

## Episode 20: Ana Castillo: Writing, Empowerment and Social Justice

### Transcript

Participants:

Brenda Romero: BR

Ana Castillo: AC

Music

**BR:** Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State's Center for Race, Immigration, and Social Justice -CRISJ. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

Today I will be your host. My name is Brenda Romero and I am currently a faculty member at the Department of World Languages and Literatures at Sacramento State. I have the honor to be interviewing today author Ana Castillo.

Castillo is an acclaimed Mexican American writer whose career as a scholar and storyteller spans four decades. Her work includes novels such as *So Far from God*, *The Guardians* and *Peel My Love like an Onion*, in addition to poetry collections such as *I Ask the Impossible* and her newest publication *My Book of the Dead*. This year, she received the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's Fuller Award for her lifetime achievement as an author, activist, educator, and scholar.

In today's podcast we will be talking about her life experiences, her writing, and how she has used literature as a platform to advocate for social justice.

Ana, thank you very much for being here with us today.

**AC:** Thank you. I'm very happy to be here.

**BR:** Well, let's begin this conversation. Ana, could you tell us about your background, your family, where you grew up, and how you believe those early life experiences shaped you?

**AC:** I was born and raised in the city of Chicago, in the city in a neighborhood that was mostly torn down by the time that I was ten years old. Where the University of Illinois at Chicago is now, it was originally my first neighborhood. It was the plan of the mayor at that time to really build a city, to make a big, bright, shiny city. And so many families, original migrating families were moved around. And this place, as far as my small family was, we were relocated, but we were relocated very close by. And that's where I grew up. It was called Little Italy Tailor Streets, and I grew up there and I was there until I was 20.

At that point, I had gone to public schools and at that point I went to community college. I was already aware of the changes that were going on in this country and in the world. Of course, there were many protests against Vietnam, but Chicago was also the home of the Black Panthers Party. As you may know, there was a Democratic convention. Martin Luther King marched there. All this was going on when I was just a young teenage girl. And I was witness to the eruption of the establishment, if you will, the confronting issues that had kept this country divided and stratified for so long. So that was really what

catapulted me to social awareness. And also the fact is that I come from a family where my parents both worked in factories.

I was a brown girl, Mexican, both considered to aspire for very little more than to perhaps work in an office, get married, have children, and just serve to serve the system, if you will, as it had always been. But these events, more than anything else, woke me—now I use the term being woke—it woke me up. If I could even say that I was asleep because I was just a kid to the possibility of change. And then there was also the UFW, and Cesar Chavez, and Latin America. There was so much going on and I felt connected because I am of Mexican background. I felt connected with Mexico and with Latin America, and I'm bilingual. So eventually, as I started to decide which way I would be able to serve best and contribute in some way, which ended up being through writing, I have always had a sense of connection with Latin America, but also with the world, with other with other cultures and other peoples. By the time I was in my mid-twenties, late twenties, I began to develop also a consciousness as a woman and move toward feminism. So those were my early developments. And all my books whether they've been poetry—I started with poetry and moved to fiction and nonfiction—have all been to serve the same purpose, and that is to bring to life, bring to surface to the printed page people's lives and in the form of characters or testimonials that we have long neglected and marginalized.

**BR:** Thank you so much for sharing that with us today, Ana. So my next question is: many occupations have a very linear path—becoming a teacher, an attorney, a physician—but that is not the case for becoming an author. Could you please speak about when you realized that you wanted to be a writer and about your trajectory after that initial spark?

**AC:** That's funny because I could answer that question in different ways. One of them is I have a very distinct memory at around the age of 20-21. I was at a state college at the time when I decided I would focus on poetry. And from that point on, I have never wavered from my decision to write. However, there's another way to answer that. And as you said, I was in school, I was at the university, and I was majoring to be a high school teacher and in fact, to teach visual arts something that I've never done. I've never been a high school teacher, and I've never taught art. And in fact, I moved away from both of those things as soon as I finished college. A few years later, I'm much more interested at this point in politics, the international political situation. I don't want to mix it up with politics as if I were interested in running for local office or something like that. I was interested in what was going on in South America and in Mexico and so on. And I thought about going back to school and I did. I went to back to Chicago to attend the University of Chicago their first year with their Latin American studies program, graduate program.

