So Far from God Study Guide

So Far from God by Ana Castillo

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

So Far from God Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....4

Author Biography....5

Plot Summary....6

Chapter 1....10

Chapter 2....16

Chapter 3....18

Chapter 4....20

Chapter 5....23

Chapter 6....24

Chapter 7....25

Chapter 8....26

Chapter 9....28

Chapter 10....30

Chapter 11....32

Chapter 12....34

Chapter 13....37

Chapter 14....39

Chapter 15....40

Chapter 16....41

Characters....43

Themes....46

Style....48

Historical Context....49

BOOKRAGS

[Critical Overview 50]
[Criticism 51]
[Critical Essay #1 52]
[Critical Essay #2 56]
[Critical Essay #3 58]
[Critical Essay #4 70]
[Critical Essay #5 71]
[Critical Essay #6 74]
[Critical Essay #7 76]
[Critical Essay #8 79]
[Critical Essay #9 83]
[Critical Essay #10 85]
[Critical Essay #11 88]
[Critical Essay #12 90]
[Critical Essay #13 92]
[Topics for Further Study 94]
[What Do I Read Next? 95]
[Further Study 97]
[Bibliography 98]
[Copyright Information 99]

Introduction

When *So Far From God* was published in 1993, it was heralded as the newest masterpiece from one of the most elegant voices in the Chicana movement. Julia Alvarez and Sandra Cisneros both favorably reviewed the book as true to the Chicana experience and brilliantly funny. The novel revolves around the life of Sofi, a wife, a mother, and a Chicana who discovers what it means to be a woman. Through the deterioration of her marriage, the deaths of her daughters, and the awakening of her social activism, Castillo produces an image of a Mexican-American woman who endures all and comes out stronger than ever before. Castillo mixes religion, supernatural occurrences, sex, laughter, and heartbreak in a novel unlike anything previously seen in American Literature. *So Far From God* is a funny novel than does not have a happy ending; a novel dominated by tragedy, yet full of the victory of the human spirit; a novel that is highly entertain while still thought provoking. Castillo wants to expose the joys and realities of contemporary Mexican-American life on the edge of American culture. Castillo said, in an interview with Simon Romero, that she wanted to use humor in her fiction because the themes she explores are so dense, that without the humor, her point would get lost. She wanted her novel to challenge the status quo in terms of expectations of women, religion, language, and medicine.

Author Biography

Ana Castillo, a leading voice in the Chicana/o movement, was born in 1953. Although her novels, nonfiction, and poetry are all set in the American Southwest, Castillo was raised and educated in her native Chicago, where she earned a B.A. degree in Studio Art and Secondary Education (1975) and an M.A. in Latin American and Caribbean Studies from the University of Chicago (1979). In the late 1970s, Castillo moved to southern California where she taught English as a second language and developed her style and distinctive voice. Always an activist, she uses her fiction, poetry, and nonfiction as tools to illuminate the plight of Hispanics, especially women, in contemporary American culture. She cofounded the journal *Third Woman* and also serves as a contributing editor to *Humanizarte Magazine* .

Her international fame, following the publication of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (fiction; 1986), and poetry such as *Otro Canto* (1977), *The Invitation* (1979), *Women Are Not Roses* (1984), and *My Father Was a Toltec* (1988) led to a teaching opportunity at France's Sorbonne University and a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Bremen, Germany, in 1991. Since then, Castillo has continued to lecture, read from her works, and publish fiction and poetry about the lives of Hispanic women.

Like most public intellectuals, among whom she numbers herself, Castillo has donated her papers, workbooks, and personal memorabilia to a major university. The Castillo Collection, the largest major collection of a Hispanic woman writer, is at the University of California at Los Angeles and is open to all students and scholars. The collection contains material, both personal and public, dating from 1973 to 1990 and is continually being updated by Castillo. The table of contents for the collection is available from UCLA's website.

Castillo has won numerous awards including the Before Columbia Foundation's American Book Award in 1987 and two National Endowment for the Arts awards. *So Far From God* won both the Carl Sandburg Literary Award in Fiction of 1993 and the Mountains and Plains Bookseller Award of 1994. Castillo's diverse publications, activism, and continued popularity make her one of the leading voices in a revitalized feminist Chicana/o movement along side other artists like Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, and Denise Chávez.

