

The Search for Identity in Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho*

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Introduction

One of the most overlooked novels of the Mexican Revolution is *Cartucho* by Nellie Campobello. While most literary anthologies never fail to discuss works such as *Los de abajo* or *El águila y la serpiente*, *Cartucho* is rarely even mentioned, let alone studied. In fact, it is often unknown to readers of Mexican fiction. This is unfortunate, as this narrative of the Revolution is the only work by a woman that is included in this genre. Unlike the majority of these novels, which are written by intellectuals, politicians, or

former soldiers, *Cartucho* is the work of a woman who experienced the Revolution as an adolescent, and then young woman, in the city of Parral in the northern state of Chihuahua. Rather than recounting the great battles or other decisive moments of the war, Campobello focuses on the Revolution at the micro level during its final and most brutal years (1915-1920), when Villa and his popular movement were on the decline. Although the author was not a child during this time period, she narrates her autobiographical work from the perspective of a small girl who watches the harsh reality of death and conflict from the safety of her window. The reader thus experiences the violence and horror of war through the eyes of a female, child narrator who rarely leaves the domestic environment. As the narrator is too young to understand the violence in which she lives, she speaks of death and mutilation in a matter-of-fact way that both shocks and confounds the reader. This use of a child narrator is unique among the novels of the Revolution and leaves me with various questions that merit investigation. Why does Campobello, a women author in a *machista* society, decide to write from a perspective even more marginal than her own? What literary or personal purposes does it serve? Why would an adult choose to view the world through the eyes of a child? Has this choice of narration contributed to the text's relative obscurity?

As a novel of the Revolution, *Cartucho* exhibits many of the characteristics typical of this genre. It is a partially autobiographical text, divided into fifty-six *estampas*, that is episodes or vignettes, which paint various portraits of life and death during the Revolution. Despite these similarities, the use of a child narrator makes this work unique, as stated previously. There is, however, one key difference between *Cartucho* and other novels of the Revolution which is critical to understanding the author's use of a child's voice. While texts such as *Los de abajo* are essentially epics that affirm nationalist feeling, *Cartucho* is a work based on regional identification, not national. When Nellie's¹ mother cries at the death of her *paisanos*, it is because they share a common regional identification and culture that binds them together, not as Mexicans, but as inhabitants of a specific *patria chica* that crosses the borders of Durango and Chihuahua. As a result of the Mexican

¹ Throughout this work I will use "Nellie" to refer to the child narrator created by the author, who I refer to as simply Campobello. While Nellie represents Campobello as a child, she is a fictional creation of the writer, especially considering that Campobello only assumed this name as an adult. As a child she was Francisca.

Revolution and the nationalist (biopolitical) polices that followed, this type of regional identity was lost and only preserved as memory.

Although *Cartucho* takes place in Parral, Campobello wrote from Mexico City. As a result of the Revolution, the author as a young woman suffered a trauma that resulted in the irreversible loss of part of her own identity, something that bound her intrinsically to her mother. She, however, does not mourn the loss of this object of desire, but rather is entrapped in a state of melancholia where she continually returns to the moment of her loss. Thus, Nellie is the mouthpiece through which Campobello is able to speak in an attempt to recover the individual and collective memories which are all that remain of her lost identity. In this way, she is also able to recount certain "truths" that constitute alternatives to the official history of the Mexican Revolution. Through an analysis of the narrative voice in the text, it will become clear that *Cartucho* is a complex work that deserves critical attention.

An Ignored Text

While the use of a child narrator greatly contributes to the complexity of the work, *Cartucho* has been ignored by academia for this same reason. As the narrative of a Mexican woman from the first half of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that this novel was not taken seriously at the time of its publication in 1931. In addition, Campobello offered a relatively positive vision of Pancho Villa at a time when he was "officially" regarded as a violent, brutal bandit by both the Mexican and American political systems. The images and stories in *Cartucho* directly contradict this image and describe a time when biopolitics did not determine identity and meaning.

