In her theoretical and literary production, the Chicana theorist and poet Ana Castillo brings together questions of gender oppression with the colonial dimension which has informed Chicano cultural history. Her feminist border perspective, which Castillo has defined *Xicanisma*, especially insists on issues of mestiza women’s resistance to the machismo that pervades all aspects of Mexican and Chicano culture.

*The Mixquiahuala Letters*, Castillo’s well-known 1986 epistolary novel, directly links the discourse on women’s oppression to the colonial past, through the Letters that Teresa writes to Alicia, apparently recalling the journey that the two mestizas took ten years before, when in their twenties, these two women headed to Mexico leaving behind the liberal atmosphere of their birthplace, the United States. They planned the journey after attending a summer school in Mexico City, where they studied Mexican language and culture.

The Mexican village of Mixquiahuala, after which the novel is titled, is “a Pre-Conquest village of obscurity, neglectful of progress, electricity notwithstanding” (*Letters* 25), where the two young students spend a weekend planned by the summer school. Mixquiahuala becomes a sort of soul’s place, which can metaphorically describe the deep, or rather abysmal, journey, taken by Alicia and Teresa; indeed, as Teresa writes, the Mixquiahuala experience “took us back at least to the time of colonial repression of peons and women who hid behind shutters to catch a glimpse of the street with its brusque men” (26).

Teresa’s Indian physical traits make her different in appearance from her *gringa* friends: “I, with dark hair and Asian eyes, must’ve appeared like the daughter of a migrant worker or a laborer in the North (which of course, I was)” (27); her story, together with her social destiny, is somewhat irremediably inscribed in her own skin: “I was nothing so close to godliness as fair-skinned or wealthy or even a simple gringa with a birthright ticket to upward mobility in the land paved with gold” (27). Now the two women are both in their thirties, but the narrating voice is only Teresa’s, who addresses her close friend (both her “travelling” companion and a “life” companion), with a sort of interior monologue—sketches from the past which appear so promising.

Each letter describes a special emotional situation, a particular mood dense with the liberal atmosphere widespread among American men and women during the mid Seventies. This liberal feeling is destined to clash against the hard core of the Mexican land, still oppressive and violent toward women. Yet, the liberal atmosphere, too, eventually reveals the unexpected and hidden forms of women’s oppression still harboured in American everyday life. Once back in Chicago after her Mexican journey, Teresa eventually breaks up her marriage as she is “no longer prepared to face a mundane life of need and resentment, accept monogamous commitments and honor
patriarchal traditions” (28-29). One could read each letter separately, as a single act, a brief moral tale, on which Teresa projects her mature and detached vision, which is essentially a rich and insightful inquiry on female psychology and on the subjection of woman to man, in all its varied hues.

Women’s subjection to men is perhaps the strongest theme in these letters, as evident in the epigraph chosen by Ana Castillo for her book, a bitter quote from Anaïs Nin, the French-American writer who dared to publish, between the Thirties and Sixties, erotic novels in addition to her personal diaries: “I stopped loving my father a long time ago. What remained was the slavery to a pattern.”

Yet, Castillo’s explicit acknowledgment to the Argentinean writer Julio Cortázar’s masterpiece Rayuela, makes it a model both for her rhetorical choices and for her suggestions to the reader: “Dear Reader: 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” (9). There are three proposed options: for the conformist; for the cynic; and for the Quixotic. This indicates that one can skip letters at will, which will therefore disappear, or one can reorder their sequence. As to myself, I have chosen the Quixotic, which implies that I read Letter One at the very end of my path, after Letter Thirty-Seven, and skip Letters Thirty-Eight, Thirty-Nine and Forty.

The novelist perhaps requires from her reader a truly personal engagement, a sort of complicity throughout the whole narrative, a certain awareness and commitment, most likely to remind us that every text is above all an actual event, a thoroughly inter-textual occurrence, which necessarily implies the reader’s reception, in its unique and unpredictable modality.

Two young women travelling from one Mexican village to the other, from Yucatán to Mexico City, to “find themselves,” as proclaimed by the ruling motto of the young American generation in the Seventies, Alicia and Teresa genuinely believe they are part and parcel of those values which unmistakably represent America: freedom, emancipation, pioneering spirit, and equal rights for men and women. In the course of their journey, they realize, to their great disappointment, that, while two travelling women can certainly wander about, they definitely cannot do so in the mode of the many travellers who are most congenial to narratives of the American spirit—the mythical narrative of the journey on the road, celebrated by Jack Kerouac at the end of the Fifties, which became and a sort of existential myth for generations of young Americans. Alicia and Teresa soon find out that their wandering on the road, with the required faded jeans, bandanas to hide their hair, and loose bags on shoulders, stigmatizes them as easy prey to the rapacity of the Mexican male.

