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Ana Castillo's The MixquiaLuala Letters: The Novelist as Ethnographer

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Personal narrative mediates this con tradiction between the engagement called for in fieldwork and the self-effacement called for in formal ethnographic description, or at least mediates some of its anguish, by inserting into the ethnographic text the authonty of the personal expenence out of which the ethnographyis made.—Mary Louise Pratt (1986)

In recent years the academy has been shaken by a sign)ficant shift in scholarly concerns which raises provocative questions regarding the politics of representation. By addressing problems in the Western intellectual tradition, cultural critics have uncovered what has come to be thought of as a crisis in representation. Giving rise to such subjects as the object)fication of women and other minorities, their debates challenged theories of interpretation. Mary Louise Pratt's quote resonates with a self-critical mode characteristic of the present moment in history, a moment in which dominant ideas and assumptions are problematized because of their ideological implications. While illustrating how questions raised in this time of reassessment have been appropriated by modern anthropological discourse, Pratt also reveals how some anthropologists have begun to question their own practices. She is, in fact with her treatise, deconstructing the ethnographic process, as she sharpens her focus on the concept of ethnographic authority, questioning the notion of objectivity. When we consider Pratt's assertions concerning personal narrative and formal ethnographic description, it becomes evident that we must also reevaluate the authority of personal experience. For in classical anthropological terms:

> Ethnography is a research process in which the anthropologist closely observes, records, and engages in the daily life of another culture—an experience labeled as the fieldwork method—and then writes accounts (72)of this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail. These accounts are the primary

> form in which fieldwork procedures, the other culture, and the ethnographer's personal and theoretical reflections are accessible to professionals and other readerships. (Marcus and Fischer 1986, I8)

Pratt's voice is but one of many which have begun to question ethnographic authority, reflecting on the relationship between personal narrative and "formal ethnographic description." We can view her approach as one which developed in dialectical relationship to a re-envisioning process that was initiated by Clifford Geertz's The Interpretation of Cultures (I973~. What Geertz called for in his text was a reassessment of the ethnographic fieldwork process—a process he still thinks of as objective, though symbolic and interpretive in nature. Pratt, on the other hand, suggests that the representation of culture involves a creative and interpretive mode of writing which reflects the subjective experiences of the ethnographer.

Although Geertz and Pratt connect the symbolic and interpretive quality of ethnographic writing, it is Pratt who implies that ethnographies are never simply ethnographies but rather "ethnographies for," written in the interest of the dominant culture. But as dominant culture is a value-laden term which sign)fies a point of view that has been traditionally dominated by a male perspective, as both the tradition of novel writing by men and traditional ethnography have functioned to systematically marginalize or "other" women, we begin to see the ideological limitations of both of these narrative forms. And once we apprehend that ethnographies are merely interpretations, we must determine the extent to which these interpretations or detailed descriptions can qualify as factual and objective documentations. Following this line of inquiry brings forth an interesting paradox concerning the creative, interpretive process. Is it possible to develop a discourse that is both interpretive and objective? Because the relationship between interpretation and subjectivity is a blurred one, it would seem that the anthropologist's method for observing and documenting the "daily life of another culture" could easily be viewed as subjective literary production. In George Marcus's and Michael Fischer's terms (1986) ethnography becomes a personal and imaginative vehicle by which anthropologists provide cultural critiques rather than objective representations.

What becomes evident at this point in our inquiry is the relationship between imaginary writing and ethnography as a written product. Both forms of writing reflect limited ways of seeing the world; both are influenced by social conditions and the ideology of a particular historical moment. In this light it is interesting to think about feminist writers of fiction, who, much like an anthropologist, might focus on microcosms within a (73)
culture, unpacking rituals in the context of traditional symbolic and social structures of subjugation. Yet unlike both the conventional anthropologist and the classical Chicano writer of fiction, the Chicana feminist is also interested in scrutinizing the assumptions that root her own cultural influences, unpacking so-called tradition and political institutions that shape patriarchal ways of seeing. Even though the Chicano narrative has always had some cultural context, focusing on the ethnic identification process by redefining past traditions as the work of Tomas Rivera, Americo Paretes, and Oscar Zeta Acosta illustrates, it has for the most part overlooked issues that revolve around female gender identification.

