

Episode 33: Cruz Medina Interviews Ana Castillo

KS: Karriann Soto

CM: Cruz Medina

AC: Ana Castillo

Cue music: "Flagger" by Blue Dot Sessions

KS: You're listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

KS: Hi all! I'm Karriann Soto, and today I'm introducing our guest host, Cruz Medina, who is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at Santa Clara University. In 2015, his book *Reclaiming Poch@ Pop: Examining the Rhetoric of Cultural Deficiency* looked at the pop culture responding to anti-Latinx laws passed in Arizona. To me, this kind of work continues to strengthen a stance of hope in the face of continued state repression of people of color in the U.S. His current work with Octavio Pimentel looks at racist discourse circulating through social media in response to non-whites, and it also looks at how people of color compose multimodally for non-academic literacy practices, activism and storytelling.

Speaking of storytelling, I'm so excited to share his interview with Ana Castillo, renowned for her Chicana literature and coining the term [Xicanisma](#). Her work reminds us of the long legacy of Latina resistance in art. I'm so glad Cruz Medina reached out to share his conversation with this important figure. Thanks, Cruz!

CM: Hi Karriann, so happy to be here. I had the opportunity to sit down and speak with writer Ana Castillo while we were both teaching this summer at the Bread Loaf School of English in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Bread Loaf is the Master's in English program for Middlebury College in Vermont. The program in New Mexico is about 25 years old, but the Bread Loaf program has had a who's who of writers and scholars—most notably, Robert Frost was associated with the program for decades, with word being even he'd purchased some of the land for the Vermont campus.

From within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, Andrea Lunsford and Adam Banks have taught at Vermont. Cheryl Glenn has been the director at the Santa Fe campus, where Damian Baca also teaches, and I would recommend the Bread Loaf program for any graduating undergraduate students who are going into teaching and who want to continue to study English and earn their Master's over the course of a few summers from a diverse and prestigious faculty.

I was really excited to speak and work this summer with Ana Castillo because like a lot of us in English, I came to writing through the appreciation of literature, and I'm appreciative of Ana Castillo's work because her writing reflects aspects of the Latina/o

experience in the U.S.—admittedly, I didn’t come to her work when I was young; instead, I came to know her work through the Mexican American Studies (or MAS) program that was banned in Tucson, while I was a graduate student at the University of Arizona. I focus on this ban in my book *Reclaiming Poch@ Pop* because I was impressed with the positive impact on students who had graduated from the program. While I was teaching writing at the U of A, I can recall one of my students, Crystal, who had graduated from Tucson’s Mexican American Studies program, walking out of my class reading Ana Castillo’s book *So Far from God*. Castillo’s writing grapples with complex issues including language, familial roles, ambition and expectations for women, and sexual identity.

In addition to *So Far from God*, Castillo is well-known for her book *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, in which she coins the term Xicanisma with an “X” to refer to Chicana feminism. She wrote the Spanish adaptation to *This Bridge Called My Back*, as well as several novels, books of poetry and other edited collections. Within rhetoric and composition, my friend and colleague, Aja Martinez has drawn on Castillo’s work and its attention to the imperialist role of language ideology, and assimilation in the U.S. borderlands [see Martinez’s chapter “A Personal Reflection on Chican@ Language and Identity in the US-Mexico Borderlands”]. Aja’s work, like Castillo’s, draws attention to aspects of how Latino/as experience language in the U.S., which is also being studied by such Latinxs such as Juan Guerra, Steven Alvarez, Laura Gonzales, and Sara Alvarez.

As a writer, Ana Castillo’s work is the art that identifies subject matter before those of us who are academics and scholars are able to apply lenses or qualify and quantify these rich sites of inquiry. And this is so important because there are still folks doing research on Latinas/os who bring in very little or no Latina/o scholarship, reaffirming what Jacqueline Jones Royster said in “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own,” that we are once again told that Columbus discovered America.

In our interview, we discuss topics including transgressive writing, the use of Spanish in the home, reconciling what makes good writing with the misogyny of writers such as Charles Bukowski, having a supportive audience as a writer starting out, cultivating relationships with others through shared art, the stigma of clinical depression and who receives rehabilitative treatment and who is penalized? We speak about how feminism continues to seek equal rights and why it is so important now for people of color, and the implications of what it means to be a writer in the public eye.