On Mexican territory—a mythical point of arrival for many American travellers and writers on the road—two women travelling alone can only be looking for trouble; here, two women travelling alone are definitely “trash,” “whores” with no dignity. With no settled home, like the Biblical devil, here two young women are surely considered the devil himself, since all women, as Teresa’s uncle will insist in Letter One, are possessed by the devil (20).

From lyrical evocations of marvellous landscapes, the special fragrances and colours of Mexican villages and the Ocean, to the evocation of moments when the two women seriously risk their life, as eligible prey to male violence, the letters unveil the limit of the on the road myth as an intrinsically male myth, a myth which is impossible for women, though emancipated and grown up in a liberal state, to inhabit:
we had abruptly appeared in Mexico as two snags in its pattern ... How revolting we were, susceptible to ridicule, abuse, disrespect. We would have hoped for respect as human beings, but the only respect granted a woman is that which a gentleman bestows upon the lady. Clearly, we were no ladies. What was our greatest transgression? We travelled alone. (65)

While in Yucatán, the two young women feel they are always under the scrutiny of predators’ eyes, as men mock them and women watch them with disrespect and disdain. At an outdoor cafe, two engineers who happen to be in the area for work ask them if they are South American or gringas. When one of them comes up to Teresa with this comment: “I think you are a ‘liberal woman’” (79), Teresa comments: “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). “Liberal: trash, whore, bitch” (79), Teresa jots down immediately, as if explaining to herself the new meaning of the word in Mexico.

The Letters that Teresa writes to her friend apparently repeat the rhetorical gesture which lies at the origins of the modern epistolary novel, which, as theorist Sidonie Smith explains, given its autobiographical intent, aims at uncovering the feelings and events through which character passes, charting “a progressive narrative of individual destiny” (19).1 The self can thus emerge, and move toward full maturity and self-fulfilment, as if completing a specifically Western frame, without interruptions nor obscure blanks, but rather with a complete picture instead of a sequence of sketches with no relation nor consequentiality among them. Yet, in many respects the epistolary genre here is a false path to follow, a false clue. There is no self to re-compose and present in proper form, for we stand rather before resonant images, which evoke something deeply rooted in the Mediterranean-Catholic culture: that is, subjection of women to men.

Furthermore, these letters provoke an investigation concerning a very specific trauma common among adolescent women. Indeed, these are letters of sorrow for the death of something truly precious: women’s friendship and solidarity among women, which is somehow gets lost with little particular reason after marriage, leaving behind nostalgia for an aspect of the past which will not return. It is precisely this sense of loss, this poetic lament for the lost friendship, that gives Castillo’s Letters its delicately elegiac shade. In Letter Seven, Teresa recalls:

My mother had only been close to female companions during her adolescence. My older sisters never maintained close relationships with women after marriage. When a woman entered the threshold of intimacy with a man, she left the companions of her sex without looking back. (35)

Yet, Teresa, though deeply aware of her inner emancipatory drive, ends up going back to her husband. Alicia too, as Teresa recalls in Letter Thirty, has strived and struggled to trust only solidarity and ties with women, actively taking part in feminist discussion groups which were spreading through the Seventies (111). Still Alicia never manages to escape from the man-master dependence, because she is intimately and desperately in need of a man’s love: “You craved a family, to share life with a steady

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1 Sidonie Smith’s excellent inquiry on autobiography and the issues connected to the narrative I does not deal with Ana Castillo’s text; still, it offers precious clues to interpreting women’s feminist writing.
man, and children to sit around the table together, hold fast to each other during winters, and to go out to play in better days, always as one unit” (112).

This absolute need for love also necessarily brings humiliation, so intrinsic to some man-woman relations, as Teresa notes, at the beginning of Letter Thirty-Two:

“Love? In the classic sense, it describes in one syllable all the humiliation that one is born to and pressed upon to surrender to a man … 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 from 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. 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… There isn’t a woman who doesn’t understand this death trap.” (117-118)

The conclusion of this existential journey leaves hanging a bitter question that Teresa asks Alicia, in Letter One, which—given my choice of the Quixotic option—I read at the very end: “Alicia, I don’t know why so many of our ideals were stamped out like cigarette butts when we believed in them so furiously. Perhaps we were not furious enough” (22).

Ana Castillo’s epistolary novel, alluding to the literary genre that best permits the proper construction of the subject in narrative terms, here scatters into a fragile cobweb, a texture which does not allow to reconstruct a person, in its singularity and individuality, but rather rewrites the history of woman’s subjection to the patriarchal narrative, as the quote from Anaïs Nin reminds us.

