

“Shooting Arrows with My Heart”¹ –

An Exploration of Ana Castillo’s Genre Jumping

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Ana Castillo began to write in the early days of *El Movimiento* when she used her work, mainly poetry, as a means of social protest along with her actual involvement in the conferences and public activities of the Chicanas. Ever since, she has become a prolific writer, defining herself from a literary point of view as a “genre jumper” constantly trying to reach more audiences for her Chicana voice. She has written in numerous forms (poetry, novels, short stories, etc.) and she is constantly re-inventing her way of approaching the female subject in process from a racial as well as an academic perspective.

As she confesses in an interview, her talent was inborn, and only slightly improved by the education and readings she had as an adult: “I think you are born a poet. I don't think anyone decides that. I used to tell people that I decided to be a writer when I was nineteen or twenty, and then my mother, *quien pas decanse* [who rests in peace], heard me say this once to an audience and she immediately contradicted me and said that I had been writing since I was very little. But since my first love was drawing, I never really paid attention to how much I liked to write. I wrote stories and I wrote poems, but that was just something I could just do” (Milligan, 1999: 24).

Her volumes of poetry were intertwined with prose writings starting with the publication of her first collection, *Otro Canto* in 1977. It debated themes of social protest,

serving as an alarming sign that boundaries were about to break. Two years later, she published *The Invitation*, another volume exploring the diversity of Chicana femininity through her expression of desires. The two volumes are overwhelmingly different in theme but they are both guided by the same integrative principle. Through the exploration of poetic language, Castillo approaches the relationship between the political concerns of the first poems and the erotic themes, stating her commitment to the representation of feminine creativity and sexuality. Her purpose is that of exposing the limitations of an inherited vocabulary with which she is forced to describe an entirely new experience, that of living in the United States as a Mexican Amerindian woman. It is a concept she would further develop in *Massacre of the Dreamers* (1992). Her next volume, *Women Are Not Roses* (1984), explores the difficulties of poor and working-class women who must choose between devoting their energies to erotic relationships or to breeding. Eventually, the two volumes of poetry published, *My Father Was a Toltec and Selected Poems 1973-1988* (1995) and *I Ask the Impossible* (2000), refer to a whole new identity as a poet. The Chicana themes are constant in their manifestation as poetic features, but the poet starts playing with form and meaning, investigating new poetic themes and motifs, all the while proving that the rebellious girl had grown into an independent *Xicanista*.

Judging by the popular and critical attention Castillo has received, one could, however, easily place her under the label of “novelist” or at least prose writer. Her most acclaimed novels won academic recognition by touching upon borderlands issues such as female discrimination and male violence in the context of second-wave feminism, but most of all by their employment of a specific mode of narrating, at times surprisingly intricate and multifaceted. *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), *Sapogonia* (1990), *So Far*

from God (1993), *Peel My Love Like an Onion* (1999) and the more recent *Watercolor Women*, *Opaque Men: A Novel in Verse* (2005) and *The Guardians* (2007) are writings that have entered the public sphere by their constant association with the magical realist technique, which Castillo, however, denies in her approach to the issue of literary writing as a Chicana. Criticism on Castillo's writing has focused primarily on this apparent feature, with its subsequent ethnographical approach (Quintana,1991) as well as on religiosity or sexuality. On a macroscopic level, the multitude of creative instances Castillo employs in her work articulate her vision of Xicanisma (a homophone of Chicanisma) or Chicana feminism, as expressed in her collection of theoretical texts published in 1992 and entitled *Massacre of the Dreamers*. While they all deal with primarily Chicana or Chicano protagonists, the novels do converge towards the idea that there is an aesthetic of discourse in the borderlands, and that its particularity resides in the often reversed taxonomy of genres.

Unlike other fellow Chicana activists, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo is able to manipulate many types of discourse in order to render plausible the assumption that her experience "is relevant to anyone trying to understand the world he or she lives in" (Castillo, 1994:17). Furthermore, by acknowledging the social role that literary activity may purport, especially in the case of a minority subject, Castillo also emphasizes, through her work, the importance of inter-connectedness among tradition (may it be political, social or cultural) and revisionism, all the while proposing a slightly different approach to the identitarian debate. While many critics and Chicana authors have embraced Anzaldúa's theory on the *mestiza consciousness* as an incorporating and tolerating ability to cope with the *frontera* state, Ana Castillo develops her own Chicana

theory which although preserving some of the ground assumptions, revolves around a different set of principles.

