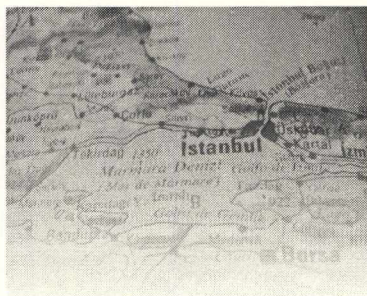


Beyond Borders:

Re-Membering Language and Self in Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* and Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mutterzunge* (Mother Tongue)

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According to Gloria Anzaldúa, the borderlands of Mexican (im)migrants in the United States signify more than just a geographical (non-)location: as a philosophical metaphor they come to symbolize that liminal space created “wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa, Preface). The transition and vagueness of the border make for a dangerous and unpredictable terrain. Yet as

the border does not allow sole allegiance with either of its sides, it also offers the possibility of a more inclusive worldview, in stark contrast to Western forms of dichotomization. The barrier then at the same time also works as a bridge.

In the following paper I want to explore how this idea of the borderland could be traced not only in the context of Mexican American 'border literature', but also whether and how this concept could be found within literature of migrant/minority writers outside the U.S. For this reason I will compare fiction by Chicana Sandra Cisneros and Turkish German Emine Sevgi Özdamar. I want to investigate how these writers present the borderlands of existence not just as a place of alienation and peril, but how they, with the help of language, are able to transform this non-place into a potential (or rather *poetential*) space for re-creating and re-remembering identity. Using Hélène Cixous' notion of feminine writing, I will argue that in Cisneros and Özdamar, writing itself becomes a form of subversive border crossing and resistance to white male imperialism.

Contemporary feminist theory has taken up ideas of exile and hybridity in interesting ways to point to women's position within patriarchal structures (and the possible subversion thereof). Just like the border is, within the patriarchal realm, considered a suspicious place, both integral to and apart from the center, so does woman in patriarchal society inhabit an uncanny space both part of and apart from male authority. In the discourse of the nation, woman usually does not take on the position of the nation builder or founder, but of the virgin land that is adored and conquered by the male citizen, who eventually domesticates woman into the "motherland" (and the attached mother tongue). The intersection of gender and nation thus reveals both aspects as "mutually constitutive locations of social construction" (Brinker-Gabler, 11-12).

In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", the French writer and feminist Hélène Cixous observes: "Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex" (Cixous 1986: 315). Since woman is compared to death, to be a woman, then, becomes in itself a life on the border, on the verge of being and not-being. For minority women, their estrangement works on several levels at once. Their lack of agency as both people of color in a white western society (or, more specifically in the case of Turks in Germany, as members of a demonized religion: Islam) as women in a world of male privilege,

leaves migrant/borderland women (at least) doubly displaced. For the woman of color, the borderland then becomes a place where identity is constantly (re-)negotiated. Due to its unfixed, transient character, it may offer the possibility of multiplicity as a counterforce to western monologism. As exemplified in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and other Chicana feminists, the borderland in this way moves beyond the realm of geographical location to denote a new kind of (feminist) consciousness, a *mestiza* consciousness that seeks to “break down dualities that serve to imprison women” (Saldívar-Hull, 5).

Reminiscent of Cixous’ depiction of feminine difference, this consciousness is not exclusively tied to the Chicanas’ realm of experiences. Yet, unlike Cixous, Anzaldúa’s notion of difference takes into account the specificity of women of color. In a similar vein like Anzaldúa, Azade Sehan writes about Turkish women writers in Germany: “Doubly marginalized as unwanted foreign elements and as women, in that order, they have turned this double bind into a mode of socio-cultural intervention” (Seyhan, 231).

