

TO SAY WHAT IS NOT BEING SAID: THE RADICAL LITERARY
STRATEGIES AND SEXUAL POLITICS
OF ANA CASTILLO'S SAPOGONIA

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

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Romance Languages
and the Honors College of the University of Oregon
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

July 1993

APPROVED:

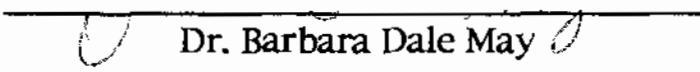
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An Abstract of the Thesis of

Lisa René Albrich for the degree Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Romance Languages to be taken July 1993

Title: TO SAY WHAT IS NOT BEING SAID: THE RADICAL
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In her second novel, Sapogonia, Ana Castillo challenges and confronts the canon by dismantling and defying the dominant ideologies of Western androcentric literature. Using Castillo's first novel, The Mixquiahuala Letters, as the framework within which to read Sapogonia, we discover that Castillo's experimentation with different genres, narrative voice, and intertextuality allows her to mock and to subvert male-authored texts. Castillo's literary strategies also facilitate her critique of the mestizo who denies his indigenous American ancestry. Finally, Sapogonia is a critique of the discourses and ideologies of patriarchal authority that have been used to oppress women. Despite the fact that Castillo's literary strategies and sexual politics establish her novel as feminist

literature, Castillo refuses to romanticize the position of women in Sapogonia. Committed to telling the truth, Castillo presents a disturbingly realistic vision of society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my most sincere appreciation to the members of my thesis committee, Barbara Dale May, Barbara Corrado Pope, and Dianne Dugaw. I especially wish to express my gratitude to Barbara May for her inspirational imitations of Wynonna. I also wish to thank my family for holding my hand through the thesis process. My deepest thanks go to my mom who made the journey for my defense and who made sure that I never ran out of M-n-M's. I am also greatly appreciative of the words of wisdom shared by my soul sister, Holly, who always knows when to remind me that "this, too, shall pass." Many thanks also go to Jenny and Patti, the frisbee golf support team, and to Heidi, my telephone accomplice, for providing me with nourishment and for listening to the trials and tribulations of my thesis. And, finally, hats off to the Dairy Queen! Trips to the DQ got me through the thesis experience on more than one occasion.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Finding a voice, searching for words and sentences: say some thing, one thing or no thing; tie/untie, read/unread, discard their forms; scrutinize the grammatical habits of your writing and decide for yourself whether they free or repress. Again order(s). Shake syntax, smash the myths, and if you lose, slide on, *unearth* some new linguistic paths. Do you surprise? Do you shock? Do you have a choice?

--Trinh T. Minh-ha,
Woman, Native, Other¹

There are few, if any, women students of Western literature who would dispute Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's assertion that "Western literary history *is* overwhelming male--or, more accurately, patriarchal" (47). For those of us who study women's literature, we know that women have been writing just as long as men have. We are aware, however, that women's literature has been neither valued nor esteemed in the same manner as has the literature of the canon. Fortunately, this patriarchal monopolization of the literary world has not gone by unnoticed by women writers.

Chicana poet, essayist, and novelist Ana Castillo is one such woman writer who is more than willing to confront the canon face-to-face, challenging its traditions and exposing its hypocrisies. This is

¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native Other: Writing, Postcoloniality, and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 20.

precisely what she does in her second novel, Sapogonia. Although Sapogonia may at first appear to be an echo of other male-authored texts in which the male character agonizes over his own personal experiences, Castillo's novel subverts and mocks the Western literary tradition, in particular, the heroic narrative. In Castillo's hands, the valiant hero who sets out to save the world from destruction is transformed into an obsessively self-absorbed anti-hero who destroys those persons around him as well as himself.

Not only is Sapogonia a critique of the canon, but it is also a critique of patriarchal society. Despite the obvious feminist themes presented in such a novel, it is imperative to recognize Castillo's refusal to romanticize the position of women in Sapogonia or to present a utopic, "woman-friendly" society. Using Castillo's first novel, The Mixquiahuala Letters, as the framework within which to read her second novel, I will show how Sapogonia is an *uncomfortably realistic reminder of this world in which women are not meant to survive, nor for that matter, to exist.* In Sapogonia women and men are subject to different standards, men terrorize and dominate women's bodies, and women's relationships with other women are subordinate to their relationships with men. As we will see soon enough, no woman lives "happily ever after" in Sapogonia.

Castillo's novel is by no means easy to read. She plays games with narrative voice, she defies the boundaries of genres, and she presents to us a harsh depiction of society. Perhaps what is the most difficult to accept, though, is that Castillo is telling us the truth.

CHAPTER II

NOT EVEN A KISS WILL HELP THIS TOAD:

CONFRONTATIONS WITH THE CANON

Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle you voice. Put your shit on the paper.

--Gloria Anzaldúa,
"Speaking in Tongues"²

Equally as important as the analysis of the meaning of the text is the examination of what the text *does*. Certainly Castillo develops many different themes, images, and symbols in Sapogonia, but it is her revolutionary exploration of genres, narrative voice, and intertextuality that deserves our most careful attention. Because of her literary ventures, Castillo successfully dismantles the tradition of Western patriarchal literature, and by doing so, creates new spaces for herself and other women writers in the literary world. In order to understand clearly how Castillo accomplishes her critique of the

² Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Woman Writers," This Bridge Called My Back, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table-Women of Color Press, 1981) 165-173.

canon in Sapogonia, however, it is essential that we closely examine her experimentations in her first novel, The Mixquiahuala Letters.

