

The Desire Called Utopia: Re-Imagining Collectivity in Moraga and Castillo

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ABSTRACT

Through a reading of a selection of Cherrie Moraga and Ana Castillo's texts –*Loving in the War Years* (1983), *The Last Generation* (1993), *The Mixiquiahuala Letters* (1986) and *Sapogonia* (1990)–, this paper is an attempt to disentangle the complex web of identity, community, home/land and collective and individual histories in their writing. It also aims to reflect upon the role and the unyielding persistence of utopian thinking today.

Throughout their work, Moraga and Castillo attempt to articulate an alternative perspective to the male-biased Chicano Nationalist Movement. They look for themselves on the border, between cultures, resisting a privileged aesthetic realm and creating their own, and also resisting the politics of cultural nationalism. Our aim is to establish a dialogue between Moraga's positing a "Queer Aztlán," and Castillo's ideas on the creation of a space or a land (Sapogon), in which people may belong in and feel free to explore the utopian alternatives they offer.

Key words: Chicanas, utopia, collectivity, Cherrie Moraga, Ana Castillo

El deseo llamado utopía: reimaginar la colectividad en Moraga y Castillo

RESUMEN

Este artículo propone una lectura de una selección de textos de Cherrie Moraga y Ana Castillo –*Loving in the War Years* (1983), *The Last Generation* (1993), *The Mixiquiahuala Letters* (1986) and *Sapogonia* (1990)–, que pretende deslindar una compleja maraña de conceptos tales como identidad, comunidad, patria e historia individual y colectiva en su quehacer literario. También se incluye una reflexión sobre el papel y la persistencia del pensamiento utópico hoy.

A lo largo de su obra, Moraga y Castillo se esfuerzan por articular una perspectiva alternativa al movimiento nacionalista chicano. Emprenden su búsqueda en el borde, entre culturas, resistiendo quedar subsumidas por un dominio estético privilegiado y creando el suyo propio, al tiempo que se alzan en oposición a la política del nacionalismo cultural. Intentamos establecer un diálogo entre las ideas de Moraga de un "Queer Aztlán" y las de Castillo de la creación de un espacio o una tierra (Sapogon) donde se pueda pertenecer y sentirse libre explorando las alternativas utópicas que ofrecen.

Palabras clave: Chicanas, utopía, colectividad, Cherríe Moraga, Ana Castillo

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Of other planets I am
Dreaming
Of other ways
Of seeing

This life

Cherríe Moraga. *Dreaming of Other Planets*. 1993

I had begun to refer to Sapogonia as my country for the first time in my life. Home as represented by a territory set off by political borders became Sapogonia when it not only gave to me but took away.

Ana Castillo. *Sapogonia*. 1990

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 because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture.

Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. 1987

1. INTRODUCTION

For several generations now, Chicana writers have confronted the ideologies of oppression of Anglo-American culture and those of patriarchal oppression, challenging cultural stereotypes that silence women of color and adding other binary oppositions to the discussion of the social construction of Chicano identity. They have insisted with radical poststructuralist feminist theories that an "identity politics" that does not account for gender or sexual orientation merely reproduces the Anglo-American oppressive hierarchies. That is, Chicana writers symbolically resist Anglo-American culture and also gender roles and speak of an oppression within an oppression, a feminism on the border. As Ramón Saldívar (1990: 173) stated in the 1990s, "Chicano narrative is ... a perfect case study of the work of ideologies that are not simply counterhegemonic but truly oppositional and

revolutionary.” If the Chicano identity or the Chicano subject is the contradictions of the Mexican and the American, but is neither Mexican or American, it remains in a “utopian margin between the two, perhaps as a sign of marginality institutionalized in geopolitical terms by the border between the sovereign states of Mexico and the United States.” (Saldívar 1990: 174-75) As Saldívar’s words suggest, we should consider that binationality creates a third space, the combination of Mexican and American as something different from Mexican or American. People who are a combination of different races or cultures can be viewed as part of an implicit racial and cultural heterogeneity whose visibility reveals the falseness of a purely homogeneous culture.

Moraga and Castillo’s texts demonstrate both the complexity of living among difference as women who do not easily fall into ethnic-national classifications, and the ways in which these categories racialize cultural expression. Both writers convey conflict and a desire for resolution to move beyond simplified ways of understanding oneself by responding to the external factors that force one to choose between “black/white” or “Anglo...Indian or Black.”

Chicana/o studies have followed a progressive movement through each decade as they respond to voices within, critiquing and challenging the inception and conception of the field as a patriarchal and nationalist project. Each social movement (or transition) has emphasized heterogeneity through a dialectic of in/visibility and denial/affirmation of voice. The assertion of the Chicanas as historical agents has expanded beyond dichotomous and stereotypical male/female gender roles. This assertion of heterogeneity has included race, as Chicana/os look beyond the dichotomy of the European/indigenous dyad. Exclusions based on homoculturalist and homonationalist notions that one can and must stand on one side of the border only is precisely why we turn to Moraga and Castillo’s texts, based as they are on a multiple and transitional process of becoming. We turn to their narratives and poems as they enact a positive alternative to constructed raced and sexed identities and as an example of Chicana epistemology.

