

Representations of Eugenic Ideology and Sterilization Abuse in Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986)

Amanda L. Bayer

The University of South Carolina

Abstract Resumen

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Towards the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, the traditional definition of womanhood began to shift, thus, calling into question society's gender roles. Many Nordic¹ or "fit" women no longer submitted to the ideas of patriarchy: marriage, family, and domestic work. Instead, according to Kline, these "new women," decided to have a career or go to college, therefore, they delayed marriage and motherhood or did not marry and become mothers (10). Birth control also affected women's role in society. It was supposed to give women *individual* reproductive choices; however, because the eugenicists' perceived birth control as a threat to the Nordic race, birth control became what was best for *society*, population control. Many "fit" men, therefore, felt threatened because they were losing control of *ideal women*. Caleb Saleeby, a medical doctor, defines a woman's role and states, "In her role as mother, 'Woman is Nature's supreme instrument of the future [race] [. . .] 'Woman' is the instrument of the racial instinct and man the master" (qtd. in Doyle 19). In other words, women are only useful for procreation purposes; they are bodies (instruments) and men are supposed to control them (masters). Women have no agency; therefore, they are viewed as breeders and sexual

objects. Although all women were defined as “instruments,” only one type of woman is beneficial to the eugenicists, the *ideal woman*, the upper to middle-class Nordic “fit” woman. Eugenicists envisioned her as “the mother of tomorrow.” They gave her the duty of saving the Nordic race:

She would [. . .] focus her energies on her domestic duties at home, as wife and mother [. . .] [and therefore] she would restore the moral forces necessary to keep the American family intact as well as reaffirm male dominance in the public sphere [. . .] [and] she would ensure that the white race would maintain its dominance. (Kline 16-17)

Nordic men praised her for her service; therefore, she was loyal to them even though they oppressed her. Motherhood became central in (dis)continuing the Nordic race: the “fit” bettered the race and the “unfit” destroyed the race. President Teddy Roosevelt proclaimed that women of “good stock” who chose not to have children were “race criminals” (11).

“Unfit” women were blamed for destroying the Nordic race because if they procreated, their children were not of the Nordic race. Scientist Charles Davenport writes, “the cross between a white man and a negro is a negro . . . and the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew” (qtd in Doyle 16). The “unfit” women and mothers, therefore, served no purpose for the progress of the Nordic race, and they must be stopped from reproducing. The “unfit” women are the “women adrift” or the working class women, the unmarried women, the non-Nordic women, the poor women, and white women who procreated with the “unfit.” According to the eugenicists, these women were

major social problems; thus, they were defined as “feeble-minded” and “bad mothers.”

Kline says,

eugenics offered a new approach to understanding and treating the “girl problem.” Such women [“unfit”] were not deprived, sick, or victimized; rather, they were genetically flawed. The eugenic response to the problem [. . .] was appealing [because] science provided ‘an objective method for resolving social and ethical questions’ rather than moral rationale for regulating female sexual behavior. Second, it suggested a relatively simple solution to the problem. By restricting reproduction of ‘feeble-minded’ mothers to eliminate feeble-mindedness in future generations, it could curb sexual immorality and advance race progress. (20)ⁱⁱ

The eugenicists were afraid of the “unfit” because they passed their “genetically flawed” genes, heritage, culture, and customs generation to generation; thus, threatening the Nordic race. The easiest and most effective way to end the passing down of the so-called “genetic problem” in the “unfit” was to stop the “unfit” women from reproducing and sterilize them. Beth Cooper Benjamin describes sterilization and states,

Sterilization is surgically achieved in women through two major means. Hysterectomy, the surgical removal of the uterus, has been commonly used for sterilization purposes [. . .] The most widely accepted procedure for sterilization of women is the tubal ligation, in which the fallopian tubes are blocked or severed, preventing the passage of eggs from the ovaries to the uterus. (par. 2)

Roberts writes, “In 1907, Indiana became the first state to pass an involuntary sterilization law, empowering state institutions to sterilize without consent, criminals and ‘imbeciles’ whose condition was ‘pronounced improvable’ by a panel of physicians (67).ⁱⁱⁱ Twenty-nine states, thus, followed suit (Shapiro 35). As a result, certain individuals, mostly “unfit” women, lost control of their own reproduction. Eugenicists, therefore, read marginal women as excessive breeders and made decisions for them.

Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters* exposes and challenges the patriarchal and eugenic ideology that upper and middle class citizens of the Nordic race are biologically superior to other races, thus, she confronts the horrific practices of sterilization abuse. In this book, the narrator, Teresa, a writer, a poet, and teacher, composes lyrical letters to her life-long friend, Alicia, a struggling, lonely artist. Patriarchy marginalizes Teresa and Alicia because they are non-white and because they challenge the traditional values of womanhood. Castillo criticizes, through Teresa, the eugenics movement in the United States and re-defines patriarchy’s “unchangeable” definition of marginal women and therefore cancels the patriarchal hierarchy and power (the right to dominate and control others).^{iv} She wants to re-define and share power in the positive sense of the word (creative and life affirming)^v with the reader through her use of form, language, and pluralistic readings of women and their bodies and by implication the horrific practices of sterilization. Her purpose is to challenge the set definitions of the patriarchal hierarchy. For the eugenicists, only one type of woman is beneficial to them, and they project the *ideal woman* as an upper to middle-class Nordic woman who willingly submits to the ideas of patriarchy (marriage, family, and motherhood).