Published in 1986, The Mixquiahuala Letters details the relationship between Teresa, a writer, and Alicia, an artist. Before the reader can even start to read the first letter, though, she notices that Castillo provides three different sequences in which to read the book. Acknowledging the "author's duty" (i) to warn her reader that this book should not simply be read from cover to cover, Castillo supplies her audience with three unconventional reading options: one for the Conformist, one for the Cynic, and one for the Quixotic. Castillo even accommodates those readers who are "committed to nothing but short fiction" (iii) by suggesting that they read the individual letters as separate entities. Referring to her insistence upon the reader becoming an active participant in the text, Castillo explains, "I never carry you through beginning, developing the plot, and end. Because I don't think that life is that way. You have a million variations and exits, like on the freeway where you can keep making choices or re-doing them" (Mitchell 154). Regardless of the method that the reader may choose, Castillo makes the reading process more dynamic and interactive by forcing the reader to choose for herself her own individualized reading of the book.

Castillo's selection of the epistolary novel as the form for The Mixquiahuala Letters also links the author with a long tradition of women writers. Although the epistolary novel's roots can be traced back to its sacred origins in Christian biblical texts and has been used by various male writers, such as Samuel Richardson's novel Pamela in which the narrator is a woman (Buck 523), letter writing itself has

traditionally offered women a literary outlet and a way to communicate with other women. Marquise Marie de Rabutin-Chantal Sévigné (1626-1696) and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1720-1800) are just two examples of celebrated letter-writers. In addition, numerous women writers have successfully established themselves in the literary world with epistolary novels, such as Mary Shelley with Frankenstein (1818) and Alice Walker with The Color Purple (1982). Castillo is no exception. She chooses this genre not only because it facilitates dialogue between Teresa and Alicia, but because it allows an exploration of self through writing.

In her letters to Alicia that are "passion bound by uterine comprehension" (24), Teresa's writing provides her with an opportunity to communicate and to re-evaluate her own beliefs not only with Alicia, but with herself. According to Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, letter writing allows Teresa "as a writing subject [to seek] self-understanding through the sifting and reconstructing of experiences" (Yarbrow-Bejarano 68). For example, in letter three, Teresa asserts her independence and resistance to a male-dominated society when she states, "It was apparent I [sic] was no longer prepared to face mundane life of need and resentment, accept monogamous commitments and honor patriarchal traditions" (28). Teresa later acknowledges her own contradictions, however, when she calls herself "the deserter, giving up Women's Quest for Freedom and Self Determination" (37) when she decides to return home to her husband. Because letter writing grants the writer freedom of expression, Teresa's actions do not always have to coincide with her

beliefs. In her letters, the only person who can question and criticize Teresa is Teresa herself.

Another significant characteristic of the epistolary novel is that one point of view does not dominate the text, but rather a multiplicity of voices fills the pages. Although Teresa writes each letter, which may be purely prosaic or a combination of both prose and poetry, not all letters are written from the first person point of view. When the first person point of view does not adequately allow Teresa to express and to deal fully with her emotions, she often switches to the third person point of view. Such is the case in letter thirty-two when Teresa's relationship with Alexis collapses. The shift to third person point of view protects Teresa by allowing her to be an observer of her own life. Teresa is able to distance herself from the woman who "frames a drawing she made once when he had stayed out all night. It is of a woman whose eyes bulge comically and whose hair is aflame" (119). Interestingly enough, this shift in narrative voice opens up the possibility of what Yarbrow-Bejarano terms "textual revenge" (68). Even though Teresa gives voice to Alexis by including one of his poems in letter thirty-three, she nonetheless retains control as narrator. Immediately preceding his poem is Teresa's description of her regal entrance into a nightclub, on the arm of another man. Teresa savors her revenge when she admits to Alicia that "the look on his face when he turned to give the light I'd [sic] asked for was well worth its weight in silver pesetas" (121); ultimately, Teresa gets the last word. In the end, Alexis may have the opportunity to express his side of the story, but it is Teresa who reproduces, and controls, his words.

Similar to the ways in which she experiments and plays with the genre of the epistolary novel in The Mixquiahuala Letters, Castillo revises, and mocks, another genre in Sapogonia. Not unlike her earlier novel in which she incites her reader to be an active participant in the text from the very beginning of the novel, Castillo arouses reader response on the title page of Sapogonia. After the title of the book reads the following subtitle: (An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter). Before we have the opportunity to begin reading the book, Castillo has deconstructed our concept of the romantic narrative by sardonically advising us that her novel will not comply with the conventions of the romance novel of the Western literary tradition. She further elucidates the intentions of her book with a musical reference. Twice as fast as the 3/4 meter of a waltz and much more brisk than a marching rhythm, 3/8 meter serves as an additional clue that Sapogonia is a parodic novel. Finally, in a statement slightly reminiscent of A Room of One's Own when Virginia Woolf forewarns her audience that "Lies will flow from [her] lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping" (4), Castillo encourages her readers to disregard the differences between what is real and what is unreal. On the page following the title page, Castillo states, "This is the story of make-believe people in a real world; or if you like, the story of real people in a make-believe world" (3). In effect, Castillo tells her readers to leave any preconceived ideas of literature at the door.

Castillo further challenges her readers' expectations of the heroic narrative when she presents the definition of an anti-hero

according to the principal female character of the novel, Pastora Velásquez Aké. Not only is the anti-hero any man who excessively flaunts his personal exploits and achievements, but he is also "The principal male character in a novel, poem, or dramatic work" (4). The parodic intentions of Pastora's definition are evident: this definition implicates almost all male characters in Western literature. Thus, in just the first few pages of the book, Castillo has already begun to undermine patriarchal literature.

