Deconstructing Patriarchy and Genre in Ana Castillo’s The Mixquiahuala Letters

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Speaking on the experience of Chicano/a artists, Guillermo Gomez Peña of the Border Arts Workshop explains that “we’ve always had postmodern, only ours was involuntary.”¹ In this, Gomez Peña identifies postmodern themes as inherent to the experiences of people who live beside and amidst both physical and cultural borders. In forming their own identities, such people must negotiate multiple (and often conflicting) cultural expectations and definitions of the self. Clashing of these worldviews leads inevitably to postmodern themes: fragmentation, liminality, and deconstruction of accepted boundaries. This becomes visible in Ana Castillo’s epistolary novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, in which the main character, Teresa, uses letters to her lifelong friend Alicia as space to face, analyze, and define her and Alicia’s experiences as women living between cultures. It soon becomes clear that the traditional confines of the epistolary genre do not provide Teresa with enough room to negotiate the complexity of these experiences, and so she steps out of their bounds, blurring the definitions of letter into poetry, dream, and myth, deconstructing and exploring genre just as she deconstructs the hegemonic gender paradigms that attempt to impose themselves on her self-identity. In embracing this deconstruction and fragmentation, Teresa embarks on what Roland Walter defines as a “repositioning of the marginalized subject by means of a counterhegemonic discourse,”² and thus a claiming of her own agency, creativity, and identity – for herself, and for all those who, like her, live in the borderlands.

*The Mixquiahuala Letters* begins in a traditional epistolary form, introducing readers to the main narrative persona, Teresa, and also to the issues of identity that accompany both the

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form and her Chicana background. Although the first letter does not have a traditional “Dear...” opening, its genre is unmistakably labeled (“Letter one”\(^3\)). It is written from a woman to her friend, Alicia, corresponding to literary critic Jonathan Singer's explanation that “Letters…must always be intended for delivery to an identifiable addressee and in this way they differ from both diaries and autobiographies” and create “a textual persona” who is situated “within a textual commerce of object-relations”\(^4\). The first letter already begins to introduce the textual persona of the central figure, Teresa, as she describes her family, plans for her and Alicia to return to Mexico, and announces that she feels as though she is “beginning a new phase in life: adulthood”\(^5\) at the age of thirty. Therefore, within even the first letter, readers find themselves introduced to a woman who believes that “The twenties were a mere continuation of adolescence.”\(^6\) Thus, she associates this past period in her life with adolescence and its insecurity, searching for one’s place in the world, and identity instability. Yet moving from this place into one of more secure identity and confidence also seems as though it is far from simple. As some of her stories convey, Teresa is living in a world of conflicting identities. She is of Mexican heritage but living in Los Angeles: Mexican enough to use the word “gringo”\(^7\) to describe an American food, but yet American, living in the United States, unimpressed by the patriarchal attitudes of her uncles and willing to write about subjects (like seeing her cousin Ignacio nude) that are not traditionally appropriate for a woman in polite correspondence.


\(^5\) Castillo, 21.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.
These tensions reveal the fundamentally relational nature of Teresa’s existence and identity formation process, something which is also fundamental to the letter genre. Writing letters creates a narrative persona but then necessarily situates that figure within a context, and things like writing about sex would not be inappropriate without traditionally-minded people who create a context in which they are not discussed. Life is relational, and as Singer explains, “epistolary identity…depends on the affirmation and response of another, through which the author may recognize a reflected, recuperated image of her- or himself.”8 Primarily, this “other” is Alicia, the woman to whom Teresa writes and around whom a significant portion of the action becomes centered. Teresa uses her as a recipient of information and memories, a subject of reflection, a character in the memories she recounts, and sometimes (it seems) an excuse to just write and work out the complicated issues of her life with someone else. This reflects the co-dependent nature of the relationship between the two women, who when they were together (as Teresa explains) “needled, stabbed, manipulated, cut, and through it all we loved, driven to see the other improved in her own reflection”.9 Writing letters continues this imposition (and frequent tension) of self-understanding upon understanding of the other, and this becomes a central theme for the novel, especially in Teresa’s negotiation of the many cultural contexts in which she finds herself — and in which she cannot help but to find herself — in her world of relationships: with her ethnicity, her culture, her relatives, her lovers, Alicia, and herself.

