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### **Rebellious Reading: The Dynamics of Chicana/o Cultural Literacy**

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#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2d05x6r6>

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#### **Publication Date**

2004-07-01

## **Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*: A Postmodern Feminist Literacy**

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The latest wave of Chicana/Latina writing, produced primarily in the last two decades, has proposed new ways of reading and interpreting the minority experience and identity. This new literacy has been defined by a radical departure from the previous nationalist and exclusive paradigms of self-imagining and positioning proposed during the 1960s and '70s cultural/literary movements of diverse Latino groups. Committed to non-essentialist and non-masculinist conceptions of *mestizaje*, contemporary Chicana/Latina writers have resignified cultural hybridity into a "differential" strategy of individual and communal emancipation and a political commitment to cross-national alliances.

In order to discuss cultural hybridity as a practice of postmodern Chicana/Latina literacy, this paper focuses on Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1987) as a border text that interrogates the mono-cultural/mono-national notions of self-definition and positioning. This Chicana narrative brings about a "rebellious reading" of gender, race, sexuality, and geopolitics by employing cultural hybridity as a political practice of female emancipation and coalitional positioning. Its epistolary structure maps out feminist reading technologies that offer oppositional interpretations of cultural hegemony and patriarchy while exploring the liberating potential of differential hybrid subjectivity.

In order to expand on cultural hybridity as a politically invested practice of Chicana/Latina literacy, this discussion draws from Chela Sandoval's theory on the methodology

of the oppressed, which theorizes cultural hybridity as a “differential” form of oppositional consciousness.

### **Cultural Hybridity as a Strategy of Survival**

In her elaboration of the “methodology of the oppressed,”<sup>1</sup> Chela Sandoval theorizes strategies of resistance that intervene in the postmodern patterns of objectification and oppression, advocating use of any tools at one’s disposition in order to sustain survival and assert resistance. Appropriation of dominant ideological forms and their application in political struggle allows for subversion of oppressive protocols of subjugation while ensuring social transformation. The significance of this political proposal lies in the possibility of transformation of existing material conditions into sources of liberating strategies. Sandoval emphasizes that it is necessary “to comprehend, respond to, and act upon” economic, political, and cultural forces affecting consciousness and identity (“New Sciences” 408), understanding that these forces create “particular subject positions within which the subordinated can legitimately function” (“Feminist Forms” 57). As she recognizes cultural hybridity as an effect of postmodern conditions of cultural transnationalization, she theorizes it as a “differential postmodern form of oppositional consciousness” and a strategy of survival that has emerged out of postmodernity (“New Sciences” 409).

Relating her argument to Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of “mestiza consciousness” and Donna Haraway’s “cyborg skills,”<sup>2</sup> Sandoval identifies hybridity’s potential of an oppositional political stance as it undermines master narratives of sociopolitical forces—racism, colonialism, patriarchy, etc.—with its principles of mobility, partiality, non-essentialism, and cyborg forms. Challenging singularity, homogeneity, and totality of social reality, the positioning in hybridity

generates agency and differential consciousness that counter objectification and oppression without reproducing hegemony that such positioning strives to overthrow. This is why Sandoval places hybrid positioning at the basis of “differential consciousness:” emerging out of “correlation, intensities, junctures, crises,” hybridity allows for a continual movement between and among different oppositional ideological positionings (“Feminist Forms” 59).

In addition, validating the impossibility of wholeness and exposing the limitations of essentialism, the hybrid mode of being generates coalitional forms of social positioning that insist on an alignment of different social subjects and theories around affinity rather than difference. Such lines of affinity, asserts Sandoval, occur through “attraction, combination, and relation carved out of and in spite of difference” (“New Sciences” 413). This is the political/critical stance articulated in both U.S. third-world feminism and Haraway’s cyborg manifesto, political philosophies invested in “affinity-through-difference” for the sake of individual and social transformation. Sandoval sees the urgency of coalitional positioning precisely in the conditions of postmodern globalization that work across difference and essence in “techno-human” space.

