THE CHICANA SUBJECT IN ANA CASTILLO’S FICTION AND THE DISCURSIVE ZONE OF CHICANA/O THEORY

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In the world of Chicana fiction, Ana Castillo has achieved the kind of status Maxine Hong Kingston has attained within Asian American discourse. Castillo’s work is popular not only with the general reading public but in many academic circles as well. As Sara L. Spurgeon writes, “In 1994, [So Far From God] would help garner Castillo the Mountains and Plains Bookseller’s Award and place her, along with Sandra Cisneros, Julia Álvarez, and Denise Chávez, in the September issue of Vanity Fair, cementing her place, with or without the unanimous agreement of academia, at the forefront of Chicana literature, and establishing her as an important voice in the canon of western writing” (15).

But what sets Castillo apart from so many other Chicana fiction writers is that she is also a theorist, and her Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma (1994) has achieved widespread acclaim. As is the case in African American, Native American, and Asian American discourse, the primary concern of Chicana fiction and theory is the integrity and authenticity of the ethnic subject. Following the pioneering work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Chicana authors like Castillo have embraced the notion of the “mestiza,” who “is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions” (Anzaldúa, Borderlands 103; emphasis original). As Anzaldúa writes,

at the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly “crossing over,” this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making—a new mestiza consciousness, una conciencia de mujer. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands. (99)

Within the discourse of Chicana literature and theory, the mestiza has a privileged position, functioning as she does as a reminder of the hybridity that has resulted from more than five hundred years of colonization and cultural miscegenation. The mestiza further reminds Chicana/os of “the contentious history of the Chicana/o population in [the] U.S.” (Delgadillo 893). Because of this history, Delgadillo writes,

It is not unusual for the literature of this heterogeneous community to grapple with conflicting claims and demands, for its characters engage a discourse of identity in which issues of power and opposition to the dominant society are central. Consequently, Chicana/o literature has demonstrated a preoccupation with the multiplicity of subject positions that colonized and oppressed people must of necessity occupy in their experiences. (893)
The fictional works by Ana Castillo, as Delgadillo suggests, are indeed preoccupied "with the multiplicity of subject positions" her characters inhabit (893). They represent a "virtual catalog of the subjectivities, often in opposition to one another, in Chicana communities" (893). And yet in Massacre of the Dreamers, a collection of critical essays on the experience of those whom Castillo calls "Mexic Amerindians," Castillo suggests rather explicitly that, while Chicana identity is fragmented due to the vicissitudes of history, there is an essential "Mexic Amerindian" identity that can be "asserted" (Castillo, Massacre 12).

In order to illuminate the ways in which Castillo theorizes and constructs Chicana identity, in what follows I will look at the relationship between Castillo's own theoretical work, Massacre of the Dreamers, and her fiction, including The Mixquiahuala Letters and So Far From God. There is, I argue, a curious incongruity between how Castillo theorizes the Chicana subject and how her characters perform subjectivity in her fiction. While Castillo's fiction not only exemplifies and performs "the arcane mysteries of absence, trace, and the slippery possibilities of presence" that are the hallmark of postmodernism, in Massacre of the Dreamers Castillo nostalgically searches for an originating moment that will ground her Mexic Amerindian identity (Smith 6). She argues that "As Mexic Amerindians we must, to find a clue as to who we are and from whom we descend, become akin to archaeologists" (Massacre 6). As an archaeologist, Castillo looks to history for what Derrida calls a "centered structure" in which to ground her identity (279). In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida writes,

> the concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play [. . .] This is why one perhaps could say that the movement of any archaeology, like that of any eschatology, is an accomplice of this reduction of the structurality of structure and always attempts to conceive of structure on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play. (279)

If Western epistemology is founded upon the concept of a centered structure—or a center which "orient[s], balance[s], and organize[s] the structure" (278)—then Castillo's Massacre reproduces rather than challenges an "Anglocentric perspective" (Castillo, Massacre 2). But before I turn in greater detail to Castillo's work, I would like first to look briefly at the important ways Chicana/o theorists Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Emma Pérez, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña theorize the Chicana/o subject and the ideological terrain in which it circulates.

**Theorizing the Chicana/o Subject:**

**Anzaldúa, Sandoval, Pérez, Gómez-Peña**

In "La Prieta," Gloria Anzaldúa tells us that she lives "[b]etween [. . .] and among others" (232). She writes, "I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses [. . .] This task—to be a bridge, to be a fucking crossroads for goddess' sake" (228, 229). Here Anzaldúa articulates the subject position of the mestiza/Mexic Amerindian, balancing at a "crossroads" between multiple worlds, multiple ideologies. Building on Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, in Methodology of the Oppressed, theorizes the space the mestiza occupies in order to develop an "oppositional consciousness" or theory of resistance to dominant—Western,
white—ideology (Sandoval 58). Sandoval calls her theory “differential consciousness.” This “activity of [oppositional] consciousness,” she writes, is

“differential” insofar as it enables movement “between and among” ideological positionings (the equal-rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist modes of oppositional consciousness) considered as variables, in order to disclose the distinctions among them. In this sense, the differential mode of consciousness functions like the clutch of an automobile, the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power. The differential represents the variant; its presence emerges out of correlations, intensities, junctures, crises. (58)

Because the mestiza lives in the borderlands, a topographical space where multiple cultures and ideologies “meet, clash, and grapple with each another,” differential consciousness functions as a strategy of resistance for the mestiza and other subjugated peoples (Pratt 4). As Pratt writes in Imperial Eyes, “While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for” (6).