Considered the “dominant race mother,” this ideal woman ensures the dominance of her race through her capability to give birth to white,^{vi} upper to middle-class, “fit” offspring. Patriarchy blames those women who do not meet their model; therefore, they reject “the new woman,” or the white woman who is capable but does not *want* to meet the patriarchy’s definition of the *ideal woman*; the “woman adrift,” or the working-class woman; the non-Nordic woman; and the unmarried woman for the destruction of the race (Kline 16). The women who are incapable of becoming the *ideal woman*, those unmarried, poor, non-white, and white who procreate with the “unfit” become marginalized and therefore targets of sterilization.^{vii} The eugenicists and the patriarchy define women in order to help their cause in the United States.

The Mixquiahuala Letters is not a conventional novel, although critics and publishers label it as such: “*The Mixquiahuala Letters* is the controversial and outstanding first *novel*” (back cover; my emphasis). It is not a conventional novel because Castillo does not desire that it be subject to the traditional, patriarchal conventions of reading: cover-to-cover. Castillo asks from her reader to participate and question her^{viii} role as a reader. Castillo states, “Dear Reader: [. . .] this is not a book to be read in the usual sequence” (i). She presents three choices to read the text and addresses three readers: “the Conformist,” “the Cynic,” and “the Quixotic.” These choices switch the sequences of the letters and sometimes leave certain ones out, but Castillo then includes a note to inform the reader that she can actually read the book anyway she likes, stating, “For the reader committed to short fiction, all the letters read as separate entities” (iii). Critic Anne Bower reminds us that although “Castillo chooses [to write in] a highly

patterned form – the letter novel – [. . .] [she] enacts her call of change by playing with that form” (133).

Castillo does indeed “play with that form.” She challenges the dominant discourse when the narrator, Teresa, does not use the conventional “I,” as the patriarch does. The “I” perceives the first person narrative as the center of the universe. Instead, Teresa identifies herself as “i” and de-centralizes the term in hopes to share creative power. In an interview, Castillo says that her narrator is “a Chicana, who is a radical poet and uses the small ‘i’ and she uses verse whenever she feels like it” because Castillo, as she noted,

was just thinking of Luce Irigaray [. . .] she’s an example of someone causing a revolution in her profession and in writing just by virtue of the language that she used.[. . .] She was attacking white, male writing – she broke all the rules in the French language to do that. (Saeta par.34)

In other words, Castillo challenges the “white, male writing” in her own work when she uses “i,” plays with the form of the letter novel, and asks the reader to participate in order to protest the social expectations of patriarchy. Choosing to use unconventional form and language, she problematizes the assumptions of the eugenics movement and its subsequent sterilization because patriarchy shows one right way to “read” marginal women. Castillo, on the other hand, de-centralizes the patriarchal belief and asserts multiple readings of the novel or marginal women and their bodies.

The plural readings of women and their bodies illuminate how Castillo engages and criticizes the eugenics movement and sterilization. Teresa and Alicia provide helpful

examples of people who demonstrate that individuals use their own prejudices and perceptions to define others. For example, the white and colored communities perceive Teresa and Alicia differently, demonstrating that human bodies do indeed have multiple readings. Even Teresa is not immune to those prejudicial readings, which she shows when she describes how she considers herself a woman of color because she “hated white women” and that “society made them above all possessions” (49). She is part of Mexican culture and part of United States culture, and she considers herself a Chicana,^{ix} but when she visits Mexico for the first time she says, “i was part of the culture that would not allow me to separate” (27). On the other hand, the Mexican family who Teresa stays with as a student in Mexico City perceives her, as well as the other students from the United States, including Alicia, to be a *gringa*,^x “the superior other.”^{xi} She describes how the “hostesses giggled and fluttered attentively and with nervous apprehension about their latest American guests” (25). Clearly, however, Teresa has much in common with the Mexican family:

Didn't they [the hostess family] tell anything by my Indian-marked face, fluent use of the language, undeniably Spanish name? Nothing blurred their vision of another gringa come to stay as i nodded and shook hands during introductions and took my seat. (25)

While Teresa perceives herself as a Chicana, the hostesses label her a *gringa*, and patriarchy defines her as non-white and therefore biologically inferior. Teresa recalls the first time she noticed Alicia, seeing her as a “white woman,” and saying, “i didn't want to be your friend – you, some WASP chick or JAP from Manhattan's west side” (50). Her

perception categorizes Alicia as one type of person. Teresa realizes after she becomes Alicia's friend, however, that she is "only half right" because Alicia is only "partially white" (50). Yet, she still considers Alicia "the privileged white girl from the suburbs" (48). Alexis, Teresa's Spanish lover and Alicia's distant cousin, sees Alicia differently, affectionately calling her *morena*^{xii} (111). The nurse who sterilizes Alicia, on the other hand, mechanically categorizes her to be a poor, unwed, colored, mother of five though she has no children (126). Therefore, in her mind, Alicia is biologically inferior and a prime candidate for sterilization. Castillo shows here how different perceptions produce multiple readings of human bodies. These perceptions, like those of the eugenicists, can ultimately define, misjudge, harm, or destroy another.