As proponents of U.S. third-world feminism, both Anzaldúa and Sandoval advocate new subjectivities, strategic and multiple, grounded in differential and oppositional movement. Sandoval emphasizes them as “tactical and performative” and with “the capacity to de- and re-center depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted, depending upon the history of the moment” (“Feminist Forms” 60). As Chandra Mohanty points out, this form of agency is generated from the material conditions and the lived experience of the women of color: “[T]his is a notion of agency born of history and geography” (37). It is formed at the level of everyday life, configuring one’s self-identity and political consciousness within the context of specific socio-

political and cultural forces—at the intersection of gender, race, class, sexuality, and geopolitics. Facing multiple forms and sites of oppression, the new subjectivities perform strategies of resistance that utilize their multiple identities in order to contest hegemonic dualistic paradigms of “self vs. other.” In this way, their agency is formed through becoming that resists social forces and is directed toward a politicized mode of being that generates differential consciousness. In addition, although their agency is a response to specific social conditions, it also stems from their fluid positioning across cultural, racial, gender, and class boundaries.

### **Postmodern Feminist Consciousness**

Employing the differential concept of *mestizaje* as a transformational source of female self-affirmation and emancipation, Ana Castillo’s epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* presents “tactical and performative” subjectivities that emerge at the interstices of different cultural domains and under conditions of multiple oppression. Teresa, a young Mexican-American protagonist, embraces her double-voiced, hybrid identity as she attempts “to find a place to satisfy [her] yearning spirit” (52) and declare independence from “society’s tenets of heterosexist stereotypes” (45).

The novel dramatizes a female quest for identity and self-affirmation through a number of lyrical and introspective letters that the main narrator, Teresa, writes to her friend, Alicia. The letters are centered around Teresa and Alicia’s adventurous trips to Mexico and depict a development of the women’s friendship as they fight for the same cause—independence from social limitations and freedom of self-definition. Castillo employs the first-person narrative voice in order to reflect female selfhood in an intimate and direct way, as well as to grant agency to

woman's subjectivity and self-exploration. The self-reflexive style of the letters provides insight into the inner struggle of woman's self-definition caught between personal desires and repressive demands of the social order. In this way, the epistolary form of the novel allows the female subject to be the central consciousness in the textual narration and the individual self-evolvement, connecting the discursive agency with the self-defined subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

The main protagonists engage in a cross-national movement between the U.S. and Mexico in search of a new cultural space that would allow them a liberating sexual agency instead of submissive objectified roles they hold in both cultures. In this process of perpetual and subversive crossing, the women experience patriarchal abuse and objectification, but they also develop cross-cultural practices and alliances that help them ensure resistance in the cultural domains governed by patriarchy.

In the opening letter, the patriarchal concept of *machismo*<sup>4</sup> is immediately exposed as Teresa humorously describes her relatives: her uncle Fermín, who likes to flirt with women although he is married; her aunt, who does not go anywhere without her husband; and another uncle, who “cannot see a woman driving for anything in the world” or “a woman gallivanting around without her man” (17-18). This humorous tone, however, is not for the sake of a light and charming ethnographic lesson—right away it rings a satiric note that will grow into a direct and sharp criticism as the letters begin describing Teresa's and Alicia's experiences of patriarchal oppression.

Mapping out the protagonists' trips between Mexico and the U.S., Ana Castillo maintains that the ways in which women are confined are similar in both cultures. In Mexico, the two women are immediately categorized as “loose” because they travel alone, and in the U.S. their sexuality is labeled “homo” for they oppose marital conventions. Castillo also asserts that

marriage stereotypes are strongly present in the two cultural domains: “Stones of silent condemnation were thrown from every direction; relatives and friends who believed that ‘bad wives’ were bad people” (29). Subjected to patriarchal stereotypes and norms in both cultures, Teresa and Alicia’s quest for self-definition becomes further complicated as they experience a double weight of oppression and subjugation. Encountering the competing and contradictory forces of biculturalism, they experience an intensified form of patriarchal gender ideology and find themselves entrapped between two cultural orders. As Alvina Quintana notes, this text defines a woman’s experience while she is maneuvering between opposing realities that fail to acknowledge her existence.<sup>5</sup> This tactical maneuver reveals that, although cultural realities in Mexico and the U.S. are distinct and often mutually opposing, they have similar protocols of female subjugation. Patriarchy is thus unmasked as a cross-cultural phenomenon: although its articulation may vary in specific socio-cultural conditions, its patterns of oppression invariably target women as the subordinate sex.

