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12 The Future as Form: 
Undoing the Categorical Separation of Class and Gender in Ana Castillo’s Sapogonia

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In an article on Junot Díaz’s much celebrated novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Elena Machado Sáez seeks to unsettle the claim that the form of the contemporary novel “mimics” the form of the nation, a bordered space of belonging that incorporates multiple perspectives into a unified but conflicted voice and consolidates “different subcultures into one community” (Sáez 522). Referring specifically to Oscar Wao as an exemplary case, Sáez argues that the novel can also “embody the structure and linguistic diversity of” (522-23) a diaspora—migratory, perpetually dispersed, and constantly positioned at a far distance from the centeredness of a grounded homeland. Building on Sáez’s argument, I would add that the U.S. ethnic immigrant novel (and I’m thinking here of Ana Castillo’s 1994 novel Sapogonia, in particular) can also take the form of a migration not only toward or away from a geographical place or a geopolitical sense of community, but across the temporality of history itself, transgressing the demarcations of past, present and future. Sapogonia challenges a trend in contemporary American novels that have ceased to find importance in the future—novels that have succumbed to what Fredric Jameson calls “the immense privileging of the present.” “We seem to have forgotten,” Jameson asserts, “the ability to conceptualize the future in our contemporary historical moment. We find it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.” Consequently, much contemporary literature places little importance in conceptualizing a post-capitalist future, whether that future is socialism, communism, or some other social formation that we have not yet even imagined. Though not unproblematically, Sapogonia works against this anti-future tendency by alluding to the abolition of social categories—in particular, class and gender—a development that conceivably could only be realized in the future. What’s remarkable about Sapogonia’s fascination with the future is that this is a novel about working-class Latinas and Latinos, mainly immigrants, and the immigrant experience crystallizes at a nexus of concrete political and economic realities that make the fight for a better future nearly prohibitive and yet urgent. It is this fascination with the future that gives form to the novel.

Sapogonia explores the social, psychological, and ideological effects of U.S. imperialist intervention and civil war in Central America on the Latina/o immi-
grant populations living in the United States during the 1980s. In the novel, Sapogonia is a semi-mythical, diasporic place “where all mestizos reside,” but it is also a specific geographical place—a hypothetical country in Central America, a three-day bus ride from the U.S. border. Experiencing the horrors of state-sponsored death squads and war, the inhabitants of Sapogonia are forced to flee to the U.S. to find work or escape political repression, only to encounter racism, sexism, labor exploitation, prisons, and deportations in the North. Informed by Castillo’s own experience as a political activist for immigrant rights during the 1980s, Sapogonia not only makes a political statement in denouncing the oppressive social conditions in Latin America and the United States during that period, but also contributes to the formation of a distinctly American version of the anticolonial, U.S. ethnic novel. In so doing, it engages, thematically and formally, with the possibility of a post-capitalist future conceptualized as an egalitarian society in which the categorical distinction between class and gender has been eradicated and replaced by liberating forms of non-alienating productive activity.

The representation of a war-torn Central American country in Castillo’s novel recalls the intervention of the United States in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua during the 1980s. According to political historian James Dunkerley, “160,000 people were killed and two million displaced” as a result of “the region’s three civil wars” during that decade (qtd. in Rodríguez, Dividing 129). Castillo began conceptualizing the novel in the early 1980s and wrote the first draft from 1985 to 1990, and then rewrote it over the next three years. The first edition was published as an “uncorrected proof” with Bilingual Press in 1990, and a revised edition was published by Doubleday in 1994.² The period 1985 to 1994 marked the end of the Cold War and the beginning of what the first President George Bush called the “new world order,” which he announced, ironically, on September 11, 1990, eleven years to the day before the infamous attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.³ This “new world order,” which in fact was already under way prior to 1990, accelerated the policies of neoliberalism and the eventual implementation of trade agreements such as NAFTA. In practice, neoliberalism, or what was euphemistically referred to as “trickle-down economics” domestically during the Reagan years, meant that the United States could impose stringent economic and political policies on Third World countries with the collaboration of their national ruling classes. The class conflict and civil wars in Central America during the 1980s were the direct result of these policies (Booth and Walker 91–115; Vilas 211–22). Consequently, enormous numbers of poor people were forced to flee the political terror associated with neoliberalism. Ana Patricia Rodríguez reports that by 1990 “well over one million Central Americans had immigrated to the United States” (Dividing 130). Sapogonia displays the anxieties associated with this historical moment. Today Central American immigrants in the United States are a reminder of the death and de-
struction caused by neoliberalism and the “new world order” stemming from the period during which Castillo wrote her novel.

