. while imitating the

⁴ In her interview with Carmen Dolores Hernández, Ortiz Cofer notes the significance of space and experience that she learned at the grandmother's: "The origin of my imaginative life was in Mamá's *casa* [house]. That's where I learned about the power that women have; it wasn't from taking courses in the university" (*Puerto Rican Voices* 100-1). The writer's commentary on the life-long influence of the experiences associated with her grandmother's house demonstrates that that space is a critical locale where gender difference and the asymmetry of gender power relations are embedded.

Puerto Rican oral tradition in her narrative, the narrating I employs space to configure her selfhood as a dialectic of social, cultural, class, and gender differences between the island and mainland. Therefore, following Oliver-Rotger, the autobiographical self constructs her subjectivity in relation to “spatial barriers that reinforce social differences and power relations grounded upon race, class, sexual, [and] gender...status” (Oliver-Rotger 17).

Operating as a discursive continuum of female knowledge, storytelling serves to embody knowledge in *Silent Dancing*. As a tool of perpetuating patriarchal values, the tradition of telling didactic stories to young girls in the family manifests that the ultimate goal of each *cuento* is to contain female sexuality and the body. However, as a discursive process of constructing clandestine female experience in the text, storytelling transmits alternative models of living inside the female body to those enforced by patriarchy. The *cuento* of Mamá, the narrator’s grandmother on the mother’s side, is an alternative model of the traditional Puerto Rican womanhood that implies placing the body on the altar of procreation and the demands of male sexuality. Mamá’s unique strategy of contesting cultural expectations of the use of her body reflects an attempt to subvert male control. In “More Room,” the narrating “I” recalls how Mamá came to have her own bedroom from which grandfather was banned. When a child was due, Mamá would demand an additional room to be built on the house to have space for her ever growing family. Having given birth to eight children and buried three, Mamá began to feel an urgent need to return to her active life and to save her health, which was worsening after each child. The narrator emphasizes that her grandmother “had knowledge of her body” and realized that motherhood was a serious incursion in her plans and dreams (*Silent Dancing* 27).

She was to become either a chronically ill woman, or a woman who took control over her sexuality and reproduction to enjoy her own life. Once she asked for a room with a separate entrance, and her husband built her one, hoping that another baby was on the way. However, it was not a newborn to occupy the room but Mamá herself who understood that she needed to control her body:

And so it was that Mamá discovered the only means of birth control available to a Catholic woman of her time: sacrifice. She gave up the comfort of Papá's sexual love for something she deemed greater: the right to own and control her body, so that she might live to meet her grandchildren—me among them—so that she could give more of herself to the ones already there, so that even now that time has robbed her of elasticity of her body and of her amazing reservoir of energy, she still emanates the kind of joy that can be achieved by living according to the dictates of one's own heart. (28)

By breaking the traditional relationship between a husband and a wife, Mamá became the sole owner and master of her body. Her need to sacrifice sexual pleasure demonstrates that a woman has to transgress gender norms to enjoy personal freedom and to lead a fulfilling life. Women can be creative in finding ways of asserting control over their bodies. By withdrawing the body from its social function as a medium of reproduction, a woman enacts her independence and agency. Mamá finds a counter strategy to unshackle female oppression and man's control over the wife's body.

This exemplary female strategy also bespeaks refutation of the essentializing representation of the female body and experience in the colonial context. Creating a proper female space for her living and for her body, Mamá demonstrates “a resistance to homogeneization” of Puerto Rican womanhood (Oliver-Rotger 18). In particular, she contests the stereotypical image of a matron, like Flora, “a chronically ill woman,” “with her twelve children” (*Silent Dancing* 27). In the poem “Claims,” the autobiographical narrator manifests her feminist reading of Mamá’s *cuento*:

*Children are made in the night and
steal your days
for the rest of your life, amen.* She said this
to each of her daughters in turn. Once she had made a pact
with man and nature and kept it. Now like the sea,
she is claiming back her territory. (29. Emphasis in the original.)

The poem claims that Mamá’s “territory” is her body and sexuality and that she wants to own both. The narrator’s grandmother passes on her knowledge about the woman’s role in the androcentric society to her daughters, warning that a woman neither owns her nights nor days. The only way for a female to “claim back” her body and thus the right to take control of her life is to suppress her sexuality. By stressing that Mamá understands the conditions that oppress her and acts against those conditions, the autobiographical “I” reveals that she construes her grandmother’s story as a feminist narrative of female empowerment.

In terms of the construction of subjectivity in the text, Mamá's story demonstrates that the autobiographical self joins an "emancipatory practice" of feminist rewriting of the female body and sexuality, to cite Sidonie Smith (*Subjectivity* 156). Ortiz Cofer does her rewriting from a Western feminist critical perspective that is conditioned by a dual social location of her narrating "I": the island and the mainland. As a dweller of a *casa*, the grandmother's house where the women of the family gathered to share stories, the narrator points out an exceptional characteristic of Mamá's way to assert control over her body and sexuality. The narrator emphasizes that this story is transmitted as one of the habitual *cuentos* retold over and over again by elder female relatives. By classifying this historical fact as a *cuento*, the narrator converts Mamá's story into a singular narrative of an alternative cultural construct of the female body. Calling the story a *cuento* also shows that this story becomes a part of clandestine female knowledge about the female body that is transmitted in the female community.

As a resident of a neighborhood in Patterson and nominally an outsider to the *casa* community, the narrating "I" does not simply recollect Mamá's *cuento* but also provides a feminist reading of it. Darlene Pagán suggests that the narrator acts as a Western reader and as an observer in the Puerto Rican female community; therefore, the narrating "I" joins an Anglo feminist tradition of revising gender roles through offering new interpretations of them (58-9). The scholar claims that Ortiz Cofer follows a Chicana tradition articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa as a "pluralistic mode," or a way of living with a plural personality, with "a tolerance for contradictions," and being able to turn the "ambivalences into something else" (101). Pagán concludes that Anzaldúa's "pluralistic

mode” operates in *Silent Dancing* as “a strategy used by women, as members of multiple cultural communities, to circulate a wealth of terms that define women and their experiences” (59). Following the logic of the “pluralistic mode,” Ortiz Cofer’s narrator does not downplay or reject certain elements of the construction of the female body and of the enactment of gender roles. Instead, she preserves ambivalences and cultural contradictions that she is able to discern from her dual social location to create an anti-essentializing interpretation of female experience and body. As a Puerto Rican, the narrator highlights cultural traditions that essentialize the female body. The stories of María la Loca, La Gringa, and the narrator’s embodied knowledge of Puerto Rican womanhood in the vignette “Quinceañera” are examples of the tradition essentializing representation of the female body. The female representations in these stories promote submissiveness, contained sexual desire, purity, and proper bodily behavior as essentially female. Simultaneously, as a Western observer, the autobiographical self suggests that Puerto Rican womanhood does not have a common denominator, for there are examples of women who challenge the traditional paradigm such as her grandmother.

Along with the tales of María la Loca and María Sabida, the autobiographical self employs Mamá’s *cuento* to create a continuum of knowledge about the body in the female community. The aspect of teaching young girls how to conceptualize their bodies according to cultural and gender expectations through narrative reveals that storytelling functions as a discursive process of knowledge production. As I have discussed above, the *cuento* of María la Loca is an example *par excellence* of how the female body functions as the material surface upon which the discourse of sexuality is inscribed.

Uncontained sexuality turns the protagonist into a crazy person and a fat undesirable body, a town character:

She would swing her hips in an exaggerated, clownish way, and sometimes even hip hop and skip up to someone's house. She spoke to no one. Even if you asked her a question, she would just look at you and smile, showing her yellow teeth. But I heard if you got close enough, you could hear her humming a tune without words. (*Silent Dancing* 17)

The narrator uses the discourse of health and disease to portray her character. María la Loca's clumsy movements, her silence, and her yellow teeth point to her aberrant mental condition and unhealthy body. In her description, the autobiographical self appears to inscribe María la Loca's "defeat" onto her body. On the contrary, as a female role model, María Sabida is a healthy person, who bore children and lived till she was one hundred years old. Similarly, the narrator's version of María Sabida's *cuento* emphasizes the protagonist's healthy hair that she rinsed with clear rainwater and coconut oil. The politics of representation employed in the depiction of the two characters reveals that the female body directly participates in the discourse of female gender and sexuality.

Further, as a fifteen-year-old who begins to feel the effects of puberty in her body, the narrator chooses to recollect the image of a young mother, Nora, living across the street from the grandmother's house. Deceived by a man twice her age, Nora had a child and dropped out of school. She is a twin of legendary María la Loca in the way she let herself be defeated. Interestingly enough, the narrator expresses her disapproval of Nora's unwise use of her sexuality through the representation of the girl's body. The

narrating “I” does not state explicitly her criticism of Nora’s behavior but does so by creating an unsightly image of her body: “Could she have been only sixteen? Her body was bloated in an unhealthy way, her movements were slow, as if she had no energy or will. I was repelled by her appearance and her lethargy. I felt inexplicable anger when I saw her” (141). The narrator deliberately makes the least pleasant parts of Nora’s body visible, inscribing the consequences of her sexual conduct on her flesh. The representation of Nora’s body attests to the narrator’s strategy to embody the concept of “defeat” she heard in the *cuentos* told by the women in her family.

Likewise, in the poem “Quinceañera,” the narrator underscores that her coming of age along with gaining sexual knowledge is accompanied by the memory associated with the sensory experience of her body:

My dolls have been put away like dead
children in a chest I will carry
with me when I marry.
I reach under my skirt to feel
a satin slip bought for this day. It is soft
as the inside of my thighs. My hair
has been nailed back with my mother’s
black hairpins to my skull... (50)

The mother “nails back” the narrator’s hair to show that the girl enters womanhood; therefore, the narrator has to endure the weight of being a woman, including her looks and attire. In the vignette “Quinceañera,” the autobiographical “I” narrates how her body

has become the site which is policed by *cuentos* because the cautionary narratives told by the adult women are intended to control her display of sexuality and bodily conduct. If in the vignette “Casa,” the narrator is a little girl and the moral of María la Loca’s story is addressed to her seventeen-year-old aunt Laura, this time the attention of adult women is directed to the body of the narrating “I.” As a fifteen-year-old “trainee for the demands of womanhood and marriage”, the narrator experiences female knowledge about the body and sexuality that she had acquired earlier in Puerto Rico in a different way: “Somehow my body with its new contours and new biological powers had changed everything: half of the world now had become a threat, or felt threatened by its potential for disaster” (140-1). The autobiographical “I” experiences living inside a female body according to the gender expectations internalized in the *cuentos* in her childhood.

The process of recognizing new meanings in the cultural and social function of the body points to a specific subjectivity in *Silent Dancing* built on the conflation of the Puerto Rican and American social texts of the female body. This aspect of knowledge is embodied in the construction of the female body as a social text that inscribed how gender should be culturally enacted. In my analysis of *Silent Dancing*, I argue the narrator examines the embodiment of female knowledge through the critical lens of her U.S. social location. Transmitted in Puerto Rico, *cuento* remains to signify “organic” female knowledge that comes out naturally, without the ideological charge produced by critical examination of the oppressions experienced by women. However, when measured against U.S. cultural traditions, the experience of Puerto Rican women converts into a site of negotiation and production of feminist knowledge. For instance, emphasizing a

subversive nature of the story about the grandmother, the autobiographical self confers a feminist valence to Puerto Rican “organic female experience”. Recurring to the metaphor of “claiming back her territory” in the poem “Claims,” the narrator maps the female body as a foremost space where female empowerment takes place (29). The quintessential poems that conclude each vignette demonstrate, like in “Claims,” that the narrator inspects Puerto Rican cultural experience from a Western critical perspective.

Likewise, the cultural construction of her body also serves as a site of the speaking subjects’ feminist examination of gender discourse. New meanings of the stories circulating in the family surface from the autobiographical self’s reflection on the status of her body in gender relations. As a teenager, she listens to her grandmother’s *cuentos*, discerning new connotations in the reiterated stories:

I still took pleasure in listening to the women talk about their lives, and still relished and memorized Mamá’s *cuentos*, but by then I was beginning to recognize the subtext of sexual innuendo, to detect the sarcasm, and to find the hidden clues to their true feelings of frustrations in their marriages and in their narrowly circumscribed lives as women in Puerto Rico. (142)

The age difference between the narrating “I” in the initial and final vignettes creates two perspectives on interpreting women’s stories: one is an uncritical internalization of the codes of womanhood; the other is a critical examination of the cultural construct of the female. By learning to distinguish more complex cultural meanings of the female body contained in *cuentos*, the autobiographical subject becomes able to see that her

understanding of the cultural function of the body is shaped by the dialect between her immature and grown-up interpretations of the stories that embody female experience.

Likewise, the narrator constructs her specific autobiographical subjectivity by juxtaposing the stories about the body she comes across in Puerto Rico and New Jersey. In the poem “The Way My Mother Walked,” the autobiographical “I” tells that her mother’s body stands out in New Jersey:

...She was the gypsy queen of Market Street,
shuttling her caramel-candy body past
the blind window of the Jewish tailor
who did not lift his gaze,
the morse code of her stiletto heels sending
their Mayday-but-do-not-approach into
the darkened doorways where eyes
hung like mobiles in the breeze...(99)

The poem reveals that the mother is visible in the Patterson barrio because of her marked “Latina beauty” that displays her sexuality (*Silent Dancing* 63). The poetic persona notices that her mother does not look like the mothers of her classmates: “[M]y mother was an exotic young beauty, black hair down to her waist and a propensity for wearing bright colors and spike heels” (126). Both her mother’s way of dressing herself and “her voluptuous body which even the winter clothes could not disguise” (63-4) reveal that a female appearance that is normal in Puerto Rico does not match U.S. expectations. The poem compares the mother to a Gypsy because of her appearance and “sensuous walk”

intended to attract a man's gaze (126). The behavior the poetic persona sees as transgressive in the U.S. context. Her mother's representation in this poem demonstrates that the female body is the site of cultural confusion for the autobiographical self. Recognizing that her shame is provoked by her mother's looks, the poetic persona acknowledges that social expectations about the female body are not universal, for they embody gender expectations differently in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

By comparing cultural perceptions of the body in Puerto Rico and U.S., the autobiographical self reconstructs her ethnic and racial identity. Considering herself white in Puerto Rico, the narrator comes to a painful realization that she is coded as brown in Patterson neighborhood—"café-con-leche brown" (89). The narrator evokes the poetic of space here to show that El Building, the apartment building where her family lives, automatically labels the bodies of its residents as brown: "It was as if the heart of the city map were being gradually colored in brown—café-con-leche brown. Our color" (89). This points to the fact that social location changes the color of the body and thus inscribes new meanings on the body in a process of both ethnicization and racialization it. It also lowers the class status of the narrator, because to be brown for her means to be socially marginalized. In "The Looking-Glass Shame," the narrator recollects her "cultural schizophrenia" as the consequence of being disconnected from the body. She explains alienation of the self from its material form as an impact of her bicultural life: "It is not unusual for an adolescent to feel disconnected from her body—a stranger to herself and to her new developing needs—but I think that to a person living simultaneously in two cultures this phenomenon is intensified" (124). The body of the autobiographical

subject becomes the site of clashing cultural messages and a “displaced border” between U.S. and Puerto Rico (Derrickson 126). In other words, the body becomes the site of a battleground of two systems of values in which the notions of gender, race, ethnicity, and class do not always denote the same. Reflecting on the meanings of the body in terms of color and class as well as the display of female sexuality, the autobiographical subject treats her body a space of cultural negotiation. By culturally constructing her body as brown in the U.S., the autobiographical self claims her position as an ethnic subject. In the Patterson neighborhood, the narrator’s body signifies not gender but ethnic and class oppression. It is the meaning of her body as an inferior female Puerto Rican immigrant that allows the speaking subject to construct her subjectivity along the axes of ethnicity, class, and race.