The Mixquiahuala Letters I I 986) iS a postmodernist, Chicana feminist novel that reflects the historical forces of the eighties, as well as an incredible diversity of concerns, literary and otherwise, from what has been previously recognized and legitimized by canonical structures. What I want to explore is not so much the pervasive ram)fications of an American literary canon, which serves to reify social injustice and inequality as it suppresses the nature and development of the experiences of people of color, but rather how a close reading of The MisquiaLuala Letters reveals Ana Castillo's attempt to retaliate, by striking out against the limitations created by canonical structures. Castillo's novel functions as an oppositional feminist discourse that challenges the limitations inherent in both Anglo-American and Mexican culture. Certainly, feminist literary criticism has helped to expose the limitations of a canon which fails to equitably represent the nature and development of "white" women in America. But when we consider how mainstream feminist theory has likewise, because of its failure to appraise race and class oppression, helped to perpetuate white middle- class values, it seems to me that we can deem Chicana feminist creative writings as emancipatory cultural formations, that are either in alternative or oppositional relationship to Anglo-American feminist discourse.

Chicano culture draws on two external forces and has been labelled by anthropologists as a "creole culture" because it is one which draws on two or more origins: (I ~ a long-standing culture one is born into, and 1~ ~ a culture in terms of its social and political forces in the immediate environment. Both of these points of origin are limiting for Chicanas in that neither addresses gender issues. The Chicana writer is thus engaged in mediating and negotiating between two cultural systems, constructing a cultural and feminist identity as she works to deconstruct the predominantly male cultural paradigms that have worked to suppress a female perspective. Following this train of thought, Chicana literature functions as a bold cultural intervention, which ironically enough resembles what we have (74)
come to respect as interpretive or experimental ethnography. I want to begin my study by juxtaposing the words of two cultural critics, Clifford Geertz and Ana Castillo:

> There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture. {Geertz 19731

> There was a definite call to find a place to satisfy my yearning spirit, the Indian in me that had begun to cure the ails of humble folk distrustful of modern medicine; a need for the sapling woman for the fertile earth that nurtured her growth. (Castillo 1986)

Geertz and Castillo, though utilizing different discourses directed to different audiences, raise similar issues concerning culture and human nature. Geertz's comments are drawn from his rather elaborate discussion on culture in chapter I of The Interpretation of Cultures. He contends that humans are like animals suspended in the "webs of s;gnificance" they themselves have spun. An analysis of these webs should not be viewed as an experimental science in search of law but rather as an interpretative search for meaning. If humans are suspended within cultural webs, it seems obvious that "there can be no such thing as human nature independent of culture." Geertz's ideas, taken out of their anthropological context, seem innocent enough, but we must remember that he is speaking as an ethnographer, speaking in terms of "the Other" and so-called "primitive culture." If we consciously avoid the subtle trappings of this hierarchical way of seeing, his metaphor can also be used to

describe the self-fashioning process marginal ethnic groups undertake in the United States, as they attempt to create an existence, drawing from not one but two distinct cultural systems. It is important to note that Geertz's views on culture and his notion of interpretive analysis ithick description as he calls it1 have been appropriated by many feminist scholars, since the feminist analysis of women's culture also involves decoding and interpreting many of the same systems with which traditional anthropologists are concerned (i.e., gender relations, kinship, sexuality, taboos, etc.).

