

Politics, Power, and *Palabras* Mirrored in Contemporary Chicana Literature

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ABSTRACT

One of the main characteristics of politics is its close connection with power whose positive effect is to work for the common good. However, there is also the risk of political power being used in a less benevolent way. On the one hand, concrete acts are what makes power visible and tangible, yet on the other hand written and oral speech acts will achieve the same end. Then again, words which are spoken or noted down on paper are only one way to get a message across, since everything that remains unsaid also has considerable effects. Missing or fragmentary information hints at the tendency of public institutions to overlook or neglect certain population groups thus putting the members of those groups at a disadvantage, impeding their participation within society.

The subsequent analysis of contemporary Mexican-American prose will examine the interactions and effects of political communication in the USA by studying literary characters and their lives as well as the legislative framework and the arguments of individuals in key positions of society. Examining the literary representation of these interrelated aspects in Ana Castillo's novel *So Far From God* will expose the connections between political acts and statements as well as the effects of the corresponding communication or lack thereof on the people concerned.

The interdisciplinary approach of the analysis makes use of scientific knowledge regarding power, language, sociology and cultural studies in order to provide deeper insights into the interaction of politics and literature.

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RESUMEN

La política está marcada por el ejercicio del poder, cuyo efecto positivo consiste en asegurar el bienestar común. Sin embargo, el poder político conlleva el riesgo de ser utilizado con motivos no filantrópicos. El poder en sus diferentes formas se vuelve palpable y visible, por un lado, por acciones concretas, así como también por expresiones escritas y orales. De esta forma, no solamente las palabras orales o escritas tienen efecto, sino también las cosas no expresadas.

La falta de información o la información expresada de una forma incompleta indica que las instituciones públicas tienden a omitir o descuidar algunos grupos de la población, por lo que los integrantes de dichos grupos quedan en desventaja al participar de la vida social.

El siguiente análisis de prosa mexicana-americana muestra el vínculo y el efecto de las comunicaciones políticas en los EUA, lo que se observa tanto en los destinos personales de personajes literarios, como en la legislación fundamental y las formas de argumentación de los dirigentes en posiciones claves en la sociedad. El estudio de la representación literaria de estas relaciones en la novela *So Far From God* de Ana Castillo deja discernir claramente el lazo entre los actos políticos y las declaraciones y expone las consecuencias, que aquella comunicación o la falta de ella significa para los afectados. El enfoque interdisciplinario de este análisis se apoya en conocimientos ganados en la investigación de poder, el lenguaje, la sociología y las ciencias culturales para adquirir una comprensión más profunda de la interacción entre la política y la literatura.

Palabras clave: Poder, lenguaje, silencio, política, consecuencias de acción, el sexo, la comunicación, cultura chicana, Ana Castillo

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of power seems to be inextricably tied to the binary of domination and subordination, of one person giving orders and another one having to obey. Both of these aspects are closely connected with the meaning of words and their communicative functions so that an examination of the language of power will also entail an analysis of the power of language.

Language is not merely a neutral means of exchanging information, since there is always the underlying network of social interactions and personal factors which is again reflected by the linguistic structures themselves. Depending on the viewpoint of the observer there are different assessments for these interrelated facts: “For doctors and lawyers, and to some degree for political philosophers also, words are signs which represent verifiable facts about human beings and human actions. [...] For moralists on the other hand, language is more a web which offers no escape, not a transparent window on to an object or action” (Maclean 87).

Language itself serves as a reflection of power and hierarchy which can be illustrated by the power of science in claiming “[t]he license to *name*” (Trinh 1991: 48), thus subordinating the Other to one’s own discursive system. The same arrangements hold true for patriarchal structures, which as a consequence, constitute particular challenges for women involved in matters of language and communication:

This positioning of the literal poses special problems for women readers and writers because literal language, together with nature and matter to which it is epistemologically linked, is traditionally classified as feminine, and the feminine is, from the point of view of a predominantly androcentric culture, always elsewhere too. A dualism of presence and absence, of subject and object, structures everything our culture considers thinkable; yet women cannot participate in it as subjects as easily as can men because of the powerful, persuasive way in which the feminine is again and again said to be on the object’s side of that dyad. (Homans 4-5)

Dichotomy and the meanings attached to those positions imply well-defined, rigid models for women and the behavior they are expected to conform to in a given society. Accordingly, a single character in a literary work of art whose identity becomes audible due to her voice and language acts as a microcosm illustrating the interactions in her cultural and political environment in an exemplary way.