When subjugated peoples enact differential consciousness “in dialectical relation to” the other ideological positions Sandoval discusses—the equal-rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist modes of oppositional consciousness—“and not as separated ideologies, each oppositional mode of consciousness, each ideology-praxis, is transformed into tactical weaponry for intervening in shifting currents of power” (Sandoval 58). This is important because such a consciousness enables the “subject,” in this case, the Chicana subject, to posit a “tactical subjectivity with the capacity to de- and recenter” ideologies (59), that is, to “determine to varying extents what” of dominant culture it “absorb[s]” (Pratt 6). As Sandoval goes on to explain, “These dynamics are what were required in the shift from enacting a hegemonic oppositional theory and practice to engaging in the differential form of social movement, as performed by U.S. feminists of color during the post-WWII period of great social transformation” (Sandoval 59).

We see Anzaldúa enacting tactical subjectivity in “La Prieta” when she writes,

“Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,” say the members of my race. “Your allegiance is to the Third World,” say my Black and Asian friends. “Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,” say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings [. . .] I identify as a woman [. . .] I identify as gay [. . .] I identify as feminist. (228, 229; emphasis original)

To negotiate the terrain of multiple, competing ideologies—a zone of “radically asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 7)—and resist dominant culture, the mestiza must be able to recognize all “tactical positionings” as “a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (Sandoval 59; Lorde 107). And differential consciousness, Sandoval writes, “re-cognizes and works upon other modes of consciousness in opposition to transfigure their meanings: they convert into repositories within which subjugated citizens either occupy or throw off subjectivity, a process that simultaneously enacts yet decolonizes their various relations to their real conditions of existence” (Sandoval 63).
What Sandoval calls “differential consciousness,” Emma Pérez calls “a theory of Chicano/a historical consciousness” (Pérez 4). Pérez and Sandoval, in similar fashion, challenge dominant ideology “from within but against the grain” (Spivak 13). Pérez’s theory of consciousness posits a subject that functions “within, yet beyond, the demands of dominant ideology” (Sandoval 63). Pérez writes, “If we are dividing history into these categories—colonial relations, postcolonial relations, and so on—then I would like to propose a decolonial imaginary as a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history” (6). Drawing on Homi Bhabha, Pérez argues that “the decolonial imaginary is that time lag between the colonial and postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated” (6). This interstitial space is what Bhabha refers to as the “Third Space of enunciation,” which is “the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference” (39).

What this means for the Chicana subject, the “new mestiza,” is that she must cope by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa, Borderlands 101)

Within this third space, this borderland, the identity of the new mestiza is plural, polyglot—a “clash of voices”—and performative (100). As Sandoval writes, “The cruising mobilities [of the new mestiza] required in this [Third Space] demand of the differential practitioner commitment to the process of metamorphosis itself: this is the activity of the trickster who practices subjectivity as masquerade, the oppositional agent who accesses differing identity, ideological, aesthetic, and political positions” (62). The “diasporic subjectivities” who occupy the borderlands “live inside [dominant ideology] with a difference” (Clifford 308). “In the difference,” Pérez writes,

is the diasporic subject’s mobility through and about, weaving interstitially, to create, always create, something else, whether music, food, clothes, style, or language. The diasporic ushers in an adaptability as only one of many ways to keep moving, to keep weaving through power, to grasp and re-create culture, to re-create oneself through and with diasporic communities. The diasporic subject is not only here and there, is not only Mexican or American, or Mexican American, or even Chicano/a, but more, much more, is always re-creating the unimagined, the unknown, where mobile third space identities thrive, and where the decolonial imaginary gleans the diasporic’s subjecthood. (79)

What the work of Anzaldúa, Sandoval, and Pérez does, then, is demarcate “the progression toward postmodern, postnational identities for Chicanas/mestizas” (Pérez 25), and “allow for a third space feminist analysis” that moves “beyond woman as an essentialist category” (23). This analysis not only complicates what it means to be a woman, but it imagines the mestiza as a “hybrid progeny” irreducible to a single Chicana essence (Anzaldúa, Borderlands 99), which assumes that Chicanas “have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of that category” (Ashcroft et al. 77). In Massacre of the Dreamers Castillo argues, “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" (1). La nueva mestiza is a "mixed race woman [. . .] without borders, without boundaries" (Pérez 25). Echoing both Pérez and Sandoval, Anzaldúa writes, "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 [. . .]." (Borderlands 103).

As a performance artist, Gómez-Peña makes his living "participating in the creation of yet another culture" (Anzaldúa, Borderlands 103; emphasis original). In The New World Border, he opposes the "sinister cartography of the New World Order with the conceptual map of the New World Border—a great trans- and intercontinental border zone, a place in which no centers remain" (7). This map is one of transculturation, which, according to Pratt, "is a phenomenon of the contact zone," and requires a "‘contact’ perspective [that] emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other" (6, 7). On Gómez-Peña's map, "It's all margins, meaning there are no ‘others,’ or better said, the only true ‘others’ are those who resist fusion, mestizaje, and cross-cultural dialogue. In this utopian cartography, hybridity is the dominant culture [. . .]. [O]ur identities are constantly being reshaped by the kaleidoscopic experience" (7; emphasis original).