Yet as Teresa’s narrative persona and complicated relational contexts develop, the letter format begins to seem insufficient for the radical exploration of identity towards which she seems to be moving. Singer explains that “letters foster a persona that is both narrative and serial,

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8 Singer, 2.

9 Castillo, 29.
attesting to a continuous identity that reaches back to earlier letters."¹⁰ Yet Teresa’s identity is not continuous; it is (as she explains) only just emerging from more unstable, adolescent stages of identity development. This inconsistency grows in significance when following more of Singer’s argument, as he cites a Lockean model of identity and explains that “identity is a property of consciousness, and becomes unified throughout time by the property of memory…only inasmuch as it is recognized and assimilated by memory in the present. Letters provide a comparable model of identity that is unified by the gesture of signature, which associates the letter with its writer”.¹¹ Thus identity is formed through the process of understanding and claiming memories, and as the writing of a letter is often a way of claiming or assimilating those memories, the name at the end of a letter becomes representative of the now-asserted identity of the writer, as if the writing process is one of claiming identity and a name is the stamp of success.

With this understanding of identity in letters, Teresa’s writing reveals itself to be far from stability. This is appropriate for a novel whose purpose is to articulate this experience of searching, of being in between different physical and cultural boundaries. First of all, she signs her name at least three different ways (Teresa, Tere, T.) – and often not at all, which clearly does not fulfill Locke’s description of a narrative persona with a consistent identity – and this is intentional, as she adopts a variety of perspectives and voices throughout the course of the work. This draws on the idea that Cristina Beltran explains in her article “Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies, and the Challenge of Mestizaje,” that the “theory of the borderlands… challenges the myth of the autonomous, coherent, and stable subject – a subject who is able to occupy fully

¹⁰ Singer, 2.
¹¹ Ibid.
a single, unproblematic category.”12 In this, Beltran cites Gloria Anzaldúa, a writer whose work addresses the experience of living between different Mexican and American cultures, of never belonging to any one culture in a traditional way, but rather of being “half-breed / caught in the fire between camps….both woman and man, neither….the battleground / where enemies are kin to each other.”13 The borderland experience is one in which there is always tension between the many racial backgrounds of Mexicans, as well as the ethnic tensions between Mexicans and Americans, and of all of the cultural and social conflicts that result thereof.

Living in such a state, Anzaldúa writes that the way to survive is to “be a crossroads,”14 and this is what the novel becomes: a space in which different modes and paradigms for understanding the world are not unified but rather explored and critiqued. As Beltran explains, this is an attempt to “provide a theoretical space, a discursive ‘home,’ for an identity recognized as multiple, fluid, and contradictory.”15 In this line, Teresa’s writing is not intended to be a coherent whole, but rather an exploration of this fragmented experience: “an indignant outcry against the Chicana’s fragmented and alienated existence in a racist, patriarchal order – an outcry that characterizes the narrative style, structure, and theme…”16 Certainly, the confusions of her experience must manifest themselves in her form, as she deals with the “‘psychic restlessness’

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13 Qtd. in Beltran, 595.
14 Ibid.
15 Beltran, 597.
16 Walter, 82.
which characterizes the protagonist’s endeavors to deconstruct [an] imposed identity as man’s Other and create an authentic consciousness.”

This status as “Other” returns directly to the centrality of relationships and provides one more explanation for Teresa’s need to expand genres in her text: letters subject themselves to a certain lack of agency in being sent away, and Teresa is in a search to assert her own agency as well as identity. Singer argues that “While promising the means of stable, reliable self-expression, the dialectical structure of epistolary circulations critically undermines autonomy,” since it risks “self-alienation in the public sphere of discourse.” This is an appropriate process to accompany and exploration of the borderlands, because tensions between different cultures so often arise over misinterpretation of the Other. It is exactly others’ attempts to impose their own definitions on Teresa that threaten her autonomy and complicate her quest for authentic self-definition. Her response is, as Singer predicts, to attempt to “overcome or exploit the unpredictable interpretations wrought by the letter’s public dimension, in order to control self-representation and its interpretation.”