Eugenicists consider Teresa and Alicia "unfit" for procreation of the Nordic race, thus candidates for sterilization, because they represent society's marginal women. First, they are non-white, and throughout the text, Teresa describes herself as "dark" with an "Indian-marked face" who has "dark hair and Asian eyes [. . .] [and who is] the daughter of a migrant worker [. . .] in the North [U.S.]" (24- 25). She further asserts her Mexican identity when she says, "No one in my family has bothered to trace further back than the Mexican civil war" (50). While both Teresa and Alicia are non-white, Alicia is not Mexican-American; she is Andulucian-American^{xiii} with black hair (34). Both women do not conform to the eugenicists' *ideal woman*.^{xiv} Moreover, Teresa and Alicia are independent of men since they travel without male companions throughout Mexico and the United States, something to be considered socially unacceptable. For example, Teresa describes her *tío Chino*^{xv} as someone who cannot see a woman "gallivanting around

without her man” (18). Yet, they live and have careers without men. Teresa and Alicia also become pregnant by men who eugenicists see as “unfit,” or basically non-white. Teresa becomes pregnant twice, once by her Spanish lover, Alexis, who is a flamenco dancer, and once by her estranged Mexican-American husband with “dough colored” arms. Alicia’s pregnancy is caused by her first lover, Rodney, who Teresa describes as “a poor, misdirected, deprived black man from the ghetto” (48). Finally, eugenicists categorize Teresa and Alicia as marginal women because both have an abortion, a social taboo.^{xvi} Teresa aborts her fetus from her relationship with Alexis because “i [. . .] knew he would never have been out of my life if i’d had his child. i wanted to be rid of him like a cancerous tumor” (116). Alicia has her abortion at seventeen when “Rodney stopped coming around” (126). Although they are both candidates for sterilization, according to eugenicists, Teresa is able to have her child. On the other hand, Alicia is sterilized and cannot have hers.

Yet, if they are both marginal women, why do the eugenicists sterilize Alicia and not Teresa? Teresa is older than Alicia, in her late twenties or thirties,^{xvii} when she has an abortion and a child,^{xviii} she is a professional and a member of the middle-class, and she is a married Catholic woman. She is a writer and a college instructor, and therefore, we assume that she has health insurance, because the medical professionals, when she is having the abortion, treat her with respect. Teresa says, “the assistant [to the doctor] was kind with water-filled eyes. My fingernails embedded into her sleeve” (114). The assistant is more personal and does not judge her like the nurse who performs Alicia’s abortion and sterilization. Teresa also has certain advantages over Alicia because she is

technically married when she has the abortion and later when she has her child. Although she and her husband are separated, they are not officially divorced. Her godmother (Madrina) asks her if she and her husband are officially divorced, and she responds, “We weren’t come to think of it, I admitted” (22). Teresa’s Catholicism saves her from the status of unwed, although she insists that she was not married in a church because as her godmother reminds her, “According to the Church, even if you get a divorce, you’ll always be married” (22).

Alicia, on the other hand, is not perceived as religious. She is young, poor, misperceived, and therefore, more of a threat to the Nordic race than Teresa. Alicia’s lack of religious identity proves most disadvantageous since Teresa states in a letter, “we already know that you [Alicia] are not a religious type person” (134). In other words, Alicia is not a “good Christian woman” who submits to the beliefs of the patriarchal institution, the Church. Gloria Anzaldúa clarifies,

Culture forms our beliefs.[. . .] Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. [. . .] The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala* [bad woman]. (38-39)

In addition, Alicia is seventeen and unmarried when she decides to have an abortion (Castillo 126). Thus, Alicia is a woman who “transgresse[s] the genteel standards of civilized morality” (Kline 20). Because the eugenicists could not accept this way of life,

they deem these women “genetically flawed,” therefore, prime candidates for sterilization (20). According to the eugenicists’ standard, Alicia is defined as a promiscuous, careless, highly-sexual, and “genetically flawed” young woman because she is so young, unwed, and pregnant. Her youth makes her more vulnerable to the patriarchal institution because she is a minor and does not have adult or parental advice.^{xix} Alicia struggles to make the decision to have an abortion. Teresa states,

At first, [you (Alicia)] had wanted the child, romanticized motherhood, life with its father, struggling together [. . .] When Rodney stopped coming around, you were afraid to be exiled alone. (Castillo 126)

Because Rodney “stopped coming around,” he makes Alicia responsible for the child growing inside of her. Alicia feels “exiled” by Rodney; she is alone, frightened, and “afraid” of being a young unwed mother. She, therefore, submits blindly to the rules of the eugenicists.

