

The Sardonic Powers of the Erotic in the Work of Ana Castillo

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Ana Castillo, a native of Chicago, first made an impact on the Chicano writer's community with the publication of her chapbook, *Otro Canto* (1977). Written mostly in English (as is almost all of Castillo's work), it ensured her reputation as a "social protest" poet at a time when it was difficult to be anything else. As a result, some of the ironic tones already present in the early work have been easily over-looked in favor of the protest message, which in fact is re-doubled by irony. It can be argued that irony is one of Castillo's trademarks. Irony often appears when experience is viewed after-the-fact or in opposition to another's subjectivity. In this essay, I would like to explore the ironically erotic dance that Castillo's speaking subjects often take up with men. Thus, my exploration will follow the trajectory of the traditional heterosexual, female speaking subject in Castillo's published works: *Otro Canto*, *The Inuitatzon* (1979), *Women Are Not Roses* (1984), and *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986).

Otro Canto portrayed the burdens of the urban poor through the voice of a young woman who had learned the bitter lessons of disillusionment early in life. Thus, in the poem "1975," we hear a sign of relief when all of those "proletarian talks"—the nemesis of many a left-wing activist—are finally translated into action. The speaker underscores the repetitiveness of mere talk by starting off every stanza with the line, "talking proletarian talks," which subsequently opens the way for details that give rise to such talk. We are not relieved from this tactical monotony "until one long awaited day—/we are tired/of talking" (1977, 49-51). Though in "1975" the speaker is not gender-marked but is revealed as being in a "we-us" speaking position within a Marxist revolutionary stance, that speaker is transformed into a "we-us" who makes "A Counter-Revolutionary Proposition." In this poem we are called **(6)** upon to make love and "forget/that Everything matters" (1984, 63). Given the litany of the things that matter in the stanza preceding the call, however, the poem urges me to ask if the speaker is wryly alluding to the well-known Anglo counterculture slogan of the sixties: "Make Love, Not War." As the poem notes, what matters to the proletarian (i.e., Marxist) revolutionary speaker is the struggle to overcome class oppression, a struggle that is spoken through a supposedly non-gendered we. However, juxtaposing the poem's title, "A Counter-Revolutionary Proposition," with the implicit allusion to the slogan "Make Love, Not War," may help us to unravel a story with a difference for the underclass female speaker who addresses her partner, "Let's forget . . ." (1984, 63).

Notwithstanding the recent involvement of women in revolutionary struggles (i.e., Cuba and Nicaragua), it is still the case that in opposition to the erotic, a revolution or a war is especially marked with a traditional male subjectivity that awaits analysis. In order for a female speaker to recover the full meaningful impact of herself, she still must address how that self figures in the "heterosexual erotic contract," revolutions not excepted. Within this contract, the female body continues to be the site of both

reproduction and the erotic; despite class position, a speaker and her gendered social experience are imbricated in that age-old contract. Thus, "A Counter- Revolutionary Proposition" may now be understood as a call to explore the politics of the erotic. Let us actively explore the neo- revolutionary implications of erotic relations that have been constantly displaced, undervalued, and even erased by masculine- marked militancy, or at best rendered passively by the male poet, with the woman as the muse, the wife, the mother.

From this point of view, the poem's title acquires a polyvalence that goes beyond the private, where the erotic has often been held "hostage," and is placed in the political arena. In a sense, then, "Let's 'make love'" is taken from the lips of an Anglo, male, leftwing activist by the most unexpected speakers—Ana Castillo's poetic persona. In retrospect, Castillo's early work stands out as one of her first attempts to appropriate the erotic and its sign)ficances for the female speaker, with ironic repercussions. Given the assumed class position of the speaker herself, affirming the erotic, as she takes pause from the class struggle, is tantamount to speaking (7) against herself, or so her "brother/lover" may attest. The implicit suggestion that the erotic and the class struggle may be incompatible in a patriarchal world, when both are made public, places the underclass female in a double bind, since she may be forced to choose between areas of life that, for her, are intertwined or indivisible. In my view, the speakers in Castillo's work refuse to make such choices. Choosing one or the other splits the subject into the domains that heretofore have been symbolically marked feminine or masculine.

