

The Power of a Query

This interview reflects the "rebellious wisdom" of Ana Castillo, a Xicanista, strongly committed to her community and beliefs, who constantly challenges the limitations of the apparent. Her writing captures the critical vision that emerges from both her questioning spirit and the politicization of her experience, offering a powerful query of the social reality in which she lives. As such, Castillo's *The Guardians* speaks, representing a cry for social justice and making visible a reality that many refuse to see.

Aishih Wehbe (AW): Ana, you have recently published a new novel, *The Guardians*. What was the major motivation that got you involved in this project? Besides, how would you define your creative process? When you are envisioning a new project, how do you come across with a new idea? How is your "prelude to crossing", that is, how do you bring the idea into a book, a poem, a play etc.?

Ana Castillo (AC): In the case of *The Guardians*, I was hoping for "inspiration" from my new surroundings, the desert landscape of Southern New Mexico. One early morning while drinking coffee I contemplated the Franklin Mountains, which I can normally view from my house in the desert. That morning they were somewhat obscured by the low morning clouds of winter. I began to wonder what it would be like to be a person trying to cross over those mountains to the U.S., during that freezing previous night and who might still be waiting for safe passage. There are any numbers of perils in such a crossing—from mountain lions to criminals preying on such poor people. A novel begins with a query. The query for me was not that first contemplation but what followed: What would it feel like to be a person on this U.S. waiting for a loved one who is attempting to cross over? With that query I went to my laptop and wrote a short story. That short story became the first chapter of the novel. Beginnings are all very different for me; sometimes the subject lingers with me for a while before I find the genre.

AW: *The Guardians* deals with several political, social and economic issues regarding the Mexican-American border. Life in the borderlands is a major aspect of the novel, as *la frontera* not only brings people together but also sets them apart abruptly and violently. You stated in *Massacre of the Dreamers* that "until we are all represented, respected, and protected by society and the laws that govern it, the status of the Chicana will be that of a countryless woman" (*Massacre*, 41). This has been a constant vindication in your work, as you powerfully express "In My Country" (*My Father Was a Toltec*). Do you think the Chicana/Latina is closer to a place called home? Is it possible to create a home at all when you are so jeopardized as a Chicana from all fronts?

AC: It is the nature of all living creatures, including Homo sapiens, I believe, to adapt to a place where they may survive. If that is something we as social beings called home then home it is for my main character in *The Guardians*, Regina who has plunked down hard earned pennies on a *cachito* of terreno where she can survive, plants some vegetables to live from, etc.

AW: I think it is one of the very first times in your novels that you present such a stark but surprisingly vivid picture of the US-Mexican border. And I also read *The Guardians* as one of your most political novels so far. In fact, *la frontera* is portrayed as a space in the vacuum for both governments on either side of the border, a "no-man's land", much less "a woman's?". However, it is very real for the people living there and those endlessly crossing over. The borderlands, then, is a highly gendered, racialised and sexualised space, regarding the "femicides" in Ciudad Juárez "also tackled in your poem "In the Jaws of Xolotl" in *Watercolor Women, Opaque Men: A Novel in Verse* (Curbstone Press, 2005) " and the "law of terror" enforced by coyotes and narcos alike. Not to mention the Minuteman's xenophobic ethos and the still overall "incredible whiteness of being" (*Guardians*, 31) of mainstream America. How does *la conscientización* work in this context?

AC: The obvious first answer is the existence of political activism on both sides of the border. There are many local groups and there are groups from the outside that lend some support. Most of what it accomplishes is public awareness. There are efforts to be supportive of victims' families and there is also activism to help communities in Juárez in dire poverty. Due to NAFTA the factories (*maquilas*) along the Border attracted millions from the interior. There were no living provisions for them. Now that these companies are moving to China these impoverished communities are left in further despair.

Regarding the level of the criminality, engendered by drug cartels along the Border, as my character Miguel puts out in *The Guardians*, it is a multi-billion dollar international enterprise. It is maintained with unbridled violence and as with all "underground organizations," if you will, pathological. In summer 2008, when this interview is taking place, *los narcos* in Juárez have declared an all out war on numerous local officials and civilians, leaving hit lists. There is a climate of terror. The military is patrolling the area but every week, the drug lords kill at least a dozen people. They have taken to beheadings to accelerate the intimidation.

