Amara Graf
The State University of New York at Old Westbury

The Power of Poetic Praxis in the Literature of Pat Mora and Ana Castillo[1]

Chicana literary work is predominantly characterized by poetry. Lyrical poetic phrases are interwoven into Chicanas' short stories, novels, theoretical, and critical essays. Why poetry? What is distinct about poetry as a literary genre or the process of writing poetry that facilitates Chicanas' self-expression? Various Chicana writers refer to the process of writing poetry as essential to the (trans)formation of identity and society. Poetry allows Chicanas to transform their own identities and to re-define the contours of the world by creating a new or distinct reality from which to act. Collectively, Chicana writers produce a corpus of literary work that is characterized by the commingling of poetry, theory, and criticism. In this article I illustrate that these three phenomena are inextricably linked and that theoretical and critical essays written by and about Chicanas often grow out of and through their more creative, poetic literary work. My analysis focuses primarily on two Chicana authors, Pat Mora and Ana Castillo, and examines how their poetry exemplifies and contextualizes some of their abstract claims and critical theories, as well as how the blending of poetry, theory, and criticism functions as a powerful tool to create socio-political change both in the academy and beyond.

key words: Chicana, poetry, politics, Castillo, Mora

Chicana literary work is predominantly characterized by poetry. Lyrical poetic phrases are interwoven into Chicanas' short stories, novels, theoretical, and critical essays. Why poetry? What is distinct about poetry as a literary genre or the process of writing poetry that facilitates Chicanas' self-expression? Various Chicana writers refer to the process of writing poetry as essential to the (trans)formation of identity and society. Contemplating the question why she, as a Chicana writes poetry, Naomi Quiñónez states:

> To write poetry we must understand ourselves; in order to understand ourselves we must deconstruct ourselves from an imposed game plan, and then re-identify ourselves in newfound images. Through this process, we can incorporate everything we've ever been, ever wanted to be or wished to become into an art form that allows us our individual expression. (175)

Quiñónez explains how the process of writing poetry necessitates a deep level of self-understanding that is only possible by questioning and dismantling an already-established identity and re-creating traditional societal roles. Poetry allows Chicanas to transform not only their own identity but also the world around them. As Alma Villanueva articulates, "A poet's job / is to see / the contours of the / world and make / a myth to share / for others to see / to make a reality; /

[1] This article is part of a much longer analysis of their work in my Master's Report, *Intersection of Theory and Poetics in the Literature of Pat Mora and Ana Castillo*, The University of Texas at Austin 2003.

a point from where the / world spins— / and if stubborn and persistent enough, / the point from where the / universe whorls: / right here" ("A Poet's Job" 1-13). Poetry becomes a way to re-define the contours of the world by creating a new or distinct reality from which to act.

The process of transforming identity and society through poetry is not a solitary act that each Chicana engages in isolated from her community. As Ana Castillo states, "the construction of poetics and prose, the development of ideas, is not the achievement of any one individual writer of her generation. Together, we create a tapestry" (*Massacre* 171). Pat Mora also captures the communal and collective aspect of Chicana literature in her poem "A River of Women." She uses the metaphor of a river to describe the genealogy of women who have preceded her and who will support her and future generations: "River of women / stream on in this valley / gather all spirits / deepen and rise / sustaining your daughters / who dream in the sun" ("A River of Women" 25-30). Collectively, Chicana writers produce a corpus of literary work that is characterized by the commingling of poetry, theory, and criticism. In this article I illustrate that these three phenomena are inextricably linked and that theoretical and critical essays written by and about Chicanas often grow out of and through their more creative, poetic literary work. My analysis focuses primarily on two Chicana authors, Pat Mora and Ana Castillo, and examines how their poetry exemplifies and contextualizes some of their abstract claims and critical theories, as well as how the blending of poetry, theory, and criticism functions as a powerful tool to create socio-political change both in the academy and beyond.

Poetry holds an important place as a literary genre in the Mexican-American cultural heritage. Poetry links Chicanas to the early literary tradition within their culture from Sor Juana's poems onwards. Tey Diana Rebolledo describes how, in the early part of the twentieth century, Spanish-language newspapers in almost every Spanish-speaking community in the U.S. were publishing Mexican poetry as well as poetry from other Latin American countries and Spain. Many local writers copied the styles of the poetry featured in the newspapers: "In early writing in Spanish, poetry was the craft most used by men and women" (Rebolledo, *Infinite* 38). Early U.S. women scholars writing in Spanish, such as Carmen Celia Beltrán, María Guadalupe Valero, and María Ibarra, preserved and documented their cultural heritage by passing on the details of their lives through the oral tradition as well as through poems and novels. These early women writers serve as "literary foremothers" to contemporary Chicana writers (Rebolledo, *Infinite* 38-39).