Plot Summary

Episode 1

Ana Castillo's So Far From God is written in a structure similar to a tele-novella, the Latino version of a soap opera, in that the novel is a series of "episodes." The first episode introduces the six major characters: Sofi, her daughters, and her husband. Sofi is introduced by describing her function within her society. Her daughter, Loca, dies at age three and the community helps Sofi mourn. Everyone comes to the wake except Sofi's husband, Domingo. None of Sofi's family had approved of their marriage and even the local priest had refused to perform the wedding ceremony. Domingo had left Sofi soon after Loca's conception.

At the baby's funeral, all of Sofi's neighbors are astonished when the seemingly dead child pushes open the lid of her coffin and flies onto the roof of the church. She argues with the priest and claims to have gone to Hell and come back. Because she seems to see things on a different level and because of her odd behavior, the townsfolk start calling the baby La Santa Loca (The Crazy Saint), which quickly becomes simply La Loca (The Crazy One). She cannot stand people other than her family, so she does not go to school or interact with the community.

Sofi's three other daughters are introduced in this first part as well. Esperanza is the "smart" one, Caridad the "pretty" one, and Fe the "normal" one. Esperanza, the college-educated reporter, joined a Chicano rights organization and discovered that the men were only interested in sex. She is jilted by Ruben and finds a job at a local television station as a broadcast journalist. Caridad hated school and works as an orderly in a hospital only to afford to go out, get drunk, and have sex. Caridad's three abortions, all performed by her sister La Loca, and her failed marriage right out of high school contribute to her weakness for men and alcohol, leading to tragedy later. Fe has a respectable job at the local bank and is engaged to Tom Torres, manager of a mini-mart.

Gradually, misfortunes begin to befall the characters. Esperanza's college boyfriend returns, divorced from his Anglo wife, and he wants to use Esperanza for sex again. She goes along with it for a while, but decides that he is not what she wants and that working in Washington, DC, is her dream. She leaves the security of her family and moves across the country. Fe's seemingly perfect relationship ends with a Dear Jane letter: Tom breaks the engagement without even talking to her. Fe suffers a mental breakdown and spends a year screaming and beating her head against the walls. At the same time, Caridad is sexually assaulted, badly beaten and mutilated, and left for dead on the side of the road. Sofi spends the year tending to Fe and Caridad while La Loca takes care of the house and Esperanza takes care of Sofi. The first episode ends with the recovery of Caridad, who miraculously bears no scars, and of Fe, who is left with severe damage to her vocal chords. Domingo returns as well, not because he has missed his family but because the community has insulted his honor by suggesting that

he had married another woman. A lout, gambler, and deserter he is, but a bigamist he is not.

Episode 2: Esperanza

Esperanza never seems at ease with her life. She is torn between her love for Ruben and her desire for a career. When her mother criticizes her for sleeping with Ruben, suggesting that Ruben is not going to "buy the cow if he gets the milk for free," Esperanza answers that she is not a cow. She turns down a job in Houston, Texas, because that is where Ruben's ex-wife will be living. She begins seeing Ruben again, but realizes that he only wants sex and not a relationship; she breaks it off before he has a chance to. She then takes a job at a national network in Washington, DC.

Esperanza is soon assigned to the Persian Gulf to cover the war there. She is killed on the job, but her body is never recovered. Sofi and Domingo are invited to Washington, DC, to receive a medal in her honor. Later Esperanza appears as a ghost to comfort her mother and play with her sister, La Loca.

Episode 3: Caridad

Caridad's life is rich in both events and spirituality. After she recovers from her attack, she moves out of the family home and begins her spiritual training at the hands of Dona Felica, an elderly healer. Dona Felica and Caridad go on several pilgrimages to local shrines that tend to mix Pagan ritual with Catholic Christian symbolism and theology. At one of these shrines, Caridad falls in love with another woman, not so much in a sexual way but more in a spiritual way. She and this young woman eventually become friends, after Caridad has spent a year meditating in a cave, and her abilities to heal and channel spirits greatly increase. She meets Dona Felica's godson, Francisco, a devoted sculptor. He becomes fixated on Caridad, both as a spiritual holy woman and as a target of lust. Just as Caridad finds happiness with Womanon- the-Wall, Francisco's urge to remove her influence from his life becomes unbearable. He pursues Caridad and her lover, threatening them both with rape and murder. Caridad chooses to leap to her death from a pueblo rather than risk being murdered by her stalker. Like Esperanza's, Caridad's body is never found.