This paper aims to demonstrate how, in Moraga and Castillo’s narratives, there is a clear strand of utopianism common to other projects put forward by Chicana writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez and Norma Alarcón. At present, the waning of the Utopian ideal is a fundamental historical and political symptom. It is thus worth analysing why, in the aftermath of a postmodernity characterized by the weakening of the sense of history, utopianism resists in residual forms in minority cultures, new political movements, antiglobalization movements and NGOs. For as Fredric Jameson, in his continuing engagement with utopia has argued, “It is difficult enough to imagine any radical political program today without that conception of radical systemic otherness, of an alternate society, which only the idea of utopia seems today to keep alive, however feebly.” (2003:2)

Both Moraga and Castillo elaborate on how *mestizaje* works contemporaneously in the articulation of subjectivity. For them, the concept of *mestiza* touches on the implications of racial miscegenation in Spanish/indigenous

mixing as a notion that excludes integration of other racial categories, and which becomes an entry into the borderlands where the indigenous Other lives as an alienated or repressed part of oneself. Both writers reclaim the indigenous other within as a counter hegemonic dislocation that could potentially lead the mestiza into I/We consciousness of self-awareness and destabilize fixed identities to reaffirm Chicana knowledge.

Crucial to the advent of this new consciousness is the theorization of a social space inclusive of all those whose histories and struggle were never recorded. While Moraga posits her “Queer Aztlán,” Castillo constructs “Sapogonia”; years before in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, she had meditated upon the creation of an ideal culture in a mythical enclave where diversity existed in an atmosphere of respect. Aztlán, as both symbol and ideological frame, challenges the prevailing Western/Anglo–frontier imaginary that perpetuates the story of discovery and manifest destiny. Aztlán’s existence demonstrates the dynamic workings of an “other” imaginary within the dominant imaginary, as well as an “other” symbolic order within the dominant symbolic order. Moraga’s point is that Aztlán exists through the collective Chicana/o imagination, and she uses Aztlán to critique Mexican and Chicano patriarchies. In Castillo’s texts, readers find themselves addressing, challenging, and questioning their relationship to Aztlán under different names.

Laura Pérez (1999) argues that Chicana identity is a produced and producing identification, not only based and emerging from experience, but also in constant re/articulation within the Chicana/o culture. To become or come to identify oneself as Chicana is to articulate oneself through a collectivity that reimagines and shapes Aztlán¹ as a signifier of Chicana meaning which, in turn, interrupts imposition by US hegemony. Pérez highlights the entanglement of Chicana cultural and national identification: “Constructed through the wilful acts of collective Chicana nationalist discourse and the collective Chicana imagination, Aztlán exists as an invisible nation within the engulfing ‘imagined community’ of dominant US discourse” (Pérez 1999:19) She thus shifts her focus from opposition and negation to positive self/communal identification as a discourse that is also part of the US’s minority discourse. However, the Chicana discourse is not about assimilation as a US minority, but about strongly affirming difference against a totalizing usurpation by the US as an ideal. Aztlán is not simply a counternarrative to US history and myths of Manifest Destiny, the American Dream and “development” on a personal level through social climbing. Perez’ explanation of Aztlán becomes a historical unity of analysis since Aztlán designates a long history based on the analysis of a historical period of 500 years. The oppositional countering is especially relevant when Pérez differentiates between Mexican American, Mexican, and US

¹ The mythical/physical Aztlán will be further addressed in this paper in the context of Moraga’s work.

hegemonic identity/cultural identification by stressing the Chicana's over-determined biculturality.

Moraga and Castillo's deeply personal and historical narratives begin at a genesis frequently designated as the birth of a new race. They employ a discourse of racial *mestizaje* and end with a desire for trans-Latino unification comparable to Latin Americanist philosophers and revolutionaries such as José Martí, José Vasconcelos and Che Guevara. This utopian impulse, conspicuously present in recent Chicana cultural production, might be read as one of the signs of the millennium. As Fredric Jameson (2005: xii) has recently remarked, "Utopia seems to have recovered its vitality as a political slogan and a politically energizing perspective...Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality." This radical otherness and the utopian impulse are well represented in the variety of genres of Chicano writing, where history is no longer seen through the fictions of white supremacy but is rather deconstructed and disseminated in *petites histories* that construct new forms of collectivity. In Moraga's words (1993: 61-62),

I hold a vision requiring a radical transformation of consciousness in this country, that as people-of-color population increases, we will not be jut another brown faceless mass hungrily awaiting integration into white Amerika, but that we will emerge as a mass movement of people to redefine what an 'American' is. Our entire concept of this nation's identity must change, possibly be obliterated. We must learn to see ourselves less as US citizens and more as members of a larger world community composed of many nations of people and no longer give credence to the geopolitical borders that have divided us...

This emphasis on the collective is characteristic of the Utopian impulse, which in Jameson's words (2005: 8), "moves towards that final form which is the figure of the collectivity as such."

2. CHERRÍE MORAGA'S QUEER AZTLÁN AND THE NEW MALINCHES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In her introduction to *Loving in the War Years*, Moraga (1983: vi) states that "The combining of poetry and essays in this book is the compromise I make in the effort to be understood." It is this very fusion of ideas and forms however, present also in *The Last Generation* (1993), that inherently joins the texts together to form a complex web of searching and questioning. Without the "compromise," the connection is never quite complete—for the meaning of one becomes defined by and allied to that of the other. Where this is most apparent in the texts is Moraga's switch of voice and language, and again, this change is instrumental in their reading.