As a seventeen-year-old struggling artist, Alicia also has little money. In order to afford the abortion, she borrows a welfare card from a “friend of a friend” because “the fee for a legal abortion was steep for a teenage girl with no one to trust who has that kind of money” (126). A welfare card cannot be readily available to a young woman who cannot afford the expense of an abortion, and indeed the card that Alicia does borrow belongs to a colored woman who has five children. Teresa writes, “At the clinic, you were alone, posing as a Puerto Rican woman who had already borne five children” (126). The nurse perceives her as a colored, unwed, young, mother with five children which to the nurse signifies negligence. Teresa states, “The nurse looked up the records and shook

her head disgusted by your supposed negligence” (126). The nurse ignores Alicia, an individual person who has individual rights, and only sees the record of a colored, poor (on welfare), promiscuous, unintelligent, woman who “neglected” to use birth control and “take responsibility.”^{xx} In the minds of the supporters and enforcers of the eugenics movement, the only way to stop a promiscuous, unintelligent woman who is on welfare is to make the decision for her and decide to permanently sterilize her and take away her right to chose to have children. Teresa ponders the fate of that Puerto Rican woman and writes, “Maybe that Puerto Rican woman with all of those fatherless children went on to have yet another child. ‘Who knows?’” (Castillo 127). The Puerto Rican woman, like Alicia, is a victim because she is on welfare, unmarried, and a woman of color; therefore, according to the eugenicists, she is a promiscuous woman and should be sterilized. Here, Teresa subtly addresses that such practices affect all women who do not meet the characteristics of an *ideal woman*. They affect the Puerto Rican, the Chicana, the Native American, the African American, and the poor white woman, and Castillo, through Teresa, shows how the practice of sterilization abuse is hidden from everyday society. Very few people know or care to know what happened to this poor, unwed Puerto Rican woman. Because Alicia has the welfare card, the nurse thinks that she is the negligent one. Teresa articulates, “She [the nurse] drew up the forms that were not presented to you until you were on the table, sedated, feet in stirrups and exposed to the world the way you had never been exposed before in your life” (126). In other words, the nurse is distant and cruel, and therefore, tricks and misinforms Alicia when she is most vulnerable – sedated, alone, and exposed – into being sterilized. “The clinic” does not just perform an abortion;

it only performs an abortion if the woman “agrees” to be permanently sterilized.^{xxi} The nurse sterilizes Alicia because she defines her according to patriarchal rules and consequently misperceives her.

In a single paragraph, Teresa writes, “You were sterilized” (126). In this blunt manner she suggests that Alicia was not only physically sterilized but quickly and harshly violated against her will. She also suffers an emotional sterilization by violently being robbed of her right to have children. Castillo puts attention on this line to force the reader to pause and think about violence, deception, loss of an individual right, and harmful sterilization procedures. Critic Thomas Shapiro describes sterilization as

a permanent form of contraception. It involves the disruption of a portion of the male or female reproductive tract so that a sperm can not [sic] unite with an ovum. In order to block conception in women the fallopian tubes can be cut, tied, crushed, burned, or blocked by chemicals or occlusive devices. The tubes can be reached by either a vaginal or an abdominal approach. (7)

The words “cut, tied, crushed, and burned” convey the horrific violence to the body this operation involves.

La Operación, filmed in 1982, is a rare documentary that addresses sterilization abuse in the early 1900’s to the present day in Puerto Rican women living in Puerto Rico. This crucial film parallels the United States corporate economic interests with the propaganda that influenced approximately one-third of all Puerto Rican women within childbearing age to be sterilized (*La Operación*). *La Operación* shows a sterilization

operation performed through the abdominal approach. The surgeon cuts a three inch horizontal line on the abdomen, and almost carelessly sticks his finger inside the fresh cut. As the blood oozes from the incision, the surgeon with his metal surgical instruments digs to find the patient's fallopian tubes. When he locates them, he lifts them about an inch and a half out of her body, takes black thread, and ties numerous messy black bows around her tubes. He then cuts her tubes and sews her abdomen with black thread. The procedure indeed proves violent on the body. Even the colors – red (blood) and black (thread) – represent violence. Literary critic Alfred Arteaga writes,

Violence, act and event, is red. [. . .] Violence is not apart from blood, but rather the hot articulation of it. It is a blood act; it is a red event. It is the red of death and the push toward death. [. . .] Black serves to articulate the memory and image of unspeakable acts and events. [. . .] It is by the absence of light and color that we denote violence. [. . .] black is the link to red. (vii-viii)

Red represents the blood from the first cut of the surgeon, and therefore, shows the violence of a sterilization. Black, the color of the thread, leaves “the memory and image of unspeakable acts.” Although, the book does not present a visual representation of the details of *la operación*, it has an impact that shows the procedure's ongoing violence.

The eugenicists' actions towards Alicia harm her and her heritage. Her sterilization not only violates her body; it violates her whole self as a woman. The eugenicists define her in single terms: “unfit,” thus, she loses her individual rights as a

woman and becomes a victim of population control. The mechanics of population control are shown within “Letter 35” when Teresa thinks of Alicia’s sterilization:

i watched a special report on public television the other evening on China’s policy on population control. According to the report, if the country doesn’t receive full cooperation, the Chinese people will begin to starve in ten years. Married couples are allowed to have no more than one child. (126)

A “special report” often refers to commentary that usually wants to cause an immediate effect or shock to the viewer and “public television” typically reflects an educational program which informs the viewer about a place or culture outside of her understanding. This “special report on public television” that Teresa watches, therefore, wants to shock and cause an emotional affect on the viewer about China’s difficulties with population control. This section makes the reader realize the boundary between birth control and population control even though these terms are often used interchangeably. Shapiro, for example, defines population control as

the Malthusian belief inspired that for the good of society, in light of overpopulation, certain groups (usually the least powerful and poor) should reduce their birth rates. (9)

