Each friend represents a world in us, a world not born until they arrive,
and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.
—Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*

HOMOINTIMATE FRIENDSHIP and Queer Possibility in Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*

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Abstract: Employing queer, decolonial, and asexual frameworks, this paper offers the language of homointimacy and homointimate friendship to read the platonic, yet deeply queer, relationship between Teresa and Alicia in Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. While relationships with men are evident throughout the novel and often serve as subjects of the women's correspondence, I challenge the heteronormative gaze that governs most readings of the novel by illuminating Teresa and Alicia's homointimate bond and its disruption of the colonially constructed platonic/romantic binary. Revealing how the queer decolonial narrative structure of the novel aids in interpreting Teresa and Alicia's queer relationship, this article invokes a decolonial imaginary attuned to queer asexual life to assert new ways of seeing and knowing "queer" beyond sex and sexual attraction. While most scholarship on queer Chicanx identity and relationships centralizes the subversive nature of queer sexualities against the demands of compulsory heterosexuality, this article seeks to elevate the equally liberatory and transgressive nature of homointimate friendship which equips us to better understand "queer" as an expansive, radical mode of relating often inclusive of, but not inherently dependent on, sex and sexual attraction.

Keywords: *Ana Castillo; Chicana; decolonial; queer; asexual; friendship; intimacy*

Chicana feminist writers have historically utilized the creative capacity of fiction to imagine futures for women beyond oppressive machista standards. Ana Castillo is one such author whose novels critique and intervene in masculinist constructions of Chicana womanhood that centralize and perpetuate heteronormativity. In her debut novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), Ana Castillo asserts the importance of choice by devising multiple plot possibilities for women beyond those predicated on heterosexual marriage and motherhood. Before the novel begins, Castillo offers readers three letter sequences "For the Conformist," "For the Cynic," and "For the Quixotic," as well as the option to read each letter independently. Despite differences in chronology and plot design, each letter sequence centralizes the intertwined lives of Chicana narrator Teresa and her best friend Alicia, a Spanish-Romani artist.[1] Each of Teresa's letters recounts the women's shared experiences across the United States and Mexico, where they embark on journeys of self-exploration against patriarchal pressures to abandon their independence. While the "ending" of each plot sequence provides readers with varied, even clashing, interpretations of how Teresa and Alicia's friendship withstands conflict, what remains evident throughout the novel is the deeply intimate bond the women share in their struggle for self-determination. This bond, fueled by empathy for their shared gendered experiences, serves as a vital source of refuge from both interpersonal and institutional forms of misogyny.

While Teresa and Alicia's relationship is never sexual, nor do Teresa's letters indicate a desire for it to be, the women share a level of intimacy that provokes Teresa to call her relationship with Alicia "a love affair" in Letter Eleven and compare it "to that of an old wedded couple" in Letter Sixteen (Castillo 45, 53). Indeed, the close connection they forge blurs the line often

drawn between friends and lovers, a dynamic I refer to as "homointimate," as the level of intimacy Teresa and Alicia share exceeds mere social bonds (signified by "homosocial") but does not explicitly include or imply erotic desire (signified by "homoerotic"). Homointimate bonds stem from shared gendered experiences or perceptions, wherein each person sees the other as a confidant, companion, and source of refuge from conflicts and over-arching oppressions related to their shared politicized gender identities. These bonds embody queer possibility from the depth of their emotional and psychic intimacy, not necessarily because two people share or desire sexually intimate encounters. Here, I use "sexual" to denote physical acts and behaviors which stem from a desire for sexual pleasure, either for one's self or someone else. Sexual longings and sexual attraction, whether they lead to sexual contact or not, stem from a desire to be physically pleasured or to physically give pleasure. Homointimate friendships disrupt sexualized definitions of "queer" and encompass alternative modes of queer relating, including bonds developed from emotional connection and platonic love.

In *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, Castillo's fluid storytelling—encompassed in the novel's non-linear narration and multiple plot lines—mirrors the unintelligibility and queer nature of Teresa and Alicia's relationship. The novel's fluid narrative structure tasks readers with embracing possibility over certainty, openly inviting queer interpretation beyond rigid identity markers typically attached to sex and sexual attraction. Read through the lenses of decolonial and asexuality studies, I argue that *The Mixquiahuala Letters* reshapes and reimagines the sexualized contours of "queer" to elevate the equally liberatory and socially disruptive capacity of platonic homointimacy. Positioning Castillo's late twentieth-century novel in dialogue with decolonial and asexual queer theories raises several important questions in our contemporary moment: How do we read queer intimacy beyond the realm of sex and sex attraction? How do friendships

within same-gender networks hold the capacity to transgress and reimagine heteronormative structures and colonial logics? How do platonic sites of empathy and emotional connection foster queer intimacy? And to what ends? Taking up these questions, I examine *The Mixquiahuala Letters* as a Chicana feminist text that challenges dominant narratives of queerness predicated on sex and sexual attraction to legitimize homointimate friendships as equally disruptive to the social and political structures of heteronormativity and machismo.