In her novel *So Far From God*, Ana Castillo presents five different women whose lives are influenced by the language of politics. Sofia lives in New Mexico in a small town called Tome with her four daughters La Loca, Caridad, Esperanza, and Fe. Sofia’s husband leaves the family when the children are still small and returns unexpectedly many years later, his daughters all grown up. The focus of the analysis will be on the five female characters.

2. *LA LOCA* – VOICE OF AN ANGEL

The youngest daughter is called *La Loca Santa* – instead of her Christian name which is never mentioned in the novel – when she is pronounced dead by a doctor as a

three-year old but is miraculously resurrected, opening up her coffin during her own funeral and, according to eyewitnesses, “she lifted herself up into the air and landed on the church roof” (Castillo 23). Flying through the air in an angelic way, “like the glittering angel placed at the top of a Christmas tree” (Castillo 24), praying for the congregation and later on staying mostly in and around her home, the girl seems to fit the traditional image of the “angel in the house”. This historically established female ideal may be seen as the ultimate picture of the perfect woman which continues to contribute to a binary view of masculinity and femininity. Barbara Welter spells out the ideals to be aspired as the *Cult of True Womanhood*, defining the religious, biological and psychological boundaries of a woman:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (Welter 44)

The political implications of La Loca’s case seem to reinforce the idea that the safest place for a woman is her home. The only medical attention the girl receives is a vague diagnosis, yet nobody follows up on her symptoms or offers medical and psychological treatment, since “it was diagnosed that she was in all probability an epileptic. Epilepsy notwithstanding, there was much left unexplained and for this reason Sofi’s baby grew up at home, away from strangers who might be witnesses to her astonishing behavior” (Castillo 25). None of the institutions responsible for health or education ever enquire about this citizen who is left without professional medical surveillance, so “aside from when she suffered that abrupt death she never got no other medical attention” (Castillo 225). The same applies to her education, so she is left without school or private tuition until the day she dies: “She had never been to school” (Castillo 221). In “forgetting” to address this issue and resorting to no speech act at all, the political intention of avoiding public attention is achieved: “In political discourse, silence is also recognized as a tool, not only an effect, of certain strategies employed to achieve particular goals” (Jaworski 1993: 105). Consequently this literary character is confined to her home by her handicap, thus limiting not only her individual development, but restricting her mother’s freedom of movement as well, since Sofia is the only one La Loca can rely on. The political strategy of silent indifference still works twenty years later when the young woman La Loca is dying and the only help offered is that of friends and family (Castillo 223-246).

La Loca's special needs are never recognized by the authorities, so the official interpretation of her life would have to be one of a fragmented existence. This again reflects the general social reality as well as the insights of literary studies, claiming that there is a connection between death, violence, and the erotic, highlighting the strained relationship of *self* and *other* (Stephan 297). Not only this one literary character, but women in general are subject to more frequent acts of silence or invisibility: "This question has been directed at those who theorize about how the silent/silenced Other becomes the speaking Self" (Hestetun 8). The characters in Castillo's novel do not perceive La Loca as someone whose life or whose femininity are fragmented or mute. Instead, La Loca is seen as an unusual and hard-working woman of many talents, helping others in her community by following her own inner voice (Castillo 162-167).

3. CARIDAD AND THE TRANSGRESSIONS OF LOVE

To begin with, Sofia's daughter Caridad leads a life that is in no way out of the ordinary. She seems destined for the role of mother and homemaker since her only ambition is to marry her high school sweetheart Memo (Castillo 26). Caridad thus conforms to cultural norms postulating a chaste and humble lifestyle for women. "Silence is golden" would be another way of expressing the Mexican saying "*En boca cerrada no entran moscas*" which girls who grow up in this environment are constantly reminded of (Anzaldúa 54). The same *dicho* is also used in the novel *So Far From God* with the express purpose to silence a woman (Castillo 144). Traditions such as these cultural norms continue to be relevant in society to some extent, just as they are for the literary characters of Castillo's novel:

One of our theses is that a number of present-day cultural mandates which impinge on the contemporary Chicana originated in ancient Indian and Mexican culture. Some cultural expectations of Chicanas date back to Aztec models - such as being the heart of the home, bearing and rearing children, being clean and tidy, dedicating oneself to a husband, and preserving one's respectability in the eyes of the community. (Mirandé and Enríquez 14-15)

For Caridad, however, the dream of a quiet family life does not come true, since she finds out a few weeks after the wedding that Memo, her husband, is not faithful (Castillo 26). The desired roles of loving wife and mother are thus denied to her. This again means Caridad cannot follow in the footsteps of the most famous icon *la Virgen de Guadalupe* who helped to shape the Mexican national identity (Nebel 126) and has even acquired the status of a "master symbol" for Mexicans and Chicanos alike (Wolf 34). Concerning female identity, the *Virgen* personifies the impeccable woman and "radiates a sense of

purity which generations of Mexican women have been inspired to imitate” (Johnston 52). Aspiring to this ideal and trying to live up to the meaning of her Christian name, Caridad gives her love to Memo and when he finally leaves to join the Marines, she tries to find love in making love to anyone resembling Memo.