Castillo's words are different than Geertz's in that they are taken from a work of fiction—The MisquiaLuala Letters. She makes no claims of factualism, but states rather explicitly early on that her text is fiction, and that "Any resemblance it may have to actual persons or incidents is coincidental" [Introduction, n.p.). Even so, it is clear in the above passage that as a creative writer, she, like Geertz, is grappling with the influence of an elusive, but powerful, cultural force. It becomes clear to Castillo's readers that her protagonist's existential well-being is dependent on culture. When (75) we carry forward Geertz's semiotic concept of culture and evaluate the ethnographic writings of traditional anthropologists as representations based on individual interpretations, it becomes difficult to qualify them as objective, factual accounts of reality. Once we admit that these cultural representations should also be viewed as a mixture of descriptive and interpretive modes of discourse, the gap between imaginary and ethnographic writing shrinks before our eyes as both forms of writing are reduced to a particular way of seeing the world. And as such, we can see that Castillo, like Geertz, is involved in the process of describing and interpreting culture.

But aside from what appears to be a somewhat natural affinity, these two quotes are also interesting because on a broader level, they illustrate the vast difference in objective and subjective writing. Geertz, in the straightforward language of an "authority," states that all human nature is influenced by culture. In contrast, Castillo's language, more personal in tone, elaborates on Geertz's comments regarding the sign)ficance of culture. As they bring to life a rather academic yet direct observation, her words seem to embroider Geertz's by illustrating why or how his thoughts might be applied in the real world of subjective experiences. With her words she has in effect grounded his theory in practice. In the final analysis it is

evident that each quote seems to grow in insight when juxtaposed to the other. This grounding of theory with practice becomes relevant when we begin to consider the rather abstract subject: the Chicana writers' quest for self-definition.

Put simply, the process of fashioning any kind of marginal identity Iwhether it be Chicana, feminist, or hyphenated American) involves a series of negotiations and mediations between the past and the future—a past and a future which for the Chicana is culturally explosive in terms of women's experiences and historical implications because, at this point in history, she attempts to define herself as she maneuvers between two opposing realities that fail to acknowledge her existence. Chicanas are not represented, but I instead fall into the category of structured absences in both Chicano and Anglo feminist ideologies. Because of the Chicana's positioning between the Chicano and Anglo feminist postures, she is faced with the task of formulating an ideology, an identity out of two plans: the nostalgic plan of the past and the stereotypical Anglo feminist plan for the future. The nostalgic past refers to the idealization of old customs, largely a patriarchal interpretation of Mexican cultural traditions and history. The limitations of this plan are obvious when compared to the barriers created by an Anglo-American feminist movement which has, for the most part, failed to acknowledge female differences based on culture and ethnicity. It is because of this movement's failure to acknowledge differences that Anglo-American feminist (76) theory has provided Chicanas with more of a mirage than a vehicle for understanding or change. The MisquiaLuala Letters illustrates Chicanas caught between these two polarities, moving closer to self-discovery by drawing and synthesizing usable aspects from both Anglo and Mexican cultures, weaving a complicated present out of the past and future options. The novel centers on the marginal experiences of two friends, Teresa and Alicia, as they live and travel through Mexico and the United States. By representing the daily activities of these two women, Castillo is able to reveal exactly what is at risk when an invisible entity attempts to define itself out of the structured omissions of two oppositional ideologies.

Stephen Greenblatt's Renaissance Self-Fashioning II980~ is useful for conceptualizing the Chicana's self-definition process. Although his discussion focuses on self-fashioning in Renaissance literature, it provides a workable method

for analyzing the Chicana's struggle for self-identification. It is because of the clear distinctions he makes between self-fashioning in upper and marginal classes that his approach becomes useful to our inquiry. He states that for marginal classes:

> Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile . . .; self-fashioning always involves some experience of threat some effacement or undermining, some loss of self . . .; we may say that self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien, that what is produced in this encounter partakes of both the authority and the alien that is marked for attack, and hence that way achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss. (1980, 91