This shift in language is crucial in Moraga's writing, for although she "must...speak two tongues" (1983: vi) in order to be understood –by both the Chicano community and the foreign Anglo publishing world and readers– it is this dependency on both that defines the instinctive dual identity of the text and of Moraga herself. Switching from dreams to narrative, poetry and essays, the limitations and boundaries of language appear to merge, mirroring the interplay that Moraga creates between the different forms. It also serves as the foundation for the issues and themes she deals with, for by emphasizing the very mutability of language and form she demonstrates how she has managed to weave back together the separate strands of her life. Bound up within the texts are a number of conflicting issues: coming from a Chicano background on her mother's side and brought up in the United States, Moraga is placed in a world of oppositions. Prose and poetry intermingle to create an atmosphere of exploration –a pushing and pulling together of boundaries where Moraga chases the Chicana, the lesbian, the essence of herself. Language, of course, is a fundamental aspect of this, but the divide is further widened by gender and race issues.

Throughout *Loving in the War Years*, Moraga examines the disparities she found herself brought up amongst and it is these experiences which she uses to find an 'avenue' back to her mother, one which also joins with that of her lesbian self.² Moraga must first explore her own culture in order to find out where she and it meet. In Gloria Anzaldúa's essay "En rapport, In opposition," the author explores the internalization of the colonizer's oppression within one's own community,

External oppression is paralleled with our internalization of this oppression. And our acting from that oppression. They have us doing to those within our own ranks what they have done and continue to do to us – *Othering* people. That is, isolating them, pushing them out of the herd, ostracizing them. The internalization of negative images of ourselves, our own self-hatred, poor self-esteem, makes our own people the Other...And it is exactly our internalized whiteness that desperately wants boundary lines (this part of me Mexican, this Indian) marked out and woe to any sister or any part of us that steps out of our

² In the following extract Moraga (1983: 52-53) writes about those imparities and her relationship to her mother at length: "I was educated: but more than this, I was 'la güera' –fair-skinned. Born with the features of my Chicana mother, but the skin of my Anglo father, I had it made...From all of this, I experience, daily, a huge disparity between what I was born into and what I was to grow up to become. Because...these stories my mother told me crept under my 'guera' skin. I had no choice but to enter into the life of my mother. *I had no choice*. I took her life into my heart, but managed to keep a lid on it as long as I feigned being the happy, upwardly mobile heterosexual. When I finally lifted the lid to my lesbianism, a profound connection with my mother reawakened in me. It wasn't until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother's oppression –due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana... was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings".

assigned places, woe to any sister who doesn't measure up to our standards of ethnicity." (1990: 143)

Moraga (1983: 52) argues the same, "The danger lies in ranking the oppressions." For by delineating the text and deconstructing the body, representing it as images that intermingle, she is also dismantling what the parts themselves are supposed to portray, "the part of the eye / that is not eye at all/ but hole" ("Fear. A Love Poem" 33); "Catch my face, a moving portrait/ in a storefront window/ am taken aback by the drop/ in cheekline/ my face sinking into itself.../I watch myself for clues, / trying to catch up/ inhabit my body/ again" ("Raw Experience" 48). Separation of these images allows her to demonstrate the constructedness of race, in much the same way that she realigns language to suit her own means. Dismantling the myths surrounding her culture, she finds a way, a third way, the "borderland", and her idea of a "Queer Aztlán" where she and it can hopefully converge.

"I think: this is my responsibility to my roots: both white and brown. Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds. I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes I feel it urgently. But one voice is not enough, nor two, although this is where dialogue begins." (Moraga 1983: 58). And this is the case with Moraga's texts, for by giving voice to so many elements of herself, by allowing each one its own space, whether through prose, poetry or journal entry, she is lifting each component and stretching it to see if it fits the big picture.

A large part of *Loving in the War Years* concentrates in prose form on the events and experiences Moraga encountered in relation to her color, her sexuality, and the disparate cultural signals she was given on both sides. These are dealt with in straight journal-type entries or 'rememberings' on the page, but are also conducted in a short story confessional format detailing the struggles that a character, Cecilia, has in growing up. Through these short, interspersed fragments, she introduces a whole host of conflicting questions which have entered her world. There is the question of race, her white skin which means she can "pass" for white, her acculturation into the U.S. which assumes she must throw off the garments of her Chicano heritage in order to be fully accepted, the learning of a new language while finding her mother tongue left behind, and finally gaining an education and overcoming the machismo of her Chicano culture. Moraga finds herself in the outskirts of her own culture purely because she has successfully survived the acculturation process; the myth of the Malinche, and the woman as traitor and whore.

All these issues are brought to the fore and examined in the context of events in her life as well as being transferred and questioned through the person of Cecilia. And it is through these questions that Moraga achieves a connection to her culture and her mother which she felt was lacking. Only by separating herself from her world, however, can this be fully accomplished and only by a linkage with the prejudices she has felt because of her sexuality can she begin to comprehend what separates and unites both her mother and herself, "lo que nunca/ pasó / por sus labios/ but was/ utterly/ utterly/ heard" ("Querida Compañera," 1983: 149) –

woman can speak to woman, nothing needs to be said in order to be heard. It is both a celebration of her lesbian desire and an acknowledgement of her mother's own identity, and in a sense it demonstrates the unity that Moraga feels she has reached between the identity of mother and her own self.

Throughout *Loving in the War Years* and *The Last Generation*, Moraga's use of language in her poems is instrumental in emphasizing the antithetical coupling of separateness and union by concentrating on parts of the body as almost disconnected. It is as if she is paring down the body to its roots, piece by piece, to squeeze everything out in order to then reassemble it with a greater sense of understanding. Her images of the body are a prominent and continuous symbol in much of her work, with the mouth and lips playing an integral part. By using the 'mouth' she draws herself back into her mother and into the culture which she was forced to leave.