Despite changes in opinion regarding Villa, the text continued to be overlooked and misinterpreted in later years. For example, in his 1966 publication *Mexico in its Novel*, John Brushwood writes that the "view of the Revolution" is "limited" by the use of a child narrator. Then, without discussing the work's meaning, he concludes: "However, the book apparently says what the author wanted to say about the Revolution, since she made no further contributions to the theme" (208). Brushwood thus belittles the work itself, and leaves the reader clueless as to its content. Regardless of his flawed analysis, he does not even pause to consider Campobello's second text, *Las manos de Mamá*,

which has also been studied as a work of the Revolution. Brushwood's analysis is typical of many other articles that I read during the course of my research which, like his, fail to take Campobello's work seriously.

Perhaps these critics find it difficult to accept Campobello's work as a part of the genre because it is narrated by a female child and treats a maternal figure as a revolutionary hero. This differs greatly from the majority of the novels of the Mexican Revolution, where women rarely play an active role, as Elvia Montes de Oca Navas details:

En la novela de la Revolución Mexicana la mujer aparece como un ser sin nombre ni rostro, anónimo y secundario, aunque siempre presente ... un 'artefacto masculino' que se toma y se abandona cuando ya no es útil ni necesario; un ser sin ubicación propia. (136)

In contrast, *Cartucho* is a text in which the woman, not the man, provides stability and protection. While men quickly become cadavers, the women of Parral maintain the collective memory of the community, protecting both their families and home. It is Nellie, ever-watching from her window, who remains constant as men quickly come in and out of her amoral gaze. Thus, it is the man that becomes a "feminine artifact" that exists thanks to either the stories and *corridos* of female oral history or the gaze of a small girl. By writing from the perspective of a defenseless child, the author actually inverts the traditional female/male relationship as it appears in other novels of the Revolution. This inversion is also another contributing factor to *Cartucho's* marginal status in the Mexican literary canon.

Cartucho as Autobiography

Despite the lack of critical attention to *Cartucho*, several scholars have analyzed and valued it as an autobiographical work. Most of these, however, do not acknowledge the author's skills as a writer of fiction and wholly accept Campobello's narrative as a factual account told by a wide-eyed youth. For example, Gary D. Keller describes Campobello as "afortunada" because her childhood coincided with the most violent part of the Revolution, thus giving her narrative "una veracidad y espontaneidad muy diferente a la obra del artista adulto" (143). Keller seems to overlook the fact that the author wrote the text as an adult, and is thus not comparable to a child writing a diary. One cannot consider Campobello as a Mexican Anne Frank. Even Marta

Portal, who acknowledges that the text is partially fictionalized, describes Nellie's perspective as "una visión inocentemente objetiva, o naturalmente objetiva" (125). She concludes her discussion of the work by praising the writer for having "una visión virginal de la Revolución" (127). Is it even possible for a writer to be "naturally" objective, or to have a pure, virginal perspective of anything? The very process of writing compromises meaning. The moment that Campobello put her memories to paper, she turned them into something literary that should be treated as such.

Unfortunately, it is quite common for autobiographical works to be considered factual, and thus distinct from fiction. The reader imagines the writer, sitting at a desk, putting her words to paper without pause or reflection. It is the story of her life, or in other words, her life "produces the autobiography" (Man 69). Paul de Man demonstrates that this is not the case:

. . . can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? (69)

In this way, it is not always the life of a writer that gives way to her autobiography. The very process of writing, of "capturing" one's life on paper, can determine the path of or even limit the life itself. The same can be said of reading. What I read is the result of my life, but, at the same time, isn't my life shaped by what I read?