Cue music: “Flagger” by Blue Dot Sessions

CM: Thank you for being with me, Ana. AC: Thank you for the interview. CM: The title of your recent memoir is *Black Dove: Mama, Mi’jo and Me*. I think the ‘black dove’ part comes from a song that your mother sang while you moved out. Is that true, and could you explain the subtitle ‘mama, mi’jo and me,’ where does that come from?

AC: Okay. The book is a compilation of personal essays and memoir. The earliest essay in the book is called “My Mother’s Mexico,” and it goes back to over twenty years ago. I

thought for a very long time that I would like to put together a combination of essays that I was writing and publishing in different places, and that the leading essay would be “My Mother’s Mexico.” But, as time has gone on, I think I’ve become more mother in this life than daughter, so hence the changing of the title. The title however does come from my mother and her beautiful singing voice, as I write about in the essay about this. She sang that song as I was leaving my home. I wasn’t going very far. I was trying to go to community college—you know how that goes—[the] first one who doesn’t elope, but decides to go pursue her education. But for a Mexican, traditional mother, that was like my taking the road to perdition. And that song “Paloma Negra [black dove]” says that: you’ve gone off to live this, you know, this night life, parrandera. Mama, Mi’jo and Me, so it is about my mother, and her influences on me. It’s also about me and my own teenage years in Chicago, during that period of time in the late 60s and early 70s. And then, as I mentioned, there’s quite a bit of new material about raising a son.

Cue music: “Wahre” by Blue Dot Sessions

CM: Yeah, one of the things I found interesting too was, I love that your mother had this really strong willfulness about only speaking Spanish to you in public, right? And at home was it the same way where she’d only speak in Spanish at home? Because what sticks out to me about that is how friends of mine like Aja Martinez, who cites your work with language, I’m wondering if your experiences from your mother and her perspectives on language informed how you think about language in some of your work?

AC: Well I do think quite a bit about language, and I don’t know how much of that is exclusively with bilingualism. My mother, in fact may she rest in peace, never spoke to me in English, never. Her last words to me before she died—the day she died, she had a stroke that day on dialysis—was “Hasta luego, mi amor.” I’ll see you later my love. She didn’t say that in English. She never spoke to me in English. What was so funny about that is she worked for decades in factories outside the home and so obviously she had to know English to some degree. And she also sold Avon and you know, so she had other things she had to do. She read the *Chicago Sun Times* every single day, and yet, it was ingrained in me that if I spoke to her in English, she would not understand me. And she would say that: “No te entiendo.” So then I’d have to speak to her in Spanish, and everybody knows that that benefited me, would know that that logic would follow that that benefited me, and indeed it did, which is that I became fluent bilingually.

My father, who was born and raised in Chicago, was bilingual. But he was born and raised in Chicago, and he was the product of Chicago public schools. He spoke to me mostly in English and he spoke to my mother also in Spanish, but he was a storyteller, with a Chicago accent from Little Italy, and so I also listened to the nuances of: how English is being spoken, how Spanish is spoken, who’s speaking it, who’s speaking in either language, or are they using both languages. So I think that being an attentive listener as a child and trying to, like all children, learn from the people around you, did make me very aware of language and how it’s used. And, inadvertently, although neither one knew where I came from as to decide to become a writer—inadvertently, they both taught me about storytelling.

CM: I think I heard you say, too, you didn't start off to be a writer or maybe you started off as a poet. And in your book you do mention how, I think it was your Tía Flor who was really someone who was a really great audience for you because she wasn't really judgmental. Do you think that's really important for a young writer or new writer to have, an audience in mind who is not going to be very judgmental of your writing?

AC: I remember Pablo Neruda's memoir, *Recuerdo Que He Vivido*, I haven't read it since it came out in the 70s, but some things stay with me. And I remember him talking about what he considered to be his first poem when he was eight years old, and then he went to a table where his dad and his step-mother were having an adult discussion and they looked at it and one of them said, "Who wrote this?" or "Where did you copy this from?" And he said that was his first experience with irresponsible literary criticism [chuckles]. And so, you know, as a child I don't think that we do get, in general, especially with children who write and who are introspective, get that kind of respect, if you will, or paid attention to. I didn't develop that relationship with my aunt until I was a grown woman. She had five children to concern herself with, so she wasn't my audience. And I don't know if I actually turned to writing and drawing because of that, because I was like a single child. I had two older siblings, but they were several years older and more company to each other and off into the world. So I spent a lot of time by myself and I think that that was my audience: the books that I was reading, speaking to the books through my writing, as we do as writers, but I started that very young, like, just a little kid.