Not only is poetry a powerful tool through which Chicanas articulate a sense of communal identity, it is also a catalyst for social change. As Castillo explains:

> Our early poetry,[2] primarily intended to catalyze resistance and to stir the hearts of the pueblo . . . The emergence and vitality of this poetry played an important role in the Chicano Movement's two primary goals: the gaining of legitimate acknowledgement by dominant society, thereby generating greater educational and economic opportunities, and the affirming of our unique cultural identity in an Anglocentric society. (*Massacre* 167)

Sonía Saldívar-Hull also attests to the power of the Movimiento poetry of the 1970s, which she attributes to the burgeoning of her feminist Chicana identity. She describes how by drinking "the lifeblood of Chicana poetry," she learned to value her voice as "a female subject of transfrontera culture" in South Texas, which led her to attend college and ultimately to go on to graduate

[2] See for example, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales' *I am Joaquin* (1967), one of the most famous poems of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement.

school (12).[3] Echoing Castillo and Saldívar-Hull, Rebolledo also emphasizes the connection between poetry and political praxis. She states, "the poet's role is not just an intellectual concern abstracted from social and cultural reality"; Chicana poets are "very much linked to social and political concerns within their community" (*Women Singing* 145). Rebolledo emphasizes the fact that privileging theory over praxis runs the risk of questioning the validity of praxis (*Women Singing* 2). Chicana scholars provide a more pragmatic, realist approach to their theoretical and critical essays by grounding them in the praxis of poetry that focuses on the material reality of daily life. Rebolledo explains, "writing can be linked with day-to-day life at home, at work, in the streets of the *barrio*; for some poets, words come between loads of laundry, between the leaves of lettuce they are washing at the sink" (*Infinite* 274). Rebolledo suggests that part of what distinguishes Chicana feminist scholars from bourgeois white European feminists is that most Chicanas do not have the economic means to extricate themselves from the demands of their daily lives in order to write in private. For example, while Virginia Woolf imagines the luxury of a room of one's own, Anzaldúa encourages women to write in the reality of a bathroom or on the subway, which they already ride (Rebolledo, *Women Singing* 132). Rebolledo is not suggesting that bourgeois European feminists do not engage in housework but rather that they have the luxury of obtaining time and space away from household chores in order to write. Nor is Rebolledo suggesting that all Chicana feminists write while doing housework, but rather that generally they have fewer options to obtain a separate space in which to write.[4]

I want to expand upon Rebolledo's ideas by arguing that perhaps the more important point is not that Chicana feminist scholars integrate praxis into theory because they do not have the luxury of seeking privacy from the demands of daily life, but rather because praxis is the source of socio-political change. While European feminists tend to place more emphasis on abstract theory, Chicanas privilege and value poetic praxis as much as, if not more than, theory. As Norma Alarcón emphasizes, it is imperative to move beyond theory to focus on the socio-political struggle (qtd. in Rebolledo, *Women Singing* 5). By grounding their theoretical and critical writing with poetry, Chicana authors produce work that often leads to and precipitates a change in consciousness, ultimately creating social change, thus moving, as Alarcón exhorts, beyond theory and returning again to praxis.[5]

---

[3] Yet, ironically, poetry by writers like Angela de Hoyos, an active Chicana in the early Movimiento, not only challenged the white supremacist hegemony but also the sexism of their own culture's nationalist movement. In the introduction to *Feminism on the Border*, Saldívar-Hull discusses how de Hoyos' poems "Mujer Sin Nombre" and "Below Zero" encouraged her to contemplate her position as a Chicana feminist in a movement with an exclusively nationalist agenda that failed to acknowledge the question of gender.

[4] The title of Sandra Cisneros' forthcoming book, *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life* (October 2015), alludes to Woolf's canonical feminist text *A Room of One's Own*, and the challenges of achieving the financial independence necessary in order to obtain the space (physical and mental/psychic) for one's self in which to write. Of course there are exceptions to Rebolledo's seemingly superficial divisions between European and Chicana feminists based upon economics. However, there is some validity to what Rebolledo is saying. There are economic factors that differentiate the lives of European and Chicana feminists. Rebolledo's point seems to be that while European feminists tend to work in a more abstract, theoretical realm that does not often incorporate the reality of their practical lives, Chicana feminists are grounded in daily life.