Given the varied and incomplete plot lines *The Mixquiahuala Letters* offers, I am not concerned with claiming the "true" nature of Teresa and Alicia's relationship but am instead invested in revealing the queer possibilities that arise from their homointimate friendship when we recognize queer life beyond the confines of sex and sexual attraction. Echoing Juana María Rodríguez's definition, I invoke "queer" in this article not solely as "an umbrella term that encompasses lesbians, bisexuals, gay men, two-spirited people, and [trans] people" but as a description for any "challenge to constructions of heteronormativity" (2003, 24). While both Teresa and Alicia maintain sexual relationships with men across various contexts in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, including fleeting encounters, committed relationships, and even marriage, Castillo challenges the notion that sex necessarily breeds intimacy. Indeed, the novel portrays Teresa and Alicia's platonic friendship as more intimate and meaningful than their sexual relationships with men throughout the novel. In doing so, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* necessitates new grammars for reading and understanding queer life, particularly as it manifests within relationships that do not fit neatly on either side of the platonic/romantic binary.

In this article, I offer the language of homointimacy and homointimate friendship to assist in interpreting same-gender friendships that possess a heightened level of vulnerability, trust, and understanding to the extent that

they not only straddle or complicate the platonic/romantic binary but actually elide it altogether. This transgressive level of intimacy ultimately calls us to reassess and expand our reading of queerness to include homointimate relationships as equally viable sources of queer life regardless of sexual acts or desire. Like Audre Lorde's conceptualization of the "erotic" which includes psychic and emotional lifeforces, homointimate friendships stem "from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person . . . physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual" (1984, 56). Whereas Lorde's formulation of the erotic is largely rooted in individual experiences of empowerment and joy, which can then "be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between [others]," homointimacy is inherently based on relationality and understanding between two or more people (1984, 56). While Lorde's definition of the erotic is also woman-centered, it is not exclusively sustained by relationships between women or other same-gender dynamics. Homointimate friendships are.

Friendship as a source of queer life in Chicana literature and Chicanx studies more broadly has thus far been an understudied subject. While scholars of Latinx literary and cultural studies have explored queer Chicana sexualities for decades, less attention has been given to alternative forms of queer relating which figure prominently in the canon of Chicana feminist literature. Catrióna Rueda Esquibel's *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians* (2006) builds on the earlier, foundational works of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and Cherríe Moraga (Anzaldá and Moraga 1981) by offering the first full-length study of Chicana lesbians in fiction—a genre, she argues, which reflects and shapes the lived experiences of lesbian Chicanas often neglected in mainstream accounts of Chicanx history. In her extensive study, Esquibel is not concerned with limiting the criteria for Chicana lesbian literature based on explicit identity disclosures or sexual encounters between women but is

instead invested in "beginning the discussion of what Chicana lesbian fiction accomplishes": seeing beyond heteronormative constructions of Chicana subjectivity to reflect the presence of queer Chicana desire as having always existed (2006, 2). Sandra K. Soto's *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer*: *The De-Mastery of Desire* similarly focuses on literary works depicting queer Chicanx life to "theorize racialized sexuality as a pervasive category in Chican@ cultural production more broadly" (2010, 9). Soto argues that sexuality cannot be disentangled from racialization and asserts that racialized sexuality, despite its marginalization in dominant historical accounts, plays a significant and undeniable role in the formation of Chicanidad and Chicanx literature specifically. Most recently, T. Jackie Cuevas's (2018) *Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Literature and Gender Variant Critique* shifts the focus from queer Chicana sexualities to the lesser studied realm of Chicanx gender variance, which she examines as an equally significant site for reading (gender)queer Chicanxs and their long presence in and contributions to constructions of Chicanidad. Each of these scholars offers important studies centered on queer Chicanx life that account for racialized and gendered experiences not encompassed in mainstream studies rooted in white experiences. While each scholar's work embraces fluid frameworks for interpreting Chicana lesbianism and queerness more broadly, their engagement with queer life centers primarily on Chicana sexualities and sexual politics.

Of the critical texts referenced above, Esquibel's *With Her Machete in Her Hand* is the only one that includes an in-depth study of queer friendship. In her chapter titled "Memories of Girlhood: Chicana Lesbian Fictions," Esquibel argues that the intimacy young Chicanas share "within the socially sanctioned system of *comadrazgo* . . . often provides the context for lesbian desire" (2006, 646). While girls are culturally discouraged from exploring or claiming ownership of their sexualities, "the cultural role of comadres, which raises lifelong friendships to the

status of kinship, is both encouraged and recognized" (Esquibel 2006, 94). By encouraging girls to occupy each other's time rather than engage with boys who could tarnish their sexual "purity," the system of comadrazgo unintentionally provides a vessel for girls to form queer bonds as they come to know each other more intimately than anyone else in their lives. Cristina Herrera similarly examines the power of women's friendship in her analysis of *Loving Pedro Infante* by Chicana writer Denise Chavez. As Herrera notes, "Critical work on female friendship in women's literature has virtually ignored this theme in writings by women of color, particularly Chicana and Latina fiction . . . The majority of this work narrows its focus to Anglo, middle-class women writers from the eighteenth century to the present" (2011, 51). Like Esquibel, Herrera highlights the social and political importance of comadrazgo for Chicana characters who form alliances based on their shared gendered and ethnic experiences. While Teresa and Alicia have different ethnic identities in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, the concept of comadrazgo queered by Esquibel and Herrera highlights the power of women's friendships in Chicana feminist fiction at large.