This is especially meaningful in the case of Nellie Campobello, as her two best known texts (*Cartucho* and *Las Manos de Mamá*) in many ways dictated the path of her life. Even her name and birth date are not her own. According to baptismal records, Campobello was born in 1900 and given the name María Francisca Moya Luna. During her life in Mexico City, however, she repeatedly claimed to have been born in 1909 and baptized Nellie Francisca Ernestina. She was not a small child during the last years of the Revolution during which the events related in *Cartucho* are supposed to have taken place. As she watched the violence and massacre of her mother's *paisanos*, Campobello was not the "innocent" child of *Cartucho*, Nellie, but rather, Francisca, a young woman capable of understanding her mother's stories while experiencing the true horror of the Revolution. For Francisca the Revolution was a great trauma where her world, and thus her identity,

were destroyed. The final blow came shortly after the Revolution when her mother died in 1922 and she relocated to Mexico City. Unable to mourn this final loss, of both mother and motherland, she turned her melancholic view towards writing and dance, in which she was able to reinvent herself, first as Nellie Campbell and, eventually, as Campobello. By appropriating a new identity, she is able to speak of the past from a safe distance, as a child who is incapable of comprehending the horror in which she lives.

This abandonment of a former identity is not uncommon in the melancholic subject. In “Duelo y melancolia,” Sigmund Freud says that the melancholic “yo” often identifies with the lost or abandoned object, and thus loses her ability to love herself and even becomes overly self-critical. The self, not the object, becomes the target of any hate that the subject may harbor. In this way, the loss of the object becomes a loss of the “yo” (2095). Unable to live with Francisca’s pain and self-hatred, the author develops a new identity, Nellie Campobello. As the lost object of desire is a feminine figure, she appropriates the English name of her half-sister’s illegitimate father, Campbell, and later hispanicizes it. The name “Nellie” similarly reflects this unconscious aversion to the self, as it was the name of her mother’s dog in Parral (Carballo 328). For the rest of her life, Campobello lives as the narrator of her works, that is to say as a small child obsessed with her origin, the past life that she continually explores/creates in her writing and dance, as she indicates in a published interview from 1965: “Pronto me di cuenta que aquí todo es simulación, componenda, que lo único cierto era lo que nos decía Ella, Mamá. Por eso vivo en el pasado: en la infancia y la adolescencia” (330). Campobello sees her mother, and thus the regional identity she reflects, as the only source of truth. Just as Paul de Man outlines, the very process of self-portraiture determined many of the aspects of the author’s life.

In classifying Campobello as a melancholic subject, I am not trying to undermine her narrative, but rather explore its origins and the source of its unique use of a female, child narrator. As Walter Benjamin has noted, to speak of the “past historically” does not mean that one needs to relate events as they actually were, but rather “it means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (255). Campobello does precisely this, as she understands that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy,” when that enemy is tradition and the official history of the state and its dominance of biopolitics (255). In an

interview with Emmanuel Carballo printed in *Diecinueve protagonistas de la literatura mexicana del siglo XX*, Campobello explains why she wrote *Cartucho*: “Lo escribí para vengar una injuria. Las novelas que por entonces se escribían, y que narran hechos guerreros, están repletas de mentiras contra los hombres de la Revolución” (336). For Campobello, other novels of the Revolution² represented a type of threat or “enemy” that contradicted the very memories that constituted her identity. These works not only injured the reputation of the men of the Revolution, but also Nellie herself. According to Freud, the melancholic subject suffers as a person with an injury: “El complejo melancólico se conduce como una herida abierta” (2097). Thus, *Cartucho* can be seen as a defense mechanism, meant to protect what the author sees as an attack on the dead, on her “muertos,” on her memories and thus on her identity.

Regional Identity and its Basis in Cartucho

Through the narration of a child, *Cartucho* challenges the notion that the Revolution was a purely nationalist movement, demonstrating that regional identification was an important factor even during the postrevolutionary period when national policy promoted the idea of Mexico as a mestizo nation with a single identity. In her narration, Nellie reveals that her mother is greatly saddened whenever one of her *paisanos* is killed, whether or not he is a *Villista*. She is particularly affected when Santos Ruíz, who refuses to become a *Villista*, is executed along with two of his closest friends (67). While his comrades are in fact *Villistas*, they respect his bravery and wish to stand by him even in death. Clearly, Santos is a member of the community and lives his life according to the same regional values as his executors. Thus, his death is seen as a momentous loss, while at the same time Nellie views the massacre of over three hundred anonymous *Carrancistas* as an everyday event. Clearly, for the residents of Parral, regional identity distinguishes friend from foe, even more than political or military affiliation does. It is the female narrator, a small girl affected by her mother's emotions, that makes this distinction clear to the reader. As she recounts the

