

SAPOGONIA



A NOVEL



ANA CASTILLO



SAPOGONIA

(An Anti-Romance in $\frac{3}{8}$ Meter)

ANA CASTILLO

Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe

TEMPE, ARIZONA



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ISBN: 0-916950-95-6

Printed simultaneously in a softcover edition. ISBN: 0-916950-96-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Castillo, Ana.

Sapogonia : (an anti-romance in 3/8 meter) / Ana Castillo.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-916950-95-6. — ISBN 0-916950-96-4 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3553.A8135S27 1989

813'.54—dc19

89-933

CIP

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Cover design by Robin Ravary

Back cover photo by Rubén Guzmán

Acknowledgments

This volume is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal agency.



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*A Marcel Ramón,
querido ser que me sostiene
en esta tierra*

This is the story of make-believe people in a real world;
or, if you like, the story of real people
in a make-believe world.

anti-hero (*ant-ē-hē-rō*) *n.*, *pl.* *-roes*. 1. In mythology and legend, a man who celebrates his own strength and bold exploits. 2. Any man who notes his special achievements. 3. The principal male character in a novel, poem, or dramatic work.
—as defined by Pastora Velásquez Aké



PROLOGUE

Sapogonia is a distinct place in the Americas where all mestizos reside, regardless of nationality, individual racial composition, or legal residential status—or, perhaps, because of all of these.

Their cultural roots may be traced back further than 7,000 B.C. In the gradual and inevitable process that eventually contributed to the world at large, chile, corn, beans, and chocolate, not least among their agricultural developments are variations of something fermented and concocted from a root, plant, or cactus. These, owing to sheer human imagination, are used for the sole purpose of altering daily reality.

The Sapogón is besieged by a history of slavery, genocide, immigration, and civil uprisings, all of which have left their marks on the genetic make-up of the generation following such periods as well as the border outline of its territory.

The Sapogón whose family background has been one of a certain wealth and class status, like the one in our story, speaks fluent French in addition to his native Spanish—which aside from being the national language is considered by his kind to be the tongue of the less civilized and cultured. The truly updated Sapogón, however (also as in the case of the one in our story), will attain fluency in English. While he may maintain sympathies with the intellectual credences of certain European states, he perceives that international achievement now weighs almost exclusively on recognition by the United States of America.

Whereas he may, by affectation, acquire the mannerisms and the idioms of the North American with the intent of assimilation, his genetic make-up immediately sets him apart, for his European ancestry, which may be either Spanish or French with the invariable contribution of indigenous blood, makes him shorter in stature with dark features not

characteristic of the Aryan or Anglo. For his own ends, he may fake an entire Latin-European background or Mediterranean autobiography. Any acknowledgment of indigenous American ancestry causes him almost immediately to be relegated to the world of Sapogonia.

Sapogonia (like the Sapogón/a) is not identified by modern boundaries. Throughout the Americas, Sapogones, those who are wholly or in part descended from the indigenous peoples of what was erroneously named "The New World," continue to populate, breed, and therefore dominate the lands of their ancestors. Due to present political conditions decreed by the powers that be, the Sapogón pueblo finds itself continuously divided and reunited with the certainty of the Northern winds that sweep across its continents to leave evershifting results.

A.C.

July 29, 1985

Chicago, birthplace

one

His lips touch each eyelid light as breath. He steps back, arms raised over his head. Momentarily he is distracted by the sound of laughter on the street, a girl's voice and the deeper sounds of male companions. She is inebriated with life.

A hundred sparrows awaken and sing from the tree outside the bedroom window. Sunrise against violet chiffon curtains casts a hue on the brown body breathing softly before him. His head tilts and his being is filled with a certain tenderness for her whom he loved through the night and left limp, 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. Her image, this one before him, consumed his brain until it burst like a circus balloon, pained him into nothingness, and he went back to find her, again and again, in other women, taller women, fairer, women of porcelain faces and transparent eyes, women with melon asses and women with cash to spend on a man such as he.