In the remainder of this paper I would like to examine how this ‘border consciousness,’ this ‘socio-cultural intervention,’ finds expression in literature written by three different ‘border women,’ and in which ways this liminal space (i.e. ‘creative moment’) is achieved through and in their writing. As Empire, according to Elleke Boehmer, “was itself, at least in part, a textual exercise,” the act of de-colonization thus “frequently assumed textual form” (Boehmer, 12-13). Writing then, as resistance towards dominant discourses, becomes in itself a form of transgressive bordercrossing.

Verena Andermatt Conley explains that

[a]s an institution, literature reinforces the values of the dominant class. The literary establishment serves a class interest under the guise of moral and aesthetic values. Literary discourse must marginalize itself not through socialist-realist techniques but through the questioning of language. (Conley, 11)

In Cisneros, this marginalization of language occurs, for instance, through her incorporation of Chicano Spanish into her short stories. For example, at the beginning of her short story “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” the author presents the reader with a series of letters/prayers/thank-you notes by various Chicanos, thanking God for miracles fulfilled: “Milagroso Cristo negro,/Thank you por el milagro de haber graduado de high school. Aquí le regalo mi retrato de graduation” (Cisneros, 123).

Apart from de-westernizing Jesus Christ into Cristo Negro, Cisneros also subverts the idea of a linear text by starting off her story with seven pages of thanksgivings by various characters. Presenting several different voices, from both sides of the U.S. Mexican border, the author underscores the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Chicano culture, while also pointing out the constructed nature of the border as a dividing line. Furthermore, by deliberately using non-standard English and Spanish as her literary languages, Cisneros defies notions of non/standard and asserts herself not as Mexican or American, but as a Chicana woman and writer.

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? (Anzaldúa, 77)

Here Gloria Anzaldúa illustrates the liminal character of Chicano Spanish as a border tongue and the fact that language and identity cannot be easily separated from each other: "Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself," Anzaldúa claims (81).

Another important aspect of Cisneros' use of multiple tongues in her stories is the attempt to show the inability to adequately translate migrants' experiences into the world of experience of the dominant culture. Instead of appropriating the unfamiliar into the dominant discourse, Cisneros confronts the (western part of her) audience with a feeling of helplessness and un-belonging usually experienced by the migrant in society. The second part of her story (or stories) focuses on the fate of one young woman named Rosario and her own coming to terms with her Chicana heritage:

Virgencita de Guadalupe. For a long time I wouldn't let you in my house. I couldn't see you without seeing my ma each time my father came home drunk and yelling, blaming everything that ever went wrong in his life on her.

I couldn't look at your folded hands without seeing my *abuela* mumbling, "My son, my son, my son..." Couldn't look at you without blaming you for all the pain my mother and her mother and all of our mothers have put up with in the name of God. Couldn't let you in my house. (Cisneros, 127)

The religious (Christian) figure of the Virgin Mary as a representation of womanhood is associated with suffering and obedience. The “folded hands” signify passivity and resignation, while the mumbling of the woman’s grandmother alludes to a lack of voice and agency of women (woman is mumbling instead of speaking out loud). Likewise, the repetition of the unfinished phrase “my son, my son,” describes a female lack of language (i.e. power) and positions women outside the masculine, logocentric discourse. Female subjugation is thus intricately tied to religion and the oppressive (masculine) power of the (Catholic) church. The innocent virgin(land) is conquered and appropriated into the mother(land) by the forces of colonialism. In contrast to her female relatives, Rosario does not accept the role she is assigned to as woman as natural: “I don’t want to be a mother. I wouldn’t mind being a father. At least a father could still be artist [sic!], could still love *something* instead of *someone*, and no one would call that selfish” (Cisneros, 127). She questions the validity of her gendered position by asserting herself as an artist and by staying outside the realm of motherhood and marriage. As the ultimate rejection of (traditional) femininity, she cuts off her long hair.