Teresa begins to claim some freedom from expectations by creating a collection of letters without complementing them by their responses. Literary critic Heiner Bus accuses her of writing “monologues disguised as dialogues,” and to a certain extent, the lack of Alicia’s responses, (along with the frequently unconventional nature of Teresa’s correspondent style), demonstrate that Teresa does not feel strictly confined to the conventional demands and

17 Ibid.
18 Singer, 3.
19 Ibid., vii–viii.
20 Heiner Bus, “‘I too was of that small corner of the world’: The Cross-Cultural Experience in Ana Castillo’s The Mixquiahuala Letters (1986),” The Americas Review 21.3-4: 128.
requirements of letters in which “self-expression…hinges on unambiguous, transparent communication.”21 Yet the fact that the question is present, the “unanswerable question of whether letters should be interpreted as social performances or as honest representations of the author’s mind”22 indicates that the epistolary format cannot help but come with certain expectations. There is always a question of whether or not the writer is reliable, but this question disappears to a large extent with the new genre into which she transitions: poetry.

Poetry’s primary function is fundamentally different and more personal than that of a letter, stressing the agency of the speaker. This occurs as early as in letter two, which re-writes some of the basic themes of letter one as a free-verse poem. It is composed mostly of recollections of experiences that she and Alicia shared in Mexico, and although it is still situated within the context of a letter (beginning conventionally with “Dear Alicia”23), its new form creates a subtle shift in function. In her article “Avant-Garde or Borderguard: (Latino) Identity in Poetry,” Maria Damon highlights the “possible role of poetry, that stereotypically ‘private’ and interior genre, in addressing and unraveling the border between private and public cultures.”24 Unlike a letter, generally written for someone else, poetry is more often understood to be personal, (even if it is later shared). This first poem only just begins to prove this idea since it is written specifically for another person – Alicia – on her birthday, but subsequent poems demonstrate the primacy of the poet more fully as many are written without any evident, practical purpose or definite signs of being intended for sending. Instead, these poems create a

21 Singer, vii.
22 Ibid.
23 Castillo, 7.
pause in the information-sharing pace of letters, a textual space to reflect on, represent, and explore issues. Often these issues come from the public sphere, but the poet engages them within her own personal, textual space. Thus the re-presenting of these issues through the resulting poem indeed serves to blur the distinction between “private and public cultures,” as Damon writes. Poems are expected to be subjective and often highly personal, which allows them to provide an often intimate glimpse into the speaker’s experience that might be less likely seen in a letter or some other more public genre. In fact, in speaking of the “poet,” it is important to note that the speaker of poem is not expected (unlike in letters) to be the voice of its creator.

Rather, the poet finds herself with a poetic “space” and liberty from expectations of literal reliability, allowing her to more easily distance herself from a situation and reflect upon it. This occurs as she adopts a variety of tones, attitudes, and thus perspectives from which to understand a situation, none of which are necessarily representative of her true self – even if they seem deceptively similar to her. In fact, it is often the close proximity of Teresa’s poetic voices to her narrative persona that creates a feeling of fragmentation in the text, since they often contradict each other while writing about the same topics. In order to understand these contradictions, it is important to appreciate poetry as a genre that lets its creator, (in this case, an identity-searcher like Teresa), explore different dimensions of both her – and society’s – worldviews.

Such an example of this process occurs in Teresa’s descriptions of Alicia. In letter fourteen, Teresa begins by writing, “Hermana, i wish i could have convinced you how beautiful you are…. You keep your virgin hair long, long, a snake hung by its tail down the narrow ripples of your vertebrae. Putting antiquated values regarding feminine beauty aside, it is lovely…” and then she continues with her detailed praise of Alicia’s features, describing other specific

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25 Castillo, 51.
body parts as though she to prove the first line of the letter. Her language is lyrical and
descriptive, like poetry – and yet it is much more a letter than a poem. It is expressly written for
Alicia, to actually convey knowledge to her with a purpose, a wish that such a description might
have helped Alicia avoid “so much personal agony during that second journey to Mexico.”26 In
contrast, Teresa ends the poem in the previous letter to Alicia with: “…you were flat-chested, not
especially pretty and / bore no resemblance to the ideal of any man…”27 This alternate
assessment of the same thing (Alicia’s physical appearance) is starkly different than that of the
letter, directly contradicting it and possibly raising questions on Teresa’s reliability. She seems to
be “lying” in one the correspondences, until one considers the poet Judith Ortiz Cofer’s claim
that “Every poem is the truth, no matter how much you invent in it.”28