[5] However, it is important to note that not all theoretical and critical essays written by and about Chicanas are intertwined with poetic praxis and grounded in daily life. As Analouise Keating observes in the introduction to *This Bridge We Call Home*, "I've read highly astute theoretical pieces by other self-identified women of color. They know the lingo, they use the terms and theories with grace" ("Charting Pathways" 14). It is not that Chicanas are incapable of doing high theory or that which is more abstract and infused with esoteric jargon (see, for example, work by Chela Sandoval, Paula Moya, and Norma Alarcón); it is just that in many cases they have intentionally chosen not to because doing high theory is often viewed as assimilating to the dictates of the academy. However, as Keating points

In her introduction to the anthology *Making Face, Making Soul* Gloria Anzaldúa legitimizes personal narrative and poetry as valid praxis for scholarship and a direct link to theory. Anzaldúa states, "[i]n our literature, social issues such as race, class and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of a text, elements in which theory is embedded" (xxvi). It is precisely from these non-traditional locations, (i.e. personal narrative and poetry) that Anzaldúa creates new theories in her groundbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* which is an example par excellence of the blending of the creative and critical praxis (Rebolledo, *Women Singing* 6). *Borderlands*, originally published in 1987, is a revolutionary text for various reasons, but primarily because it features a voice that had previously been ignored in U.S. literature, that of a self-proclaimed "Chicana *tejana*-lesbian-feminist poet and fiction writer" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 253). It is also an innovative text because, as a commingling of theoretical and critical essays and poems written in various languages (alternating between Spanish, English, and Nahuatl, the indigenous language of the Aztecs), it does not conform to standard academic style. In this way, the formal aspects of the text, the crossing and blending of genres and languages, reflect or mirror the subject matter, namely the physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual borders within, between, and among people.[6]

Anzaldúa openly states that she cannot extract herself or somehow detach herself from her literary work; "I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one" (*Borderlands* 95). Her own experience and bias inform and permeate her theoretical essays and poetry. Anzaldúa admits that her subject position has a profound influence on her work and is a crucial part of what defines her authorial voice. But, she also indicates that her subjectivity should not invalidate her work because to separate herself from her text in order to establish an objective, rational voice would be to rob her book of its specific, historical context and social situatedness. Illustrating the intensely personal nature of her writing while simultaneously showing its universal appeal, Anzaldúa validates the subjective aspect of all theoretical, critical, and poetic texts. Anzaldúa carves space in the U.S. literary canon for other female ethnic writers, like Mora and Castillo, who also find it necessary to define their specific social location, which is necessarily a subjective process.

There are many ways in which Anzaldúa's seminal thoughts and distinctive style influence the literary work of Mora and Castillo and yet other ways in which these scholars depart from her original ideas. While Anzaldúa states that the focus of her book is her own existence and viscerally describes her psychic transformation, Mora emphasizes her connection to the larger community and depicts her pivotal role as an educator. Castillo stresses the socio-political injustices in society and her work is a militant cry for systemic change. However, despite each of these scholars' distinct approaches and motivations for writing, they touch on many of the same issues in their work. All of these Chicana writers incorporate aspects of their indigenous, cultural heritage, reclaiming some traditions and values and rebelling against or re-envisioning others. For example, Castillo echoes Anzaldúa's challenge to machismo in the Latino community as well as to many of the Catholic beliefs that were imposed over indigenous

---

out, it is a false division to believe that women of color do non-theoretical work exclusively (12) and she questions the association of high theory with whiteness and the academy and the white/theoretical versus color/nontheoretical binary (14).

[6] While I include a more extensive analysis of Anzaldúa's theories, particularly the mestiza consciousness, la facultad, and Coatlicue state, and their profound influence on Chicana/o literature specifically, and Ethnic-American literature in particular, in my Master's Report, it is beyond the scope of this article.

religious practices. Castillo also shares Anzaldúa's belief that imagination and intuition are as valid, if not more so, than objectivity and reason in the process of consciousness raising. Mora reiterates many of Anzaldúa's ideas about language and identity. For example, Mora reaffirms the value of code switching and decries the violence of linguistic terrorism.

Both Mora and Castillo emulate Anzaldúa's style, writing in a mixture of English and Spanish with a few words in Nahuatl. However, an interesting distinction is that Anzaldúa does not translate every phrase or paragraph that she writes in Spanish, forcing the reader to code-switch throughout the text or experience the challenge of a language barrier that impedes comprehension. However, Mora and Castillo are more careful to provide translations for the reader. Mora particularly is concerned with inclusivity and not producing a text that will alienate any potential readers. Although Castillo does not explore the complex relationship between language and identity as in-depth as Anzaldúa and Mora, she is careful to define the various Spanish terms she utilizes, such as *conscientización*, in English. Another essential difference between these Chicana scholars is that Anzaldúa combines theoretical essays and poetry in one text. In contrast, Castillo has published a collection of critical essays separate from her books of poetry and although the two mutually influence and inform each other, they are different works. Mora's style more closely mirrors that of Anzaldúa and she blends some poetry into her book of theoretical essays. However, Mora's larger collections of poetry are published separately. With a better understanding of the social historical context and theoretical framework out of which Mora and Castillo are writing and how they have been influenced by their literary foremothers like Anzaldúa, I can now examine their work in more detail. In the next section I analyze the literary work of Mora and Castillo that exemplifies the commingling of theory, criticism, and poetry and how the imbricated nature of these three phenomena serves as a powerful tool to create socio-political change.