Gómez-Peña opposes what he sees as a "homogenized global culture" and the emergence of a new essentialist culture, "one that advocates national, ethnic, and gender separatism in the quest for cultural autonomy, ‘bio-regional identity,’ and ‘traditional values’" (11). Against these two visions of the future—ultranationalism or a homogenized global culture—he offers an alternative: "the hybrid—a cultural, political, aesthetic, and sexual hybrid" (11). Gómez-Peña's border-crossing hybrid posits what Sandoval calls "tactical subjectivity" and enacts a "differential consciousness" (Sandoval 59). His hybrid is cross-racial, polylinguistic, and multicontextual. From a disadvantaged position, the hybrid expropriates elements from all sides to create more open and fluid systems [. . .] The artist who understands and practices hybridity in this way can be at the same time an insider and an outsider, an expert in border crossings, a temporary member of multiple communities, a citizen of two or more nations. S/he performs multiple roles in multiple contexts. (New World, 11-12; emphasis mine)

By constructing a new conceptual map—a new world border—Gómez-Peña wants to remind us that "we are not the product of just one culture; that we have multiple and transitional identities; that we contain a multiplicity of voices and selves, some of which may even be contradictory" (12).

Like Anzaldúa's new mestiza, Gómez-Peña's hybrid is a border-crooser who embraces his/her "multiple and incomplete identities, and celebrates all of them" (Dangerous 10). Gómez-Peña suggests that the hybrid is very much a product of history, in the way that Jameson's schizophrenic, as outlined in Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, is the product of late capitalism. "Nomadism and migration," Gómez-Peña writes, "have become central experiences of millennial postmodernity. As our (cultural) continents collide and overlap in the rapid process of ‘globalization,’ the ongoing migration of South to North and East to West redefines not only geopolitical borders, but also language (the currency of lingua francas), identity (national and personal), activism, art and popular culture" (11; emphasis original).
nomadic hybrid, a transcultural trickster, challenges the border guards of identity who wish to pin down identity (12).

The hybrid or mestiza must be understood, Gómez-Peña argues, as a “cross-cultural diplomat, as an intellectual coyote (smuggler of ideas) or a media pirate. At other times, s/he assumes the role of nomadic chronicler, intercultural translator, or political trickster,” someone who resists boundaries, bridges gaps, trespasses on and remaps cultural terrain, reinterprets and redefines signs and symbols, all in order to “find the outer limits of his/her culture and cross them” (New World 12; emphasis original). For William Boelhower, “the ethnic subject,” as a transcultural trickster, “is [. . .] uncontrollable [. . .] multiple and polymorphic [. . .] pluralized and multiform [. . .] unpredictable and aleatory” (135).

Here Boelhower succinctly describes the subjects in Castillo’s The Mixquiahuala Letters and So Far From God. Castillo’s characters are hybrids who display a differential consciousness, the consciousness of the border crosser; and her novels, in this sense, are contact zones. Drawing on Louis Althusser, Sandoval reminds us, we can never get outside of dominant ideology. Subjugated subjects in the contact zone can resist, but they resist from within ideology. It is true, though, Sandoval suggests, that subjects can get some critical distance from dominant ideology—and differential consciousness is one of the ways subjects can work “beyond” the “demands of dominant ideology” (Sandoval 63).

As Sandoval reminds us,

All social orders hierarchically organized into relations of domination and subordination create particular subject positions within which the subordinated can legitimately function. These subject positions, once self-consciously recognized by their inhabitants, can become transfigured into effective sites of resistance to an oppressive ordering of power relations. (55)

While a subject can become self-conscious of subject position, it would be a mistake to suggest that s/he can be “completely aware of his or her determination by class ideology, and [can] [. . .] step outside of this determination by sheer lucidity and clarity of thought” (Saldivar, “Narrative” 17). Because subjects are not able to determine finally their imaginary relation to the real conditions of existence, art is called upon “to produce the individual’s imaginary relationship to conditions of existence” (17).11

Literature, in this sense, functions as a “vital element of ideological analysis” (17). “Great art,” Saldivar writes, “distances ideology by the way in which, endowing ideology with figurative and narrative articulations, the text frees its ideological content to demonstrate the contradictions within which ideologies are created. Great art is thus speculative in the most fundamental of senses: it allows us to see” (17). Chicano narratives, like Castillo’s The Mixquiahuala Letters and So Far From God, resist dominant ideology and help us to see what it has silenced by creating what Goran Therborn, in The Power of Ideology and the Ideology of Power, calls an “alter-ideology” (28). This “alter-ideology”, Saldivar argues, “is conflictual and oppositional rather than consensual or integrative” (“Narrative” 17). For Roland Walter, a “narrative ‘alter-ideology’” is “a narrative ‘dialectic of difference’ as socially symbolic act with an ideological utopian function intent on finding imaginary solutions to existing social conflicts” (82). If, as Pierre Macherey claims, “an ideology is made of what it does not mention [and] it exists because there are things which must not be spoken of” (132), then Castillo’s fiction gives voice to what Foucault calls “the great silent, motionless bases” (Foucault 3), that, in Pérez’s words, “constitute the interstitial gaps, the unheard, the unthought, the unspoken” (Pérez 5).
The Chicana Subject in Ana Castillo’s Fiction

The Chicana Subject in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and *So Far From God*