In the seventies, Chicanas and other women of color had a difficult time within their fraternal group when they insisted that feminist politics, with its commitment to the exploration of women's sexuality and gendered identities, also applied to them. The supposed contradictory position of women of color, one that was between a male-identified class liberation struggle and a middle-or upper-class, white, female-identified sexual liberation struggle, forced women of color to walk a tightrope in their quest for an exploration of gender (Moraga 1983; Pineda 1986). Thus, a poem such as "A Counter-Revolutionary Proposition" was politically risky, as the speaker addresses another, ostensibly male, and asks that he forget that "Everything matters." Yet, it is only within this apparent self-contradictory situation that such a speaker may be able to claim sexuality for herself and explore the sign)ficance of the female body that is always, and already, sexually marked. Such a "proposition" simultaneously opens up a gap between the fact of economic oppression and the desire for erotic pleasure and sign)ficance that faces us when we perceive the separation between the first and the second stanzas in the poem.

In *77ze Invitation* (1979), a chapbook-length collection of erotic poems and vignettes, Castillo's speaker no longer requests that her interlocutor forget that "everything matters" but pursues, instead, a sustained exploration of her erotic, at times bisexual desires. The appropriation of the erotic for the female speaker is again a motivating force. The emphasis, however, is not so much on the speaker's uneasy conjunction with "proletarian politics" as it is with "textual politics." That is, the appropriative process resonates respectively against, and with, two important books of our time: Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), and Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Isabel Barreno, and

Maria Velho da Costa's *The Three Manas New Portuguese Letters* (1975). Consider, for example, that in the second chapter of this book, Paz affirms women's dormant and submissive sexuality that awaits discovery through male efforts, while "The Three Marias" reject this view throughout their book and protest women's political bondage that, at the core, is based on their sexuality. Notwithstanding the different approaches that each of "The Three Marias" would take to liberate women, there is very little doubt that they agree that male perception of women's sexuality pervades all levels of women's existence.

The erotic thematics of *The Invitation* openly declare the influence of those two books (1979, iii, 9). Castillo's text, when viewed in their light, becomes a purposefully glossed negation of Paz's view and an extension of the authors own erotic vision. It is as if the relative absence of any sociopolitical debate of the Chicana/ Mexicana's sexuality had made it imperative that Castillo explore instead her speaker's desire in the light of a textual milieu. Moreover, reading Castillo's work in this fashion enables us to clarify her struggle to place her erotic thematics and voices in the interstice of both her sociopolitical and textual experiences. In other words, if, due to her social position, the underclass female is called upon to address her oppression with a ready-made, class-struggle rhetoric, attempting to address her sexual/erotic oppression forces her to see it in relation to texts. Her own response to those texts enables her to give voice to her experience and make it public. If she does not make an effort to bring out that voice herself, it will remain muted, as she is forced to align herself with the heretofore masculine-marked class voice. Thus, she is reconfirming, from another angle, Gilbert and Gubar's call in *The Mad-woman in the Attic* for our critical need to explore "the metaphor of experience" (in "1975" and "A Counter-Revolutionary Proposition") and "the experience of metaphor" (in *The Invitation*) (Gilbert and Gubar 1979; Wigel 1986, 59-80). The speaker/writer and the critic must discern, insofar as it is possible, between the metaphors female speakers create to represent our sociopolitical and erotic experience and the metaphors these speakers inherit and that a *poem* inscribe our potential experience. Thus, a writer/speaker can unwittingly live out the experiences that the metaphors call upon her to duplicate (i.e., Paz's description of female sexuality) or she can struggle to lay them bare and thus reinscribe her evolving position (i.e. "The Three Marias" struggle to reinscribe women's sexuality). (9)

Paz's wot

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ing out how everything turns out in the end" provides a helpful perspective for understanding Castillo's parodic plots.

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rkers in Northern California." In *Women and Politics of Empowerment. Perspectives from the Workplace and the Community*, edited by Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgan, 202-224. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1988.

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health care delivery for Chicanas/Latinas.

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