Greenblatt's discourse emphasizes the issues involved when marginals ("aliens" as he calls them) seek to obtain an autonomous status created by self-identification. When we consider Greenblatt's analysis, we can see how the Chicanas' self-fashioning "always involves some experience of threat" or "some loss of self." Castillo's protagonist, Teresa, speaks of such a loss when she reflects on her relationship to Mexico in letter number nineteen: "Mexico. Melancholy, profoundly right and wrong, it embraces as it strangulates. Destiny is not a metaphysical confrontation with one's self rather, society has knit its pattern so tight that a confrontation with it is inevitable'' jig). Teresa's words reveal that she understands that her destiny as a woman is not determined through a confrontation with herself, but rather through a confrontation with a society that holds the very real threat of restricting, silencing, and marginalizing women. In letter number thirteen, Teresa refers to another threat, while at the same time revealing her attitudes about Anglo women. She writes to Alicia: (77)

> why i hated white women and sometimes didn't like you: Society had made them above all possessions
>
> the most desired. And they believed
> it.
>
> My husband admitted feeling inferior to them.... i hated

> white women who took black pimps everyone knows savages have bestial members i hated
>
> white women who preferred Latins and Mediterraneans because of the fusion of hot and Qold blood running through the very core of their erections and nineteenth-century romanticism that makes going to bed with them much more challenging than with WASP men who are only good for making money and marrying. 143)

Teresa's thoughts communicate how she, as an individual, perceives white women as a threat. But when we consider this letter as a symbolic representation of cultural attitudes, it tells us something basic about the Chicana woman's experience. Yet her reference to her husband's admission of feeling inferior to them illustrates how the threat created by white women moves beyond gender distinctions. With this letter Castillo has unmasked one of the ideological limitations of Anglo feminist theory, a feminism with little concern for issues of race, class, or culture. It becomes apparent in Teresa's letter that the subordination and control of "women of color" is further complicated when white women are elevated to the status of "most desirable": as a backlash to this white privilege, women of color, regardless of their gender, are relegated to a subordinate position with respect to white women, simply because the standards for desirability are based on light skin beauty. And once we consider the structured absences in feminist theory, Chicana autonomy becomes a critical issue that cannot be overlooked.

For Greenblatt autonomy, though important, does not represent the central issue. What is crucial here is the power one has to impose a shape upon oneself, a power to control one's identity. He, like Geertz and, for that matter, many Chicano writers, argues that the interplay between external forces is what determines self-fashioning. His discussion reinforces the need to understand the external forces that will ultimately affect the Chicana's self-fashioning process. If we are to carry this discussion further, then we must consider these "external forces" and the implications involved whenever Chicanas attempt to define themselves in cultural and feminist terms. The issues I wish to address, therefore, focus specifically on how The MixquiaLuala Letters negotiates and mediates between the external forces

which encompass time and space as well as the past and future. (78)
Chicana critic Norma Alarcon conceives of Chicana poets as "umpires" mediating between a past Chicano patriarchal interpretation of culture, which holds the potential for locking them into "crippling traditional stereotypes," and a future that can be equally limiting within an "AngloAmerican feminist promise" |I9851. In The MixquiaLuala Letters, Ana Castillo has moved beyond her role as poet "umpire" into the position of modern [experimental! ethnographer, as she has produced a personal narrative which mediates between objective and subjective narratives, thereby overcoming what lames Clifford has identified as anthropology's "impossible attempt to fuse objective and subjective practices" II986, IO91. The sign)ficance of Clifford's point becomes clearer when we consider Eric Wolf's thoughts on fieldwork in Europe and the People Without History (1982):

> Fieldwork—direct communication with people and participant observation of their on-going activities . . . became a hallmark of anthropological method. Fieldwork has proved enormously fruitful in laying bare and correcting false assumptions and erroneous descriptions. It has also revealed hitherto unsuspected connections among sets of social activities and cultural forms. Yet the very success of the method lulled its users into a false confidence. It became easy for them to convert merely heuristic considerations of method into theoretical postulates about society and culture. (I3)

Indeed, if we consider The MixquiaLuala Letters as a personal narrative that mediates between objective and subjective practices, we can envision—as I have argued elsewhere {I988~—examining the social sciences and literature together to set the stage for a more inclusive type of theorizing. In other words, once we make one minor adjustment and move toward an interdisciplinary approach, anthropology's impossibilities appear to become possibilities. Likewise, when we consider Castillo's text as a mediation between objective and subjective practices, the imaginary, fictive content of this novel seems to transcend its form. Once we are able to make this leap in consciousness, opening rather than closing our respective discourses, the limitations created by our fragmented visions quickly begin to dissipate.