By the time I finished that that I majored in social science. So I'm not again, I'm not in the humanities, although I'm still writing. And I'm at that point teaching in higher education. I started teaching at a community college in California and in Chicago. I taught a couple of adjunct courses, but I knew I needed to have my master's degree to continue doing that, which was interesting to me, stimulated me. And at the same time I continued writing. By the time I finished there, I was seriously considering law school and I thought law school for the purpose of representing people that needed representation. I chose not to do that because writing was really pulling me in that direction. And I was seeing myself moved toward prose writing, and I was beginning the work on what became my first novel, which was the Mixquiahuala letters.

I moved to California subsequently. At this point, Chicano writers in this country are beginning to be published, they're beginning to be recognized, discussed, talked about in the United States, but also in Europe. I was invited to speak in Germany about this. But at this point, my first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, has just premiered and I also have a book of poems that is being talked about. It was called *My Father Was a Toltec*. And so as a result of that visit, I was invited to work on a dissertation. The idea was, the invitation was, that with a Ph.D. I would have more leverage in the university if I wanted to take up teaching because of course, writing wasn't going to pay my livelihood.

And so at this point in my life, I have now two careers, which is the career of scholar and academic, if you will, and then a radical writer. Because what I was writing was not at all conventional. It was very new, but it wasn't necessarily accepted by the American literary world. And so it's been like that for most of my life. I've taught in many different universities and all kinds of different subjects and contexts and lectured all over the world. But at the same time, I've also continued to write my literature and so an invitation can come to me from one or the other areas. And they and they're not separate that obviously I'm writing about these things, even if it's in poetry or in fiction.

**BR:** Wow. Thank you so much for telling us about that fascinating trajectory.

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**BR:** So Ana, your writing is incredibly inclusive. Your narrative as well as your poetry brings forward intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and gives a voice to those who are usually silenced. Why is it important for you to use your literary talent to advocate for social justice?

**AC:** As I mentioned earlier, being very young, becoming aware of so many segments of the world and of society that's being mistreated, but also my own backgrounds. I, you know, being a brown girl from a working class family, that would be a given to say it would attract me to join the UFW in California with Chavez and Dolores Huerta at that time. That would be a given, of course. But as I matured in my twenties and I began to realize as a woman because I was also aware of the women's movement in the United States and around the world. Now, we didn't hear that much about working class women. We didn't hear that much about women of color. The term women of color, of course, comes from my own generation. It's coined. We can find this in a book by two Chicanas that came out in the mid-eighties. And speaking of inclusive, they included women from all diverse backgrounds. So we don't even have a name for this. And so this generation is starting to pinpoint where is it and why is it that so many groups are disenfranchised, generation after generation, and it's okay. And the system of white privileged, mostly males in the world continues generation after generation. So all of this is being part of that and being aware of it has been what has been so important to me.

Now in terms of literature. I was always a reader. I loved to read since I first learned to read, and my mother was the one who pointed out to an audience some years after I was publishing that I was writing since I learned to write. And I didn't think about it because it sort of came easy to me to write little stories, little poems when I was a child and nobody was really encouraging me or no one at home was encouraging me. But any time I found something to read, I read it. And I loved art and I loved drawing. And I loved to write stories. I just loved everything that I would get my hands on. But the problem was and as I begin to have consciousness about myself, why is that? I don't see on the page a brown girl that looks like me. A woman that looks and speaks like my mother. Our school books were blond little children, and of course, there were in English. And so all of this is important for me to bring that to the page. When I was in my late teens, early twenties, I am reading African American writers, and I have a

great debt to James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, who I was reading at 19 years old, 18 years old. But again, our history is a little different, not entirely different, but a little different. And we're treated a little different. Not entirely different. There are similarities, but I want the nuances. I want to show the migrant worker or the woman, the woman that looks like my mother, who never speaks English in the home, but you have to speak English in school or at work.