In view of this, it is possible to view these two letters as complimentary, not contradictory,
each a fragment that must be understood in its own context and then in relation to the other. The
poem does not intend to present a literal truth; instead, it addresses the existence of racism and
prejudice by presenting stereotypes about the Other. Teresa begins it by explaining “why i hated
white women,” because “Society had made them above all possessions,” and also because she
thought that they were racist, perpetuating colonial stereotypes into modern-day relationships.29
All of these judgments are over-generalizations and even somewhat arbitrary venting of
frustration against deeper societal problems than skin color, which Teresa concedes when she

26      Ibid.
27      Ibid., 50.
28    Rafael Ocasio, “The Infinite Variety of the Puerto Rican Reality: An Interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer,”
29    Castillo, 49.
writes that “I found / sources to direct my anger…called them white.” Teresa objects to injustice and inequality, which are the root problems (not the arbitrary color of skin). However, the correlation between these problems and skin color is prominent enough for her to just simplify it: oppression equals whiteness. She critiques this attitude somewhat by laying it out in a poem, and when she follows this with the disparagement of Alicia’s looks in the same tone, therefore, she critiques judgmental thought processes (not Alicia’s looks). It is Alicia who thinks that she is not “especially pretty” and judges based on stereotype, just as Teresa does about whiteness. This sheds light on how many forms prejudice can take, even to the point of making someone beautiful believe that she is not. Since Teresa’s letter presents an effective argument that Alicia is, in fact, beautiful, the contrast of the truth of a letter (a more straightforward genre) with the manipulation of the poem makes both more effective in relief. The poem allows Teresa to adopt an alternative perspective that is not necessarily her own, which makes the writing of her poetry different than that of her more straightforward letters. While the latter are more accepted as signifying their literal meaning, Teresa’s poems join words in a way intended to invite her reader to think about how the words mean more than just their denotation. In this case, the poetic voice seems to be mimicking someone like Alicia, enmeshed in societal standards of beauty. Translating these voices into lines of poetry makes their messages more audible and thus able to be analyzed.

Thus to appreciate the subtle differences between genres and their meanings, a reader (or letter recipient) must become keenly aware of the context in which information is presented. On a large scale, this may require her to adopt some distance and also a critical lens in viewing the past. This is what Teresa’s changing and fragmented writing style necessitates, since it refuses to

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30 Castillo, 50.

31 Ibid.
be read complacently as a chronological, conventional narrative. Rather, each perplexing piece must be encountered in its individual complexity, challenging the reader to question the expectations that a lifetime of accepted social paradigms have taught her. This parallels Teresa’s questioning of accepted paradigms, as the way that she should understand her life seems to (in many ways) have been dictated to her by others: by her family, her Mexican heritage, and her lovers – particularly Alexis. Looking back on this late in the novel, she names her response to these dictations; “i was docile,”32 she admits, filling the role of “desirable, soft, uncomplicated, maternal/child, buxom, ever-enduring lap and embrace… clichéd man’s definition of what a woman is and has to be.”33 All of these descriptors define a certain stereotype, and patriarchal society judges women by how well they fit in to one of them. Teresa receives attention from men in Mexico because she passively allows herself to embody some of these stereotypes. However, as she begins to process each of these individual situations through her letters, she becomes aware of and develops a critical lens for the larger constructs and confines in which she was/is trapped.

Writing becomes a tool for Teresa to work herself out of these paradigms. Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, a Chilean poet, critic, and translator explains that a woman writer deals with dominant culture in three ways: acceptance, adaptation, or rejection of “the linguistic, ideological, sociocultural and aesthetic codes which predate her text.”34 From what Teresa explains, it seems that she often operated in “acceptance” mode earlier in life, allowing herself to fall into gender paradigms and fill the woman’s role in patriarchal relationships; however, the novel

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32 Ibid., 119.
33 Ibid.
demonstrates that her tactics have changed. She blurs lines between literary genres (letter and poetry), and then even within genres, as her poetry is far from traditional. Rather, she embraces experimental, contemporary uses of fragmentation, collage and shifting voices.