Since adopting the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, a policy designed to maintain strict control of Latin America’s resources and markets, the United States has waged an endless war against Latin American countries in an effort to protect its financial and political interests—either through economic coercion, governmental meddling, or outright military invasion (Chomsky; Galeano). Taking this long history of U.S. interventionist politics into account, the hypothetical Sapogonia represents the general experience of colonialism and imperialism in all Latin American countries historically.4 The novel, however, does not reconstruct the history of war and imperialism in Latin America by describing actual events. In fact, there are no war scenes in the novel, only references to the aftereffects of political repression and war. The various themes and conflicts in the novel—and perhaps the personalities of the characters themselves—reveal the depths to which class struggle and war in Central America during the 1980s affected the self-identification of Latino communities in the United States at the time, and the repercussions of that history continue to the present. Consequently, the novel’s protagonist, Pastora, becomes involved in a movement to smuggle undocumented immigrants across the border and set them up in safe locations. It is through these kinds of activities that she becomes fascinated with the commitment of the political activists she comes to know, and the tireless hours they devote to their work without pay. Pastora finds herself intrigued by the thought of working without any kind of compensation at all—labor performed entirely for the social good and for the transformation of society, that is to say, non-alienated labor.

Here it will help to recall Marx’s well-rehearsed critique of alienated labor from the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. For Marx, labor under capitalism is dehumanizing because it denies humans the opportunity to engage in free productive activity. Because workers are forced to sell their labor to capitalists, neither their labor activity nor the products they produce belong to themselves. They belong rather to the capitalist and function primarily to create value. Thus, workers become “estranged” or alienated from the things they produce, their labor activity, other workers, and their very humanity. Further, Marx’s critique of alienated labor presupposes a concept of non-alienated labor which refers to productive and creative activity that satisfies distinctly human needs and develops human potentials. Non-alienated labor allows people to realize their “species-being” or humanity. It bears mentioning that Marx’s critique of labor is not aimed at increasing wages for workers. He argues vehemently against the idea that the “equality of wages” (Marx 82) would resolve the contradictions of exploited, alienated labor. The goal for Marx is to abolish wage-labor and money entirely; to eradicate private property and replace it with what he calls “truly human, social property” (82); and to do away with the economic and political structures that necessitate class divisions.
and, by implication, other social categories, such as gender and race. *Sapogonia* comes to dwell on free, non-alienated productive activities and relations not only as they relate to wage-labor and forms of bound labor, but also in creative activities, political struggle, marriage, and the rearing of children. In this way, the novel’s imagined conception of a future society is not one that is based exclusively on the emancipation of labor, but one that also suggests the abolition of gender and other social categories, along with the proliferation of non-alienating productive human activities. For these reasons, I hold that *Sapogonia* should be read as a narrative about overcoming the lasting effects of colonial and imperialist encounters in the Americas from the point of view of a class-conscious feminism.

“A Reality that Differs from What Already Exists”

Before elaborating on the claim that *Sapogonia* represents a class-conscious feminism, I shall first respond to a critical question. What are we to make of the fact that many of the representations of gender in the novel (at least on the surface) appear to be anti-feminist? Granted, the novel at times draws our attention to the potential of women to establish relationships with one another based on equality rather than dominance. In Chapter 18, for example, Perla moves in with Pastora and forms a relationship based on friendship, affection, equality, and mutual respect. They share clothes; share the same bed; they even use the same toothbrush. It’s like a happy marriage, but without the sex (*Sapogonia* 126–29). Despite these moments, ultimately the female characters in *Sapogonia* cannot translate this potential into a long-lasting community. In fact, the female characters are almost as problematic ideologically as the male characters, even if in different ways. With the exception of Chapter 18, women in *Sapogonia* do not band together; they do not form long-lasting relationships. On the contrary, female characters in the novel often work against one another or try to undermine the efforts of other women, as is evident, for example, in the prison scene where Elaine beats Pastora violently for becoming intimate with Elaine’s lesbian lover Mary Lou (219). It’s interesting to note that of all of Castillo’s novels, *Sapogonia*’s reception has been the weakest. One has to assume that this is partly because, to some degree, Pastora appears to lack the qualities of an ideal feminist, displaying instead an array of ideological contradictions—first, because of her obsessive sexual desire for Max, a patriarchal egotist, but then later, because of her marriage to Eduardo at the novel’s end, which gives the impression that, ultimately, Pastora has chosen domesticity over class struggle, political art, and the immigrants’ rights movement.

Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, for example, conveys a sympathetic but sharp critique of what she perceives as the novel’s weak feminist politics. She argues that while readers clearly are not expected to identify with Max, “Pastora is only partially available for identification,” (68) meaning that women or feminist
readers can identify with Pastora because she is female, but not because of her ideas, values, and actions, which are politically suspect from a feminist perspective. Yarbro-Bejarano further states that Sapogonia “reveal[s] Pastora’s complicity with the objectification of woman necessary for [the] construction of masculine identity. . . . [S]he is deeply attracted by her relationship with Máximo, hooked on her own objectification as enigma and object of desire. As female subject, she both desires the Other and desires to be desired as Other” (69). It would be difficult to disagree with Yarbro-Bejarano’s criticisms. Max dehumanizes Pastora by objectifying her throughout the novel and symbolically annihilating her in the opening chapter, murdering her in a dream. Moreover, Pastora does not always resist Max’s objectification but, on the contrary, desires it. In a particularly telling scene, for example, Pastora masturbates while fantasizing about Max’s dehumanizing treatment of her. “Eyes closed, she visualized him. . . . When he made love to her, he inserted a finger, like a bloodhound on the trail of the wounded prey” (190). Here, Pastora becomes sexually aroused at the thought of being hunted, imaginatively transforming herself into his object of animalistic desire. Perhaps just as problematically, she derives pleasure from the thought of being worshipped by him. Pastora’s willingness to entangle herself in a relationship based on reciprocal objectification is what Yarbro-Bejarano refers to when arguing, compellingly, that Pastora is complicit with “the objectification of woman necessary for [the] construction of masculine identity” (69).

Despite the persuasiveness of her reading, Yarbro-Bejarano locates the meaning of the novel almost entirely in Pastora’s precarious lack of feminist qualities, even though a reading of the novel’s feminism need not be limited to the personal traits of the protagonist. By contrast, I propose to expand on Yarbro-Bejarano’s analysis by suggesting that the novel can be read as casting a wide net of symbolic signification that surpasses Pastora’s personality or her contradictions as an individual character. We can, for example, read Sapogonia as representing a class-conscious, anticolonial, feminist critique formally in the unity and conflict of the two main characters: Pastora and Max. Pastora, a Chicana guitarist and singer of protest songs, plays music to express her opinions and feelings about social issues, raise political consciousness, and help bring about change. She becomes active in an “underground railroad,” smuggling undocumented workers from Sapogonia to the United States. Eventually federal agents arrest her and she serves two years in prison. Max stands at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum from Pastora. A native of the hypothetical Sapogonia and born into a relatively prosperous landowning family, Max immigrates to the United States, where he tries his hand at being an artist, a sculptor, a musician, and a dancer. He dreams of becoming rich and famous with his art, even though his artistic talent is mediocre at best. He is also self-centered, arrogant, and sexist.

The novel produces an uneasy tension in the unlikely relationship between the two: their desire for one another as well as the impossible fulfillment of that
desire. Read literally, the attraction that Max and Pastora feel for one another remains logically implausible because their ideological differences presumably make them incompatible partners. But symbolically, their obsessive love-hate relationship strikes a truthful chord in that it mirrors in a formal sense the internal conflict of a colonized subject—a kind of Duboisian “double consciousness.” Thematically, Max and Pastora are mirror opposites of one another, but formally they embody the contradictory ideological viewpoints of an oppressed ethno-cultural group. The relationship between these two politically incompatible characters replicates the form of the novel, which can be described as the unity and conflict of opposites, and it is no coincidence that one side of this dialectic takes the form of a contradictory class-conscious female character while the other is occupied by the figure of colonial-minded masculinist ideology.