Criticizing patriarchy as a cross-national practice, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* also exposes institutionalized forms of gender oppression. Throughout the narrative, the traditional Catholic church is portrayed as another system of patriarchal control, governed by limiting and contradictory norms that define women only in relation to men while condemning them as sinful for being in this relation. Being an integral part of the Latino experience, traditional Catholicism acts as an arbiter in social regulation of gender roles in U.S. Latino communities. The author exposes the patriarchal logic of the church morals in Letter Four, where Teresa remembers her first confessional with the priest who did not trust her sexual innocence:

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 waver under the torment, although feeling my knees raw, air spare, he accused outright: *Are you going to tell me that you haven't wanted to be with a man? You must have let one do more than...than what?* (30)

The passage shows the religious myth of female purity colliding with the social stereotype of female sinfulness. Constituted by male desire, women are condemned as the sole guilt bearers, although men apparently participate in the same "sinful" act. The dichotomy of la *virgen/la puta* (virgin/whore) reveals its dynamic labeling of womanhood in relation to male expectations.

While woman faces the impossible demands of the patriarchal order, requiring her to be saintly, she is at the same time morally accused for the impossibility of this task. Her very physicality and humanity become regarded as her failure, or, conversely, her lack of complicity with male sexual desire is seen as a frustration of male libidinal energy.

Constructing Teresa and Alicia's trips as a search for emancipation and a process of self-exploration, the novel advocates a rebellion against female victimization by patriarchy.

Experimenting with different sexual encounters in Mexico, Teresa and Alicia take control of their sexuality. They refuse male definitions of womanhood and assert agency in the process of self-definition. Teresa clearly articulates this when a Mexican man mistakes woman's liberation for sexual promiscuity. She corrects him: "What you perceive as 'liberal' is my independence to choose what i do, with whom, and when. Moreover, it also means that i may choose not to do it, with anyone, ever" (79). When insisting on freedom from men's restrictive rules, woman



becomes marked again as a transgressor—an immoral and worthless person: “*Liberal: trash, whore, bitch*” (79).

Situating gender and sexuality in a cross-cultural context, this scene underscores the clash of signification: women’s struggle for self-determination and sexual emancipation receives a different signifying context in the two cultures. In Mexico, it still denotes transgressive, non-permissible behavior that places woman in the stigmatized and outcast position of a prostitute: “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” (79). Determined to continue their feminist struggle in Mexico too, Teresa and Alicia consciously assert their emancipated subjectivities against the patriarchal stereotype of a (married) woman that supposes her to be de-sexed, de-physicalized, and domesticated: they adopt counter action, leaving the domestic space and openly asserting their sexuality in the public domain.

The narrative places feminist resistance in both the private and public spheres, underlining that the two realms contain the same protocols of oppression and regulation, governed by the culturally encoded concept of female inferiority and submission. The letters trace Teresa’s and Alicia’s assertion of critical opposition in the sites of marriage, heterosexual relationships, traditional religion, familial connections, and artistic expression. As the female protagonists renounce limiting and objectifying roles designed for women in the patriarchal order, they adopt what Chela Sandoval defines as “methodology of the oppressed,” methods of survival and resistance under the postmodern conditions of objectification and subjugation.<sup>6</sup>

Castillo’s narrative protagonists consciously confront stereotypical concepts of womanhood in both cultures through deconstruction and critical opposition: they de-mythologize