As a Chicana writer, Castillo inevitably positions herself in the recent tradition of feminist revisionism. However, she acknowledges the fact that “textbook feminism” does not necessarily reflect the female position encountered as a Chicana, therefore a new terminology is needed to define that particular instance of feminine struggle originating in the borderlands but expanding to the whole immigrant community in the United States. In an attempt to distance herself from Anglo feminism as well as from the ideology of *El Movimiento*, Castillo develops a model of indigenous feminism based primarily on her experience as an American-born Mexican and on her further academic development. By growing up in an environment that was primarily Mexican, although physically located in Chicago, she argues that white feminism had no influence whatsoever on her development as an artist or an academic: “I had no idea what white feminists were thinking of in spheres far from my life in those asphalt, slush-covered streets of working class Chicago” (Castillo 1994: 122). In addition to that, contemporary white feminism appears to respond, in Castillo’s view, to mainly Anglo centric perspectives, and thus her attempt is that of articulating a Chicana-oriented one.

Her response to *El Movimiento* is even more extensively discussed as she identifies the origin of female discrimination in two of the doctrines or ideologies that structure it, namely Marxism and Catholicism: “El Movimiento (or La Causa) was rooted to a degree in Marxist oriented theory (despite the strong ties activists felt to their Catholic upbringings) because it offered some response to our oppression under capitalism” (Castillo, 1994: 33). Castillo argues that these two ideologies enabled *El*

Movimento to function predominantly from a masculine perspective, which inevitably equaled an exclusion of the feminine principle. Furthermore, she argues that the “omission of the feminine principle in society prohibits true social transformation” (Castillo, 1994: 87) and reaches the conclusion that the Chicanas need to turn elsewhere for inspiration. Throughout her essays in *Massacre*, Castillo pleads for a process of *conscientización*²(consciousness raising process) which Chicanas should go through in order to become politically active and re-establish the lost place of the female subject in the patriarchal world. And in order to do that, the Xicanista should go back to the “long forgotten Amerindian heritage” and re-evaluate her position throughout history in order to further claim the rightful equality of “all things created in the universe” (Castillo, 1994: 87). Unlike Anzaldua’s tolerance and apparent optimism, Castillo brings forth the idea of restoration of an apparently pre-historic structure in which male and female subjects were equal, regardless of racial or religious constraints. Despite the fact that a “conservative viewpoint” argues that matriarchal societies did not exist, Castillo implies that they did and that they should serve as an example for an indigenous feminism and for a non-patriarchal society:

Communal societies existed long before the rigid control of patriarchal Christianity and later, communist doctrine. A conservative viewpoint on behalf of some scholars and thinkers resists drawing conclusions about the possibility of matriarchal practices in pre-recorded history because of lack of conclusive evidence and because it is too controversial, or rather too threatening to what we have for so long accepted to be absolute truth in Western Civilization. [...]For too long we have been told what we are and why we are as women: mujeres mestizas (sino descendientes de sangre Europea, somos indias sin razón),

católicas (sino ahora protestantes o pecadoras), definitions embedded in a history that has subordinated the female gender [sic]. (Castillo 1994:104)

As a response to that, Castillo proposes that the Xicanista should reclaim her *indigenismo* and reinsert the feminine into public consciousness, may it be academic or social, and renounce Catholic male-dominated spirituality. The feminine creative spirit (creatrix) must be reintegrated into society, and the process of *conscientización* implies that the body (as the metonymic form of creatrix) should become less celebrated than the intellect (the masculine creative power). The model for such an integration of the spiritual into the society existed in the pre-patriarchal world of the Aztecs, and thus its validity is undeniable. It is in this complex reintegration of the feminine creativity and subjectivity that Ana Castillo also rejects the notion of “magical realism” as intertwining reality and dream (the “traditional” magic) becomes a sine qua non feature of this new existence of the subject, post-*conscientización*.

The focus on the intellect and not the body is what links Ana Castillo’s vision of the female subject, the *Xicanista*, to the complex structure of her writing. As anticipated, her work configures a new form of identity for the marginalized subject by exploring the ways in which the female-writer’s intellect is put to work. She often engages in revisionist endeavors in order to re-integrate, on the one hand, the female imagery as it should have been “preserved” by the patriarchal tradition, and, on the other, to reveal a whole new approach to the feminine sensibility and creativity. However, as hers is a process of conscious work, the reader is often placed in a position in which he/she needs to effectively participate in the creation of meaning. Furthermore, subtle devices such as the frequent use of multiple voices, indicators or irony contribute to the overall

impression of “work in process” which is, to a certain extent similar to the process of identity formation, or rising consciousness.