Before delving more deeply into Castillo's novel, I begin first by positing queer decolonial and asexual frameworks for reading homointimate friendships in Chicana literature. I next underscore how the novel's queer decolonial narrative structure aids readers in interpreting Teresa and Alicia's queer relationship. I then examine homointimate scenes in the novel that exemplify the socially subversive and radically queer capacity of platonic friendships and conclude with a reflection on the 1986 novel's significance today as it both anticipates and shapes queer futures beyond limiting binaries.

Reading Homointimacy: Decolonial and Asexual Approaches

Though some scholars have recognized the queer nature of Teresa and Alicia's relationship, scholars within the last decade have primarily taken

up the novel's innovations regarding genre, ethnicity, and nationality, including its ethnic epistolary form and demand for reader responsibility (Greenberg 2016; Larkin 2012), the cultural and ethnic tensions between Teresa and Alicia (Abitz 2015), and Castillo's representation of mestizaje and disruption of Chicano nationalism (Szeghi 2013; Sánchez-Pardo González 2009). Though queer-centered scholarship on the novel is limited, both Ibis Gómez-Vega (2003) and Barbara Weissberger (2007) offer valuable analyses of Teresa and Alicia's friendship that warrant greater attention to decolonial, asexual approaches to reading queerness and intimacy. In "The Homoerotic Tease and Lesbian Identity in Ana Castillo's Work," Gómez-Vega cites an abundance of evidence to showcase Teresa and Alicia's queer bond; yet, she clings closely to a restrictive definition of lesbianism[2] and ultimately refutes any possibility of Teresa and Alicia engaging in a nonsexual lesbian relationship. She argues that the women "have the comfort of friendship and companionship without the sexual connection" and concludes that Castillo merely teases lesbianism by not committing to a sexual relationship between her characters (2003, 71). In "Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*: A Queer *Don Quijote*," Weissberger goes a step further than Gómez-Vega, introducing a more nuanced approach to reading Teresa and Alicia's relationship through the lens of postmodern queer theory. "Queer theorists like Eve Kosfsky Sedgwick" Weissberger writes, "conceptualize queerness broadly, beyond the specificities, or essentialisms, of sexuality" (2007, 18). Yet, it is not until the conclusion of her article that she considers moving beyond essentialist determinations of queerness, ultimately rendering her analysis incomplete and open to expansion. Most recently, Liliana C. González examines "homoerotic undertones" between Teresa and Alicia in "Nostalgia for a Future: Queer Longings and Lesbian Desire in Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*" (2021, 148). González's analysis of queer possibility between Teresa and Alicia is situated "within a capitalist, sexist,

and heteronormative world," emphasizing the sociopolitical function and power of women's friendship (2021, 151). While I affirm interpretations of lesbian possibility in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* grounded in sexual desire such as those referenced above, I argue that it is equally essential to expand sex-centered readings of queer life by tending more deeply to the queer nature of Teresa and Alicia's platonic love and friendship.

One such way to begin this expansion is by revisiting lesbian feminist theory which emerged shortly before Castillo published *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. While "queer" had not yet entered popular discourse, lesbian feminists in the late twentieth century had already begun theorizing queerness as a socially disruptive force by expanding the terms of lesbianism beyond sex and sexual attraction. Barbara Smith's analysis of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), for example, queers the friendship between protagonists Sula and Nel from a Black feminist perspective. While there is no indication of sexual desire between Sula and Nel, Smith reads their relationship as lesbian based on the depth of their emotionally intimate connection. She writes that "the deepest communion and communication in the novel occurs between two women who love each other," reading this love as queer regardless of each character's sexual relationships with men (Smith 1977, 25). It is not their sexual encounters that offer each woman a sense of true connection or emotional fulfillment but rather the empathy derived from their friendship and understanding of each other's gendered and racialized experiences as Black women. I offer the language of "homointimate" in conjunction with and as an expansion of Smith's use of the term "lesbian" to capture queer platonic bonds such as Sula and Nel's. Likewise, Adrienne Rich's articulation of "the lesbian continuum" provides a useful framework for expanding Smith's reading of *Sula* and other sites of nonsexual lesbian life. In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich posits a spectrum of lesbianism that includes

any "woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (1986, 51). In this sense, she decenters sex as the standard from which lesbian life is measured to promote a more expansive understanding of queerness. Rich, like Smith, complicates mainstream definitions of lesbianism to legitimize all forms of intimacy between women. Her attention to emotional connection as a valid form of queer relating is what scholars of asexuality studies have continued to take up today.

Despite emergent discourse on asexuality in the realm of queer studies, many scholars continue to regard sex and sexual attraction as the root of queer life. As Jana Fedtke describes, "In our often hypersexualized society where the (hetero)sexual matrix determines most people's identities . . . sexuality is often seen as at the core of identity formation" (2014, 329). Queerness is often perceived and treated as inextricably linked to sexual orientation, even when the term "queer" attempts to belie minoritarian classifications. It is still common practice, for instance, for readers to define relationships as queer based on inclinations of sexual activity or desire when queer identity is not disclosed. Yet, as Lee Bebout writes, "Not simply determined through specific sexual practices and desires, queer is grounded in the broader, more flexible concept of nonnormativity" (2011, 157). Rather than ascribe "queer" to *any* instance of nonnormativity, however, queer *specifically* encompasses interventions against heteronormativity, a system and set of practices predicated on a binary gender system and heterosexual coupling. Heteronormativity relies on compulsory heterosexuality—the assumption that all people are and should be heterosexual. This cultural emphasis on heterosexuality not only leads many to discredit alternative forms of sexuality, including homosexuality and bisexuality, but also dismisses platonic intimacy to the extent that asexuality is widely pathologized with the goal of medical

"correction" or "curing." In order to render visible and validate queer life in all its forms, we must extend beyond sexual attraction as the standard from which queer life is measured and honor modes of intimacy that exist beyond the confines of compulsory (hetero)sexuality.