In addition to this preliminary foundation that Pastora provides us with her definition of an anti-hero, the prologue supplies us with a further framework within which to read the novel. Although Sapogonia is defined as "a distinct place in the Americas where all mestizos reside, regardless of nationality, individual racial composition, or legal residential status--or, perhaps, because of all of these" (5), our reading of the book suggests that Sapogonia may not be a distinct geographical place, but rather a space. More specifically, Sapogonia is any town, city, state, or country inhabited by mestizos. Though the description of Sapogonia is inclusive of both men and women, the narrator of the prologue pays particular attention to the male, the Sapogón.

Much of the narrator's biting description of the Sapogón stems from the fact that he has succumbed to cultural pressures to assimilate with the white culture of the United States. The Sapogón's first error is to elevate Europe's intellectual contributions to the world by disregarding and discrediting his culture's agricultural developments that, "owing to sheer human imagination, are used for the sole purpose of altering daily reality" (5). The Sapogón also

attempts to raise himself above his own people by attaining fluency in both French and English, along with his efforts to "fake an entire Latin-European background or Mediterranean autobiography. Any acknowledgment of indigenous American ancestry causes him almost immediately to be relegated to the world of Sapogonia" (6); thus, the Sapogón seeks validation by emphasizing his European ancestry over his indigenous American ancestry.

It is worthwhile noting that Castillo's choice of the word Sapogón is not coincidental. Interestingly enough, in Spanish "sapo" means toad, or more figuratively, a repulsively disgusting person. Knowledge of this definition contributes a comedic element to the novel, such as when we hear the anti-hero describe how he ran over the amphibious creatures in his homeland and they just "croaked a pious sound and never knew what plastered their glowing bodies to the asphalt as the tires of [his] vehicle ran over them, giving off a series of popping sounds" (220). Additionally, the "-on" suffix connotes a derogatory or pejorative term, as in *cabezón* (pigheaded, stubborn), *gordiflón* (fat, tubby), and *pobretón* (wretch). As we will soon see, Sapogón is the perfect term to describe Máximo Madrigal, the anti-hero of Sapogonia.

Despite the multiplicity of characters in Sapogonia, we are exposed primarily to the thoughts and experiences of Máximo. This exposure to Máximo's exploits and obsessively abusive relationships creates numerous problems for the reader, however, especially for the female reader who finds herself in the too familiar situation of reading yet another book from the male point of view. Chances are that there are few women readers who identify with Máximo's belief

that women are made "to make men ready each day to go on. They made him into a demigod so that when he got an erection, he thought he fucked the world" (296). Unlike the male reader of the androcentric text who is able to validate himself through his identification with the male character, it is more than likely that the female reader of this text written by and about a man will find no positive female character to identify with. Instead, the female reader is not only forced to identify with the man, but she must see herself as a man:

Androcentric literature is all the more efficient as an instrument of sexual politics because it does not allow the female reader to seek refuge in her difference. Instead, it draws her into a process that uses her against herself. It solicits her complicity in the elevation of male difference into universality and, accordingly, the denigration of female difference in to otherness without reciprocity. To be sure, misogyny is abundant in the literary canon (Schweickart 42).

While it may first appear that Castillo's decision to present the male point of view represents her collusion with the patriarchal literary tradition, this is not the case. In fact, it is Castillo's election to use the male point of view that facilitates her subversion of the androcentric text.

Every one of Máximo's descriptions of Pastora is biased. Much to the dismay of the female reader, most of the selective third person views of Pastora are also subject to the influence of a male narrator, as is evident when we read that "Máximo was under the impression that Pastora was his sexual counterpart in every sense, that she was as much a manizer, a Jezebel of a thousand lovers, as he was the

Cortés of every vagina he crossed" (124). In spite of the fact that these different angles of vision make it difficult for female readers to identify with Máximo, and equally troublesome to identify with Pastora because we are presented both a subjective and limited portrayal of her, these two points of view successfully enable Castillo to present Máximo as an unreliable narrator. Because the changes between first and third person point of view are frequent, and sudden, we must discount most of what Máximo says. If we cannot focus on the narrator, how can we focus on, and trust, what is being said? Fortunately, Castillo rewards her tolerant female readers in chapter thirty-eight, the only chapter in Sapogonia to be written in the second person point of view. It is in this chapter, and in this chapter alone, that we get any real sense of who Pastora is. Not surprisingly, everything that Máximo says about Pastora is dispelled in this chapter.

Thus far, we have seen how Castillo has begun to subvert the Western literary tradition by defying pre-existing genres and by mocking the male hero with her creation of a toadish *anti-hero* in Sapogonia. This revolutionary subversion is not limited to Sapogonia, though. By returning to our examination of The Mixquiahuala Letters we find that Castillo is already at work disrupting Western literature with her development of the female hero. Unlike the male hero who represents and exemplifies society's ideals of individuality and independence, particularly through his adherence to a code of honor, the female hero does not set out to conquer, nor is she motivated by desires of self-aggrandizement. Instead, the female hero respects what Marilyn Farwell calls a "code of care and

responsibility" (30-31). Teresa, Alicia's "self-appointed guardian" (84), typifies these characteristics of the female hero by first saving Alicia from being raped at gun point, and again by rescuing her friend from an attempted gang rape. Despite the fact that Teresa acknowledges her own vulnerability by recognizing, in her words, "there is little in the end i [sic] can do. i [sic] have a vagina too" (84), Teresa takes action and protects Alicia from sexual violence.