The question of structure in Castillo’s writing is of utmost concern when discussing her argumentation of the Xicanista theory. She deliberately employs fractured and nonunitary narrative structures in order to include poetic elements in novelistic form. As she elaborates in interviews, the novelistic form was limiting, and hence needed a revision. Furthermore, a Chicana subjectivity is thematized through the appeal of fragmented modes of writing. Her genre jumping becomes in this respect a performance of borderland subjectivity through which the writer does not only reveal her own struggle to cope with the patriarchal modes, but also enables the reader to grasp the limits that had previously been (self)imposed upon his/her consciousness as a human being.

In choosing to genre jump, Ana Castillo also documents what Norma Alarcón calls a “multiplicity of others - the individual women and men of their culture and of other cultures as well as entire racial, class and cultural groups” (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1992:66) in that her work refuses to accept a single, author-imposed reading. Instead, the reader can choose to reject the author’s proposed alternatives of reading the Chicana subjectivity, create his/her own interpretation of things, or, perpetuate in quandary. It is also the reason for which some of the writings even indicate alternative readings (such as *The Mixquiahuala Letters*), while others assume a certain inbetweenness of genre through their subtitles (“An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter” or “A Novel in Verse”). While some³ consider this a feature of Castillo’s appropriation of the *nouveaux roman*, it is however a way to demarcate “the progression toward postmodern, postnational identities for Chicanas/mestizas” (Pérez, 1999: 25).

There is a paradox similar to that developed by Jacques Derrida in *The Law of Genre* (1980) in Castillo's choice of genre jumping. While acknowledging the fact that genres do exist in the patriarchal tradition and they are consequently one of the factors limiting creativity, she does not position herself outside the genre system: "A text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (Derrida, 1980: 65). Instead, she "jumps" from one to another in an explorative, yet self-explanatory manner. In complying with the performative aspect of writing "as a Xicanista," Castillo uses the notion of genre as a modifiable attribute, rather than as part of an inherited taxonomy. Her poetry and prose writing participate in a more complex genre, yet to be created, re-invented and performed by the new *mestiza*. And as reintegration within the "traditional" genre is carried out by the feminine, the emphasis on the female subject position is implied. It is the reason for which in all her writings the focus lies on female experience and the ways in which she (either in the form of 1st or 3rd person) copes with and eventually manipulates the Chicana subjectivity. In what follows, we will formally accept the assumed patriarchal delimitation of genre in Castillo's work, for structuring reasons alone; all the while emphasizing the "improvements" she brings forth in poetry and prose in order to facilitate the feminine immersion.

In starting out as a Chicana poet, Castillo first responded to her creative impulses as a young girl in the barrio. Poetry seems to have come to her ("poetry that came to me as a child and for which I had no name", *Introduction*: xxii) in an unmediated way. Hence, feminine creativity has manifested itself prior to the patriarchal knowledge of

genre and form: “what I did instinctively in delivering poetry, was later identified for me as a performance art”(xxiii). There is a feeling of performed modesty however, in all of Castillo’s introductions to her volumes, which integrates in the broader framework of the Xicanista subjectivity. By recalling first encounters with poetry and the notion of genre, she re-enacts a type of *indigenismo* which she would later recommend in *Massacre*. The superiority of feminine creativity is thus implied from the first pages of her work, even before reaching the actual writings that should sustain the initial statements: “I was afraid I would be told that I had no right to poetry and that I didn’t write English or Spanish well enough to write. So, while I was indeed intent on being a good poet, I had to carve out for myself the definition of good” (*Introduction*, xxiv). And this definition of good suddenly becomes an intricate notion, as one might be entitled to question the rightful existence of good in art. However, as she links poetry to social activism, the notion of genre seems to decrease in importance. It addresses “her people” and admittedly Castillo “considered [herself] not-first-a-poet but a component of the growing Latino artists’ community”(*Introduction*, xxvi) only to later move to a more complex understanding of poetics and style.

The female subject is however an undeniable presence in her poems. Traditional forms are re-envisioned through the female perspective, and re-written as they should have evolved provided the pre-historical matriarchal society had survived the patriarchal extinguishing power. By dedicating her poetry to the “daughters of Latino men,” Castillo re-acknowledges the necessity to combine creativity and intellect in the Xicanista consciousness:

As a new generation of Latina writers, we had always willingly and consciously made connections with mothers, grandmothers- our feminine inheritance as

women – but we had not yet fully identified the masculine within ourselves and how our male models contribute to our way of looking and being in the world.

