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# ANA CASTILLO

by Sara L. Spurgeon



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# **Ana Castillo**

By Sara L. Spurgeon  
University of Arizona

Boise State University, Boise, Idaho

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**Ana Castillo**

## Ana Castillo

It may seem odd to call Ana Castillo a western writer, considering she has lived most of her life in Chicago. Geographically, this city would not generally qualify as “western.” But the images, tensions, and themes that drive Castillo’s work are the same that currently challenge traditional definitions of the “west” as a place bounded strictly by geography. Historically, of course, Chicago at one time imagined itself as the prototypical western city, but the frontier moved on, and with it the American notion of what the west was, where it was located, what it looked like, and who inhabited it. Frontiers, in fact, have traditionally been vital in determining what Americans consider the west. From the perspective of Anglo New England, it was what Daniel Boone was traversing in the wilds of Kentucky. Later it was the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the deserts of Nevada, the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. California? Maybe yes, maybe no. Some argue it is the least “western” of the western states despite its location; others insist it is the most western because of everything *but* its longitude.

Nevertheless, in North America frontiers often, though not always, moved west, and in the modern American imagination that geographic term has come to be conflated with the idea of the frontier and all the cultural symbolism we attach to it. When we attempt to define a western writer, or what it is that makes a writer western, we often rely on the same images and ideas we use in thinking about frontiers. The west is landscape, for instance, but a very specific kind of landscape—wild, untamed,

dangerous though holding enormous utopic potential. Generally it is also rural, but that stereotype has long been attacked by those who argue that the modern west must be constructed from a modern vision, not one anchored in a nostalgic geography of the past.

The west is also cultures brought into uneasy intimacy, eyeing each other warily from opposing sides of some frontier, be it racial, political, geographic, or all three. This is especially clear in the history of much of the land we consider geographically west today. When the U.S.-Mexican frontier suddenly leapt south in 1848, tens of thousands of people who had believed they were on one side of the border found themselves abruptly on the other. Natives became foreigners overnight without ever leaving their beds. Their relations to their land, to their cultures, to their languages, their government, families, and neighbors—their entire identities—were redefined in relation to the newly drawn frontier, and this has always been the case with how Americans define the west. The idea of the “west” refers in some sense to geography, but a fluid, mobile, *relative* geography, as mutable and ubiquitous as the idea of frontier to which we still attach it.

Within this admittedly postmodern definition of the west, Ana Castillo is without doubt a western writer, even discounting her years in New Mexico and California. The legacy of colonization and imperialism built into the west and the struggle to understand the mixed, contested, often fractured identities that legacy imposes on the region’s inhabitants is at the heart of Castillo’s poetry, fiction, and prose. How people are granted or denied legitimacy based on their perceived relationship to the post-1848 frontier, how its movement still structures their lives, what it means (especially for brown-skinned women) to cross from one side of it to the other, forms the basis of her openly activist political organizing and equally activist writing. Even the title “Chicana,” which she proudly claims, is indicative of the history of racial,

cultural, and class tensions lurking just below the surface of American cultures and intensified in the American west. The term "Chicano" or "Chicana," used often by Castillo, becomes exceptionally important in her New Mexico novel, *So Far From God* (1993). Many Nuevo Mexicanos, especially of older generations, prefer to call themselves Spanish or Spanish American, saying that unlike Mexicans or Mexican Americans, their ancestors did not intermarry with indigenous peoples, although this claim is widely disputed. Others, especially in the midwest and west, prefer the more generic term "Hispanic," while Latino/a is common on the east coast, though it is often taken to refer mainly to those of Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Central or South American descent. Many politically active individuals, however, insist on Chicano/a, claiming the tradition of resistance, racial hybridity, and cultural and working-class pride associated with that term, although it is more frequently used by those of Mexican American descent than by those of Caribbean, Central or South American descent.

The effects of such a contested identity, shattered and reshaped by the imperial urge which gained the U.S. much of what we today call the west, structures Castillo's life and work even at the level of language. Scholar and translator Carol Maier, who translated a number of Castillo's early poems from Spanish into English, writes of her dilemma in attempting to recreate the poems without colonizing them (and Castillo) with her own cultural and linguistic vision, thus "rendering [the poet] speechless and invisible in the new language" in a sort of linguistic synecdoche of 1848 and colonialist nostalgia (631). To ignore this danger, especially when working with the texts of Chicanas, she continues, "is to evade what might be the greatest challenge of translation: the struggle with the paradoxes of verbal identity, the acknowledgement of translation's double drive to welcome and wipe out, and the singular, dynamic way in which it can contain two worlds" (631).

A dynamic containment of two (or more) worlds is a fitting metaphor for the west, one Castillo often invokes, and it renders her identity in many ways typically western. The Chicago-born daughter of a Mexican American father and Mexican immigrant mother, bilingual, multicultural, her heritage of mixed worlds and crossed borders is common in America. The frequency of such mixed identities helps to explain why myths about the west and the imagined frontiers that construct it remain among this country's defining metaphors.

Ana Castillo was born June 15, 1953. Her mother, Raquel Rocha Castillo, grew up in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, where, by the age of eleven, she was scrubbing floors in exchange for food. Her father was Raymond Castillo, a Chicago native whose curandera [traditional healer skilled in the use of medicinal herbs] mother emigrated from central Mexico shortly after the Mexican Revolution.

Castillo was raised in a mainly immigrant, working class neighborhood, where she watched her parents struggle through a series of low-paying, blue-collar jobs that often left the family on the edge of hunger and homelessness. In an early poem from the collection *My Father Was A Toltec* (1988), Castillo remembers the disturbing contrast between the world presented to her in her grammar-school primers, where smiling blonde children pulled a red wagon across neat, green lawns as she and her classmates read, "Silly Sally pulled Tim / on the red wagon" (5), and her own reality, in which her father used a battered red wagon to carry cans of kerosene to heat their flat "when he was home / and if there was money. / If not, children went to bed / in silly coats / silly socks; in the morning; were already dressed / for school" (5).

Although a good student, Castillo struggled with English and Spanish, feeling herself entirely at home in neither. She graduated from a secretarial high school for girls, Jones's Commercial High



School, in 1971, headed for what her parents imagined to be the most a Mexican girl could hope for—clerical work. Despite their skepticism and lack of financial support, Castillo instead enrolled in Chicago City College, transferring two years later to Northeastern Illinois University, where she earned a Bachelor's Degree in Art with a minor in Secondary Education in 1975. The racism and sexism she encountered at Northeastern would prove devastating, but also serve to launch her writing career.

She had always loved to paint. When she entered Northeastern's Art Department her dream was to be an artist, her paintings an expression of her growing political consciousness. The hostility she endured from the almost exclusively white and male faculty, however, meant that by the time she graduated, she recalls, "I was really convinced that I had no talent. I couldn't draw and I had no right to be painting" (Saeta 134). It would be over twenty years before she picked up a paintbrush again, but her passion and creativity demanded some outlet, so while still in school she began writing poetry, and almost immediately had two poems published in the journal *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* in 1975. She threw herself into poetry and vowed never to take a writing class of any kind, terrified that if she did, she would be told, "I had no right to be writing poetry, that I didn't write English well enough, that I didn't write Spanish well enough" (Saeta 134).

The fear of being judged inadequate in *two* languages, Castillo posits, is a particular anxiety of Mexican Americans, reflecting what she feels is their invisibility in and perceived inferiority to two cultures—that of Mexico and of the U.S. It is as though they live in a sort of imaginary third country, defined more by the mixed heritages and supposedly deficient linguistic abilities of its inhabitants than by any actual political border. It is this country she names and maps in her second novel, *Sapogonia* (1990), calling it "a distinct place in the Americas where all mestizos [people

of mixed European and indigenous American ancestry] reside, regardless of nationality, individual racial composition, or legal residential status—or, perhaps, because of all these” (5). As natives of this border culture, Mexican Americans, she believes, never feel completely at home or welcomed in either of the countries from which they draw their fractured identities. Instead, they are often viewed in Mexico as “pochos,” traitors or trash who have gone over to the other side and become Americanized, while the dominant culture of the U.S., she writes, sees them as “a mongrel race, a mixture of the dispensable Amerindian race and the lowly Spaniard,” good mainly for gardening and domestic work and nearly always presumed to have immigrated, no matter how long their ancestors may have lived in the U.S. or which side of the border they were on in 1848 (*Massacre of the Dreamers* 22).

For Mexican American women, Castillo argues, this precarious existence is even more extreme. Caught between the racism and misogyny of multiple cultures, pressured to smother their feminism by the Chicano civil rights movement, their ethnicity by mainstream white feminism, and their sexuality by the Church, their lives are a constant, often violent struggle to negotiate a safe place for themselves.

It is a struggle Castillo is personally familiar with. Despite her impressive publishing record, with acclaimed texts in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, multiple fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, numerous awards for writing, including the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award and a Carl Sandburg Literary Award in Fiction, as well as a Ph.D. in American Studies, Castillo has moved from one part-time teaching position to another, never having been offered a permanent or tenure-track university job. Her early writing, especially, received violently contradictory receptions from the academic world, being simultaneously lauded for its grittiness, immediacy, and

unapologetic Chicana worldview and panned for its unpolished prose and overt politics. Castillo blames much of this on what she sees as inherent racism and sexism in the academy, along with an elitist distrust of activists and the working class. She has never tried to hide either her activist organizing or her working-class roots, and is openly critical of what she believes is the stifling effect academia has had on the development of a uniquely Chicana feminism.