And so that's all that has been given me a great deal of material to write about. I continue to do so. It's been my pleasure, my honor to do so and to bring together my desire for transformation in this world, and also to bring to the public insights to who we are as communities and families. And we talked about race and we talked about class and sexuality. And gender was also critical, gender because I was a female and I was a girl and I was very much treated like a girl and am and always will be, even though I'm a grandmother now. But sexuality for me as I was reading and looking and searching to figure out how is it that we are so oppressed as a large demographics of people was critical. And so I began very early on writing about sexuality.

As it turned out, in my generation, other women of color were also addressing the subject. And it's been very, very important. We're very linked around the world by the issue of our sexuality and what we're seeing now. And I'm so happy to see that this subject is treated much more openly and accepted. 40, 50 years ago wasn't a taboo subject. And any woman who talked about herself or talked about sexuality 40 or 50 or 60 years ago was disregarded or treated as frivolous by the left, who thought that, you know, what's important is the unions and working and you know and jobs and so it was considered irrelevant. But on the contrary, it's very critical to our existence and how we are looked at and represented in society as women.

**BR:** Yes, representation really matters. And we are so thankful that you and the other pioneer women of color had all of that energy and all that talent and were able to express all the circumstances of our communities. Thank you. Thank you so much.

So before we run out of time, I would like to ask you one final question and could you tell us what new projects you have?

**AC:** Yes, they I'd be happy to. I just had published a collection of poetry, which is my Book of the Dead. And it's been out for about six months with the University of New Mexico Press. Poetry, which was my first love, and I returned to it in the last year from my own experience. A solid collection may take as long as ten years, maybe longer. So I don't think that I'll be publishing a new collection of poetry very soon. But I have turned my attention to, most recently, to the short story form, and I'm very happy to announce that a collection of short stories will be published in May of 2023 by Harper Villa. And it's called Doña Clean Well Leaves Home. And in these stories, which I started out very slowly there, I keep referring to them as quiet. Maybe it's misleading because it's not quiet what happens in our lives every day. It's quiet because we live private lives, but there can be huge things. And in each of these stories, which take place in different decades, 20th century, and then coming into the early part of the 21st century, they're usually focused around. They're almost always focused around brown people, usually women. And the choices and the choices they are forced to make in their everyday lives.

And so Doña Clean Well Leaves Home is a story about a Mexican mother, a Mexican mother in Chicago who has left her husband and four children one fine day and never came home from work. And the daughter, who is just 17, 18 years old, is sent to Mexico to bring her mother home. So this is a story

about this young teenage woman. This is in the seventies and her mother and it's a very huge thing for a woman to leave her so, quote, unquote, abandon her husband and our children. But we get to find out. where we go on the journey and we get to find out how and why she has left, whether or not she decides to return.

And this story maybe in 2022 wouldn't be headline news. But in the 1970s, this took a lot of and affects everybody. It disrupts the whole ecosystem, if you will. This is part of what I've been talking about as far as how we began to develop our own brand of feminism as Latinas and as Latinas transnationally. We may have been born and raised in the United States or maybe for many generations, but we still are very attached to our culture and religious choices, and these things have affected us. So anyway, that's my next coming up.

And following that will be a novel, which will be my first dystopian-historical novel. So it's a great challenge for me and I'm very happy that I've not only been able to continue writing after all these years, but that I also have new generations of new readers who come to my work. And it just delights me, you know? And since I started this journey, I didn't think anybody at all in the world would ever be interested in what I had to say. And it just goes to show that literature indeed has a place for social justice.

**BR:** It does indeed. Thank you so much for sharing that with us. I look forward to reading that collection of short stories and your novel. So we run out of time. Thank you so much, Ana. it was wonderful talking to you today.

**AC:** Well, thank you. It's been my pleasure.

**BR:** Thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all.

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