Castillo further revamps the heroic narrative by deconstructing the hero's journey, or rather, his "solitary quest" (Farwell 30). Differing from the male hero's journey in which the end goal is ennoblement, Teresa's journey to Mexico does not revolve around a struggle or conflict, but instead around a reunion with her cultural heritage. From the viewpoint of the female hero, Teresa sees Mexico as the "home of [her] mother, grandmothers, and greatmother, as an embracing bosom, to welcome [her] back and rock [her] weary body and mind to sleep in its tumultuous, over populated, throbbing, ever pulsating heart" (98). Unfortunately, however, Teresa's encounter with Mexican culture is not as idyllic as she has planned. In an uncovering of the gender politics of the hero's journey to his homeland, Castillo refutes the assertion that the Chicano who returns to the past in search of a lost paradise will ascertain a feeling of complete identity (Rodríguez 205). For Teresa, Mexico is far from being paradise. As a fiercely independent Chicana from the Midwest traveling through Mexico with another woman, Teresa quickly discovers that "in the ancient land where villages still remained unchanged since the sixteenth century, two foreign women with more book knowledge than the average local official...stood, little

chance of gaining favorable odds" (92). Whereas these villages welcome home the male hero, their archaic and oppressive views of women create an atmosphere that does not accommodate the female hero; Teresa's search for cultural identity in her homeland proves to be unsuccessful. Through this exposure of the hypocrisies of the heroic narrative, Castillo once again undermines the Western literary tradition.

Though Castillo does not continue to develop the female hero in Sapogonia that she creates in The Mixquiahuala Letters, she does proceed with her critique of the male hero, a critique that she began in an earlier poem entitled "The Anti-Hero" in Women are Not Roses. Similar to the anti-hero in the poem who "always gets the woman / not in the end / an anticlimax instead / in the end / spits on her body" (24), Máximo manipulates Pastora in order to satisfy his own desires. When the third person narrator informs us that Máximo and Pastora's "interludes were rare and only for sex, a suspension of obsession for the other linked each occasion with uneven measurements of time" (109), we must remember that this interpretation of their relationship is from the male point of view. We never actually know Pastora's opinion of their relationship. As far as we can tell, based on the male point of view, their relationship is one in which Máximo completely disregards his partner's desire and makes his own primary. Not unlike his predecessor in the poem, Máximo believes "in the end the key is / to leave her yearning lest / she discover that is all" (24).

Exemplifying the characteristics of the Sapogón presented in the prologue, Máximo lives up to his role as the anti-hero with his

staunch denial of his indigenous American ancestry. Whether he chooses to speak French and English instead of his native Spanish, or dresses himself in clothing that the average person from Sapogonia would not wear, Máximo consistently preoccupies himself with authenticating a European appearance. Even when he returns home to Sapogonia to visit his parents and grandparents, Máximo exhibits no interest in the civil war that plagues his homeland with dangerously unstable social and economic conditions. As far as Máximo is concerned, "Life was to be enjoyed...He couldn't waste it in a shit-colored uniform, licking the boots of a lice-headed officer or acting as a water-boy for an egotistical self-anointed savior of the people" (101). In the end, Máximo always prioritizes himself over other persons.

Finally, in our examination of Castillo's confrontation with the canon, we must examine the implications of Castillo's usage of intertextuality in both The Mixquiahuala Letter and Sapogonia. A term coined by Julia Kristeva in her 1966 essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel," Intertextuality is one text's reference to and discourse with (an)other text(s), explicit or implicit (34-61). In addition to the obvious discourse with her own texts, such as Sapogonia having its roots in the poem "The Anti-Hero," as well as Teresa and Alicia from The Mixquiahuala Letters making a cameo appearance in chapter twenty-six of Sapogonia, Castillo makes numerous, conscious references to male works in her novels. For example, not only does she refer to Cervantes' Don Quixote when a man calls Alicia by the name of Don Quixote's beloved, Dulcinea, but Castillo also dedicates her novel to Argentine author, Julio Cortázar, "master of the game,"

well-known for his novel Rayuela in which he uses the convention of the hopscotch game in order to offer his readers various reading patterns. In Sapogonla, Castillo multiplies her references to male texts with her mentionings of Cervantes, García-Lorca, Shakespeare, Wagner, Dostoyevsky, Puccini, and Da Vinci. According to Castillo, these references represent her efforts to dispel the faulty Anglo assumption that "most Chicano writers and Chicanos were from rural backgrounds and that they sort of just erupted as writers at some point" (Mitchell 152). We now have to wonder, however, whether Castillo's usage of intertextuality establishes her as an educated reader and writer, or whether it represents her collusion with the tradition that she tries to subvert.

We can begin to answer this difficult question by examining Teresa's labeling of Mexico as Babylonia in The Mixquiahuala Letters. After warding off several attempted sexual assaults and confrontations with men who equate Teresa's independence and liberalness with promiscuity, Teresa wants "only to be rid of Babylonia with its vestiges of doom with every encounter" (91). Along with other women of color writers who discard and defy the gender and genre limitations of Western literature, specifically the Bible and other mythical texts that have been used to oppress women (Ordóñez 19), Castillo's association of the corrupt Babylonia and its excessive luxuries with the sexual discrimination and violence of inhospitable Mexico functions to critique the patriarchal authority of the Bible. Curiously, however, Teresa intersperses lines from the "Lord's Prayer" in letter twenty-four, the letter in which she recounts the evening when Teresa saves herself and Alicia from a phantom

that has entered their room. Despite her progressive politics and adamant resistance to the fathers of the Church, Teresa, who grew up with Catholic indoctrination, is able to save herself through her beliefs. Rather than surrendering to the ghost, Teresa draws upon her faith, particularly upon the belief that good prevails over evil, in order to fight successfully against a force that appears to be more powerful than she. Castillo, in light of her acute critique of the Bible, does not deny the influential and dominating role that religion has played in the life of the Chicana. The patriarchal legacy of the duality of good and evil never relinquishes any of its omnipotence. In Castillo's opinion, "The splitting is so embedded in our psyche that it's almost impossible for us to separate ourselves" (Navarro 130).