Reading Mora's critical work in *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993) along with her collections of poetry including *Chants, Borders, and Agua Santa/Holy Water*, enhances each genre by providing a more in-depth analysis of social issues that are addressed distinctly in each of these literary forms. In her introduction to *Nepantla,* Mora addresses her audience as "my family, writers, Chicanas, Southwesterners, mothers, women of color, daughters, Latinas, college graduates, Hispanas, wives, Mexicans, U.S. citizens, readers, advocates, Mexican Americans, women, educators, learners" (7). As the broad definition of her audience reveals, Mora's aim is to be as inclusive as possible. Mora invites the reader in as a "dear guest" to "wander through these rooms, these essays" that pose more questions than reveal answers (*Nepantla* 8). "Questions" which she says, are "too often ignored-about our economic, linguistic, and color hierarchies, about the power of naming in this country, about dominance and colonization, about unquestioned norms, about the need to create space for ourselves, individually and collectively" (*Nepantla* 8-9). The theoretical essays in Mora's book provide a deeper understanding of the complex socio-historical background for her poetry.

Mora aptly chose the word *nepantla* meaning "place in the middle" in Nahuatl, for the title of her book. As a "Texican," a person born in Texas of Mexican ancestry, who grew up in El Paso on the U.S./Mexico border, Mora developed a keen awareness of straddling various cultures and languages (*Nepantla* 5). In the poem "Legal Alien," Mora articulates her experience of being "bi-lingual, bi-cultural" and "sliding back and forth / between the fringes of both worlds" (17-18). She describes the discomfort and isolation of exclusion, "viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic / perhaps inferior, definitely different / viewed by Mexicans as alien" (9-11). Mora's

experience of living in the middle place on a "land corridor bordered by two countries" is a prominent theme in her writing (*Nepantla* 6).

The U.S./Mexico border reveals the glaring truth of poverty. The desert cannot conceal the shacks on the other side of the Rio Grande where "children go to bed hungry and stare at stores filled with books they'll never touch, with books they'll never read" (Mora, *Nepantla* 14). In the poem "Border Town: 1938," Mora describes a poor Mexican girl, Esperanza, who counts cement cracks "so as not to hear / the girls in the playground singing, / 'the farmer's in the dell / the farmer's in the dell'/ laughing and running round-round" (3-7). While the young white children are happily playing, "Esperanza walks head down / eyes full of tears" through the graveyard and down the dirt path "to that other school / for Mexicans" (8-9, 17-18). The border is a daily visual reminder of the extreme disparity between the First and Third Worlds.

The stark desert landscape mirrors the harsh economic reality of the U.S./Mexico border. In her poem "Desert Women," Mora describes how "[l]ike cactus / we've learned to hoard / to sprout deep roots" and hide pain and sadness "safe behind our thorns" (5-6, 14). "Desert women know / about survival" and endure in spite of the severe conditions in which they live. As she states, "don't be deceived / When we bloom, we stun" (1-2, 15-16). Mora identifies with the strength and resistance as well as the beauty of the desert landscape. Despite the extreme conditions of living on the border, Mora feels that it accorded her the privilege of daily being able to see the native land of her ancestors in the Chihuahua desert (*Nepantla* 13). While critical of the political underpinnings that create and drive the economic inequality evident on the U.S./Mexico border, Mora articulates the strength of those who live on the border and continually struggle to survive.

Having worked as a teacher and administrator in academia, Mora also inhabits the border between the academic world and her community. She lives "in the middle land between the university and the community, the Latino community, our broader civic community, and our international community" (*Nepantla* 6). In the poem "University Avenue," Mora describes being part of the first wave of Latina writers and scholars entering the world of academia unfamiliar to her ancestors. "We are the first / of our people to walk this path / We move cautiously/ unfamiliar with the sounds / guides for those who follow" (1-5). Mora inhabits the middle place between her ancestors who did not frequent university campuses and future generations of Latina/os whose enrolment at colleges and universities is increasing nationwide.