Episode 4: Sofi's Turn

At this point in the novel, Castillo uses flashback to describe the relationship between Sofi and Domingo, thus setting the stage for the rest of the story. Sofi and Domingo met at her cousin's *quinceañera*, a traditional Latin American comingout party marking a girl's fifteenth year. Domingo was charming and gorgeous, and Sofi fell in love with him. He crashed Sofi's *quinceañera* the next year and they danced all night long. Three years later they married and had a baby girl once every three years until Domingo had gambled away all the land that Sofi had inherited from her father. He abandoned her soon after La Loca's conception and did not return until the child was a teenager.

Although Domingo tries to straighten himself out, he can't; he loses even the house Sofi lives in. At that point, she divorces him and decides to live for herself. She organizes the laborers into unions and cooperatives, then runs for mayor of the unincorporated area. She puts her energies into making her community better, bringing in a real hospital instead of the clinic where her daughter had been declared dead after an epileptic seizure, attracting real grocery stores, and improving the roads, sewer system, and water supply system. She also comes to terms with the deaths of Esperanza and Caridad.

Episode 5: Fe

Fe never really recovers from her year of screaming after Tom canceled the wedding, but she does manage to get on with her life. She was always more grounded than any of her sisters, and she soon returns to work at the bank. She falls in love with (or settles for) her cousin Casimiro, an accountant. They eventually marry and try to start a family. However, soon after her wedding, Fe leaves her job at the bank to work at a parts cleaning factory. She hears that workers can make good money and if they do as they are told, there are bonuses as well. Fe is a very good and careful worker. She is soon promoted and given more special assignments with various chemicals. No one ever explains the dangers to Fe and she does not think to ask because she cannot believe that her bosses would not care about her health. Fe discovers that she has terminal cancer when she fails to get pregnant and she seeks help from a fertility specialist. While the company offers to pay a small amount, Fe hires a lawyer to sue the company which is now under investigation by the government. Fe's illness makes her research the chemicals that she used and her horror and shock at what these chemicals do to human tissue is real and terrifying. Like her sisters, she dies unfulfilled; her body, or what is left of it, is cremated and buried next to the tombstones of Esperanza and Caridad.

Episode 6: Loca

Sofi and Domingo's youngest child has no better luck that her sisters. Her seeming death as a young child, which was actually an epileptic seizure that left her with no vital signs, and her miraculous return from the dead made her special. She spends her time talking to the animals, birds, and ghosts of the neighborhood. She is able to talk to both Esperanza's and Caridad's ghosts, and this comforts her mother. However, as the years go by, she becomes weaker and more withdrawn. Two faith healers, Dr. Tolentino and Dona Felica, could not cure her, although both tried for many months. Tolentino tries to psychically remove numerous growths from her stomach and intestines, while Felica gives her teas to improve her strength and appetite, but nothing works. In actuality, La Loca has AIDS, although the story does not reveal how she got it. Soon La Loca dies□a true death this time□and is buried with her sisters. Sofi mourns yet again.

Episode 7

In a very real way, *So Far From God* revolves around the search of one woman for the meaning of life. After La Loca's death, Sofi gives up trying to be a good daughter, wife, and mother. She asks herself, "What's the use? Christalmighty!" When Sofi decides that she no longer has to care for her parents, her husband, her daughters, her land, her shop, or her community, she finds out that she herself is the most important person in her life. She founds an organization dedicated to the mothers of children who have been killed or died young.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

La Loca is just three years old when she dies. Her mother, Sofi, is awakened at midnight by the howling of the animals and, after checking on her three older daughters, finds the baby jerking and foaming at the mouth. With her mother and sisters screaming and moaning around her, the baby dies.