Whereas Pastora struggles to integrate the politics of anticolonialism into her music and personal life as a lover, wife, and mother, Max lives in denial, attempting to distance himself from Sapogonia’s history of colonization. Whereas Pastora seeks to free herself from the sexist, racist, class-based social constructs imposed on mestizas and mestizos historically, Max adopts the mindset of an exploiter, attempting to dominate Pastora sexually and psychologically. This becomes apparent when he sculpts a statue of her, which he calls, ironically, Coatlicue, the goddess of life, death, and rebirth in Aztec mythology, while referring to himself as Huitzilopochtli, the god of war and Coatlicue’s son. Notwithstanding the Oedipal allusions inherent in his nomenclature (the son sexually attracted to the mother), Max seeks to capture the iridescent beauty of Coatlicue’s concrete form in his artwork, but he fails to grasp the social and historical dynamism of either Coatlicue or Pastora. His obsessive desire to possess Pastora in the way he would own a physical object displays the depth of his reified consciousness: he loved her “like an overused thing. . . . And like a thing, an abstract idea, he prayed to her. He worshipped her as he soldered metal and bent it into any likeness but hers” (5).7

We might also arrive at an alternative interpretation of Sapogonia by reframing both the problems that the novel addresses and the solutions it proposes—that is, by reading the novel at once as a critique of the categorical separation of class and gender, and an effort to visualize a social system in which the categories themselves would cease to be functional or practical. No doubt, male characters such as Max hurt female characters in the novel, but it is not just men that keep women from uniting. It is rather the gender-based, class-based world-capitalist system; it is the history of colonization and the persistence of colonial mentalities and practices among both men and women.8 Significantly, Castillo attempts to understand the ways that knowledge is produced from the clash and convergence of the various social categories. From a traditional Marxist perspective, all knowledge can be traced back to labor through its mental and physical efforts to transform the material world, and thus
one goal of the anticolonial novelist will be achieved with the emancipation of labor, which is synonymous with becoming fully human. In Castillo’s novel, however, the path toward humanization covers a wider terrain wherein the strategic focal point of social transformation—or the subject of history, if you will—cannot be reduced to class, race, gender, or sexuality separately, but hinges on a conception of subjectivity that “(w)holistically” shatters the distinctions between the various social categories.

Here I draw on the work of Marcelle Maese-Cohen who argues for a “(w)holistic imperative of decolonial feminist thought [as] an approach to historicizing antigenocidal practices in the Américas” (16). She further explains that the “neologism (w)holistic” is a strategic “way of syncretizing the Marxist literary tradition . . . —a hermeneutics for reading racialized subjectivity and class struggle as symptoms of the totality of social relations embodied in the novel form—and what Gloria Anzaldúa names the Coyolxauhqui imperative—the wish to create healing forms of teaching and activism that begins with imagining ‘a reality that differs from what already exists’” (16).9 The syncretizing of Marxism and decolonial feminism in Maese-Cohen’s work is synonymous with efforts to dismantle the categorical isolation of class and gender as social and analytical categories. While the actual eradication of categories under capitalism would be unattainable in a practical sense given their constant reinforcement in a class-stratified, gender-divided, racist society, striving for this goal as if it were possible (and investigating the ways in which the American ethnic, anticolonial novel represents such a goal symbolically) opens the opportunity to devise political strategies in the present that are based on the anticipation of what a future society might look like: one in which the categories of race, gender, and class are no longer fomented or tolerated. This is not Utopia in the broad, idealist sense; it is a futuristic vision that is grounded in the political realities of the present, which are in constant tension with the capitalist and colonial legacies of the past.