Regarding the infamous heinous murders that feminist academics have named "femicides," in part, do have to do with entrenched macho attitudes at the sociopath level. In other words, men still think women are sexual objects that they possess and may discard at will. But, those murders only account for a small percentage. Body trafficking (sex trade, includes catering to from pedophiles to work and sex slaves) is even bigger business in the world than drugs, financed undoubtedly by drug enterprises. If you consider the violent retaliation of the cartels this summer, the horrific kidnappings and murders of females "from 5 to over 50 years old" going with impunity makes "sense." Who was going to stop a multi-billion enterprise run by thugs? Excuse me for going on about this but while the world watched the release of hostages in Colombia that were taken by "extreme leftist guerrillas" supposedly financed by

drug lords, I won't hold my breath to see what government officials are also financed by these criminals. I am not just referring to Latin American officials.

AW: The Guardians brings together different people from different generations, and it is precisely the tragedies in their lives that make them unite, but also, what will eventually estrange them from each other. How can we build coalitions between peoples and communities so that the "centre [can] hold" (Guardians, 186), as you mention in the novel? In this respect, why did you choose W.B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming"?

AC: I'll answer the second question first—the association of the poem has to do with Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart*, which is about the breakdown of traditional cultures that I think holds a lesson for Mexican families. What to do so that the "center can hold"...? Well, I don't have the answer for all families and communities. As people move up and out of poverty, village life and traditional societies, they become more like other "middle class" and "Westernized" families. Materialism seems to be the goal and measure of success for too many.

So, I'll address this from the perspective of a single mother with one male child. He is a young adult now with a new family of his own. I always tried to keep communication open and without him fearing to come to me about anything. At the same time, I was not his buddy. I was (and am) his mother. He need not fear me but he must respect me as authority in his life. To this day, we are close. I am not the authority now but someone who he does turn to for guidance. We keep communicating—long distance—not just by phone but text message and emails to keep the channels open when there is difficulty. We're generationally-challenged but we always affirm our commitment to each other.

AW: Another recurrent theme in your novels is the limitations or symbolic borders that Chicanas and Chicanos carry along in their daily lives. For instance, you interrogate the Catholic doctrine through the character of Gabo, whose strength precisely comes from his faith. Moreover, you have thoroughly explored these issues regarding Chicanas/Latinas, but as I see it, it is one of the first times that one of your male characters openly questions his own self in terms of gender. Obviously, I am talking about Miguel. My question is, are you observing these changes—like the ones Miguel undergoes as a character—in Chicano men and their sense of manhood?

AC: Yes, ma'am! Many years ago now I was first so pleased to discover a new generation of young Chicanos buying my first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, that blew up the macho paradigm of the Chicano Movement in fiction, I believe, by presenting the inner workings of a Chicana mind in the face of all of it in California and Mexico. Especially in California, home of Xicanismo in my opinion, I find I have young Chicano fans because of that book, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, *My Father was a Toltec* and *Sapogonia*. They are all works that brought out machismo in bas-relief. In this respect, I do know that (especially in California) men's groups have responded to feminism by trying to reflect on the culture they inherited and being

supportive of each other to change it. Miguel is one of these kinds of men.

On the other hand, today, the new generation, the Millennials ?born around 1990 and that take the struggles of feminism in stride and even resent being reminded of the Civil Right Movement? seem to think it?s ?uncool? to refer to machismo. Considering the phenomenal popularity of hip-hop culture, that?s very telling of what happened to feminism. I?m not sure where it?s all going. Let?s take for example, the ongoing ?breast fest? going on, not just in the States but popular culture all over. In that frame of mind young women think that it is beneficial in many ways to have, to use popular anti-feminist vernacular, ?big boobs.? So yes, despite changes, I will say here and now that society at large is in retro mode. There are some enlightened men in the United States, at the same time, popular culture rewards ghetto macho behavior by making it cool or marketable i.e. bling-bling cheap gaudy jewelry, clothes, films by white women called ?Baby Mama,? a ghetto term. Moreover, there are young women subscribing to the whole lifestyle as something beneficial. I see the ?breast fest? going on around the world where we see every female?s cleavage, ?girls? gone wild? commercials, not to mention Spring Breaks in the States, their wet t-shirt contests and so forth. I think, this is what we feminists struggled so hard for?