(Introduction, xxii)

Castillo's poetry is the initial step in reflecting the Xicanista consciousness she would later develop in *Massacre of the Dreamers* and her other novels. In anticipating that "in the end, interpretation is not only the privilege of the reader, but a responsibility that belongs to the reader,"⁴ Castillo suggests that the process of reading, just as the one of writing, presupposes an ability to understand what it is that makes us understand certain elements in a particular way, and willing to renounce learned taxonomies.

While her focus in poetry is that of writing "from her own experience" and enacting the process of consciousness formation, when it comes to prose, the feminine authorship is made less visible, unless it serves the purpose of emphasizing technique. Instead, the female subject takes the form of various characters, all of which struggle to surpass the assigned roles of the patriarchal society. Their different subject positions enable the emphasis on the idea of hybrid consciousness. By placing the Chicana in various environments, revolving around similar issues but reacting in different ways, the hybrid identity complicates the notion of womanhood as it becomes irreducible to an essence. Just as Anzaldúa argued, "as a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless [...]" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 80), Castillo takes the argument even further by saying that "the woman in the United States who is politically self-described as Chicana, mestiza in terms of race, and Latina or Hispanic in regard to her Spanish speaking heritage, and who numbers in the millions in the United States

cannot be summarized nor neatly categorized" (Castillo, 1994: 1). Therefore, it becomes her goal as a Xicanista writer to deploy the various subject positions the female can assume, often in contrast to the ones assigned by patriarchal ruling (especially materialized within the Catholic tradition). To this goal, she settles to eradicate the feminine prototypes and replace them with new, self-aware individualities all the while documenting the passage from acceptance of male dominance, to revolt, and eventually empowerment and re-integration.

One of Castillo's constant preoccupations, as well as that of related theorists within the Chicana movement, has been that of initially abolishing these inherited stereotypes, traditionally associated with the Mexican-American environment. However, as the battles fought by Chicanas have always been doubled within the Chicano movement by the constant rejection on behalf of the male counterparts, one of the first changes which needed to be brought about was that of stereotypes within the Mexican community itself. Simultaneously venerated and mutilated, the image of womanhood within the Chicano environment had proven to be based on patriarchal assumptions, coming from a long line of inflicted archetypal images. The roles available to Chicana women were thus drawn from legendary figures easily confined to specific categories—*la madre, la virgen y la puta*⁵ (Gaspar de Alba, 51). Correspondingly, three goddesses of mixed historical origins were subverted to function as models and counter-models, respectively - La Llorona, Guadalupe, and La Malinche. They stand to justify the origins of male Mexican belief and education.

All these figures are closely tied to the Spanish conquest of Mexico, to colonialism and mixed race. However, there is another feature often debated upon which

makes all of them alike aside from the obvious gender-assigning and that is spirituality. The most efficient means through which these stereotypes were imposed was religious belief regardless of it being Mexican or Spanish (Catholic). Women were led to believe that being like the “good” goddesses was the guarantee of spiritual fulfillment, whereas being a *chingada* (traitor) would only be an example of misconduct. Furthermore, legends served to justify this spiritual confinement and while the Mexican heritage insisted upon the factual information, there came Catholicism to imply that failure to behave accordingly to these established roles would bring damnation, even beyond death.

La Llorona was said to be a wandering woman whose image scared children as she was constantly wailing around rivers. Supposedly, La Llorona was originally a happily married woman whose husband abandoned her and their two or three children. Instead of carrying on with her life, she chose to kill them, and thus was banned from entering heaven until she recovered them from the river. Her name⁶ suggests the constant wailing and weeping associated with this stereotype of the woman who was unable to cope with a man’s departure, as well as of the mother who deliberately killed her children. The story comes from Mexican mythology, emphasizing the cruel consequences of abandonment of gender-based roles.

La Malinche, on the other hand, stands for the traitor of her whole people, no longer weeping, but seemingly joyful. The legend draws on historical records of an Indian woman with various names⁷ who was repeatedly sold as a slave and learned different languages. She also functioned as a translator for Hernán Cortes, thus contributing to the downfall of the Aztec empire in the 16th century. The legend pushed even further the symbolism of the traitor, as La Malinche is said to have succumbed to

Cortes' desires, thus leaving her people in despair to become slaves to the Spanish. The myth of La Malinche stands to define the danger posed by feminine sexual urges, although she is also said to have been the first mother of a *mestizo* (Cortes' son).