Castillo’s representation of female characters in Sapogonia draws on the kind of historical/political interpretation that Maese-Cohen outlines in her work, drawing on both class critique and decolonial feminism. Clearly, the novel conveys the idea that female sexuality and the politics of gender for working-class women of color are critical epistemologies in their own right. Given that working-class women of color are entrenched in daily struggles against the world-capitalist economy and the long-lasting effects of colonialism in the Americas, they have much to teach Marxism. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains, “Third-World women workers,” which in her view include women from the geographical Third World as well as immigrant women and working-class women of color in the United States, “occupy a specific social location in the international division of labor which illuminates and explains crucial features of the capitalist processes of exploitation and domination” (7). While Castillo would no doubt agree with Mohanty, she sharpens the critique
by contemplating the potential force of unity between working-class women and men. In Castillo’s view, the ability or inability of women and men to form close working and loving relationships—to establish a collective form of social organization based on the principles of structural equality—has been conditioned by their economic, political, and psychological subjugation to a U.S.-centered, gender-based, world-capitalism historically. Nevertheless, Sapogonia elicits a futuristic vision of the ways in which women and men can free themselves from this bondage, illustrated most vividly (but also ironically) in scenes that emphasize motherhood, domestic labor, and marriage.

**Formal Aspirations toward the Future**

Castillo’s novel alludes to a futuristic social form in a number of ways, but for the sake of economy I’ll refer to just two examples. The first example has to do with childrearing and families, and the second (which is related) has to do with non-alienated productive activity and social relations. In the first example, a press conference takes place late in the novel for the newly elected Latino mayor of Chicago, Alan Garcia, a totally fictitious character since there has never been a Latino mayor of Chicago. Not coincidently, Alan Garcia is the namesake of the former president of Peru who served from 1985 to 1990, or roughly the period during which Castillo wrote Sapogonia.10 In any event, the press conference—the novel’s formal dénouement—brings together all of the novel’s main characters, including Pastora who is a spokesperson for a national organization called the Colloquium on U.S. Latinas. At the conference, Pastora stands out as the only voice of opposition to the opportunistic identity politics of Chicago’s inimical Latino politicians. Just before speaking, she suddenly remembers her infant son and thinks to herself: “Had she left enough diapers with the sitter? Yes, of course she had” (310). This seemingly trivial and mundane diversion in Pastora’s train of thought dramatizes the inseparability of political participation and domestic life. After reassuring herself that her child is under good care, Pastora proceeds to address the mayor, declaring in her well-crafted comments that working-class women and men throughout the United States lack adequate child care programs.

One of the mayor’s assistants interrupts her, claiming that there are government programs to provide these services. But Pastora replies, “I am not talking about government subsidized programs. . . . I am referring to child-care facilities at the place of employment of women; these employers should not be the only ones responsible for providing child-care services, but the employers of fathers, too” (312). Pastora creates a stir with her comments, but the mayor and his supporters think her ideas are far-fetched and dismiss her as idealist or crazy. Her argument for employer-paid child care for working mothers and fathers nevertheless has profound implications politically, in addition to being important for understanding the novel’s subject.
Pastora’s intervention at the press conference illustrates the novel’s critique of the sexist assumption that mothers, whether they have paid jobs or not, must bear the primary responsibility of caring for children. More than that, employer-paid child care for working mothers and fathers would require a total restructuring of the way labor is conceptualized in a capitalist society, wherein domestic labor traditionally has not been considered “labor” and thus not worthy of compensation because supposedly it does not produce “value.” Some materialist-feminists have held that domestic labor, including the rearing of children, creates social value because it produces labor power—that is, it reproduces the next generation of laborers that will be necessary to sustain the economic system. In her (strident but nevertheless valuable) study of Marxism, feminism, and postmodernism, Teresa Ebert clarifies that reproduction in the Marxist sense “does not simply mean the reproduction of . . . class relations, but also the reproduction of labor power and thus of the laborer. It, therefore, involves questions of sexuality, domestic labor, and fertility and thus population. To separate the reproduction (of life) from the reproduction of the conditions of production is to regress to an idealist, bourgeois social theory in which . . . all social practices are posited as simply different from each other without any necessary (causal) connection” (86–87). What I am arguing in this chapter is that Sapogonia dramatizes an attempt to undo the separation of the reproduction of life from the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