This is the case in letter twenty-three, in which Teresa writes about the fluidity of gender, the objectification of women, and the related near-violation of Alicia in such an objectifying context. The poem is written in a free-form verse style, which is appropriate for Teresa’s exploration of the borderlands experience, since Damon argues that “…poetic vanguardism happens precisely, or that the conditions for poetic innovation are at a premium, in the interstices of… ‘contact zones.’”35 “Contact zones” refer specifically to the work of Mary Pratt, a woman who writes about the places where different cultures intersect and conflict with each other.36 This idea is very similar to Anzaldúa’s theory of the borderlands, since both suggest that contact zones/borderlands become sites where new cultures and ideas are forged. “Exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms or…with other ways of telling,”37 Damon further explains. Therefore, free verse and even the blurring of lyric and prose within this experimental poem are perhaps the most appropriate media for such a context. Even the very first line of the poem introduces the fact that the poem is a contact zone, as an unknown speaker cries out in three different languages: English, Spanish, and French. “HOT WOMEN! ¡ Caliente !”38 the speaker yells, sounding out cliché advertisements like that of a circus caller trying to lure people into a peep show. Objectification is not restricted

35 Damon, 480.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 478.
38 Castillo, 82.
to any particular culture, it is clear, since the languages of three different cultures are all used in the same way: to point out the attractiveness of women somewhat crudely.

The poem then introduces more tensions by revealing that it is also a narrative of how Teresa and Alicia stumble upon a sort of Miss Universe pageant, and that these “women” contestants are actually transvestites. This revelation opens the poem/prose to issues of gender, as well as inverted patriarchy, as Teresa (or the speaker – it is characteristically unstable) works through this and Alicia’s experience. “La crème de la crème,” the speaker (not necessarily Teresa but based on her) calls out: “the vamp world in competition for the throne / banners across broad shaven chests.”39 Her superlatives vocalize the charged, competitive atmosphere of the event, as though there pervades a general excitement at the superiority of these “women” who compete to see who of them is the ultimate best. Ironically, the speaker portrays this event as patriarchy rather than solidarity with the experience of being female, since the men make the two women feel “dull, lusterless,”40 and then one of them threatens Alicia with violence, anxious to “have [her], chew [her] / up.”41 This form of sexism and violence against women inverts the typical critiques of feminists who want to “be men.” Instead, the men attempt to exert power over women by taking over their roles, allowing themselves to be objectified, and then finishing by threatening them with the more traditional, physical form of violence against women. These final images are those of traditional male domination: that the men want to assert Alicia as a possession and then “chew” her, as though in their destruction of her they receive bodily nourishment. This old patriarchy from a new source seems to be formed in its own contact zone, a place where non-traditional gender paradigms meet power structures of patriarchy. The

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 83.
strength of this new form of patriarchal power discourages the speaker, who says “…there is little in the end I can do. i / have a vagina too.” Yet she challenges this strength in spite of her weaker position within social constructs and saves Alicia from rape, revealing the potential for strength in even a small community of two women.

The poem itself is unstable because it is written like an experimental, free-verse poem, and yet it tells a story like a letter. However, the content of the story would already be (like most of the novel) known to the recipient, and so the purpose seems more clearly poetic than epistolary. By juxtaposing the transvestites with the story of Alicia’s various attackers, both at the pageant bar and at the university, the speaker moves past mere narrative to larger themes of patriarchy and gender. Damon identifies this as central to poetry, since she argues that poets do not:

simply talk about their experiences, but that they create experience and subjectivity in the process of meaning-making, of poiesis…[and] for certain kinds of subjects (specifically…Chicano) who have not been conventionally honored as such because of their subordinated social locations, poetic-subjective language can and often does provide a sort of laboratory for experimentation for new forms, new consciousnesses, new communities…[that] carry with them the traces and influences of many dissident or socially subordinated traditions as well as evolving new ones.

This description speaks directly to this particular poem, since even this short poem works in a new form, (a blending of experimental poetry, different languages, and narrative); is proof of a new consciousness for the speaker; and presents a new alternative community (transvestites) as well as drawing her more closely in community with Alicia. The new consciousness comes with

42 Ibid., 84.
43 Damon, 479.
her recognition of sexism everywhere, even in men who act and dress like women. This implies the fact that change in gender paradigms must be more radical, since patriarchy seems to continue to propagate itself, even in extremely modern, “dissident” cultural movements such as this one. In highlighting this reality through the telling of the poem, the speaker asserts her ability to protest.