I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother/ speaking to her through the unnamed part of the mouth/ the wide arched muzzle of brown women/ ... at five, her mouth/ pressed into a seam/ a fine blue child's line drawn across her face/ her mouth, pressed into mouthing English/ mouthing yes yes yes... ("For the Color of my Mother," 1983: 60-61).

Here the mouth becomes a representation of her 'mother tongue' –the part of herself that was cut off when she left behind the stigmas of her culture, along with her family. It also suggests the inherent silence that was imposed upon her mother, through her own culture and that of an immigrant status in the USA. And this is where her conflicts meet: her lesbian desire and her sense of identity break through their restraints and join, as represented by the dislocations and the convoluted form the text takes. The language is always pushing at boundaries, coming back upon itself, staring us down. This is a sort of unconscious mode of exploration, which attempts to bring the text back to where it began, dissecting words and redefining meaning.

Reading *Loving in the War Years* in this manner, we begin to understand what Moraga means by her 'compromise.' Taking herself back to her childhood, she is at once both re-entering her beginnings and pulling the strands of her current life into the mould. The text is constantly shuffling between these two standpoints, propelling itself forward. The insistent pushing and re-addressing throughout the text is the assault on language which to Moraga represents the machismo of her Chicano upbringing and the events she had to deal with because of her sexuality in both the Chicano and Anglo cultures. The 'mouth' is her way of trying to seek where and who she came from, and so who she is. It is the 'mouth' that must speak two languages, for her mother speaks only one. It is the mouth that exhibits her lesbian desire, and the mouth from which insults and derision flow. The mouth is both the beginning and the end of her identity; it is where she came from but also what she seeks. Where does the mouth begin and where does it end? *Loving in the*

War Years signifies many things, not least the continuing battles surrounding sexuality, race, and the conventions and expectations of societies and families. That her voice has been “utterly/utterly/heard” is a way of opening up desire to the terrain of the social, and in Norma Alarcón’s words, a way of “making Familia from scratch.”³ The difficult journey Moraga embarks upon in order to discover the truth about herself not only allows her a return to her mother, but also a return to her people, to “la mujer mestiza,” to a new awareness of what it means to be Malinche’s daughter.⁴

Moraga’s idea of a “Queer Aztlán” takes shape from her conversations with gay poet Ricardo Bracho. Their discussions of the limitations of “Queer Nation”, with its anglocentricity, and of Chicano nationalism, which has never accepted openly gay men and lesbians among its ranks, concluded (Moraga 1993: 147) that they needed a “Queer Aztlán. A Chicano homeland that could embrace all its people, including its *jotería*.”⁵ In Moraga’s view, land remains the common ground for all radical political action; it covers a range of meanings that go well beyond territory and the natural resources associated with it. It is bound to the lives of people, to a collectivity that today remains under occupation. And Moraga insistently uses a “we” that suffers from and responds to this aggression.⁶

³ Critic Norma Alarcón, writing about the contribution of Chicana writers and their exploration of relationships among women and with society at large contends, “For young Chicana writers (and critics) the crisis of meaning as women has increasingly led to a measuring ‘after-the-fact’ of the speaking subject’s meanings. The most exciting explorations are those that ‘measure’ the intricacies of relationship between and among women. Yet if actual social experiences have the potential of effecting a complex and heterogeneous subjectivity, the symbolic contract within which ‘woman’ is the repository of meaning and not the agent, constantly presses her to align herself with the symbolic; in this way she is forced to live the life of a literal (body) and symbolic (iconic/linguistic configurations), throws her into a crisis of meaning” (1988: 157). Alarcón’s point is that Chicana writers are bound to explore sexual identities as they have been bequeathed to them, and that they take different and diverse positions according to their self-conscious grasp of the engendering process, which is constantly throwing women into a crisis of meaning as women.

⁴ . As Nancy S. Sternbach has remarked, whereas Moraga also reassesses the myth of the Malinche, she takes a sharp departure from contemporary Chicana re-evaluations. She is not only “hija de la Malinche” –in counterpoint to Octavio Paz’s well-known essay “Los hijos de la Malinche”– and her assessment is different for in her case, “Moraga also confronts her own problem and resultant pain: the daughter betrayed by a mother who showed preference for her male children (...) in this case, the daughter, in turn, is accused of betraying her race by choosing the sex of her mother as the object of her love” (1989:54).

⁵ A footnote in the text indicates ‘jotería’ is a Chicano term for ‘queer folk’.

⁶ Moraga’s harsh critique of US imperialism is present throughout *The Last Generation*: “Land remains the common ground for all radical action. But land is more than the rocks and trees, the animal and plant life that make up the territory of Aztlán or Navajo Nation or Maya Mesoamerica. For immigrant and native alike, land is also the factories where we work, the water our children drink, and the housing project where we live. For women, lesbians and gay men, land is that physical mass called our bodies. Throughout las Américas, all these ‘lands’ remain under occupation by an Anglocentric, patriarchal, imperialist United States” (1993: 173).