² Although she attacked most *novelas de la Revolución*, Campobello made an exception for *El águila y la serpiente* by Martín Lúís Guzmán, who was her close personal friend and possible lover.

gruesome death scenes of the men of her “*patria chica*,” Nellie consistently mentions the birthplace of each, while describing the precise location where they are killed. She even identifies the surrounding hills and landmarks with proper names that only a local would recognize. As a child, Nellie does not focus on the political reasons for the war, and she is incapable of understanding it as a “national” movement. For Nellie, the war is a part of her community and thus a local movement. In this manner, the use of a child narrator, who is incapable of transcending the domestic or regional space, contributes to the micro-level portrayal of the Revolution and the emphasis on regional identity. In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar explains that first-person narratives written by marginalized figures such as African-Americans have “challenged monolithic views of identity in the United States, and asserted the multiplicity of American cultures” (27). Nellie is just such a marginal subject that becomes a voice for her community, as she offers a compelling discourse based on local culture. Nellie’s narration of the Revolution as a purely local phenomenon reveals the wide variety of cultural and land-based identities prevalent in revolutionary Mexico.

The narrator’s distinctive local culture and identity are the result of northern Mexico’s unique path of development. In *Exits from the labyrinth*, Claudio Lomnitz-Adler explains that a variety of factors, including political and economic change, can cause new intimate cultures to develop or converge with others. Although Mexico was principally colonized by the Spanish who started as a single identity group, patterns of settlement, mixture with the native population and a variety of other factors changed this: “Through economic and political processes, members of a single identity group can become differentiated to the point that each develops its own intimate culture, while certain common elements remain and are constituted into a culture of social relations” (34). While the colonizers of northern Mexico maintained a culture of social relations with the rest of the Mexican territory, they also developed a distinct intimate culture based on their specific needs. For example, Hidalgo del Parral developed as the center of the mining industry for southern Chihuahua and northern Durango. As colonists were relatively isolated from Mexico City and had to deal with the nomadic Indian populations of the north on their own, they settled in military colonies and became skilled in fighting and the use of fire arms. Private armies were the norm, and the landowners who controlled

them also controlled politics. Thus, this area was distinct even in the twentieth century, as Max Parra notes: "Tradición guerrera, autonomía política, código de honor con matices señoriales, confluyen en la formación de la conciencia cultural de la región" (175). During the years of the Revolution, *Villismo* was the most visible incarnation of this northern Mexican culture (Katz 142-143). For this reason, the author associates attacks on Villa's reputation with an attack on her own regional identity.

Claudio Lominitz-Adler presents an analysis of another intimate culture in Mexico, that of Huasteca, that is particularly applicable to the case of *Villista* identity and culture. Due to its relative political autonomy from the capital, Huastecan culture and history do not have a place in nationalist discourse and are countered "with the construction of an ideology of frontierization" (53). In response, the people of Huasteca channel their "hidden values and alternate truths" into a variety of political and regionalist social movements (53). Huasteca lives in a state of exception, as Lominitz-Adler indicates: "The Huasteca is assimilable to national culture only as vast periphery, never on its own terms" (55). In this way, *Villismo* is a popular movement that incarnates the "hidden values and alternate truths" of northern regional identity and is thus not assimilable into national culture. It is only included in national discourse through its own exclusion. For example, in official national history Villa can only be accepted as a bandit. By contradicting this image, Nellie overturns official history and defines the Revolution in her own terms, through her mother's regional identity and oral history. In this way, she explores not only her lost identity, but the "alternate truth present in local tradition" (Lominitz-Adler, 55).