Though Western societies often distinguish platonic friendship from romantic partnership, many relationships embody an alternative sphere, commanding more attention to the nuances of human intimacy. Emma Pérez's formulation of "the decolonial imaginary" proves useful in reading fluid relationships through a Chicana feminist lens. In *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (1999), Pérez calls on readers to invoke a decolonial imaginary in readings of Chicana history so that we can revive and honor stories which have been silenced by Eurocentric modes of thought and historiography. In her later essay, "Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard" (2003), Pérez challenges colonial logics and research practices that specifically neglect queer Chicana histories. She argues: "If we have inherited a colonial white heteronormative way of seeing and knowing, then we must retrain ourselves to confront and rearrange a mindset that privileges certain relationships" (Pérez 2003, 124). Pérez asserts that a decolonial shift in research and reading practices aids readers and researchers in recognizing queer Chicana life where it has otherwise been ignored or erased by Eurocentric historical methods. She writes, for instance, that "a decolonial queer gaze would permit scholars to interrogate medical texts, newspapers, court records, wills, novels, and corridos with [a] fresh critical eye" (Pérez 2003, 128). In the realm of literature, invoking a decolonial imaginary requires that we expand the terms of queerness beyond sexuality to honor alternative forms of queer relating at the same time it requires that we engage nontraditional methods of storytelling. In Chicana feminist texts, connections between women often center on shared gendered

and ethnic experiences—sites of kinship that serve as refuge from the cultural demands of marriage and motherhood, compulsory heterosexuality, and strict gender roles, especially those idealized by machista standards. Through a decolonial imaginary, we can read gendered and ethnic points of connection as politicized sites where women can and do forge queer bonds independent of their sexual encounters.

While scholarly overlap between Chicana feminist theory and asexuality studies is scarce, positioning Pérez's decolonial work in dialogue with Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper's work on asexual resonances illuminates their epistemological and cultural intersections. Both camps of theory prove useful when reading Teresa and Alicia's friendship as a platonic, yet deeply queer, relationship between two women whose gendered connection provides the context for their homointimate bond. Like Pérez, Przybylo and Cooper articulate the need for more expansive reading practices that visibilize resonances of queer life in unexpected and unconventional spaces. Reflecting on her own queer identity, Przybylo describes how "asexuality resonates in the highly charged and intimate, yet asexual, friendships that have populated [her] life since a young age . . . [which] bypass 'sex' in favor of other modes of being with others" (2014, 297). With co-author Cooper, Przybylo sets out to challenge and redefine "queer" from a distinctly asexual perspective. Such an approach, they argue, "challenges us to revisit queer histories, past and present, and encourages skepticism of any approach to sexuality that does not question the sociocultural centrality of sex" (2014, 298). Employing an asexual lens in readings of queer life helps us discern and validate platonic intimacy and its radical potential, regardless of whether an individual identifies as asexual or not. It is not the identity itself but the queer possibilities rendered visible by asexuality studies that prove useful in reading non-normative relationships such as Teresa and Alicia's.

Queer Decolonial Narration in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*

Castillo's use of non-linear time and narration signals a refusal to conform to conventional standards before readers are even introduced to Teresa's letters. As mentioned previously, Castillo opens the novel by offering three separate reading paths "For the Conformist," "For the Cynic," and "For the Quixotic"—alerting readers upfront: "This is not a book to be read in the usual sequence."[3] Each narrative path Castillo provides includes a bulk of the same letters ordered differently to establish multiple plot possibilities. As Linda Greenberg writes: "Because readers are tempted to, and often do, ignore the recommended reading routes, the book highlights the possibilities of counternarratives and alternate pathways that are not labeled, cannot be predetermined, and do not lay out a master path for others to follow" (2016, 299). Readers who choose to forego these routes and read each letter sequentially are still subjected to a non-linear series of letters that exclude Alicia's replies and elicit reader imagination as a necessary component for reading the novel. In this sense, none of the paths Castillo provides truly ends, as readers are tasked with actively imagining Alicia's side of the correspondence to develop a fuller picture of each plot. The novel, then, embodies queer decolonial narration by refusing to follow a linear series of events—particularly those which lead to heterosexual marriage and motherhood as the prized "ending" for women. My use of "queer decolonial" here specifically references how the narrative structure of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* deviates from a neat and linear sequence of events embedded in a colonial heteronormative vision of womanhood—that is, a vision that requires women to devote their lives to serving and elevating the status of men through their labor as mothers and wives. Not only does *The Mixquiahuala Letters* offer alternative plot possibilities for women beyond those rooted in this heteronormative colonial vision, but it also invokes a decolonial imaginary in its narration of these plot possibilities. We can identify the nontraditional narrative structure of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* as "deconstructing systems of thought

and the manner in which they frame Chicana stories," specifically those which unravel linearly, "which is the sanctioned European and Euroamerican historical method" (Pérez 1999, XII). While Teresa and Alicia do eventually marry and have children with men in the sequences "For the Conformist" and "For the Cynic," the narrative path toward each traditional "ending" is unruly, unpredictable, and queer in its deviation of the norm, as is the plot line "For the Quixotic," where Teresa and Alicia's friendship outlasts their relationships with men. The fact that Castillo offers multiple plot possibilities in general also signals a departure from the singular fate of women demanded by a heteronormative colonial vision.