This paradoxical structure of a woman image is taken even further in respects to the Lady of Guadalupe (or *La Virgen de Guadalupe*). Frequently considered the most complex of the Chicana Goddesses since she stands for a multitude of symbols, Guadalupe is first and foremost an image of cultural *mestizaje*. She is in fact the only actual goddess, and the story of her origin is often blurred as it is rooted in ancient myths. Guadalupe is associated with the fertility goddesses of the Aztec world (Tonantzin, Coatlicue) as well as with the Catholic Virgin Mary. She is said to have appeared to the first Mexican who became a Catholic, thus making the belief that the two cultures could mingle. In fact, the Virgin of Guadalupe is the only deity whose specificity is that of being on the borderlands, just like the Chicano people, so that is why she is considered their protector. She stands as a goddess of both Mexican and Spanish origin who is "the single most potent religious, political, and cultural image of the Chicano/Mexicano. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered" (Anzaldúa 30).

It is the Virgen of Guadalupe that also stands for feminine submission as she incorporates ideals of motherhood and domesticity, purity and willingness to sacrifice for the wellbeing of others. Therefore, she was among the first stereotypical images to be contested by the Chicanas in their struggle to replace male-dominated ideology with female-centered visions. Her perfect image guiding generations of Chicanas to believe that women are either virgins or whores has often been considered unrealistic by theorists

of the movement, and as a consequence, they developed an eagerness to reconfigure her role:

That was why I was angry every time I saw la Virgen de Guadalupe, my culture's role model for brown women like me. She was damn dangerous, an ideal so lofty and unrealistic that was laughable. Did boys have to aspire to be Jesus? (Cisneros, 1997:48)

To the same purpose, Ana Castillo's acclaimed novel, *So Far from God* introduces the reader into the atmosphere of the borderland city of Tome, in which apparently the archetypes function. Women are assigned specific roles as mothers, wives and servants of the church, in a community in which the 'goddesses' are taken for granted and spirituality is guided by the principles of the patriarchal world. However, as we get accustomed to the overwhelmingly ironic tone of the author herself, we realize that in fact there is another story to follow besides the one actually written, the story of re-creating a myth, reshaping the inherited images according to new visions of a female-dominated world. The plot revolves around Sofi's family, with her four daughters, Esperanza (Hope), Caridad (Charity), Fe (Faith), and La Loca (The Crazy One) narrating the transformations they undergo from being socially bound to martyrdom. In a magical-realistic novel, Castillo critiques the dominant cultural institutions and ideologies as multiple forms of oppression, all the while questioning the processes through which women could become, in their turn, dominant over their own existence.

What is apparently a mournful day in the family, as the youngest daughter dies, is disrupted by the resurrection of La Loca, functioning as a sign that boundaries are about to break, and that whatever kept women in a silence similar to death would be shortly de-constructed by the novel itself. And so it does, by shifting focus on each

female character while having as a center point the house they all inhabit in the beginning. As the plot advances, all five heroines become modified variants of myths. They are images of new Chicana goddesses, freed from stereotypes and seeking a spirituality of their own.

Castillo engenders the archetypes when she writes “a story where the ‘unreal’ and the ‘real’ coexist within the storyworld, but do so as filtered through the parodic voice of a Chicana-identified narrator and characters” (Aldama, 2003: 76). These archetypes are no longer bound to the dominant ideology of masculinity and taken as traditional common knowledge, but rather they are created on the spot, as characters evolve and abandon pre-established paths. That is why no character could be said to stand for a goddess alone. They all incorporate aspects of the myths, justify the irrelevance of stereotypes in respect to the uniqueness of one’s existential choices and step outside the framework of the novel in order to become new icons, in the end, either martyrs or saints.