However, at the Mass, the lid of the coffin opens and La Loca sits up. In front of the terrified witnesses, she rises into the air and lands on the church roof. Father Jerome asks her if this is the work of God or the Devil, but Sofi screams at him, "calling the holy priest a pendejo [pubic hair] and hitting him." Sofi tells him not to start that backwards thinking about her child, and that the Devil does not produce miracles, which this surely must be.

La Loca says she has been to three places: hell, *pulgatorio* (purgatory), and heaven, where God sent her back to pray for all of them. Reluctantly, Father Jerome coaxes the child inside, saying they will pray for her, but she says no—it is *she* who is here to pray for *them*.

At a hospital in Albuquerque, La Loca is diagnosed with epilepsy, but with the rest unexplained, Sofi raises her daughter at home. The child becomes known as La Loca Santa (The Crazy Saint), and people come from all over the Rio Abajo region to receive her blessing. However, La Loca is repulsed by humans because of their peculiar odor, and will not let anybody but her mother and the animals touch her. Soon, "Santa" is dropped from her name and she comes to be known simply as La Loca, even by her family. By the time she turns twenty-one no one remembers her Christian name.

Sofi runs the *Carne Buena Carnecería*, a butcher shop she inherited from her parents. With the help of La Loca, she raises and butchers livestock for the store, manages its finances, and runs her household of four grown daughters alone. Sofi's husband, Domingo, was a compulsive gambler and left the family before La Loca's death and miraculous resurrection. Sofi had married him against her family's opposition, and after he ran off, she forbade anyone to mention his name again.

Sofi's oldest daughter, Esperanza, is independent, outspoken and ambitious. The only one to have finished college, where she focused on Chicano studies, Esperanza is now a news broadcaster at the local television station. She returned home after breaking up with her live-in boyfriend, Rubén, who renamed himself Cuauhtémoc, at the "height of his Chicano cosmic consciousness." Sofi was opposed to the nonsanctified union, telling Esperanza a man will not buy the cow when he can get the milk for free, and sure enough, Cuauhtémoc dumped Esperanza for a middle-class white girl with a Corvette. They married and bought a house in Albuquerque and Esperanza went back to school

for an M.A. in communications, though she still feels that a woman with brains is as good as dead "for all the happiness it brought her in the love department."

Caridad, the beautiful second daughter, fell in love with Memo in high school, got pregnant and married him the day after graduation. However, within two weeks, Caridad learned Memo was still seeing his ex-girlfriend and Caridad moved back home. La Loca, who has an uncanny understanding of the female reproductive cycle, performed an abortion, and they told Memo that Caridad miscarried because she was so upset about his cheating. The marriage was annulled and the abortion, which would have been cause for excommunication, not to mention, getting La Loca arrested, was kept secret. The next two abortions Caridad and La Loca kept secret even from Sofi. With a weakness for Royal Crown with beer chasers, Caridad replaces Memo with a string of anonymous men she meets in bars after work at the hospital, where she is an orderly.

Fe, the third daughter, is a steady and reliable girl with a job at the bank and a hard-working fiancé named Tom. Light-skinned and determinedly respectable, Fe dreams of getting married and living a life like the one she sees on T.V. She and Tom, who runs a mini-mart filling station, have been putting money away for their wedding and a down payment on a house. Fe is just back from being fitted for her wedding dress when she finds a letter from Tom. He says he did not have the nerve to tell her in person, but he is not ready to get married. Fe, shut in the bathroom, begins to scream and does not stop.

After ten days of screaming, Sofi goes over to Tom's house and tells his mother she has a daughter that will not quit screaming. Tom's mother says she has a son with *susto* (cold feet), and at least he did the honorable thing and spared her from an unhappy marriage. Tom comes out and Sofi brings him to the house, but when he hears the screaming, he refuses to go in. So Sofi and her other daughters take turns feeding and cleaning and dressing Fe, who continues to scream, and La Loca prays for her, and for Tom, who like so many hispanos or nuevo mexicanos is more afraid of giving himself to a woman than of having lunch with the Devil.

Fe's screaming becomes a routine part of the household, interrupted only by the tranquilizers Caridad gets from the hospital. Then one night Caridad comes home mutilated, having been raped and left for dead by the side of the road. Although many in the local parish say Masses for the recovery of the young woman, the local police department figures she was probably asking for it and no one is ever caught. As the months pass, everyone forgets the assault, and Caridad, still horribly mutilated, is left in the care of her family.