Moraga raises her utopian voice in the last section of her “Queer Aztlán: The Re-Formation of Chicano Tribe”. She sits herself as in search of a new Chicano nationalism, of a dream for a collectivity where integration is possible, the past and its mestizo roots and the revolutionary; respect for the Other and for Nature and its resources, in an affirmation of sovereignty and the supreme value of freedom. Inflamed with revolutionary rhetoric, she (1990: 173-74) proclaims:

As a Chicana lesbian, I know that the struggle I share with all Chicanos and Indigenous peoples is truly one of sovereignty, the sovereign right to wholly inhabit oneself (*cuero y alma*) and one’s territory (*pan y tierra*). I don’t know if we can ever take back Aztlán from Anglo-America, but in the name of a new Chicano nationalism we can work to defend one another that our freedom as a people is mutually dependent and cannot be parceled out –class before race before sex before sexuality. A new Chicano nationalism calls for the integration of both the traditional and the revolutionary, the ancient and the contemporary. It requires a serious reckoning with the weaknesses in our mestizo culture, and a reaffirmation of what has preserved and sustained us as a people.

Moraga envisions a mestizo race for the future that appears in one of her dreams. It is a new species, half-human, half-animal: “Maybe they are the hope of the future, these mixed beings who will bridge a world of oppositions, re-unite the human with the natural world” (1993: 127-28). This 21st century mestizo is increasingly born of two parents of color of different races and/or ethnicities, and as mixed-blood women they will be the mothers of a new generation, “We are the products of rape and the creators of a new breed. We are Malinche’s children and the new Malinches of the 21st century” (1993: 128).

3. BEYOND BOUNDARIES: ANA CASTILLO’S QUEST FOR SAPOGONIA

What is the relationship between imaginative writing and ethnography? No doubt they both constitute a limited way of seeing the world, and both are influenced by social conditions and the ideology of a particular historical moment. They aim at questioning objectivity and reevaluating the authority of personal experience. Chicana women writers, like anthropologists, might focus on a microcosm within a culture, unveiling realities (rituals and structures of subjugation). Even though Chicano narrative has always had a rich cultural context focusing on an ethnic identification process by redefining past traditions (Tomás Rivera, Acosta, Paredes) it has mostly overlooked issues surrounding female gender identification.

The Chicana women have a specific history of racial and sexual and class exploitation. Chicana writers such as Rosaura Sánchez, Alma Gómez, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Helena María Viramontes insist on illuminating the

complications of a multiple system of exploitation: capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Chicana feminism challenges boundaries defined by a hegemony which does not recognize racial and ethnic differences. They aim at looking to the history in order to transform the present. The Chicanas' quest for self-identity is thus negotiated out of the past and projected onto the future. Both the nostalgic past, patriarchal, and traditional, and the stereotypical Anglo-feminist plan for the future fail to acknowledge differences based on culture and ethnicity.

In *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), the epistolary form gives Castillo flexibility to describe the differences in the way women are viewed in the US and Mexico. She documents, in this "meta-ethnographic" work, the social injustice and inequality that Chicanas face when questioning or defying authority. Castillo plays with the conventions of the epistolary novel in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), a postmodernist, Chicana feminist novel that reflects the historical forces of the 80s, striking out against the canonical and its limitations. It is a text that illustrates Chicanas caught between two polarities. The novel consists of letters that systematically observe, record and describe the experiences that take place in the daily life of Mexican and American culture –something like ethnographic field work– and can be read as a parody of modern ethnographic and travel writing. With the epistolary form, Castillo can move freely from issue to issue and country to country, describing the differences between the sexes and how women are viewed in Mexico and the US. In both *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and later, in *Sapogonia*, utopian visions of the construction of a space and a culture to which Castillo's characters feel they belong, reminds us of the mythical Aztlán, "...a distinct place in the Americas where all mestizos reside, regardless of nationality, individual racial composition, or legal residential status –or perhaps, because of all these" (1990: 5). Castillo creates a homeland based on a mestizo consciousness.

The Mixquiahuala Letters consists of forty letters that Teresa, the protagonist, writes to her friend Alicia. Throughout the letters she remembers the time they spent together over a decade of close friendship that started when they met on a summer course on language and culture in Mexico City. Teresa is a mestiza who lives in Chicago and comes from a working class family: "a peona by birthright comfortable without a chair or table but squatted (1986: 44). She is Catholic, but she is influenced by indigenous beliefs, and she is an intellectual who wants to be a poet. For Teresa, writing is a vital necessity, a way of looking at and facing reality, and trying to change it by constructing something new; and through this process seeking to construct her own identity. Alicia is a middle-class woman with white and Latino roots who is close to feminist positions, "the privileged girl of the suburbs" (1986: 42). For Teresa this friendship means also a confrontation with herself and with the conventional ideas associated with her conservative Chicano upbringing.

Teresa manifests the terrible sense of unease and psychic unrest characteristic of the borderlands subject, and constantly fights to deconstruct this identity that has been imposed on her and in which she always appears as the "other," either in relation to the culture or in relation to man. She therefore suffers from an anxiety

and feeling of crisis caused by the split brought about by living on the border, and shows a strong desire to transcend this state by reassembling all the fragments. Teresa asks herself endless questions throughout the text such as: who am I, as a Chicana living in the United States?, or how do I relate to men and to other women? The solution to this existential conflict has to do with having the “mestiza consciousness,” suggested by Anzaldúa, which entails a renegotiation of culture, ideology and society and will bring about the transformation of the abyss or liminal space between the two worlds in a home.