Therefore, in the eyes of the world she does not lead the life of a respectable woman and consequently, has no moral right to be protected. Somebody assaults Caridad one night, stabbing and mutilating her and she is “left for dead by the side of the road” (Castillo 33). Public discourse, however, sees no reason to speak up on her behalf. The law enforcement officers show no interest in this case but keep quiet and inert. This is due to the fact that in their terms Caridad is to be defined not so much as a victim of a violent act but as a worthless and shameless woman: “Among them were the sheriff’s deputies and the local police department; therefore Caridad’s attacker or attackers were never found. No one was even ever detained as a suspect” (Castillo 33). In political terms, Caridad does not live according to the norms and values of the dominant society and the traditions upon which it is founded, so any imitation of her behavior by other women must be strongly discouraged and muted:

“The silence which is conjoined to political discourse involves a special binding and joining of the present author and audience to the ‘founding fathers’ of their political community. What is uttered in the present is meant to prolong, preserve, and develop what was initiated in the beginning” (Dauenhauer 39-40).

Over the last decades, the gender discourse has started to change these power mechanisms finding ways and words to express violence as something which is not part and parcel of a woman’s life: “The feminist discourse which names, identifies and condemns sexual harassment of women by men can be seen as empowering to women, compared with a traditional discourse in which male harassment of women was something ‘natural’, and therefore something women had to put up with” (Sunderland 49-50).

A similar incident may be interpreted as a killing by proxy. When the police find Caridad’s horse, named Corazón, with a broken hoof having jumped over a fence, they do not call in a vet or notify the owner: “They did what they thought they had to do and shot it. One bullet just above its left nostril” (Castillo 53). From a medical point of view, the sheriff’s act is exaggerated and even irresponsible since neither the horse’s life nor its limbs were in danger. Caridad’s close friend Doña Felicia, who works as a *curandera*, insists that using her methods of traditional healing, she “could have set its bones” (Castillo 55). The death of Caridad’s horse touches a vital area of her life as she does not simply lose an animal, but true to the meaning of his name Corazón, she loses

her emotional focus due to “the death of her heart” (Castillo 58). From a political point of view, the violence which Caridad encounters in her close environment is meant to subdue or silence her. These acts are also meant to set an example for other women, using the mutilated body of this young woman as a powerful language to illustrate the visible and inescapable consequences of female non-conformity.

4. ESPERANZA, THE HERO OF HOPE

Esperanza, Sofia’s eldest daughter, is the only one in the family with a college degree. She is very successful in her profession and works first for a local TV station and later takes an even more prestigious job reporting on events in the Persian Gulf. From the viewpoint of radical Chicanos, Esperanza is a “sellout” because she conforms to Anglo-American values and lifestyles, “that job which he suspected her so much of selling out to white society for” (Castillo 39). This accusation can be traced to the image of *La Malinche* who is seen as the personification of treason and at the same time, every woman is included in this label of a *vendida*: “Ever since, brown men have been accusing [La Malinche] of betraying her race, and over the centuries continue to blame her entire sex for this ‘transgression.’” (Moraga 174-175).

This same job seems to prove that any involvement with Anglo society is detrimental since Esperanza does not come home from the Persian Gulf alive. In fact, the official letter from the US military informing her parents about her demise states that “Esperanza died an American hero” (Castillo 159). She is thus denied the status of a woman by dominant society even if only linguistically by not being called a heroine. This incident serves to illustrate the subtle strategies of exclusion the dominant discourse resorts to by means of silencing dominated groups or perceiving their status as ambiguous (Jaworski 125).

Reporting from the ends of the world, the literary character Esperanza could be interpreted as the voice of hope, making visible both her ethnic group and the option of female success. There is, however, a catch in this idea of freedom of speech:

Implied in this strategy is the old paradox of the speaking statue, the created thing that magically begins to create, for when a woman writes – self-consciously from her muted position as a woman and not as an honorary man – about female desire, female sexuality, female sensuous experience generally, her performance has the effect of giving voice to pure corporeality, of turning a product of the dominant meaning-system into a producer of meanings. (Hite 122)

Traditionally, a woman would not be expected to require a voice, so that any successful female identity would be characterized mostly by profound silence. Esperanza may thus be seen as a contradiction in terms.