In fact, chronicling this experience and rebellion through language becomes the major way for Teresa to critique patriarchal hegemonies. Speaking about this and other experiences in Mexico, Teresa rationalizes that “in the end, it all had to have meant something, that, if we were able to analyze, it would be pertinent, not just to benefit our lives, but womanhood…i nodded, alert… ‘i’m writing about it,’ i confessed…”44 Thus through writing about such a situation, Teresa exposes its actors and truths (such as the changing but continuing prevalence of patriarchy) to critique. She even calls out the learned sexism of women by presenting the saved Alicia “with blank eyes…led by the hand,”45 possibly resenting her savior for denying her attention (even violent attention) from males. Such a stark and disturbing portrayal highlights Alicia’s total vulnerability, as the men’s’ violence dazes her into passivity and even extends into her own psyche, directing her blame towards the last person who should deserve it. Yet in presenting this vulnerability, Teresa begins to somewhat reclaim some of the power in the situation, or at least she begins to reassert her agency through her ability to recognize and critique the paradigms of power that work to keep her subdued.

In writing these realities, “Teresa moves from silence into speech, from invisibility into visibility: an act of cultural revision intent on transforming the ‘abismo,’ this unhomely liminal

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44 Castillo, 53.

45 Ibid., 85.
space, into a home.” 46 Thus even if her experiences are uncomfortable and unresolved, this writing itself becomes a way of creating a space in which she can acknowledge and analyze them. This new textual “home” is, as Damon explains, not empty, but rather filled with other “dissident or socially subordinated traditions” 47 to be confronted.

For Teresa, these traditions frequently relate back to her Mexican heritage, linking back even to myths of creation that she rewrites and contextualizes in order to explore its true meaning for her life. This particular search takes place within a related dream, which she explains in letter twenty-seven. She dreams that she is in Mexico where she is one of the people “of that mixed blood” and where she “walk[s] through the streets with a sensation of pride and belonging. More than this: there was the constant conviction that it would/could not be taken, at least not while i stood and breathed the fine mountain air and the rich harvest below.” 48 This feeling of security in belonging somewhere, of being among one’s people, follows and relates to a creation story in which God molds clay three different times to form humans, discarding models that are too dark or light and finally settling on the one who is “brown, firm, and strong.” 49 This telling of myth creates another shift in the narrative, since it is a genre used to explain the transcendent and intangible in human terms. Myths (such as this one) tend towards ethnocentrism, and yet Teresa presents this more positively than negatively, not commenting upon how black and white people are discounted in the story. Her tone is unapologetic and even proud of her connection to such a strong heritage. Yet this becomes (predictably) complicated in the next lines when her mother – a figure who often represents home and belonging – cannot be found. Thus although Teresa

46 Walter, 84.
47 Damon, 479.
48 Castillo, 102.
49 Ibid.
certainly has a connection to her heritage, it is complicated and she identifies personally more
with the larger, more anonymous culture of her past rather than with the modern-day
embodiments of that culture in her family members.

The dream-telling genre is appropriate for such implications, especially since it tends
towards instability while nevertheless inviting interpretation. Dreams can sometimes create
illusions of the agency of the dreamer, but this feeling generally disappears in waking when the
person realizes that it was only a dream. Instead, the real control of the dreamer lies in the
manner of interpreting it, trying to understand one’s subconscious, and perhaps (as in this case)
in presenting it in a very specific way to others. This particular dream is no exception to the
latter. It involves the impending doom of a small Mexican town, before which Teresa feels
needed to teach sexual love to turn an adolescent into a man. She recounts:

i met an adolescent who sat on the curb. He had been waiting for me. Although he
recognized me, i only knew that he was needed…At once i was his mother,
comrade, friend, first love…i couldn’t allow him to cower; there was so little
time. He was to know manhood in its entirety in the next hour, witness the
macabre of odious death and yet hadn’t known the splendor of love and life even
once.\footnote{Ibid.}