Despite the growing number of Latina undergraduate students, Latina faculty members and administrative staff are still under-represented in academia. In the poem "Withdrawal Symptoms," Mora articulates the difficulty of facing "bitter frowns / in committees and board rooms" that "push and pound, push and pound" forcing her to wonder, "Why am I the only Mexican American here?" (20-24). The division Mora feels pulled between the academic world and her community is expressed even more explicitly in her poem "Sonrisas." Mora describes her compartmentalized existence as living "in a doorway / between two rooms" (1-2). In one room there are "cups of black coffee" and Mora hears quiet clicks "like facts / budgets, tenure, curriculum / from careful women in crisp beige" (3-6). Mora peeks, "In the other room señoras / in faded dresses stir sweet / milk coffee, laughter whirls / with steam from fresh *tamales*" (10-13). She describes standing in the hallway (middle space) between two adjacent rooms (worlds), one inhabited by women analyzing factual data and another where a group of señoras are gathered laughing. This image depicts her experience as a Mexican American woman in academia. As a *nepantlera* Mora slides back and forth between the world of academia and her community and thus she serves as a guide to those that follow.

Ultimately, she resists becoming absorbed in academia and challenges the institutional practices of the university that fail to consider and serve the surrounding community. For Mora "retreating from the world feels irresponsible" (*Nepantla* 173). She urges her colleagues and fellow faculty members to stay "engaged" and "not to settle for being enclaves of the advantaged" but to accept their tremendous responsibility to educate many of the country's future leaders (*Nepantla* 153, 167). She challenges universities "to recruit and retain more women and scholars and students of non-European backgrounds" and explains that part of the social obligation of universities is "to uphold the right in this country to pursue education regardless of one's background. The scholarly privilege cannot be tied to skin color" (*Nepantla* 162). Universities need to promote and support ethnic diversity; as Mora states succinctly, "A multicultural society deserves a multicultural education" (*Nepantla* 179).

As Mora indicates, it is essential for universities to promote diversity not just culturally but also linguistically in order to provide a strong education for our country's future leaders. For decades Latina/os have struggled to survive in the hostile environment of the U.S. schools where they were often punished for speaking Spanish or not speaking English correctly.[7] Mora documents incidents of what Anzaldúa refers to as "linguistic terrorism" or the process by which non-native English speakers are literally terrorized, verbally and physically into abandoning their original and/or indigenous languages to speak English exclusively (*Borderlands* 80). In the poem "Unnatural Speech," Mora describes a young "girl / child" who used to sing to her dolls in Spanish and the words were light in her mouth. Later, as a twenty-year-old woman scared by the English language, she practices speaking to her dolls, "tongue thick, dry / pushing heavy English / words out" (2, 27-29). In the poem "Immigrants," Mora describes how parents, even before their children can walk, "speak to them in thick English / hallo, babe, hallo" hoping they will become quickly assimilated into the mainstream U.S. culture (7-8). At the same time that parents urge their children to learn English, doing so often creates a language barrier that prevents parents from talking to their children. Mora describes a Mexican mother in her poem "Elena" who fears not being able to communicate with her children: "Sometimes I take / my English book and lock myself in the bathroom, / say the thick words softly, / for if I stop trying, I will be deaf / when my children need my help" (19-22). Mora echoes this sentiment in another poem entitled "Let Us Hold Hands" in which she refers to a mother like Elena who "trained her stubborn tongue to wrap / around that spiny language, English, to place her child in school" (12-13). In these poems Mora describes the linguistic barriers immigrants face and their struggles to learn to speak English in order to receive an education and survive in society. She urges universities to accept the responsibility they have to provide a multicultural education that includes promoting the value of and fostering an environment to speak various languages. This is particularly important, as Mora points out, in the process of preparing our country's youth to participate and make responsible decisions in a global economy.

Mora's challenge to her colleagues in academia to assume responsibility for providing a multicultural education underscores her commitment to the Latino community. As she states, "Like many Chicana writers, I was motivated to write because I felt our voices were absent from

[7] Saldívar-Hull refers to the work of historian Vicki Ruiz who documented such cases like that of Rosa Guerrero, from El Paso Texas who states, "I remember being punished for speaking Spanish. *Nos daban coscorrones, pero coscorrones* (they gave us strong blows on the head) . . . *Yo no fuí la única; fueron miles de gente que sufrieron* (I wasn't the only one; there were miles of people who suffered) en Arizona, en Colorado, en Nuevo México, en Texas, en California; *que nos estereotipaban horriblemente* (they stereotyped us horribly) 'Don't you speak that ugly language, you are American now, you Mexican child'" (19).

what is labeled American literature, but is U.S. Eurocentric literature seasoned sparingly with a bit of Color" (*Nepantla* 15). Mora writes in order to make Latinas visible and allow them to see themselves reflected in her work. Mora knows that Latinas "need to be published and to be studied in schools and colleges so that the stories and ideas of [her] people won't quietly disappear" (*Nepantla* 139). The act of writing is, for Mora, her contribution to and work for her community. In the face of social problems Mora feels that writing is "neither elitist nor irrelevant" (*Nepantla* 133), but that "the work of the poet is for the people" (*Nepantla* 181). Thus, for Mora, writing poetry is an act of social justice; poetic praxis urges change in the world around her.