Differing from her discourses with male texts in The Mixquiahuala Letters, Castillo's usage of intertextuality in Sapogonia furthers her creation of Máximo as an anti-hero. While living in Chicago and working in a playhouse in the Mexican community of Little Village, Máximo provides us with yet another example of his preoccupation of distancing himself from his indigenous American history. When the director of the playhouse informs Máximo that they will be staging a production of Rudolfo Usigli's Corona de sombra, a play about the history of the Austrian Maximilian who becomes the emperor of Mexico, Máximo suggests that they do "something more popular, more relevant" (114), perhaps a play by the Spanish playwright Federico García-Lorca. Máximo selects Lorca not because he feels that Lorca's plays are more entertaining than Usigli's, but rather because he feels that a white audience in Chicago would be more responsive, and receptive, to a playwright from

Europe, not one from Latin America. As justification of his disapproval of the selection of Usigli's play, Máximo imposes on the reader of the novel his blatantly derogatory portrayal of Mexicans:

But bring up our amigo just south of the border [to the North American public], conjuring up images of gritty, snot-nosed children; women in dust-covered skirts squatting before a griddle over hot stones...and their men, loathsome bandit types, with beady black eyes and those wretched bodles, tough like those of desert mules--and they wrinkle their noses as if someone had just passed air (118).

In one sweeping generalization, Máximo manages to reinforce negative stereotypes, while at the same time distancing himself from his own cultural background. Because Máximo cannot stand the thought of being thought of as "other," he does not hesitate to attach this label to someone else.

On more than one occasion we have seen how Máximo's actions and beliefs confirm Pastora's definition of the anti-hero. Accustomed to promoting himself and celebrating his own exploits, Máximo focuses his attention on no one but himself. In turn, his toadish behavior facilitates Castillo's subversion of male authored texts. Although Castillo writes a large portion of Sapogonia from the male point of view, this book does not represent the author's compliance with the canon. Quite the contrary, Castillo challenges and mocks the traditions of male literature; she does not exalt the canon. Effectively, Sapogonia is a book about books.

Lastly, it is crucial to remember that under the parodic intentions of Sapogonia lies Castillo's commentary about mestizos who deny their cultural heritage and history by attempting to

assimilate with white culture. Though Castillo mocks Máximo as an anti-hero, she also derides him for his cultural blindness and his futile efforts to be someone he is not. Castillo is not afraid to point out hypocrisies and pretenses. As we will see in the second half of this thesis, Castillo upholds an unbending commitment to telling the truth.

CHAPTER III

LIFTING BLINDERS, REVEALING REALITY

The writer--like the musician or painter--must be free to explore, otherwise she or he will never discover what is needed (by everyone) to be known. This means, very often, finding oneself considered "unacceptable" by masses of people who think that the writer's obligation is not to explore or to challenge, but to second the masses' motions, whatever they are. Yet the gift of loneliness is sometimes a radical vision of one's society or one's people that has not previously been taken into account.

--Alice Walker,
In Search of Our
Mothers' Gardens ³

Just as our examination of Castillo's literary endeavors in Sapogonia prove that her text is a complex and challenging piece of literature that demands high levels of reader participation, our reading of the themes in Sapogonia will prove to be equally difficult. Not only can we not always easily ascertain the meaning of the text, but we may also resist or choose to deny the numerous disturbing messages about the oppression of women that Castillo presents to us. Honest with her readers, Castillo makes little effort to soften reality. It would be an error, however, to misread Sapogonia as a piece of literature that victimizes women, for Castillo refuses to make

³ Alice Walker, "From an Interview," In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1983) 244-272.

concessions to patriarchal society. Though Castillo exposes the hypocrisies and injustices of the patriarchy, she adamantly refuses to accept male domination as a simple fact of life.

Once again, we will use The Mixquiahuala Letters as a framework for our reading of Sapogonia. Like other Latina⁴ texts that emphasize women's lives and experiences in women-centered texts, Castillo's first novel represents a literature that honors and acknowledges a "matriarchal heritage" (Ortega and Sternbach 12). In addition to Castillo's development of the relationship between Teresa and Alicia, she also celebrates this heritage of women with her presentation of Teresa's abuelita, the grandmother who raises Teresa. Traditionally, abuelitas in Chicana literature have been the revered "antepasadas, the transmitters of culture" who preserve their history and cultural heritage by sharing their wisdom and knowledge with their grandchildren (Rebolledo 153). Teresa's grandmother is no exception. Her influence is evident the night when Teresa relies upon her spiritual beliefs in order to save herself and Alicia from the phantom that enters their room. While we have already seen how Teresa draws up her Catholic upbringing that evening, she also uses the metaphysical wisdom that her grandmother had shared with her. Because Teresa remembers that her "grandmother had told [her] that if a spirit appeared before [her],

⁴ Eliana Ortega and Nancy Saporta Sternbach, "At the Threshold of the Unnamed: Latina Literary Discourse in the Eighties," Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writings and Critical Readings, ed. Asunción Horno-Delgado, et al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989) 2-23. Ortega and Sternbach use this term inclusively to refer to Chicana, Boricua, Cuban, and Latin American women writers.

[she] should ask it directly what it sought because there had to be something that wasn't letting it rest" (90), she is able to save her life. In the end, Teresa's relationship with her abuelita represents more than a link with the past. Their relationship represents a bond of survival.