This dream-story contains multiple layers of meaning, revealing elements of both conscious and
subconscious in its teller. It takes place within Mexico, a context of more traditional gender
paradigms than Teresa is comfortable with. Thus in this story, it seems to be the men who are
fighting the battles that will decide the future destruction or viability of life for all people in the
town. Teresa seems to be an unquestioning part of this dream landscape, which can partially be
attributed to the fact that it is a dream – a situation with less agency than real life – and yet it also
is arguably a reflection of the fact that part of her is still subconsciously under the influence of these traditional gender assumptions. In fact, even within them, she is able to assert the dignity of a specifically feminine role. The men might have the control in this situation, but this role of manhood is linked to death and destruction and horror. A woman is needed to bring life and love to the situation, to redeem death with the creative capacity of life. By writing this story directly after the creation myth, Teresa presents an alternative, empowering understanding of women’s capability to nurture and create. This fits with Carol E. Klein’s description of “new, emancipatory feminist writing, [in which] the feminist poet reads the patriarchal text and appropriates it.” It provides an alternative to the patriarchal representations of Creator God as an old man shaping clay, as well as to the heroic stories of men going off to battle to decide the fate of civilizations.

Yet this counter-narrative to the creation story is critiqued and complicated by violence in her dream, as her attempt to share the beauty of humanity are rejected and instead turned towards violence. This occurs when “intellectuals” interrupt her and the adolescent, critiquing her even though the action is portrayed as appropriate for the eyes of an innocent child on the street with them. In the dream, Teresa scorns these intellectuals who are caught up in “words and ideologies…fools” and cannot appreciate the physical nature of humanity that she, as a mature woman, tries to share. This appears to be different than merely reproductive value; rather, she is teaching him about “the splendor of love and life.” Yet this is rejected by the intellectuals and made further impossible by impending war, forcing Teresa to replace her lover with a gun that

51       Klein, 80.
52       Castillo, 103.
53       Ibid., 102.
54       Ibid., 102.
she explains “fit into my hand like a faithful lover.”55 Thus the dream transitions from human love to violence and Teresa’s relationship with a gun, an object often associated with machismo. Further, this change accompanies the end of her culture. These events seem to critique the loss of appreciation for human interactions without power struggles, violence, or loss of innocence – and particularly the contributions of women to such human interactions. When the world loses respect for these things, macho violence becomes the most viable alternative (which becomes the case in reality when Teresa rescues Alicia from rape). Therefore, even when Teresa wields power through a gun, this power comes from the patriarchal system in which she finds herself.

The dream-source of these implications is fundamentally fragmentary, however, fitting perfectly into the overall mosaic format of the novel. Each letter – and even different parts within different letters – seem to be constructed of its own unique material, shaped by its own unique context, mirroring the many different identities that come together to make up Teresa. Even she describes herself as broken (specifically when Alexis removes his dominating support from her), and thus she “begins the methodic process of gathering the pieces of that woman, like the jagged pieces of a broken china vase, and glues them together, patiently, as neatly as she is able.”56 As this image so aptly suggests, facing this fragmentation seems painful but empowering, enabling her to look at herself almost objectively, try to understand herself, and then decide how she wants to form herself into a new creation. This work in fragments contradicts traditional conceptions of a coherent, contained person, and yet it presents a more realistic viewpoint of the modern person in the world. The poet Ann Lauterbach explains that “There are only fragments. The world is far bigger and more complex than any picture or whole we mere mortals can come

55 Ibid., 103.
56 Ibid., 118.
up with.” In fact, assuming a comprehensive, overarching understanding of the world would be a fallacy, as each person is inevitably limited by his or her context. This becomes increasingly clear throughout the course of the novel, since despite all of her efforts, Teresa seems to always be surrounded by patriarchal contexts.

Her power, therefore, is not necessarily in escaping these contexts, but rather in naming them and renegotiating her relationship to their inevitable existence. This is done powerfully in her “textual revenge” against Alexis when she writes a poem from his perspective. Writing, as before described, has the potential to subtly shift power dynamics, asserting the agency of the one who writes. This is because, as Damon explains: “Poetry enacts, sometimes in the space of a single word, how power relations are negotiated in and through language.” In this particular poem, the speaker of the poem (made to be Alexis) sees Teresa in a nightclub and finds her beautiful and desirable, and yet he is with a different woman, someone who is as docile as Teresa used to be when Alexis describes her as:

of innocent yearning without question. You trembling with fear of my will. You whom I kept from your husband home family friends and made you only mine

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57 Daniel Kane, *What is Poetry: Conversations with the American Avant-Garde* (New York: Teachers and Writers, 2003), 111.

