ANA CASTILLO DISCUSSES HER ESSAYS DEFINING ` - Weekend Edition Sunday [NPR] (USA) - September 25, 1994


LIANE HANSEN, Host: This is "Weekend Edition". I'm Liane Hansen.

(SOUND OF PERCUSSIVE TONES)

(SOUND OF HIGH-PITCHED TONE)

ANA CASTILLO, Writer, Poet and Political Activist: [reading] This is not my country. In my country, I am not exotic. I do not have Asian eyes. I was not raised on a reservation. I do not go artificially blonde. The sun that gravitates to my dark pigmentation is not my enemy.

HANSEN: Ana Castillo, reading from her poem, `My Country.' She's also an award-winning fiction writer and political activist. Castillo was born in Chicago and grew up in that city's Mexican community. As a teenager, she joined the Latino Chicano movement. As a published writer, her poems and novels reflected the cultural, political and social conditions of Mexican-American Indian women in this country. This past week, a book of Castillo's essays was published. It's called Massacre of the Dreamers. She says the title is drawn from an incident which occurred in the remaining days of the Aztec Empire.

MS. CASTILLO: Many of us have heard the stories of omens that the Aztec people had witnessed regarding some kind of doom to the empire. Well, Montezuma, the emperor of Mexico at that time- uh- sent out emissaries throughout the empire- uh- to bring back people who had, perhaps, dreamed of something that might have prophetized- um- something like that. So, they went out. They went all over. They brought back thousands of people - they called them the dreamers - thousands of people who had had dreams that in some way prophetized doom. However, Montezuma, being the despot- uh, dictator that he was, emperor that he was, afterwards, he felt so much in despair, he had them all killed there in the palace, and it became known as the massacre of the dreamers. As you might imagine, after that no one throughout the empire ever discussed or talked about their dreams again.

HANSEN: Hmm. And Montezuma thought that by killing the dreamers he might kill the subject of the dreams?

MS. CASTILLO: Exactly. And what we all know, if we look at history, is that that didn't happen at all. That did not prevent the doom of the empire. And so my- my using that as the title of my book, talking about Amerindian women, particularly from Mexico - Chicanas, Latinas, Mestisas - is that if we don't heed those messages that we know, we feel in our psyches and in our sub consciences, that that doesn't prevent apathy doesn't prevent the doom anyway.

HANSEN: Umm. What messages are being transmitted in this book?
MS. CASTILLO: Well, as a woman of Mexican background, born in the United States, I look very Native American. I have experienced a life of feeling and being rendered invisible and, as such, and I don't of course, we are not invisible to each other, but we're invisible to mainstream society, and so, what the essays really do is that they make an attempt to explain who we are to each other, what our history is in terms of our mixed-race background, who we are to society, now as well as in the past and who we might be to the world in the future.

HANSEN: When this book was proposed originally, it was the under title was Reflections on Mexican-Indian Women in the United States 500 Years After the Conquest. It became Essays in Chicanisma, which is a word that I haven't heard before. Can you define it?

MS. CASTILLO: Well, I made it up.

HANSEN: Ah! [laughter of both women] Then you're the best person to define it.

MS. CASTILLO: Well- Yo- You know, I thought that first subtitle, you know, was like having half the text in the subtitle-

HANSEN: [short laugh]

MS. CASTILLO: So, I thought, well, they might be too tired to read the book after they've read the cover.

HANSEN: [laughing]

MS. CASTILLO: So, l- I decided to shorten that up and to take a risk exactly what the word that and that no one had ever heard of, but it comes out of having political consciousness. Uh- I was- uh, uh- in high school and in my early years in college. I was part of the Latino movement, the Chicano movement, which I feel was heavily dominated by male leadership. And anything that was related to that movement would be called Chicanismo, with a `ch.' When I was writing the book, which took me about six or seven years to finish, and traveling around the country and other places- um - Latinas would ask me to please come up with something that was closer to their experience, and so, one day, on a radio program such as this, and talking about it, Chicanisma just came out, and so that was what I decided. This is what- maybe we could call it.

HANSEN: What is that identity in 1990s America?

MS. CASTILLO: Well, as long as mainstream society continues to ignore us and we don't see ourselves, as I say, in the media or represented in a very integrated manner in private and public-uh- professions and so forth, that identity is still very obscure, sometimes even to ourselves, so a lot of trauma and confusion that goes on when you're constantly being told that you don't exist, or what does define you at home or in your neighborhoods or communities isn't given any value. And what I'm hoping to do with my essays is to just expose that- what that is. And what that is is a very long history of being mixed-race, of being American in the true sense of the word, of having- uh- a
great deal of joy and creativity and spontaneity that is never, ever given- um- given value or- or brought to light in society, except in stereotype.

HANSEN: Hmm. This book, the tone of it- um- swings back and forth sometimes between real anger - but a righteous anger - and then you'll pull back a little bit and offer up some hope. The- the book has been reviewed as a- a- signals change in real hope. It's called a book of footprints in-in some places. Where do you see- uh- that ground where everyone can meet to change things for the better?

MS. CASTILLO: Well, as I said- um- in the beginning of the book I'm not trying to speak as an authority. I'm not- um- an economist. I'm not a- an historian. I'm really a highly-opinionated poet and so this- this is my own personal feeling, and that is that- um - economically throughout the world, we're all experiencing a change in society. This is the time now in which middle class white America is looking around for alternatives, for other answers, and they are looking to the cultures of people of color to see if perhaps there is something there for their own souls and for their own survival and the survival of future generations.

HANSEN: Ana Castillo. Her book is called Massacre of the Dreamers; Essays on Chicanisma. She joins us from the studios of WFCR in Amherst, Massachusetts."