In Sapogonia Castillo again emphasizes the significant role of the abuelita. Exemplifying the role of the grandmother, Máximo's Mamá Grande shares with her grandson her prophetic warnings, such as the time when she predicts to the ever-pompous Máximo that he is going to marry, though death would be preferable. Immediately following her warning, Máximo is cuckolded by Marisela, the woman who had elected to marry him because of his wealth. In another display of her wisdom, Mamá Grande advises her grandson, "Don't deceive woman, Máximo. Do what you must and be happy, but try not to use woman like an animal who has no feelings, which by the way, animals do..." (104). Unfortunately, Máximo fails to listen to the his grandmother's advice.

We can trace some of Máximo's inattention to his grandmother back to his grandfather. Disrespectful of his wife's cultural heritage, Máximo's grandfather denies his wife her Mayan culture and beliefs by imposing upon her his own Roman Catholic faith. Máximo later presents us with more information about the relationship between his grandparents in a story that he wishes he would have heard earlier in life because "it would have undoubtedly made [his] grandfather, in [Máximo's] perspective, even more noble than [he] already thought him" (105). In Máximo's story we learn that his grandfather, on an excursion through the jungle of the Santa Agueda

Quetzaltenango peninsula, raped Mamá Grande when she was still a young girl. He later decided to assist Mamá Grande by marrying her because he realized that "she was no longer a virgin, she had lost her worth" (106); originally promised to marry someone else, Mamá Grande's loss of virginity forces her to be returned to her family. Ultimately, Mamá Grande has become nothing more than a commodity traded between men.

The commodification of Mamá Grande supports Luce Irigaray's argument that our society is based upon, and maintained by, a system of exchange that is inaccessible to women, yet perpetuated by the privileged men who circulate women among themselves. In her essay "Women on the Market," Irigaray highlights this exploitative masculine monopoly when she explains that "women's bodies--through their use, consumption, and circulation--provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown 'infrastructure' of the elaboration of that social life and culture (171). Despite the fact that women are the needed components, or rather the commodities, that provide the foundation of this socio-economic and cultural market, women are not allowed to either appropriate or market themselves (187); in effect, women do not exist, except as products of exchange, in this men's system. Aptly, Mamá Grande is excluded from the decision that designates her as the property of her new husband.

Castillo's illustration of the exploitative foundation of Western society is only the beginning of her critique of patriarchal culture. She further reveals the hypocrisies of the patriarchy in a scene undeniably reminiscent of Mamá Grande's rape. Continuing his

grandfather's brutal legacy of exploiting women, Máximo, as an adolescent, rapes a young girl and leaves her by the side of the road. Not surprisingly, Máximo's grandfather is the person who rescues his grandson from the girl's brothers when they almost drown him. Perhaps what is most disturbing about this episode is the fact that Máximo senses that his grandfather can understand why he took the young girl by force. According to Máximo, this understanding between men is "all part of the ritual" (14). Sadly enough, Máximo even forges a friendship with the girl's brothers "probably because of mutual compassion, [and because they] forgot about their deflowered sister, and gave [themselves] up to fraternal esteem for each other" (14).

This bonding between men over women is en(epi)demic to patriarchal societies. Drawing from the works of Lévi-Strauss who proposes that the cultural organization of kinship between men is established through the exchange of women, Gayle Rubin maintains that the motive for giving women as gifts is not merely the building of solidarity between men. Divulging the real attraction of the exchange of women, Rubin states, "Kinship is organization, and organization gives power" (174). What is important to remember, though, is that this power is conferred upon only men. In Rubin's view, kinship systems bestow power upon men and grant them to the right to women, while denying women rights to men and to themselves (174-175). This is precisely what we observe in Sapogonia with Máximo and his newfound brotherhood. The gift givers and the gift taker relish power that can never be enjoyed by the gift herself.

Castillo's examination of the dynamics of the relationship between men and women occupies a large portion of Sapogonia. An equally significant section of the novel, however, is devoted to women's relationships with women, a topic that Castillo begins to explore in The Mixquiahuala Letters. Interestingly enough, the relationship between Teresa and Alicia has as much to do with relationships between women as it does with relationships between women and men, for not only is Teresa and Alicia's bond established through their relationships with men, but it is also reflective of their internalization of repressive definitions of femininity and female sexuality (Yarbro-Bejarano 66). Reflecting upon her relationship with Alicia and the influence that each woman's relationship with men has played on the way in which the women respond to each other, Teresa tells Alicia that "When a woman entered the threshold of intimacy with a man, she left the companions of her sex without looking back" (35). According to Castillo, this betrayal between women is "phenomenal" (Navarro 117). In a racist, sexist, heterosexist, and classist society that executes and enforces a white aesthetic, the oppression of women, heterosexuality, and the privileging of the elite, it really comes as no surprise that Teresa and Alicia, though "experts at exchanging empathy for heart-rending confusion known only to lovers...had never been lovers" (127).

As pointed out by Yarbro-Bejarano, letters thirteen and fourteen offer us valuable insight into Teresa's internalization of the definitions of femininity and female sexuality that prevent her from becoming lovers with Alicia. In letter thirteen, Teresa's explanation to Alicia of "why i [sic] hated white women and sometimes didn't like

you" (49), Teresa criticizes the skin and class privilege that Alicia enjoys. Not only is Alicia "partially white" (50), but she also grew up in a more economically comfortable household than did Teresa. The hatred and bitterness that characterizes letter thirteen is nowhere to be found in letter fourteen. Instead, we discover a letter that celebrates the Chicana body and Chicana sexuality. Affirming the beauty of Alicia's body, Teresa asks her, "Why do you shun the plum breasts, the raisin nipples that stand perpendicular to your torso--as if nature deprived you of a harvest?" (51). Despite her praise, Teresa realizes that she will not be able to convince Alicia of her own beauty. In the end, Teresa's words "were only the words of another woman" (52).