In this discovery of the frame of woman’s subjection to man, another unacknowledged unconscious emerges at the same time: the repressed colonial past. This Mexican journey is a metaphor for the necessary self-discovery process that Ana Castillo defines conscientización—borrowing the term from the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Massacre 9-10).

In the chapter “The ancient roots of Machismo,” from her 1994 Massacre of the Dreamers. Essays on Xicanisma, Castillo insists on the crucial importance of conscientización for mestizas, mixed blood women (like Teresa and Alicia, for instance): the identity issues shared by people of mixed blood emerge as particularly complex, especially when confronted with the sexist politics that shape the lives of women. The conscientización process, just like Teresa and Alicia’s journey to Mexico, sheds light upon the intimate relation between machismo, meaning the cultural subjection of woman to man, and the colonial past, inscribed on the very skin of the two young women, both mestizas: if Teresa’s physical traits, her skin colour and her eyes, show her kinship with the native indios, who lived in those Mexican territories before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores, Alicia too reveals in her traits those mixed origins which result from colonial history: Alicia’s grandmother, on her father’s side, was from Andalucia and part gypsy. Teresa remembers: “You told me that gypsies are an oppressed dark people … Your parents had never wanted anything to do with that mongrel race, the lost tribe, and fought in America for American ideals and the American way of life” (Letters 31). With some disappointment Teresa concludes that she would have liked to ask Alicia’s parents “what those ideals had been” (32).

This explicit reference to the Spanish heritage is fundamental to explain how the roots of that machismo one finds at all levels of life, investing “our gender roles within our social networks, the nuclear family, extended family, and the community at large” (Massacre 69) in Chicano, Mexican, Latin culture, are indeed the result of that ancient
encounter with the Arab culture, which arrived in Mexico through the Spanish Catholic heritage:

This is due to our historical ties with Spain. Until shortly before Spain’s explorations and exploitation of the Americas Spain had been conquered and ruled by the North African followers of Muhammad for nearly eight hundred years. It is impossible to dismiss the tremendous influence Arabs had on Spanish culture after a period of domination that lasted over three times the duration of the United States’s existence as a nation… When acknowledging our kinship with the Arab world, we find uncanny similarities in both our peoples’ social behavior and attitudes toward women that may be traced back thousands of years to the African continent. (63)

Castillo puts forward here the anthropologist Germaine Tillion’s 1984 study, *The Republic of Cousins: Women’s Oppression in Mediterranean Society*, which traces part of the cultural and religious traditions in the Mediterranean and Latin areas back to that geo-cultural region known as the Maghreb:

The ancient culture of the Maghreb originated in North Africa, spread throughout the Mediterranean, and as a consequence of the conquest of the Americas via the Spaniards, to the Southwest United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean… The Maghreb people include all those whose language and culture are Berber-Arab. They reside in five states on that continent including Morocco, which is where we have a direct connection with the Moorish Conquest of Spain. (*Massacre* 71-72)

Castillo provides more details on the forms of machismo derived from North Africa (not necessarily Muslim), as a consequence of the Spanish Catholic heritage:

jealousy; vendettas; privilege of first born male; brother’s (male cousin’s) defence of sister’s honour; the patrimonial ties to incest; male sexual obsession as a result of female seclusion; the objectification of the female as enigma and aggrandizement of the male’s prowess and virility; brotherhood society; the origins of a certain type of ‘racism’. (72)

This complicated journey is, in many ways, unacceptable and intentionally forgotten, or rather erased by those living in the Americas, due, as Castillo explains, to the little knowledge of Mexican as well as Spanish cultural history, not to mention significant reluctance to accept any possible kinship with North Africa (70).

Because of this intriguing awareness of the interconnectedness of cultures distant in time and space, this awareness of the trans-national osmosis among Mediterranean shores, North African (Maghreb) and American shores, Castillo defines Tillion’s work “a provisional structure from which we may try to see across the centuries and continents how humanity has evolved and connected through migration and time” (71).

Indeed, it is for this very reason that Teresa and Alicia’s journey in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* can be envisaged as an inward journey, a psychic and visceral descent into one’s own unconscious. A *psycho/analysis* that sheds light upon something removed, something which has been repressed, that is the colonial past.

I would venture to call this colonial past *rimosso mediterraneo*, that is Mediterranean unconscious, to acknowledge and pay homage to the many efforts that scholars like Martin Bernal, Iain Chambers, Ranjana Khanna, just to name a few, have been making

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in these last decades to relocate identitarian politics, taking into account the effects of transatlantic migration and European colonialism. Their inquiries might seriously contribute to put an end to those modern, and racially informed, geographies of Euro-American power, which have so far delineated the physical and mental borders and boundaries of nations and peoples all over the world, ignoring the distant, unceasing and surprising connections among cultures and histories.

Works Cited