It is too much for Sofi. One night, she finds La Loca up the fireplace, crying. La Loca asks if Caridad is dead. Then Fe wakes up and begins screaming, La Loca starts crying harder, and Sofi finally collapses on the sofa and begins to sob. Esperanza begs her mother not to give up. She tells Sofi that she has just been offered a job in Houston, but Sofi does not hear her and Esperanza gives up.

The next day, Esperanza gives notice at the station. However, before the end of the week, Rubén calls and asks her to lunch. Esperanza figures she's doing well enough

and will soon be out of New Mexico for good, so with no hard feelings, she agrees. As it turns out, Rubén's wife has split with their kid (apparently broadening her horizons, like Esperanza), and Rubén has gone back to the Native-American Church. Though he has put on more than a few pounds, he still has an animal magnetism that draws Esperanza, and they pick up where they left off.

The job in Houston is forgotten. Esperanza starts attending the teepee meetings of the Native-American Church, learning Rubén's interpretation of lodge etiquette and the strict role of men and women. Since she has no Native women friends to verify his interpretation, she does not contradict him and every two or three weeks they go to the meeting, then go home and make love all day. Afterward, she does not hear from Rubén until the next meeting, when Esperanza again participates in what she begins to feel is a ritual in which she is some kind of unsuspecting symbol. In the meantime, she is closed off from the rest of her life, which Rubén calls "careerist." Rubén refuses to see her outside of the meetings, though he's more than willing to call her collect from trips he takes alone, to accept rides in her car and let her pick up the tab when they stop for beer.

Sofi is caring for what is left of Caridad, and La Loca is caring for the animals, when Esperanza witnesses a miracle. After the perfunctory warning of the animals, a whole and beautiful Caridad, dressed in Fe's wedding gown, walks soundlessly across the room. Then a calm Fe begins holding her, rocking her and humming softly. La Loca says she prayed for them and Fe smiles and thanks her.

Esperanza, who has never been able to explain her family, despite spending her whole life trying, decides it is time to get away. She calls Rubén to tell him she is accepting a job in Washington, D.C. While he is trying to come up with a response, a man steps into the house and Esperanza, who recognizes him right away, hangs up on Rubén.

It is Domingo, her father, returned after nearly twenty years, though he never says where he has been. The people around Tome begin speculating and making up wild stories, like Domingo was running a gambling operation and living the high life, but Domingo quickly realizes his so-called adventures can't compete with the stories about La Loca, who keeps coming up to him and sniffing him. After a while, Sofi asks La Loca what she smells on her father, and La Loca says it is hell. Domingo was in hell a long time, and hell is a place where you "go to see yourself." When Sofi asks if she should forgive him, La Loca says, "Here we don't forgive…Only in hell do we learn to forgive and you got to die first…That's when we pluck out all the devils from our hearts that were put there when we were *here*. That's where we get rid of all the lies told to us."

Chapter 1 Analysis

The most distinctive element of *So Far From God* is its use of magical realism, a technique in fiction that fuses the real and the fantastic. Magical realism, which is most often associated with the work of Latin and Latin American authors, presents supernatural characters and events as if they are part of every-day reality.

Metamorphosis (the transformation of one being into another kind of being) is a common occurrence.

In *So Far From God*, events that would seem unbelievable, like the resurrection of La Loca, who flies from her coffin to the church roof, become an integral part of the story. Although the characters may express dismay at the event, the event itself is generally unquestioned. In opening the story with the death and resurrection of La Loca (a kind of metamorphosis), Castillo signals to the reader that the events in the story will be fantastic; thus the reader can suspend disbelief as the story progresses and La Loca goes up the fireplace chimney, Fe screams non-stop day after day, Caridad is miraculously healed overnight, and the long-lost Domingo suddenly returns home.

Unlike stories of pure fantasy, stories that use magical realism are set in realistic locations and describe the world in realistic ways. *So Far From God* is set in Tome, a modern suburb of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and centers around the life of Sofi, a single mother of four who runs a butcher shop. While Sofi and her daughters realize their lives are off-center—unusual by the standards of their neighbors, primarily because of La Loca—they struggle to make normal lives for themselves against the traditional obstacles facing women.