One of the ways in which Castillo in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* gives voice to the “unheard, the unthought, the unspoken” narrative of one young Chicana woman, Teresa, is by using a fragmented epistolary style, and by inviting readers of any race, gender, or ethnicity to construct their own non-chronological narrative—strategies that bear on Teresa’s search for a sense of identity. At the beginning of the novel Castillo 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” (np). She then provides three paths that the “conformist,” “cynical,” or “quixotic” reader can choose to take. As Walter argues,

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; emphasis mine)

Castillo’s “radical deconstruction of the symbolic order” in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is part and parcel of ideology critique. As Tonya Long Bennett argues, “the main effect of Castillo’s use of language, metaphor, and form to exhibit the problems of essentialism is an undermining of dominant ideologies as systems by which one may be fully defined” (472). What Castillo makes clear in *Letters* is that “there is no essential Teresa to create that self; rather it is she, whose shape is at least partly molded by society, who is constructing the letters. Thus, it is impossible for her to free herself entirely from what surrounds and constructs her, thwarting, for good or for ill, the idea of total individualism” (470). The subject in Castillo’s fiction is nonunitary. It is, as T. Minh-ha Trinh writes, “not one, not two either. T is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with a layer of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. T is, itself, *infinite layers*. Its complexity can hardly be conveyed through such typographic conventions as I, i, or I/I” (94; emphasis original).

Teresa’s identity/ies, then, is/are relational, and “Castillo represents this unstable, relational self, a self that can only be understood and can only understand herself in relation to others, with the lower-case ‘i’ instead of the capital ‘I’” (Oliver-Rotger 260). Throughout the novel, we see Castillo—through Teresa—enacting “differential consciousness,” which posits a non-unitary subject. As Bennett suggests,

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)

Teresa’s sense of identity, then, is loosely constructed—and readily dismantled—through the ongoing process of “self-fashioning” both within and beyond dominant ideology. As Greenblatt explains:
Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile [. . . ]; self-fashioning always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self [. . . ]; we may say that self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien, that what is produced in this encounter partakes of both the authority and the alien that is marked for attack and hence that way achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss. (9)

As border-crossers, Teresa, who grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood in Chicago, and Alicia, who was raised in an upper-middle-class suburb in New York, have a tenuous relationship with both Mexico and the United States; both, in a sense, are alien to them, because, as mestizas, they live not in one culture, but between and among several cultures, which results in a fractured subject.

Despite Teresa's Mexican heritage, she feels alienated from Mexico. In Letter Nineteen she writes, "Mexico. Melancholy, profoundly right and wrong, it embraces as it strangulates."

"Destiny is not a metaphysical confrontation with one's self, rather, society has knit its pattern so tight that a confrontation with it is inevitable" (Castillo, Letters 59). In Mexico Teresa and Alicia, whose grandmother was Andalusian, expect to find a kind of "cultural home" or "spiritual haven" (Oliver-Rotger 262). And they expect to blend in because they look mestiza (or Mexicana). Teresa describes herself as having an "Indian-marked face" with "dark hair and Asian eyes" (Castillo, Letters 19, 21). But their looks do not help them to integrate into Mexican culture; rather "they are suddenly turned into targets of the Mexicans' inferiority complex before the more respected gringo tourists" (Oliver-Rotger 262; emphasis original). To her Mexican Spanish instructor, Teresa looks "like the daughter of a migrant worker or a laborer in the North (which of course, i was), i was nothing so close to godliness as fair-skinned or wealthy or even a simple gringa with a birthright ticket to upward mobility in the land paved with gold, but the daughter of someone like him, except that he'd made the wade to the other side" (Castillo, Letters 21).

Here Teresa realizes that "self-fashioning" requires negotiating with "society" and the ideology that society adheres to; and the society Teresa confronts in Mexico threatens to restrict, silence, and marginalize her. In Massacre of the Dreamers Castillo discusses "how Catholicism has shaped our [mestiza] identity as well as our political activism" (12). In Letters, we see Teresa confronting and struggling with the Catholic ideology that was instilled in her as a child and still haunts her as an adult. To Alicia she writes:

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. (24)

The edicts of the Catholic Church and the culture that heeds the Church's teachings restrict the lives of women, and Teresa and Alicia not only know this but experience it firsthand. In Mexico, it is not appropriate for women to move about freely unescorted, and
yet Teresa and Alicia travel alone. Because of this, in Acapulco, “Mexicans who were black and kinky-haired with shackled history, grease-covered mechanics [. . . ] watched [them] slyly with unsympathetic notions of [their] vagabonding” (27). Teresa writes to Alicia,

How revolting we were, susceptible to ridicule, abuse, disrespect. We would have hoped for respect as human beings, but the only respect granted a woman is that which a gentleman bestows upon the lady. Clearly, we were no ladies.

What was our greatest transgression? We traveled alone. (59)

The myth of Mexican hospitality is quickly dissolved, as well, as they are perceived as outsiders, “two bohemian women travelers, with no strings attached” (79).

Teresa and Alicia’s desire to travel alone enacts the “Woman’s Quest for Freedom and Self-Determination,” that is, the quest to fashion an autonomous self free from dominant ideology. But Teresa and Alicia know that is impossible. The utopian dream of a self entirely free from ideology, Fredric Jameson reminds us, is a myth (Jameson, Political 283). Teresa writes to Alicia, saying, “We weren’t free of society’s tenets to be convinced we could exist indefinitely without the demands and complications one aggregated with the supreme commitment to a man” (39).12 Patriarchy, buttressed by the Catholic Church, suggests that a woman’s value is gained by or attained through her relationship with men.

