

Reviews

I, LATINA

LUZ MARIA MARTINEZ REVIEWS FELLOW LATINAS ANA CASTILLO'S MIXQUIAHUALA LETTERS AND SANDRA CISNEROS' WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK

In my euphoria at learning that Latina writers are hitting the best seller list not only in the US but also internationally, I sat down to read back to back Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek*. The stories I encountered mirrored my life and captured the essence, contradictions, pains, and passions of being a Latina in the United States.

Different from the writings of other immigrant women in the US, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and *Woman Hollering Creek* pointedly and saliently depict what it is like to journey through life straddling two cultures, while asserting only one identity.

The largest immigrant community in the United States are Latinos. Mostly coming from Mexico and Puerto Rico, many of us are children of poor migrants who had come seeking out the land of "milk and honey." But because we are poor and a people of color and minority ethnic cultures, we find that the honey is laced with vinegar and the milk is curdled. Our geographical proximity to our native lands—Mexico, Puerto Rico and the rest of Latin America—

make us different from many other immigrant groups both past and present. We have what sociologists call "one foot in the US and the other in the homeland." Unlike other immigrant groups in the US we try hard not to assimilate, choosing to maintain and strengthen our extended family connections across boundaries. It is these mesh of filial and cultural ties that give us our pride, identity and sense of belonging.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's my generation became the first large contingent of Latinos in the U. S. to have formal education. The Civil Rights Acts and the newly established equal opportunity quotas finally gave many of us an opportunity to go through college and have careers. Many of those who took this option were women. Suddenly we had a chance to work at a career, and to avoid early marriage and motherhood which was the only choice given our mothers. We were rife for the feminist movement, which at that time was energizing society. It took some time however for us to define our feminism since the movement in its early years had an overwhelmingly white and middle-class composition. We struggled with our own

contradictions: we resisted the voices of white women on the frontlines who seemed to sing a different tune from us, yet we could not help but hear the pained and anguished cries of our own mothers, sisters, neighbors and friends.

Like myself, Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros are products of these times. The stories in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and *Woman Hollering Creek*, resonate with the struggle of that first generation of educated, liberated, and proud Latinas in the US during that period in our life which Castillo calls our "fledgling womanhood."

Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is the story of best friends Tere and Alicia told through a series of the former's letters to the latter. Mixquiahuala is where the two met: an obscure, pre-conquest Mexican village, as Tere describes it. A daughter of migrant laborer, Tere describes herself as a woman with dark hair and Asian eyes. In contrast, Alicia has fair skin and hair, traits that give no hint that her grandmother was a Spanish gypsy who had sang strange, dark love songs. Her parents had kept these connections away from her; they have long embraced main-

stream America's ideals and way of life.

These two women from different places in life navigate its many byways. They look for love in all the wrong places, test their values, and take in life's pains and glories. Tere the writer of the letters, conjures up memories of days gone by in her and Alicia's parallel lives. Each letter reveals the intimacy of their friendship and the depths of their being.

Ana Castillo, writes in the lyrical and mystical way only a poet knows how to. The two friends—one of indigenous roots, the other of European roots but both assimilated into the US mainstream culture—signify the tensions that exist between Latinos and their colonized roots. The descendants of the colonizers, shunning the isolation of being boxed in the role of Spanish-speaking citizens of Europe now, seek to identify with Latin America. They now attempt to understand and imbibe a culture that has survived colonialism and absorbed the varied colors of all the people that settled in the Americas.

My grandmother used to tell us her grandchildren, "you should not be afraid of the dead, for they will not hurt you but be fearful of the living for they are the ones who can do you harm." I grew up in a culture where the supernatural is seen as a natural part of life, and sometimes a medium through which life's profound meanings are discerned. In letter Twenty Four, (the letters are identified only as numbers), the two women are revealed to have experienced being "visited" by beings from another dimension. This letter strongly shows how much Ana Castillo has achieved in giving words and color to those experiences and feelings that my Latina friends and I have always taken for granted:

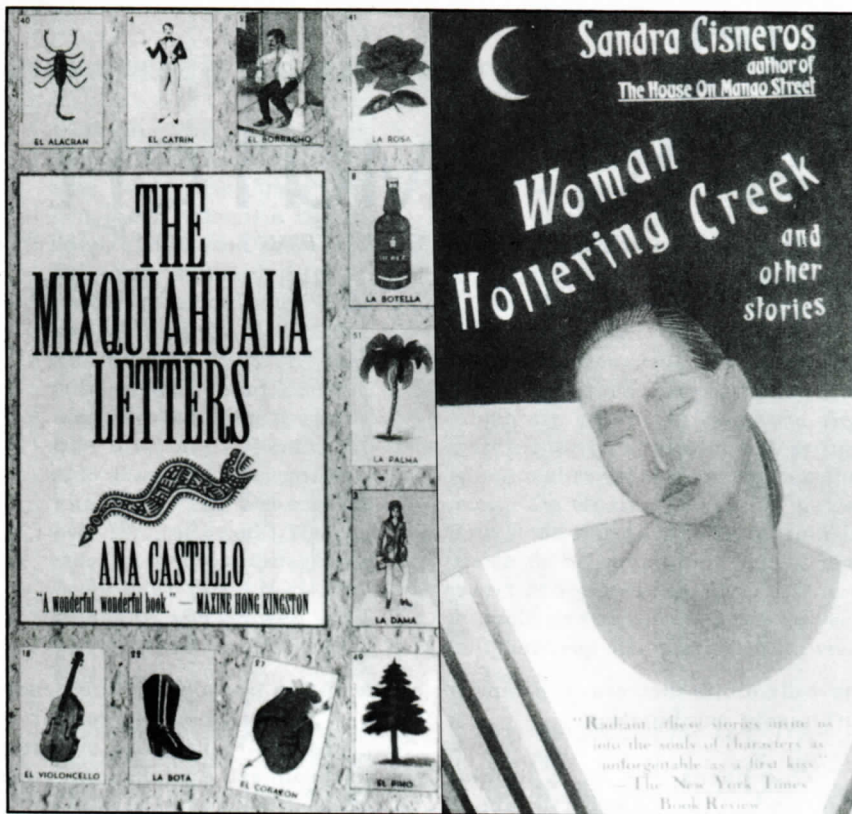
"There were hushed stirrings in the house...Furious rain poured outside on the patio, bathing the foliage that adorned the building's facade. We had gone to bed in scant clothing, the humidity of the night suffocated. Again, I was stirred from my sleep. I felt you leave the bed. You went to close the door to our room. We had deliberately locked it before going to bed. The skeleton key was in the lock. You had just closed it, turned the skeleton key...yet we both watched as it deliberately pushed inward. You jumped back into bed and my hands were moist as I reached out and clutched you...I recalled my spiritual guardian's advice, my grandmother, who had told me long ago: only fear could harm one...Clutching the crystal-beaded rosary in my hands and winding it around your fingers against my chest. I whispered with an exorcists will in your ear.. Our Father Who art in heaven...You've never been indoctrinated into an institutionalized religion, never heard eerie folktales from the old ones who lived in the Sierra Madre or near ancient ruins: never feared God or Satan, but there you were, quivering spasmodically in my arms. Hallowed be thy name."

Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* is a compilation of well-written, witty short stories that demonstrate this writer's ability to capture the absurdities and contradictions, as well as the zest and spice of being a Latina.

Mexicans in the US hold on feverishly to their customs, traditions and beliefs. For us who are

predominantly Catholic, our religion is an integral part of our everyday life. We may or may not know it, but our brand of strong Catholicism is actually infused with the pagan beliefs of our ancestors from all three continents—Africa, Asia and the Americas. To most people then, including Catholics from other cultures, our religiosity is somewhat odd. We believe for instance in a Holy Trinity that presides over hundreds of saints who each can and will make miracles for and grant the prayers of the most devout. We therefore make it our business to know which saint does what and what ritual is appropriate for each heaven-bound petition. The story *Little Miracles, Kept Promises* shows this side of our identity as a people. Irreverent but not disrespectful, Sandra injects humor, reflecting on the issues that affect Mexicans and Mexican-Americans alike.

In *Eyes of Zapata*, Cisneros deals with our belief that love and hate are equal just as life and death are. Zapata is of course the revered Mexican revolutionary. Cisneros cleverly uses the legendary hero's reputation with women as a starting point of this tale about the complexities of Latina women's relationships with men. The narrator is one of Zapata's mistresses. We see her adoration of her lover, and we feel the heat and passion between them. Yet we are also made aware of her unflinching awareness of Zapata's boorish machismo. She makes us rile against the injustices women suffer just because they are women. More profoundly, she lets us into her secret: she can love and hate this man, her lover, at the same time and with equal fierceness because she is stronger than this great revolutionary. As she tries to understand his philandering she says:



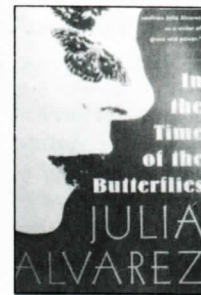
" You have your pas-times. That's how it's said, no? Your many pastimes. I know you take to your bed women half my age...These stupid country girls, how can they resist you? The magnificent Zapata in his elegant charro costume, riding a splendid horse. Your wide sombrero a halo around your face. You're not a man for them; you're a legend, a myth, a god. But you are as well my husband. Albeit sometimes. How can a woman be happy in love? To love like this, to love as strong as we hate. That is how we are, the women of my family. We never forget a wrong. We know how to love and we know how to hate."

With Cisneros' stories we are allowed to traverse different boundaries, to move through time and history. The reader quickly finds herself immersed in two cultures without losing sight of one singular

identity. Or one's feminist perspective. The feminist perspective though that permeates Cisneros' stories is not the same as the viewpoint of sisters from the North or even of native Latin American women. This is a perspective that recognizes and deals with our contradictions as Latinas who have "one foot in the US and the other in the homeland." We are reluctant to be like our mothers and sisters, yet we embrace their own love for passion and romance. We hold on to a culture that is intensely patriarchal, because that same culture also defines our people's great spirit. In *Woman Hollering Creek*, Sandra Cisneros boldly, passionately and sensuously brings this to the fore.

Luz Maria Martinez was born in Mexico and grew up in the same streets in Chicago as Castillo and Cisneros. She has been a Philippine resident in the last four years.

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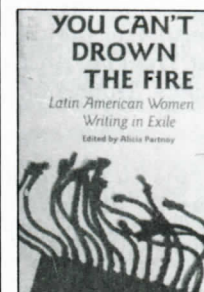


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