One of the primary obstacles the women face is their relationship with the men who dominate their patriarchal society. A patriarchal society is one that traditionally gives the man the role of decision-maker and the woman the role of family caregiver. However, many stories that promote feminism (the empowering of women), as this one does, show the tragic results of male-female inequality in such a society. Sofi's gambler-husband left her to raise their children alone; Esperanza wants a career but is drawn to a man who wants her to assume what he believes is a traditionally feminine role (a role he defined for himself and in which she has no say); Caridad, broken-hearted over her husband's cheating, tries to replace him, but her lack of discrimination causes her to be horribly assaulted; and Fe, who has done everything society would regard as "right" is suddenly dumped by her fiancé when he gets cold feet. La Loca, both healer and butcher, and repulsed by the smell of humans, defies all of her society's "rules," and so is considered crazy. She is willingly kept at home, never participating in society. As the story progresses, each of these characters will rebel more and more against the traditional values of their patriarchal society.

In the first chapter, Castillo quickly characterizes each of the women by assigning them particular roles: one is the mother, one is outspoken, one is beautiful, one is steadfast and one is a free spirit (perceived to be crazy). Thus, each character is an *archetype*—a character representing universal qualities that are immediately recognizable. Archetypes are a mythical element common in stories that use magical realism. They often function as symbols of higher ideals.

The women are given names that represent particular ideals, which they ironically lack or begin to lose in the first chapter: *Sofia* means wisdom; *Esperanza* means hope; *Fe* means faith; and *Caridad* means charity. Esperanza has great hope for the future, but must choose between her own future and her boyfriend. Fe has faith that if she does all

the right things she will be rewarded, though this proves untrue, and she suffers a crisis of faith that manifests itself in one long scream. Caridad, a pretty, sweet-natured girl, loves too freely and becomes a pitiable creature after she is mutilated, one who finds little charity among the police. La Loca's unwillingness to play by society's rules causes her to be perceived as crazy, though her clear perception of others makes her possibly the sanest character in the story. Sofi, through the course of the novel, will struggle to gain wisdom from the tragedies she suffers, and then to use that wisdom in serving her community.

Furthermore, the three older daughters' names represent Christian ideals (faith, hope and charity). Christianity—particularly Catholicism—plays a strong role in the story, which is primarily about rebellion. Although Sofi is Catholic, she frequently comes into conflict with the Church (represented by Father Jerome and the parishioners), which cannot offer her adequate explanations for the tragedies of her life. Usually, supernatural events are regarded as works of the Devil, but Sofi refuses to accept that her daughter's resurrection is anything but a miracle from God. She begins her rebellion against the Church by attacking Father Jerome in the first chapter. Throughout the story, Sofi will continue to rebel against the male-dominated Church, which seems to oppose and exclude women more often than helping them.

The theme of rebellion is embodied in the character of La Loca, who is accepted as a saint until she refuses to bless the people who come to see her. La Loca performs abortions on her sister as a means of helping, or healing, her, yet this remains a secret because abortion is a sin and would be cause for excommunication. In describing La Loca as a healer, Castillo refers to the pre-Christian tradition of the woman as healer and midwife. Historically, these women (who also performed abortions on occasion) frequently came into conflict with the Church, which at times accused them of witchcraft.

Catholic tradition promises clarity and understanding as a reward at the end of life, but in *So Far From God*, most of the characters that die do not stay dead. Instead, magical realism is used as a form of rebellion against the inadequacy of the Church's explanations. One premise of magical realism is that upon emerging from a dream (where fantasy presides), we look on the world of the mundane with new eyes. La Loca has traveled through hell, purgatory, and heaven, and has brought back the reward of clarity, which helps her to see in people what most others can't, and to heal the wounds they suffer in life, which she attributes to "the lies told to us"—a kind of misperception or misunderstanding of life.