While there are no dates provided, it is clear that Teresa's letters are organized non-consecutively as they alternate from one significant period in her life to the next. The letters often oscillate, for instance, between different decades, different geographical locations, and different relationships with men. The shifting between these points mirrors the fluid fragmentation of Teresa's memory and encourages readers to embrace the fluid nature of Teresa and Alicia's friendship. Jack Halberstam's formulation of "queer time" provides a fitting framework from which to analyze the novel's unconventional structure. Invoking Michel Foucault's "Friendship as a Way of Life," Halberstam pinpoints how queer subjects challenge heteronormative ways of being not simply because of their sexual choices but because of their refusal to conform "to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (2005, 1). Teresa's letters, which cast a reflective gaze on her past experiences with Alicia, resist a coherent narrative arc consistent with straight time and in turn challenge "patriarchal capitalist-coloniality" which governs life in the United States (Motta and Bermudez 2019, 424). The novel's fluid temporality invites readers to abandon convention and adopt a decolonial imaginary to read queerness in Teresa and Alicia's friendship where it would otherwise be overlooked or ignored.

Indeed, the novel's open-ended plot lines destabilize the notion that Teresa and Alicia's relationship must embody one "true" nature tied to their sexual relations with men. The path "For the Conformist" follows their travels in Mexico and indicates that Teresa and Alicia eventually retire their adventures across the border so Teresa can establish a family with her husband, while the path "For the Cynic" suggests a betrayal of their friendship when Teresa finds out that her ex-boyfriend had been secretly living with and dating Alicia in Puerto Rico. The path "For the Quixotic" challenges the centralization of heteronormativity in the other sequences as the women's friendship outlasts their relationships with men, ultimately placing more importance on Teresa and Alicia's homointimate bond than their fleeting heterosexual ties. Regardless of each possible ending, the irregular structure of the novel itself resists convention and, in posing the possibility of the women choosing each other over the men in their lives, invites queer interpretation of Teresa and Alicia's friendship.

Rather than abide by the linear course of straight time that traditionally follows a trajectory toward marriage and reproduction, the novel's fluid temporality suggests alternative possibilities for Teresa and Alicia. Letter Two appears as the first letter in the paths "For the Conformist" and "For the Quixotic," though it does not appear at all in the path "For the Cynic." Teresa begins by declaring to Alicia: "Finally we end the cesspool / twirl of our 20s . . . Finally men / no longer can / deposit memories of past love affairs / with their dirty underwear in our hampers" (23). The poem ends with Teresa wishing Alicia a happy thirtieth birthday, situating them a decade removed from when they first met at the age of twenty, while also revealing the liberating act of discarding their past relationships with men. Letter Three, which follows Letter Two in both paths "For the Conformist" and "For the Quixotic," takes readers back to the first time the friends meet in a Mexican

summer program; Teresa reflects: "You told me of your lover, Rodney, back home . . . how you once contemplated having a baby, just like that, knowing your future with him had been predetermined by societal mores" (27). As the novel whisks readers back and forth through time in a queer structural move, it also characterizes the prominent role of heteronormativity in the women's lives, often portraying their relationships with men as routine and obligatory rather than genuinely intimate.

The novel's resistance to linearity with a typical "beginning," "middle," and "end" also speaks to what Elizabeth Hanna Hanson (2014) terms "asexual possibility" as it rejects a traditional narrative path dependent on closure after climax. Though the characters engage in sexual activity with men, the narrative structure of the novel itself resists a traditional linear arc often consistent with the arc of sex. There is no identifiable climax in the novel as it does not abide by a sequential narrative structure, nor does it offer true closure since Alicia's replies are only to be imagined by readers. Instead, the collection of letters, in any sequence, showcases memories that are no doubt revealing but ultimately offer no concrete conclusions. This is not to say that an asexual narrative structure offers no meaning. Rather, reading the structure of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* asexually reveals alternative sites for producing meaning that do not depend on a single climactic ending. Readers who are seduced by traditional narratives expect to reach closure in the end of a novel, but asexual possibility resists this relationship between reader and text by refraining from a traditional linear narrative arc. Instead, this alternative structure reorients readers to embrace diverse structures of time and narration. The unconventional narrative structure of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* embodies Hanson's notion of asexual possibility by asserting meaning through individual engagement with the text rather than feeding desire through a narrative structure that follows the arc of a sexual orgasm.

Indeed, the final letters in each narrative sequence gesture toward plots but never fulfill them. While Letter Thirty-Seven appears near the end of each reading path, revealing months of silence between the two close friends, each sequence ends with a different letter that enables multiple possibilities. The path "For the Conformist" ends with Letter Thirty-Four, where Teresa juxtaposes her past life with her new life, one in which she, her husband, and new son plan to settle in Mexico to establish the conventional life she once rejected. Teresa tells Alicia: "i think of you, and you seem so far away. i hardly dream of you. Does this mean we're no longer the friends we were—or the same women?" (125).[4] Readers are left to speculate the answer to this question as the novel leaves it open for interpretation. The path "For the Cynic" ends with Letter Thirty-Eight—which does not appear in the other paths—where Teresa illustrates a sense of betrayal after finding out about her ex-boyfriend's love affair with Alicia. Letter One, the last letter in the path "For the Quixotic," is one of the few letters written in the present tense. In it, Teresa describes the plan for her and Alicia to visit Mexico while in their thirties, picking up where they left off in earlier years. Unlike the seemingly negative endings of the other paths, the one "For the Quixotic" gestures toward the women reigniting their adventures across the border to revel in their independence as they did in earlier years. In any case, each sequence only alludes to possible endings rather than concretely establishing them.