Individual and Regional Memory

In *Cartucho*, Campobello attempts to recover her lost object of desire, that is, her regional identity (as described above), by recuperating her memories through writing. As a melancholic subject, however, she is unable to speak of the pain she suffered, and so she writes and lives as Nellie. As a child, she can speak frankly and seemingly emotionally detached from the shock and emotion of the memories she relates. She speaks from a relatively safe perspective, as Matthews describes: "The battle frame is correspondingly child sized: not the slope of a distant hilltop but the square of a window, the canyon of a small-town

street, the angle of vision around the ample, discreet slope of her mother's skirts" (149). In this way, Nellie's vision and discourse is contained within a limited, regional frame of reference. Her memories are localized in both meaning and context. Despite this limited scope however, Campobello gives a "powerful literary voice to a heretofore powerless and voiceless participant, not only of the Mexican Revolution, but of WAR in general—the female child" (Peters 338). The narrator's power does not come from within, however, but from the world she is a part of through her mother who acts as her bridge to the outside world. As a marginal figure, Nellie is able to enter domestic and private spaces that a politician or intellectual could never access. She listens to her mother's stories and to those related to her by others. Often, she turns the discourse over to other women, expanding the scope of her narrative. Thus, Nellie is not the sole narrator of the work, as she actually conducts and arranges a polyphony of female voices that share her mother's values and identity, as Dennis Parle writes: "The narrator functions as a compiler or composite voice of intimate memories of personal experience of small town people, caught up in the revolutionary holocaust" (202). Nellie's intimate memories that form the base of the work are superimposed with the regional or collective memory of the community (Parra 168). From this local perspective, the reader derives a more profound vision of the Revolution.

As Nellie is educated in the oral history of her community, she becomes another link in the chain of female oral history. The author uses the child narrator to present an intimate view of the Revolution that conveniently characterizes her invented persona, Nellie, as the possessor of her mother's truths and thus, identity. Through writing she attempts to create a bridge to the past, where she can recreate and transform the moment when her object of desire was initially lost. Such a recuperation and revision of memory is not possible, however, as narrative never quite brings memory to the immediate present, as Roberto González Echevarría outlines in his analysis of *Biografía de un cimarrón*³ in *The Voice of the Masters*:

³This is also a work that deals with the theme of revolution, as it is a novel of the Cuban Revolution, written by Miguel Barnet. Although González Echevarría analyzes it as a documentary novel, its classification is problematic as it has also been referred to as an autobiography, biography, and novel.

As a writer, the protagonist has as his only recourse the inscription of the memory and its gradual fading—writing hovers on that point where memory slips away from the present to become literature, a code that is both memory and the gesture of its recovery. Once it becomes literature, memory may return to the present, but (already) only and always belatedly, having relinquished immediacy in the process. (113)

As the author puts memory to paper, it “slips away” and becomes literature, something purely discursive, a literary theme, that no longer belongs to the present. Just as in the case of texts, such as *Facundo*, that attempt to become the foundational works of a nation, textualized memory, whether collective or individual, cannot serve as the basis of identity. This reflects the same problem that occurs when writing about the “other.” That is to say, How do I write about the other, without turning him into literature? Just as this question has yet to be answered, Campobello does not recuperate her lost identity in *Cartucho*. As discussed earlier, she in fact continues to deal with these same issues of loss and identity in her later text, *Las manos de mamá*.

Alternate “Truths” in the Final Estampas

Although Campobello does not succeed in recuperating her identity, she does present a text that challenges traditional historiography by entering into a domestic world rarely explored by writers during her time period. She goes against the dominate ideology of her day and looks at the Revolution not as a new glorious beginning, but as an intimate and horrific trauma viewed through the eyes of a small girl. The collective memory of Parral is not that of the victors, but of the vanquished, of those who are denied voice in official history. *Cartucho* stands as a testimony of the barbarism and carnage that taints every monument or document of civilization (Benjamin 256). In his prologue to a recent edition of the text, Jorge Aguilar Mora writes that *Cartucho* captures “esos momentos que la historiografía no sabe cómo incorporar a su visión ni a su discurso” (39). Through Nellie’s eyes, Campobello is able to examine the personal and familiar aspects of war and revolution, as her “innocent” child narrator serves as the catalyst of violence (Fornet 13). In this way, memory serves as much more than a way to preserve individual and collective identity. The memory of the marginal stands outside of history and thus challenges it.