Cue music: "Wahre" by Blue Dot Sessions

CM: After talking about the exchange of roles with an audience of writers and writers as audience, I asked Castillo about the role that her son played in her book. She describes a clarity about her son in her communication with him while he was rediscovering his love for reading and writing. This got me thinking about Castillo's experience as a writer starting out, and how she describes her Tía Flor as being an audience for her who was never judgmental about Ana's writing.

Similarly, I [recall](#) that Kurt Vonnegut said that he always wrote with his sister Allie in mind as his intended audience. So many of us who write and work with young writers are always switching between roles as we provide guidance and then ourselves transition into the vulnerable position of asking colleagues for feedback as we are writing, so I was curious about the kind of feedback and guidance a celebrated author would offer their child.

AC: I definitely, as an educator who has worked with young people since I was a young adult myself (I started teaching when I was twenty-two at a community college), it's a natural thing for me to impart that with anybody, but especially my son. He had been through college. You know, he's much more literary than I am. He had a better education than I did. He read Homer when he was sixteen and Kierkegaard—you know, things that I didn't get a chance or an opportunity with the education that I gleaned, initially. So, it's

easy for us to have that conversation. He's an educated man, and I'm partly college professor and part writer and public intellectual and thinker; and so I talk that way to everybody, really. But especially in the case of my son and this book, I felt that to a large degree I had lost him intellectually and I've said this in the book, and I've said this publicly. I don't know what it was. I know that my son spiraled. Mentally, he was in a depression and a very deep funk. He was very angry. There are many things that I speculate about in the essays that are in this book. The editor at Feminist Press thought it was important to have his voice in it. I agree, and we included an essay that he wrote when he was incarcerated and some of our email exchanges. What I find interesting, and this goes back to your question, is how much of our dialogue is book-based. We sort of bounce off books and art, and thinkers and writers. Even when we talk about ourselves in terms of our identity as Chicanos, we're talking about Rudy Anaya or Oscar Zeta Acosta. And then there's Basquiat, who's an artist and a graffiti artist. So I thought that was interesting that that's how I relate to life, but that my son was also able to do that.

Cue music: "Wahre" by Blue Dot Sessions

CM: One of the authors you mention as sort of being one that your son found interesting and you found yourself reading and talking to him about was Charles Bukowski. He's an interesting figure because he's thought of as something of a misogynist writer. This is very interesting knowing that you are one of these people who came up in the beginning of Chicana feminist theory and things. So how was that sort of negotiating talking about Bukowski maybe as a writer as opposed to maybe some of the negative representations that he was putting out in his writing?

AC: Well, what I'll say about writing is that good writing is good writing, the subject matter aside. I have enjoyed his stories. I personally feel perhaps he is a better poet than his prose. I discovered Bukowski in maybe the mid-80s. I think he may have been still alive. I'm not sure. He was very hot in Paris. I had gone to a conference in Paris. I think that's actually—you know the French are always the first ones to go to the transgressive literature. So, all that aside, that was cool for me because I could read his poetry. I have read very few men who are not a little bit misogynist, and a lot of white people who are not a little bit ignorant about race and class. And who did I grow up reading as a self-taught writer? D.H. Lawrence, you know, *Quetzalcoatl* book, or Hemingway talking about Spain. These are white and privileged men, so Bukowski, who's Bukowski? Another white man, but that doesn't take away from my appreciation of how he handles language. Now what was fun for me at that moment, which I did need a little levity with my son's near tragic spiraling and then ended up incarcerated for two years, was that when he asked for the books on Bukowski, I decided "well I'll read the prose. I've read the poetry—it's cool he's reading the poetry and I like that and we can talk about that." As I said, good literature—good writing is good writing. And when you read good writing and you're a writer, just like when you're a painter or a musician and you hear something that speaks to your ear or to your eyes, you want to go home and do that. You want to try it. You get inspired. And I got inspired and I decided to experiment with transgressive literature. What happened, consequently, and very quickly, was I wrote the novel *Give it to Me*. And I wrote it in like maybe two months, which I wrote it one: to riff

off this style, to see, what would Ana Castillo write if she's gonna write a transgressive—[chuckles] if she was gonna write—a transgressive piece of fun fiction. And, then it also gave me a good laugh, because on top of the fact that my heart was broken about my son's—where he was, and certainly where I never expected him to be, and what had happened to him mentally—which I also was heartbroken over—I was also working on the updated revision of *Massacre of the Dreamers*, which if anyone has looked at the book, it's pretty dense and pretty serious, so I needed a little bit of levity and that's what actually came out of going back to Bukowski.