Like Mora, Castillo's poetic praxis is a means of using her voice to demand social justice. She has also written a collection of critical essays, *Massacre of the Dreamers* (1994) as well as many books of poetry including *I Ask the Impossible*, *My Father Was a Toltec*, and *Women are Not Roses* and various novels. The title of her book *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* suggests a violent militancy that permeates the text. There is an urgency to Castillo's critical essays in her demand for immediate political action and social change in the face of atrocious abuses of power and injustice. More than a provocative title, *Massacre of the Dreamers* refers to a specific historical event that took place towards the end of the Mexica Empire when Moteuczoma murdered thousands of dreamers, traditionally esteemed for their divine wisdom and vision, who "were sharing the same premonition: the prophesied arrival of Cortés and the subsequent annihilation of the Empire" (Castillo, *Massacre* 16). Unable to accept their threatening omens, Moteuczoma "murdered them out of his own sense of despair and because of his abuse of power . . . it was his fatalism that debilitated him and caused the end of the Mexica world" (16). Castillo focuses on this violent historical event because the massacre of the dreamers signaled the rise of a domineering imperial patriarchy that destroys life. As critical socio-political commentary, her text is a call to arms, a call to "unearth the female indigenous consciousness" and fight against the injustice of the patriarchy (16).

In the poem "Coatlicue's Legacy," Castillo calls upon the tremendous power of Coatlique, the Aztec goddess of fertility and destruction to overcome deeply entrenched patriarchal ideas. "Sometimes I forget / all I need to do is say it / think it / breathe it / dream it / and life is at the hem of my stone skirt / a drifting feather / four hundred warriors strong" (12-19). Castillo rejects any negative force that disrespects her divine essence as a descendent of the Aztec goddess. She will "spit out the skeletons of bad boys / or shit them out / who did not learn to honor / Woman / but fear Her just the same" (37-41). Men's fear of "Woman" leads them to dishonor her. The "terrible wrath" Castillo feels from having "been robbed and raped / to numbness" pulls her out of her forgetfulness to reestablish her connection to the indigenous female consciousness (43-45). In this poem, Castillo echoes Anzaldúa who also reclaims a connection to the Aztec goddess and refers to a "Coatlicue state," as a moment of psychic disruption that provides an opportunity for heightened awareness or consciousness (*Borderlands* 68-69).

In addition to reclaiming positive aspects of the spiritual beliefs and practices of her indigenous ancestors, Castillo also questions the negative aspects of the Catholic religion, particularly those that promote the subjugation of women. She states, "As Christianized mestizas we have been conditioned for generations to reject our *indigena* blood, as well as invalidate folk medicine for Western medical practices and above all, to put our faith in God the Father" (*Massacre* 87). Castillo explicitly expresses her criticism of the Catholic Church in the poem "Dear Pope: Open Letter from the Americas": "*Querido Papa* (Dear Father): We are bound to

you, the multitude of the Americas / the barefoot and patricians, the imposing politicians, / like a rosary binds a matrimony, she, promising to obey, / he, to protect" (1-4). Castillo highlights the patriarchal hierarchy of the Catholic Church in which men hold the positions of power and women are relegated to a position of submissive dependence. Castillo wonders who safeguards young women in Honduras and Mexico who slave as prostitutes to support their families. Challenging the Pope, Castillo questions: "How many candidates for beatification would you have if all / those girls said no, 'I'd rather die, let my mother die, / my father, my baby starve? / I will not give up my virtue for the sake of beans and a pound / of cornmeal. / I will stay faithful to my church no matter what'" (14-18). She indicates how absurd the church's obsession with sexual purity and virtue is in the face of the harsh reality of poverty with the imminent threat of starvation and death.

In another passage in the poem Castillo questions whether or not a woman who has an abortion as a result of being raped will also be condemned, for committing murder. She addresses the Pope in a mocking tone, "you, who are eminent and wise / unfettered by the profane, tell me this" (32-33). Castillo wonders even if she accepted all the children God sent her, "would my passion for my beloved be an offense to God?" (36). She highlights the fact that the church condemns women who enjoy pleasure during the sexual act that should solely be engaged in for procreation. In this provocative poem, Castillo offers a scathing criticism of the patriarchy of the Catholic Church.