“When a woman entered the threshold of intimacy with a man,” Teresa tells Alicia, “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” (29). While traveling, Teresa and Alicia not only disregard the rule against “waltzing Matilda,” which in Australian parlance, means traveling without a male escort, but they forego rules of chastity and adultery, taking many lovers along the way. Alicia takes more lovers than Teresa can count, and Teresa, who is married, gets pregnant and has an abortion.13

In Mexico, the women struggle to negotiate gender roles and cultural stereotypes. In Letter Twenty-Two, Teresa recounts their evening with a number of Mexican men. Ponce, “the engineer who had thought we were from South America,” (72) asks Teresa, “I think you are a “liberal woman.” Am I correct?” Teresa explains to Alicia that

[h]is expression meant to persuade me that it didn’t matter what I replied. In the end he would win. He would systematically strip away all my pretexts, reservations and defenses, and end up in bed with me.

In the end he would win. He would systematically strip away all my pretexts, reservations and defenses, and end up in bed with me.

In that country, the term “liberated woman” meant something other than what we had strived for back in the United States. In this case it simply meant a woman who would sleep nondiscriminately with any man who came along.

In response to Ponce, Teresa says, “What you perceive as ‘liberal’ is my independence to choose what i do, with whom, and when. Moreover, it also means that i may choose not to do it, with anyone, ever” (73).

As Teresa recounts to Alicia, “another myth involving Mexican tradition dissipated before our eyes. Mexican hospitality did indeed have its limits that could border on hostility and total lack of social graces practiced on those who seemed to be questionable worthwhile guests” (93). What Teresa and Alicia discover is that, even in the “country of their inherited origins,” and “[i]n 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 263-64; emphasis original).
Teresa and Alicia struggle to resist the authority that comes from patriarchy/dominant ideology, and wish, in terms of their bodies in particular and their lives in general, to make a “free choice” (Walter 82). But it is clear from Teresa’s letters and actions that the process of self-fashioning (acting/resisting/capitulating) is a difficult one, and results in “mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness” (Anzaldua, Borderlands 100). While writing down her experiences of traveling and living in Mexico and the United States is indeed an act of agency (though one might call it confession), it does not finally give her peace (or absolution). Teresa finds out that “[w]hen one is confronted by the mirror, the spirit trembles” (Castillo, Letters 49). When Teresa’s spirit trembles, she reluctantly returns to her husband. Teresa writes, “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” (31). But Teresa’s decision to return to her husband is not entirely an act of capitulation. The act of writing the letters functions as an important act of self-fashioning: Teresa is (re)writing her own history. As Bennett writes, “although what Teresa learns by looking in the mirror/writing her letters is not comforting, it allows her a sense of agency. This agency comes primarily from her observation that reality is constructed, that is, the act of writing gives her a medium, first for deconstructing oppressive ideologies, and then for constructing her own reality, including her self” (463).

Whatever might be said about Teresa’s decision to return to her husband—an act which was entirely of her own free will—she, during her multiple journeys through the borderlands, demonstrates and enacts what Anzaldua calls the “mestiza consciousness.” While this consciousness is a “source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (Anzaldua, Borderlands 102). Teresa discovers that

she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries [. . .] La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (101)

In The Mixquiahuala Letters, Teresa and Castillo challenge the limits of dominant ideology by “find[ing] the outer limits of [their] culture and cross[ing] them” (Gómez-Peña, New World 12). They “pluralize meaning by violating the taboos erected by the classist, racist, sexist ruling-order by opening [their] lips, politicizing the word, and proclaiming its revolutionary force. In doing so,” Teresa and Castillo participate “actively [. . .] in the ongoing disruption of the absolute fusion of hegemonic ideologies and the status quo” (Saldivar, Chicano 198-99). Castillo’s postmodern, fragmented narrative approach destabilizes the generic or conventional form of the novel, decenters the authority of the author, encourages the reader to participate in the making of the text, and challenges dominant conceptions of Chicana subjectivity. 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 or foreign 'authority' by creating a space for themselves. (83)

The mestiza, the "I/i," however it might be articulated in this post-frontier space, is always under construction. It is, in existentialist terms, always in the process of becoming, always revolting against "stagnant traditions and ideals that smother and suppress" Chicana subjectivity.

In *So Far From God* Castillo once again employs a mestiza consciousness. In this novel she does so to reimagine the West. Against the model of a new world order, based on the western colonialist notions of progress and Manifest Destiny, she sets out to create what Gómez-Peña calls "the New World Border [. . .] a place in which no centers remain" (*New World* 7). As Spurgeon suggests, in *So Far From God* Castillo "re-imagines western utopia as an ever-shifting community, a hybridized, differentiated space producing identities that are fractured, mobile, and unfixed" (40).

Castillo's *So Far From God* is an "ironic allegory" (Manriquez 38); it is multi-generic, combining poetry, folk literature, recipes, indigenous remedies for various ailments, as well as social and political commentary. These aspects, according to B.J. Manriquez, "are indicative of both postmodern fragmentation and absurdist techniques" (38). As in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, Castillo, in *So Far From God*, subverts essentialist notions of the self and, in so doing, challenges dominant ideologies. Manriquez, who calls *So Far From God* the first "absurdist Chicana novel," argues that the "novel of the absurd ignores the ideological and [. . .] rebels against essentialist beliefs of both traditional culture and literature" (39). In Castillo's absurd world, "human beings exist in a silent universe that possesses no inherent truth or meaning. Human beings appear senseless and absurd" (39).