There is hardly a pattern to be followed in this complex restructuring of stereotypes, but one thing to be noticed is the fact that all female characters undergo at least one change, most of which coincide with death or a near-death experience. La Loca (also called La Loquita Santa) is the one to die first. At the age of three, she is mistakenly considered dead from an epileptic attack, and resurrects during the Mass. However, her resurrection functions also as an awakening as it becomes “the beginning of the child’s long life’s phobia of people” (23). She is thus a resurrected goddess, but she denies the worship she would have received from patriarchal-educated believers, becoming estranged and continuing her life only around the house. Seemingly the image of an innocent virgin, and at the same time a non-social being, reluctant to engage in all human

behavior, she becomes a 'saint' without even knowing it, although she does not perform any magic. To emphasize La Loca's refusal to accept a pre-established position, Castillo concludes that 'Santa' "was dropped from her name and she was soon forgotten by strangers" (25). Towards the end of the novel, she dies 'again', never to return, and she becomes the new goddess of those killed by modern diseases (she is thought to have AIDS). It is through the complex character of La Loca that an ironic statement is made throughout the novel. Although she is apparently ignorant of the entire world, she is in fact unresponsive solely to people. She is responsive to natural stimuli rather than to people. The reader is confronted only towards the end with her knowledge of 'regular' facts, which leads to an awareness of the stereotypes previously applied to isolated beings. Although she is still a virgin, she is the one dying of a disease transmitted through human contact. This double irony stands to justify, once more, the fact that even those who are seemingly pure, isolated and submissive can become victims of fate, either they choose to accept it or not.

An interesting way of playing and re-fashioning writing technique is also present in the second most acclaimed work of Ana Castillo's, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986). It is a puzzle-like narrative (Quintana, 1991: 82) which provokes and attracts the reader in a postmodernist journey, all the while focusing on subjectivity as the main feature of the Xicanista consciousness. The novel (as it has formally been called) deals with the experience of two women, Teresa and Alicia, as border-crossers who inhabit an in-between space as mestizas. Teresa grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood in Chicago, while Alicia was raised in an upper-middle-class suburb in New York. However, American citizenship does not keep them from becoming fractured subjects since they

live in one culture, but also preserve a relationship with Mexico. The story can be grasped from the letters, as the reader follows the two in their journeys to Mexico in search of a homeland and identity. As they walk the lines between the two cultures, they encounter both male and female characters that help define their sense of place and (un)belongingness. Furthermore, as the letters are not dated and apparently written in various contexts, they frame a story which obviously lacks numerous details. Just as she advocates for the Xicanista subjects, Castillo configures a friendship between the two that is an "allegiance in good faith/passion bound/by uterine comprehension. In sisterhood. In solidarity" (Castillo, 1992: 24). The two are never explicitly depicted as having lesbian encounters, but the way their constant failure to establish relationships with men and their reliance on each other for comfort is depicted, the reader is able to grasp a certain connection between the characters that goes beyond simple "allegiance".

But although *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is a novel of womanhood, it is nonetheless yet another instance of genre-jumping made explicit by the author's own participation in both the writing and the reading process. The letters that make up the story of the two women, some of them written by Teresa to Alicia, some of them unsigned (but still presumably written by Teresa and not necessarily sent), provide the framework for Teresa's search for identity as a Xicanista. However, in order to invite readers from different backgrounds to construct their own narrative, Castillo uses the epistolary style. Her revisionist intention is made explicit in the beginning of the novel when she addresses the reader directly: "Dear Reader: It is the author's duty to alert the reader that this is not a book to be read in the usual sequence. All letters are numbered to aid in following any one of the author's proposed options" (Castillo, 1986: 1). The

‘options’ that she later offers are "conformist," (1) "cynical," (1) or "quixotic" (2) and the compelling way in which the letters are organized in the three different ways of reading suggest, as literary critics have noticed, a deconstructionist intention. Roland Walter (1998) enlarges upon this technique as:

the use of multiple perspectives and a protean, lyrical prose revealing both the conscious and unconscious levels of Teresa's mental life break with the chronological order of the narrative and connote free choice and otherness. Style and structure furthermore intimate the implicit author's renunciation of authority and, based on the theme, suggest a radical deconstruction of the symbolic order as a solution to Teresa's identity crisis and search for selfhood. (82)

Indeed authorship in the *Letters* functions as a rather explicit device made obvious from the beginning and overshadowed by the character's own voice in the writing. And in order to deconstruct the already deconstructed order of the narrative, the reader is eventually offered (or assigned) the opportunity to create his/her own path: "For the reader committed to nothing but short-fiction, all the letters read as separate entities. Good luck whichever journey you choose!" (Castillo, 1986: 3). Castillo therefore leaves the itinerary open to the readers in that she deliberately releases them from a prescribed perspective. Furthermore, this technique functions as an invitation for them to participate in the process of consciousness formation, not only by witnessing the characters' development and struggle but also by becoming aware of their preferred mode of reading. As Bennett (1996) puts it:

by using the epistolary novel [...], by developing tension through language and metaphor, and by manipulating form to show the nature of Teresa's fragmentation, Castillo places readers—and Teresa--somewhere between a

perspective that acknowledges ideology and one that rejects ideological dominance. This fluctuation reflects the impossibility of taking any permanent position and foregrounds the resulting fragmentation of Teresa's self. (464)