*marianismo* and *machismo*, traditional concepts of gender roles in Latino cultures, by exposing these social norms as oppressive protocols of male control. Teresa's introspective letters disclose distinct norms of conduct for men and women, condemning a double standard that allows all freedom to men while denying it to women. Also, they illustrate that *machismo* exists across cultures, as a patriarchal system that assigns to a woman a role of a sacrificing and submissive caregiver without granting her individual freedom:

A woman takes care of the man she has made her life with, cleans, cooks, washes his underwear, does as if he were her only child, as if he had come out of her womb. In exchange, he may pay her bills, he may not. He may give her acceptance into society by replacing her father's name with his, or he may choose to not (*sic*). He may make her feel like a woman, or rather, how she has been told a woman feels with a man—or he may not. (118)

By emphasizing the women's awareness of these patriarchal codes and their refusal to conform to them, Ana Castillo demonstrates their capacity to read cultural signs below the surface and assert an agentic subversion of male ideology. It is interesting to note that in order to convey the characters' subversion of feminine gender roles, the author allows them to borrow from masculine ideology. Teresa and Alicia use the "male code" of behavior—a great sexual freedom, personal independence, decision to travel alone, drink, smoke, etc.—in order to reclaim their own freedom. This practice of meta-ideologizing, of adopting and re-signifying the very tools that confine women, de-essentializes gender<sup>7</sup> and allows an appropriation of patriarchal practices as tools for emancipation. Castillo affirms Sandoval's claim that a strategic appropriation of

dominant ideological forms may engender some form of liberation. It is important to emphasize that this is a temporary solution, but it nevertheless serves as a potent criticism of the dominant social structure.

By engaging her protagonists in a feminist resistance through practices of critical opposition, deconstruction, semiology, and meta-ideologizing, the author criticizes and rejects cultural/sexual stereotypes perpetuated in both Mexican and Anglo American culture. However, she does not completely discard and break away from these cultures. By allowing her narrative protagonists to find liberating concepts in the available cultural material, Castillo advocates a new hybrid consciousness, an awareness of multiple cultural self-definition and inclusiveness of different cultural realities. As they adopt a critical stance toward Anglo-American and Mexican cultural traditions, Teresa and Alicia also embrace both cultures through a strategic hybridity. They enjoy the greater agency that women have in the U.S., but they also need the close connection with family and community experienced in the Mexican tradition. They choose to define themselves at the crossroads of two cultures, resisting cultural hegemony and patriarchy while at the same time synthesizing a plurality of liberating positions and possibilities.

As a Mexican-American, Teresa experiences Mexican culture as an intimate part of her identity. For her, the journey to Mexico becomes a way of reconnecting with her primordial being: “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. [i] searched for my home... [i] chose Mexico” (52). Castillo posits that the reconnection with Mexican culture and people gives Teresa a sense of belonging to the originary place while affirming her double-voiced self: “i too was of that small corner of the world. i was of that mixed blood, of fire and stone, timber and

vine, a history passed down from mouth to mouth, since the beginning of time..." (101). Teresa needs this affirmation of belonging and origins as an antidote to patriarchal/racial discrimination that she encounters as a woman of color. Paradoxically, she seeks affirmation in the culture that provides her with a source of desired self-identification and at the same time denies her agency of free female identification by its patriarchal protocols. This tension points back to her ambivalent need to be "accepted back into society" and yet be independent of its "patriarchal tenets," the condition that is frequently denied to her but that she nevertheless struggles to accomplish.

Alicia is a white American of Spanish/European descent, but her racial identification is presented throughout the narrative in ambiguous and shifting terms. Although she has darker skin (her grandmother supposedly was a Spanish Roma) and can pass in Latin America as a non-gringa—"couldn't they see by our coloring that we were not gringas" (69)—Teresa identifies her as "the privileged white girl of the suburbs," (48) "WASP chick or JAP from Manhattan's west side" (50), seeing Alicia's high-class and European origin as "white, privileged, and unjust." (50) Initially thinking that they "could not possibly relate" (50), Teresa changes her perception after they become friends. "You were partially white," (50) Teresa concludes, realizing that they share, in spite of differences, a common experience of patriarchal oppression and female solidarity.<sup>8</sup>