Because Castillo's epistolary novel consists of letters that systematically observe, record and describe experiences that take place in the daily life of Mexican and American culture—a process we have previously described as the fieldwork method—we can read it as a parody of modern ethnographic and travel writing. It is interesting to note that Castillo's process of textual production is somewhat suggestive of Linda Hutcheon's A Theory of Parody (19851. Drawing from the double etymology of the (79) prefix para she concludes: "on a pragmatic level parody was not limited to producing a ridiculous effect [pare as 'counter' or against], but that the equally strong suggestion of complicity and accord (pare as 'beside'! Allowed for an opening up of the range of parody. This distinction between prefix meaning, has been used to argue for the existence of both comic and serious types of parody" (53).

As a parody of modern ethnography, Castillo's text becomes an enterprise that provides the voices and experiences involved in growing up Chicana, revealing in Wolf's words "unsuspected connections among sets of social activities and cultural forms." Like an ethnographer, Castillo uses the voice of her informant, Teresa, to focus on what is at risk when a Chi cana attempts to fashion an identity in response to two opposing cultures. In letter number four, Teresa foregrounds the Catholic church's enormous influence on young women as the institution molds individual Mexican/ Chicana identity into a cultural model that promotes women's passivity and guilt. She writes:

> Alicia,
> Do you know the smell of a church? Not a storefront, praise the Lord, hallelujah church, or a modest frame building with a simple steeple projecting to the all heavens, but a CATHEDRAL, with doors the height of two very tall men and so heavy that when you pull one open to enter you feel as small as you are destined.
> You were never led by the hand as a little girl by a godmother, or tugged by the ear by a nun whose dogmatic instruction initiated you into humility which is quite different from baptism when you were anointed with water as a squirming baby in the event that you should die and never see God face-to-face because you had not been cleansed of the sin of your parents'

> copulation.
>
> It smells of incense, hot oils, the wax of constant burning candles, melting at a vigilant pace, the plaster of an army of saints watching with fixed glass eyes, revered in exchange for being mediators and delivering your feeble prayers. It smells of flowers and palms that precede Easter. It smells of death. The last time i went to CHURCH, genuflecting my way to the confessional, i was eighteen years old. i was a virgin, technically speaking, a decent girl, having been conditioned to put my self-respect before curiosity. This did not satisfy the priest, or should i say, stimulate his stagnant duty in that dark closet of anonymity and appointed judgement.
>
> He began to probe. When that got him no titillating results, he suggested, or more precisely, led an interrogation founded on gestapo technique. When i didn't waiver under the torment, although feeling (80)I going to tell me you haven't wanted to be with a man' You must have let one do mote than. . . than what:
>
> i ran out of the booth in tears and in a rage, left the CHURCH without waiting to hear my penance for absolution of my unforgivable sins. (24-25).

Her emotional narrative describes religious rituals that have limited the development of a feminist political consciousness. Her thoughts on religion also resonate with the powerful words of Chicana feminist and social activist Cherne Moraga:

> Women of color have always known, although we have not always wanted to look at it, that our sexuality is not merely a physical response or drive, but holds a crucial relationship to our entire spiritual capacity. Patriarchal religions—whether brought to us by the colonizer's cross and gun or emerging from our own people—have always known this. Why else would the female body be so associated with sin and disobedience? Simply put, if the spirit and sex have been linked in our oppression, then they must also be linked in the strategy toward our liberation. ~ I 98 3, I 3~)

Castillo uses the epistolary form as a vehicle, enabling her to move freely from one issue to another, from one country to another as she describes the relationship between the sexes. But more importantly, it is the epistolary from which gives her the flexibility to describe the differences between the way women are viewed in the United States and Mexico. In an entry devoted to recollections about her experiences in Veracruz, Teresa recalls a conversation she had with Ponce, a Mexican engineer:

> He began, "I think you are a 'liberal woman.' Am I correct?" His expression meant to persuade me that it didn't matter what I replied. In the end he would win. He would systematically strip away all my pretexts, reservations, and defenses, and end up in bed with me.
>
> In that country, the term "liberated woman" meant something other than what we had strived for back in the United States. In this case it simply meant a woman who would sleep nondiscriminately with any man who came along. I inhaled deeply from the strong cigarette he had given me and released the smoke in the direction of his face which diminished the sarcastic expression. (73)

In postmodernist fashion Castillo provides her readers with a pastiche of what has been a nearly invisible section of Chicano culture. Her fragmented approach is a powerful tool that enables her to negotiate and mediatev (81) as she probes the female psyche. Her style reflects the influence and power of many of Latin America's greatest writers. And because of this it comes as no surprise that she dedicates her novel "in memory of the master of the game, Julio Cortazar" (Introduction, n. p.~.

Following Cortazar, Castillo is also a mistress of play, an author who seems to intuitively understand the issues at stake when providing a puzzlelike narrative. The text comes to life as a series of games revolving around courtship, wit, and women. In the opening letter to the reader, Castillo playfully suggests three proposed readings of her novel: "It is the author's duty to alert the reader that this is not a book to be read in the usual sequence. All letters are numbered to aid in following any one of the author's proposed options: For the Conformist; For the

Cynic; For the Quixotic" ("Dear Reader," n. p.~. She closes by including a message "For the reader committed to nothing but short fiction, all the letters read as separate entities. Good luck whichever journey you choose! " Castillo forces her readers to select a sequence; the interpretation of an itinerary through her text is in fact left open to them. By taking this step she has managed to release her readers from what could be referred to as her personal biases or subjective interpretations. Castillo's narrative strategy aimed at releasing her readers from a prescribed reading, encourages them to become active participants in her text. Umberto Eco's concept of the "open work" is reminiscent of Castillo's process of textual production.

> [i] "open works," insofar as they are in movement, are characterized by the invitation to make the work together with the author and [iij on a wider level [as a subgenus in the species "work in movement"] there exist works, which though organically completed, are "open" to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli. [iiil Every work of art, even though it is produced by following an explicit poetics of necessity, is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire a new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal performance. (1979, 63)

Castillo's use of the "open work" structure allows her to become an active participant in her own novel. She is in this way not only mediating between "personal narrative" and "objective description," but also between her role as author and her role as reader. It is through this mediation process, as an aside to the reader, that she raises questions regarding the issue of authority and interpretation, an issue which has become problematic in the disciplines of history and anthropology. We could very easily think of Castillo'~ text as meta- ethnography. (82)
Thus Castillo's novel functions as a linguistic artifact that does more to inform readers about the Chicana's struggle for self-definition than many of the contemporary theoretical efforts, which because of their failure to consider race, ethnicity, and class as variables have produced ineffective, onedimensional paradigms. In The MixquiaLuala Letters Castillo attempts to retaliate against social injustice and inequality by documenting what is at risk when the Chicana defies

authority in order to break away from the stagnant traditions and ideals that smother and suppress female desire. She explores the female psyche—the unspeakable, unveiling secrets and taboos in language that are profound and whimsical, perverse and waggish. U1timately, the text can be read as a revolt against order, which eloquently illustrates why it is essential for feminists to expose and thereby destroy the power of any outside or foreign "authority" by creating a space for themselves. The novel reveals how subjective experiences provide relevant strands of information, which are essential to creating a space that is fundamental to the Chicana's self- definition process. In this way Castillo's epistolary novel [like mainstream feminist theory) is effective in simultaneously marking out women as special selves and claiming, in Marilyn Strathern's words, "that knowledge of the self as such can come only from acknowledging this special nature" {1984, 22). (83)