The Mixquiahuala Letters offers multiple ways for readers to engage with the text that exist beyond dominant structures. The novel's rejection of straight time also queers Teresa's narrative voice as readers encounter it fluidly. The way her letters fluctuate in tone, tense, and style—some in prose and others as poems—introduce readers to a multiplicity of ways to exist beyond the linear and predictable. Likewise, the novel's lack of a clear plot destabilizes the sexual arc mirrored in narratives that feed readerly desire with climax and

resolve it with closure. By adopting a decolonial imaginary attuned to asexual resonances of queer life, readers are equipped to resist the heteronormative gaze when reading Teresa's letters.

Teresa and Alicia's Homointimate Friendship

The fluid structure of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* encourages readers to explore features of Teresa and Alicia's friendship that would not typically be interpreted as queer, including the strong bond they establish when navigating deeply heterosexist cultures in the United States and Mexico. The bulk of Teresa's letters depict her friendship with Alicia as an aid in battling oppressive power structures that threaten their agency on both sides of the border. Her letters particularly hone in on the politics of women's choice and freedom, which are compromised when the women set out to exercise agency over their own bodies, whether that be the choice to terminate pregnancy or the choice to travel across the border without men. Teresa's letters also reveal the subtle and extreme ways patriarchal power affects their daily lives, ranging from microaggressions about food intake to the violence of rape. The homointimate bond that develops from Teresa and Alicia's shared empathy as women, despite their ethnic and racial differences, fosters a unique form of intimacy that is deeply queer. By embracing diverse forms of relationality, we can recognize Teresa and Alicia's gendered bond as a legitimate site for queer relating that offers them a distinct level of intimacy no men in their lives match.

While Teresa and Alicia gather creative inspiration from their various trips to Mexico, what remains central to Teresa's letters are not the sights or surroundings they encounter, but the homointimate bond they develop in response to heterosexist customs they navigate as a team. When recalling their travels, Teresa consistently fixates on their gendered experiences. In Letter Nineteen, she describes their arrival to Mexico "as two snags in its pattern,"

reminding Alicia: “How revolting we were, susceptible to ridicule, abuse, disrespect. We would have hoped for respect as human beings, but the only respect granted a woman is that which a gentleman bestows upon the lady. Clearly, we were no ladies. What was our greatest transgression? We traveled alone” (Castillo 1986, 65-66). In this passage, Teresa characterizes their trips across the border as culturally rebellious given the expectation that women travel under the supervision of men or not at all. Teresa speaks back to this expectation by revealing moments in their travels where the presence of men threatened their safety rather than secured it.

Indeed, the threat of violence inflicted by men is what drives Teresa and Alicia closer together in Mexico. In Letter Twenty-Four, Teresa reminds Alicia: “Our sticking together had become a habit born of preventative measures . . . The closeness we felt for each other had been heightened by our desire to survive during our travels that had been filled with unpredictable dilemmas” (87, 98). One such dilemma arises when Alvaro, one of Teresa’s former colleagues, invites her to stay in Mexico at his family’s ranch. Taking advantage of free lodging, Teresa invites Alicia to stay with her without telling Alvaro, who assumed he would have a private night with Teresa. When a drunk Alvaro makes an unsolicited move on Teresa, she and Alicia go back to the ranch and block the bedroom door with furniture to keep him out. Yet, Alvaro still manages to make his way in and wedges his body between the two friends, who eventually escape downstairs when the drunkard falls asleep. Teresa describes their hectic escape from the ranch the next morning: “We scooted down, out of the window’s view, in case a sniper took aim to embed a bullet in the head of the woman who had no interest in the Pérez estate—or its heir [Alvaro]” (58). While seemingly hyperbolic, this line suggests the real threat of violence that could ensue from Teresa’s rejection of Alvaro or any man who finds the women’s independence threatening.

Given the personal and systemic oppressions they face from men throughout the novel, Teresa and Alicia consistently critique the expectation that they abandon their freedom for marriage. In Letter Seven, Teresa exemplifies the heteronormative path expected of her by invoking the lives of her older sisters, who each "left the companions of her sex without looking back" once married (35). Teresa, also married at the time of this letter, rejects the assumption that she must depend on her husband to fulfill all of her needs at the expense of other intimate connections, namely with Alicia. Teresa reflects on the effects of this social expectation, recalling the time one of her married sisters joined her and Alicia for a night out: "She was enthusiastic about all our suggestions because for the first time in her life she had a choice, expressed an opinion, and was able to decide what she wanted to do on a Saturday night" (36). This pointed observation reveals the normalization of marital submission promoted by Teresa's family that both she and Alicia resist through their homointimate friendship. Rather than rely solely on men to sustain all their needs, they establish their independence by offering each other an incomparable level of empathy and support.

