

Jane Juffer: On Ana Castillo's Poetry

Chicago native Ana Castillo began to write as a young activist in the 1970s, using her poetry as a form of a social protest; as she says, "Being of Mexican background, being Indian-looking, being a female, coming from a working-class background, and then becoming politicized in high school, that was my direction . . . I was a Chicana protest poet, a complete renegade--and I continue to write that way" (Baker 59).

Indeed, throughout the last two decades, Castillo has used her poetry, fiction, and essays to help define an oppositional Chicana feminism. The meaning of "oppositional," however, has been contested and conflicted, and Castillo's work testifies to this struggle. Among the many issues to consider in the intersections of Chicana art and activism, we might focus on two that are central to Castillo's work. First, how does one retain the specificity of Chicana experience while making connections to other Latino/a and other women's issues? Second, how can writers who define themselves through their marginality move into the mainstream publishing world without losing their radical edge?

During her college years in Chicago in the early 1970s, Castillo was active in organizing Latino artists into a group called the Association of Latino Brotherhood of Artists. Like many Chicanas/os in the years immediately following the Chicano nationalist movement of the 1960s, Castillo saw the need to form alliances between Latinas/os in the U.S., and, of course, art became one important means of forging coalitions. Her first book of poetry, the self-published chapbook *Otro Canto*, pursues the theme of socio-political oppression of Third World women and men.

Castillo did not let this search for coalitions with Latinos mitigate against her critique of sexism; she has been influential in the Chicana feminist movement, which has insisted that activism must consider the intersections of gender, class, race, and sexuality. Her self-published chapbook, *The Invitation* (1979), was a response to sexism in the Chicano movement; she herself calls it a "sobering" critique of how women were "demeaned, misunderstood, objectified, and excluded by the politic of those men with whom I had aligned myself on the basis of our mutual subjugation as Latinos in the United States" (Massacre 121). *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) is an epistolary novel that describes the physical and mental journeys through Mexico and the U.S. of two friends--one Chicana and one woman of mixed Latina/white background. Written from the point of view of the Chicana, *ML* represents her despair at her inability to feel "at home" in Mexico, where she repeatedly encounters men who think U.S. women are loose and seem not to recognize the protagonist's desire to claim her Mexican heritage. The novel testifies to the importance of solidarity among Latinas, to the omniscience of machismo, and to the fear that all women face of sexual violence. *ML* won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award in 1987.

Castillo further explores the politics of solidarity in her collection of essays, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (1994), where one can see links to Gloria Anzaldúa's influential *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), a seminal text in theories of the border, hybridity, and mestizaje. "Xicanisma" is a kind of Chicana feminism that challenges binaries--black/white, masculine/feminine, straight/gay--even as it retains the specificity of Chicana

experience. As Castillo defines it, "Xicanisma is an ever present consciousness of our interdependence specifically rooted in our culture and history. Although Xicanisma is a way to understand ourselves in the world, it may also help others who are not necessarily of Mexican background and/or women. It is yielding; never resistant to change, one based on wholeness not dualisms. Men are not our opposites, our opponents, our 'other'"(226). Like Anzaldua, Castillo strives for a theory that transcends narrow identity politics and presents the potential for alliances between marginalized peoples, across various borders. Also toward this end, Castillo and Norma Alarcon translated into Spanish *This Bridge Called My Back*, the groundbreaking feminist anthology representing diverse women of color.

Castillo's work also challenges a set of binaries that have shaped Latina sexuality: virgin/whore, spirituality/sexuality, church hierarchy/the politics of the everyday. Her 1993 novel *So Far From God* rearticulates religion into a rich blend of spirituality, sensuality, and everyday politics; in the opening chapter a three-year-old girl who is presumed dead rises from her coffin and challenges the priest who orders the "evil spirit" to leave her body. Says "La Loca," who will soon become a voice of wisdom connected to nature, "Remember (Padre), it is I who am here to pray for you" (24). Castillo continues to challenge Catholic hierarchy in her

1996 edited collection, *Goddess of the Americas/La Diosa de las Americas*, which redefines la Virgen de Guadalupe from a number of overlapping perspectives, including feminist, leftist, indigeneous, and erotic. In discussing the collection (which includes essays by Sandra Cisneros, Elena Poniatowska, and Luis Rodriguez, among others), in a 1996 interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Castillo said that one of her goals "is to get an encyclical from the church--if not from the pope, then from the bishops--to ban the book. I think that would be the best advertisement for the book, if a cardinal or someone would say that it definitely should not be read by any good Catholic in the world" (Baker 60).

Castillo's work is at times deeply sensual and erotic, as in the poem anthologized in the Oxford. "Seduced by Natassja Kinski" describes the protagonist's infatuation with the German actress, then their chance encounter in Chicago. Feeling the dangers of seduction, the narrator tries, unsuccessfully, to resist the actress's pull: "And when we dance, I am a strawberry, ripened and / bursting, devoured, and she has won."

Castillo's non-fiction essays similarly critique hegemonic perceptions of female roles, including that of mothering. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, her essay "The Mother-Bond Principle" critiques narrow conceptions of the nuclear family and the self-sacrificing mother and calls on all people to be responsible for children: "As Xicanistas, female and male alike, whether we are biological mothers or not, we can learn to incorporate qualities customarily seen as inherent in mothering and apply them to how we treat ourselves, our relationships, and, of course, our children" (204). Castillo has written about her own experiences as a single mother for the on-line magazine *Salon*.

Along with Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chavez, Helena Maria Viramontes, Julia Alvarez, and other Latina writers, Castillo has helped created a mainstream market for Latino fiction and poetry--but not without some reservations. Like many Chicana/Latina writers (see Cisneros' entry), Castillo began her career with independent Latino presses--Arte Publico published a collection of poetry, *Women are Not Roses*, in 1984, and West End Press published another poetry volume, *My Father was a Toltec*, in 1988. Bilingual Review Press published *The Mixquiahuala Letters* in 1986 and her second novel, *Sapagonia* in 1990. Castillo has also been a fervent supporter of independent bookstores; her 1996 collection of short stories, *Loverboys*

, extols the virtues of the small bookstore in its title story. The narrator of the story owns a bookstore specializing in spirituality, a difficult choice since, the narrator relates, the town could also have used a "woman's bookstore, a lesbian bookstore, a gay and lesbian bookstore, a 'Third World' bookstore, or even an exclusively Latina bookstore." All important information, she reasons, that you don't "get from the mass media" (32). She eventually decides on "the question of the soul," however, because "all roads sooner or later will lead you there" (22).

Yet what happens when the roads lead you to W.W. Norton, *USA Weekend* and Barnes and Noble? Have you then lost your soul? Ironically, another story from *Loverboys*, "Juan in a Million" was featured in *USA Weekend*, with a distribution of 40 million. Norton published *So Far From God* in 1993; other projects are forthcoming from major presses, including a children's book, *My Daughter, My Son, My Eagle, My Dove*, and a novel, *Peel My Love Like an Onion*. Yet clearly these works are as "soulful" and provocative as anything Castillo has published with independent presses, indicating that perhaps the margins can infiltrate the mainstream. Castillo told *PW* that she hopes to redefine the mainstream: "The kind of literature I write is not directed for the mainstream, although *So Far from God* did very well, and I'm hoping that we're entering a new era now where it will be more and more the case that writers from the fringes occupy the mainstream" (59).

Works Cited

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