Yet the gesture turns out to be not one of denial but reverence. As she learns to recollect cultural memory and history, she is finally able to see beyond the constraints of dichotomization and to understand the interrelation of colonialism and subjugation of women and to view the virgin “no longer [as] Mary the mild, but [as] our mother Tonantzin,” and to find her in the Aztec deity of “Coatlaxopeuh, She Who Has Dominion over Serpents,” as well as in “Teteoinnan, Toci, Xchiquitzal, Tlazoleotl, Coatlicue, Chalchiuhtlicue, Coyoxauhqui, Huixtocihuatl, Chicomecuatl [or] Cihuacoatl” (Cisneros, 128). Anzaldúa explains that “*Coatlicue* is the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial being out of her cavernous womb. Goddess of birth and death, *Coatlicue* gives and takes life; she is the incarnation of the cosmic processes” (68). The woman in the story is eventually able to realize the different Aztec divinities as different aspects of the same goddess, as symbols of the multiplicity and the ambiguity of the self: the woman as giver, protector and destroyer of life. Anzaldúa similarly re-imagines the virgin not as a mere symbol of suffering and defeat, but as a mediating figure, reconciling different cultures and world views:

[La Virgen de Guadalupe] mediates between the Spanish and the Indian cultures [...] and between Chicanos and the white world. She mediates between humans and the divine, between this reality and the reality of spirit entities. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess. (Anzaldúa, 52)

By finding coalitions between these ancient pre-colonial deities and their Eurocentric counterparts of the likes of “Our Lady of Lourdes” or “Our Lady of the Rosary,” Rosario manages to go beyond a naïve return to a pre-Columbian mythic past, as she re-names and thus consciously de-constructs and re-constructs female identity (Cisneros, 128).

Re-naming becomes an important aspect of re-memembering not only the personal but also the collective self. By discovering “Our Lady of the Rosary” as another side of Tonantzín/Coatlicue, Rosario also learns to re-read and accept her own name: Rosario, short for Nuestra Señora del Rosario, is a synonym for the Virgin Mary. The grammatically masculine gender (el rosario, meaning “rosary” in English) of this rather common female name further underscores the multiplicity of self/selves and a resistance towards essentialized constructions of identity. Re-naming herself and realizing that “there is power in my mother’s patience, strength in my grandmother’s endurance,” Rosario is finally able to recognize and validate her connection with her female relatives and ancestors: “I wasn’t ashamed, then, to be my mother’s daughter, my grandmother’s granddaughter, my ancestors’ child” (Cisneros, 128).

As she cuts off her hair and leaves it as a gift for la Virgen “[a]bove a Toys ‘R’ Us name tag that says IZAURA. Along several hospital bracelets. Next to a business card for Sergio’s Casa de la Belleza Beauty College. Domingo Reyna’s driver’s licence. Notes printed on the flaps of envelopes,” and many other souvenirs of thankful parishioners, she places herself no longer outside, but within the context of her mother’s culture (Cisneros, 124). She takes her place within this group, not as a forced obligation, but as a conscious decision. The story thus moves back and forth between the collective/public (the various notes by people left on a church wall) and the personal/private level (Rosario’s story), resisting the western dichotomized view of antagonizing private and public spheres.

By choosing to re-member her individual and collective histories, Rosario learns to appreciate herself in all ambiguity and contradiction:

I'm a bell without a clapper. A woman with one foot in this world and one foot in that. A woman straddling both. This thing between my legs, this unmentionable.

I'm a snake swallowing its tail. I'm my history and my future. All my ancestors' ancestors inside my own belly. All my futures and all my pasts. (Cisneros, 125-126)

Memory, in the form of re-membrance, becomes a mediator between the spaces of the past, the present and the future. Re-membrance thus connects Rosario to different geographical, political and temporal locations. As she carries her ancestors inside her belly, she embodies her memory, makes it not just an abstract concept, but a concrete matter. By naming the body, she manages to mention the 'unmentionable'. In her essays, Cixous postulates the body as a vital part of feminine writing:

If you write as a woman, you know this as much as I do: you write to give the body its Books of the Future because Love dictates your new geneses to you. Not to fill in the abyss, but to love yourself right to the bottom of your abyss. To know, not to avoid. Not to surmount; to explore, dive down, visit. There, where you write, everything grows, your body unfurls, your skin recounts its hitherto silent legends. (Cixous 1991: 42)

The (female) body, "without which Writing becomes atrophied" (Cixous 1991: 42), is here more than just a site on which text is inscribed. It is not merely a locus of lack, needing to be 'filled in,' but rather an active, creative force. Carnal, embodied knowledge is thus presented as an alternative to western masculine thought, with its emphasis on reason and 'objective' distance.