Continuing this exploration of relationships between women, Castillo presents several different female pairs in *Sapogonia*. Not surprisingly, Castillo once again juxtaposes these relationships with women's relationships with men and shows "women who find it impossible to love women in a world of men" (Navarro 121). One such pair is Pastora and Perla. Upon their first encounter at a gathering of artists, Pastora and Perla are brought together by a shared history of familial rejection and relationships marred by violence. Following Perla's account of her struggle as a single mother and the separation from her parents who criticized her for never having married the abusive father of her children, "Pastora hardly said a word, and yet Perla knew that Pastora was with her, understanding the tragedy of her young life" (19). Once they move in together and are "not too unlike a pair of newlyweds" (69), Pastora and Perla's relationship serves a role model for the Pastora's

childhood friend, Fabiola. After spending an evening with Pastora and Perla and observing the possibility of "liv[ing] without the prerequisite of men" (71), Fabiola and her friend, Rosario, vow to leave their husbands and to move out-of-state in order to begin their lives with one another. In spite of their plans, however, only one woman is able to leave her husband.

A fate similar to that of Fabiola and Rosario hinders Pastora and Perla's relationship. Despite their obvious love for one another, Pastora and Perla discover that they are not able to provide one another with validation. Like Teresa and Allcia, Pastora and Perla find their validation in relationships with men. Perla, for example, seeks validation in her marriage with a white man. Castillo's disapproval of this marriage is apparent, especially in her selection of the husband's non-descript name, Bob. Knowing that Perla means "pearl" in Spanish, we realize that this marriage tarnishes Perla's luster, in large part because Bob "place[s] her integrity on a loyalty that went beyond sexual fidelity to emotional and intellectual dependency. He held in his power the influence of the Great White Father" (203). Pastora, too, ends up marrying a man, but not until after her relationship with Mary Lou.

In chapter thirty-eight, the only chapter in Sapogonia to be written in the second person point of view and addressed directly to Pastora, we are finally able to get a real sense of her personal history. This chapter about Pastora's experience in prison frees us from the filtered information presented by Máximo and the third person narrator. When Pastora is in prison she becomes close to Mary Lou, a lesbian involved in a ongoing relationship with a woman

not in prison. Unlike Castillo's other female characters who subordinate relationships with women to their search for validation in relationships with men, Mary Lou does not seek validation through men, nor does she succumb to societal pressures and expectations. Ironically, Pastora find validation through her new relationship with Mary Lou. Mary Lou, "the one familiar object that reminds [Pastora] of where [she] came from" (188), empowers Pastora to remember the past and to reclaim her life:

You will take Mary Lou with you. Mary Lou, who is the abandoned building you explored with a child's courage; rooftops jumped; fast double-dutch tournament; black girls who pulled your red-ribboned braids; pink and white roses offered to the Virgin the month of May; Christmas pilgrimages which taught you the hymns that gave you the gift of song; urban renewal and the upheaval of your Mexican world; white city workers who relocated each family after its building was marked with a X in a circle, the next one to be torn down; your father who left, and the mother's new husband who never spoke your name or looked you in the face until you were thirteen and tried to have in you in bed; your mother, who stopped being Catholic after your confirmation and went to Protestant church meeting in a storefront every night; Abuelita who took care of you from the age of three months and taught you about the healing of the body with herbs and of the soul with your own; Mary Lou, who banished the devil of your childhood (193).

In a women's prison, separated from the dominant and oppressive ideologies of the outside world, Pastora is able to find true validation. Castillo's ironic treatment of incarceration forces us to question whether it is jail, or society, that imprisons women.

In light of this positive relationship between Pastora and Mary Lou, we have to wonder why in both The Mixquiahuala Letters and

Sapogonia "female bonding and lesbian desire are presented as non-utopian possibility" (Yarbro-Bejarano 70). To answer this question, we can turn to the literature of other Chicana writers who address the topic of Chicana sexuality. In her book entitled Loving in the War Years, Cherríe Moraga explains that her identity as a Chicana lesbian has been a "radical stand in direct contradiction to, and in violation of, the women [she] was raised to be" (117). There are great prices to pay for the Chicana lesbian who challenges her family and her culture by openly acknowledging her sexuality. Historically, Third World people have had to rely upon other members of their culture, particularly family members, in order to protect themselves from cultural genocide (Moraga 110). Even though familial strength has been central to the survival of Chicanos, Moraga points out that this very strength has also functioned as a weakness in that it contributes to the belief that the preservation of sex roles will enable Chicanos to resist white domination (110). Consequently, the Chicana lesbian who challenges her family by taking control of her own sexuality is bound to encounter opposition. Castillo herself refers to this inevitable opposition when she says, "As a mexicana, whenever you decide to rebel against your family, the status quo, you are going to get punished" (Navarro 122-123).

It is also not uncommon for the Chicana lesbian to face the accusation that she has betrayed her race and turned her back on her culture. In addition to living in the shadow of the misconstrued history of La Malinche⁵ along with all other Chicanas, the Chicana

⁵ La Malinche is the Aztec noble woman who was sold to Cortés in 1519 and served as his translator and advisor. She is remembered as the woman who

lesbian also must contend with the Chicano culture's labeling of lesbianism as "white" (Moraga 116). In effect, the Chicana lesbian is seen as colluding with the oppressor. Articulating the feelings of isolation and exclusion from their own culture shared by many Chicana lesbians, Gloria Anzaldúa states, "We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us" (Borderlands 20). With this cultural and historical information in mind, we can better understand Castillo's presentation of the impossibility of a "lesbian utopia." As Moraga, Anzaldúa, and Castillo have all shown, the possible repercussion of rejection by one's family and culture prevents many Chicana lesbians from acknowledging their sexuality.