Such outspokenness has resulted in an exceptionally peripatetic life. In 1975, just out of college at the age of twenty-two, Castillo moved to California to teach Ethnic Studies at Santa Rosa Junior College. Two years later, she self-published her first chapbook of poetry, *Otro Canto* (1977), and returned to Chicago as a writer-in-residence for the Illinois Arts Council, while teaching English as a Second Language and Mexican and Mexican American history in several community colleges. She also began work on her first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), and enrolled in a Master's Program in Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, receiving her M.A. in Latin American and Caribbean Studies in 1979. Also that year, she self-published her second chapbook of poetry, *The Invitation*, an open call to those men in the Chicano civil rights movement still operating under the rules of machismo to acknowledge and respect the varied sexualities of the women who worked at their sides.

In 1982 she traveled to New York, where poems from *The Invitation* were set to Latin jazz under her direction and produced by Chicano Raza Group as part of the First Soho Art Festival. She was back in Chicago by autumn of the next year, and her son, Marcel Ramón Herrera, was born in Evanston on 21 September 1983. For the next several years, she bounced back and forth between Chicago and California, teaching, organizing, and writing. Houston's Arte Publico Press published her next poetry collection,

*Women Are Not Roses* (1984), to much critical acclaim, and in 1985 she traveled to Paris for a speaking tour organized by the Sorbonne and funded by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council. *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, which had been accepted in 1983 and published in 1986, won Castillo the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award the following year. This novel is considered groundbreaking in its portrayal of female, and specifically Chicana, sexuality, and its overt lesbian overtones. It began what is today a flood of critical essays examining Castillo as a Chicana and feminist writer and one who openly invites queer theoretical readings. (See, for example, Alarcón, Quintana, Saldivar-Hull, Sanchez.) Following the publication of *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, she moved back to California, began work on her doctoral thesis, which would be published in 1994 as *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, and returned to Europe for another reading tour in Germany organized by the German Association of the Americanists. (Like many prophets, Castillo seems to be more honored in other lands, and her work has always been highly regarded in Europe.)

She published another generally well-received poetry collection in 1988, *My Father Was A Toltec*. Still living in California, she had developed a deep friendship with several other activist Chicana writers and scholars—Cherrie Moraga, Norma Alarcón, Lucha Corpi, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano—who all lived on the same street in the Bay Area (Saeta 137). For the first time since she had discovered Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire's classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) while teaching at Santa Rosa Junior College in her early 20s, Castillo had found a community of Chicanas dedicated not only to activism, but to actively criticizing both Anglo American and Mexican American cultures, and to speaking openly about the still-taboo subject of lesbianism. This group of friends would collaborate on a number of groundbreaking

projects, including *Third Woman: The Sexuality of Latinas* (1993; with Norma Alarcón and Cherrie Moraga) and the Spanish version of the critically acclaimed *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (1989; *Esta Puente, Mi Espalda: Voces de Mujeres Tercermundistas in los Estados Unidos*), for which Castillo was the primary translator. The women became each other's first critics and strongest supporters.

Still scrambling to pay her bills, Castillo was relieved the next year to win a fellowship in the category of fiction from the California Arts Council. The cash award would help support her and her son as she completed her second novel, *Sapogonia*, a sprawling political love story cum satire begun in 1984 and published in 1990. Meanwhile, she also continued work on her Ph.D. and became a Dissertation Fellow with the Chicano Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She taught part-time at Santa Barbara until 1990, finished her dissertation in 1991, and the same year received her Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Bremen, Germany. (She has pointedly remarked that no U.S. university was willing to consider her somewhat unorthodox, interdisciplinary dissertation.)

The year *Sapogonia* was published proved to be one of both triumphs and grief for Castillo. She was wrapping up work on her dissertation and had received another fellowship, this one for poetry, from the National Endowment for the Arts. After visiting New Mexico several times, becoming involved with the Native American Church there, and beginning a supportive friendship with Rudolfo Anaya, she purchased land and an old adobe house in Albuquerque where she moved with her son. The same year, her father passed away at the age of fifty-seven, dying, Castillo says, from shame and a deep feeling of worthlessness after being laid off and failing repeatedly to find another job (Milligan 22).



Castillo's relationship with her father had always been a troubled one. Raymond Castillo was a handsome man with an almost dandyish sense of style. In his teens and early twenties, he was a member of the infamous Chicago street gang The Toltecs, with a reputation in his Mexican American neighborhood for toughness and brazen acts of defiance against white street gangs from other parts of Chicago and African American ones from the South Side. Later, he would have a collection of hand-tailored silk suits that Castillo suggests he wore in part to counter the racism and humiliation he suffered at his various blue-collar jobs. Having inherited her father's natural ear for music, Castillo also credits him with endowing her with a sense of passion, creativity, and the will to dream (Spurgeon).

She struggled, however, to forgive him for his treatment of her mother. In an early poem from the volume named for him, *My Father Was A Toltec*, and dedicated to "the daughters of Latino men everywhere," she recalls watching him don one of his silk suits on a Saturday night, adjusting the tie while waiting for her mother to finish ironing the jacket. He asks his wife, "How do I look?" / 'Bien,' went on ironing. / That's why he married her, a Mexican / woman, like his mother, not like / they were in Chicago, not like / the one he was going out to meet" (6). The one he was going out to meet, one of a string of women with whom Raymond carried on affairs throughout most of the 1960s, was supplied by him with silk blouses, tight skirts with slits up the thigh, and fur-trimmed coats, all of which he kept hidden in his bedroom while Castillo's mother worked overtime at various minimum-wage jobs in a desperate attempt to keep the family going.

The betrayal Castillo feels Mexican American women often suffer at the hands of Mexican American men is a recurring theme in her writing, and a paradoxical impetus for her extended travels in Mexico beginning in her early twenties, searching for the roots of

a culture she both loves and fiercely accuses. Her experiences there would be fictionalized in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, and also move her to deepen her search for a spiritual path that, unlike Catholicism, in her view, would honor the feminine rather than reducing it to the virgen/puta [virgin/whore] dichotomy she would ultimately discover in many Mesoamerican religions, as well as Christianity.

In some ways, the Native American Church seemed to offer this possibility, in addition to allowing Castillo to acknowledge her indigenous blood. In New Mexico, her son would be baptized in the Native American Church, although she would send him to a Catholic school there (Romero 2). And it was in New Mexico that she wrote and published what was to date her best selling and most widely acclaimed novel, *So Far From God*, in 1993. This book won the Carl Sandburg Literary Award in Fiction that same year. In 1994, it would help garner Castillo the Mountains and Plains Bookseller's Award and place her, along with Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarèz, and Denise Chàvez, in the September issue of *Vanity Fair*, cementing her place, with or without the unanimous agreement of academia, at the forefront of Chicana literature, and establishing her as an important voice in the canon of western writing.

As much as she had grown to love the western deserts, however, the lure of Chicago was strong. Her mother was suffering from diabetes and kidney failure, and in 1995, the same year she won another fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, this time in fiction, Castillo returned to Chicago yet again. She had been working on a number of projects, including editing an anthology, *La Diosa de Las Americas*, on a figure very close to her heart—La Virgen de Guadalupe. Also called La Virgen Morena [the Dark Virgin], she is said to have appeared shortly after the Spanish conquest to a young Mexican Indian man, on a hill

formerly used for the worship of the Goddess Coatlicue, in the form of a brown-skinned Indian woman. While not widely recognized outside the Americas, the Virgin of Guadalupe has been embraced by Mexican and Mexican American populations, offering a vision of spirituality that seems to cross the often violent borders between indigenous religions and the Church of Rome, between European ideals of the feminine and the physical bodies of mestizos and Indians. She is, Castillo suggests, a quintessentially western figure.

Castillo's mother died in 1997, her kidneys destroyed by diabetes, and Castillo was at her mother's side as she went through dialysis. Despite her old anger at her mother's acquiescence to her father's infidelities, Castillo began to realize what lessons her mother had bequeathed to her. In a poem written shortly after Raquel Castillo's death, and published in *I Ask The Impossible* (2001), the author remembers looking at an old photograph of her mother as a young wife, seeing how far she was from the Anglo ideal of beauty with her wide hips, heavy arms, and too-full lips painted in a too-bright shade of red. Now, the narrator reflects, the woman in the photograph appears beautiful, "luscious," and she understands why her father loved her, "Although he did not / tell her, / show it, / even when she asked" (37). "She taught me these things and more," the narrator continues: "Strength is a woman, a seed in a box / buried in the ground in a thunderstorm, / buried deep in my heart" (38).

She had already begun work on her next novel, 1999's *Peel My Love Like An Onion*, which was followed in 2000 by the beautifully illustrated children's book *My Daughter, My Son, The Eagle, The Dove*, Castillo's own translation of Aztec chants traditionally intended for children as they come of age socially and prepare to enter into adult roles. In 2001, she published her latest collection of poetry, *I Ask The Impossible*, poems written between 1989 and

2000, many hearkening back to her years in New Mexico and her continuing fascination with the desert and the uniquely New Mexican Chicano culture there.