In addition to challenging and resisting the patriarchy of the Catholic Church which upholds traditional gender roles, many Chicana writers have reinterpreted or transformed female cultural archetypes, such as La Malinche, to depict a more positive view of women. As Castillo states: "We have taken on the revisioning of our own culture's metaphors, informed as they are by male perceptions" (*Massacr*e 166). For example, in the poem, "Malinche's Tips: Pique from Mexico's Mother," Mora vindicates the "much maligned" Eve figure of Mexican history who served as a translator for Hernán Cortés (14). Mora writes the poem from La Malinche's point of view, offering an alternate version of traditional Mexican history that blames women for the conquest of the Mexican people: "Re-view / folklore typology / and then reread / hisstory" (56-59). Mora cleverly plays with the word history to highlight the fact that it is often written from the male perspective as his story. She describes how men typically depict female icons as submissive and powerless: "Virgin mothers. / Women of closed / uterus. Women / of closed / mouths. Women / of covered / hair. Women / of cloaked / bodies" (65-73). Mora separates the lines of the poem to highlight the ways in which women are silenced (their mouths and uteruses closed) and hidden (their hair and bodies covered and cloaked). She encourages women to "Alter / the altared women" (80-81) – the female religious icons, like the Virgin Mary, that appear on the altars of Catholic Churches – and challenge the negative images of women they represent.

Like Castillo, Mora resists the Catholic Church's obsession with controlling female sexuality. The Catholic Church perpetuates the virgin/whore dichotomy by presenting two primary female icons, the Virgin Mary, associated with purity, Divine Conception, and submission to God's will, and Eve, associated with lasciviousness, sin, and disobedience of God's will. These Catholic female icons were integrated into the Mexican culture in the form of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche. Mora presents a more empowered vision of La Malinche who reprimands her devotees for insulting her: "I hear / prostitute, puta, hooker, bitch. / Try saying Mamá. / Watch your tongues" (129-32). Mora re-envisions the female Mexican cultural icon to present a more positive image of women and challenges the patriarchy of the

Catholic Church that reinforces the degradation of female sexuality in its slandering of La Malinche as a whore.

In addition to criticizing the patriarchy of the Catholic Church, Castillo also documents how the patriarchy operates within the global economic system to control and abuse women, particularly Chicanas. As the U.S. moves most of their manufacturing facilities to less industrialized nations, such as Mexico, Mejicanas and Chicanas are exploited for the benefit of a capitalist system. Castillo states, "For very little pay and with little regard to health and safety conditions and no benefits for maquiladoras and other low skilled workers, multinational investors can produce more by spending less and making bigger profits from world consumers" (*Massacre* 43). Castillo emphasizes that poor women working in the maquiladoras are the most vulnerable. Not only are these women exploited by multinational corporations as she notes, but they are also the target of violent sexual crimes and murder.[8] Pressed with dire economic necessity, "Mejicanas and Chicanas are the majority who serve in low skilled labor jobs on both sides of the border" (Castillo, *Massacre* 43). And those Chicanas who do retaliate by going on strike or demanding protection through unions, often run a great risk. For example, although the Watsonville Women's Strike of 1985 in which 1,600 workers went on strike against the Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Company was successful and the women gained the wages and health benefits they deserved, it highlighted the tense reality Chicanas face (Castillo, *Massacre* 56). Castillo explains, "as women their duty was to maintain two jobs at once-with little compensation for either-at work and at home. Women who were married sometimes received little, if any, emotional support from home for their participation in the strike" (*Massacre* 56). If they retaliate, Chicanas face the economic challenge of a cessation in income and health benefits that affects their children, as well as the emotional challenge of non-support from family members.

Castillo describes the brutal economic reality Chicanas face in the poem "Women Don't Riot." Castillo begins her poem with vivid descriptions of the dangerous conditions in which lower-class women around the world perform manual labour: "Women don't riot / not in maquilas in Malaysia, Mexico, or Korea / not in sweatshops in New York or El Paso / They don't revolt / in kitchens, laundries, or nurseries / Not by the hundreds or thousands, changing / sheets in hotels or in laundries / when scalded by hot water / not in restaurants where they clean and clean / and clean their hands raw" (1-9). In this passage Castillo highlights not only the physical injuries women suffer and the endlessness and repetition of their work, but also the magnitude of the number of women subjected to such miserable working conditions. She shows how the capitalist system physically and emotionally abuses women, rendering them almost incapable of fighting back: "We women are sterilized, have more children / than they can feed / don't speak the official language / want things they see on TV / would like to own a TV— / women who were molested as children / raped / beaten / harassed, which means / every last one sooner or later / women who've defended themselves / and women who can't or don't know how / we don't — won't ever rise up in arms" ("Women Don't Riot" 20-32). By delineating a long list of physical and sexual abuses that many women endure, Castillo underscores not only how wide-spread such abuse is, but also how vulnerable and powerless women are to resist or defend themselves against

[8] Although Castillo published her work before the maquiladora murders were exposed and under investigation the reality of these grisly crimes further bolsters her argument about the vulnerability and exploitation of these women. Many Mejicana and Chicana scholars and journalists have since written about the maquiladora murders. See for example Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera* (2010) and Diana Washington Valdez's *Cosecha de mujeres: Safari en el desierto mexicano* (2005).

such acts of violence. In light of the fact that many women are either unable or do not know how to defend themselves, Castillo urges all people, not just women and other minorities, to unite to fight against injustice. She states, we have, "so much endless misery in common / that must stop / not for one woman or every woman / but for the sake of us all / . . . / Today it was her. Next time who?" (44-47, 57). Castillo ends her poem with this haunting line startling the reader into realizing that in a capitalist system any one can be targeted in order to make more profit.