5. FE SCREAMING AGAINST THE SILENCING SYSTEM

The last of Sofia's daughters to be discussed is Fe who works at the local bank and is engaged to be married, aspiring to the generally accepted ideals of a modest and supportive female role (Castillo 86). These concepts are widely found in Chicano culture as well, yet they serve more as an ideal to adhere to than as a depiction of reality: "It is important to remember that the roles of Hispanic women are as diverse as is the population itself. [...] To stereotype this diversity by describing a single role for Hispanic women would be a massive injustice" (Moore 103). However, when Fe's fiancé writes her a note saying he had changed his mind and will not marry her, Fe's dream world is shattered so violently that she raises her voice for the first time to let out a scream of anguish and despair which does not stop for weeks on end. She breaks the silence articulating not only her pain and rage but also a part of her inner self she has not acknowledged before: "[F]inding one's own voice remains essential or women (and men) will certainly be spoken by the culture around them" (Ross xvi). Yet screaming cannot describe Fe's feelings in a precise way and reducing herself to nonverbal (even if clearly audible) articulation also means avoiding to name the unspeakable and to find a new identity in the labels attached to her changed position, e.g. as "*la abandonada*". The underlying power structures remain unspoken as well, leaving more room for them to establish their discursive performativity: "Keeping such terms unsaid and unsayable can also work to lock them in place, preserving their power to injure, and arresting the possibility of a reworking that might shift their context and purpose" (Butler 38).

Fe's screaming works against the silencing of women which is part of the norms and traditions in patriarchal societies. This can be found throughout history which does not acknowledge women in the same way as men:

Much of the search has revolved around the issue of woman as a subject, that is as an active agent of history. How could women achieve the status of subjects in a field that subsumed or ignored them? Would making women visible suffice to rectify past neglect? How could women be added to a history presented as a universal human story exemplified by the lives of men? Since the specificity or particularity of women already made them unfit representatives of humankind, how could attention to women undercut, rather than reinforce, that notion? (Scott 18)

As a representative of humankind, Fe is merely seen as not functioning properly and her illness is ignored accordingly. She receives no medical or psychological help, even when it becomes obvious that her vocal chords must be damaged because frequently things she says are not audible (Castillo 85). When Fe finally quits screaming and returns to her job at the bank, there is no counseling or offers of reintegration. Instead she is discriminated against due to her speech impairment which can also be interpreted as hidden racism illustrating “how racialized rhetoric on the job affects women specifically” (Treviño Roy-Davis).

Disillusioned, Fe starts a new job at a company called Acme International offering superior pay for those willing to put in extra hours and work hard, or in the official terminology of the firm, “people were in fact given raises on the sheer basis of ‘utilization and efficiency’” (Castillo 178). In this way, the phrasing of the company’s views illustrates the power structures and their interaction with language, meaning “the relationship between organizational discourse practices, power and resistance” (Talbot, 2003: 72). It takes a while to realize that the special jobs Fe is given by the supervisors and the material she is handling are making her sick. It is not the harmless ether which the foreman has told her, but an extremely hazardous and illegal substance.

Meanwhile, Fe receives a visit from the U.S. Attorney General’s Office telling her she will receive a subpoena and is not allowed to speak about it with anybody at work, while in the meantime her employer would “assign a counselor on her behalf” (Castillo 184). This is in fact not an act of kindness but a political measure to first silence her and then have someone else speak for her, thus absorbing her potential power as well. Acme International puts Fe “on some kind of strange probation with no pay” (Castillo 187) and neither her legal counselor nor the Attorney General intervenes. Instead, there seems to be some arrangement between the political powers and the business bosses which is, however, shrouded in silence as “everything was dropped, just as quickly and unexplainedly as it had started” (Castillo 187-188). Having avoided taking official responsibility for Fe’s sickness and death, the company’s intention to appear innocent is betrayed by the very fact that Acme International pays for the cremation of Fe’s dead body (Castillo 186), as if to remove all traces of a witness so that nothing can be examined afterwards and no evidence be found for Acme’s crimes.

The strategy of the Attorney General’s Office is equally aimed at leaving the established mechanisms of power in place. The officers in charge display no interest in Fe’s deteriorating health and subsequent death but are only interested in who is to blame for the illegal use of certain chemicals (Castillo 187). Consequently, this means they are not planning to help the weak and unprotected but are looking for a way to make

it look as if they have done their job so they cannot be blamed for negligence. This illustrates the power structures, a hierarchy in which the one in a subordinate position is not heard or heeded: “The *metastructure* of interpretation – not what the interpretation is, but *whose interpretation is accepted* – is one of inequality” (Henley and Kramarae 149).