The narrator presents the female body and the embodiment of cultural experiences as sites of feminine/feminist knowledge production and transmission. In addition to representing the ways in which knowledge and bodily experience are conceptualized in the female community, she uses the oral tradition to revise traditional female knowledge. The story of Mamá who banned her husband from her room as the only means of birth control available to a practicing Catholic reveals an alternative, non-essentializing conceptualization of the female body. Speaking as a woman and as an ethnic subject, the autobiographical self creates subjectivity that recognizes different meanings attached to the body, including color as the base for ethnic, class, and racial identification. Therefore, the body underwrites the discourses of gender, class, race, and ethnicity in the construction of autobiographical subjectivity in *Silent Dancing*.

Female Experience, Community, and the Body in *The Alphabet in My Hands*

Like Ortiz Cofer, Agosín employs the Latin American oral tradition as the main strategy of constructing subjectivity in her narrative. In *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the autobiographical self uses storytelling to recount stories she heard in her childhood and, at the same time, to imitate the discursive pattern of the oral tradition in her narrative. In my comparative analysis of Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's autobiographies, I argue that in both texts storytelling functions to create a continuum of female knowledge in the female community and to embody that knowledge by producing a narrative of the culturally constructed body of the narrating "I."

In *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the power of the oral tradition emerges in the ritual of storytelling during the daily reunions of the women in the family in Chile. In the vignette "My Aunts," the narrator calls the gathering of female relatives to drink "coffee with cream at five past twelve" a "ritual of love, of sorority in old age" (67). Starting with the discussion of trivial things in their lives, the women inevitably turn the conversation to the recollections of their shared past as Jewish exiles from Europe: "...but my aunts always return, hearts bleeding, to the realm of that first crossing, where my grandmother tells the story of her journey, crossing the Andes on a mule, and how the Chileans changed her name to Josefina although her real name is Hanna" (67). The repetition of the stories about the flight to Chile, which are the core of the family's lore, attests to the discursive construction and maintenance through oral reiteration of collective female experience. Finishing her story about the ritual of telling stories, the narrator concisely remarks that her aunts "go home to prepare more stories for the following day's coffee."

They are alive” (67). Telling stories is a way of surviving as women and as Jewish women; it is also a rite that reinforces female bonds in the family. As a member of the audience of that “chorus of recollections,” the narrating “I” internalizes those stories as a part of her female Jewish experience (67). Contemplating her Jewish identity in “Looking-Glass Memory,” the autobiographical self concludes that remembering the past of her family before exile is “a way of rescuing the past” and a mode of being a Jew.⁵ By being a Jew, the narrator understands the preservation of collective memory, religion, and identity that precluded Jews from dissolving in the mainstream culture. The importance of recalling the collective past is further explained by the fear of assimilation and cultural amnesia that forced the Jews who wanted to enter the dominant culture to abandon their cultural roots.⁶ Remembering the past occurs through narratives and, more importantly, through the repetition of the well-known stories of the family’s lore. Therefore, by

⁵ Ariel Dorfman, a contemporary Chilean American novelist forced into exile in 1973 to the U.S. (*Dorfman*), demonstrates how the Jewish component emerges in his work as a response to the condition of exile. In his interview with Nora Glickman he contemplates what constitutes the “Jewish component” of his work, “my life burnt with a fierce longing to be back where I thought that things would have once again a meaning, an order, a center. It is possible that this experience of distance and rejection, of desire for a homeland, has helped me to understand what could well be termed the Jewish component of my fundamental obsessions” (Glickman 14). I see a similar dialectical relationship of the personal experience of exile and Jewish identity in Agosín’s work.

⁶ Exploring the Jewish theme in Agosín’s autobiography *A Cross and A Star*, Florence Moorhead-Rosenberg presents a brief outline of the history of Jewish immigrants in Latin America. She stresses that Latin American Jews, which account for more than 500,000 people, is not by any means a monolithic group, but what almost all of them share is the experience of marginalization, “el exilio previamente mencionado e impuesto desde adentro o de afuera—ha sido una preocupación central, una característica esencial de la psicología del grupo” (30). Moorhead-Rosenberg continues that the Jewish group developed a variety of strategies to react to exile, one of them being to assimilate completely and to forget cultural roots. Likewise, some Jewish maintained their identity vehemently despite many pressures from the dominant culture.

listening to the women's stories about the flight from Europe, the narrator constructs and affirms her Jewish experience and identity discursively.⁷

The ritual of storytelling in *The Alphabet in My Hands* resembles the ceremony of women gathering to tell stories during the hour of *café con leche* in *Silent Dancing*. Although the women in both autobiographies create a discursive space of female experience, the topics of stories that circulate in the two spaces differ. The repertoire of stories in *Silent Dancing* points to the transmission of female experience about gender oppression and the strategies of female empowerment, whereas the stories circulating among the women in the family in *The Alphabet in My Hands* are indicative of the female experience of displacement. The condition of displacement points to the marginalization of Jews as ethnic subjects in Latin America (Moorhead-Rosenberg 30).⁸

In my reading of *The Alphabet in My Hands*, I claim that storytelling goes beyond the oral mode. Agosin converts storytelling in an extended metaphor of the narrative of female experience that is transmitted orally, in writing, and through the female body. In the vignette "Autumn," the narrator remembers receiving a copy of *The Diary of Anne*

⁷ In her compelling discussion of exile writing in *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (1999), Amy Kaminsky asserts that fixing gradually escaping memory in narrative is imperative for the displaced person. Living the place of home, the exile loses a sense of place that serves as groundwork for the exile's identity (42). Thus, the reconstruction of the lost place occurs through memory: "The lost place of origin needs to be contained, to become manageable as memory" (42). Kaminsky's commentary explicates the urge to remember in *The Alphabet in My Hands*. Agosin's autobiographical narrator's obsession with remembering the stories of the Jewish exiles reveals her project to construct the place that her family lost and the Jewish identity as memory, which, in its turn, can be contained in reiterated narratives.

⁸ Analyzing the body of writings by contemporary Jewish Latin American writers, Leonardo Senkman concludes that the condition of exile and displacement in the texts by Jewish writers is "the result of experiencing the trauma of exile and violence" (34). In her examination of how Agosin operates the discourse of memory, Florence Moorhead-Rosenberg points to the feeling, conscious or unconscious, of being a permanent stranger is inherent in Jewish identity (Moorhead-Rosenberg 3).

Frank from her grandmother Helena. Telling a compelling story of a little Jewish girl, a Holocaust victim from Amsterdam, the book—as a written mode of telling stories—symbolizes the narrative of collective Jewish experience. Along with the aunts’ stories of the crossing, *The Diary of Anne Frank* is yet another story that confirms the autobiographical self’s ethnic identity. The fact that the grandmother Helena bequeaths the story of Anne Frank to the narrator enforces the idea that the elder women in the family educate young girls how to be a Jew, pointing out the core narratives of female Jewish experience. Comparing the didactic function of storytelling in Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s autobiographical texts, I notice that the latter disregards the need of educating young girls in the family about gender expectations. Unlike *Silent Dancing* in which the oral tradition is the primary medium of teaching girls what is expected from them as women, the adult women in *The Alphabet in My Hands* employ storytelling to transmit ethnic experience to the girls in the family.

In addition to constructing Jewish experience and identity, the story of Anne Frank’s experience serves to inscribe the Jewish experience on the body of the narrating “I.” Reading the story, the autobiographical self mirrors the protagonist’s physical suffering with her own agonizing body: “When I read the story I, too, died, my head shaven, my arms tattooed. I decided to wear long sleeves from then on to hide my lacerated skin” (62). By feeling the scars and tattoos on her body, the narrating “I” manifests that her body is a site of immediate internalization of the collective experience of Jewish women who vanished in the chimneys of concentration camps.

Further, the embodiment of the Jewish experience of Holocaust along with a painful condition of exile surfaces in the recurring metaphor of the narrator's mutilated body. In the vignette "Christmas Even at the Pacific," the celebration of Christmas intensifies the autobiographical self's sense of being "distant and alone" in Catholic culture (22). Her social location of a Jewish household in Chile creates a symbolic distance from the dominant Catholic culture, thus reinforcing a sense of religious and cultural alienation. The narrating "I" converts her understanding of Jewish identity and the mode of living into an "open wound"⁹: "Being Jewish was like having an open wound that never healed" (22). The metaphor of an "open wound" creates a displaced border between the dominant Hispanic-Catholic culture and Judaic group. Notably, having never personally experienced exile from Europe, she identifies her experience as a cultural and religious pariah in the Catholic Chile with her family's condition of exile that she internalized through storytelling. Recollecting her exile to the U.S. years later in the vignette "Mama," the autobiographical "I" turns to the metaphor of a wound again to embody her experience of displacement. She passes the memories of her lost life in Chile through sensory experience: "I have never written about the Simon Bolívar house, as you called it, Mama, because it is too painful for me. It is as if I were bleeding, torn apart, because I still dream of that house every night" (136). *The Alphabet in My Hands* shows that the condition of displacement from the home country traverses the body of the

⁹ Agosin's use of the metaphor "an open wound" echoes Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "una herida abierta" ["an open wound"] (*Borderlands* 25). Anzaldúa's uses this metaphor to represent the U.S.-Mexico border as a space where "the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25). In a similar manner, Agosin construes "an open wound" as a displaced border that marks the asymmetry of power relations between the two groups—the dominant culture and the marginalized Jewish ethnic group.

narrating “I,” mapping it as a site of exile and marginalization from the dominant culture, both in Chile and the U.S.

Moreover, the metaphor of the mutilated body in Agosín’s text symbolizes that reconciliation is outside the realm of possibilities for the exile. Displacement is ever present reality; just like the wound on the body of the narrating “I” never heals. The autobiographical self’s cultural confusion produced by the flight to North America makes her body “split in two” (109). The feeling of the emotional and geographical disorientation of Agosín’s autobiographical self is similar to the state of “cultural schizophrenia” of Ortiz Cofer’s narrating “I.” Both Agosín’s and Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographies inscribe the unsettling experience of living between two countries on the material surface of their bodies. The narrator of the first text lives in a bicultural environment by fixating her gaze on the discrepancies between the home and host country, whereas the speaking subject of the latter physically moves from one culture to another.

In addition to the experience of living along conflicting axes of simultaneous belonging and not belonging to Chilean and American cultures, the autobiographical “I” in *The Alphabet in My Hands* constructs her subjectivity along the lines of class division. The speaking subject employs storytelling as discursive and performative processes to predicate her subjectivity on yet another set of stories that transmit female experiences. In the vignette “Servants,” the servants’ ritual of storytelling is contrasted to the one of the women in the narrator’s family described above. The oral tradition that circulates among servants passes on the stories about the life of women of the lower class—Indian and

Chilean maids who arrived to the narrator's household "with broken suitcases" and "expressionless faces" (74). The stories told by nannies create a bridge between the autobiographical self as a privileged girl from a well-to-do family and the poor servants, forming a new outlook for the narrator: "I liked the nanas because in them I witnessed something close to the truth. Their words were like a light drowsiness, they lacked false modulations" (74). Following Frances Aparicio, I call "the truth" that the narrator discovers in the nanas' narratives "organic female knowledge." Unlike Mamá's *cuentos* in *Silent Dancing* that transmitted "organic feminist knowledge" suggesting tactics for transgressing gender norms (Aparicio 64), the servants' stories in *The Alphabet in My Hands* convey "the truth" of being poor, colonized, and marginalized women, without trespassing the territory of gender expectations.

In "With the Nanás," the narrating "I" stressing the didactic overtones of the stories told by her nanny Carmencha: "Most of all she told us to be kind to strangers and to act charitably toward the poor, because one of them could be an angel" (92). In contrast to *Silent Dancing*, the adult woman in this text does not educate her young charges about what constitutes womanhood but rather about universal humanist categories. Therefore, the "truth" of the poor women's stories is close to existential truth, for they interpret the meaning of happiness, death, nature, poverty, compassion, love, and other imperative human concepts in simple but apt terms. Calling happiness "something like fireflies," these uneducated women display their natural wisdom, which reveals their cultural wealth (74). In her rhetorical strategy to point out the insight of the working class women hidden in the stories they tell, I see the speaking subject's stance to endorse the

“organic female knowledge” of these women as a valid viewpoint. Thus the autobiographical subject prepares discursive ground for rejecting class barriers that marginalize the working class women.

The narrator’s closeness to the Chilean indigenous oral tradition emerges not only in her interpretation of life but also in her imitation of the storytelling pattern in the autobiography. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, Agosín crafts her narrative as a series of stories articulated through a poetic language rich in metaphors. The impact of the countless narratives, such as stories about Araucan princesses, the orphan bride, the dead souls who inhabit Chile, becomes apparent in *The Alphabet in My Hands* in the autobiographical self’s affinity with the experience of poor women, who are marginalized from the dominant culture.¹⁰ The narrating “I” connects emotionally to the experience of her nannies, thus constructing a shared episteme with the women of the low class.