Stories that make use of magical realism are often told in a dream-like fashion, wandering in and out of time and consciousness, and using mythical symbols to signify deeper meanings. In this way, magical realism shares many of the characteristics of oral storytelling. In *So Far From God*, the first-person narrator weaves in and out of the present time, pausing to pass along a rumor, describe a minor character we'll likely never meet again, or comment on an event (like the sad death of La Loca). Occasionally, the narrator makes a distinction between what she herself perceives and what the characters perceive, using a simple parenthetical like, "my term, not Fe's" (when she describes Fe's bridesmaids as "gabachas"—a generally derogatory term).

Castillo frequently uses humor to lighten the mood that would otherwise be produced by such a long string of unbroken tragedies. The humor arises from both the bizarre events and the way they are described by the narrator who, though nameless, has such strong opinions she can be considered another character. Much of the narrative is infused with Spanish words, which are inserted naturally into English sentences in a way that mimics what we might imagine to be Latin-American speech, adding authenticity to the story and establishing the narrator as a character who pulled us aside to tell us this bizarre story. Since classic oral legends and fairy tales are often meant to be symbolic, rather than literal, Castillo encourages us to pay attention not to the events themselves, but to their ultimate meaning, especially as the story progresses and the tragedies worsen.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

After what Sofi calls Caridad's "Holy Restoration," Caridad takes her horse Corazón and moves to a trailer park in Albuquerque, where she's watched over by don□a Felicia, an old *curandera* (healer) whose stories of the Mexican Civil War imply she must be over a hundred.

Before she left home, Caridad had begun falling into trances, during which she would have prophetic visions. The first time, she announced the return of Esperanza, now an anchorwoman in Washington, D.C. She said Esperanza was going far away, and was afraid, and they should keep her home. Within minutes Esperanza appeared, on her way to Saudi Arabia to cover the war. Don Domingo, once grateful he'd never had any sons for this very reason, was dismayed at the thought of his only college-educated daughter—a civilian—being sent to the front lines, but was equally interested in Caridad's prophetic faculty. The next time she had a vision, of a hundred and thirteen horses galloping along a creek, he put a buck on the number 113 in the state lottery and won eighty dollars.

Caridad has returned to her job at the hospital, where she changes linens and bedpans and keeps patients as comfortable as she can, but she tends to be distant now, though she does her job as well as before. In fact, she is more diligent than ever, sometimes working double shifts until seven in the morning. However, while she is gone, Corazón, who has no stall at the trailer park and is afraid of everyone but Caridad, tends to run off, back toward Sofi's house. Corazón is Caridad's best and only friend, and so don□a Felicia tries to keep an eye on her, but she is too old and tired to watch the horse all night. One morning, Caridad returns home to find a sheriff's deputy waiting for her. He tells her that he and his partner found the horse lying by the side of the road with a broken hoof and did what they thought was necessary: they shot her.

Caridad is devastated. Don□a Felicia arranges to have the horse's carcass delivered to Sofi. She says it is a shame, since she could have mended the horse's hoof if given the opportunity. She asks Caridad why she had not foreseen the event, given her gift of prophecy, but Caridad says she did, only "knowing and preventing are two very different things." For don□a Felicia, this is an indication of a true healer, and she decides to mentor Caridad, pointing out that all they did at the hospital was patch her up and send her home more dead than alive, and that with the help of God Caridad healed herself by pure will.

Grief-stricken, Caridad sleeps for fourteen days. In the meantime, don Domingo plays the lottery on the license plate number of the sheriff's deputy's car and wins. To ensure his continued luck, he promises himself that when Caridad wakes up he will grant her anything she wants "with the winnings that had come from the death of her heart."

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter lays the foundation for many of the events to come. Having been brutalized, Caridad has rejected men and embraced spirituality, which is gifted to her in the form of prophecy after her attack. Her prophetic visions often foreshadow events to come, such as the return of Esperanza on her way to the front lines of the war. Caridad tells Sofi they should keep Esperanza at home, a warning that goes unheeded.

Instead, her father, who having returned to his family still cannot resist gambling, exploits Caridad's gift. The exploitation of women is a strong theme throughout the book, its ultimate defeat forming Sofi's final triumph.

The police are further established in this chapter as an authoritarian entity in society that does the women more harm than good. Either unable or unwilling to help Caridad in the first chapter, they now aggressively destroy her "heart."