Fe’s enforced silence is meant to further suppress any involvement of people who might speak up against the company and against the government which had not protected them to begin with: “Those in power tend to argue that anger is ‘improper’ precisely because they think it is to their advantage to shut up voices that question, or might make *them* question, their dominator role” (Lashgari 11). However, when Fe is finally allowed to read the documents which prove it is due to her employer’s negligence that she is dying and her neighborhood has been poisoned, she breaks the silence and yells at one of her superiors (Castillo 189). Fe asserts her voice yet her ultimate silence is imminent.

6. SOFIA AND THE POWER OF LEGAL LANGUAGE

The mother of the four daughters, Sofia, loses not her life but her home due to the political mechanisms in power. The house has been in her family for generations, but when her husband returns home after a mysterious absence of many years he manages to gamble the building away. Since Sofia is the original owner, having inherited the house from her parents, this incident illustrates the unfairness of a legal system which allows this man to act as if he were the sole proprietor (Castillo 215). To top it off, Sofia’s husband loses the house in an illegal cockfight not to just anybody, not even to an ordinary lawyer, he “lost such a bet to a *judge*, a servant of the people” (Castillo 216). When Sofia tries to reason with the judge, his reaction is one of a standard legal approach, resorting to the authority of legal practice and using the official language of power: “Yes, indeed, Judge Julano had won the house at a cockfight ‘fair and square,’ the judge told Sofi in that way that legal-type people always talk to people who are not, giving off that feeling that they got the law on their side, whether or not they do” (Castillo 216). The judge acts as if he were in a courtroom where a great difference can be observed in the language used when comparing people of high social power and those who lack power: Women tend to show more speech patterns of “powerless language” than men, reflecting women’s greater share of powerless social positions (O’Barr and Atkins 65). In effect, the dialogic discourse and the language patterns used in courtrooms function as strategies of domination, maintained by “the interplay between discursive choices and power” (Young and Fitzgerald 215).

It can be concluded that “[p]owerless language may be a reflection of a powerless social situation, but it also would seem to reinforce such inferior status” (O’Barr and Atkins 2008: 70). In public talk, the loss of power is even greater when someone is not allowed to speak, becoming almost non-existent: “Being forced to remain silent, to have no public voice, is like being invisible” (Talbot 1998: 105). Even if it is not women alone who are reduced to words of little effect, in the consciousness of American society the absence or low level of power is intrinsically linked with the term “female” more than with anything else. This can be clearly seen in the “cultural meaning of speaking ‘like a woman’” (O’Barr and Atkins 70).

Sofia is a very down-to-earth character who shows a lot of strength in raising her daughters alone and taking responsibility for her community, running a cooperative and acting as mayor of the town of Tome. She accepts the imperfections of her life, redefining and revising traditions and power structures to serve her community. Negotiating her rights in a world where the power of language seems to belong always to the others, she uses the resources of her community and asks her neighbor for help: “Since he had turned out to be a good vecino, Sofi didn’t really think of him as no lawyer but more like gente, so she felt she could trust him” (215-216). This incident illustrates Sofia’s strategy of personal involvement and her trust in the power of community spirit and thus, in the power of words.

7. CONCLUSION

To conclude, in the society under examination which is depicted in Ana Castillo’s novel, there are several power mechanisms in place working to render the five characters La Loca, Caridad, Esperanza, Fe and Sofia inaudible and thus invisible and intangible. From a political viewpoint, each of the examples illustrates the power of overlooking someone, i.e. the power of silence. These Mexican-American citizens are forgotten both in their needs and in their rights which means that they are neglected as regards education, health, protection at work, law enforcement, and legal rights. Sofia is the only character still alive at the end of the novel and her daughters seem to be irrevocably silenced. However, the underlying belief system of Chicano syncretism allows the author to have Sofia found a worldwide organization called “M.O.M.A.S., Mothers of Martyrs and Saints” (Castillo 247). This strategy paves the way for new voices to be heard and political power to be gained, which is also part of the role of writing:

Writing, after all, is naming, mapping, and leading, as well as creating. It forms an explanation of the meaning of existence; it can order chaos, introduce reason into ambiguity, re-create loss, call up the past, and create new models and traditions. In sum, it orders existence and invents new worlds. It can denounce

injustice and prejudice and may function as a focus for a shared experience. Therefore, how poets see their roles can shape the social consciousness as well as the literary consciousness of generations. (Rebolledo 167)

Literature takes a great share both in giving voice to those lives that seem to be silenced and in putting visions into words. Ana Castillo uses her literary characters to give life to identities which are no longer static and mute, but which illustrate individual and collective revisions and transformations.

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