Currently, Castillo lives in Chicago with her son, writing, organizing, and teaching. She holds the Sor Juana Inès de la Cruz Chair (created for her) in the Latin American/Latino Studies Program and English Department at DePaul University. Her next book, a collection of narrative poetry called *Watercolor Woman and the Opaque Man*, will be published by Curbstone Press in 2005.

### THE POETRY

Castillo's 1977 chapbook *Otro Canto [Another Song]*, introduces many of the western themes Castillo explores in later volumes. Containing poems in Spanish, English, and sometimes both, it is unabashedly political, but also fearlessly wide-ranging in its criticism. "Otro Canto al Pueblo" [Another Song to the People] for example, explicitly challenges what Castillo and many others have seen as the Chicano civil rights movement (el Mòvimiento)'s blind adoration of the symbol of Aztlàn, the Aztec's semi-mythical homeland. According to legend it is located somewhere far to the north of their capital, Tenochtitlan, modern-day Mexico City. Loosely translated, Aztlàn means "place of the herons," and many believe it may refer to a site south of Albuquerque, New Mexico, now called Bosque del Apache, a major resting place on the migratory path of North American herons. Others feel its actual geographic location is less important than its role as a powerful symbol of cultural and racial pride, legitimizing Chicano presence in the U.S. in the face of hostile Anglo calls for Chicanos to "go home." Seizing on the legend of Aztlàn and what Castillo sees as an uncritical glorification of Aztec culture as a source of identity, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, el Mòvimiento created a specific Chicano nationalism rooted in a patriarchal discourse it imagined as part of a

grand and ancient indigenous heritage. In "Otro Canto al Pueblo" Castillo criticizes the hypocrisy of a movement that championed working-class people oppressed and exploited by the wealthy and powerful, while glorifying an emperor whose throne rested on conquest and slavery. The poem declares bluntly, "Moctezuma fue / Imperialista / no fue dios [...]" (30) [Moctezuma was / an Imperialist / not a god].\* "No me Pinten de / Princesa Azteca" [Don't Paint me as / an Aztec Princess], Castillo continues. "[...] No mienten Jamas / de mi sangre— / Sigo siendo Esclavo" (31) [Never lie to me / about my blood— / I continue being a Slave]. The slavery from which she suffers, Castillo makes clear, is as much at the hands of Mexican American culture and the Chicano civil rights movement, as at the hands of the dominant Anglo culture that politically active Chicanos sought to challenge.

Part of what Castillo highlights here, and in her other works of poetry, prose, and fiction, is the complex web of oppression that constrains and shapes the identities of Chicanas, who can never be simply women or only Americans, or even just Mexican Americans, but who must always be aware of their multiple and overlapping marginalities. This is particularly apparent in her second chapbook, *The Invitation*, with prose and poems in both Spanish and English beginning an exploration of the varied sexualities and erotic lives of Chicanas that Castillo continues in future works. In the prose poem "Part I: The Act," sex between men and women is envisioned as beautiful shards of broken glass, "bits of pointed ice" (9), wounding the man. The physical intimacy between the narrator and her lover is shattered into a sharp-edged weapon by the narrator's challenge to her expected role in the sex act. But the

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\*With Carol Maier's warning in mind, I cautiously offer the translations that appear in this text, made with the help of Sandy Soto and Dorana Lopez. Any mistakes or misinterpretations are entirely my own. —AU



narrator sees this as having been a sacrifice of herself, resulting in “coals . . . sizzling against my bones . . .” (9).

Women who too openly express a sexual appetite of any kind often gain a contradictory victory, satisfying themselves at least temporarily, while earning social condemnation. In the prose poem “The Cavern,” the second-person narrator imagines the protagonist finally fulfilling the sexual fantasy she has had about a handsome youth in her neighborhood, now grown to young manhood. The narrator tells her that one day he will come to her and on that day, when “honey oozed between you. . . . They would kick down the door with their rosary beads and heavy tattered bibles, gnaw at your flesh with gold filled teeth, condemn you to a cavern in hell for the incestuous, where the young and old chew each other’s pubic hair” (23).

While heterosexual sex is often imagined through images of delicious violence, fulfillment followed by punishment, lesbian sex is both sweeter and sadder, with the beloved seemingly always just out of reach. In “Tango (de la luna),” appearing in Spanish and an English translation by Carol Maier, the narrator lies half asleep in a mood in which “the sun won’t come out” (27). Staring dreamily at a photograph, she thinks, “I see your body / in miniature / wide hips / a transparent blouse / shows off your / nipples— / And my image / beside / yours / full of / hot / sap— [ . . . ]” (27). The poem ends with the image of the moon calling the sun to come out, but the sun refuses, and the two lovers remain with only their images in the photograph next to each other.

Several of the poems in *Women Are Not Roses* (1984), the first volume to bring Castillo national attention, introduce a motif Castillo will return to again and again, especially in her first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*—the painful and exhilarating experiences of two young, American-born Latinas traveling in Mexico where, as in the U.S., they are at once foreigners and natives, the

battle between competing cultural identities played out on/within their sexualized bodies. Indeed, Joy Lynch notes that for Castillo, "the ethnic body is a literal text on which the forces of colonization were (and continue to be) most frequently and directly written" (127). In this volume, Castillo introduces the character Alicia. Castillo is known for building longer works of fiction from characters first introduced in poems or short stories, and the adventures of Alicia and Teresa in Mexico, told through Tere's letters to Alicia, are first realized in the poem "From 'A Letter to Alicia.'" This poem will in fact appear two years later as part of *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. In the poem, the narrator reflects on the changes the women have gone through now that they are "ending the cesspool / of the 20's" (19), having returned to the U.S. from their travels south of the border. Mexico, as both colonizer and colonized, serves at once to circumscribe and free the two women sexually. They feel they are constantly policed and scrutinized by the male gaze there, but paradoxically, this draws them even closer together in an uneasy dance of (often) unfulfilled desire. Their experiences as students in Mexico forge a powerful tie between them, but as the novel will explore more fully, also change them profoundly, sometimes in ways that cause them to grow apart from each other. The memory of those months, however, still serves as a fulcrum over and against which they build their identities as Latinas in America and their relationship to the history, cultures, and religions of Mexico.

Despite, or perhaps because of, Alicia's relatively privileged position as part-Anglo and upper-middle-class, their shared identities as Latinas in America and Americans in Mexico continue to shape their ideas about themselves and their place as women in the cultures on both sides of the border. "i remember you," Tere writes to Alicia. "[Y]ou don't fool me / [ . . . ]we shared the same jar of noxema / i covered for you at the ruins of monte albàn / while you

changed your tampon / before the eyes of gods and ghosts / and scorpions[. . .]" (19). Mexico watches over the women, but is something that must be guarded against, a place of the ruins of cultures and religions destroyed by the Spanish but still with the power to terrify and delight. Tere deliberately recalls a moment juxtaposing the sexed, menstruating, vulnerably human body of Alicia engaged in a small act of defiant femininity in a massive temple dedicated to a powerful, but now ghostly, patriarchal deity. Pre-Columbian Mexico, they discover more often than not, offers a sort of indigenous version of Catholicism, replicating the demonization of the feminine and the violent exploitation of the weak they fled the U.S. to escape in the first place.

But the poems in *My Father Was A Toltec* illustrate the extent to which the indigenous, ghostly past of Mexico easily traverses national borders and historic frontiers. Five hundred years after the Spanish conquest, one hundred and forty years after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, those descendents of Toltecs, Aztecs, and Spaniards still carry the gods and scorpions of Mexico, even in the cold, urban streets of Chicago. In the poem "Ixtacihuatl Died In Vain," Castillo references the legend of the twin volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtacihuatl, in Puebla, Mexico, which says the peaks were once a warrior and a princess from warring tribes who died for love of each other. "Hard are the women of my family, / hard on the mothers who've died on us / and the daughters born to us, / hard on all except sacred husbands / and the blessings of sons. / We are Ixtacihuatls, / sleeping, snowcapped volcanoes / buried alive in myths / princesses with the name of a warrior / on our lips [. . .]" (35).

This bitterness, based in part from observing her own parents' marriage, leads Castillo to write later in the same collection,

i will never  
in my life

marry  
a Mexican man,  
utter  
with deep devotion  
"Si, mi señor."

[. . .]  
i will never hold  
a Mexican lover  
in my arms  
tell him  
i love him  
and mean it.

[. . .]  
i will desire him  
my own way  
give him  
what I please  
[. . .]  
drive an obsidian blade  
through his heart,  
lick up the blood. (39)

The relationships of Mexican American women and men continue to be voiced by Castillo as brutal songs full of duty, desire, rebellion, and often bloodshed. The iconographic images of indigenous religions invoked by Castillo serve as symbols of life and power for the female narrators, but at the same time take their humanity, turning them into goddesses, killers, and sacrificial victims. (Aztec priests—mostly male—used obsidian blades to cut out the hearts of sacrificial victims, some male and some female. Licking up the blood seems to be Castillo's own image.) Castillo indicts pre-Columbian cultures, Spanish culture, Mexican culture, the Catholic Church, and Anglo America in perpetuating a cycle of

violent repression of Mexican American women's sexuality and a glorification of a male sexuality that finds its expression through misogyny.