The absurdity of the world Castillo creates in *So Far From God* is illustrated in terms of both content and form. The plot of the novel was "inspired by a story from early Christian theology, an allegorical tale involving Sophia (wisdom) and her three daughters: Faith, Hope, and Charity. At the end of the original story, Sophia stands weeping over the graves of her allegorical offspring, hopelessly resigned to the stubborn, unchanging sinfulness of human nature" (Spurgeon 40). From this it is clear that Castillo's revision of this story is ironic. The utter strangeness and overt artificiality of the plot "all point to an absurdist plot of rebellion against essential beliefs and values, ridiculing the characters' attempts to find order or 'meaning' in their lives" (Manriquez 44). For example, Fe struggles desperately to live the "good life," to achieve the American Dream. Unlike her sisters, Fe "embraces mainstream culture; she wants to be like the white women she works with" at the bank (Lanza 71). To earn more money so she can buy "the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR," she quits her job at the bank and takes a job with Acme International, a subcontractor for the Defense Department, scrubbing weapon parts (Castillo, *So Far* 171). The cleaning product, unbeknownst to Fe, is extremely toxic, and she inevitably gets terribly sick:

And that is when they found out that Fe had cancer. She had cancer on the outside and all over the inside and there was no stopping it by then [. . .] Very shortly after that first prognosis, Fe just died [. . .] Fe was given a Mass in Tome by Father Jerome who said her cremation was approved of by the Church (and paid for by Acme International) because at the time of her death there was so little left of Fe to be buried anyway. (186)
Fe’s desire to achieve the American Dream is shown to be futile, and the senselessness of her death points to the absurdity of existence. And like Teresa in *The Mixquiabualta Letters*, Fe discovers the pain of being a mestiza. As Kingsolver argues, “Castillo’s characters are caught between two cultures: an old one that is both reverent and exploitative of women; and a new one that views them mainly as a cheap labor force to be used up and abandoned” (9).

La Loca’s death is equally senseless and even more inexplicable. La Loca, who dies at the age of three and then rises from the dead at her funeral, dies again later (and for good), but this time of AIDS while still a teenager, after having lived an inordinately reclusive life. Because La Loca learned “to recognize the smell of death during her time as a corpse,” she “cannot bear to be near any other human being except her mother” (Spurgeon 42). Yet she miraculously and tragically contracts AIDS and dies, only to become a saint. “Her infection is inexplicable” and absurd, “and this casts her as a martyr” (42). Caridad, who is the most gregarious and rebellious of the four daughters (she has a weakness for Crown Royal and sleeps with any man who comes along), is brutally attacked and mutilated one night by a “thing,” but then later heals herself, and eventually, under the tutelage of doña Felicia, becomes a *curandera.* Esperanza, the oldest and most politically minded of the five women, goes to Saudi Arabia to report on the Gulf War, is taken prisoner, and then is presumably killed, because she makes an “ectoplasmic return” and haunts the creek near her mother’s home (Castillo, *So Far* 150). In *So Far From God* the only thing that seems clear is that “Nobody and nothing [is] able to know what was going on around them no more” (189).

By constructing a novel that calls attention to its artificiality and rejects a linear ordering of reality, Castillo challenges “any construction that tries to impose direction, order, or meaning upon existence” (Manriquez 43). As Manriquez argues, Castillo “presents not only the chaos of American society but also the chaos and alienation in Chicano/Chicana culture. Using the techniques developed by absurdist novelists of the 1960s, Castillo uses these filters to view the absurdity of life in American society for a Chicana, and thus includes in *So Far From God* a series of preposterous and burlesque events and characters who are distorted and caricatured” (43). Moreover, Castillo challenges static notions of subjectivity by suggesting that “life is absurd” for Chicanas who live in the borderlands (44)—a place of “psychic restlessness” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 100). Because the Chicana subject lives between and among multiple realities, the Chicana subject is fractured. If the universe possesses no inherent truth or meaning, then neither do the “selves” that populate that universe.

“In Search of Identity”: The Chicana Subject in *Massacre of the Dreamers*

If Castillo, in her fiction, challenges “essentialist notions” of Chicana subjectivity and argues that there is no “unified subject,” in *Massacre of the Dreamers* she suggests there is, in fact, a mestiza “doer behind the doing,” as Nietzsche would say. To be sure, she does say that the Chicana, the mestiza, the Latina, or Hispanic “cannot be summarized nor neatly categorized” (Castillo, *Massacre* 1). But, like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who invokes the notion of “race-memory” (82), Castillo seeks solidarity with other mestizas by invoking “indigenous blood” ties (*Massacre* 8). She writes, “This acknowledgement of our cultural legacies and our reclaiming of our indigenous blood-ties, I hope, is not simultaneously an
assertion that our heritage is superior to that of peoples from throughout the world” (6). While Sandoval argues that “Differential consciousness and social movement thus are linked to the necessity to stake out and hold solid identity and political positions in the social world,” she also argues that “differential consciousness” is “performative” (Sandoval 60, 58). While a “solid identity” is acknowledged in order to “perform” a strategic political function, there is no “essential” identity behind the performance itself. Identity itself is the performance; the performance is the identity.