Tanya Bennet contends that the tension between Teresa’s identities in conflict and her desire to establish an independent being liberated from ideological constrictions – manifest in binary oppositions– is reflected in the text through the language, the use of metaphors and the form of the novel. As far as language is concerned, Bennett (1996: 465) emphasizes the fact that Teresa moves at ease from English to Spanish and viceversa: “she shifts between English and Spanish (...) and her use of the languages associated with her various identities becomes, in fact, something of a collage.” This linguistic hybridity is present throughout the novel starting from the first letter in which Teresa tells anecdotes concerning her family of Mexican origin and where sentences, expressions and words of Hispanic origin appear.

Mestizaje is also shown in Teresa’s speech in its mix of formal and informal language, prose and poetry, as well as in the oscillation between the use of direct and indirect speech in narration when Alicia and Teresa refer to relevant events in the story.

In letter twenty-seven (1986: 95-96), Teresa has a mythical dream on the creation of an ideal culture she is part of:

The people were of mixed blood, people of the sun and earth (...) It was a village where people had buried their dead for generations. Women in black clothing kneaded dough at dawn for the morning meal of their men. Children learned to read and write only until it was time to tend to the land: the land that was theirs, that had been worked to sustain their livelihood and very little more. I too was of that small corner of the world. I was of that mixed blood, of fire and stone, timber and vine, a history passed down from mouth to mouth since the beginning of time when God, finding Himself lonely (...) decided to make a companion out of clay...

In the lives of Teresa and Alicia these mythical visions are interrupted by numerous attacks from patriarchy that they both experience through their relationships with the men they come across. This is the real Mexico, a hostile country that marginalizes those women who are bold enough to break established rules by travelling on their own.

The Mixquiahuala Letters is a postmodern text which does not have a single, fixed way of being read. The limits among the different genres blur, and move from letter to narrative to poetry. There is no fixed ending, since it varies depending on the kind of reading the reader chooses. The reader can no longer be a

passive consumer, but must rather become what Cortázar called “accomplice reader”, taking decisions and becoming in a certain way co-author of the text. Castillo undermines the conventions of the epistolary novel by inviting the reader to combine and recombine the individual letters in Cortázar fashion. At the same time, the epistolary form calls attention to the role of writing in sifting through and making sense of experience.

The Mixquiahuala Letters is a very fragmented text where temporal connections among the different letters are missing. Nevertheless, all these fragments constitute Teresa’s new identity, which is rewritten through these letters. As Yabro-Bejarano (1988: 144) states, “The narrative voice not only engages in a process of self-exploration through writing, but the form of the writing –letters– foregrounds an explicit exchange with a reader to whom the writing is directed.” The epistolary genre also contributes to communicating this sense of ambiguity if we take the metaphor of the letters as a mirror that not only reflects the image but also deconstructs it: “we needled, stabbed, manipulated, and cut and through it all we loved, driven to see the other improved in her own reflection” (1986: 23). Yabro-Bejarano (1992: 67) writes about Teresa and Alicia as mirror-images for each other: “their mirroring of each other works paradoxically against their identification, due at times to the inaccuracy of the representation. In the other each sees the reflection of her own need and dependence from which she must avert her gaze.” The central motif in their friendship, which moves them to identify or not with each other, is their relationships with men. Moreover, these relationships determine their travels and stays in different places. Teresa and Alicia are what Rebolledo calls “mujeres andariegas, mujeres callejeras” since they are constantly in motion, traveling either through the US or through Mexico. In Rebolledo’s view (1995: 183), these women are “symbols of empowering the body, sexuality and the self.” In this novel, women have a transgressive attitude towards sexuality: they have sex with the men they want to, talk explicitly about sex and its pleasures, and also talk about their bodies.

Teresa finds herself in an ambiguous and contradictory position; she longs to be accepted and to affirm her Mexican roots, but at the same time she does not want to relinquish her sexual freedom. In Norma Alarcón’s view (1989: 95-96),

The implicit suggestion that the erotic and the class struggle may be incompatible in a patriarchal world, when both are made public, places the underclass female in a double bind, since she may be forced to choose between areas of life that, for her, are intertwined or indivisible. In my view, the speakers in Castillo’s work refuse to make such choices.

Alicia, quite the opposite, appears as a woman who is much more influenced by the values of Anglo culture than Teresa, and has more liberal ideas. They are both well aware of the differences that exist between them, but it is precisely patriarchal oppression which prevents both friends from taking their first steps toward a love

relationship. Their feeling of defenselessness vis-à-vis men binds them closely together.

Despite *The Mixquiahuala Letters* being an open-ended novel that invites many readings, one of its main tenets is the vindication of a mestiza consciousness. There is a constant oscillation and an impossibility of determining whether it is Alicia – the woman who feels less attached to traditional Mexican culture– or Teresa – closer to their signs of identity– who is making the right choices. As Alvina Quintana (1991) has stated, Castillo interprets her culture as if she were an ethnographer, moving from objectivity to the realm of the subjective and debatable. This strategy of writing paves the way for her protagonist Teresa's resistance to Anglo culture without adopting the oppressive function of the ethnographer. It allows her to comment on social and gender issues through her personal narration.

