

Simon Romero: An Interview with Ana Castillo

Amidst the strained sounds of students snoring and the steady hum of human traffic in Albuquerque's best coffeehouse (often lauded in these pages), Simon Romero, NuCity's writer-on-the-run, had the opportunity to speak with Ana Castillo, on break from an extensive tour publicizing her newest novel, *So Far From God*. Themes large and small, local and international, somehow managed to be recorded on the AVR tucked away at the corner of their worn table. Illustrious, fortunate readers take heed and guard this issue carefully--these are the words that managed to survive that single tape:

S.R.: I understand you're originally from Chicago. How did you end up in Albuquerque? Why here?

A.C.: People usually think I came here to teach at the University, but I didn't. I had visited here and been invited to talk here a few times...

S.R.:...over at the university...

A.C.:...yeah, so I'd met a few people like Rudy Anaya--he was instrumental in inviting me--but it was after a sweat that it came to me to come here, so I did. I got my adobe and I've lived here for three years and this is home.

S.R.: Where else had you lived before coming to Albuquerque?

A.C.: Five years in California, including three years in the Bay Area. I also taught up in Chico and then I was a fellow at UCSD for a year. Before that I lived nearly all my life in Chicago, aside from travelling extensively here and there.

S.R.: You mentioned previously that you'd be interested in collaborating with someone on a film. How would you describe the current state of Chicano film-making?

A.C.: We could say, finally, that in 1993 there is Chicano filmmaking. So I think the possibilities are endless in terms of what the genre would be like. However, in terms of looking for sources of money, I think we have to be very careful not to fall into Hollywood's commodification of Chicano culture. We could look at the example of Piri Thomas, a successful Puerto Rican writer now living in the Bay Area, who has received repeated offers from Hollywood...and he said he's not going to write about his people doing drugs and going to jail. He mentioned that every time they wanted him to write something, they wanted him to do that, to portray the Puerto Ricans and the Latinos in a negative way.

S.R.: What kind of film would you make?

A.C.: Well of course, if you think about the kind of books I've written, it would be different, coming from a woman's perspective, something like, say, Maria Novaro's "Danzon." I think it would be similar to a Maria Novaro film, with a Chicana protagonist, with Brown women, with the specificity of our culture. But, you know, I think the issues I have always dealt with are very contemporary and very "universal."

S.R.: There's a certain trace of Baccaccio or Cervantes in *So Far From God*. For example, you begin each chapter with a humourous summary. How important would you say humor is in your novels?

A.C.: It seems to be coming out more and more. When I devoted myself to poetry--and poetry is a very serious medium--I don't think the people that knew me as an individual with that tongue-in-cheek kind of humor...well, it didn't always lend itself to my poetry. When you're writing poetry, it's like working with gold, you can't waste anything. You have to be very economical with each word you're going to select. But when you're writing fiction, you can just go on and on; you can be more playful. My editor's main task is to cut back, not ask for more.

S.R.: Not only do you use New Mexican Spanish in *So Far From God*, but also the unique English that's spoken here, the long descriptive sentences. It appears that the syntax is Spanish, but the vocabulary is essentially English. How would you say that New Mexico's vernacular differs from Chicago's or California's?

A.C.: Well, I'm glad you observed that. Are you a native New Mexican?

S.R.: Yeah...

A.C.: Good, then maybe I can get an endorsement from you since the language here is very different. At first when you hear the speech here, you don't really know what to do with it, but then I just went with it, because as a writer as well as a translator I do believe that translated words are not different names for the same thing. They're different names for different things. If my novel was instead written in White standard English, I'm doing nothing more than writing a White standard novel with an ethnic motif. Here I started to listen very carefully, and the double negatives in fact drove some of the New York copyeditors crazy, they had to cut back. But it was fun for me. I tried to stay as true as I could, so I used Ruben Cobos' dictionary of Southwestern Spanish, and when I went into Spanish I never assumed the word I would use would be the word a nuevomexicano would use. Chicago Spanish, for example would be more reminiscent of Central Mexican Spanish. And the californios go back several generations, and many don't have Spanish. And if we're talking about L.A., there's been a huge migration of Mexicanos and Central Americans. So it was very important to me to feel the aspirations of the northern New Mexicans and represent them correctly.

S.R.: How would you describe the future of Chicano speech? Do you see language as something in a permanent state of change, as something maleable? What language will the next generation of Chicanos be writing in?