AW: Miguel?s inability to relate and express his emotions beyond the limitations of his own sense of masculinity is what partially alienates him from his family and Regina, at some point in the novel. On the contrary, El Abuelo Milton?s capacity to emotionally look after others and his commitment to help Gabo, Regina and later his grandson, makes him a key figure in the novel. I believe you beautifully vindicate here the importance of integrating the mother-bond principle in our identities, which you analyze in ?Toward the Mother-Bond Principle? in *Massacre of the Dreamers*; the fact that anybody can be motherly and nurturing, independently of their sex and gender. How does this translate into the Chicano/Latino community on a daily basis, regarding the ?de-humanization? of the institutions and the fierce individualist ethos, to which more people assimilate? Regina is a good example of this negotiation.

AC: I saw Miguel-Mike who is in his mid-thirties in the novel (born in 1969) struggling with the macho legacies of the men in his family and role models, his white military father and his cantina owning grandfather. At the same time he struggles with how much his ex-wife dotes on their son. For instance, this tends to be a stereotype in Latino families, too. The Chicano comedian, George L?pez does a routine about this. He jokes that boys at 7 or 8 can?t walk yet because the mother is still carrying them around.

But as far as the novel makes reference to that, Miguel seems to be willing to concede to the mother?s care more than enforce macho authority over the sickly boy. Miguel is a man of the new millennia. He listens to what his significant other opines. As an educated individual, he also turns to literature for answers. He reflects on his failed marriage and tries to learn from it rather than shut down and repeat his mistakes. There is a deep desire to find spiritual and romantic fulfillment. He?s willing to find new ways to do that within the constrictions of society?s patriarchal institutions.

El Abuelo Milton was no doubt as macho as they came during his younger days. The wisdom of aging teaches to discriminate, when and to what degree imposing your male privilege

works. I think that is what you are referring to as "the mother-bond principle," this compassion and protection offered unconditionally to those around us in the way a mother is known to love her child. In traditional cultures we turn to our elders to give us the guidance of their long experience. Some young people today, I find, think that because their elders make mistakes in their youth they have no right to give advice. But that is exactly why their advice is so valuable. Our elders guide us to keep us from similar pitfalls. Miguel turns to his grandfather to show him what is important as a man in his family. The old man learned the hard way—by hurting his wife, the love of his life with his infidelities. By fathering Miguel, El Abuelo has also shown him how to parent.

AW: Exploring female sexuality has been a constant in your work, not only in your poems and novels, but also in your critical production. In *Sapogonia*, for instance, you deal with the connection between eroticism, sexuality and spirituality through the character of Pastora. In *Peel My Love like an Onion*, you reclaim the female body and sexuality as a way to self-affirmation and psychological/emotional strength, away from the strings holding back Teresa in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. Do you think Chicanas/Latinas have found a way to heal this bond, the one connecting eroticism and spirituality? As a result of this reconnection, what changes are experiencing the wider Chicano/Latino community?

AC: Well, the Latino communities are not isolated from all else that goes on in world popular culture. Moreover, sexual identity politics regarding Latin@s has been examined in academia where the works of my generation have been studied for decades now. Among educated women, I do believe much has changed—borrowing from the old feminist term, "liberating." Not only are lesbians and gay men more apt to live full lives out of the shadows of homophobia now, but society is moving toward an unprecedented era of accepting transgendered identities living open lifestyles. In terms of Latino communities generally speaking, I don't think women's (and gay) sexual identities are more than simply tolerated outside the heterosexual one. But I do believe there is change taking place there, too. These are my observations and most definitely have no empirical basis. I do believe that straight men, regardless of age or background, because times are changing, are becoming more accepting of the variations of binary gender constructs.