While emotional connection is usually perceived as a core tenet of romantic relationships, it is often not viewed as romantic unless sex or sexual attraction accompanies it. Reading Teresa and Alicia's relationship through a decolonial asexual framework complicates the platonic/romantic binary to exhibit the two as harmonious rather than oppositional. Such an approach equips readers to queer Teresa and Alicia's friendship by exploring the depth of their emotional intimacy in asexual terms. Decentering sex in this case prompts readers to tend more closely to the resonances of queer asexuality that Teresa exhibits in her letters, particularly in her descriptions of Alicia as more of a partner than her own husband. While marriage has been culturally constructed to symbolize the deepest form of intimacy between

two people, Teresa's letters challenge this assumption by treating it more as a social expectation to fulfill than a genuine gesture of love. Teresa's own marriage lacks the same intimate capacity she finds in her platonic friendship with Alicia, which is particularly evident when she recalls her urge to get away one winter, writing: "i needed to go to someone familiar, who didn't make me feel alone. You [Alicia] had your fill with Abdel. So my long lost husband had to do" (132). The letter continues to describe the empty meeting Teresa shares with her then-separated husband, who she characterizes more as a stranger than a partner. Even before their separation, Teresa hardly describes him fondly, even choosing to primarily refer to him simply as "my husband" rather than naming him. Yet, when describing Alicia, Teresa depicts an unparalleled level of trust and passion one would typically assign to a partner:

> It is true we slept together curled up on the double seat of a rickety Mexican bus that wound its way through the nocturnal roads from one strange place to another; a soft shoulder served as a pillow for one another's head . . . It is true we bathed together in the most casual sense, scrubbed each other's back, combed out one another's wet hair, braided it with more care than grandmothers who invariably catch it on broken tooth combs . . . For the first half of the decade we were an objective one, a single entity, nondiscriminate of the other's being. (127-128)

Referencing their years of travel together, Teresa illustrates a close bond with Alicia that exceeds that of any other relationship in the novel. Though she claims the two "had never been lovers" in a sexual sense, reading Teresa's letters through an asexual lens makes the homointimate nature of their relationship more visible (127).

The women's queer bond is particularly evident through the intimate language Teresa adopts when referring to Alicia. She consistently romanticizes their platonic relationship by centering their emotional connection as an equally valid and even greater source of intimacy in their lives than sex—which she consistently characterizes as a routine source of pleasure rather than intimacy. Teresa even deflates their sexual encounters with men by situating them within the social grip of heteronormativity, reminding Alicia:

> We weren't free of society's tenets to be convinced we could exist indefinitely without the demands and complications one aggregated with the supreme commitment to a man. Even greater than these factors was that of an ever present need, emotional, psychological, physical . . . it provoked us nonetheless to seek approval from [men] through sexual meetings. (45)

In the lines that follow, Teresa offers a detailed poem describing Alicia having sex. The vivid descriptions reveal Teresa's close proximity to a typically private encounter. After describing sensual scenes of an unnamed man undressing Alicia, Teresa flattens any intimacy from the encounter, concluding the poem: "*across the room / i closed my eyes / went on / with my nap*" (46). Sex in this instance becomes less about intimacy and more about a physical urge to be fulfilled. The poem, in fact, elicits Teresa's intimacy with Alicia rather than Alicia's intimacy with the unnamed lover she has sex with, as the level of trust between the two friends enables Teresa to observe the sexual encounter with such close attention she can recall it vividly in writing.

While Teresa often describes her close bond with Alicia as sisterly, the queer nature of their intimacy should not be discounted, particularly given the common feminist gesture to name close bonds with other women as familial.

Rather, it is through their shared empathy as women that the two forge such a close bond that holds the potential to be both feminist and romantic. Teresa and Alicia's homointimate friendship unsettles the rigid boundaries of the platonic/romantic binary as their relationship, however platonic, may also be read as romantic. In Letter Three, Teresa reminisces on the height of her and Alicia's homointimate friendship, reminding her close companion: "Our first letters were addressed and signed with the greatest affirmation of allegiance in good faith, passion bound by uterine comprehension. In sisterhood. In solidarity. A strong embrace. Always. We were not to be separated. A fine-edged blade couldn't have been wedged between our shared consciousness" (24). Here, "uterine comprehension" serves as a metonym for (cis) gendered empathy as Teresa and Alicia bond over their shared experiences as women co-struggling for independence and safety from patriarchal control. It is this gendered understanding that ultimately provides the context for Teresa and Alicia's queer bond as they come to know and trust each other more deeply than the men they date. In Letter Three, Teresa characterizes the intensity of their intimate friendship in romantic terms, portraying the two as one—much like the gesture of a wedding vow. She reflects on the interstitial periods between their travels with a romantic gaze, describing their correspondence full of shared poetry, late night calls, and the exchange of hand-made postcards and jewelry. She describes how they "begged for the other's visit" in these empty periods, writing: "We needled, stabbed, manipulated, cut, and through it all we loved, driven to see the other improved in her own reflection" (29). Teresa's language exhibits a deep level of intimacy with Alicia that again disrupts the platonic/romantic binary. Indeed, it is through their platonic friendship that romance is born, despite the dominant belief that sexual attraction is a necessary component for romantic connection.