Sapogonia (1990), Castillo's second novel, tells the story of Maximo Madrigal, an expatriate who travels from his country to Paris, from there to Barcelona and Madrid, and later on, to several places in North America. He meets his father along the way in Spain, travels through America and is obsessed with Pastora, a woman of Spanish and Indian origin. This novel deals with one of the most-debated issues in the Chicano movement, namely the idea of nation. In the book, the idea of Sapogonia serves a twofold purpose. It both appears as a mythical land analogous to Aztlán, and at the same time it is a real place. In the novel's preface there is a description of Sapogonia that takes us directly to Aztlán, since it does not refer to a real country but to an idealized place: "Sapogonia is a distinct place in the Americas where all mestizos reside, regardless of nationality, individual racial composition, or legal residential status – or perhaps, because of all these." (1990: 5) In this description, there is no allusion whatsoever to the sexual or gender identity of its inhabitants, as was the case with the idea of Aztlán constructed by the Chicano movement and which excluded women and all non-heterosexuals.

As regards the social and political situation of this enclave, Sapogonia mirrors the history of Mexican culture, the origin of the Chicano race in times of conquest: "slavery, genocide, immigration, and civil uprisings, all of which have left their marks on the genetic make-up of the generation following such periods as well as the border outline of its territory" (1990, 5). A last detail that confirms that Sapogonia is a place in our imagination is the impossibility of identifying it with any current geopolitical limits, as it is the case with Aztlán, "Sapogonia (like the Sapogon/a) is not identified by modern boundaries" (1990: 6).

Maya Socolovsky has written about the idea of nation and that of homeland in *Sapogonia* using Alfred Arteaga's definition of Aztlán and borderlands. Arteaga holds that Aztlán is the mythical land of the Aztecs, and he points out that it is an idea exclusively addressed to Chicano males, to the Brotherhood. It is located within the political limits of the US, and it calls for a cultural rather than a political nationalism. Socolovsky is particularly interested in Arteaga's view that there is no need to go back to that mythical land since they are already living there. Unlike Aztlán, the notion of borderlands offers a much more impoverished idea of home,

because one never knows where the real border ends and the metaphorical border begins. Aztlán is a myth and the borderlands are a matter of debate among several superimposed levels. In Socolovsky's view (1999: 76), it would be interesting to use the myths and open them up to debate reinterpretation and appropriation, and this is what occurs in *Sapogonia*: "What is significant in Castillo's creation of *Sapogonia* is that as a homeland based on a borderland consciousness it merges the mythical Aztlán with the contemporary and argumentative borderlands." Socolovsky bases her arguments on what the prologue of the novel announces: *Sapogonia* is a land of mestizos and this means its origin is hybrid, not pure, and thus it is associated with mestizo consciousness. In our view, *Sapogonia* can be identified with Aztlán, and even when the prologue of the novel says it can no longer be identified with present-day limits, in the narrative it does have certain definite limits and a specific site. It is not a borderland area where various cultures meet but rather a nation independent from the US. In *Sapogonia*, Castillo not only analyzes the difficulties Máximo has to be able to survive on the borderlands, but also the effects that frontier life has upon individuals. In Roland Walter's (1998) view, Máximo can be understood as the masculine version of Teresa, the protagonist of *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, since he is also an inhabitant of the border who is undergoing an existential crisis.

According to Socolovsky, Castillo's major achievement in *Sapogonia* is her rewriting of the myth of the homeland and heroism as a quest that involves displacement and uprootedness. The origin of the narrative is also hybrid –linearity is undermined, the chapters do not follow a chronological order and references are made to the same event from different points of view –inasmuch as the origin of *Sapogonia* is in miscegenation. This hybridity derides hierarchy and genealogy – after all, if everything is hybrid, the notion of one single origin makes no sense. Curiously enough, Máximo, the protagonist of the novel, does not see *Sapogonia* as his homeland until he loses it, and this sense of belonging only takes place after the death of his grandparents.

Sapogonia teaches us that a useful model for survival on the borderlands is mestiza consciousness, embodied in the story in the character of Pastora. Pastora is a woman who feels integrated in North American society but who give up neither her cultural background nor the struggle for the rights of the Latinos, as her work as a songwriter attests. Pastora opposes both Máximo's obsession with money and material possessions and his individualism. She is a member of that race of women who, in Roland Walter's view, are "earthly women with a cosmic worldview" (1998: 86), women who go beyond the empirical and the rational, and who place themselves in a harmonious relationship with Nature. This collectivity of mixed-blood women is Castillo's response to the challenge of the Chicano signs of identity in the future.

4. THE NEW COLLECTIVE SUBJECT TO COME

Throughout their work, Moraga and Castillo attempt to articulate an alternative perspective to the male-biased Chicano Nationalist Movement. They write political texts that challenge the politics of domination and essentialist notions of identity in an effort to dissipate the assumption that Chicanos are a homogeneous community.

Moraga finds herself on the outskirts of her own culture; being “queer” forces her from her home further to the margins, into a “border culture.” Anzaldúa’s “borderland,” the “third space” of flux and translation, comes to the fore by designating a hybrid space: “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms its hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country –a border culture.” (1987: 3)

Cherríe Moraga’s prose and poetry of fractures and continuities undertake a path from the border to the borderland, drawing a complex area of political intervention. While *Loving in the War Years* engages the contradictory and troubled multiplicity of a Chicana lesbian subject in many different ways, Moraga’s emphasis is on the representation of the body as site of the struggle to represent Chicana lesbian desire. In *The Last Generation* (1993), the borderland emerges as a space of ambivalence that undermines the determination of clear-cut frontiers between cultural formations, where Moraga orchestrates her critique of heterosexism, machismo and the lack of a cohesive national political strategy in Chicano nationalism. Moraga strives to create an all-inclusive utopian vision in Queer Aztlán; “a Chicano homeland that could embrace all its people, including its jotería [queer folk]” (1993: 147). Throughout her oeuvre, Moraga battles to pinpoint her allegiances, to divide and thus divine what makes her who she is and how she feels. Yet hers is no separatist approach, for by using this discourse she draws herself back into her mother and into the culture which she was forced to leave. Dismantling the myths surrounding that culture (Malintzin, the virgin of Guadalupe), she finds a third way, the “borderland”, where she and that ancient culture can converge: “I know full well that my mestizaje –my breed blood– is the catalyst of my activism and my art.” (1993: 127)