Further, the belief that rearing children is primarily a mother’s responsibility stems directly from the experience of living in a society in which women and children historically have been considered private property. By contrast, Pastora holds a view of children based on the principles of communal egalitarianism. In a telling conversation with Max, in which he is trying to find out if the child she is carrying is his, Pastora explains, “[M]y son is not a continuation of you or me, who’ve considered ourselves exceptional individuals among the species, but a continuity of the species, a simple and humble fact. . . . There are societies in which children born into them belong to all. All are mothers and fathers of the child, all other children its siblings” (304). Pastora may be referring here mainly to traditional cultures from the past, but we can also infer from her words an allusion to a future society and the possibility of a social order not organized around the nuclear family. An incredulous Max, unable to think beyond a biological conception of parenthood, unable to break the constraints of a reified consciousness, responds by saying, “But in reality, [the child] has only one mother and one father,” to which the ever-critical Pastora says, “No, in reality, there are no mothers and no fathers” (304). For Pastora, the words “mother” and “father” imply a social system based on the legal and ideological right to own a child and—for that matter—the mother of the child. To say there are no mothers and fathers connotes a radically altered approach to child rearing, one that we are not familiar with in contemporary society. But to accept child rearing as a social responsibility in the truest sense of the word would require eradicating the view
that children are private property, and this in turn could only be made possible by the total restructuring of society at all levels: economic, political, cultural, ideological, and domestic.

Needless to say, I lack the space here to elaborate on the long-standing debate concerning whether or not domestic labor and other forms of unpaid labor should be considered “productive labor.” It is imperative, however, to clarify briefly that while Marxist theorists of labor have been correct to argue that domestic labor in advanced capitalist societies is not “productive labor” in the strict sense because it does not directly produce surplus value, materialist-feminists have responded to this claim by asserting that “the relation of domestic labor to the production of surplus value is simply that the former makes the latter possible” (Women’s Collective 13; qtd in German 154). Or stated differently, “[d]omestic labor can be seen as indirectly productive of surplus value” because it is “directly productive of labor power” (German 154). From this perspective, domestic labor cannot be isolated entirely from “productive labor” and the production of surplus value because they are each necessary for enabling the exploitative function of capitalism (Gimenez 77). In a critical move, however, Castillo’s novel effectively disarticulates the distinction between productive and unproductive forms of labor—or, its correlate, the historically specific, structural separation of class and gender—via an imagined future that has abrogated the need for the categories themselves.

The second example of the novel’s allusion to a future social form occurs when Pastora first meets Eduardo, a political activist and the man she eventually marries. She wonders why he is so committed to his political beliefs and to his involvement in an underground railroad for undocumented immigrants. The narrator states, “She didn’t question Eduardo’s dedication to his work, but as an artist herself, she wondered how one could be so selfless. She sacrificed for her song, it was true, and her lyrics and performances were motivated by the same politics, but she also expected recognition for her dedication. People like Eduardo were anonymous even to those for whom they risked their own safety and well-being” (199). Pastora often performs without charge at fundraisers for worthy causes, but she still finds herself fascinated by the thought of working without any kind of compensation at all—labor performed totally for social well-being and for the transformation of society, that is, non-alienated labor. She comes to think of the concept of non-alienation also in terms of marriage and the rearing of children. Thus she challenges the belief that marriage and family must necessarily be based on unequal relations. In Sapogonia, the concept of non-alienated labor becomes the vehicle for conceptualizing other forms of non-alienating activity, including the production of art, music, and literature, for which individuals harbor no expectation of receiving compensation, but which is instead performed solely to promote the social good. Non-alienating relations between women and men, adults and children, are thus not based on
ownership, objectification, and domination, but are instead founded on equality, respect, sharing, loving, listening, and giving.

Through an examination of domestic labor, artistic creation, and political activism, Castillo has written a novel that effectively engages with and builds upon Ngũgĩ’s wa Thiong’o’s theory of the role of the anticolonial artist. As Ngũgĩ states, “The real artist in the world is human labor . . . . The liberation of human labor is the only condition for the true liberation of the human being, the artist” (Barrel 67). Like Ngũgĩ, who is also a novelist, Castillo has reappropriated a traditional literary form (the novel) for the purpose of developing an anticolonial, anti-imperialist aesthetic—the U.S. ethnic novel. But Sapogonia extends Ngũgĩ’s claims about the anticolonial novel by representing the relations between women and men as an integral aspect of the structural determinants in a world-capitalist system, and the novel repeatedly alludes to a future society free of the constraints imposed by a system grounded on profits, private property, and gender oppression. Following the logic of the novel, a truly human subject can only be fully realized when the structural categories of gender, sexuality, race, and class have been dissolved (i.e., a classless, genderless, antiracist, anticolonial society). In turn, that can only happen when the end of gender-based and race-based colonial mentalities and practices coincides with the demise of capitalist relations of production.