She also suggests that this misogynistic tendency is exacerbated by the Mexican American experience of being Mexican in America, and the harmful stereotypes of Mexican American men often expressed by popular American culture—a culture which seems to selectively forget its own roots as an immigrant society, and as the perpetrator of what Mexico refers to as the North American Invasion of 1848. In "We Would Like You To Know," the narrator declares, "We would like you to know / we are not all / docile / nor revolutionaries / but we are all survivors. / We do not all carry / zip guns, hot pistols, / steal cars. / We do know how / to defend ourselves. / [ . . . ] We do not all sneak / under barbed wire or / wade the Rio Grande [ . . . ]" (67).

In perhaps the most powerful and complex poem in the collection, "Daddy With Chesterfields In A Rolled Up Sleeve," Castillo manages to condense all these themes into one excruciating moment in her relationship with her father on a day when she was nine years old and the white principal at her school came to her class "to say a man claiming to be / my father / was in her office" (10). She remembers how painfully out of place her father appeared in the white world of the school: "[. . .] this guy across the table / is young with acne, / hair greased back. He smokes cigarettes, / doesn't ask permission, speaks English / with a crooked smile: charm personified" (10). The narrator's mingled love and shame for her father beneath the contemptuous gaze of the white principal are agonizingly apparent. Her father is there to tell her that her grandmother, his mother, has died, and in a later scene echoing the one in the principal's office, Castillo emphasizes the humiliating discrepancy between the Mexican American man's status as unchallenged patriarch of his household and the very



different status he experiences in the Anglo world, where he is presumed to be lazy and dishonest. "Daddy's white foreman / who doesn't believe his mother died, / comes to watch Daddy cry at the coffin" (11).

Castillo also focuses on what she identifies as a paradox of Mexican American culture—the man's worshipful love for his mother, but his disdain for his wife and female children. The narrator recalls, "And Daddy, who never looks at me / and talks to me at the same time / says 'Granny died,' and begins to cry" (11). This last line is repeated three more times throughout the rest of the poem, and marks one of the few instances a Mexican American man is shown expressing any emotion other than sexual desire or jealousy. The effect of viewing the mother as saintly and beyond reproach is to mark the wife and daughter as forever deficient, the first a sexual object and the second a disappointing replacement for a son. And ironically, the Mexican mother reinscribes this cultural construct onto her daughter:

Every year Mami makes enchiladas for Daddy's birthday,  
never as good as the memory of his mother's.

Mami takes her place now,  
tells his daughter to her face:

"You're like your father,  
don't like to work,  
a daydreamer,  
think someday you'll be rich and famous,  
an artist, who wastes her time  
traveling,  
wearing finery she can't afford,  
neglecting her children and her home!" (11)

The narrator's anguish at being a daughter, but not being a good enough daughter, at being like the powerful father but being

shamed for that likeness, shapes the woman she will become, who can look back at the grief-stricken young girl's feminized helplessness from her position as a deliberately un-feminine (according to tradition) woman. She writes of flirting with a woman in words that deliberately echo the earlier image of her father:

i speak English with a crooked smile,  
say "man," smoke cigarettes,  
drink tequila, grab your eyes that dart  
from me to tell you of my  
trips to Mexico,  
i play down the elegant fingers,  
hair that falls over an eye,  
the silk dress accentuating breasts—  
and fit the street jargon to my full lips [. . .] (13)

By the end of the poem, the narrator has become her father and the son he wished she had been, although she appears both defiant and sorrowful over this development, in part because the masculine role seems to offer independence and power, but also to require the cynical use of women who become, as the narrator saw with her parents, sexual objects never able to live up to the image of their partner's saintly mother. And yet, as Castillo makes clear in the poem, it is her femininity, her "thin arms," "perfumed hair," and "reassuring voice," which allow her to get close to women and compel their trust in her. Castillo ends by writing,

Because of the seductive aroma of molé  
in my kitchen, and the mysterious preparation  
of herbs, women tolerate *my* cigarette  
and cognac breath, unmade bed,  
and my inability to keep a budget—  
in exchange for a promise  
[. . .]

Oh Daddy, with the Chesterfields  
rolled up in a sleeve,  
you got a woman for a son. (14; emphasis in original)

As with much of Castillo's work, however, not all reviewers responded positively to this collection. While feminist and Chicana critics overwhelmingly lauded it as presenting an exciting new voice in Chicana literature, one which challenged academic conventions imagining poetry as white, male, and upper-class, Gregory Racz, writing for the journal *Literary Review*, calls the work "self serving" (137) and "self-congratulatory" (138), and says the poems contain "one too many instances of [. . .] old-world wifely devotion, macho philandering and plain old male-bashing" (139). His review reflects the often sharply divided reactions to Castillo's work ultimately rooted in the very issues that drove her both to activism and to poetry, and which have haunted her relationship with academia. The reader of *My Father is a Toltec* is left, Racz continues, "with the nagging sense that Castillo ultimately harbors a working-class distrust of language" (140), with "her sometimes choppy English [. . .] leaving one to wonder whether a Chicago-style Chicana Spanglish could ever be a desirable departure from more internationally recognized idioms" (139). And echoing Castillo's argument that Mexican American linguistic usage is viewed as deficient in both Spanish and English, Racz charges that the occasional "errors" in her Spanish offer a "discouraging impediment that gives the reader little incentive to continue" (140). Some critics have seen this as an east/west conflict, as a New England-based literary elite constructing a poetic canon which automatically labels a "Chicago-style Chicana Spanglish" as deficient because it is a departure from recognized idioms. Some charge that this linguistic criticism is tinged as well with racism, sexism, and class prejudices. Others argue that it identifies a serious weakness in Castillo's poetry and prose, and bears no

relationship to her gender or ethnicity. Disparagement of her language, many contend, is what kept her marginalized in academia for so many years.

It would be thirteen years before Castillo published another collection of poetry, 2001's *I Ask The Impossible*. Also with poems in both English and Spanish, this collection showcases Castillo's maturity as a writer. By 2001, the wealth of academic essays engaging Castillo's works had begun to soften her marginalized and contentious position. Reviews for this collection were overwhelmingly positive, with the *Library Journal* calling the titular poem "simple, lyrical, and poignant" and the book itself "a delightful and enticing orientation to one of the most outstanding Chicanas writing today" (Olszewski 111). There is more playfulness in the rhythms here, and poems with longer line lengths and more complex imagery reflect a self-conscious psychological exploration of identity. The righteous anger is still there, but it is at once deeper and more focused. In these works Castillo struggles to come to terms with her mother's death, perhaps even more painful for her than her father's earlier passing, as she reflects on her own experiences as a mother. A number of the poems are also, unlike most of her earlier works, lighthearted and more openly humorous. In a charming and frequently reprinted piece called "El Chicle" [The Piece of Gum] she relates, in the matter-of-fact but wonder-filled voice of a storyteller, the fantastical journey made by a piece of gum. "Mi'jo [affectionate shortening of *mi hijo*, or my son] and I were laughing / ha, ha, ha— / when the gum he chewed / fell out of his mouth / and into my hair" (4). After the narrator cuts the gum out of her hair, it falls onto the back of a dragonfly, which flies up in the air but is then eaten by a turtle, which "swam south on Saturday / and hasn't been seen / once since" (4).

Also in these poems is a much fuller exploration of a personal relationship to landscape, especially the desert, seemingly sparked

by Castillo's years in New Mexico. This collection further establishes her importance as a western writer who both affirms the stereotype of the westerner as enjoying a close relationship to a harshly unforgiving natural world and at the same time challenges the definition of the west by extending the landscape across political boundaries. The result is a number of poems in which the land (both north and south of the U.S.-Mexican border) plays a major role. In "The Desert As Antidote: Verano [Summer] 1997," she writes of walking in sunlight in a high desert in Mexico, the taste of various edible plants and herbs, and "the claret burst of bliss" (16) from the tiny pineapple-shaped fruit of a cactus. The narrator wryly observes later, during one of the extravagant desert lightning storms, "It's easy to get lost / with so much going on / in the sky. / A good thing to know / is how to whistle. / Someone will find you" (17). A number of these poems associate the desert with sustenance and healing, both in the spiritual sense and physically, as the source of many of the medicinal herbs Castillo originally learned about as a child accompanying her curandera grandmother, and later studied in greater depth with curanderas and medicine people in New Mexico.

Another poem imagines an intimately sexual relationship between the narrator and the desert. In "A Small Scorpion," Castillo writes of a scorpion that ran into her blankets and, "while I slept beneath / a veil of meteorites, / made love to me / all night / with its tiny / penis / its tiny tiny tongue" (19). The difficulty and pain of human male-female relationships are present here, although in a less wounding way, as the narrator concludes, "I did not die / and neither did / the scorpion. / We just went on / with our lives / after that" (19).