In her search for origins, Castillo implies that there is a “Mexic Amerindian” identity waiting to be “discovered.” In Massacre of the Dreamers Castillo chose to use the “ethnic and racial definition of Mexic Amerindian to assert both our indigenous blood and the source, at least in part, of our spirituality” (10), and “spirituality,” for Castillo, “is an acutely personalized experience inherent in our ongoing existences” (13). While in the process of researching for Massacre of the Dreamers, she tells us, “I found ethnographic data that ultimately did not bring me closer to understanding how the Mexic Amerindian woman truly perceives herself [ . . . ] In graduate school I did indeed search for some clue to a crucial part of my ‘identity’ inherent in the Mexic Amerindian woman” (7, 8; emphasis mine). If Jameson suggests that getting outside of ideology is a myth, Castillo, in Massacre, implies that she—and fellow archaeologists—by discovering the identity inherent in the Mexic Amerindian, will be able to understand how the “Mexic Amerindian woman truly perceives herself.” Castillo writes,

I was unable to unearth the female indigenous consciousness in graduate school that I am certain is part of my genetic collective memory and my life experience. Nevertheless I stand firm that I am that Mexic Amerindian woman's consciousness [ . . . ] and that I must, with others like myself, utter thought and intuitions that dwell in the recesses of primal collective memory. (17)

If identity is performative, then the truth of identity lies not in a pre-existing condition waiting to be unearthed, but in the act of performance itself. Castillo tells us she is “inclined to object to the claim that [Mexic Amerindians] are simply in search of identity but rather asserting it” (12). In other words, she objects to the claim that identity is performed rather than found and then asserted. Janet Cooper, taking notice of such an attitude, writes, “the border crossings that [Monica] Sone and Castillo deploy in their novels do not represent internal negotiations that aim to construct new cultural spaces. Instead of examining their beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions as they migrate across national and pseudo-national borders, as Anzaldúa suggests, both protagonists [Kazuko and Teresa] believe that they will find their identities ready-made by a change of location” (160).

Even while Castillo, in Chapter eight of Massacre, “Un Tapiz: The Poetics of Conscientización,” speaks of a “poetics of self-definition,” her belief in an essential mestiza self is quite evident (167): “Denial of her mestisaje does not change what she is. The point for us in our identity analyses [ . . . ] is a self-evaluation that brings us closer to the truth about ourselves in an affirming way” (175; emphasis mine). But Jean-Luc Nancy argues that we need to resist the urge to turn mestizaje (or race) into “a substance, an object, an identity [ . . . ] that could be grasped and ‘processed’” (123). “Everything,” Nancy goes on to argue,

Everyone—male, female—who alters me, subjects me to mestizaje. This has nothing to do with mixed blood or mixed cultures. Even the process of ‘mix-
ing’ in general, long celebrated by a certain theoretical literary and artistic tradi-
tion—even this kind of ‘mixing’ must remain suspect: it should not be turned
into a new substance, a new identity.

A mestizo is someone who is on the border, on the very border of meaning.
And we are all out there, exposed. As the century ends, our world has become a
tissue, a métissage of ends and fringes of meaning (123).

What Castillo does in *Massacre* is reify “mestizaje,” turning it into a “new substance, a new
identity” that must be recovered and asserted. There are moments, though, in *Massacre*
when she begins to sound a little like Nancy. For example, Castillo writes, “we must
remind ourselves and others that nothing is separate from anything else. Matter and ener-

gy are one in a constant state of flux: this fusion can only be expressed in our work if we
allow ourselves to be open to the endless possibilities of associations [. . .] (170) For there
is one universal aim of poetry, it is the relentless attempt to free human desire: to inspire
the will to live, to rejoice, to let the imagination flourish” (166). She even claims that the
“subversion of all implied truths is necessary in order to understand the milieu of sexist
politics that shape the lives of women” (176–77). While this is precisely what Castillo does
in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and *So Far From God*, in *Massacre* she makes “truth” claims
about Mexic Amerindian identity: “we” have a “sixth sense” (173); “we” are “intimate with
passion”; “Word-play for the Mexican Spanish speaker is contagious, a reflection of our
sense of irony and humor about life” (168).

Castillo ignores Jean-Luc Nancy’s admonition and turns *mestizaje* into an identity
with “several defining features exclusive to all members of that category” (Ashcroft, et al.
77): a “sixth sense,” a concern for Thanatos, a love of word-play, and the desire to treat lan-
guage with the attention of an alchemist.

Castillo’s work does, as Madsen suggests, place “emphasis upon traditional Chicana
cultural practices as an assertion of cultural identity and resistance to assimilation” (99).
Castillo and her characters fight “the forces of assimilation that lead many people with
mixed ethnic and racial heritages (which means, in effect, everyone) to identify as pri-
marily white and who thereby become part of a historical and social momentum that
erases and denies the rich heritage of many people of color living in the United States”
(Martínez 3). But in asserting her “heritage,” Castillo takes refuge in “indigenous blood,”
which, she claims, has been so denigrated that “few of us, especially in the past, have
claimed our lineage” (Castillo, *Massacre* 8); in so doing, though, she lapses into “biologism
in an attempt to pin down identity and, by extension, meaning. And as Norma Alarcon
argues, “to be pinned down by meaning and intentionality, to mean, is to essentialize. The
pursuit of identity as a quest for meaning closes off possibility” (“Conjugating” 131). To
close off possibility is to exclude, and “exclusions are what racist culture is all about”
(Martínez 3; emphasis original). By way of contrast, Anzalduá’s mestiza employs “diver-
gent thinking,” which is “characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and
toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzalduá,
*Borderlands* 101).