Cue music: "Flagger" by Blue Dot Sessions

CM: You've mentioned it a couple of times and I don't know if I've done a good job of asking the question, maybe tell a little bit about your son's situation with incarceration because I think it really brings up these issues that have been coming up with the over-policing of young Black and Brown and Latino men, and at the same time the question of mental illness that you're sort of raising and how we tend to deal with mental illness through punishment as opposed to actually trying to help these youth?

AC: Well, you're using the term "mental illness," which has a stigma in our society and certainly has a stigma for our culture, which is anybody who goes see a therapist is loco and if you're loco, you know, you're banished. My son has never been diagnosed with anything. My observations are as a mother and someone who knew him, who saw him when he was despondent and when he was depressed. We're beginning to look at clinical depression and accept it in our society in general at this time as something that everybody—almost—in this crazy world that we live in, at some point in their lives goes through this clinical depression. Clinical meaning that it's almost out of control, you can't function maybe, or it's hard to function. You're in a very dark place, and so I saw that in him.

Now the other thing I saw in him, which is social and which addresses your question right now—he was, from twelve years old on, he was growing up in Chicago, in the inner city of Chicago. Not out in a nice suburb or place where people like to say that they're in Chicago, but they're really somewhere else in a nice little cul-de-sac. We were in one of the harshest neighborhoods in Chicago. It was what I had which was affordable. And it's difficult to be in any city or town in this country right now without any of the mixture of things that we are aware of that can be happening. There's a lot of drug availability. There's gangbangers, for sure, from here throughout the world, from here to Russia—let's just put it that way. So he, as a young man, when he leaves home—the house, the nice little apartment that we had with all of its conveniences, his own room, his own bathroom—he leaves and he is confronted by all of these elements. There is, as I said, there's drug pushers and there's gangbangers, and there's prostitution that's real evident, you know happening right in the back alley, people selling drugs. It could happen anywhere. But also there's uniform police and they're at the train station, but they're not stopping everybody. Who they were stopping were the young people, and they were young people of color. I saw it myself. I saw them let me walk by, or go across the turn table, coming back from teaching my class at night, ten o'clock at night. But they pulled

over young women and young men of color; teenagers. My son was one of them. And so what begins to happen is despite the fact that he does have a mother who has educated him and he has privilege for education and for travel and things like that—how he is viewed in the eyes of this environment is as a potential menace or a potential recruit, or somehow or other, suspect. He might be an immigrant. Undocumented. All of these things. So, what young people start to do is they start to rebel as they do everywhere. He also began to get that chip on his shoulder. And it's a self-fulfilling prophecy, you start to act tough. You start to build a hard shell. You start to become aggressive, or at least I've seen this with these young people they become aggressive with other people, other young people, and so on.

And so, that's what I address in the book, from a personal level. And on a social level, we have a multibillion dollar mass-incarceration industry, so a lot of people make a lot of money on that. Where I take also personal offense is *who gets sent to rehab*, and who does not? At the time of my son's arrest, we had two Illinois governors in federal prison. Now, when they come out, I don't think it's going to be difficult for them to find housing. I don't think it's going to be difficult for them to find employment and to support their families and the lifestyles that they enjoyed in the past. But, if the majority that are going to prison are people of color or people who are already marginalized by society because of their class background, or what have you, or lack of education, and they come out, and they can't find a place to live, or they can't provide for their young children or be reunited with their families... And this has happened to my son and is happening today as we speak, where he is eligible, he has a college education, and he's eligible and he's been clean—and he had, that felony was an isolated incident, in a sense that he had no record before that, nothing since then, he has been let off probation early. Nevertheless, because of our laws, he had been turned down for *numerous* positions for which he's *qualified* because of the fact that the law permits you not to hire somebody...

CM: You have to check off that box.

AC: They do a background check and even though he has numerous times been offered a job or liked in an interview and so on, they'll tell him, "We can't do it."

CM: Hmm.