The playfulness of such an endeavor is not neglected, and Castillo foregrounds the possibility of interpreting her work ironically. She dedicates the novel “in memory of the master of the game, Julio Cortázar,” which is a statement of both acknowledgement and revisionist attitude. He is a “master” as he is a literary figure largely acclaimed by academic environments, but “of the game,” in the sense that he plays a part in the patriarchally-constructed literary tradition. In this respect, Castillo’s novel prefigures a feminist version of postmodernism in claiming that ‘open work’ can function in the case of the Xicanista as well, with the auctorial instance mediating between a personal narrative and an objective description of events.

And while configuring the Xicanista from the outer perspective of the writer, through narrative technique, Castillo also emphasizes a different type of female positioning for her characters than the ones discussed in the case of *So Far from God*. Although revolving around similar existential crises, Teresa and Alicia are first and foremost dislocated characters. They do not migrate from a territory of constraining safety to liberation, as Sofi does, but rather are confronted with the tenets of two different cultures, the Mexican and the American one. Despite Teresa's Mexican heritage, she feels alienated from her “homeland” and is looking for a way out of the constraints it seems to impose upon the mixed-blood subject: “Mexico. Melancholy, profoundly right and wrong, it embraces as it strangulates” (65). When traveling to Mexico, she expects to find a “cultural home” in which she should be able to integrate, as back home, in the U.S. she is often rejected as being a *mestiza*. However, although she had an Indian-marked face

and “dark hair and Asian eyes” (27), therefore corresponding to the stereotype on one side of the border, she does not integrate. It is Castillo’s way of deliberately placing the female subject in an intricate position in order to make her negotiate with society and most of all, ideology. Teresa often refers to Catholicism as the main restrictive power the patriarchal world has imposed upon women. As the characters struggle with their own upbringing as Catholics and confront the threatening perspective of remaining silenced by this ideology, they also develop a sense of self-consciousness which later enables liberation:

Do you know the smell of a church? Not a storefront, praise the Lord, hallelujah church, or a modest frame building with a simple steeple projecting to the all heavens, but a CATHEDRAL, with doors the height of two very tall men and so heavy that when you pull one open to enter you feel as small as you are destined. You were never led by the hand as a little girl by a godmother, or tugged by the ear by a nun whose dogmatic instruction initiated you into humility, which is quite different from baptism when you were anointed with water as a squirming baby in the event that you should die and never see God face-to-face because you had not been cleansed of the sin of your parents' copulation. (30)

Throughout the letters, the sense that ideology is abandoned and replaced is ever-present as the women grow into being independent. However, they have various encounters with men, all of which bring back the gender element of the Xicanista equation. It is in this negotiation of gender roles that the awareness of ideology is seen at work, as both Teresa and Alicia admit that traditionally, "when a woman entered the threshold of intimacy with a man, she left the companions of her sex without looking

back. Her needs had to be sustained by him. If not, she was to keep her emptiness to herself" (35). While enjoying each other's companionship, the two confront this ideology from time to time and attempt to surpass it. They travel unaccompanied by a man, but take many male lovers on the way. They experience what critics have called "free choice" (Walter, 1998: 82) in a quest for freedom and self-determination.

An interesting remark that Teresa makes is that ideology also varies with place. In becoming a liberated self-sufficient female subject, the *mestiza* does not completely liberate from all stereotypes on each side of the border. That is why her attempt to self-define apparently fails with her return to her husband in the United States. What Teresa and Alicia discover is that even in the "country of their inherited origins," (Mexico) and "in spite of the color of their skin, their blue jeans and their accent make them suspicious. As Mexicans in the U.S., they have been deceived by the promises of the American dream and jilted by unscrupulous, insensitive lovers. As gringas in Mexico they are subject to the stereotype of the 'liberated woman,' loaded with connotations of sexual availability" (Oliver-Rotger, 2003: 263-64).

While it might be seen as an act of capitulation in the face of this two-fold position which she cannot escape, Teresa's ultimate return to her husband is not entirely so. She acknowledges that "again, i was the deserter, giving up Woman's Quest for Freedom and Self Determination. i was on my way to my husband, stopping off in New York to spend just a few days with you [Alicia]--as if postponing a sentence to Siberia" (37), but she uses the act of writing as escape from this self-imposed sentence. Upon a journey similar to a *bildungsroman*, Teresa somehow demonstrates Anzaldúa's *mestiza*

consciousness. She is the writer and the experiencer, drawing conclusions and reaching awareness as the letters progress.