Sharing with Teresa the same quest for emancipated selfhood, Alicia too experiences Mexican culture as a catalyst for the definition of her identity. As she gets to know intimately Mexican people, customs, places, and history, she finds a source of affirmation and inspiration. By fusing different cultural experiences, she creates a space of greater personal freedom and creativity. "The idea of the journey that would lead from ruin to ruin offered your creativity new

dimensions...” (52), writes Teresa to Alicia in one of the letters. Castillo shows that cultural hybridity may be used as a strategy to make connections to one’s deepest feelings and sense of self. At the same time, this self-knowledge may offer an entry into the knowledge of the Other, transcending difference and creating cross-connections.

Both female protagonists challenge paradigms of unicultural and national self-definition by fusing different cultural horizons and grounding their identities in polyvalent spaces of cultural hybridity. Castillo demonstrates that this synthesis of different cultural aspects does not represent a mere assembly but a creative selection and combination that is used as a strategy of resistance and critical positioning. Questioning of tradition does not signify a complete refusal of the traditional ways, she conveys in her narrative, but rather a critical contestation and deconstruction of the systems of control and power. Teresa and Alicia break paradigms of patriarchal regulation and cultural prejudices but also explore new ways by being heterogeneous, mobile, and hybrid. Their perspective is oppositional and yet synthesizing, for they develop new strategies of self-creation through a constant movement between conflicting essentialist definitions of womanhood and ethnic identity. This movement is symbolized in their geographical border-crossings through which they develop and affirm their fluid subjectivities.

In Norma Alarcón’s analysis of *The Mixquiahuala Letters*,<sup>9</sup> Teresa and Alicia’s opposition is discussed as unsuccessful. Alarcón claims that, although they act as free agents in their expression and practice of sexuality, the women still remain imprisoned by heterosexist ideology. It is true that Teresa and Alicia often adopt heterosexist ideology as they explore different sexual experiences. Even when they face male manipulation and humiliation, they are sometimes unable to break away. Many times, Teresa goes back to her husband when she feels lonely, and Alicia looks for comfort in other men when her boyfriend leaves her. Also, when the

novel is read, as Carl Gutiérrez-Jones suggests, through the lesbian erotic register, Teresa and Alicia's relation and position are undoubtedly frustrated by heterosexuality (115). Gutiérrez-Jones, too, sees their transgression undercut by their persistent desire to connect with men; but, as he points out, this "failure" is critically connected to larger forces that determine social interrelations (117).

Teresa herself begins to understand this connection, becoming aware of the patriarchal manipulation via heterosexual norms: "We were not free of society's tenets of heterosexist stereotypes to be convinced we could exist indefinitely without the demands and complications one aggregated with the supreme commitment to a man" (45). Therefore, what distinguishes these women as oppositional to instead of simply "imprisoned" by heterosexuality is their awareness of being entrapped. Castillo asserts that this need for approval illustrates how difficult it is to find affirmation in the society that denies female agency and self-determination. In fact, this need for man's approval points to the "larger forces," to the social order that exploits and solidifies the social marginalization of women. In addition, these very moments of objectification act as transformative forces in their continual struggle, for an impetus for transformation and resistance arises in the moment of oppression. Teresa's and Alicia's experience of marginalization and confinement by patriarchy initiates their quest for liberation, and as they actively and often effectively employ some forms of resistance and subversion, they do demonstrate agency and differential consciousness in their quest for self-determination

In addition, Castillo underscores that women's alliances do not have to base their strategy and unity on the premise of essentialism—rather, their coalition and methodology should be based on political affinity and agenda. Teresa and Alicia unite not only because they are women, but also because they share the experience of marginalization and objectification and are

determined to transform it. As postmodern subjects, they embrace their particularized conditions but sustain the possibility of shared knowledge and experience through which they can initiate a joined transformation of individual and social identity.