For Castillo writing is a method of (what Paulo Friere refers to as) *conscientización*[9] or raising social awareness to create change. She states, "The work of the conscienticized writer" is to "remind ourselves and others that nothing is separate from anything else" (*Massacre* 170). By realizing our interconnectedness to others, we refuse to tolerate senseless injustice and destruction. Echoing Castillo, Mora also calls us to join in solidarity with other women to resist the patriarchal, capitalist system. In the poem "Let Us Hold Hands," Mora writes, "Let us hold hands / with the woman who holds her sister in Bosnia, Detroit, Somalia / Jacksonville, Guatemala, Burma, Juárez, and Cincinnati / with the woman who confronts the glare of eyes and gunbarrels / yet rises in protest in Yoruba, English, Polish, Spanish, Chinese, Urdu" (20-24). Both Mora and Castillo use poetry to advocate for female empowerment and solidarity among women.

The intersection of theory, criticism, and poetry is clearly evident in the literary work of Mora and Castillo. Heavily influenced by Anzaldúa, both of these writers integrate these phenomena. Their theoretical and critical essays include poetic elements and are enhanced by their larger collections of poetry. They bolster their abstract theoretical concepts and critical socio-historical commentary with specific examples from daily life in their poetry. By integrating lived experience and reflections of the real world with theory Chicanas move from intellectual reflection to social praxis. Their work demonstrates how poetry can be used as a subversive tool to resist the dominant culture and a method by which those on the margins create space to articulate their own experience. Anzaldúa, Mora, and Castillo realize the powerful political implications of poetry and urge the necessity of acknowledging poetry as a valid praxis for scholarship. Poetry serves as a link between Chicanas and other women of colour and through which they are able to stand in solidarity with one another. By combining theory and criticism with poetic praxis, Mora and Castillo facilitate social change in the academy and the larger world.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. Print.

---. Introduction. *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*. Ed. Gloria Anzaldúa. 1st ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990. i-xxviii Print.

Castillo, Ana "Coatlicue's Legacy." Castillo, *I Ask the Impossible* 39-40.

---. "Dear Pope: Open Letter from the Americas." Castillo, *I Ask the Impossible* 53-54.

---. *I Ask the Impossible*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000. Print.

---. *The Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma.* 1st ed. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1994. Print.

[9] In Portuguese the word is *consientizaçao*, which Brazilian educator Paulo Freire discusses in his well-known text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

---. "Women Don't Riot." Castillo, *I Ask the Impossible* 58-60.
Keating, Analouise. "Charting Pathways, Marking Thresholds . . . A Warning, an Introduction." *This Bridge We Call Home*. Ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating. New York: Routledge, 2002. 6-21. Print.
Mora, Pat. *Borders*. Houston: Arte Público P, 1986. Print.
---. "Border Town: 1938." Mora, *Borders* 16.
---. *Chants*. Houston: Arte Público P, 1984. Print.
---. "Desert Women," Mora, *Borders* 80.
---. "Elena." Mora, *Chants* 58.
---. *Holy Water/ Agua Santa*. Boston: Beacon P, 1995. Print.
---. "Immigrants." Mora, *Borders* 15.
---. "Legal Alien." Mora, *Chants* 60.
---. "Let Us Hold Hands." Mora, *Holy Water/ Agua Santa* 116-17.
---. "Malinche's Tips: Pique from Mexico's Mother." Mora, *Holy Water/ Agua Santa* 64-70.
---. *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1993. Print.
---. "A River of Women." Mora, *Holy Water/ Agua Santa* 31-32.
---. "Sonrisas." Mora, *Borders* 20.
---. "University Avenue." Mora, *Borders* 19.
---. "Unnatural Speech." Mora, *Borders* 17.
---. "Withdrawal Symptoms." Mora, *Borders* 26.
Quiñónez, Naomi. "Molcajete Mamas and the Feathered Pens." *Máscaras*. Ed. Lucha Corpi. Berkeley: Third Woman P, 1997. 169-76. Print.
Rebolledo, Tey Diana, and Eliana S. Rivero, eds. *Infinite Divisions*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1993. Print.
Rebolledo, Tey Diana. *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1995. Print.
Saldívar-Hull, Sonia. *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000. Print.
Villanueva, Alma. "A Poet's Job." *Infinite Divisions*. Ed. Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1993. 276. Print.