Toward the end of the novel, Pastora marries Eduardo, and together they raise her son. Some readers might understandably view her marriage as enigmatic because it seems that she has given in to domesticity. But this final turn in the novel can also be read in a positive light. That is, when Pastora marries Eduardo, she has not surrendered to domesticity. But rather, she has, symbolically, married the concept of social “selflessness.” She has wedded herself to the idea of non-alienated labor and creativity—and non-alienating relations between women and men. It is in this way that Sapogonia can be interpreted not as capitulating to the patriarchal implications of the institution of marriage at the expense of politics and art, but as envisioning a system that sabotages unequal relations at every level, not least of all the relationships between men and women.

Even if it does so incompletely or imperfectly, Sapogonia conceptualizes a society that frees itself from the long history of colonized ideas and practices imposed on men and women—a society in which the main conflict is not men against women, per se, but men and women together, united, against the class- and gender-based political forces that divide them. Castillo’s novel represents a battle fought on several sociopolitical fronts including the critique of colonialism, racism, anti-immigrant hysteria, gender oppression, and exploited labor, but it also voices the need to consider an alternative reality through which an expanded perception of humanity can be better understood and put into practice. In this chapter, I have attempted to show that Sapogonia reconceptualizes both the anticolonial novel and the American ethnic novel by dramatizing the
dissolution of the structural separation of class and gender. But *Sapogonia* also stands as an exemplary case for a growing number of American ethnic novels that can be characterized as futuristic, egalitarian-aspiring novels—novels that represent the expression of an emergent, though still contradictory, class-conscious, feminist, anticolonial subject speaking from within the limits of a traditional (but now reappropriated and reinvigorated) literary form.

NOTES

1 The quoted passage comes from a lecture entitled “The Aesthetics of Singularity” delivered by Fredric Jameson at the International House, Chevron Auditorium, University of California, Berkeley, on February 28, 2012.

2 All of my references to *Sapogonia* are from the 1994 Doubleday edition of the novel.


4 In an essay entitled “The Fiction of Solidarity,” Ana Patricia Rodríguez has criticized Chicana and U.S. Latina writers, including Castillo, for romanticizing the struggles of Central Americans to promote Chicana feminist politics more than to represent the specific social realities, histories, and aspirations of Central Americans themselves. She writes, “U.S. Latina and Chicana writers in the 1980s and 1990s identified themselves with the cause and plight of Central Americans, producing thus the fiction (and illusion) of *transfronterista* solidarity” (223).

5 Elsewhere, I have argued that “[r]acialized subjects must become conscious of themselves as members of a historically situated politicized group but primarily for the purpose of abolishing all divisions based on racial, ethnic, and national difference, including those differences resulting from self-fashioned oppositional identities” (González 7). Here I hold that a similar claim can be made for subjectivities based on gender, sexuality, and class.

6 Yarbro-Bejarano is responding here to the 1990 edition of the novel, but her criticism could equally be made of the 1994 edition.

7 The perceptive reader might interpret Castillo’s novel as a critique of idealized representations of Indigenous belief systems similar to Sheila Contreras’s critique of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/la frontera*, which Contreras respectfully but assertively characterizes as partaking in “the manipulation of pre-Columbian mythology” (Contreras 131).

8 Here I am drawing on María Lugones’s concept of “the coloniality of gender,” a social system that historically has established and reinforced the “categorical separation” of gender, sexuality, race, and class. While I have reservations about Lugones’
paradigm for understanding class relations and power, her argument for the eradication of social categories is consistent with the Marxist call for the abolition of class and thus is valuable for political strategies aimed at a post-capitalist future, even if futurity remains under theorized in her work.

9 The internal quotation appears in Anzaldúa 5.

10 García, dubbed the Peruvian Kennedy because of his liberal politics, was forced to resign from his presidency amid accusations of corruption and with the country on the verge of bankruptcy. By naming the fictional Hispanic mayor Alan García, Castillo effectively links the ideological interests of mainstream U.S. ethnic politicians to those of neocolonial apologists.

WORKS CITED