In order to create this subjective progression Castillo uses the 1st person and the confessional character of the letter form. While writing down her experiences of traveling and living in Mexico and the United States, Teresa enacts personal agency which finally does not give her the “peace” she was struggling for. Teresa finds out that “[w]hen one is confronted by the mirror, the spirit trembles” (Castillo, 1986: 55) and it is in this trembling that the Xicanista consciousness can originate and reside. As Quintana argues,

In *The Mixquiahuala Letters* Castillo attempts to retaliate against social injustice and inequality by documenting what is at risk when the Chicana defies authority in order to break away from the stagnant traditions and ideals that smother and suppress female desire [...] Ultimately, the text can be read as a revolt against order, which eloquently illustrates why it is essential for feminists to expose and thereby destroy the power of any outside of foreign 'authority' by creating a space for themselves. (Quintana, 1991: 83)

Ana Castillo’s case as a Chicana writer is a willingly complicated one. The author is at times the performer who enacts the roles she ascribes to herself – the activist, the Xicanista and the woman. By admitting and even promoting a constant genre jumping, Ana Castillo, the writer, challenges literary views on multiple fronts: the traditional patriarchal structures as well as the semiotics of *El Movimiento*. She signifies form on a broader level than the sign itself, and as words ‘have already been signified’ and ‘inflicted upon the Chicana as a tool of repression’ (Castillo, 1994: 12). Actually, there is no escape for the female subject though language use, unless the inherited formulas are also re-invented. Castillo does not feel comfortable with either English or Spanish words

defining the female experience as they are similarly restrictive. Therefore the semiotic shift starts with coining the *Xicanista*, a word that not only describes, but manages to interfere with and modify 'common' vocabulary and alter the previously strict relationship between an accepted signifier and the signified, and continues with attributing to language use a role in the formation of the subject. In *Borderlands/La frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa exemplifies her concept of the *new mestiza* as the book progresses, by combing historical data, essay and poetry. Ana Castillo does the same, but on the level of her entire work. It is not to say that the *Xicanista* is the unifying principle, but rather the one enabling fragmentation of the consciousness in the case of each female presence in the texts. There are "slips" in her poetry where she abandons the typically presumed Chicana voice and works with mainstream tools in order to interfere in a tradition that denies female creativity the deserved role. The insistence with which her writing revolves around commonly acknowledged Chicana metaphors functions as a reminder that when trying to de-construct and re-construct one cannot start from the scratch.

The same could be applied to other genres that Castillo jumps 'into' or 'out of', depending on how she positions herself towards canons. Prose writings provide accounts of the various ways in which the Chicana experience transforms the female subject from a stereotype into a liberated, self-conscious self. Her most acclaimed 'novels' are in fact writings that configure the fragmented subjectivity of the Chicana, exploring the means through which she attains independence.

Instead of seeing Ana Castillo's genre jumping and in-betweenness as a drive to create counter-narratives infused with symbols that originate in the essentialized notion

of Mexican or American culture, we could interpret her technique as an urgency to create a different ‘mainstream’ to include what was lost along the course of patriarchal history. As an act of interference with the readers’ perception and interpretation, genre-jumping nonetheless enables the latter to reach a certain ‘freedom of choice,’ outside the inherited system of meaning. Unlike other forms of manifestation such as political or social activism, literature allows for these interferences, offers the opportunity to ‘exercise freedom’ (Castillo, 2001: xxvi) and brings together creativity and intellect.

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Notes:

¹ In *Introduction to My Father Was a Toltec*, Castillo states: “With my poems, I know I have shot a lot of arrows, but the hand that drew back the bow was always held over my heart”(xxvii)

² Cf. Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

³ Ritch Calvin, “Writing the Xicanista: Ana Castillo and the Articulation of Chicana Feminist Aesthetics”, *Unmaking race, remaking soul : transformative aesthetics and the practice of freedom* edited by Christa Davis Acampora, Angela L. Cotton. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2007, 29

⁴ Castillo, Ana, *Introduction* to the volume, *My Father Was a Toltec*, New York, Random House., 1996

⁵ the mother, the virgin and the whore

⁶ “The crier” from the Spanish word *llorar* (to cry)

⁷ Malintzín, Malinalli, and Doña Marina

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