58 Yarbrio-Bejarano, 68.

59 Damon, 480.
a stuffed souvenir on the mantle.\textsuperscript{60}

This dominating, victimizing image is addressed directly to Teresa, marking a transition from third person to direct address within the poem. He stereotypes her as a traditional, submissive woman, uneducated about sex, reliant upon the man to lead her and anxious to please him. She is a possession for him to control and isolate from any sources of nurture aside from himself – even from her own husband. He considers himself a sort of conqueror, or hunter, and she is his prize catch. Initially, this seems clearly like a poem that confirms his domination over her, and he finishes with his assertion that “I will always have your love wrapped / in a winter night’s desire when you belonged / to another man.”\textsuperscript{61} He claims his ownership of her in typical, objectifying language, identifying her as a possession to be passed from man to man. Yet a deeper look at this passage reveals that it challenges, rather than asserts, Alexis’ dominance. Before their breakup, it seems that Teresa had submitted completely to Alexis, not understanding herself to be in a state of oppression, and thus the writing of this poem marks an advent in her understanding of his patriarchal attitude. Her poem exposes it, thus rejecting the domination and giving her the last word. As a writer, this is a significant move toward freedom from objectification, exactly what Walter calls the “\textit{repositioning} of the marginalized subject by means of a counterhegemonic discourse.”\textsuperscript{62} This action may not erase her previous state of domination, but it shows her awareness (and rejection) of it, which are both necessary as she now defines for herself the context in which she wants to assemble all of the various fragments of her past and self.

The centrality of language and perspective in poetry allows her to do this, and yet the fact that she is still writing a letter also creates implications for the larger community ramifications of

\textsuperscript{60} Castillo, 122.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 123.

\textsuperscript{62} Walter, 83.
her writing. Alicia, too, is caught in patriarchal paradigms, and thus in sharing her reclamation of agency, Teresa encourages Alicia to do the same. Power comes with collectivity, and this newfound power of minority women “must counter an oppression that [Castillo] sees as far-reaching, ranging from the economic power which afflicts women of color to the indifference of Anglo feminists who discount their voice.”\(^6^3\) Thus, as Castillo explains, the lowercase “i” that she uses throughout the book has particular significance and implications for a wider audience. She writes: “…in the \textit{The Mixquiahuala Letters}, I used the lowercase “i” throughout because I feel – and I may be wrong about this – I feel that I am talking about a lot of people. So I also wrote in things that I had heard from other people.”\(^6^4\) This relates to a more modern concept of the function of poetry, because although it begins as personal, it concludes with implications for a wider community, like letters. In Laura Riding Jackson’s “What is a Poem?” she explains that “in the old romanticism…all interest centred in this mysterious capacity of the poet for overfeeling, for being overaffected. In Poe the old romanticism ended…the interest was broadened to include the reader: the end of the poem was pushed ahead a stage, from the poet to the reader…”\(^6^5\)

Thus Ana Castillo’s epistolary novel \textit{The Mixquiahuala Letters} becomes like a collection of letters to all oppressed women of the world, attempting to liberate them from the confines of patriarchal gender paradigms through their deconstruction. As the novel blurs and blends a wide range of literary genres, it identifies and “reflects the difficulties involved in this search for

\(^{6^3}\) McKenna, 32.


meaning, its fragmentary character, its diversity and subjectivity.\textsuperscript{66} Teresa’s own personal “search for meaning” centers around her attempt to define her identity through the presentation, analysis, and reclamation of both personal and communal experiences and memories that fill and spill out of the traditional confines of the letter genre. Her deconstruction of this (and other) genres mirrors her deconstruction and analysis of the other categories that attempt to impose their definitions in her life, and this becomes an offering to all women in similar positions. The novel becomes the chronicle of a woman and all women who find themselves besieged by conflicting cultural and social expectations and who respond by rejecting the narrow confines that existing paradigms offer, instead creating their own spaces in which to decide and articulate who they are and who they want to be.

\textsuperscript{66} Bus, 129.
References