Notions of re-membling, of resistance and subversion, are also important aspects in the writings of Emine Sevgi Özdamar. Like Cisneros, she de-centers the dominant culture by making the so-called margins of society the focus of her work. Unlike Cisneros, who was born in the United States, Özdamar, born in Anatolia, first came to Germany as a factory worker and later returned to work as an actress and (eventually) writer. Özdamar does not write in her mother tongue, but in the language of her adopted home: German. By not only using the dominant language but also re-shaping it, Özdamar shows "how language determines the reality of our experiences, time (and history),

space, and relationships” (Seyhan, 244). In order to re-member her identity, the narrator has to “negotiate three languages” (Bird, 159); apart from her mother tongue, Turkish, and her newly adopted tongue, German, she also has to find access to Arabic, her ‘grandfather’s tongue’. It is an understanding that, as Stephanie Bird points out, “is not simply narrated by [the author], but is directly apparent in the textual practice” (159). For instance, the author presents vocabulary lists within the story of Turkish words with Arabic roots and their German translations, thus, as Bird argues, “self-consciously confronting the reader with the experience of learning a new language” (159).

The German of Özdamar’s text is fluent but often shows grammatical and syntactic errors,¹ illustrating both the migrant’s displacement from her original identity and the process of seeking/finding a new one. Instead of replacing her mother tongue with German, she rather seeks to “rebuild the tongue which we have lost with the tongue that we have found” (Manguel, 157), or what Azade Seyhan calls “continuously postponing the death of [one’s] language and cultural traditions in a world where advanced technology allows little or no time for leisurely spoken words, tales, and memories” (231).

Already in the beginning of her story “Mutterzunge” (Mother Tongue), Özdamar illustrates her sense of re-building language: “In meiner Sprache heißt Zunge: Sprache”² she starts off her account, adding that, “Zunge hat keine Knochen, wohin man sie dreht, dreht sie sich dorthin”³ (Özdamar, 7). In contrast to Turkish and English, the word “tongue” in German does not refer to both a physical organ and language. By using the word “tongue” (Zunge) for “language,” Özdamar deliberately displaces the German language, twisting it around like a tongue. On another level, Özdamar reconnects the body (tongue) and the mind (language) in her alternative version of German, thus illustrating again Cixous’ point of the importance of the body for the process of writing:

To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal. (Cixous 1986: 312)

¹ an aspect that is not apparent in the official English translation.

² [In my language, ‘tongue’ means ‘language’.] All translations are my own.

³ [Tongue has no bones, wherever one turns it, it will turn that way.]

While the female narrator in Özdamar's tale remembers some words in her mother tongue, she also recaptures scenes and events from her collective and individual history as a woman growing up in Turkey. By doing this, Özdamar, like Chicana poet Sandra Cisneros, de-constructs and "challenges [the migrant woman's] lowly status in her own culture and the negative images of her womanhood and ethnic identity in the host culture" (Seyhan, 232). As the narrator refuses the naïve notion of deconstructing only the dominant language and culture, but rather critically assesses both German and Turkish cultures and histories, she and her texts, in Stephanie Bird's words, "undermine any notion of 'original' Turkish identity," and "resist any simple opposition and concurrently celebrate and question the role that tradition plays in identity formation" (Bird, 158). In this way, Özdamar works against the notion of memory as forgetfulness: in order to re-member herself as a Turkish woman in Germany, the narrator also has to re-member Turkey from a critical viewpoint.