A.C.: I definitely do see language serving its users, and when it no longer serves them we need to look for new words. I was a principal translator of *This Bridge Called My Back*, which is a groundbreaking feminist anthology of writing by women of color. The original title was *Este Puente, Mi Espalda*, and near the end of the project I decided on *Esta Puente, Mi Espalda*, so we had a debate and decided to put a note in the book, and what happened was

that because we are Chicanas it was assumed that we don't know our English nor our Spanish. People would actually question us publicly if we knew that *punte* was a masculine noun. We felt like the White feminists who used herstory instead of history. We were doing the same thing. We will never have "a" Chicano English or Spanish because of regional differences. But I think that because of our bilingual history, we'll always be speaking a special kind of English and Spanish. What we do have to do is fight for the right to use those two languages in the way that it serves us. Nuevo-mexicanos have done it very well for hundreds of years, inventing words where they don't have them. I think the future of our language is where we claim our bilingualism for its utility.

S.R.: How would you characterize the reception of Chicano literature abroad? There seems to be an interest in Germany and England...

A.C.: Many European countries are fascinated with minorities from the United States. They still see this country as a world power and they covet that power...I was approached by a professor once at the Sorbonne in Paris and asked about racism in this country, and when I reflected on racism on the streets of Paris--you know, I'd be considered an Arab there--well, she didn't want to address that...It just goes to show it was easier for Europeans to study racism in the United States than it is from within the belly of the beast.

S.R.: You mentioned that you have a young son, Marcel. How would you describe the schools here in Albuquerque?

A.C.: I have him in San Felipe and I had him as a non-Catholic child, so I pay more. He was baptized by the Chicano/Native American community and not by the church. Anyway, when I first came I tried very hard to get him into Longfellow, a school with good programs, but it was very hard, I even offered to teach for free...I had serious reservations about putting him in the public schools in my area. I think that the problems here in Albuquerque, especially in regards to the Chicano community, are as serious as those in any large city in this country...The gang problem does not seem like it should be that serious, but it is for a Latino. I have a tremendous amount of fear for the future of my boy. He's nine-and-a-half and dark-skinned. By the time he's 12 or 13, who knows who he's going to be identifying with in these days when you get shot down for wearing expensive Nikes to school...I've heard that if a Latino makes it to 19 years of age, he has a good chance of surviving into adulthood. Up until then, you don't know.

S.R.: What significance does modern Latin American writing have for you and your work?

A.C.: I've been writing and publishing now for almost 20 years, so when I began examining my reality, the closest examples I could find were the Latin Americans, especially the women. And I was especially influenced by a book called *As Tres Marias* written by three Portuguese women. That book came out when I was just coming out of high school. These women were in prison, they were being censored, and later I saw this story in New York as an experimental play. They were talking about all the issues that affect Latina women, from Catholicism to incest to patriarchy. At that time, we didn't have many books by U.S. Latinas; they were writing but not getting published. Anyone that came close to my experience was someone that I would read.

S.R.: How would you describe the current state of American fiction? Is there a glut of themes? Is it getting repetitive now?

A.C.: Well, you know, as time has gone on and we're at the end of the 20th century and major publishing is a big business, yes, of course we're going to get a lot of plain, mediocre trash. There are a lot of writers who get huge advances for books that don't go anywhere and they have to burn them somewhere or throw them away. I always think about all the poor trees that have been sacrificed. All it is is a mass-consumption for a brain-dead readership. The writers who have been serious about recreating American literature have always been far and few between. What we do have at the end of the 20th century that we didn't have at the beginning, at that time of the Lost Generation of rich white boys, is a mixture. We're now getting gay writers of color, let's say, and women of color being published. This is unprecedented.

S.R.: How do you view the reception of your work in Mexico?

A.C.: Among feminists, there's been an ongoing dialogue. For example, Elena Poniatowska has become a friend of mine and she's acknowledging Chicana literature. And in a month, I'll be attending a conference on Chicana writers at UNAM (Universidad Autonoma de Mexico). This exchange has been taking place for about 10 years. *The Mixquihuala Letters* should be translated into Spanish, I understand that my poetry has been studied, and *Esta Puente, Mi Espalda* has also been used in Mexico now for several years. I think, again, that it's the women who are taking the lead in establishing this communication...As far as our language goes, I'm not exactly sure that the bilingualism that we use--though we have a stronger hold on it--isn't understood by Mexicanos once it crosses the border. You hear it a lot in the slang picked up by the Pop Culture. People like to think of themselves as purists, but there is no such thing as purity, when there exists so much contact.

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