Castillo’s fiction, then, enacts the critical theories articulated by Gloria Anzalduá
(mestiza consciousness), Chela Sandoval (differential consciousness), Emma Pérez (the
decolonial imagination), and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (the hybrid). In Castillo’s fiction,
the mestiza is an elusive hybrid—“a cultural, political, aesthetic, and sexual hybrid” that
does not exclude anything (Gómez-Peña, *New World* 11). But while Castillo’s fiction is in
accord with the theories proffered by Anzalduá, Sandoval, Pérez, and Gómez-Peña, her
own theoretical work gets bogged down in an essentialist rhetoric of exclusion. By invoking “indigenous blood” ties in order to establish her heritage, she replaces the notion of identity as performance with “biologism” and reifies mestizaje; that is, she turns mestizaje “into a new substance, a new identity,” which must be discovered (like ancestral bones) and then asserted (Nancy 123). If in Massacre Castillo set out to challenge Western epistemology, grounded as it is in the notion of a centered structure—the “condition of the episteme”—she reproduces that very epistemology by seeking, archaeologically, an originating moment “beyond play” in which to ground her Mexic Amerindian identity (Derrida 279).

At a time when borders are being rapidly dismantled as globalization becomes the order of the day, “identity” (individual and group) is increasingly unmoored as communities and “traditional” affiliations fracture and become diffuse. Centers, as Yeats once said, cannot hold. In reaction to this cultural diffusion, historically marginalized groups mobilize what Sandoval calls “tactic[s] of resistance, one of which is “the separatist form” (Sandoval 57). “This form of political resistance,” Sandoval writes, “is organized [. . .] to protect and nurture the differences that define its practitioners through their complete separation from the dominant social order” (57). Despite the lip service paid to a mestiza consciousness, Castillo in Massacre of the Dreamers invokes this separatist mode of oppositional consciousness, and in this sense, finds common cause with Native American literary separatists like Craig S. Womack, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and Robert Warrior. But in her fiction Castillo opposes the rhetoric of exclusion and posits pace Anzaldua what Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor calls in Earthdivers “a new consciousness of coexistence” (ix)—a new consciousness of coexistence for the future.

Notes
1 Maxine Hong Kingston has become, “according to some accounts, the most widely taught living American author on college campuses” (Palumbo-Liu 395).
3 In my mind, the best introduction to the issue of Native American subjectivity from a postmodern perspective is Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures, ed. Gerald Vizenor (1989). See also Elvira Pultano’s Toward a Native American Critical Theory (2003). For views that run counter to those articulated in Vizenor and Pultano, see Craig S. Womack’s Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism (1999), Devon A. Mihesuah’s Natives and Academics (1998), and Robert Warrior’s Tribal Secrets (1995). Concerning Native American literature, the late Native American scholar and novelist Louis Owens argues that “there is more wrangling over diverse issues (identity, authenticity, essentialism, critical colonization, appropriation, and so forth) in this area of American literature than in any other nook or cranny of contemporary writing” (xv).
4 See particularly David Palumbo-Liu’s Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier (1999), and Elaine H. Kim’s Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context (1982). Most of the scholarship on Maxine Hong Kingston’s work, it is safe to say, deals with the issue of Asian American subjectivity. See, for example, Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston (1998), ed. Laura E. Skandera-Trombley.
5 For an excellent introduction to Chicana/o history, see Rodolfo Acuña’s Occupied America: The Chicano’s Struggle Toward Liberation (1972).
For a short, useful introduction to the work of Ana Castillo, see Deborah L. Madsen’s *Contemporary Chicana Literature* (2000).

While Sandoval’s work is certainly indebted to Anzaldúa, she also draws heavily on Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Her theory of differential consciousness, incidentally, has much in common with what Teresa de Lauretis calls “that doubled vision.” See Chapter One: “The Technology of Gender” in de Lauretis’s *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (1987).

For an informative overview of Gómez-Peña’s work in his own voice, see “Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Borders,” an interview with Coco Fusco, in Fusco’s *English is Broken Here* (1995).

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes, “Culture is never a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures” (217). On the issue of cultural appropriation, see Coco Fusco’s “Who’s Doin’ the Twist? Notes Toward a Politics of Appropriation” in *English is Broken Here* (1995).

Gómez-Peña’s work has much in common with Deleuze and Guattari’s. See, for example, “1227: Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine” in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987).

Here we detect the language of Louis Althusser and his influence on both Saldivar and Sandoval. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser writes, “What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (242).

On this point, Alarcon, in “The Sardonic Powers of the Erotic,” writes, “Ana Castillo’s Letters [. . .] projects a subjectivity, free to express and practice her sexuality, but still imprisoned by an intangible heterosexist ideology, a heterosexist ideology for which we may posit [Octavio] Paz’s view as the model” (9). For Paz’s “model,” see *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1961).


Teresa describes her summer with Alicia as “existential.” She writes, “All this made worse by the general attitude that no one had any objective but to undergo an existential summer of exotic experiences” (18).

On the issue of identity as performed, see “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions” in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). See also Butler’s *Undoing Gender* (2004).

For a concise critique of the notion that truth can be discovered, see “The Contingency of Language” in Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989).

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**Works Cited**