He escaped from her to every woman as unlike her as he could find. Women who drank hard whiskey and fucked him in the men's toilet. Women who'd travelled the four corners of the world, who spoke more languages than he, who dressed in silk camisoles and garters, who lived in big houses and high-rise apartments with doormen and a privileged view of the city. The women who would lay down their lives, who used their minds to scheme for him, who handled his contracts, negotiations, who wore tweed suits and carried briefcases, whose parents hosted dinner parties for him.

Meanwhile, he remembered her. He remembered her especially when he worked, when he welded, when he stared at what might be no more than the beginning of a wall, a crosspiece for an iron fence, and in his mind's eye saw it take form.

While he thought it cliché, he saw her in the eyes of the cat, because it was with her that he discovered how seductive that

animal was, indifferent and capable of attack when disturbed, so unlike the dog, unlike his own obedient animals that watched his house and his back on the street. And what good was a cat if not to be adored and stroked in this fashion, as he had done to her all night?

Once, he lured a yellow spotted cat into his house with a fish fillet. He left the kitchen window open all summer. At the same hour every day the yellow spotted cat would jump through and have its dinner, leaving without so much as a thank you. But if he happened to be sitting at the table, he was allowed to reach a hand out with ever so much finesse and pet its thick coat, causing the cat to stretch its back into a hump and close its eyes for three intimate seconds. Then it jumped back out the window. His Five-Minute Cat he called it.

By the end of summer, he had been conditioned to have the cat's fillet waiting, and he sitting quietly at the table, if he were to stroke it at all.

For several days the cat stopped coming.

Surely it had found another window to crawl into, or else it had become bored with its fillet, its daily stroke.

One evening he came back from walking the pit bull, Siquieros, and saw Five-Minute Cat waiting on the kitchen table, paws tucked under its body. It winked at him. Siquieros barked and pulled at its chain. The cat watched its familiar enemy, eyes steady, motionless. He let his fingers go limp on the leather strap and the dog headed straight for the cat that leapt like a jackrabbit out the window in one movement.

It never returned.

You are a damned alley cat, he wants to utter under his breath as he continues to watch her, who has just moved so that her breasts part and the sun-toasted shoulders, neck, and face contrast the flesh color of her breasts. The voices fade outside. In the distance, a car horn honks impatiently. Someone is on his way to punch a time clock. Another Saturday begins. He has appointments, too.

In one thrust his clenched fist holding the scissors from her sewing table comes down to pierce the hollow spot between the lumps of nipples flesh. Her eyes open and are on him. Her face is wild as she inhales with the thrust and exhales when he pulls the scissors out.

His hands are wet and drip red,
he wipes the sweat from his brow
mixed with tears. ¿Estás muerta ya, puta?

Her body heaves and she writhes with agony. She moans but says nothing. She stares at him, quivers, writhes, holds her wound like a child clasped to her bosom and says nothing.

Still holding the scissors in one hand, he drops to his knees and kisses her bloodied hands over the new mouth of her chest; he kisses her navel, the line of sparse hairs down to the abdomen, his mouth burying itself in the pubic hair, and already he knows this is not what he wants.

“Mejor que yo me muera,” he sobs. His eyes search with unexpected self-recrimination in hers, still staring, blank, darker now with death inhabiting her body. Knowing he doesn’t want to die either, he turns away from her, and when his eyes return to her face, the yellow spotted cat leaps out at him, claws dig into his brow and cheeks, catch in the delicate skin of his eyelids, and yank them with loud screeches.

The scissors still in his hand can’t find the cat to stop its excruciating attack. “¡Cabrona! ¡Te mato, cabrona, te mato . . . !” he screams, falling on the floor that is no longer the carpeted one of her bedroom but a cobblestone street, and somehow he knows that one’s life is a full circle and he is about to die thousands of miles away. . . in the village of San Co at the steps of the house where I was born right after the war, during another war, and before the next; for in my country, a war has always gone on with peacetime falling in unpredicted intervals or at designated times, such as Christmas and Holy Week.

My father was not present at my birth. As my mother told it, he had been called back to Galicia to be at his mother’s side during her last days. A stern matriarch, she had demanded that her only son return to take his rightful place as head of her estate.

This story fascinated me so that at the age of six, having tired Mamá with relentless questions as to the whereabouts of my father, who by then I believed was a grand man in or about Galicia, Spain, an enchanted place way across the body of massive water that separated us, she finally told me she wasn’t sure about my father’s story after all.