Although many groups including the eugenicists, feminists, and socialists, especially in the 1920s, believed that population control and birth control were synonymous, they are not (9). Shapiro defines birth control as “the more or less voluntary planning and actions by individuals to have the number of children they want and to decide when they want

them” (8). In other words, birth control is an *individual choice*, and population control is “*society’s*” choice. The confusion between the definitions of birth control and population control has caused numerous groups to operate under eugenics ideology that the Nordic race is biologically superior to other races. Therefore, population controllers encourage upper to middle-class Nordic women to use contraceptives such as the diaphragm and the pill, and encourage “unfit” women to use the intrauterine device and sterilization, methods that physicians control (Shapiro 9-10). This section on the special report addresses the issues of individual freedom and society control. According to the “special report” on China, the people have no right to decide on their individual freedom to have children, but must do what is right for society. The supporters of population control are the government, “China’s policy.” As many “special reports” do, this report ignores, hides, and does not develop what lies behind a potential problem; it only focuses on the surface and the false logic of the situation.^{xxii} For example, the policy makers limit procreation to married couples. The report states that “married couples are allowed to have no more than one child” (Castillo 126). Yet, what about the people who are not married? Clearly unmarried people, mainly women, are expected and pressured not to have children, because unmarried pregnant women are socially unacceptable. This “special report” is based on propaganda because it is founded on the belief that people who have children out of wedlock or who are married and have more than one child are to blame for the starvation of the Chinese people. If unmarried women are not to have children, then they alone are made responsible for “controlling the population.” Teresa concludes this paragraph with a question: “The question was posed at the end of the

program, how would this country handle the problem?” (126). This question no longer asks the viewer to be distant and consider a foreign culture; it forces the viewer to look at her own culture and ask: yes, “how would this country handle the problem?” Yet, what problem is Teresa addressing? Is it the problem of starving people or is it the problem of people losing their individual rights to chose to have a child or to have children?

Losing individual rights assists the loss of heritage and the dying of a culture. Teresa explains:

Even while I dreamed, you had stopped waiting for knights in shining armor, hoping of cradling little princes and princesses, whispering lullabys your grandmothers once sang to you. (126)

She can still dream of becoming a mother and having a family – “knight in shining armor [. . .] cradling little princes and princesses,” because she is able to have children if she chooses. Alicia, on the other hand, has “stopped waiting” to have a family and experience biological motherhood because children for her are as much a fantasy as the world of knights, princes, and princesses. Linguistically, “stopped” is a quick harsh action written in the past tense which suggests that Alicia cannot have children because another quick harsh action violated her in the past. Consequently, she is unable to pass on to her progeny her Andulucian and her gypsy heritage. Alicia recalls her mother singing a lullaby to her as a child; the one she learned from Alicia’s grandmother: “*Este niño no tiene cuna. Su papá es carpintero. El le hará una*” (31).^{xxiii} Ironically, this is a gypsy ballad that addresses the Christ child (*el niño*). However, because Alicia has been perceived as a non-religious marginal woman, she will never be able to sing this lullaby

to her future children, and therefore, the passing of generations, cultures, and customs cease. “Stopping” (via sterilization and propaganda) generations and families of the “unfit” was one goal of the eugenicists because they believed the “unfit” affected the intelligence of the United States gene pool. Alicia is “unfit” because she is of an “inferior immigrant race.” The eugenics ideology that the Nordic race is biologically superior to other races is widespread and seemingly effective because it stopped the passing of heritages, cultures, and customs. For example, Alicia knows very little about her own ethnic background. She only remembers that gypsies “are an oppressed dark people who nevertheless live celebrating death through life” (31). One way to “celebrate death through life” is to have children. Alicia is unable to pass on her gypsy heritage because of her sterilization. Her parents “had never wanted anything to do with that mongrel race [the gypsies], the lost tribe, and fought in America for American ideals and the American way of life.” (31) The eugenics propaganda persuaded immigrants, like Alicia’s family, to deny their own culture, and it brainwashed them to become part of the mainstream culture so that they would not stick out. Immigrants, especially during the eugenics movement, were mostly Southern European, Eastern European, and Jewish (Doyle 14). The immigrants, therefore, become ashamed of their race and look up to the Nordic race.

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Although Alicia cannot biologically have children, she defies the eugenicists and re-defines and pluralizes motherhood. However, Alicia still regrets not being a biological mother. Teresa states, “There would be no babes to caress and coo, none to worry and fuss over, no bittersweet reflections in your twilight years of how they had grown up so