One of the most powerful and lyrical poems in this collection combines Castillo's deep affinity for the desert with her lifelong rage at those who abuse or oppress the weak. "I Heard The Cries

Of Two Hundred Children” begins with the sound of the crying of children’s ghosts on the desert wind. These are the cries of “the ones who sleep on cathedral steps, / and who swerve through traffic, / little clowns and fire-eaters, / wash windshields / with contaminated water and shine shoes / with hepatitis spit [. . .],” while “behind a dark window of the Palacio Nacional / the president looks out / concerned about the national deficit” (20). The images are brought back to the desert with a violent cleansing, at once terrifying and maternal, and Castillo again calls on the powerful symbolism of Catholicism and an indigenous goddess to serve as a sort of ancient and immortal witness to the children’s pain:

I heard the children’s cries in the desert  
but it was a storm  
like storms can be in the desert  
majestic and terrible,  
lightning swords pierced  
the horizon.  
Three swords went through my heart, and  
came out on the other side.  
You think you are alone in the desert  
but you are not; so many eyes watching you.

[. . .]

Coyolxiauqui Warrior Queen  
does battle each night,  
her four hundred children stand guard.

[. . .]

Is that you? I call, and I think someone answers.  
I think it is her, my dead mother  
marching across the Tropic of Cancer,  
marching with four hundred sky children,  
feasting on the wind. (21)

The calls of the children are an irresistible demand, one Castillo seems always to have heard, that someone acknowledge and protect them. The goddess and Castillo's mother merge, offering a kind of dark sanctuary to the ghost children, hungry in life and allowed to feast only in death. This poem explains very much how Castillo views herself as a poet and activist: duty-bound to give voice to the voiceless and to bring the stories of the most invisible of society, on any side of any border, to attention.

### THE FICTION

Like her poetry, Castillo's fiction tends to be both intensely personal and overtly activist. More experimental in form than her poetry, however, Castillo's novels experiment freely with such postmodern elements as shifting narrative viewpoints, reader-guided plots, and multiple endings.

Castillo's first attempt at fiction, the epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, was published in 1986 and won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award the following year. It is, as the title suggests, a series of letters about the experiences of the two characters first introduced in the poem "From 'A Letter to Alicia.'" The two young women meet when they are college students enrolled at a North American language institute in Mexico City. The letters are all written by Tere to Alicia, some of them penned many years after the events of that first summer. While evoking the classical form of the epistolary novel, this is a decidedly postmodern adaptation of that genre. All the letters are numbered but not dated, and the book opens with an address to the reader explaining that the letters can be read in any of three possible orders laid out in three different tables of contents labeled: "For The Conformist," "For The Cynic," and "For The Quixotic." The story is further complicated by Tere's admission that what is contained in the letters is not necessarily the truth,

but merely her personal memory of events—a version, she suggests, Alicia may dispute.

The letters are an eclectic mix of poetry and prose, with Tere adopting (as Castillo typically does) the small letter “i” for the personal pronoun in both forms. Tere is, in fact, a poet, while Alicia has studied design and sculpture in New York and is called “white” by Tere, even though she has an Andalusian grandmother. While Tere, like Castillo, grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood in Chicago, Alicia was raised in an upper-middle-class suburb in New York. The two live a post-frontier experience together, shadowed by an American and Mexican history of conquest, colonization, and racial and cultural mixing, and it is their defiantly Chicana interpretation of that experience that makes this an especially important western novel.

Tere describes herself as “Indian-marked face, fluent use of the language, undeniably Spanish name” (19) and immediately feels out of place among the white instructors and students she imagines are in Mexico for “an existential summer of exotic experiences” (19). In many ways, Tere is looking for the same thing—an exotic experience in a culture radically different from that of Anglo America, and yet an experience she hopes will prove familiar in the end as part of the heritage for which she is eagerly and fearfully searching. She is both proud and embarrassed by her obvious physical resemblance to the “exotic” Mexicans the white students have come to encounter, but at the same time is constantly reminded of the “American-ness” of her identity by the many clashes she has with Mexican culture. Her inappropriateness, the sense of always being on the wrong side of the border, an object of both envy and contempt for Mexicans and Americans alike, is underscored by the reaction of one of the few non-white instructors at the school. The art teacher, Señor Aragón, doesn’t like her, she writes, because she looks like “the daughter of someone like him,



except that he'd made the wade to the other side" (21). Aragón favors the pretty, blonde gringas "with a birthright ticket to upward mobility in the land paved with gold" (21).

All the tensions of class, race, language, and identity are reified and complicated in the relationship between the two young women, beginning with their physical, and sexualized, appearances. The tall, willowy, pale-skinned Alicia embodies, to Tere's eyes, the ultimate in Anglo femininity, while Alicia reveals she has always envied Tere's voluptuous hips, full breasts, and dark beauty. By comparison Alicia sees herself as merely thin and plain, especially when she notices the reaction of Mexican men to Tere's curvaceous figure. When they stop in Oaxaca, where Alicia sits painting the ruins of Monte Albán, they are approached by a handsome young Mexican artist who praises Alicia's work. She is charmed, and as the day progresses and the three go for coffee that evening, she eagerly anticipates that he will ask her for a date. Instead, he abruptly turns his back on her and asks Tere. She refuses him, telling Alicia in a letter recalling those events that she was "agonized by your sense of rejection" (57). Later that night, in their hotel room, Alicia is still dejected and humiliated, her sense of physical unattractiveness overwhelming her. Tere pretends not to know why her friend is despondent, writing, "You couldn't bring yourself to look at me, who stood defiantly. Then lifting your face to the dull mirror, 'You... just... don't... understand... do... you?' No! i lied" (58).

But as always with Castillo's Chicana characters, whose complexly intertwined identities are sliced and shifted across lines of race, color, class, and gender, there are deeper layers of meaning behind every act. Years later, when Alicia is on the verge of suicide over another rejection by a man, Tere writes,

Oh, Alicia, if i were back in that miserable hotel in the ancient city where gods, warriors, and women all fell beneath

the blows of imposing invaders [. . .] i wouldn't deny to you again that i understand why you hated yourself [. . .] you had been angry that i never had problems attracting men. You pointed out the obvious, the big breasts, full hips [. . .] Underlining the superficial attraction men felt toward me is what you did not recognize. i was docile. (113)

It is, ironically, this docile "Mexican" part of her identity (which Alicia lacks, one reason Tere persists in thinking of her as "white") that Tere seeks to lose in Mexico. She recognizes, however, that many of the ways in which she has had her "consciousness raised" are reflections of a mainly white, middle-class feminist movement in the U.S. that has typically ignored brown-skinned and working-class women like herself.

Nonetheless, she searches Mexico desperately for some sign of an indigenous heritage in which she can take pride as a Mexican *and* as a woman. She does not find it in the Mexican men she and Alicia meet. Almost without exception, each man they encounter over the months, even those who at first appear respectful or friendly, ultimately just wants to have sex with one or both of them, or failing that, simply to boast that he did. And again, ironically, Tere knows this is because they see her *not* as a Mexican, but as an American—a "liberated gringa," which to them means one who will have sex with any man who asks. Even those Mexican men who most loudly denounce the Spanish conquest, continue to treat women as colonized subjects.

This is not to say there are not times when Tere finds profound joy in Mexico. Acts of exquisite kindness, music and laughter, landscapes of breathtaking beauty, and art and architecture move both Tere and Alicia to worshipful silence. They take a special interest in pre-conquest cultures, and Tere writes of walking into a plaza in a small Indian town and being "delighted with the montage of the marketplace, the doves and parrots in wooden cages,

handmade wares, Zapotec women in bright, shiny skirts, hair bound and hidden beneath grey rebozos" (57). Ultimately, however, she struggles to find any meaningful or personal connection with these cultures, uneasily aware that she may be colonizing and exoticizing them, as a relatively wealthy North American, much as she feels colonized by white culture north of the border. In the end, she remains deeply ambivalent about Mexico, writing, "Mexico. Melancholy, profoundly right and wrong, it embraces as it strangulates" (59).

One of the most important things Tere brings out of Mexico is her friendship with Alicia, and a good portion of the letters deals with their experiences after their return to the U.S. As the two grow closer, Tere describes their relationship as "akin to that of an old married couple" (47). In another letter she writes, "When i say ours was a love affair, it is an expression of nostalgia and melancholy for the depth of our empathy" (39). Tere obliquely acknowledges the sexual tension between them, noting that when they travel in Mexico, they sleep together, shower together, and freely rub each other's sore necks, backs, and legs, but disdainfully she accuses some men they know of assuming that must mean they have sex with each other, as well. Any actual sex act between them is never recorded, but there is the suggestion that this (perhaps) unresolved tension in their relationship in part drives them, both in Mexico and upon their return to the U.S., to seek out a series of male lovers who use and desert them. Tere recalls, "We licked our wounds with the underside of penises and applied semen to our tender bellies and breasts like Tiger's balm" (100). A good deal of their erotic desire for each other seems to play out on the bodies of the men they sleep with. In the same letter in which she compares their friendship to a love affair, Tere describes a sensuous, drawn-out massage of Alicia's naked body administered by a male lover, the two of them stretched out on a red carpet. As

the man pushes Alicia's thighs apart, "*on the sofa / across the room / i closed my eyes / went on / with my nap*" (40; italics in original).