Along with the narrative mode, storytelling in the circle of the maids is performed imagistically, for the stories are told through photographs, too. The maids hang the pictures of their patron’s children and treasure the memories of their “white children” as if they were their own: “There were many pictures of other women’s children, youngsters for whom the servants had cared rigorously, loving them, dressing them, white children whose bodies they had smelled” (74). By choosing to tell the maids’ stories of loving

¹⁰ In her interview with Kathy S. Leonard, Agosín elucidates on the impact of her intimate relationship with her nanas, “La experiencia de mi infancia fue decisiva en mi experiencia como escritora... La presencia de otros niños me aburría, en cambio, me fascinaba permanecer en el cuarto de las criadas y escuchar con ellas las radionovelas, imaginar que yo también pertenecía a un mundo de dolor, de desgarró y de pasión” (“Una conversación” 190). For my analysis, the writer’s belonging to the community of servants is important, for it creates premises for her ideological standpoint on the necessity of erasing class distinctions as a condition of liberating women in Latin America.

their mistresses' children, the autobiographical self contends the institutionalized class division that displaces poor woman to the margins of the social hierarchy. Deprived of the opportunity to nurture their own children, the maids are left with the only choice of making the narrative about the lives of their white charges the story of their ersatz motherhood. Poverty makes those women move to somebody else's houses and make "backrooms" their own home. They spend their lives taking care of "white children" so that the well-off matrons "could sip wine at midnight, aloof, alone, and free" (74). Contrasting "white" children to the "maize" bodies of the maids, the narrator exposes how the discourse of race underwrites the inferior socioeconomic status of women of color. Thus, along with a disadvantaged class position, the stories of growing up "white" charges epitomize racial oppression of poor Chilean and indigenous women.

Recollecting the life of young Claudina, the autobiographical "I" draws a parallel between the condition of poor Chilean women and Jewish women in her family: "But their children were never with them [the maids]...Like Jews forced from cities, these illegitimate children were often turned away, thrown out onto the streets, made to disappear" (79). The poor servants have to leave their children and home behind, and that makes them exiles in their own land. Comparing the experience of poor Chilean women with that of Jewish women, the narrator creates her own understanding of exile as a condition of being forced away from the ones who women love and care about. The maids' unconditional love to their little charges converts the stories that accompany the pictures into a narrative of colonial subjects who experience the asymmetry of power relations in Chilean society. Projecting their motherly feeling on other women's children,

the backroom maids affirm that they are marginalized in the colonial environment and, more radically, exiled to the margins of the society in their home country.

Jettisoning the belief of class distinction that she internalized in her childhood from her well-to-do white relatives, the autobiographical self persists in her project of transgressing the class barriers. Writing the female body in her narrative, the autobiographical “I” discovers closeness with the maids through tactile feelings. Thus, in the vignette “Nana,” the recollections of her nanny Delfina are a mixture of stories told by the old woman and the language of love communicated by her body:

She washed my hair time and again. She told me stories of sleeping Araucan princesses inebriated in the clear light of the moon. As always, she promised me love. She kissed my eyelids. Time and again she returned to the plains of my ears, singing in the language of her ancestors, of fire and ashes. I cannot, nor do I wish to, explain my love for her. It was like treading the earth with bare feet, my lips sunk into the coolness of stone. That was my country: Delfina, her hands of sulphur and maize, her face next to mine, old woman and young woman braiding one another’s hair.

(83)

The act of touching each other’s hair is symbolic of forming a bond between two women of different ages, educational, class, racial, and ethnic statuses. The differences between them do not hinder the identification of the narrator with her Indian nanny. Braiding one another’s hair serves as a metaphor of the embodiment of knowledge that circulates in the female community. In “Nape,” the narrator strengthens the connection with Delfina by

recounting another habitual physical contact between them: “I approach and cover her eyes with my hands. Delfina recognizes me because she says she bathed me and taught me the secrets of my body, from the earliest age of faint memory” (82). The Indian nanny teaches the narrator about her body and sexuality. By remembering the stories told by Delfina along with her touches, kisses, hands, and face, the narrator emphasizes that memories associated with sensory experience evoked by the nanny’s body are not less valuable than the stories she heard from her. Appreciating the gift of unconditional love from maids, the autobiographical self points the direction of one of her identity vectors: she lives, albeit only through stories, the lives of the servants and understands the difficulties of their fates.

A valuable aspect of writing the sensory experience of closeness to the servants into the text is a strategy of representing the marginalized body. In *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the body of an Indian female is made visible. The politics of representation in the autobiography makes noticeable the bodies that “slid as if invisible to the backrooms” (74). The autobiographical self admires Delfina’s “sulphur and maize” hands that “blend with the boldo,” “dark skin,” arms with “no tattoos of defeat on their skin,” “braided gait,” and “the gaze of deep rivers” (82-4). An elegant description converts not good-looking, overworked hands from bathing someone else’s children into tender hands to show that the Indian maid possesses her specific natural beauty. Giving an aesthetic value to Delfina’s body, the speaking subject writes the body of the colonial subject into the gallery of refined white women who form the Chilean middle and upper class. Likewise, the subject underscores that her subjectivity is shaped by the embodied experience of

marginalized maids—the colonial subjects that have a long history of being invisible. In this sense, the maid’s body embodies the history of invisible bodies and the colonial past of the women dwelling in the “backrooms” of their masters’ houses.

In my comparative examination of the politics of representation in *The Alphabet in My Hands* and *Silent Dancing*, I find that both texts write invisible bodies into the narrative, but the purpose of representation is different in these texts. As I have demonstrated in my discussion of the critique of the “defeat” of female sexuality, Ortiz Cofer’s autobiography designs its politics of representation in accordance with the cultural narrative of sexuality and gender. The autobiographical self in *Silent Dancing* exposes unsightly invisible aspects of the female body to embody the narrative of undesirable female display of sexuality. In contrast, the narrating “I” in Agosín’s text represents invisible female bodies of the colonial subjects in her narrative to uncover inequality of power relations between classes. By giving visibility to the bodies of the working class women, the autobiographical self not only embodies their experience and makes it a part of her subjectivity but also reveals her critique of the public value of the female body in relation to power.

In the vignette “Wisdom,” a tacit pact between the narrator’s grandmother and nanny Delfina epitomizes the multiplicity of identity vectors drawn in *The Alphabet in My Hands*. Although the grandmother “insults her [Delfina] because it has been her job” as a white woman, the two life-long companions have created a female bond (84). This relationship neither necessarily obliterates the white woman’s racial prejudices nor elevates the Indian woman’s social status but helps them to recognize the importance of

each other in their shared life: “They stay together like the breath of stones, beyond time and the speed of hands. And the Jewish grandmother checks in on her, too, during afternoon naps when the old Indian dreams about children she never had” (84). The dissimilarity of their visions of the world, of the “sense of widowhood,” and of their “orphaned state” indicates that the bond between the two women preserves their different identities and oppression that they experience. Nevertheless, they share common female knowledge and concern for each other, thus forming a variety of the narrator’s identity positions. Reading the companionship between her nanny and grandmother as a metaphor of the “house of memory,” the autobiographical self points manifold identities that she can take on without contradicting any of them (84). She can be a Jew as well as an Indian and a poor Chilean because all identifications are equally valuable for her.

Like in *Silent Dancing*, the storytelling tradition in *The Alphabet in My Hands* is related to the female “social space” of home. In the vignette “The Backrooms,” the narrator accentuates that the division of space in her house mirrors the lines of class demarcation. The best rooms house white women who tell the stories of Jewish exile while the backrooms are given to poor women who recount their particular experience. Joining both her aunts’ and maids’ ceremonies of telling stories, the autobiographical self trespasses the lines that divide space in the house: “I killed going to the backrooms. I wanted to loose myself amid those shadows that separated my house from hers [Carmen’s], the house of the rich from the dark rooms of the poor” (93). Remembering her Indian nanny Delfina, the autobiographical “I” reveals that the division of space is a product of and conduit for asymmetrical power relations between servants and white

masters: “That’s how I began each morning, in the arms of that servant who had come to my grandmother’s house and later to my mother’s, . . . who has a small room almost outside the house because she belonged to neither the city nor the country” (81). The narrator further voices her critique of oppression of the working class woman by sarcastically remarking that she “was and was not a present-day slave” to allude to her subjugated status as a colonial subject (81).

However, in contrast to Ortiz Cofer’s autobiography, in Agosín’s text the space where transmission of stories takes place is symbolic not of gender differences but of class distinctions. The division of the space of the house creates fixed attachments of the bodies to particular spaces producing what Chicana critic Mary Pat Brady calls the “spatialization of bodies” (8). The spatial belonging of the body indicates what types of narrative the subject can tell; therefore, the spatialization of the body circumscribes a repertoire of subjectivities that the subjects can construct. Crossing the space of the poor and the rich, the autobiographical “I” attunes to multiple subjectivities that emerge due to the spatial division of the house and, simultaneously, exposes class oppression of poor Chilean women.

Offering a bodily instantiation of debunking class and race oppression in *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the autobiographical “I” employs storytelling to create an affinity with gypsies—a multiply marginalized group in Chile. In the vignette “Gypsy Women,” the narrator recollects scary stories about gypsies that she heard from the maids. The stories about kidnapping and cutting out hearts demonize gypsies alienating them as a group from the Catholic society. These narratives construct a gypsy identity as delinquent

and alien to the dominant culture. Disobeying the stories that prescribe staying away from gypsies, the autobiographical self begins “to love them unreservedly like the noise of dreams” (26). The narrator’s connection with gypsy women comes from her own state of alienation as a Jewish child in a Catholic culture: “I gave them my hand because I was alone, because I was like them. I, too, had come out of my dark castle. I gave them my hand, some jewelry that I received from a few dark ancestors. In the end I offered them both hands, faintly lined and ripe for invention” (26). The autobiographical self’s bond with gypsies occurs in a similar manner to her identification with the working class Indian and Chilean women. In both instances, the affinity is created on the shared ground of alienation and marginalization from the dominant culture.

Furthermore, cultural marginalization of gypsy women underwrites the discourse of sexuality. The narrator describes them as transgressors of gender norms and cultural expectations regarding female behavior:

There they were with their silk skirts, withered by the clouded gaze of passion and boldly plotted secrets. They seemed to float among the shrubs, walk along forbidden lawns, go off in bare feet to urinate like an orchestra of crickets. Sometimes their clothing would not cover their private parts, the narrator evokes, “and everyone stared at them, especially at the clusters of hair between their legs. (25)

Gypsies’ obscene behavior that publicly displays their sexuality attracts the autobiographical self for its incursion on what is culturally acceptable and what is labeled as proper for a certain group of women. As if embodying gypsies’ experience of

transgressive sexuality, the narrator writes her sexuality in the text: “Every summer when I was allowed to bare my legs and feel the yearning presence of desire, skin shedding its petals, I invoked their [gypsy women’s] image” (26). In my reading of Agosín’s autobiographical text, I argue that the autobiographical self imitates the gypsies’ way of displaying their body to demonstrate her affinity with that marginal group. Placing the narrative of transgressive sexuality in the text, the autobiographical narrator does not attempt to create a female counter narrative of sexuality to contest patriarchy in Ortiz Cofer’s key. Quite the opposite, Agosín’s autobiographical “I” identifies herself with gypsy women to manifest her rejection of class distinctions by going against the prohibitions to communicate with gypsies. Although she seemingly transgresses gender expectations that code proper female behavior to expose her sexuality, in fact, she manifests that the embodiment of experiences of marginalized females can be as important for the construction of her subjectivity as the experience of other women regardless of class and social status. Likewise, disbelieving the demonizing stories about gypsies, she challenges the cultural narrative of gypsy women that constructs them as a transgressive, marginal, and alienated group.¹¹

¹¹ The representation of gypsies as a marginalized and transgressive group is quite common in Latin American and U.S. Latino/a literature. For instance, in her novel *Peel My Love Like an Onion* (1999), Chicana writer Ana Castillo portrays the female protagonist as a gypsy woman to create a poignant image of a sensual woman. Castillo’s narrator points out the stereotypical representation of gypsy women as those who disregard the social norms of sexual conduct by describing gypsies as “¡Sin vergüenzas!” or “women without shame” (34). In the manner similar to Agosín’s autobiographical text, Castillo’s narrator acknowledges that she had been taught in her childhood to avoid gypsies and later transformed that warning into a fear of gypsies as a group. However, Castillo uses the figure of a gypsy also as a model of female conduct with an empowering potential because “sinvergüenzas” women can reveal their sexuality openly, without fearing being reproached by society.

A significant aspect of the narrator's imitation of gypsy women's experience in the inscription of her own body is that she manifests the feminist "emancipatory" rewriting of the female body and sexuality. As I have demonstrated in my analysis of *Silent Dancing* earlier in this chapter, Ortiz Cofer's representation of the female body attests to her feminist agenda of anti-essentializing the female body and experience. She revises prescriptive gender norms and suggests new ways of enacting female gender thus constructing her gendered subjectivity. However, looking at Agosín's "emancipatory practice" requires a shift in the lens from gender to class oppression. Agosín's speaking subject contests class distinction as the base of female oppression. She scrutinizes the stories and distinct ways of embodying female experiences to find out that class barriers function as institutionalized tools of female oppression. The difference between Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's conceptualization of what constitutes female oppression stems from their different social origins and interpretations of feminism. The first comes from the low middle class, while the latter is from the upper class family, in which women enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. In contrast to Ortiz Cofer's feminist strategy to contest androcentric gender discourse, Agosín envisions class as the main axis of female oppression in Latin America.¹² In her essay "Stories of Night and Dawn: Latin American

¹² Analyzing Agosín's ideological position, Elizabeth Horan concludes: "Feminism is the key to Agosín's continuing, passionate articulation of the lives of women who are in one way or another outsiders" (Horan 9). I concur with Horan's interpretation of Agosín's feminism, for the writer constantly picks out outsiders and marginalized women to write invisible bodies into her text. One telling example of her strategy is the narrator's identification with the experience of an abused girl María in the vignette "María" in *The Alphabet in My Hands*. Raised on the margins of the society and later sold into sex slavery by her mother, María exemplifies a woman deprived of any rights to the degree that she identifies herself with the body "in pieces" (173). Agosín's narrator voices María's story thus metaphorically assembles her mutilated body as well as making it visible.