In fact, she had reason to suspect that he may have not had a

dying mother to return to, but perhaps a wife. As it was confirmed to me by my father himself years later, he indeed had had no mother to return to, and least of all any inheritance, but left San Co to where he had gone to seek his fortune in gold mining, to get out from under the crossfire.

It wasn't long after he returned home that he married and for the time being forgot Mamá.

tWO

All my life has been divided into two realities: dreams of revelation and prophecy, and those dreams that manifest my present. In each case, the dreams take two forms: those that beg for fantastic flight and those that are nightmares without recompense.

Although you might think me a complete idiot, it has taken me almost all my life to know this. It is a fact that I'd often had a sense of awaking in my sleep when I was presumably awake, susceptible to those same occurrences of *déjà vu* as anyone else, or having those frustrating dreams in which one struggles with desperation to wake up and does so repeatedly before actually awaking.

It is also a fact that my Mamá Grande, a tiny Mayan woman, took me aside when I was an adolescent and told me several things that didn't make a bit of sense to my young and inattentive ears, and as young people tend to waste all attempts of our elders to relay to us wisdom accumulated over the decades, I thought my Mamá Grande had a few mice in the attic.

My tata, el señor Máximo Mireles y Macías, forbade his Mayan bride, whom he took from her home in Santa Agueda Quetzaltenango at the age of thirteen, to wear her native costumes, except, of course, when she went home on visits.

She was not allowed to pray to her rows of clay statues. He made certain his diminutive wife was a God-fearing Roman Catholic, and built a shrine in the garden for a life-size statue of the Virgen de los Remedios, where my Mamá Grande was permitted to go for solace and meditation daily. It was the only place outside that my Mamá Grande was ever permitted to go alone. Even though it was just in the back of the house, I think the privilege meant a great deal to Mamá Grande.

Then there was the period of repeated discovery of the little statues about the garden, in the house, the linen, and the chicken

coops, servants turning up tiny baked men and women in Indian clothing of real cotton and wool.

Finally, out of sheer tolerance for the persistence of the Indian determination to keep her culture thriving, or because my tata knew when to give up, he allowed Mamá Grande to place all of her statues alongside and at the foot of the statue of the Virgen, which she did and which I believe caused her to have more reason to visit her shrine daily.

It was Mamá Grande who told me, not once but many times, the stories related to her people, their history, and her own ideas about their traditions, all of which are really quite entertaining and which I may somewhere along this discourse share, but for now, I will only tell of how she was the one who insisted that my life was merely a series of dreams.

three

When I was very small I suffered from a recurrent nightmare in which I dreamed I was drowning and, sometimes, that I had drowned. I told Mamá in hopes that she might save me from these nocturnal tortures and Mamá, after trying various teas and placing soothing potato skins on my forehead before I went to sleep, turned me over to Mamá Grande's care and wisdom.

Mamá Grande pulled out her little sack of tobacco and rolled herself a cigarette. She was almost done with it before I finally got a response. At a young age I tended to be an impatient fellow and I remember distinctly hanging on with every puff of her scandalous-smelling cigarette until she finally looked me in the eye. It was a whole minute later when she spoke.

"Mimo, tú eres un alma mu-uuy vieja. A mí me parece que en una de tus vidas te ahogaste . . . o si no, tú ahogaste a alguien . . ." Mamá Grande had just said an outrageous thing, judging from the reaction of my mother, who threw her hands over her mouth to stifle a gasp. As for me, I didn't understand a word of it.

Many years later, when I was an adolescent, I forced myself upon a girl. Her brothers were like mad dogs when they caught up with me. If it wasn't for my grandfather, who had approached and shot his gun in the air, they would have killed me. My grandfather turned around and went back home, leaving me half drowned on the river bank.

That night as my mamá fed me chicken consommé in bed, Mamá Grande rolled up a cigarette nearby and said, "You see? I told you."

In all honesty, I hardly know why I took that girl by force. It wasn't as if I couldn't have had any other girl that I wanted without a struggle, but somehow it occurred to me to choose this one and once I realized that she didn't love me, that she didn't even like me, it