What finally happens with the two women, the neat conclusion or closure many readers may expect, is never offered by Castillo; or more precisely, she offers multiple possible conclusions. The first version, "For The Conformist," ends with Alicia's well-received, one-woman art show at a fashionable gallery, and Tere's return to Mexico to stay with the parents of her baby's father in Cuernavaca. The second version, "For The Cynic," leaves Alicia having begun an affair with yet another man to whom she has given her heart, in what Tere implies is just one more relationship bound to end in pain and despair for her. The third version, "For The Quixotic," ends with Tere and Alicia, now in their thirties, eagerly planning another trip to Mixquiahuala. "I don't know why so many of our ideals were stamped out [ . . . ] when we believed in them so furiously," Tere muses. "Perhaps we were not furious enough" (16).

As with *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, in her second novel, *Sapogonia (An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter)*, Castillo also delights in postmodern word plays, using shifting narrative viewpoints and voices, multiple conclusions, and dreamlike elements of magical realism, creating a truly postmodern western novel set in what may be the most truly western place, a sort of ubiquitous but geographically un-locatable frontier. Joy Lynch calls the book an exploration of "the geographic and psychic borderlands between the United States and Mexico" (130). The text is bracketed by either an actual murder or an overwhelming experience of fantasy or obsessive imagination. The potential murderer is the handsome, charismatic artist, Mximo Madrigal. He is the personification of the native of the metaphorical nation of Sapogonia that Castillo describes in her Prologue. The Sapogon's European ancestry, she

writes, may be Spanish or French, but there is inevitably indigenous blood, and "Whereas he may, by affectation, acquire the mannerisms and the idioms of the North American with the intent of assimilation, his genetic make-up immediately sets him apart" (5). While certain Sapogòns, she continues, may fake an entirely European or Mediterranean background, "Any acknowledgement of indigenous American ancestry causes him almost immediately to be relegated to the world of Sapogonia," a place loosely modeled after Mexico, perhaps Castillo's parents' homeland of Guanajuato in central Mexico. Sapogonia, Castillo indicates, means "place of the frogs," as does the name Guanajuato in the local Indian dialect.

While Maximo is a talented artist, his art and his life are often circumscribed as much by his machismo-driven ego, typical of Sapogòn men, she implies, as by his indigenous Sapogòn ancestry. The woman with whom he becomes obsessed is Pastora Akè, whose grandparents are Yaqui and who is a moderately successful folk singer in the U.S. The novel is sprawling and loosely structured, jumping from Maximo's fairly privileged childhood on a small estate in rural Sapogonia, to his travels in Europe, to behind-closed-doors looks at the Chicago art scene and backroom political maneuverings. Castillo has remarked that she was taken by surprise when Bilingual Press published the novel unedited, and even tried to pull it before it went to press, but was too late to intervene. Given the choice, she says, she would not have published it as it was (Milligan 26). Nonetheless, it succeeds in its own quirky way. At bottom, the novel is as much a sort of mythic allegory (with characters imagining themselves and others as personifications of various Aztec deities) as it is a story about individual people. Maximo is in some senses all men who allow their views of themselves and of women to be shaped by the precepts of machismo, and Pastora is almost an archetype of the difficulties and sorrows that befall creative, independent women in a

patriarchal culture. Both suffer the psychic effects of a racial and cultural history of conquest, enslavement, and murder.

The sense of tragic inevitability about Maximo and Pastora's relationship is foreshadowed early on by Maximo's Mayan grandmother, who is also a seer. She tells him, while he is still a young boy, that his is a very old soul, and that she believes in some past life he was assaulted, or if not, that he assaulted someone (13). Several years later, as an adolescent, he will rape a young girl, then later be betrayed by the first girl to whom he truly gives his heart. This girl, whom Max wants to marry, tells him that his best friend is a much better lover than he is, but that his friend is "a poor fool. And I would rather marry a rich one than a poor one" (15). He wraps his hands around her throat in a blind rage and begins to strangle her before coming to his senses and deciding to leave Sapogonia. As his grandmother watches him pack, she says,

"Didn't I tell you you would rather die than get married?"

"I didn't want to die tonight, Mama Grande! I wanted *her* to die!" Mama Grande shook her head and laughed a little.

"¿No sabes, hijo? Es la misma cosa" [Don't you know, son? It's the same thing.] (15)

But Maximo is never able to make this metaphysical leap of empathy. His sense of machismo continues to make him regard all women as potential conquests, usually sexual, sometimes objects to be seduced to satisfy him physically, sometimes to further his artistic career. But Maximo's troubles extend far beyond the vagaries of the art world, as his self-image more and more is created as a reaction to the ways Anglo culture in the U.S. imagines him, always as a Sapogon first, and a man and an artist second. While his affair with Pastora continues through his other doomed relationships, Pastora eventually falls in love and has a child by a man who smuggles Sapogon refugees fleeing their country's bloody civil war into the United States. Maximo is at a loss to understand

her decision. He wonders why she allows her son to take time away from her music and is disgusted that she is acting like a "typical woman." In his eyes she has traded true artistry and the potential her career held to make her rich and famous, for something utterly useless that he can only imagine as deadening her creativity. She tries to explain how differently she views motherhood:

"I may have asked to be born with this." She patted her lower stomach and then pointed to her crotch. "I may have asked before entering this life to return here to learn what it was to be a vessel, to be biologically bound to all things, to be bound beyond will" [ . . . ]

"But are you freer as a mother?"

"I was not free before [ . . . ]" (268)

Máximo is unable to comprehend being bound to any person, although ironically, of course, he is completely bound to Pastora. Even more, he is unable to comprehend anyone actually wanting to be born a woman. Women in his view remain objects whose eventual submission to him serves to reinforce his imagined distance from them.

He cannot however, distance himself from Pastora, because Pastora has never submitted to him. She has sex with him if she feels like it, demands that he satisfy her, may or may not speak to him again for months afterward, and appears unconcerned when he doesn't call. He treats her in much the same way, but he feels such an attitude to be his right as a male. His other women, he reflects, especially the white ones, make him feel like a demi-god, but with Pastora he is only a man (296). As the years progress, he begins to see her as a *bruja* [witch] who has cast a sexual spell on him. He imagines himself as Huizilopochtli, the Sun God, and Pastora as Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of birth and death, creation and destruction, whose iconic image is as a decapitated

woman with two streams of blood shooting from her neck that become serpents, her sacred animal. As the novel progresses, he refers to her with increasing frequency as Coatlicue, sculpting this image of her into his art. Eventually, he admits to himself that he would do anything to destroy her and her sexual power over him, to recreate her as *his*, obedient and self-sacrificing, not as the snake he envisions her to be, strangling him as he orgasms (288). Their relationship is a synecdoche of the history of both Mexico and the American west, of the relationship between indigenous Sapogòns and their Spanish conquerors, between those Sapagòns with the most indigenous blood, darkest skin, and least wealth and those with the opposite, and between the wealthy and powerful white Americans and their poorer neighbors to the south. As much as the conquerors have always been able to conquer, Castillo suggests, they have never quite succeeded in compelling submission. To the extent that they have feminized those they've colonized, they have to an equal extent projected their own misogynistic fears of feminine (sexual) power onto them, never able to admit that the death of the feminized Other is their own death, as well.

Castillo's next novel, *So Far From God* (1993), revolves even more obviously around the experience of motherhood for the mixed-blood woman in the U.S., although it too has the shadow of allegory about it. Like many other western works, it is also deeply concerned with space—geographic, historical, cultural, and spiritual. This is Castillo's most overtly western novel, exploring the mythic image of utopia in the Golden west, a major justification for the warfare necessary to conquer the frontier and extend American imperialism into what was previously Mexico, itself a nation indelibly marked by its own history of invasion and conquest. The claiming and shaping of wilderness into an Edenic garden has been a common trope in imagining the American west



(both mythic and geographic) as utopic and female, especially in writings by women. This theme is complicated, however, when the writer is both female and Chicana, the daughter of colonizers and the colonized.

Set in the rural town of Tome, New Mexico, just south of Albuquerque, *So Far From God* is situated in a colonized frontier, an often dangerous borderland and a site of cultural, racial, and linguistic contention. The colonized borderland would seem at first glance to be an unlikely location for utopia, and indeed many critics have noted that with few exceptions, most Chicano literature is anti-utopic, unable to reconcile the desire for a more stable and less threatened identity with the inherently unstable nature of borderlands, and yet Castillo imagines such a space as the only place within which Chicanas can craft their own utopia. Unable to escape entirely the effects of conquest and imperialism—indeed, often both agent and victim of it—Castillo's Chicanas must create a mythic vision in direct contradiction to the traditional idea of a utopia in which cultural and racial purity are presumed to result in a longed-for wholeness or singularity of self and identity. Roland Walter notes that "While *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and *Sapogonia* initiate what [Gayatri] Spivak has called 'subaltern insurgency,' *So Far From God* adds to the initial moment of negation [. . .] one of *affirmation*, a communal existence in the borderlands" (91; emphasis in original). In *So Far From God*, Castillo re-imagines western utopia as an ever-shifting community, a hybridized, differentiated space producing identities that are fractured, mobile, and unfixed.