Ana Castillo’s experience as a Chicana pervades her whole work. She is a woman of color who suffers discrimination within her own culture as well as within contemporary US culture and white Western feminism in academia: “I cannot say that I am a citizen of the world as Virginia Woolf, speaking as an Anglo woman to economic means, declared herself; nor can I make the same claim to US citizenship as Adrienne Rich does despite her universal feeling for humanity. As a mestiza born to the lower strata, I am treated as best, as a second class citizen, at worst, as a non-entity.” (1995: 21) As Deborah Madsen (2000: 104) states, the aim of Castillo’s writing is “to resist conformity to racial and gender limitations; to resist invisibility and powerlessness by engaging with the most urgent issues that face Chicanos.”

For their colleague Gloria Anzaldúa, Aztlán, the legendary place of origin of the Aztecs in Mexico, is seen as a symbol of a desired homeland, a site of return or rediscovery of Chicano/a culture. She suggests, however, that the contemporary Aztlán is the U.S. Southwest, and this time, “the traffic is from south to north.”(1987: 11) In her view, the history of migration and immigration across the border constructs the concept of Aztlán as both a utopian and subjective land that shifts as borderlands shift. No longer a physical space that will, one day, be transformed into the center of a national identity, Aztlán comes to mean identity itself. What Anzaldúa (1987: 11) calls the “tradition of long walks,” then, leads not back to a mythical Aztlán and a dream of origin, but to engagement with various cultural identities at all kinds of borders. Aztlán is a “movable border within the self, where the self comes to terms with fluctuating positionalities.” (Pérez-Torres 1995: 93) Aztlán comes to articulate a reinscription of identity and collectivity.

In Moraga and Castillo’s texts, the Chicanos are no longer seen as a homogeneous community. By challenging essentialist notions of identity, these writers attempt to create a space where they can come to terms with ‘old’ and ‘new’ world traditions, a space where a new race, a new collective subject may be born. The juxtaposition of myth and realities, ethnography and fantasy, essays, poetry and folklore makes one question literary form and assess experimentation. The semi-autobiographical nature of these texts makes it evident that extremely self-conscious as they are,⁷ they are challenging conventional perceptions of genre. They are a mixture of autobiography and creative writing, blurring fact with fantasy, oral history with History, English with Spanish. By experimenting with content and form, they are inscribing a new culture, *una cultura mestiza* and confronting dominant modes of perception. This mixture of autobiography and historical accounts is a rejection of the Western culture’s dichotomy between the private and public spheres and an exercise in historical memory.

As Fredric Jameson (2005: 15) has aptly demonstrated, “Utopian space is an imaginary enclave within real social space.” He (2005: 12) remarks that “Utopians ... always aim at the alleviation and elimination of the sources of exploitation and suffering...” From her home in “The Mission,” San Francisco, Cherrie Moraga (1993: 191) joins him in foreseeing the fall of Empire,

⁷ As we mentioned before, Moraga states that her mixing of genres is her personal compromise in the effort to be understood, “And I guess, in fact, I write as I do because I am committed to communicating with both sides of myself” (1983: vi). Castillo’s extreme self-consciousness is evident from the very first page of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* where she alerts her readers that “This is not a book to be read in the usual sequence” (n.p.) and the letters are arranged in three different ways, “For the Conformist,” “For the Cynic,” “For the Quixotic.” Castillo finally wishes us “Good luck whichever journey you choose!” (n.p.) Anzaldúa’s vision of her stories as performances is an attempt at trying to rewrite culture by creating a literary space which will facilitate a discussion between oral influence and patriarchy.

This Fifth Sun is quickly vanishing. Urban Warriors emerge on LA streetscapes. “Every Empire falls,” says the homeboy. “The Romans fell. The Egyptians fell. [The Aztecs fell]. This empire’s gonna go, too.” He, too, reads the writing on the wall. Five hundred years ago, our original colonizers came in search of Gold. And today, in Los Angeles and San Francisco our babies are being buried under it.

This will bring about the beginning of a new order. The final section of *The Last Generation*, “Codex Xerí: El Momento Histórico” closes with a prayer for the last generation of Chicanos. Moraga (1993: 76) envisions the end of El Quinto Sol, “[T]he end of a 500-year historia sangrienta that saw to the near destruction of the indigenous peoples of Las Américas. And from the ashes of destruction, a new era is born: El Sexto Sol: La Epoca de la Conciencia Humana.” She explores the obstacles encountered in looking for the lost written word. With the help of an ancient Chicano scribe, she remembers in order to envision, “[L]ooks backward in order to look forward to a world founded not on greed, but on respect for the sovereignty of nature.” (1993: 190) Moraga, present-day scribe, interprets the signs of the time and witnesses “a new breed of revolucionario, their speech scrolls are slave tongues unraveling.” (192) Her writing turns into a hymn in celebration of the new collective subject to come.

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