Cue music: "Wahre" by Blue Dot Sessions

CM: Ana Castillo's writing is particularly salient and endures because her experiences resonate so much with what is currently happening. In her 1993 novel, *So Far from God*, Castillo was challenging reader's assumptions about sexuality; in her novel, strong female characters fall in love and have relationships with both men and women, before there was real widespread support for issues such as marriage equality. Castillo grew up in Chicago during the Black Power Movement and she comments on her understanding of being a woman of color in schools that lacked resources. With the increase in charter and private schools, education continues to fail young people of color through systemic forms of segregation that leave these communities with little hope or options of achieving

their American Dream. In our historical moment, the Black Lives Matter movement asks for the deferred dream of life and the pursuit of happiness. At the same time, when there are murders such as the mass shootings at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, we see how these struggles for equality continue in the face of individuals, indicative of communities who resist social equality and inclusivity.

In the context of all of these events weighing so heavily on those of us working to provoke critical consciousness, staying woke and advocating for social justice, I asked Ana Castillo, “what do think of the fact that there is an extreme need for social movements that parallel those that you grew up with?”

AC: Yes, well we don’t live in a democracy. And misogyny, patriarchy—I’ll throw all the terms, you know, the usual suspects out there—feminism responds, not just to women’s rights, but to human rights. I think Audre Lorde said, “If Black women don’t have equal rights, nobody has them.” We have to think about the people we have marginalized and disenfranchised most—and everybody in society at some point or another is. So it’s a fallacy to think that we have democracy and that everybody has the same opportunity. But, in terms of patriarchy, you know, women *for eons* have been kept in a secondary place. In terms of race issues in this country, which is only over 200 years old, but if we include the Americas, we’re talking about the conquest of Mexico and Peru and so on, so over half a millennium ago, here, of colonialism here. If we talk about other places in the world, it’s been going on for a very, very long time. Twenty or thirty years is just a drop in the bucket as far as some of the things that we’re addressing.

We have made enough progress to say it was needed. And lives have been lost. And lives have been dedicated to these issues. But of course it’s not a surprise to me to think that today we still look at a woman who looks like me and assume that I’m not the professor in the room but maybe the cleaning lady. It’s a natural assumption. We go—young and older people of color walk into a nice store and before you know it, security is following them around. This racial profiling not only went on for a long time before, of course it’s still going on, and it’s going to be a very long time before we see a little more changes. But I don’t see it happening, not in my lifetime and I don’t even think in my granddaughter’s lifetime.

CM: You’re saying so much of this—what’s happening in your life or what’s happening in your son’s life very much resonates with a lot of these things happening, and it does go back to the idea of the personal being the political. And so maybe I’m interested, too, in thinking about how you’ve addressed this idea of needing to walk the line between—how you’re viewed as this public intellectual and writer, versus maybe maintaining this private life, and I think that’s something that maybe a lot of people are thinking about in terms of social media; we don’t see ourselves, we blur that line often. How did you come to this idea that you feel like you wanted to maintain your private life in such a way that it wasn’t, you know, on display with you as the public writer as well?

AC: For a long time, and it was also my mother’s wish, I kept my family and my own relationships out of the public eye because, while I may have signed up to be a public

person when I started to publish—and the minute you publish something it belongs to the public, so it’s not as though I thought “oh, I’m going to be a famous writer,” it was just the fact that I went to do some readings, poetry, reading political poetry and then I put it out and my name was there, so you know you go to conferences or you begin to be a speaker—all of that, whether it’s in your town or your hometown or if it’s an international forum, makes you a public person. My family and the people that have personal relationships with me didn’t sign up for that. So, out of respect for the people around me, I also could not address a lot of things that I was experiencing on a personal level. Most recently, with the material I have written about as a mother and my son’s life, my son is fully on board with telling the story publicly, came from the fact that a major problem we have in our society. And it addresses all those things. It addresses the mass incarceration, the fallacy of the war on drugs from the Reagan era since the 1980s, how our poor communities of color have been invaded by drugs and all of the multitude of things that happened to our young people generation after generation. My son and I felt it really important to share the story, not only for our own personal healing, but also in a way to open up that communication for other people. I think people have an idea that when you’re successful at what you do—in my case publishing books—that you’re living this wonderful, glamorous carefree life. And as we know, we read these magazines about celebrities and we say “oh, look what’s going on with their lives,” we see that nobody’s exempt from these social ills. And it’s important for me as a person who cares about all of these issues that we’ve talked about, for people to understand that I’m not talking from an ivory tower, or from some observational space, but that I’m part of that.

Cue music: “Flagger” by Blue Dot Sessions

CM: Thank you so much Ana Castillo for being here, and ... thank you.

AC: Well, I appreciate it.

KS: Co-executive producers of This Rhetorical Life are Ben Keubrich and Karriann Soto, with additional production from André Habet.