Women Today,” Agosin affirms that the specificity of feminism in Latin America comes from the fact that it “is born of a consciousness of class”; therefore, “the liberation of rural women or working women will not come out of criticism against men, who are more or less oppressed as they are, but will emerge from a radical, cultural change in the class structure” (“Stories” 508). She highlights that her model of female liberation encompasses the validation of the experience of working class women in order to make it the base for female empowerment: “Their liberation will come when they understand their true value within their own tradition; when they realize how marvelous it is to live in a house full of aunts and grandmothers; how glorious it is to go down the street, holding someone’s hand, and feeling able to depend on all women for advice, recipes, lore, for ways of living and dreaming” (509). The writer’s insistence on the transformation of class hierarchy indicates that autobiographical subjectivity in her text constitutes of experiences of women from different classes. By crossing class barriers, the autobiographical subject in *The Alphabet in My Hands*, effaces class distinctions and makes the body of the colonized subjects visible.

To evoke *Silent Dancing*, the autobiographical “I” exploits the traditional cultural construct of the Gypsy identity as a marginal group. In her description of her mother’s transgressive display of sexuality in the U.S., the narrator uses a stereotypical image of a Gypsy woman as a transgressor of social norms. On the contrary, the autobiographical self in *The Alphabet in My Hands* displays a critical interpretation of the discourse of female Gypsy sexuality. She uses it to create yet another identity vector of her selfhood as well as to manifest her own marginalization in the dominant culture.

The autobiographical self in Agosín's text reveals her further rethinking of the cultural meanings attached to her body in the embodiment of her experience of exile to North America. Recollecting the celebration of Halloween during her first year in the U.S., the narrator creates a powerful metaphor of "black presence" that embodies her alienated condition and inferior social status. Dressed as a witch, she joins a group of American classmates on their trick-or-treat route. It began to rain, and the black dress stuck to her body, making her look like a real ugly witch: "One look and people closed their doors on me. They did not love me because, in truth, my face, cracked and split, had shut down. I had become an intense and painful black presence. On that first Halloween night, when fairies and witches ventures forth, I was as strange as they were" (115). The autobiographical "I" conceives of her self as "black presence," signifying her status as of the other or "a stranger to all" (122). The narrator's condition of alienation in the U.S. milieu is also embodied in the color of her body—it is black. Being a hallmark of the other, the "blackness" of the body crate new meanings of the narrator's body, making it the body of an unwelcome other.

The social location in the U.S. produces new sociocultural meanings for the narrator's body. She loses her privileged position as a white girl from the elite class. As a fourteen-year-old, the autobiographical "I" discovers that the color of her body does not depend upon the physiological characteristics of her body. Rather, it is culturally constructed: "It had nothing to do with the shade of my skin, but rather with my voice, the obstacle of being like them, dressing like them" (122). Now she is labeled as a woman of color; therefore, she is a third-class immigrant displaced to the margins of the

social hierarchy. Using the rhetorical strategy of embodying experience similar to the one I examined in my discussion of the narrative of Anne Frank, the narrator inscribed a new cultural meaning of her body on the material surface of her body: “‘Woman of color’ was the tattoo born by every foreign girl” (122). The autobiographical self demonstrates that the experience of exile and social marginalization goes hand in hand with racialization and ethnicization of her body. A girl with golden hair and Nordic countenance, she converts into a woman of color by the virtue of being an immigrant from Latin America. This allows the narrator to take a new identity position—the one of the working class women. In the manner parallel to *Silent Dancing*, the speaking subject in *The Alphabet in My Hands* shapes her subjectivity along the lines of racial and ethnic oppression in the U.S. The autobiographical “I” demonstrates that her social location in the U.S. forces certain readings of her body that change her racial and class status from white privileged girl to a third-class immigrant of color. It is remarkable that unlike gendered subjectivity in Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographical text, Agosín’s text once again dismisses gender as the primary tenet of her marginalized condition in the U.S. Instead, Agosín’s autobiographical narrator configures her subjectivity through rewriting of the cultural meanings attached to her body and challenging the discourses of class, ethnic, and racial oppression.

In my comparative examination of the function of storytelling in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* in this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that the Latin American oral tradition extends its influence beyond the discursive construction of experience, identity, and embodiment. Its effect is noticeable in the fragmented nature of

the speaking subject and the structural organization of the two texts. Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's autobiographies display a series of commonalities in their use of storytelling, including transmission of female experience and creating a female community through the ritual of storytelling. Both texts employ storytelling to embody experience and to construct the body of the narrating "I" as a site of clashing cultural values and as the sociopolitical body that underwrites relationships of power. Likewise, the autobiographical narrators in both texts construct their identities in accordance with the stories they tell or hear. The major difference of the function of storytelling between the autobiographies emerges in the kinds of discourses they envision as central to female oppression. Thus, Ortiz Cofer exploits the oral tradition to emphasize stories that offer alternative enactment of gender, while Agosín's primary preoccupation is to efface class distinction by bringing together the stories that circulate in the communities of women of different classes.

4. Interrogating the Discourse of Memory, Gaining Agency:

Imagination and Creativity in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*

I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there. That is, I suppose, that my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen. (Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* 67)

...very often life, like history, cannot be measured by means of memories, instances that make an impression, that leave prints but yet allow our memory to flow. (Marjorie Agosín, *Amigas* xi)

In this chapter, I continue my comparative exploration of the constitutive processes of autobiographical subjectivity in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*, shifting my focus to memory and agency. I discuss how the dialectic between facticity and ficticity in writing about the lived past in the two autobiographies results in “poetic truth.” Considering how Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s autobiographical subjects employ “poetic truth” in their narratives, I scrutinize the influences of imagination and creativity on the configuration of subjectivity in the two texts. Later, I move to my examination of the effects of “poetic truth” on the specific rhetorical strategies that allow

the autobiographical selves to gain agency in self-representation. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of how the speaking subjects' control over self-representation reflects their feminist practice of interrogating patriarchy and refuting unequal division of power between genders and classes.

The Truth of Memory and the Storytelling Tradition

As I have discussed at length in the second chapter of this thesis, the discourse of memory in autobiographical narrative is shaped by the autobiographical narrator's subjective interpretation of her past, which is never identical to her lived experience. Although the narrating "I" appears to be free to tell her story in any way she would like to do it, her evocation of memories is inescapably conditioned by cultural scripts and literary conventions that define the form of her narrative. As Liz Stanley insightfully reminds us, the seemingly unique autobiographical selves created in autobiographical acts are "actually invocations of a cultural representation of what selves should be: these are shared ideas, conventions, about a cultural form: not descriptions of actual lives but interpretations within the convention" (62). Continuing my discussion of the effects of the oral tradition on autobiographical subjectivity in Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's texts, I intend to examine the discourse of memory as conjoining the narrator's subjective interpretation of the past and the cultural scripts available to her. In my reading of *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*, I discern two immediate cultural forms that the autobiographical selves use to narrate their memories: the Latin American storytelling tradition and the tradition of women's writing.

In *Silent Dancing* in the vignette “The Black Virgin,” the narrator recollects her first memory of her father who returned from the military trip to Panama. Abandoned by the adults, she got out of her crib and nearly got into the fire in the backyard. The autobiographical self highlights that her mother’s story about that incident is different from her own memories. Although there were a number of witnesses to that event, “[t]he story varies with the telling and the teller” (46). Returning to the moment of the father’s homecoming in the final vignette, “The Last Word,” the narrator questions again the work of her memory by comparing her story to her mother’s account. She underscores that her narrative represents only one of many possible interpretations of the past: “I have my own “memories” about this time in my life, but I decided to ask her a few questions, anyway. It is always fascinating to see what shades of pastel she [her mother] will choose to paint my childhood’s “summer afternoon” (162). Acknowledging the discrepancies between the version of stories about the incident, the narrating “I” indicates that any narrative intended to reconstruct memory is not a reliable source of the lived past. She treats these narratives along with her own version of the event not as factual evidence but rather as a sort of *cuentos* of the family’s lore. Each subsequent version of a *cuento* in *Silent Dancing* offers new hues to the core plot, which depend entirely on the teller.¹³ As

¹³ Ortiz Cofer joins her family’s practice of telling new versions of *cuentos*. In her version of the tale of María Sabida in her essay “The Woman Who Slept with One Eye Open: Notes on Being a Writer,” she introduces the details about sleep-inducing figs, *higos de sueño*, that the bandit used to trick María Sabida’s companions (5). Charmed by the bandit’s voice, the girls ate the fruit and fell asleep. In my reading of this version of the *cuento*, I emphasize that Ortiz Cofer adds new details to the core plot to underscore the discourse of female sexuality. The writer creates a parable of women who fall prey to man’s sexual desire because they forgot to stay alert. Moreover, saving her María Sabida from *higos de sueño*, Ortiz Cofer declares that a female artist who stays alert can find the ways to survive in patriarchy: “But as a writer, I choose to interpret the tale of the woman who outmaneuvers the killer, who marries him so that she does not have to fear him, as a metaphor for the woman/creator” (“The Woman” 7).

I have discussed in the third chapter, the definition of *cuento* as a short story indicates that the initial fictionalization of Ortiz Cofer's narrative is already in place. By recognizing the differing ways of telling the same story, the autobiographical "I" alleges that the reconstruction of the past is a discursive process, for the retrieved memories come into being in the process of telling the story about that particular moment of the past. The autobiographical "I" shapes her selfhood not by telling a cohesive story about herself but by narrating various versions of her past to demonstrate that her writing about the past involves initial fictionalization. Drawing on the oral tradition preserved among the women in her family, the narrator shapes her autobiographical recollections according to the conventions of the storytelling tradition. Each *cuento* about the past, be it corresponding or not to the lived reality, becomes a valid source of autobiographical experience about the past. As I have examined in the third chapter, the narrating "I" uses the female knowledge transmitted in *cuentos* as a base for defining her selfhood. Thus, the storytelling tradition emerges as the narrator's cultural script that shapes her narrative about the self.

Furthermore, the autobiographical self points to her subjective interpretation of the past. She doubts whether her story about the accident with the fire rests upon her lived past or pure imagination: "*I may have imagined this*" (46; emphasis in the original). In a similar manner, the narrator shows that her mother's memories also rely heavily on her subjective vision of the past. She remarks that the image of the father depends on how her mother "prefers to remember him" (162). Leaving room for mistrust to her memory, the autobiographical subject admits the initial non-referentiality of her autobiographical

narrative to her lived experience. Although she queries the verisimilitude of her memories, the narrator chooses to include her recollections about the father's homecoming in the text. I argue that this rhetorical move of the narrator is indicative of her politics of remembering. She claims that not only facticity is involved in her writing about memory but more importantly, her creative elaboration and subjective interpretation of her memories. The autobiographical "I" underlines that the aim of her self-reflection is not to recover the historical events of her life, but rather to reveal how she feels about her past, and what meaning it has for her in the present. She asserts that the imagined past, which conjoins creativity and history, is worth telling because it demonstrates what meanings the autobiographical self decides to make out of her life, and what kind of subjectivity she intends to create in her narrative.

Moreover, the speaking subject's manipulation of the politics of representation shows that autobiographical subjectivity rests upon experiences, identities, and memories that the subject deems necessary to represent. The metaphor of the cutting room floor in the opening lines of the book is a telling example of the narrator's selective and carefully designed process of constructing autobiographical subjectivity. The narrating "I" compares her childhood memories to a film in which "the hurtful parts can be edited out, and the moments of joy brought in sharp focus to the foreground" (11). The autobiographer's work is compared to the job of the film editor, who assembles the footage, editing out or fleshing out certain aspects of the story. Recognizing that she omits a lot of memories, the narrator questions: "But with all that on the cutting room floor, what remains to tell?" (11). Her answer is that imagination fills the gaps and

patches up the “footage” of her memory. The autobiographical “I” talks about her memories using film discourse to highlight that writing her narrative, she as a producer of her selfhood, or film, inevitably resorts to the fabrication of her autobiographical subject. This deliberate, subjective manipulation of the memories results in the fragmented, unstable configuration of her autobiographical subject. Therefore, the narrator’s politics of remembering is contingent upon her politics of representation, which involves premeditated selection of memories that correspond to the narrator’s project of constructing her selfhood.

The politics of remembering brings on the discussion of the tradition of women’s life writing as another cultural script that shapes the subject and regulates the form of the narrative in *Silent Dancing*. Ortiz Cofer’s autobiography displays its close connection with the feminist canon of autobiographical writing by citing Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* in the epigraph: “A woman writing thinks back through her mothers” (3). The significance of Woolf’s writing for Ortiz Cofer’s text is further accentuated by autobiographical “I” who calls the British writer the “literary mentor” for her autobiographical project (13).¹⁴ Indeed, the narrator dedicates “Preface: Journey to a Summer’s Afternoon” to explicating the connection between *Silent Dancing* and Woolf’s *Moments of Being* (1976). Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographical “I” reveals that she uses

¹⁴ In her interview to Jocelyn Bartkevicius, Ortiz Cofer explains why she has chosen Virginia Woolf as a mentor for her autobiographical writing. She also acknowledges that Woolf’s feminist writing together with the Latin American storytelling tradition is the source of the rhetorical strategies in her autobiography: “She was a model in all writing. After reading *Silent Dancing* some people have said, “that’s very strange because you credit Virginia Woolf and your grandmother. And I say that’s exactly right because at my grandmother’s house—this sounds like a cliché now because it’s been said so much—but it was that I leaned how powerful story telling can be, it can change lives. When I was studying, the only woman that kept coming up in my required readings was Virginia Woolf” (61).