It has to be emphasized that even though *The Mixquiahuala Letters* portrays female experience of patriarchy in sometimes different racial and ethnic terms, it underscores that the feminist alliance and methodology of resistance are grounded on solidarity and unity. This is why it cannot be said that this text addresses the concerns of only Chicanas and other women of color. What is crucial here is the experience of oppression which is not exclusively racialized or ethnicized. The narrative shows that Alicia is abused and threatened by patriarchy although she is not a “woman of color,” according to Teresa.<sup>10</sup> Even though they are not related through racial “essence,” Ana Castillo unites these women in a struggle for the same cause—resistance to oppression and the “New Woman’s Emergence” (35)—foregrounding the shared ideological positioning and what Chandra Mohanty emphasizes as the “common context of struggle rather than color or racial identifications” (7).

### **Strategic Hybridity**

*The Mixquiahuala Letters* presents, in Donna Haraway’s words, “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (154) of an in-between positioning adopted as a strategy of survival and liberation. Ana Castillo engages her female protagonists in tactical differential movement in(-between) divergent cultures and traditions in order to demand oppositional agency against patriarchal subjugation and against unitary paradigms of self-definition. The novel advocates feminist struggle against abuse and objectification by mapping

out the protagonists' critical maneuver between essentialist positions and depicting their strategic positioning in cultural hybridity.

Becoming, as Bhabha puts it, a "terrain for elaboration of new strategies of selfhood" (1) in the context of female experience, the ambiguous and polyvalent space of biculturalism is transformed in this text from an initial condition of entrapment into a site of emancipation and self-affirmation. It is constituted as a locus where one culture contests the other and thus reveals alternative and critical modes of cultural practice and subject positioning. As it situates its female protagonists in this shifting and unstable terrain, this border text demonstrates that an effective subversion of oppressive aspects may be forged through a creative synthesis of empowering possibilities and a critical opposition to patterns of subjugation. In addition, the novel reaffirms that the survival in the space of biculturalism may engender hybrid, fluid, and multiple subjectivities that engage in the transformation of postmodern social reality through the "unity-across-difference."



## Notes

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1. Chela Sandoval, "New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed," in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray; and *Methodology of the Oppressed*.
2. See Gloria Anzaldúa's "La conciencia de la mestiza / Towards a New Consciousness" in *Borderlands / La frontera* and Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.
3. One of the frequently posed questions by literary critics in regards to the epistolary form of this novel addresses the absence of Alicia's voice, as the letters go in only one direction, from Teresa to Alicia. I interpret this absence through the novel's emphasis on self-reflexivity. The letters represent Teresa's dialogues with her own self, and the narration of the past events is her reconstruction of the quest for self-meaning. Alicia is the Other from whom Teresa distances herself and at the same time identifies with in her process of introspective self-examination and projection.
4. It has to be emphasized that *machismo* is not limited to Mexican culture only, since its patriarchal code of traditional gender roles is present across cultures. For a detailed analysis of *machismo* and its different and shifting meanings, see, for example, Matthew C. Gutmann's anthropological study *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996).
5. See Quintana's analysis in *Home Girls*, 83.
6. In her article, "New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed," Sandoval distinguishes specific methods: 1) semiology, or sign-reading; 2) deconstruction; 3) meta-ideologizing; 4) democratics, which drives the previous three technologies; and 5) differential movement, which directs the other four technologies. These five technologies

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together comprise “the methodology of the oppressed,” which leads to “differential mode of oppositional social movement.” For a detailed discussion, see the article.

7. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Judith Butler theorizes gender as performance, demonstrating performative character and ideological construction of gender roles.

8. Clearly, rather than a racial concept, whiteness is presented in the text as the symbol of economic privilege and of the removal from multiple oppression in American society. Coming from a higher economic stratum and an Anglo family, Alicia is privileged, or “white;” yet, it is a relative privilege since, as a woman, she is exposed to patriarchal oppression, which makes her “partially white” and closer to the social marginalization that Teresa experiences as a “woman of color.”

9. Norma Alarcón, “The Sardonic Powers of the Erotic in the Work of Ana Castillo.”

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