quickly and gone off on their own.” (126) This statement describes the experience of motherhood – a life-long, emotional experience from “babes” to worrying to the “twilight” years of old age – an experience that Alicia will never have because of the “quick harsh action that violated her in the past.” Yet, she yearns for a family that she cannot biologically have. Teresa informs us that “you [Alicia] craved a family, to share life with a steady man, and children to sit around the table together, [. . .] always as one unit” (112). Alicia develops multiple motherly roles in many of her relationships. She becomes a godmother to Teresa’s son, Vittorio, and an “othermother.”^{xxv} Teresa writes, “since our views on parenting are similar i was pleased when you consented to be his godmother” (134). Their views on parenting are similar because they both believe that parenting is not a task for one or the other parent (112). They believe in shared parenting.^{xxvi} Alicia adores Vittorio; however, unsettling motherly feelings envelope her, and she returns mentally to the painful memories of her own loss of motherhood, the sterilization. When Alicia meets Vittorio the first time, at his christening, Teresa states, “My Vittorio’s existence had intrigued you but he opened a Pandora’s box of unspoken sentiments” (136). The emotions of not being able to biologically have a child return and overwhelm her. When Teresa gives Alicia instructions on how to care for Vittorio, if he becomes hers, Alicia accepts, but cannot look at Teresa in the eye (136). As a godmother, she understands Teresa’s feelings when she describes motherhood: “There are days when i want to shout for all to see the miracle [Vittorio]. i confess, they carry me through those when i want to deny his existence” (134). Alicia also “mothers” her disturbed lover, Abdel, and becomes an “othermother” to his children. In Teresa’s words, “*He* [Abdel]

had brought you his children to you children he had not been responsible for and expected you to be mother to them as well as to him" (136; emphasis on the original). Teresa observes that his children aroused "maternal instincts you [Alicia] would rather not acknowledge" (135). Alicia remains in this unhealthy, abusive relationship with Abdel until she ignores one of his childish tantrums. In order to get her attention and her sympathy, Abdel commits suicide. Alicia does indeed participate in motherly roles, although the eugenicists take away her ability to be a biological mother because according to their own ideologies they are interested in the bloodline. Eugenicists never achieve an ultimate victory by defining marginal women "bad mothers" in single terms; however, they do succeed in making Alicia feel ashamed and secretive about her sterilization.

The "secret" Alicia keeps from everyone except from Teresa, is that as a teenager she was involuntarily sterilized. Until the reader encounters "Letter 35," she is unaware of Alicia's sterilization, and she does not know until "Letter 40" that Alicia has kept her sterilization a secret. After Abdel, Alicia's disturbed lover, suggests that he and Alicia should create a child, Teresa informs us that "*Abdel didn't know! . . .you were never going to have a baby. Never*" (136; emphasis on the original). Alicia does not tell Abdel her "secret" because she feels a loss of identity as a woman who cannot have children, and therefore, thinks he might leave her. Teresa tells the reader Alicia's secret in order to expose the underlying horrors of sterilization. She narrates Alicia's story because Alicia cannot confront her pain from her traumatic abuse, the sterilization. Critic Anne Bower writes, "Teresa and Alicia serve various roles for each other: friend, quasi-lover (one

might say a sexless lesbianism), colearner, sister, confidante, guide [. . .] alter ego” (142).

Teresa plays her pluralistic roles and informs the reader of Alicia’s story. Teresa states,

I doubt if what I’m going to recall for both our sakes in the following pages will coincide one hundred per cent with your [Alicia’s] recollections, but as you make use of my determination to attempt a record of some sort, to stir your memory, try not to look for flaws or inaccuracies.

(Castillo 53)

Teresa records their memories in her letters as she perceives them. Teresa writes, and Alicia deals with her shame and trauma through her art. Teresa articulates,

Last month, at the opening of your show, which was meant to be a special occasion, with all your friends, your new lover, parents so proud that your strangeness had at last manifested itself in genius, I absorbed each work, a personal statement of violation and fear. (127)

Alicia is no longer physically alone because she has her friends, family, and lover; however, we understand that she feels isolated from everyone because Teresa writes that her show was “meant to be a special occasion.” In other words, it was not actually a special occasion because Alicia is emotionally alone. No one knows the depth of her wounds and no one can experience her loneliness and pain, not even Teresa. Therefore, she transfers her emotional pain to her art. Nonetheless, Teresa does recognize “the personal statement of violation and fear” because she is Alicia’s best friend and, therefore, knows the “secret” she keeps. Alicia’s “strangeness” implies the affect of the sterilization because her art reflects “violation and fear.”

Because Alicia's art reflects "violation and fear," Teresa compares Alicia's art to Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Teresa observes, "There were traces of Frida Kahlo and postmortem praise, her exposed heart as a blood pumping organ rather than the romantic metaphor expressing emotional rejection." (127) Teresa writes about Alicia's work as "postmortem" because it is a discussion of an event after it is over. Alicia discusses her "violation and fear" on canvas *after* her sterilization. Postmortem also signifies an autopsy, a violent act after one dies. An autopsy tries to discover the cause of death or in this case, Alicia's metaphorical death, her "secret," the sterilization. Frida Kahlo is a Mexican icon. Art critic, Sarah M. Lowe states, "In Mexico and among the Chicano and Hispanic communities in the United States, Kahlo has become a cult figure" (10). Teresa connects Alicia to Kahlo because they are artists who are autobiographical and put their "violation and fear" into their work. For example, Kahlo had to overcome "physical handicaps and constant pain, resignation in the face of her husband's infidelities, and a morbid obsession with her inability to bear a child." (10). Teresa suggests that Alicia is similar to Kahlo in life and in work because Kahlo's work depicts "bloody births and equally bloody deaths, fetuses, corpses, and disembodied organs" (10). When Teresa writes, "her [Kahlo's] heart exposed as a blood pumping organ," she could be thinking of Kahlo's painting *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) where Kahlo holds six of her open veins that connect to objects which represent the feelings of her "blood pumping organ."^{xxvii}