Woolf's rhetorical strategy of "writing truth from memory" that "accepts the fact that in writing about one's memory, one often has to rely on that combination of memory, imagination, and strong emotion that may result in 'poetic truth'" (11). Thus, the narrator emphasizes memory, imagination, and strong emotion as three foundational elements of her discourse of memory. She consciously makes the historicity of her lived experience a secondary characteristic, claiming that attention is directed primarily to her feelings that certain scenes of the past evoke. The task of her autobiography is not "merely 'canning' memories" (13). Instead of writing a chronicle of her life, she examines the most remarkable moments and impressions of her past experiences. Picking out her "moments of being," she emphasizes that Woolf's strategy is helpful to "study[ing] ourselves and our lives in retrospect; to understand[ing] what people and events formed us (and, yes, what and who hurt us, too) (11).¹⁵ The autobiographical "I" calls her study of the past "creative explorations of known territory" (12). The narrator's interpretation of Woolf's conceptualization of writing about memory indicates that her narrative fleshes out the memories that play the major influence on the construction of the subject in the text. This points out again that the autobiographical self's choice to tell a certain set of stories about

¹⁵ Talking about the difficulty of writing about memory in *Silent Dancing* in her interview to Pauline Newton, Ortiz Cofer further reveals that her discourse of memory shares the episteme of Woolf's writing about the past: "Virginia Woolf said that the artist has to interpret memories—that a memory is mostly fiction and a person's individual circumstances dictates what he or she remembers. I suggest that the real story was the one that my mother cites or maybe it was mine, but does it matter? Because what I remember shaped me and molded how I see the truth...I basically excuse myself from having to be factually truthful when, instead, I was trying to be true to the emotional history of my upbringing. Having said that, I will also say that everything I write is research in terms of historical accuracy, so that the only things I feel free to change are emotions, human actions, and human words. I do not change history" ("Offering" 159).

her past is not arbitrary but carefully planned according to the speaking subject's intention to design a particular version of her selfhood.

Incorporating emotions and creativity in her politics of remembering, Ortiz Cofer's narrator questions the definition of the genre of her work and attempts to resolve the tension between truth and fiction in her representation of the past. Mentioning that her goal is not to record her life, and that some of the characters are fictionalized, the autobiographical self addresses the problem of classifying the genre of her text:

Then, what is the purpose of calling this collection non-fiction or a memoir? Why not just call it fiction? Once again I must turn to my literary mentor for this project, Virginia Woolf, for an answer: like her, I wanted to try to connect myself to the threads of lives that have touched mine and at the same point converged into the tapestry that is my memory of childhood...She was a time-traveler who saw the past as a real place one could return to by following the tracks left by strong emotions. (13)

Insisting on calling *Silent Dancing* autobiography, the narrator asserts that a poetic interpretation of the past does not yield to the historical truth, for it allows the autobiographer to traverse time and imagine living in the past. In a sense, the autobiographical "I" treats fictionalization of the lived experiences as reflection on the meaning of those experiences. Justifying the validity of creativity and imagination in autobiographical writing, Ortiz Cofer's narrator turns to Woolf's claim that reclaiming "memories could provide a writer with confidence in the power of art to discover meaning and truth in ordinary events" (13). Thus Ortiz Cofer's specific rhetorical

strategy of writing about memory involves the examination of emotions and experiences of the past through the lens of creativity and the imagination.

In a similar manner, the discourse of memory in *The Alphabet in My Hands* departs from the traditional autobiography's tenet of truth-telling. I look at the function of memory in Agosín's text as a discursive process informed by the Latin American oral tradition. Drawing on my examination of the storytelling tradition at the intersection of autobiographical experience, embodiment, and identity in the previous chapter, I argue that storytelling as a discursive pattern influences the way in which Agosín's autobiographical subject employs the discourse of memory in her reconstruction of the past. Remembering her experience in the U.S., the narrator has recourse to her mother's stories about exile to shape her own narrative of displacement: "I desperately cling to your story, to the memories you brought here wrapped in down-filled comforters" (138). The narrating "I" reveals that she does not only use storytelling as a discursive pattern to tell the story of her life, but also the contents of the stories she heard from women in her family confluence with her narrative of the past. The stories of the narrator's childhood constantly surface throughout the text proving that the storytelling tradition is a powerful cultural script in Agosín's autobiography. Thus in the vignette "The Island of Swallows," the autobiographical "I" recollects her mother's story about the Island of Swallows, "where naked women combed their hair" telling each other stories, and where "words danced beside the women" (27). The narrator uses the metaphor of the Island to symbolize a community of women telling stories and preserving memory. As if a member of that community, the autobiographical self begins to tell the stories about the Island,

making that place the locus of her memory: “In the dense nights, when the soul is an agile feather, I return to the Island of Swallows. There I find my mother...I open and shut my eyes, and know myself to be at the heart of memory, in a childhood amid forests and fresh, sonorous water” (28). The narrator’s representation of the Island as a real place existing in the past demonstrates that she conceives of herself as a “time-traveler,” to borrow Ortiz Cofer’s term that she uses to describe Virginia Woolf. Treating memories of the past as if they could be retrieved through telling stories, the narrating “I” manifests her connection with Woolf’s and Ortiz Cofer’s conceptualization of writing about memory. By using the discursive pattern of storytelling, the autobiographical self is able to locate her memories both in the real and imagined world: she tells the story that is as real to her as any of her lived experiences.

Furthermore, the storytelling tradition transforms the discourse of memory in *The Alphabet in My Hands* by blending the memories about historical events with the narrator’s dreams and emotions. In “Disappeared,” the narrator’s memories of violence committed by the Latin American dictatorships along with the stories of exile heard from her Jewish relatives create a hybrid memory that takes the shape of a dream:

They [the disappeared] arrived in my dreams and called on me. They had my grandmothers’ names, or perhaps my own, but they asked me to find them, to submerge myself in those disappeared women of Latin America who also inhabited my dreams. They approached my covers, and like faithful companions in death, they slept with me...I was save in a house made of wood [in the U.S.]...Yet my destiny joined theirs. Perhaps I had

also disappeared... The nightmares of disappeared women coincided with my personal terror. I know that I would never go home. (103)

The autobiographical self manifests that her dreams and feelings are essential for the story of her lived past. The narrator's lived and imagined experiences intermingle, creating the base for the constitution of autobiographical subjectivity in multiple temporal and spatial dimensions. Identifying with the imagined stories about experiences of other people, the autobiographical self manifests that her intention is to tell her life story through an examination of her feelings and emotional reaction to the events. Instead of dedicating her narrative to the verisimilar representation of the historical reality, she focuses on the reconstruction of the emotional component of her past. Joining Ortiz Cofer's stance on the primacy of creativity and imagination in autobiographical writing, Agosín uses storytelling to introduce an artistic and emotional element in her writing about memory.

Along with the storytelling tradition, I argue that Agosín's discourse of memory is also influenced by the Latin American women's writing tradition. In her introductory essay to *The Alphabet in My Hands*, Nancy Abraham Hall draws attention to the similarity of the prose written by Agosín and Chilean writer María Luisa Bombal. The commonalities between the two writers also emerge from the fact that Agosín wrote her doctoral dissertation on Bombal's novels.¹⁶ Agosín became a close friend of the Chilean writer, who she got to know in person during her investigation in Chile (Sepúlveda 13). Her profound research for the dissertation allows me to assume that Agosín has

borrowed, consciously or not, some of Bombal's writing techniques, making her work a cultural script for *The Alphabet in My Hands*.¹⁷ In his introduction to Bombal's acclaimed novel *La última niebla* (1935), Spanish critic Amado Alonso praises Bombal for her unique poetic prose that employs the figure of reverie to fuse the imagined and real worlds:

El ensueño es el mediador, el médium o medio en que sueño y realidad se identifican; es la niebla que borra, crea y funde las formas envolviéndolas con sus blandos vellones de bruma. Lo ensoñado no se identifica ni con lo soñado ni con lo real vivido; pero, con su saboreo imaginativo y sentimental de mantener abierto un ventanillo a lo posible en aquella alma hermética. (26)

Creating a picture of reverie in *La última niebla*, Bombal uses a poetic prose, full of longing and sentimentality, to connect with the imagined world and thus to escape the "hermetic" reality:

Herméticamente cerradas las claras sedas de las ventanas y sumido así en una semioscuridad resplandeciente, nuestro cuarto parecía una gran carpa rosada tendida al sol, donde mi lucha contra el día se hacía sin angustia ni lágrimas de enervamiento.

¹⁶ *Las desterradas de paraíso: protagonistas en la narrativa de María Luisa Bombal*. New York: Senda Nueva de Ediciones, 1983.

¹⁷ Agosín comments on her close relationship with Bombal in *The Alphabet in my Hands*, stressing the spiritual intimacy between them as poets: "We liked one another right away. I think that somehow we are twin souls, detailed about language expressing through poetry the clarity and tenacity of those who love writing. María Luisa Bombal helped me to understand that writing was more than a job or vocation...I read her, laid bare what existed beyond the words, and steeped myself in her city, wandering through it, dreaming about it, trying to understand it" (153).

Imaginaba hombres avanzando penosamente por carreteras polvorientas... Veía ciudades duramente castigadas por el implacable estío, ciudades de calles vacías y establecimientos cerradas, como si el alma le hubiera escapado y no quedara de ellas sino el esqueleto, todo alquitrán, derritiéndose al sol. (79)

Contorting the truth, the writer presents the reverie as a force of imagination that is able to transport her narrator across temporal and spatial coordinates. Hence reverie also emerges as the power of the artist to escape the “hermetic” reality through imagination.

In *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the abovementioned vignettes “The Disappeared” and “The Island of Swallows” demonstrate that Agosín follows Bombal’s poetic prose that evokes the impression of a daydream, which is not exactly a dream and yet, not the lived past—it is a fusion of both. Bombal’s aesthetics of reverie offers Agosín a new dimension for using her prose as a creative representation of lived reality and a means of connecting with her imagined world. Drawing on prose marked by the aesthetics of reverie, Agosín incorporates creativity and imagination as valid tools of writing about memory that marks her disinterestedness in the representation of the factual past.

Creating a metaphorical house of memory, Agosín’s narrator reveals that memory about the historical past is merely a trigger point for unpacking truly important memories—her emotions and feelings:

There [in the house of memory] they were as if life and time were but a reconstruction of a real past, and only in that garden, veiled in dreams, was I able to recover an image of myself...Memory unbuttons dreams about

what I was, what I could have been in that house, if only the soldiers had not come with hands like claws and faces of death. (104-5)

Joining Ortiz Cofer's stance on writing about memory, Agosín creates her autobiographical subject by fleshing out feelings and strong emotions that left an imprint on the subject's memory.

Looking at Agosín's highly poetic prose, I find the definition of the genre of *The Alphabet in My Hands* problematic. Unlike Ortiz Cofer, Agosín does not question the genre of her work explicitly, but nevertheless, gives hints about her politics of remembering and her specific treatment of autobiographical writing. She begins her text by acknowledging that her narrative of memory combines both facticity and ficticity: "Generous spirits accompanied me as I journeyed in the uncertain realm of memory and the passions of imagination" (xv). Memory for Agosín is initially non-referential to the lived past. At the end of the autobiography, the narrator reveals that her project encompasses the reconstruction of memory that does not really belong to her along with a fictional recreation of her self: "I recall a childhood that did not take place here, imagining how things might have been, reinventing myself through memory" (181). She manifests that her text does not rely on memory as the only source of her narrative; rather, she considers autobiographical writing as what Ortiz Cofer calls "creative explorations" of the past. Since fiction and factual truth interweave in the discourse of memory, *The Alphabet in My Hands* can be classified as non-fiction. However, I argue that Agosín's politics of remembering, which resembles Ortiz Cofer conscious choice to tell the story of self through the prism of imagination in order to emphasize the most

bright moments of her memory, allows to classify her work as autobiographical writing. Claiming that imagination, creative elaboration on the stories she hear in the childhood, and impressions that she felt in the past are as constitutive of her autobiographical subjectivity as any historical facts that she witnessed, she asserts that her text is autobiographical.

“Poetic Truth” and Cultural Survival

Comparing the discourse of memory in *The Alphabet in My Hands* and *Silent Dancing*, I claim that both authors resolve the tension between the historical truth and, to use Liz Stanley’s term, the “authorized fictions” about the past (129) by producing “poetic truth.” Although the two autobiographies display similar notions of “poetic truth,” the cultural scripts that form the base of “poetic truth” in each text are not exactly the same. Revealing initial fictionalization of their memories, both texts share the influence of the Latin American storytelling tradition. Further, Ortiz Cofer explains that she borrows her notion of “poetic truth” from the feminist tradition of autobiographical writing. Drawing on Woolf’s approximation to writing about memory, Ortiz Cofer comments that her “poetic truth” is comprised of “memory, imagination, and strong emotion” (*Silent Dancing* 11). Affirming the legitimacy of “poetic truth” in the representation of memory, Ortiz Cofer asserts that her writing is not a meticulous excavation of the historical truth but rather a creative examination of how she construes her self in retrospect.

At first sight, Agosín uses the same components of “poetic truth”—memory, emotions, and imagination—that result in what Ortiz Cofer calls the “winding path of memory, marked by strong emotion” (*Silent Dancing* 13). In the vignette “Summers of Syrup” in *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the narrator demonstrates her use of “poetic truth” in the depiction of a summer day from her childhood: “I cannot clearly remember precise moments, dates, or events, but happiness was an outstretched hand, an open handkerchief, something fleeting and intangible, yet at the same time present and real. Never again was I able to recover this feeling” (24). The autobiographical “I” follows the path of the narrator in *Silent Dancing* by claiming that imperfect, vanishing memories of the lived events can be recovered through strong emotions that are the only true witnesses of the narrator’s life. Linking the past and the present, emotions form the ground for the autobiographical narrator to elaborate on her feelings and to present a creative account of her past. However, I claim that the “poetic truth” in *The Alphabet in My Hands* is complicated by Bombal’s notion of reverie that brings in an “imaginative and sentimental flavor of memory and hope” (Abraham Hall xxiii-xxiv) in the representation of the past. Agosín couples creativity that she derives from the oral tradition with imagination and emotions that she finds in female poetic prose. The result of the symbiosis of these two cultural scripts—storytelling and Latin American women’s writing—is “poetic truth” that is akin Ortiz Cofer’s concept.

Ortiz Cofer and Agosín demonstrate that as sociocultural bodies who live between cultures they blend together the wealth of female/feminist cultural scripts transmitted through the stories told and written by women in order to enrich the U.S. Latina tradition

of autobiographical writing. Defining their “truth-fiction” discourse as “poetic truth,” both autobiographers validate the use of creativity and the imagination in their politics of representation of the past. They declare that memories imbued with emotions and fictions are no less significant for the construction of autobiographical subjectivity in their texts than the factual accounts of their lives. Therefore, by constructing their fictionalized selves, the speaking subjects of the two texts claim the right to represent their unique vision of their lived realities.