AW: In *The Guardians*, you present Regina as a fiftyish-year-old virgin, who suddenly finds herself emotionally involved with a man fifteen years younger than her. Why this change in your approach to the issue?

AC: This has to do with the religious underpinnings in the work. Regina lives in a marginalized, traditional region. Women in general in this story do not have control of their own sexuality.

AW: Shifting the point of view as a narrative technique is something you already experimented with in *Sapogonia*, in order to dramatically destabilize Máximo as the center of patriarchal

discourse, bringing a full-picture of Pastora into play instead. What about *The Guardians*? What has been your major motivation for using this technique again?

AC: It happened pragmatically. It started out as Regina's story. At some point I experimented with the secondary characters' telling their own narrative. Finally I decided that the quartet of voices we hear were the characters telling the story.

AW: Regarding the Chicano/Latino literary scene nowadays, how have the poetics of conscientización materialised in poetry, fiction and art in general?

AC: In 2008 you don't necessarily find an overt collective Latin@ consciousness (one for all, all for one) in all the output now seen by Latinos. This is a result of the ground broken by my generation. Now, a Latin@ writer, poet, rapper of Word or hip-hop, 'chic-lit' novelist does not necessarily feel it important to write from a collective Latin@ identity. For instance, my last reading was with a successful Latina novelist who is writing best-sellers. Her characters are up-scale, East Coast and white; so you can't generalize. Latin@ literature has moved along with the times. You have Latin@s in the limelight -'American Idol', 'Desperate Housewives', in the White House, etc.- precisely because of the Latin@ Movement of the 70s. On the other hand, popular culture has become global and there aren't just Latin@s out there now but other ethnic groups that once would not have been represented in the media and mainstream publishing. For example, the Iraq invasion has brought an unprecedented interest in Middle Eastern culture, here and there and (Asian) Indian writers are also very prominent today here, as they are in Europe now.

AW: Finally, what do you think are the main challenges Chicana/o and Latina/o writers have to face in the twenty-first century, in relation to their community and American society at large?

AC: The issue is that not all successful Latin@ writers feel they owe anything to Latin@s. But among those who do, I would hope they keep in mind the history that got them there and that they work to keep those roads open for the upcoming writers. Also I hope that like with my character el Abuelo Milton who, at the start of the novel, appears to be forgotten because of his old age (by everyone except his grandson, Miguel, who values the elder) that those who benefit from our generation's courage to break ground don't forget we are still here working and 'en la lucha.'

There is a tendency to think that older citizens in general, should move aside. We live in such an ageist society we want to put the previous generation out to pasture when they are still contributing members of their communities and society at large.

Along those lines, I am part of a large population called the Baby Boomers. Our generation fought the establishment and saw us through extraordinary times. We most assuredly won't simply go off into the good night without a whimper. We are also living longer and having

more productive lives than our own parents had after fifty. So, as a writer I continue to portray unprecedented literary characters, independent, fiery Latin@s and yes, as I mature, a few mature along with me. From this perspective, I am also able to write cross-generationally.

AW: As a Chicana writer and a woman in the 21st century, what is your next challenge?

AC: My challenge today is what it has always been, all of the above. Regardless of what we have achieved today, putting a male of color and a woman out as nominees for the Democratic Party (while the war-mongering Republican Party elected an old white man) we still are far from a racist and sexist free world.

The fact that there will be Latin@s who will vote for McCain proves that despite the numbers, there is no such a thing as a Latino Movement today.

Also, as I am a self-taught writer, I continue to work on my craft. I hope to continue to produce new work, new plays and poetry that address themes relevant to the present times but also, style and language are very critical to my oeuvre. There is a new novel in the works, Waiting for Gordo. Don't you worry. I'm far from done.

The Power of a Query: Interview with Aishih Wehbe-Herrera, University of La Laguna, Spain (September 2008).

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:

Aishih Wehbe-Herrera [2]

Criticism Target:

Ana Castillo

Source URL: <https://modernamericanpoetry.org/content/power-query>

Links

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