Tightly entwined with this discussion of the denial of Chicana sexuality is the issue of the control of female sexuality. As we shall see in both The Mixquiahuala Letters and Sapogonia, if society can not deny a woman her sexuality, then men will attempt to at least control it. The letter about Teresa's abortion is an excellent example of one man's attempt to control female sexuality. Although Teresa sees her decision to have an abortion as "the saving of oneself" (115), her male partner insists that she is selfish for thinking about her own future, justifying his accusation by explaining that he had wanted to be a father. Perhaps what is most upsetting for this man, though, is the fact that he has played no role in Teresa's decision

facilitated the Spanish invasion of Mexico and the consequent colonization of her people.

about her own body. By reappropriating the power to make choices about life and death, Teresa executes an action that has traditionally been reserved for men. Alicia's abortion, on the other hand, will not have the same outcome. In order to afford her abortion, Alicia borrows a welfare card from a friend, a woman who had already given birth to five children. After her abortion, and after being mistaken for her friend with the five children, Alicia is "is exposed to the world the way [she] had never been exposed before in [her] life" (126): Alicia is sterilized. In this extreme and brutal control of female sexuality, the doctor usurps from Alicia the power to make those choices involving life and death.

While Castillo continues with this topic of abortion in Sapogonia when Pastora has an abortion as an act of "self-defense and preservation of the species" (164), she also challenges the topic of biological determinism, or rather relegating women to motherhood because of their reproductive capacities. When Pastora becomes a mother and decides to give up her singing career, Máximo criticizes her decision and implies that she has conceded to biological destiny. In response to his disapproval, Pastora flatly states, "And my son is not a continuation of you or me, who've considered ourselves exceptional individuals among the species, but a continuity of the species, a simple and humble fact" (269). For Pastora, motherhood is not a duty, but rather it is a personal choice. And according to Castillo, no one should have the power and control to make this decision but the woman herself.

Despite these discussions about abortion, sterilization, and motherhood, we have yet to see the ultimate control of female

sexuality. True to form, our infamous anti-hero Máximo will be the person who demonstrates this control. In the course of his relationship with Pastora, Máximo begins to call her by the name Coatlicue, the Aztec snake goddess who was able to both give and take away life because she embodied aspects of both the under and upper worlds (Anzaldúa, Borderlands 27). Not unlike the male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture of Mexico that "darkened" and disempowered" Coatlicue by first taking away her power, and then by driving her underground (27), Máximo, too, attempts to render the independent Pastora powerless. Perhaps what is most interesting about his relationship with Pastora is the fact that at the same time he portrays her as an arrogant and selfish goddess "who had swallowed him in his entirety and left him to suffocate inside her entrails," (122), he satisfies his male fantasies through his obsessive desire to conquer Pastora. Simultaneously, Máximo fears and fantasizes about Pastora.

Emma Pérez elucidates this connection between male fear and fantasy in her essay "Speaking from the Margin." Drawing from Irigaray's conclusion that men overcome Oedipal anxieties by repudiating women, Pérez explains, "Women become [man's] idea--castrated, passive, and eternally feminine in his gaze" (59). Consequently, woman, the object of desire who serves as the embodiment of all that the man dislikes about himself, must be destroyed. This is precisely what Máximo does, both in the first and final chapters of Sapogonia, when he murders Pastora, his "invention to make [the] world tolerable" (312). With this destruction of the "Femme fatale, mujer fatal, fatal woman" (306), Máximo not only

illustrates the connection between male fantasy and violence against women, but he also executes the ultimate form of controlling woman: murder.

Throughout her exploration of the connection between male fear and fantasy, patriarchal authority and violence against women, and the attempt to deny and control female sexuality, Castillo has shown us a world in Sapogonia in which women's survival is a fight against the most severe odds. For Pastora, it is an impossibility. Though Castillo's presentation of society has been harsh and disturbingly realistic, it is imperative we recognize that her attempt is not to victimize women. Nor is her attempt to provide us with optimism. Castillo offers no solutions to the injustices and hypocrisies that she presents. She only reminds us of reality.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Re-vision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.

--Adrienne Rich,
"When We Dead Awaken" ⁶

Sapogonia is a demanding text that incites and requires reader response. Fortunately, our reading of this book within the framework of The Mlxquiahuala Letters produces a synergistic relationship that augments the themes of each novel, in addition to illuminating Castillo's literary objectives in these works. It is our reading of these novels side by side that reveals Castillo's literary strategies and sexual politics as she questions, challenges, and defles dominant discourses of the patriarchy. Not only does she dismantle the ideologies of the canon that have been used to trap readers and writers alike, but she also excoriates those sexist, racist, heterosexist, and classist ideologies of patriarchal authority that have been used to trap women.

Castillo is a revolutionary writer. Even though her first novel is an excellent example of the traditionally female epistolary novel,

⁶ Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writings as Re-Vision," On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1979) 33-49.

Castillo experiments with and brings her own style to the genre. Similarly, she does not appropriate and comply with the traditions of Western androcentric literature in Sapogonia, but instead she subverts and mocks these works. Regardless of the genre, regardless of the theme, Castillo makes it clear that she refuses to compromise herself and her works by conceding to linear modes of thinking and writing. In Castillo's own words, "Spirals and circles and weird not linear things. Mucho de eso es la literatura feminista" (Mitchell 155). The spirals and circles of Sapogonia establish the novel as feminist literature. These same spirals and circles also establish Castillo as a radical because of her disconcertingly realistic vision of society. Castillo does not intend for her writings to soothe or to pacify her readers. Her primary concern is to reveal the truth. Ultimately, Castillo's goal is to say what is not being said.

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