The discourse of “truth-fiction” in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* is further complicated by the fact that the narrators use not only their personal but also collective memories of their families and communities to craft their autobiographical narrative. In *Silent Dancing*, the narrator reflects on the collective dimension of her memory that emerges as she connects her past with the lives of other people. The inclusion of collective memories reveals the narrator’s attempt to define what memories have influenced her selfhood. She explains that her specific rhetorical strategy of bringing together personal and collective memories is in connecting the “threads of lives that have touched... [hers] and at some point converged into the tapestry” of her childhood memories (13). The autobiographical self reveals the confluence of collective and personal memories in the *cuentos* she tells. The tales of María Sabida and María la Loca demonstrate that the narrating “I” draws on the collective experience of the women in her family to learn how to narrate stories and how to interpret their meanings. In my discussion of the narrator’s version of María Sabida’s tale in the third chapter of this thesis, I pointed out that, by making herself a María Sabida, the autobiographical self

identifies with the experience of the legendary character. Sabida exemplifies the paradigm of the life of a female artist in patriarchal society. In other words, her *cuento* is a story of collective memory of women who transgressed the limits of patriarchy. Inspecting the “genesis” of her becoming a writer, the narrator joins this collective female experience to interpret her necessity to stay alert and sleep with one eye open (*Silent Dancing* 12). The autobiographical “I” blends the figure of María Sabida with her own persona as a writer to demonstrate that the “genesis” of her literary career is equally influenced by the lived and imagined experiences as well as personal and communal memories, without claiming the primacy of either. Notably, the narrator makes the experience of Sabida her own through telling her version of the tale. This rhetorical strategy signifies that the narrator’s identification with collective experience happens through the fictionalization of that experience. The *cuento* of María la Loca is yet another example of the autobiographical self’s appropriation of collective memory. This time she turns to the experience of being a social outcast. The narrator decides to examine the influence of María la Loca as a paradigmatic figure of a marginalized, declassed woman to reveal her own lived experience of marginalization in the U.S and Puerto Rico.¹⁸

Looking at her past through the lens of collective female experiences, the

¹⁸ In an interview with Edna Acosta-Belén, Ortiz Cofer explains her interest in the eccentric characters that inhabit social margins by her own feeling of being a social outcast. She elucidates that living between cultures she has never truly become a part of either, and this fact marks her as different: “In the story ‘Casa,’ included in *Silent Dancing*, the character of Maria-la Loca-attracted me because I have often felt like the oddball myself... When I go to Puerto Rico I am always reminded that I sound like a *gringa*. I think that my own self-analysis, which may be way off the mark, is that these characters attracted me first, because I always felt like an outcast and second, because an artist is always an outcast, anyway” (“Interview” 89).

autobiographical “I” claims that her discourse of memory is a compound of collective and personal memories.

In a similar manner, the autobiographical “I” in *The Alphabet in My Hands* predicates her memories on collective female experience. Once again, the storytelling tradition emerges at the nexus of personal and collective memories. Writing about her grandmother, Chepi, the narrating “I” shows that the stories told by her grandmother are essential for the formation of her selfhood. The narrating “I” highlights that the old woman represents a link between the collective past of Jewish women and her own memories: “Of all deaths, I fear hers [Chepi’s] the most because she is my memory” (65). In the vignette “The Bonfires,” I find an illuminating example of the narrator’s theorizing of how her personal memories conflate with the memories of her female relatives preserved through the oral tradition. The autobiographical “I” confuses her memories with the memories of the Jewish community transmitted through stories:

At times my mother’s and grandmothers’ memories, transfigured and well-traveled, move to the beat of my own, and I become confused. I don’t know whether I recall or invent the stories they told me after dark...I wake up either in Vienna or Berlin. I am in Santiago de Chile. (170-1)

Since the stories about Jewish experience form the base for subjectivity in the text, I argue that by making the stories of the Jewish woman a part of her own experience, the narrator makes a claim that collective memories shape her subjectivity. Likewise, by taking her turn in telling the stories of Jewish exile, she states her right to represent collective memory of the Jewish female community.

Furthermore, the intrinsic connection between personal and collective memories in *The Alphabet in My Hands* comes forward in Agosin's specific discourse of memory that Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory." Hirsch defines the concept of "postmemory" as a specific type of memory characteristic of the second generation Jews, the descendants of the Holocaust survivors (22). The conceptual difference of "postmemory" from memory is that its bearers never lived through the actual experiences of trauma and exile but nevertheless, identify with the traumatic effects of the Holocaust through familial and communal narratives. Hirsch underscores: "Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (22). Examining the discourse of memory in *The Alphabet in My Hands* through the conceptual lens of "postmemory," I argue that Agosin's fictionalization of memories emerges from her creative investment in the collective narrative of Jewish exile and trauma. Since the autobiographical "I" has never witnessed the Holocaust, she can maintain Jewish collective memory only by imagining her memories of the Holocaust.

The autobiographical self offers a poignant illustration of the function of "postmemory" in her "truth-fiction" discourse in her recollections of the visit to Chacabuco Concentration Camp. She claims that she has seen her dead aunts and other "sleepless" dead people (*Alphabet* 170). The narrator permits her imagination and poetic language to create fantastic scenes, in which "dead were dancing behind the breeze" (170). Feeling closeness with the dead, the narrating "I" longs to join their dance. Making her impressions and imagined experiences real, she asserts:

Everything I have told you is true. I felt more Jewish than ever in that camp. Someone yanked out my hair and shaved my head... My hands were unable to remain still. Knotted, they clung to yours, because among the shrubs of patio 26, facing the tree in agony, I had been savagely wounded. I wanted to be them, to leave, to remain forever in the air alongside the dead of Chacabuco. (170)

The autobiographical self goes beyond the identification with the collective memory of her Jewish family. She employs the power of imagination and creativity to make collective memories her own. Embodying the collective Holocaust trauma in her “savagely wounded” body, the narrator claims that strong emotions and impressions embellished by her creativity are indispensable elements of her reconstruction of the past.

Following the aesthetics of “postmemory,” the autobiographical self recognizes that her memories intertwine with the memories of the Jewish female community. Thus she creates the ground for her to assume the social role of a spokesperson of Jewish female experience. Embodying the memory of trauma and exile in her wounded body, she reaffirms that her voice incorporates many voices of women. Affirming the intergenerational link in the family in the vignette “The Island of Swallows,” the narrator remarks that it is her turn now to tell the stories she heard in childhood. Likewise, in her recollection of refugee Molly McArthur, the narrating “I” identifies with her memories of displacement, commenting that “[s]tories of flight...these were our stories” (134). In the same way, the autobiographical self asserts her voice as a speaker for women of color by claiming her role in preserving communal memories. Speaking from her social location

in U.S. academe in the vignette “Wellesley College,” the narrating “I” extends her discourse of collective memory from the memories of Jewish women to women of color. She highlights the importance of her autobiographical writing in keeping “the memory of all women who could not speak” (128). The expansion of her community happens due to the narrator’s identification as a Latina and a woman of color that results from the re-signification of her body in the U.S.

Walking a similar path of asserting a collective voice, Ortiz Cofer’s narrator claims to represent the memory of her ethnic community. Indeed, Ortiz Cofer dedicates her autobiography to her daughter and her mother. The dedication serves to establish the intergenerational link and the contours of the female community in *Silent Dancing*. The autobiographer implies that her narrating “I” functions as a mediator between the generations in the family as well as a link in the chain of the transmission of female knowledge, thus pointing to the collective component of her memory. Ortiz Cofer’s narrator asserts the role of the bearer of memory in the family whose task is to preserve familial memories through telling stories. In the poem entitled “Common Ground,” the narrating “I” embodies collective memory using imagination and creativity. She creates the figure of her body as a composite of the parts of the bodies of her grandmother and mother:

Blood tells the story of your life...

...These days,

when I look into the mirror I see

my grandmother’s stern lips

speaking in parentheses at the corners
of my mouth of pain and deprivation
I have never known. I recognize...
....my mother's
nervous hands smoothing lines
just appeared on my skin,
like arrows pointing downward
to our common ground. (161)

The body of the narrating "I" converts into a collective sociocultural body that speaks of her grandmother's "pain and deprivation," thus living through the collective experience of Puerto Rican woman. By presenting her imagined memories in the form of a poem, the autobiographical "I" emphasizes that her reflections on collective memory are initially fictionalized.¹⁹ Creating the "common ground" among the women in her family, the autobiographical self demonstrates that her autobiographical narrative is, in fact, a story of collective experience of Puerto Rican women. Likewise, she tells the stories of the communal experience of the acculturation of Latinos in the U.S. in the narrative about *La Gringa*. By recounting the stories of Puerto Rican and American local lore, the autobiographical self extends her social role to being a spokesperson of the communal memory.

¹⁹ Commenting on her use of memory in the vignette "The Last Word," the narrator indicates that "what..[she] writes in..[her] poems and stories is mainly the product of ..[her] imagination" (*Silent Dancing* 163).

The fact that the narrators examine their personal histories in relation to their ethnic communities and manifest to be the collective voices for their respective communities allow to classify *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* as what Kaplan calls “cultural autobiography” (132). Kaplan questions the law of canonical representation that constitutes the autobiographical genre. By revisiting Jacques Derrida’s theory on genre production, Kaplan points to “out-law” genres produced on cultural margins. She defines out-law texts as those that deconstruct the “master” genres (119). Kaplan concludes that the power dynamics embedded in Western literary production exclude those out-law genres that contest contemporary postcolonial and transnational conditions. Kaplan underscores that “cultural autobiography” is concerned with “a struggle for personal survival rather than purely aesthetic experimentation or individual expression” (130). As I have discussed so far, Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s texts use various creative forms of writing about memory that allow the autobiographical selves inscribe collective experience and identities in their personal narratives. The storytelling tradition emerges as one of the key rhetorical strategies to connect personal and social history of the community. In both autobiographies, the narrators recollect the childhood that they spent outside the U.S. The choice to examine their memories in the colonial context signifies the autobiographical selves’ intention to draw attention to their experiences gained outside the dominant culture. The politics of representation and remembering in these two cultural autobiographies” indicates that “[r]emembering experiences nonsynchronous with dominant culture... is the activity of cultural and personal survival” (Kaplan 130). Spotlighting the colonial, postcolonial, and transcultural

histories of their lives and of their communities, the autobiographical narrators predicate their subjectivities on the manifold narratives of identities, experiences, and memories that differ from the dominant narratives. By making visible the narratives of their marginalized and oppressed groups, the narrators affirm their task of writing as resistance to dissolve in the dominant culture. Both narrators constantly juxtapose their lives in host and home countries to define their condition of marginalization and alienation. In *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the narrating “I” complicates her history of living on the margins of the dominant culture by crossing the class boundaries through identifying her experience with the lives of the working class indigenous women.

The dialectic of living not only between cultures but also on the margins of those cultures provokes a condition of “cultural schizophrenia” that the autobiographical selves intend to escape by finding a firm ground for their selves: they search for their cultural roots and memories that influenced their selfhoods. Since vanishing memory is an unreliable source for them, they need to preserve it through telling and repeating stories—the stories about themselves and their communities. In the poem “El Olvido” in *Silent Dancing*, the narrating “I” talks about the greatest danger of the immigrant life—oblivion. She highlights that remembering is necessary both for personal survival in the host country and for collective survival of her community:

...dangerous
to disdain the plaster saints
before which your mother kneels
praying with embarrassing fervor

that you survive in the place you have chosen to live:

a bare, cold room with no pictures on the walls,

a forgetting place where she fears you will die

of loneliness and exposure.

Jesús, María y José, she says,

el olvido is a dangerous thing. (68; Ortiz Cofer's emphasis)

The narrator constructs *el olvido*, the state of forgetting, as a cultural concept that she intends to resist. Following her mother's fear that she will forget her cultural roots and the memories of Puerto Rico, she tells the stories of her childhood to preserve memories and to resist cultural extinction. The narrator distinguishes her mode of survival from her mother's "chosen method of survival" which implies "perpetual nostalgia" and "constant talk of return" (128). Having spent the major part of her life in the U.S., the autobiographical "I" understands that her own return to the island is neither possible nor any longer necessary. However, she accentuates the need to conserve the memories of Puerto Rico in order to maintain the continuity of female memories and experiences that link her to her family and community. Notably, the narrative of childhood includes both the autobiographical self's memories on the island as well as on the mainland. The narrator's double focus attests to her project to speak for the communal experience of Puerto Rican women and, simultaneously, of U.S. Latinas. In her interview with Pauline Newton, Ortiz Cofer reflects on the meaning of writing for her personal life: "I write as an act of survival. I feel that the more self-knowledge I have, the greater the chance that I will have a meaningful life" ("Offering" 156). In a sense, the act of writing "cultural

autobiography,” which incorporates personal and communal histories, manifests that the narrator safeguards her memory from oblivion through the art of telling stories.

Similarly, the autobiographical subject in *The Alphabet in My Hands* turns to stories as a strategy of cultural survival. The condition of double marginalization, as a Jew and as a Latina, and of displacement makes the narrating “I” realize that no country truly belongs to her. Instead of constructing her cultural identity in relation to space, she opts for her memory as the foundation for her identity. She concludes that “only memory and its uncertain metaphors are truly mine, belong to me” (138). Thus, the act of writing an autobiographical text is a way to claim back her memories that substitute the spatial dimension, or the home country, in the reconstruction of her many ethnic identities:

Jewish, Latin American, Chilean, and Latina. As I have explained in the second chapter, having lost the home country, Jewish exiles recur to the stories about their collective past as a way of reconstructing the sense of their lost place. Hence the act of telling communal stories converts into the discursive practice of constructing identity. Resembling the Jewish women in her family, the autobiographical “I” interweaves her voice with their voices to preserve collective memories and thus to preserve her identity: “I too survived...listening to the stories of my great-grandmother Helena with baskets full of chickens and silver padlocks on the Vienna doors. I too survived thanks to the story. Then I knew...that everything has to do with seeing the flights and the irreverence of time” (135). Echoing the aesthetics of “postmemory,” she accentuates that her cultural survival is possible only through the stories because they preserve the narrative of collective social history.