One important way to bring her Turkish past into the German present is by re-learning her grandfather's alphabet:

Ich werde Arabisch lernen, das war mal unsere Schrift, nach unserem Befreiungskrieg, 1927, verbietet Atatürk die arabische Schrift und die lateinischen Buchstaben kamen, mein Großvater konnte nur arabische Schrift, ich konnte nur lateinisches Alphabet, das heißt, wenn mein Großvater und ich stumm wären und uns nur mit Schrift erzählen könnten, könnten wir uns keine Geschichten erzählen. Vielleicht erst zu Großvater zurück, dann kann ich den Weg zu meiner Mutter und Mutterzunge finden. (Özdamar, 12)⁴

Learning to write the Arabic script becomes an experience of border crossing for the narrator, connecting her at once with different temporalities –her own family's and her culture's past and present– and localities: she crosses the border metaphorically, from Western to Eastern world, and on a physical level from East Berlin to West Berlin and back again, as her Arabic teacher lives in West Berlin, while she resides in the Eastern part of the city.

⁴ [I will learn Arabic, that was our script once, after our war of liberation, 1927, Atatürk prohibits the Arabic script and the Latin letters came, my grandfather could only manage the Arabic script, I could only manage the Latin alphabet, which means, if my grandfather and I were dumb and could only speak to each other through writing, we could not tell each other stories. Perhaps first back to grandfather, then I can find a way to my mother and my mother tongue.]

Since Arabic calligraphy “is a picture alphabet” (Seyhan, 245), this form of writing once again illustrates an attempt at reconnecting the body (the calligraphic image) and the mind (the abstract concept of language). As the narrator practices her Arabic writing and reading skills in Özdamar’s story “Großvaterzunge” (Grandfather Tongue), she frequently recurs to the body as a means of creative expression. Words are not simply spoken, but letters come “aus meinem Mund”⁵ (Özdamar, 16). Language in this text, is embodied in an even more drastic way when the narrator’s Arabic teacher takes hold of the woman’s body:

Ich hatte Schmerzen in meinem Körper, ein Fieber kam und trennte mich von den anderen Lebenden, ich legte mich hin, sah, wie der Schmerz meine Haut aufmachte und sich in meinem Körper überall einnähte, ich wußte, daß in diesem Moment Ibni Abdullah in meinen Körper reingekommen war. (Özdamar, 18-19)⁶

While in a literal sense this may describe the intense emotions of a beginning love affair and sexual relationship between the female narrator and her teacher, it also becomes an account of being possessed by and in love with language/s (cf. Seyhan, 245). Instead of just dealing with language on a strictly theoretical/metaphysical level, Özdamar’s narrator incorporates language and in this way also goes along with another of Cixous’ premises, “[b]ut that means *reading*: making love to the text” (Cixous 1991: 24).

The narrator thus re-members herself through re-embodiment of language as well as through dreaming:

ich bin bei Ibni Abdullah, seine Mutter ist da, mein Gesicht ist unter Kopftüchern, ich gehe mit Ibni Abdullah einmal zur Männergesellschaft, ich habe halb Mann-, halb Frauenkostüm, ich singe dort ein Lied aus dem Koran, ich habe Angst vor den Wangen von Ibni Abdullah, sie sind wie von Khomeinis Mullah. (Özdamar, 20)⁷

⁵ [out of my mouth]

⁶ [I had pains in my body, a fever came and separated me from the other living beings, I lay down, saw, how the pain opened my skin and sewed itself into my body everywhere, I knew that in this moment Ibni Abdullah had come into my body.]

⁷ [I am with Ibni Abdullah, his mother is there, my face is under headscarfs, I go with Ibni Abdullah once to a men’s party, I have half men’s, half women’s costume, I sing there a song from the Koran, I am scared of Ibni Abdullah’s cheeks, they are like those of Khomeini’s Mullah.]