According to Castillo, the novel was inspired by a story from early Christian theology, an allegorical tale involving Sophia (wisdom) and her three daughters: Faith, Hope, and Charity (Saeta 138). At the end of the original story, Sophia stands weeping over the graves of her allegorical offspring, hopelessly resigned to the

stubborn, unchanging sinfulness of human nature. In her modern allegory, Castillo challenges this vision of helplessness, although her borderlands utopia is still limned with violence. Sofia is a New Mexican Chicana, the middle-aged mother of four daughters, who struggles to make ends meet by running a small butcher shop. Her husband, a handsome man addicted to gambling, has left years before after gambling away most of the land Sofia inherited from her grandparents. All of Sofia's daughters—Esperanza [Hope], Fe [Faith], Caridad [Charity], and a fourth daughter, La Loca [the Crazy One], who can be seen as a sort of spontaneous expression of the hybridized spiritual world of Nuevo Mexicanos, combining Roman Catholicism, folk religion, and Native American beliefs—die tragic deaths.

The structure of the novel references nineteenth-century romances, with each chapter headed by an extended description such as "10. Wherein Sofia Discovers La Loca's Playmate by the Acequia Has an Uncanny Resemblance to the Legendary Llorona; the Ectoplasmic Return of Sofi's Eldest Daughter; Fe Falls in Love Again; and Some Culinary Advice from La Loca" (150) and "12. Of the hideous Crime of Francisco el Penitente, and His Pathetic Calls Heard Throughout the Countryside as His Body Dangled from a Piñon like a Crow-Picked Pear; and the End of Caridad and Her Beloved Emerald, Which We Nevertheless Will Refrain from Calling Tragic" (190). The characters' stories are told by a humorous and highly opinionated narrator who addresses readers directly in a lively mix of English and Spanish with all the local linguistic peculiarities found in New Mexican usage. With her narrator's deliberately ungrammatical English and fiercely colloquial and sometimes crude Spanish, Castillo seems to be openly challenging those critics who have derided her writing for those very things, although critical reception of this book has been overwhelmingly positive.

In the story, each daughter's life and death provides a cultural or spiritual lesson for Sofia. These lessons are sometimes delivered personally, well after the daughter's physical demise. The novel is full of miraculous and magical events, clearly influenced by the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Jorge Amado, and Toni Morrison, all of whom Castillo says were important in shaping her ideas of what writing could do (Saeta 132). The first event of this kind involves Sofia's youngest daughter, who dies at the age of three then rises from her coffin in the middle of her funeral mass. Local parishioners immediately name her a saint, despite the protests of the Anglo priest. But having transgressed the boundaries of life and death, the little girl is symbolically marked. La Loca, as she is now called, has learned to recognize the smell of death during her time as a corpse and cannot bear to be near any other human being except her mother. She dies while still in her teens from AIDS, though she is a virgin and has had no physical contact with any person other than her mother since her resurrection. Her infection is inexplicable and this casts her as a martyr, forcing her rural Hispanic community to confront the AIDS epidemic free from divisive and distracting issues of blame or guilt directed at victims perceived as being sexually deviant, promiscuous, or users of illegal drugs.

After her death, a shrine is built to her and her image is plastered on holy candles. La Loca Santa, the virgin saint from the South Valley, becomes a sort of modern Chicana Virgen de Guadalupe, down to the typical blue robes in which the brown-skinned Virgen is depicted. Like the Virgen de Guadalupe, La Loca is a mixed and hybridized saint, reflecting her western identity. The blue robes of her sainthood (a blue chenille bathrobe she dons for her participation in the procession of the Stations of the Cross on Holy Friday) are worn over battered Levis, a man's plaid Pendleton shirt, and cowboy boots. She speaks in a combination of

English and Spanish, and makes her famous procession, as befits a western saint, on horseback. Although she is never recognized by Rome, she is nonetheless a powerful symbol for her community, squeezing through the cracks of the dominant culture's religion and acting from the space between. The paradox of her life and death—a virgin who has lived like a holy hermit yet who dies of AIDS—mirrors the conundrum of life in the western borderlands. La Loca is both pure and polluted, monstrous in her crazy anti-social behavior, yet a martyr and saint who prays for her people in life and becomes their holy intermediary in death. Like the slippery space of the west, she confounds easy categorization, rejecting a unitary identity for a contradictory otherness.

Her oldest sister, Esperanza [Hope], on the other hand, finds herself constantly at odds with the Church, Chicano culture, and Anglo culture. Rather than living in physical isolation and spiritual openness like La Loca, Esperanza is physically immersed in the world, sexually and politically, but spiritually lost and confused. Esperanza moves from battle to battle, fighting to cross the social, cultural, and gender borders which structure her world. On the surface it would appear she has achieved the American dream—money, success, and fame, Anglo America's version of utopia—but the frontiers she violates to reach these goals mark her as much as they do her sister. She travels to the Middle East as a journalist during the first Gulf War, where she is held hostage for months before being killed, her government apparently unconcerned over her fate. Esperanza's life and death can be seen as an allegory of the boundaries confining and defining the world of Chicanas. They may hope that education, careers, or financial success will free them from the suffocating gender roles imposed by Chicano and Anglo cultures, or allow them to transcend the racial and linguistic prejudices of the Anglo world, but they may find they are simply trading one set of boundaries for another,

equally rigid. If money and fame is held out to the woman of color in America as her hope for transcending borders, Castillo's version of Hope implies it is an empty promise.

While Esperanza represents the struggles of Chicanas in the white- and male-dominated world of political and economic success, Caridad [Charity] traverses the vicious borders circumscribing female sexuality. Caridad, as her name suggests, is a giver, and after her high school sweetheart impregnates then dumps her, she gives freely of her heart and body to a stream of men in the cowboy/vaquero bars in Albuquerque's South Valley. All of Anglo and Chicano cultures' anxieties about female sexuality are focused on Caridad. One night on her way home to her mother's house she is raped, slashed, and mutilated by a *malogra*, a sort of physical manifestation of evil thoughts, in this case the misogyny directed by Anglo and Chicano cultures towards a woman who transgresses sexual boundaries. La Loca prays for her sister, and Caridad is miraculously healed. She becomes a curandera and allies herself with the Pueblo world through her half-Indian lover, Esmeralda. This alliance violates most utopic visions of racial and cultural purity, as well as the Church's vision of tightly controlled female sexuality, and Caridad pays with her life (more or less). A young man called Francisco el Penitente has begun stalking her. He dreams of bringing her into the controlling sphere of Church doctrine, desperate to remove her and her famous healing powers from the religiously hybridized prayers and cures she practices, and especially from the impure female sexuality her dark Indian lover symbolizes. He follows the two women to Acoma Pueblo, where they flee from him by leaping off the top of Acoma Mesa. They do not die, but are swallowed up by the sacred earth to live out eternity together in the spirit world upon which Acoma Pueblo rests. Caridad's life and semi-death offer her mother yet another vision of how to build a utopia that rests upon rather than eradicates difference.

Fe [Faith], the third allegorical sister, is destroyed utterly by her journey into the forbidden realms of Anglo society, but mainly by her abandonment of the possibility for utopic transformation inherent in Castillo's vision of the borderlands. As a sardonic reading of her name suggests, Fe [Faith] is stubborn, blind, uncompromising, and demanding. She feels only embarrassment toward her family and Chicano culture, taking pride instead in her pale complexion as a door into Anglo society. She places all her faith in the vision of Anglo American utopia, working herself to death in a high-tech weapons factory that is poisoning its mostly Chicana workforce with illegal chemicals. She ignores all signs of health problems, however, in her drive to acquire a house in the suburbs, a microwave, VCR, etc. Unlike her sisters, when Fe dies, eaten alive by cancers, not even her ghost returns to the land of the living.

By the end of the novel, as in the original myth, Sofia has lost her daughters, but this Sofia does not stand helplessly weeping over their graves. Instead she learns from the lives and deaths of each of her daughters and vows not to lament the way of the world or the borders which have destroyed her children, but to alter them and her own identity. Reflecting on, and sometimes speaking to, her lost daughters, Sofia comes up with a plan to save the town of Tome, dying in the modern west. Like her daughters, the town is trapped between and within cultures, bound on all sides by borders which paradoxically must be crossed, but which can destroy those who do so. The town's reaction to the changing shape of the west has been to cling desperately to traditional Chicano rural culture, to resist rather than embrace change and the continuously evolving differences it represents. As a result, Tome is being slowly crushed by the forces moving in from the outside world. Nearly all the old families, rich and poor, have lost their ancestral holdings, forced to sell to Anglo retirees and

wealthy vacationers as taxes rise and subsistence farming and ranching become less feasible. Unable to pay their bills, families are deserting the land and children are moving to Albuquerque and Phoenix.

Sofia's plan is to transform Tome's present into something new, inspired by the past. She creates "Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative" [The Cattle and Wool Cooperative], gathers together a group of her *comadres* [generally the godmother of one's child, but also close female friends], and gets herself declared mayor. The *comadres* and their families begin to graze their sheep and cattle communally, sell their organic beef and mutton at Sofia's butcher shop, now part of the Cooperative, learn to weave the wool and market the handmade products they create, establish affordable daycares and search out community college classes that give them credit for their experience running small businesses. They create in modernized form the edenic, sustainable lifestyle they imagine to have existed in a romanticized past.