In no place are these points more evident than in the final episodes of *Cartucho*, where the author seems to realize the impossibility of her personal project and turns the narration over to the voice of the pueblo. While the majority of the articles I read for this investigation find little organization or underlying structure in the text, I find that the final fourteen episodes contradict this conclusion. The “Milagro de Julio” is the *estampa* that initiates this key section: “La Virgen del Rayo se entremeció de dolor, las estrellas de su enagua casi se desprendieron. Brilló tanto aquel momento, que por eso se ha quedado en la mente de todos” (115). This marks the beginning of a change in narration, where the author directly expresses her personal desire through the voice of Julio, a youth who wishes he could be a child in order to avoid the horror he is about to face: “Ahí donde ven yo no quiero pelear. No por miedo. Miedo no tengo. ¡Por vida de Dios, mejor quisiera ser chiquito!” (115). Julio is not a child, but rather a teenager, just as Campobello was during the most violent days of the Revolution. As he walks down the street, his uncombed blonde curls “le darían el aspecto de un niño que juega con la tierra en el mero sol” (116). Ironically, his wish is granted as he is burned to such a severe degree that his body disintegrates and he is “otra vez niño” (116). The references to a youth who escapes his reality by becoming an innocent child is further reinforced when the men carry his coffin to the cemetery: “lo iban meciendo al ritmo de sus pasos” (116). In this way, the author at some level recognizes the impossibility of living her life as an eternal child. Only through his death is Julio able to accomplish such a transformation and escape the world of the Revolution.

The *estampas* that follow “El Milagro de Julio” are very different from those in the rest of the work. Here, the text turns away from the horror of death and offers anecdotes that contradict the image of Villa as a brutal bandit, as in “Las Sandias,” “Las Rayadas,” and “La Voz del General.” Those episodes, though they do speak of death, are not as gruesome or violent as those that appear earlier in the text. Here, the pueblo praises the bravery and exploits of its fallen men in *corridos* so that they will not be forgotten, such as in “Tragedia de Martín.” Even the women of the community are praised in “Las Mujeres del Norte” for their role as the keepers of oral history. In these fourteen *estampas*, the author demonstrates the capacity that oral history, and thus the memory of the pueblo, has for surviving and challenging official history. The community will not forget those who died in battle but are

forgotten by history. It is this memory and identity that cannot be destroyed or forgotten, as indicated by the positive ending where the Virgen is no longer plagued by pain: "Se alegraría otra vez nuestra calle, Mamá me agarría de la mano hasta llegar al tempo, donde la Virgen la recibía" (154).

Conclusion

Clearly, *Cartucho* is a complex work that has not received the critical attention that it deserves. As a novel of the Mexican Revolution, its use of a female child narrator is truly unique. The author Nellie Campobello is a melancholic subject who through the appropriation of an alternate persona, Nellie, attempts to return to the moment of her initial trauma and loss. Speaking through Nellie is an effective strategy that allows Campobello to distance herself from the true horror she experienced as a young woman coming of age during the most violent years of the Revolution. Through Nellie, Campobello recounts in a matter-of-fact way numerous episodes of death and violence. It is thus the reader and not the narrator who experiences the shock of these disturbing portraits of the dead who continue living in the mind of the author. The use of a child narrator who has only a regional understanding of the Revolution also allows the author to challenge the idea that the Revolution was a nationalist movement. Nellie reveals that the Revolution pitted brother against brother in a highly personal struggle, as the regional autonomy and identity of northern Mexico were challenged. Nellie not only outlines regional identity, but serves as a "compiler" of the oral history of her community. As she rarely leaves the domestic space, the child narrator relies on her mother's stories, as well as those of other women in Parral, as a principal source of memory and identity. She becomes another link in the chain of female oral history and is able to recount the history of her community, becoming a source of alternate history as she recounts the war from the perspective of the losing side, which does not have a voice in official history. Nellie gives voice to the silent dead of "los vencidos." Although the author is not able to recuperate her lost object of desire through the writing of the text, she does produce a work that challenges the traditional interpretations of the Mexican Revolution and that offers a rare look into the domestic, feminine world during war. *Cartucho* truly is a work that merits a second look by the academic community.

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