Tending to the intensity of Teresa and Alicia's emotional connection enables readers to reconsider sexualized definitions of "queer" to better recognize

resonances of queer asexuality where they would otherwise be consumed by the weight of compulsory (hetero)sexuality. At the same time, reading their homointimate friendship through a decolonial asexual lens allows us to see emotional bonding as powerfully disruptive to the oppressive forces of heteronormativity that disparage intimate connections between women and render queer relating invisible. Rather than privilege sexual relating as the supreme form of human connection, readers can locate the empowering capabilities of emotional connection as an equally valid source of intimacy in relationships that alone can foster queer love.

Toward Radical Queer Futures

The Mixquiahuala Letters offers a literary channel from which we can envision queer futures that extend beyond sex and sexual attraction. Though contrived, "Fiction as a medium provides a safe space for asexual identities," and I would add, asexual resonances, "because it allows for commonly held assumptions about sexuality and gender to be questioned, challenged, and deconstructed" (Fedtke 2014, 330). Teresa's inability to easily place her relationship with Alicia on either side of the platonic/romantic binary reveals the challenge of categorizing intimacy when it is conflated with sex and sexual attraction. While Teresa characterizes her friendship with Alicia in intimate terms, she falls prey to the weight of colonial structures and ultimately does not claim Alicia as a lover given the sexual connotation of the label. While Teresa as narrator operates under dominant relationship paradigms that overlook queer asexuality as a way of intimately relating to Alicia, the novel's queer asexual structure and content call on readers to imagine the queer possibilities of friendship. Through this imagining, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* anticipates radical queer futures that are receptive to the uncertainty of possibility rather than hinging queer life on concrete identity categories defined by sex.

The real-world implications of queering friendship and legitimizing homointimacy are numerous: Asexuality, including all forms of nonsexuality, can become more visible and nonpathologized, "queer" can encompass various forms of intimacy that are not inextricably bound to sex or sexual attraction, and the empowering and subversive nature of nonsexual forms of same-gender connection may become more widely visible—ultimately opening more space to exist beyond the confines of heteronormativity. This is not to argue that sexuality should be removed from such futures, but rather, that alternative forms of relating may also flourish. While the objective should be the elimination of unhealthy forms of gatekeeping that exclude asexual people and relationships, it is not the goal to universalize "queer" to the point where it no longer has meaning. As CJ DeLuzio Chasin writes: "Nobody has sexual freedom until all of us are free to be sexual (to experience a sexual subjectivity independent of sexual contact) or not, however we feel, however it suits us, and whenever it suits us" (2013, 421). Indeed, radical queer futures allow both sexuality and asexuality to exist in tandem, often overlapping, always nuancing forms of intimacy and relating.

This radical formulation of a/sexual freedom grants individuals more agency to define how they experience intimacy on terms independent of sexual attraction. These futures carve out space for diverse forms of relating to legitimize queer bonds that develop from spiritual, emotional, and political connections that are most often silenced by colonial relationship structures. Beyond individual relationships, queering nonsexuality in all its forms holds the potential to disrupt entire systems of power that privilege (hetero) sexuality as the ultimate measure of identity. This decentralization of sex encourages us to ask, perhaps for the first time: What forms of queer life emerge when sex is destabilized as a universal experience? What political possibilities do queer nonsexualities offer? What queer subjects or histories

can be recovered when the measure of queer life extends beyond sexual desire? It is particularly essential to situate these questions within the context of Chicana/o/x/Latina/o/x studies, a field which offers an intersectional approach to queer studies by critically engaging how gender and sexuality are influenced by and, in many ways, inseparable from race and ethnicity. Indeed, these questions lead us to critically examine the function of nonsexual queer bonds forged between or written by Chicana/ox/Latina/ox subjects whose experiences are often neglected in mainstream queer studies and largely absent from the field of asexuality studies. Greater attention to Chicanx/Latinx perspectives in this context equips us to reorient our perceptions of queer intimacy beyond the scope of sexuality at the same time it calls us to consider how diverse forms of queer relationality emerge from and aid in dismantling intersectional oppressions.

Notes

[1] There is little context surrounding Alicia's heritage, aside from one mention of her mixed Spanish "gypsy" ancestry. While many Romani peoples have reclaimed the word "gypsy" from its pejorative connotation, it is still widely used in derogatory and dehumanizing ways. I have therefore opted not to include it in the body of this article.

[2] Although I choose "homointimate" and "queer" to recognize Teresa and Alicia's fluid relationship throughout this article, I also support expanding the term "lesbian" to interpret their relationship, particularly as it honors early lesbian feminist approaches. Since this article is not concerned with claiming the exact nature of Teresa or Alicia's identities, I use "queer" to encompass a multitude of possibilities that may or may not include lesbianism exclusively.

[3] Ana Castillo dedicates *The Mixquiahuala Letters* to Julio Cortázar, whose novel *Hopscotch* (1963) similarly disrupts linear time.

[4] The personal pronoun "I" appears in lowercase throughout the novel, which I have maintained in this article when quoting from Teresa's letters. In an interview with Bryce Milligan (1999) for *South Central Review*, Ana Castillo comments: "In *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, I used the lowercase "I" throughout because I feel—I might be wrong about this . . . that I am talking about a lot of people" (26). Castillo situates Teresa's first-hand experiences within a larger collective of people—namely women who sustain close friendships with other women as a means of self-preservation and empowerment. In this sense, my reading of Teresa and Alicia's homointimate friendship

extends beyond the fictional boundaries of the novel as Castillo anticipates many readers identifying with Teresa's experiences.

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