Many critics have focused on the roles of community and family in defining home and the west in this novel. Carmela Delia Lanza writes that Castillo "constructs the home as a 'site of resistance' for the woman of color living in a racist and sexist world" (65). Castillo envisions this new west, built in resistance to racism and sexism, as constructed of both the business savvy often attributed to Anglo society and the community-based nurturing she identifies as Chicano/a and female. The borders between cultures, separating and defining them within this utopia, are not destroyed, but Castillo implies they can be made easier to cross, and the crossing can be made less dangerous. The culture in between, the Chicano/a culture which spans those of Anglo America and Mexico, is affirmed as a mestizo entity and remains both a reflection of the cultures from which it draws inspiration, and determinedly different from them.

The contradictions of history and identity are also carried through in Castillo's first collection of short fiction, *Loverboys* (1996), which features an eclectic mix of styles and topics and which has, like so many of Castillo's works, received mixed reviews. From the colloquial voice of the elderly Mexican man telling the "true" story of the famous Zapatista in "Who Was Juana Gallo," to the stilted, nineteenth-century formality of "If Not For The Blessing Of A Son," Castillo freely experiments with voice and style. The themes in these works are familiar. The title story, "Loverboys," focuses on the pangs of love suffered by a lesbian Chicana bookstore owner. "Vatolandia" [Dudeland] chronicles the adventures of a hilarious, fast-talking middle-aged Chicana science teacher dealing with the sexual delights and disappointments of Chicano manhood. The teacher's story is told by an equally hilarious neighbor ("But see, here may be where the problem lies for Sara, 'cause *I* ain't all that sure that the smart part was considered by too many of the vatos [dudes] around here as a good thing. So like the vatos wanted to know her for obvious reasons and the comadres wanted to know her 'cause they just wanted to know her business" (55)). In the surreal, postmodern "Subtitles," the narrator tells the story of her life as though it were being lived in a foreign film, complete with imaginary subtitles appearing at her feet indicating that she is not really a foreigner, just often cast as one.

Castillo's latest novel, *Peel My Love Like An Onion*, continues her exploration of the conflicted identities of Mexican Americans and their search for authenticity. While her first two novels can be seen as emphasizing the postmodern alienation and fragmentation of individuals in the borderlands, and *So Far From God* may be viewed as an attempt at discovering an authentic self-identity that involves, as Walter puts it, "collective self-definition, a place among one's people" (89), grounded in a beloved, albeit conquered and contested western homeland, *Peel My Love* is perhaps even



more postmodern in its suggestion that a collective sense of self or place does not need to be anchored in an actual geographic location. The question of authenticity, what constitutes an authentic identity, and how a sense of place may or may not be part of such an identity (questions at the heart of much western literature and criticism) is frequently pondered by Castillo's narrator, who reflects that for Mexicans born "on this [U.S.] side," "You say your city the way some Americans say this is their country. You never feel right saying that—*my country*. For some reason looking Mexican means you can't be American" (3; emphasis in original). At the same time, she continues, going to Mexico reinforces the fact that she is definitely not Mexican. "Because you were born on this side *pocha* is what you're called there, by your unkind relatives and strangers on the street [. . .] when they [. . .] wince at your bad Spanish. Still, you try at least. You try like no one else on earth tries to be in two places at once" (3).

Castillo connects the multiple layers of mixed identities with the multiple layers of romantic love and artistic passion that challenge and inspire her main character throughout her life. The first-person narrator informs readers, with equal parts amusement and sarcasm, that she is known as "Carmen la Coja [the Cripple], one-legged dancing queen" (10) and tells, through a series of flashbacks, the story of her determination to become a flamenco dancer, despite the effects of childhood polio. She succeeds, not because she is more beautiful or a better dancer than other women, but because she understands that flamenco is not really about dancing, but about a way of looking at and living life. In other words, flamenco is an identity, not just a physical act.

Carmen's claim to an authentic identity is contested on multiple levels, not the least of which is the dubiousness of a crippled girl identifying herself as a dancer. Additionally, she is a Mexican American attempting to establish her identity as a dancer in an

art form native to gypsies. The only truly authentic flamenco dancers and musicians according to the novel, gypsies become a sort of transnational version of Chicano/as, the ultimate westerners, or perhaps anti-westerners. One gypsy character tells Carmen that gypsies belong to the entire world although every country disowns them, and indeed the gypsy community in Chicago boasts gypsies born in Serbia, Spain, Mexico, and North and South America. But while they freely traverse international borders, foreigners in every nation, gypsies never question the authenticity of their identities, managing to feel at home wherever they find another gypsy, in effect carrying and recreating home in their unwavering devotion to their culture, language, and music, rather than seeking authenticity in nostalgia for a hopelessly lost geography. Carmen, both a part of their world and a foreigner in it, is assured she belongs precisely because she is a "fake gypsy" (49). Castillo deliberately subverts assumptions about cultural and racial authenticity that conflict so many of her Mexican American characters, challenging yet again the scope and character of western writing.

#### BEYOND GENRES

Despite her continued successes in fiction and poetry, the book of which Castillo is most proud is her 1994 collection of critical essays, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, adapted from her doctoral dissertation. This book, which was awarded the Gustavus Myers Prize for Outstanding Book on Human Rights in 1995, lays out Castillo's vision of a Chicana feminism (which she terms Xicanisma) by exploring the roots of Chicanas' contested identities through an examination of indigenous religions, Catholicism, Marxism, eroticism, and the history of Chicanas in various modern civil rights movements. The book draws from research in the fields of history, ethnography, sociology, psychology,

anthropology, and spirituality, but is deliberately non-academic in tone, aimed, unlike most scholarly texts, Castillo claims, at its own subject. This is a wide-ranging, extensively researched collection, attempting to draw connections between various historical events and contemporary Mexican American realities. "Chapter Three—The Ancient Roots of Machismo," for example, discusses the Muslim conquest of Spain and the impact of Arab culture on Spanish social structures that would later travel to the Americas. This chapter also examines the changing status of women at the height of the Aztec Empire, noting that many indigenous cultures had grown increasingly patriarchal in the centuries prior to the Spanish conquest.

"Chapter Two—The 1986 Watsonville Women's Strike: A Case of Mexicana Activism" examines the effects of the strike and the experiences of organizing on the lives of Mexican American women living in the small agricultural city north of Fresno, California. Over 1,600 workers in the frozen-food processing plants which provide most of the employment in Watsonville, mainly Mexican American women, went on strike in September 1986 protesting cuts in pay and health benefits and attempts to break the unions. Castillo notes that the strike took on specifically "Mexican cultural overtones" (55), finally ending after eighteen months when the women "secured the publicity they needed by conducting a Catholic pilgrimage on their knees to a local church where they prayed for justice" (56). She argues that the women also experienced a particular brand of oppression and resistance to their organizing, coming from traditional husbands angered at their wives' insistence on leaving home to attend meetings, from male members of the Chicano civil rights movement who tried to take over the strike in the belief that women were unable to organize on their own, and from white factory owners who refused to recognize

Mexican women laborers as a “force to whom they should be accountable” (59).

Her arguments in “Chapter Eight—Un Tapiz: The Poetics of Conscientización” embody one of her most central beliefs and an accusation that has swirled around her own work from the beginning, that academia recognizes and rewards only “white writing” (168). Thus it locks out those Chicanas who refuse to adopt what she considers its deliberately complex and elitist language. She calls instead for a “Conscientized Poetics” (171) that would acknowledge Chicana experiences and worldviews. A poetics of this sort, she posits, would work at breaking down the binaries common in western philosophical thought as well as the rigid academic dogma which decrees that poetry cannot be theory, theory cannot be personal, and complex language is the only way to express complex ideas. The language and structure of *Massacre of the Dreamers* reflects this vision, and the book, Castillo has frequently said, was deliberately written to be accessible to its subject.

The title of the book was inspired by the legend that Moctezuma, hearing that thousands of his citizens were dreaming of the fall of the empire, called them forth to tell of their dreams. When they answered the call, he had them killed in a futile attempt to stop the prophesied coming of Cortès. The empire’s destruction, of course, was not averted, but no one was willing ever again to speak of their dreams. Castillo likens Chicanas today to those silenced dreamers. In “Chapter Ten—Resurrection of the Dreamers,” she presents Xicanisma as a blueprint for change in the world, writing that it is

an ever present consciousness of our interdependency specifically rooted in our culture and history. [. . .] What we have been permitted to be without argument [. . .] is the compassionate, cooperative, yielding, procreator of the species, india

fea [ugly Indian woman], burra [female donkey] beast of burden of society. Viewed as ugly and common as straw. We know that we are not. Let us be alchemists for our culture and our lives and use this conditioning as our raw material to convert it into a driving force pure as gold. (226)

The problem for Chicanas, according to Sonia Saldivar-Hull, is that "Chicanas ask different questions [. . .]" than other Americans (220). Castillo not only asks different questions, but asks them in different ways and directs them at different audiences, never hesitating to challenge the status of sanctioned narratives or sacred cows, no matter which side of any border they happen to be on. While an instinctive embrace of iconoclasts and a stubborn refusal to accept authority for authority's sake may be said to form a connecting thread through much of western literature and culture, it is Castillo's ability to see how such a thread has been alternately spun and unraveled throughout the history of the west and across its many frontiers that makes her both a quintessentially western writer and one of the most important voices in the new west. Weaving her own tapestry of passion, lyricism, and humor from Chicago to central Mexico, Castillo forcefully reminds her readers of the power of history, the permeability of borders, and the ephemeral nature of both as they continue to shape our ideas of the west.

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