Dreaming here becomes a way of transgressive border crossing, challenging the boundaries between conscious and unconscious, 'real' and fictitious worlds. Together with the decision to go back to her grandfather's tongue, dreams and stories serve as means to resist a complete westernization of Turkey or of Turkish people in Germany. The Turkish/Arabic proverbs and images Özdamar presents do not lend themselves to easy translation. Even though the author often provides a German version, a sentence like, "I saß mit meiner gedrehten Zunge in dieser Stadt Berlin"⁸ can only be fully understood if one knows that "'Zunge drehen' (turning the tongue) is the translation of a Turkish idiom, *dili dönmek*, often used in the negative as *dilim dönmiyör*, meaning "I can't pronounce or articulate something" (Seyhan, 244-245). As the narrator uses this phrase in the positive form, she refers to herself as "someone capable of articulation" (Seyhan, 245). Defying easy appropriation, the proverbs, prayers, songs and stories she interweaves with her main narrative work not simply as aesthetic play, but as a strategy of linguistic inter- and disruption, a 'sociocultural intervention' illustrating Brinker-Gabler's and Smith's point that "the immigrant becomes the sign of foreign disruption threatening on the one hand a national and on the other a familial transnational identity and destiny" (10).

Yet while different languages and texts interrupt, they also complement each other in beautiful ways. At the end of the story, the narrator meets a German woman, and, while talking to her, remembers another word in her language and its connection to German: The term *Ruh* exists both in Turkish (meaning "soul") and in German, where it means "peace and quiet": "*Ruh* heißt Seele', sagte ich zu dem Mädchen. 'Seele heißt Ruh', sagte sie"⁹ (Özdamar, 46). Here the narrator not only displaces and re-members language; she also re-members some form of home, drawing connections between two seemingly antagonistic languages, cultures and world views. Difference is then not only a dividing but also a reconciling force. It is also not just a marginal 'other,' "[n]ot a mask to be tried or put down at will, to be added to or subtracted from an allegedly essential body of German texts, difference is constitutive of contemporary West German writing," Leslie Adelson states (217). The border between east and west, between Turks and Germans, is in this way not just pointed out but also relativized.

⁸ [I sat with this twisted tongue in this city Berlin]

⁹ ['*Ruh* means soul,' I said to the girl. 'Soul means *Ruh*,' she said.]

Juxtaposing various languages, histories and memories, Sandra Cisneros and Emine Sevgi Özdamar both seek to not only question traditional, often oppressive forms of knowledge, they also present possible alternative spaces in which one understanding is not just replaced by another; rather, deconstruction is always followed by some form of re-construction; language and knowledge are torn apart and fused in new ways. Such re-construction offers the possibility of a different kind of memory, a memory that is embodied and that is thus “different from looking back,” as M. Jacqui Alexander observes (94). That this re-remembrance is carried out in and through writing is significant, as writing (within a phallogocentric discourse) leaves traces longer and more easily than speaking.¹⁰ Re-membering, re-shaping language for Cisneros and Özdamar does not so much entail the creation of an entirely new (essential?) language as much as the careful re-wording and re-consideration of the old and familiar. The subversions presented in this paper are then not just operated from without but also from within the constraints of empire and patriarchal discourse.

As different aspects are re-membered in new ways, writing becomes more than a form of resistance, more than transgressive border crossing. It also provides a sense of home, not as a fixed, essentialized place, but rather as a home in the making, a space constantly shifting and changing, allowing for different kinds of self/selves, promoting inclusion rather than separation.

¹⁰ As Cixous remarks, “Speaking (crying out, yelling, tearing the air, rage drove me to this endlessly) doesn’t leave traces: you can speak – it evaporates, ears are made for not hearing, voices get lost. But writing! Establishing a contract with time. Noting! Making yourself noticed!!!” (*Coming to Writing* 15)

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