As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, the autobiographical self in *The Alphabet in My Hands* creates the metaphor of the house of memory inhabited by women—the Indian nannies, the Catholic working class maids, the disappeared, the Jewish relatives, and the Holocaust victims—who bear both the memory of their respective communities and of the narrator’s past. As a “homeless” woman in exile, the narrating “I” longs to “move back into the house where...[she] smelled of hyacinths and stories” (*Alphabet* 105). The significance of that house for the narrator comes from the fact that its building blocks are the stories of and about women of different classes, ethnicities, and races. The metaphorical space of that house converts into “home” for displaced women including the narrator. Defining the subgenre of “cultural autobiography,” Kaplan examines the figure of the “home” in Western autobiographical writing to conclude that the out-law genres change the sign of “home” to convert it into the metaphor of “coalition” (131). Inscribing the sign of “home” in the text, the female author speaks about a community that dwells in that “home,” for the relationship between the author’s identity and collective identity is constantly renegotiated. I interpret the figure of house in *The Alphabet in My Hands* as Kaplan’s metaphor of “home” that manifests the subject’s feminist ideology of building coalitions among women. The autobiographical self converts the metaphor of house into a discursive sign of home for the women who are deprived of voice and whose histories she needs to save from extinction.

Reflecting on her role as a writer who gives a voice to marginalized women in the vignette “Why Do I Write?,” Agosín’s narrator connects cultural survival with the need

for visibility of these women in social history: “Writing was a way to save others and myself. We were transparent in our invisibility” (*Alphabet* 145). For the speaking subject, the danger of cultural extinction and political powerlessness of women of color comes from the invisibility of this group of women in the discourse of institutionalized history. The narrator clarifies that the goal of her politics of representation is to give visibility to the working class women whose histories are erased from the narrative of the dominant culture. Furthermore, elucidating on her social and political role as a writer, Agosín’s narrator remarks:

I came to Wellesley a fearful girl...I have not stopped writing...to keep the memory of all the woman who could not speak. That is why I am here, even though I am not from here. I am from Africa and from plundered America, I am from Harlem and from Bombay, but I live here in Wellesley where I create the signs of the stars that illuminate my lost sisters. (128)

Attempting to give voice to silenced women, the autobiographical self transcends the limits of her own communities of women—Jewish, Latin American, Chilean, Latinas—to create a multidimensional voice that can speak for all women of color, all marginalized and oppressed women. Justifying her right to be a spokesperson for all women oppressed and silenced, she explains that her physical residence in Wellesley, a privileged place that invests its residents with symbolic authority and power, does not prevent her from belonging to the group of women of color, from being a “woman of flight.” In the second chapter, I have examined how Agosín’s narrator constructs intersectional identities

through the use of stories narrated by women of different classes and ethnicities. Examining the political role of the intersectional identities in the text, I argue that by constructing her subjectivity as composite of various, and oftentimes contrasting, subject positions, the autobiographical subject claims her membership in manifold female communities.²⁰ As a sociopolitical body and a Latina, the narrator embodies the coalition of women of color. She creates a feminist refuge for oppressed and displaced women where “everyone is at home,” and that safe place is in her writing (103). Thus she asserts her political role as a spokesperson for the plight of women in any place on the globe, be it Africa, Harlem, Chile, or Wellesley.

Furthermore, Agosín reveals her ideological stance on redefining the asymmetry of power in her rewriting of the division of space as a signifier of the colonial oppression and cultural extinction of colonial subjects. In her collection of essays *Ashes of Revolt* (1996), Agosín underscores her connection with her poor nannies as the foundational experience of her becoming a writer. She is aware of the political implication of the division of the space of the house, and that that separation of space marks the specific social locations of the colonized and the privileged white women:

²⁰ Nina Scott comments that Agosín’s “desire to articulate the voice of another less privileged woman is an indicator of elitism” that leaves the writer in a contradictory position (237). Scott further comments that the Latina writers have oftentimes refused to recognize Agosín as a Latina author and as a voice for working class Latinas because of her belonging to the upper class. This explains why Agosín employs various rhetorical strategies to prove her belong to the community of underprivileged women in. Elucidating on her social role as a Latin American feminist writer in her essay “Stories of Night and Dawn: Latin American Women Today,” Agosín reveals her identification with working class women: “My voice is the voice of women from the middle class, but whose feminist consciousness does not come from the European model of the free and independent woman with genuine economic power. My consciousness developed in the markets where I went with my mother to buy fruits and vegetables, where I saw women no more than 30 years old whose faces seemed chiseled out of stone, because of their life of hard labor” (509).

My writing developed with the whispering of the women who inhabited the back rooms—the servants’ quarters... My literary space was conditioned in the back rooms, beside the women who practiced their way of speaking in underprivileged spaces—spaces behind closed doors, occupied by their silence, modesty, and obedience. My approach to the “underprivileged” was not an easy endeavor. It was my vocation and my profession. It was not anything I planned but rather the result of intuition and a sense of loyalty to them. (42-3)

Defining her literary space as “the back rooms,” Agosín manifests her feminist project of writing back to the cultural scripts that scripted some women as white and others as women of color. She collects the stories of women from both spaces to mix them and finally, to make them the stories of her own life, which is inseparable from the lives of other women. In *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the autobiographical self declares that her metaphorical house gives space for women to act freely, to feel love and support, and thus to survive. Agosín’s narrator interrogates those cultural scripts by writing back to the cultural scripts that determine the social roles of women depending on their classes and precluded them from transgressing those roles. Constructing the sociopolitical body of the narrating “I” as a compound of the bodies of the white Jewish women and the underprivileged working class women of color, the autobiographical “I” writes a new script of self that ruptures the discourse of patriarchy by demanding class equality. Assuming her social role as a spokesperson for the female community who is empowered by her privileged position in the U.S. academe, she extends the limits of her feminist

“coalition” to include the voices of all women of color in her autobiographical writing. Therefore, by making a conscious choice to speak for all oppressed and marginalized women, the speaking subject enacts her agency.

Likewise, Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographical “I” engages the cultural scripts given to her through education and upbringing in order to write back to the discourse of patriarchy. However, this does not result exclusively in interrogating the dominant culture. In the beginning of this chapter, I have examined how storytelling functions as a cultural form that defines the discursive pattern in *Silent Dancing*. As a cultural stricture on gender expectation in Puerto Rico, the storytelling tradition gives the narrator certain models of representation and self-representation that she reproduces in her narrative. For instance, by highlighting unattractive representations of the bodies of Nora and María la Loca, she expresses her reproach for their “defeat” as sexual bodies. This politics of representation demonstrates that the narrator follows the compulsory cultural scripts of the female as submissive and controlling her sexuality. However, recovering her feminist perspective, Ortiz Cofer’s narrating “I” interrogates the cultural scripts that essentialize women by creating a female “coalition.” That “coalition” is comprised of women who have differing views on their gender roles and on their lives, but they find a common ground for alliances through telling stories about women. The women have common readings of Mamá’s *cuentos* and understand the counterstrategies contained in them. Kaplan reminds us that coalition politics is the mode of working together in which “diversity operates in crisis conditions to forge powerful temporally alliances” (132). In *Silent Dancing*, diversity among women is not effaced, for the narrating “I” constantly

shifts feminist and non-feminist valences of the *cuentos* through the two-fold discursive character of storytelling. By doing so, the autobiographical “I” demonstrates that the women in her family have different definitions of womanhood. Likewise, the speaking subject enacts her agency through controlling in which ways the *cuentos* should be interpreted and through retelling various versions of the *cuentos*. Expanding on my reading of the poetics of space of the grandmother’s house in the second chapter, I interpret *casa* as a feminist space that allows women to shape their narratives of survival in androcentric society. Thus, *Silent Dancing* can be called, to borrow Kaplan’s definition, a “cultural autobiography” of the community in “resistance” (132). The narratives that originate in collective female experience become a part of Ortiz Cofer’s “cultural autobiography.” Notably, the definition of her survival as an artist comes from the *cuento* of María Sabida that she heard in the grandmother’s house. Reflecting on the gender roles Puerto Rico and on what it takes to become a writer, the autobiographical self turns to the stories of the women in her family to find strategies for her personal and cultural survival. Thus, *casa* becomes a sanctuary of stories and “home” for women who want to empower themselves through the stories.

Examining the text from a feminist ideological position, *The Alphabet in My Hands* shows a similar flaw in its representational politics by reproducing the cultural scripts. To remind, Ortiz Cofer’s narrator perpetuates the cultural strictures imposed on the ways women can feel about their bodies and sexuality through her unappealing representations of Nora’s and María la Loca’s bodies. In a similar manner, failing to act critically toward the cultural forms of self-representation, Agosín’s autobiographical self

constructs her subjectivity along the lines of racialization and marginalization in the U.S. culture. To evoke the metaphor of “black presence” discussed in the second chapter, the autobiographical “I” reveals that she follows the cultural scripts that embody her identity as the other in the racialized and ethnicized body. As a child, she cannot resist the cultural forces that circumscribe the way she can feel about or represent herself. However, as an adult, she recollects those memories to question the origins of that “black presence,” and why her white body turned to a body of color upon her arrival to the U.S. (*Alphabet* 115). By reflecting on these issues, the autobiographical self writes back to the scripts that prescribed her the identities of the other and of a marginalized and silenced Latina. This allows her to enact her agency. Through engaging critically with the cultural forms that determined her self-conceptualization, she inscribes her alternative scripts of selfhood. By gaining control over self-representation through writing back to the dominant cultural forms, the speaking subject manifests her ability to shape her subjectivity that is configured by an alternative mode of representation that refutes the cultural strictures forced on her. Comparing the ways of asserting control over self-representation in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*, I find that for both speaking subjects the transition from uncritical to critical representation of their bodies, experiences, identities, and memories marks their becoming as decolonized subjects. Following Smith’s and Watson’s theorization of decolonizing strategies in autobiographical writing, I claim that agency of each subject in these texts emerges from the fact that she assumes her role as a writer of the communal memory, and thus she enters “the process of coming to

writing...*through* interrogation, a charting of the conditions that have historically placed her identity under erasure” (“De/Colonization” xx; emphasis in the original).

In conclusion, the specificity of subjectivity in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* emerges from the fact that the narratives are equally informed by the Latin American storytelling tradition and the female/feminist autobiographical canon. The narrators in Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s autobiographies fuse both traditions to create unique politics of remembering and representation that conflate the lived experience with the imagined past. In the case of *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the process of constructing subjectivity is complicated by the notion of “postmemory” that introduces imagination as an inherent characteristic of the discourse of memory in this text. Validating the use of creativity and imagination in their autobiographies, both narrators employ the rhetorical strategy of “poetic truth” as a way of writing about memory that emphasizes strong emotions and impressions rather than the facticity in their representation of the past. The discourse of “truth-fiction” in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* is further problematized by the fact that the autobiographical selves assert collective voices and interpret their personal histories through the lens of the communal memories. By including collective memories in their writing about memory, the narrators convert their narratives in “cultural autobiographies.” In addition, by asserting her role as a spokesperson for the community of underprivileged, silenced women, the autobiographical “I” in *The Alphabet in My Hands* demonstrates that telling an autobiographical narrative that conflates personal and collective memories is an act of cultural survival. In a similar manner, the autobiographical “I” in *Silent Dancing* claims

her cultural role as a bearer of memory in her ethnic community and as a voice for the oppressed women. The speaking subjects in both texts display similar strategies of asserting agency by reshaping the cultural spaces—the space of *casa* in Ortiz Cofer’s text and “the back rooms” in Agosín’s text—to write back to the cultural scripts that impose strictures on their self-representation.

5. Conclusion

As I searched through secondary sources during my research for this thesis, I was surprised to be able to locate only few critical studies on *Silent Dancing*. Unfortunately, none have been done exclusively on *The Alphabet in My Hands*. Notably, the scarce studies on Agosín's work primarily examine her writing in the vein of human right discourse, setting aside her autobiographical writing. It was surprising for me, too, to come across only few studies that address the U.S. Latina autobiographical writing. The few works that I have found are mainly dissertations that attest to the fact that, as distinct tradition, U.S. Latina autobiography is an emerging field of study in literary criticism. The scant amount of published works and dissertations on Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's autobiographies allows me to suggest that my thesis can add new critical perspectives on these texts as I locate them in the Latina tradition as well as in the connection with the tradition of female postcolonial autobiographical writing. I also hope that my critical inquiry of the specificity of Latina texts will serve to expand the ways in which the Latina autobiographical subjectivity is theorized.

In my comparative analysis of *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands*, I have demonstrated that the autobiographical subjects in these texts are fragmented, provisional, and in a constant process of formation. I have identified two culturally specific strategies of constructing autobiographical subjectivity in these texts: the use of the Latin American storytelling tradition and "poetic truth." Each of these strategies operates on multiple levels. The storytelling tradition plays a key role in these two texts

in three ways: first, as a discursive pattern that configures the fragmented speaking subject; second, as a discursive pattern that predicates Latina subjectivity on female experiences, embodiment, and identity, underwriting the discourses of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class; third, as a tradition that conflates collective memories in the autobiographical subject's narrative of memory. Regarding "poetic truth," it effects the construction of subjectivity in these autobiographies in two ways: first, as a rhetorical strategy that validates the use of imagination and creativity in the representation of the past; second, as a rhetorical strategy of gaining agency in self-representation.

First, analyzing the structures of Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's texts in the third chapter, I have demonstrated that the storytelling tradition intervenes in the fragmentation of the autobiographical subject. The nonlinear structures of these autobiographies are arranged as a set of stories that the autobiographical selves choose to tell about themselves as they search for their cultural roots. In *Silent Dancing*, the subject presents her narrative as a series of *cuentos* that reveals that a complete picture of her selfhood comprises of many distinct stories. In *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the autobiographical subject reveals her politics of reading her autobiography in the trope of the alphabet, signifying that the stories about particular moments of her life can be arranged in manifold ways. Hence, the autobiographical "I" assembles herself not as a unified but as a fragmented subject. The use of the Latin American storytelling tradition that circulates among women points that Ortiz Cofer's and Agosín's subjects do not simply reproduce the fragmented subject as a consequence of her multiple identities as in female/feminist

autobiographical writing but achieve this configuration also by appropriating culturally specific discursive patterns, hence enriching the U.S. Latina autobiographical tradition.