Kahlo's work, *Henry Ford Hospital*, shows Kahlo coming to terms with her life of pain linked to the loss of motherhood. Specifically, she focuses on her husband's infidelities, the accident, her abortion, her miscarriage, her inability to have children, and

her aversion to machines (Lowe 67). In this painting, Kahlo lies naked in a twin-sized white hospital bed in the middle of an industrial city. Her stomach bulges from the afterbirth of her miscarried child, and she bleeds from her vagina. In her hand she holds six of her veins. They connect to a medical model of a healthy woman (a woman that she is not), her stillborn child, a snail that represents “the experience of an abortion. . .slow. . . soft. . . open,” her pelvis – “the result of her accident, which prevented her from carrying her baby to term,” a damaged flower that Diego gave her, and a machine (67). This painting connects Alicia and Frida Kahlo since both cannot have children because they were violated and “raped” by modern science. Kahlo was in a bus accident when she was a teenager and she was “raped” by a metal rod when the rod forcefully and unexplicably entered her vagina and went through her pelvic bone. Alicia was forcefully “raped” by *la operación*. Instead of the violent act of the rape leaving the women pregnant with the rapists’ child, the rapists take away their ability to have children. Arteaga writes,

The violent act, the violent event, is a bodily occurrence. It is the sharp flash against flesh, and it is the blood-colored response. The red act is a rape, the tearing of genitals and the bruising of forced arms and choked neck. [. . .] Because our lives are metered in the flow of blood at every moment, its appearance, its color accompany the attacks of our lives. [. . .] For the survivors of bloodletting, words can evoke the memories, almost like echoes, reverberating still in the tremble of the flesh. (vii)

For Kahlo and Alicia, the “words” that “evoke the memories” are spoken on canvas. “Letter 35” ends with “Love, T,” which is an apology to Alicia because Teresa

remembers and reminds Alicia of the pain of her sterilization. Although it is necessary that Teresa reveals Alicia's "secret" to the reader and inform her of sterilization abuse, Teresa asks Alicia for her forgiveness.

The eugenicists see Alicia as "unfit." They define her as non-white, poor, independent of men, young, promiscuous, non-religious, and a "bad mother." According to the eugenics theory, Alicia destroys the Nordic race because she is a marginal woman. Therefore, Alicia is the perfect candidate for sterilization. Patriarchy labels marginal women as "bad mothers." Castillo challenges the "bad mother" stereotype and re-defines marginal women as "good mothers." Nonetheless, Castillo seems to be in a paradox because although she re-defines marginal women, she follows the patriarchal belief that women should be mothers. White women have been more privileged than marginal women and have been arguing that women do not need to be mothers because, as white women, they have been expected to be mothers. As a marginal woman, Castillo protests against the eugenicists' single definition of marginal women. She uses the plural readings of women and their bodies as a bridge in order to set up dialogue between the marginal women and the supporters and enforcers of patriarchy and eugenic ideology as an important stepping stone to show that women cannot be defined in one "correct" way. (Mis)perceptions and "unchangeable" definitions harm, violate, "rape," and destroy women. Plural readings of women and their bodies are needed to represent sterilization.

ⁱ Nordic refers to the upper to middle-class Protestant and Northern European. Please see Shapiro.

ⁱⁱ Eugenics was considered a science after the re-discovery of Gregor Mendel's research. Mendel had revealed that hereditary matter passes generation to generation (genetics). "Mendel's laws established genetics as a serious science and lent more legitimacy to the eugenic claim that social undesirables—

including alcoholics, prostitutes, and even unwed mothers—would produce more of their kind by passing down their supposed genetic flaw to their children,” says Kline (20).

ⁱⁱⁱ Although men and women were sterilized according to these laws, women were sterilized more often than men. For example, 1907-1964 38,962 (61%) women and 24,716 (39%) men were sterilized according to “Periodic Cumulative Grand Totals of Persons Sterilized under State Laws According to the Categories Covered by the Laws, and by Sex, Gathered from Various Sources” (Robitscher 123).

^{iv} I am referring to bell hooks’ negative definition of power: “the right to dominate and control others” (*Feminist Theory* 91).

^v I am referring to bell hooks’ positive definition of power: “creative and life affirming” (*Feminist Theory* 85).

^{vi} “White” refers to the Nordic race

^{vii} “The new woman” was not sterilized although she disobeyed the eugenicists’ rules because she was “of good stock.” However, she was verbally condemned. Kline writes that President “Teddy Roosevelt proclaimed in the 1900’s, white middle-class womanhood had willfully abandoned its fertility. . . . Women of ‘good stock’ who chose not to have children, he declared, were ‘race criminals’” (11).

^{viii} I use *her* only because Ana Castillo’s ideal audience is “a woman who is very much like me. . . ,” or as interviewer, Elsa Saeta quotes Castillo, “another woman of color,” or “a friend who was a budding feminist. . . [who] had some consciousness. . . and needed to work things out” (pars. 29-30)

^{ix} Chicana critic, Gloria Anzaldúa, states, “Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, are the offspring of those first matings” (27). In other words, the offspring of “people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood” (*el mestizo o el mexicano*).