Second, the consolidation of a truly Latina subjectivity happens due to the stories about female experiences and the embodiment. In the third chapter, I have demonstrated that storytelling operates as the interpretive schemata of autobiographical experience in both texts. Storytelling as a performative act creates a female community in which knowledge is transmitted through stories in the female social space. In *Silent Dancing*, the Puerto Rican oral tradition functions as a two-fold discursive pattern of shaping female experience. On the one hand, it perpetuates patriarchal values about gender norms; for instance, by reiterating the *cuento* of María la Loca, Puerto Rican women maintain the concept of female “defeat” and the masculine values about women. On the other hand, the *cuento* of María Sabida transmits female counterstrategies of empowerment, creating the image of a “prevailing” woman who knows how to survive in the male world. Demonstrating that she can engage the stories that she heard in Puerto Rico to decipher their conflicting meanings, Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographical “I” constructs her subjectivity through a dialogue between feminist and patriarchal discourses of female gender and sexuality. By comparing the cultural meanings of her body that is interpreted as white in Puerto Rico and as brown in the U.S., the subject recognizes that her body is a space of cultural negotiation of ethnicity and race. Likewise, the change of social location makes her realize that the stories do not transmit universal knowledge about gender and sexuality. She reveals this realization in her description of her mother as a Latina beauty who transgresses the social norms of sexual behavior in the U.S. Asserting her role as an

ethnic subject through her racialized body, the autobiographical subject takes ethnic and racial identity positions in the construction of her subjectivity.

In *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the storytelling tradition emerges as a discursive pattern of constructing Latina subjectivity as the one informed by female experience that is transmitted through stories. Like Ortiz Cofer's text, Agosin's autobiography employs storytelling as performative and discursive processes that create a female continuum of knowledge. However, unlike *Silent Dancing*, subjectivity in *The Alphabet in My Hands* is constructed along the lines of class not gender discourse. As I have argued in the third chapter, Ortiz Cofer employs storytelling to construct subjectivity that refutes gender and sexual limitations imposed upon women by androcentric society, whereas Agosin configures her subjectivity in a way that enables her to contest the oppression suffered by working class women in Chile. In *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the autobiographical self uses storytelling to efface class distinctions by constructing her subjectivity in relation to the stories that circulate among the white Jewish as well as the working class indigenous women. By listening to the stories told by the poor servants, the subject crosses the social spaces of the house, the back and front rooms, to manifest that her personal experience is equally informed by the narratives of the well-to-do and poor women. Continuing her interrogation of class division and race oppression, she connects physically and emotionally to the bodies of her Indian and Chilean nannies while she listens to their stories. The embodiment of the subject's experience of communication with poor Indian Chilean and Chilean maids serves to create affinity with colonial subjects in order to unmask their oppressed condition and to make their bodies visible. In a manner similar to

Silent Dancing, Agosín's autobiography uses the subject's body as a site of the clash of cultures. The label of the body of color in the U.S. converts the autobiographical self into a woman of color, embodying her marginalization and inferior social status as a Latina.

The autobiographical subject in *The Alphabet in My Hands* complicates the configuration of her subjectivity by introducing the Jewish "vector" of her identity. As I have demonstrated in my discussion of the embodiment and identity in the construction of subjectivity in the third chapter, Agosín's narrator uses the stories of her aunts and Anne Frank to identify with Jewish collective female experience. Projecting the scars of the Holocaust victims on her own body, the subject embodies the narratives of the Holocaust experience, making it an inalienable part of her subjectivity. Drawing on the stories about Jewish exile from Europe that circulate among the women in her family, the autobiographical "I" also embodies her condition of exile to the U.S. in the "symbolic wound."

Third, the storytelling tradition intervenes in the discourse of memory in the two autobiographical texts, emerging as a discursive strategy of conflating individual and collective narratives of memory. I have argued in the fourth chapter that the tension between truth and fiction in the writing about memory shapes subjectivity in both texts. Telling their stories through the cultural scripts of storytelling and of women's writing, the subjects depart from the traditional autobiography's principle of adhering to facticity in the recollection of memory. By using storytelling as their cultural forms of telling the story about self, the autobiographical subjects also manifest that they follow collective stories. I have discussed in the fourth chapter that the narrating "I" in *Silent Dancing*

embodies collective female memory in the figure of her body as a collective sociocultural body that symbolizes the continuity of the practice of telling stories in the female community. By embodying communal female narratives of lived and imagined experiences, the subject asserts her collective voice as a spokesperson for her community.

In a similar manner, recollecting the grandmother's stories about her life in Vienna in *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the subject tells the narratives about the past of her Jewish relatives, contorting the truth about her lived experiences. In addition, the significance of communal memory becomes relevant due to the concept of "postmemory" in this autobiography. "Postmemory" is a specific memory of the second generation Holocaust survivors that draws on imagination and collective narratives to identify with the trauma that the second generation Jews never experienced. As I have discussed in the fourth chapter, by using collective female narratives as groundwork for her own stories of exile and marginalization, Agosín's narrator conflates her own and collective stories to create a communal narrative about marginalized and oppressed women, which she embodies in the figure of the house of memory. Furthermore, claiming her belonging to the experiences of working class women and appropriating their narratives to tell the story of self, the subject claims her voice as a collective voice for the ethnic community. As I have argued in the fourth chapter, by forming "alliances" with women of color, the autobiographical self justifies her right as a Latina writer to incorporate the stories of all marginalized and oppressed women such as Indian maids or Latinas in her narrative.

Speaking as ethnic subjects from their social location in the U.S., the autobiographical selves enact their subjectivities along the lines of ethnicity and race.

Predicating their subjectivities upon collective memories, the autobiographical selves reveal that their autobiographical writing as a form of telling stories is pivotal for cultural survival. In the case of *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the need for cultural survival in this text also emerges out of the communal Jewish narrative of exile. As texts in which social history intersects with individual stories and writing is deemed vital for cultural survival, I classify *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* as “cultural autobiographies.” Construing their social locations in the U.S. as strategic ideological positions, the autobiographical selves treat their childhood memories as crucial experiences on the margins of the dominant culture that affect their subjectivity. Moreover, the act of engaging with the communal narratives converts into a strategic role of protecting collective memories of their respective communities from cultural extinction. Drawing on the communal experiences, the speaking subjects assert the collective voices and manifest their cultural and political roles as bearers of memories for their ethnic communities.

Looking at the two narratives through the critical lens of “cultural autobiography,” I have argued that through engaging with the storytelling tradition the autobiographical subjects attempt to access the cultural scripts that impose strictures on their self-representations or that script them as gendered, racialized, or ethnicized subjects. In *Silent Dancing*, the subject asserts her agency by inspecting the stories she heard from the women in her family from the feminist angle. Giving new meaning to the stories and retelling new versions of the stories, she contends the cultural scripts that essentialize the representation of women. In a similar manner, in *The Alphabet in My Hands*, the autobiographical self writes back to the cultural forms that scripted colonial

female subjects as invisible by creating her stories about those women. Moreover, she gains agency by interrogating the division of female social space and creating her metaphorical house of memory inhabited by women of different classes, races, and ethnicities. Writing women of color into the narrative of history and deconstructing narratives that inscribed them as marginalized subjects, the autobiographical self manifests that her practice of writing back involves the creation of a new collective history that gives voice and visibility to women of color.

Enacting their female Latina subjectivity, the speaking subjects introduce the concept of “poetic truth” to validate their rhetorical strategy of using imagination and creativity in the representation of the lived experience. Notably, Agosín’s and Ortiz Cofer’s speaking subjects draw on different tradition of woman’s writing—the first connection her poetic prose with the Latin American female corpus, while the politics of representation of the other is influenced by Virginia Woolf’s feminist autobiographical writing—but “poetic truth” in the two texts results to define the same concept; that is, the primacy of strong emotions, creativity, and imagination in the politics of representation. Emphasizing the primacy of emotional and sensory experiences, the autobiographical subjects introduce their specific strategy of writing about memory. Their claim that impressions are as vital for their interpretation of the past indicates that the subjects consciously predicate their subjectivity on the emotional experiences to contest the “truth” given to them by the institutions of the dominant culture. As I have demonstrated in my discussion of Ortiz Cofer’s “Preface” and Agosín’s reflections on her writing, the autobiographical subjects in both texts are self-reflexive about the problem of

remembering that allows me to conclude that they consciously transform the U.S. Latina autobiographical tradition by validating the use of creativity and imagination in their representation of the lived reality.

Second, “poetic truth” operates in the two texts as a rhetorical strategy of constructing subjectivity that enacts agency. Finding herself among contradictory, culturally specific narratives that script her as a certain kind of ethnic, gendered, and racial subject, the autobiographical self is forced to react to those contradictions and find strategies of gaining agency in these texts. I have argued that due to the clash of the U.S. and colonial systems of values and cultural practices, Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s subjects are forced to reflect on the narratives that they are exposed to in order to save themselves from cultural confusion. Moreover, both subjects are self-reflexive about their “truth-fiction” discourse that attests to the fact that their use of “poetic truth” is a carefully arranged rhetorical strategy of their politics of representation. Applying Chris Weedon’s poststructuralist approximation to feminist agency that I have mentioned in the second chapter in my discussion of agency, I argue that forced to think critically on their multiple statuses, identity positions, social locations, and oppressions, the autobiographical subject gains agency through self-reflection. In other words, an agentified Latina subject emerges as a result of her critical retelling of the stories that form her cultural legacy. Drawing on my discussion of critical engagement with the cultural forms of self-representation in the two texts, I claim that “agentification” also happens due to the subject’s critical examination of the Latin American storytelling tradition, with its creativity and imagination, in order to use it to write back to the cultural scripts that strip the subject off

her agency. This specific strategy of “agentification” demonstrates that Ortiz Cofer and Agosín not merely reproduce the feminist rhetorical strategies of constructing the subject but use creatively the colonial cultural forms to enrich the U.S. Latina autobiographical tradition.

As Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta Sternbach observe, the becoming of a Latina as a subject compels her to “dismantle the representations of stereotypes of her Self constructed, framed, and projected by the dominant ideology” (14). Realizing that her specific sociocultural condition outside the dominant culture precludes her from constructing a unified self, the Latina autobiographical “I” turns to examine her selfhood as composite of contradictory subject positions. She feels to pressure to resist the cultural scripts that confer certain statutes on her. By validating their subjectivities, deconstructing the institutionalized narratives of history, and writing back to cultural scripts, the autobiographical subjects in *Silent Dancing* and *The Alphabet in My Hands* demonstrate that their resistance takes multiple directions. The instantiations of the subjects’ reevaluation of the narratives in place in order to interrogate the cultural strictures are Ortiz Cofer’s feminist reading of Puerto Rican *cuentos* and of her body as a social text, and Agosín’s re-signification of her body as “black presence.” These examples of critical and uncritical reproduction of cultural scripts in these texts demonstrate that the subjects emerge as “subjects-in-process” who are able, as Chris Weedon puts it, to “choose from the options available” (121). Thus, engaging storytelling dialogically to reveal her oppressions and at the same time, to refute it, the

autobiographical self becomes, what Smith and Watson term, a “critically aware subject in process” (Autobiography 46).

As I have demonstrated in my analysis of the constitutive parts of autobiographical subjectivity in Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s texts, the autobiographical selves employ the intricate work of the storytelling tradition and “poetic truth” in the configuration of subjectivity to enact their agency. Thus, by becoming a critically aware “subjects-in-process,” they interrogate the power discourse that defines them and other women of color as colonial subjects. Moreover, declaring their roles as spokespersons for their respective communities, the “subjects-in-process” attempt to re-write the communal narratives, offering their interpretations of the collective history as gendered and ethnic subjects in their “cultural autobiographies.” This specific role of the speaking subjects in the two texts allows me to term their writing as decolonizing and thus to locate the two autobiographical texts I study in a wider body of female postcolonial autobiographical writing.

An immediate line of comparison between Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s text emerges from their subjects’ engagement of the storytelling tradition to write back to the hegemonic discourse. In her careful examination of the francophone writings of women of color in the postcolonial context, Françoise Lionnet defines the concept of “braided” texts as a type of postcolonial writing. In these texts the postcolonial subject braids “all the traditions at its disposal, using the fragments that constitute it in order to participate fully in a dynamic process of transformation” of the spaces of dissymmetrical production and circulation of knowledge (5-6). Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s autobiographical subject

show a similar strategy of drawing on the fragments of traditions available to them in order to transform the discursive and social spaces that underwrite the asymmetry of power relations among genders, classes, and races. Moreover, the “agentifying” effect of moving between social locations in transnational settings in Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s autobiographies may bear resemblance to the influence of relocation from the colonial space to Europe in the autobiography by Senegalese writer Ken Bugul, *The Abandoned Baobab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese Woman*.²¹ This comparison of Ortiz Cofer’s and Agosín’s texts with Bugul’s autobiography is just one examples of how U.S. Latina autobiography can be placed within the body of postcolonial female/feminist autobiographical writing.

The examination of the cultural and political role of autobiographical narrative in cultural survival creates an affinity between the Latina texts I study and the African American autobiographical canon. Reflecting on her autobiography *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996) in the essay “Writing Autobiography,” African American feminist writer and educator bell hooks comments that the impetus for her writing autobiographical narrative was the “rapid disintegration of black folk experience or in some way the gradual wearing away of that experience” due to capitalism and

²¹ Ken Bugul (pseudonym of Mariétou M’Baye) was born in Senegal and educated in French colonial schools. She received a scholarship in 1970 to study in Brussels and in 1973 to study in France (Garane 162). She returned to Senegal in 1973, but Western education made her alien to her African family. Jeanne Garane comments that in *The Abandoned Baobab*, Bugul demonstrates “how her French education led her to assimilate Western values and place them above those of her own society, and describes her constant objectification as an exotic animal-like beauty under the gaze of Europeans she encounters” (164). Smith and Watson argue that the privilege of studying in Europe allows Bugul’s autobiographical subject to reflect critically on her position at home, as “a ‘child’ of colonial Francophone Africa, and in Europe, as an exoticized female Other, and thus to enact agency (*Autobiography* 46). However, her agentification results in “making her more keenly aware of her interpellation as a subject of neocolonial practices” (*Autobiography* 46).

assimilation into the mainstream culture (431). She defines the role of her writing as preservation of the narrative of black folk experience in order to save it from extinction. Finding themselves in a similar condition of living on the margins of the dominant culture, Ortiz Cofer and Agosín envision their cultural roles as writers for their communities. As these three texts demonstrate, situating cultural survival at the center of the cultural value of autobiographical writing in both the U.S. Latina and the African American feminist traditions of thought reinforces the idea that preserving personal and collective experiences through writing has a crucial cultural and political role for ethnic writers.

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