^x According to the *Oxford Spanish Desk Dictionary* (OSD), *gringa* signifies “foreigner,” “norteamericano [North American],” “fair-haired girl” (210). According to the *Diccionario Escolar de la Real Academia Española*, *gringo/a* means “Extranjero especialmente de habla inglesa, y en general todo el que habla lengua que no sea la española [a foreigner, especially one who speaks English and in general does not know Spanish]” and “Norteamericano de Estados Unidos [North American from the United States]” (565; translations mine). *Gringa*, therefore, has a racial connotation.

^{xi} Anzaldúa believes that, “Gringos were locked into the fiction of white superiority” (29). In other words, the gringos *thought* they were superior.

^{xii} Literally “dark,” “dark-skinned woman,” or “dark-haired woman” (OSD 282).

^{xiii} I recognize that Andulucia is a region with many ethnic groups, however, for the purpose of this thesis, I am using Andulucian to categorize people in Andulucia who are non-white.

^{xiv} Here I am referring to the “one-drop rule” where one part determines the whole (mulatto, mestiza, etc.)

^{xv} Uncle Chino

^{xvi} Abortions were socially unacceptable, yet, sterilizations were acceptable. As a matter of fact, in 1971 the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare included sterilization as part of its health and family planning programs. “To support the ‘full range of family planning services,’ except *abortion*, was the intent of Congress” (Hernandez 275-276; my emphasis). In other words, sterilizations were funded by the government and abortions were not. Shapiro says, “Sterilization thus became widely available for poor people in a decade [1970s] that has seen cutbacks in virtually all other public services – and a subsequently reduced standard of living – for the poor. It was also a decade during which abortions became legal, yet were severely restricted to the poor. While abortions have remained at the center of an intense social struggle concerning reproductive freedom and the role of the state in family-planning, sterilizations have been perceived quite differently” (6-7).

^{xvii} She and Alicia did not meet until they were twenty (23). “Letter 35,” the letter that addresses Alicia’s abortion and sterilization, is written as a flashback. She starts writing Alicia letters in her 20’s and continues until middle-age (back cover).

^{xviii} Teresa has an abortion and later has a child with her Mexican-American husband.

^{xix} Several cases have been documented of the sterilization of women under the age of 18 without proper consent. For example, see *the Relf case* where two African American girls (ages 12 and 14) were sterilized without knowledge or consent of their parents (Hernandez 282-283). Also, see the laws the sterilization laws for minors (276).

^{xx} See the sterilization case of Nial Ruth Cox, an 18 year-old marginal woman, who officials in North Carolina had threatened to discontinue her family's welfare if she refused to submit to a sterilization (Davis 216).

^{xxi} The medical practice sterilized most women without consent when they entered the clinic/hospital for an abortion or when they were delivering their child/ children. See cases of Dolores Madrigal, Maria Hurtado, etc. (Hernandez 271-275).

^{xxii} For another example of propaganda and false logic, see Angela Davis's "Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights." She includes the "genocide" sterilization propaganda from one of the pamphlets from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare which targeted Native Americans. She states, "there is a sketch of a family with *ten children* and *one horse* and another sketch of a family with *one child* and *ten horses*. The drawings are supposed to imply that more children mean more poverty and fewer children mean wealth" (218).

^{xxiii} Castillo translates in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, "This child has no cradle. His father is a carpenter. He will make him one" (31).

^{xxiv} Arguably Alicia's parents heard, witnessed, and read eugenic propaganda because Teresa writes to Alicia during the 1960s-80s when they are in their 20s-40s. Alicia's parents would then be in the heart of the eugenics movement and propaganda. This propaganda was highly prevalent 1910s – 1930s. In 1924 United States Congress passed the Immigration Act, "one of the provisions of which required that immigrants take an intelligence test." (Doyle 15). President Coolidge endorsed this law and states, "The Nordic's propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides" (15).

^{xxv} Patricia Hill-Collins speaks of "othermothers" in "Black Women and Motherhood." Othermothers are "women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (178). Othermothers include teachers, relatives, librarians, and community leaders.

^{xxvi} Please see bell hooks' chapter, "Revolutionary Parenting" 133-147 located in *Feminist Theory*.

^{xxvii} There is also evidence of a "heart exposed of a blood pumping organ" in Kahlo's *Las dos Fridas* (1939). She paints her two selves sitting next to each other on a green woven couch. The Frida who sits on the right is slightly slouched with her legs open in the outline of her green "Tehuana" skirt which falls to the ground. Her attire is colorful, her heart is whole, and one of her vein's connect to a small family portrait in her left hand. She cuts her vein and therefore, her family ties which signify the dying of a culture. The other vein connects to her "other" self. She holds the hand of the "other" Frida who dresses in a Victorian lacy white dress and sits with straight posture. This Frida's heart is exposed and she cuts one of her veins and it bleeds, staining her white dress. In an interview Kahlo commented on *Las dos Fridas* and said that "one was the self that Rivera [her husband, Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera] once loved and the other, the one he no longer loved" (Lowe 59). Like Rodney, Diego Rivera "stopped coming around."

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