This chapter also introduces the character of doña Felicia. As a healer who has survived husbands and wars, patched up men and given birth, she will become an influential character who represents all that women can survive and accomplish.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

According to don□a Felicia, nothing you do to heal will work without first placing your faith completely in God. Don□a Felicia herself was once a "non-believer"; as a child, she was suspicious of the religion that failed to help the destitute around her, including her mother, who died of malnutrition and untreated disease when don□a Felicia was eight. When she developed her faith, it was through the guidance of the wise teachers don□a Felicia met as she traveled home with her two infants from the Mexican Civil War after her husband Juan was killed.

Later, don□a Felicia became caretaker of the House of God in Tome, and began to see her God as a guiding light and herself as a lowly foot soldier doing his work. She taught herself to read and write, first in Spanish, then in French during the Second World War, and finally in English. She was deported back to Mexico after the Depression with her second husband, who died of tuberculosis, the only thing he was allowed to bring back from the United States.

In World War II, she joined the U.S. Army and trained as a nurse. She mended soldiers on the front lines in Europe and married a French soldier, but when she discovered he was already married, she returned to America. In total, don□a Felicia had eight children, two by each of her three husbands and another two during a brief love affair. Her six older children grew up and went their own ways. Her youngest son was kidnapped when he was ten and found dead face down in a riverbank, and her youngest daughter was found raped and murdered at nineteen. Since then, don□a Felicia has lived alone, devoting her self to healing.

Caridad assists don□a Felicia for several months. The old woman tells her that everything needed for healing is found in their natural surroundings. Among the most common ailments are *empacho* (blocked intestine), *bilis* (a head and stomach ailment resulting from extreme fright or another trauma), *mal de ojo* (evil eye), *caida de mollera* (fallen fontanelle leading to difficulty feeding), *susto* (fright sickness), and *aigre* (gas), all of which could have physical causes or be the result of someone's bad intentions. Envy, especially, says don□a Felicia, is a formidable force. The ailments are treated with herbs and massages as well as *limpias*, or cleansings, which might include tobacco smoke, an egg, a live black hen, an herbal bath or sweeping the body with incense. However, as long as the faith of the curandera is unwavering, success is almost certainly guaranteed, only to be prevented by the will of God.

Caridad's life becomes a rhythm of scented baths and remedies, and the calming force of the rituals she follows slowly restores her. She takes scented baths on Tuesdays and Fridays and cleans her alter and photographs on Sundays, paying special attention to the one of Esperanza, who is now a prisoner of war. Three times, Caridad awakens to feel her sister's presence, but can say only that Esperanza wants to come home.

Caridad and don□a Felicia are up most nights until midnight, seeing clients in the evening. Though don□a Felicia attends a morning Mass, Caridad, a new student of yoga, has given up Mass and rises with a salute to the sun.

Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter continues Caridad's spiritual awakening under the wise tutelage of don□a Felicia. Don□a Felicia, rather than rejecting Catholicism, has come full circle in her life to integrate a faith in God with traditional folk healing, which aims to treat the body by treating the spirit. Many of the practices of the *curandera* come from the earlier Native American peoples of the U.S. and Mexico, who traditionally embrace the earth as the giver of all life. Throughout the story, the characters will embrace both Spanish and Native traditions in an effort to understand, treat, or cope with the calamities they suffer.

We also learn in this chapter that Esperanza has been taken prisoner, fulfilling Caridad's earlier prophecy. Politically outspoken Esperanza appears on the news every night, no longer as an anchor but now as a symbol of the tragic result of a meaningless war. None of Sofi's efforts to get her daughter back can penetrate the politics of Washington, which represents the larger system of government destroying the people's lives.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

On Wednesday of Lenten Week, Caridad starts on her first pilgrimage, following doña Felicia on the long walk toward the Sangre de Cristo foothills, where two centuries before, a Penitent Brother found a buried statue of Our Lord of Esquipúlas. Afterward, the Catholic Church made sacred the earth of Tsimayo, whose healing powers the Native peoples had known all along. Because of its holiness, Caridad had chosen a spot near El Santuario (The Sanctuary) to build her house, which don Domingo is paying for with his lottery winnings.

On Good Friday, Caridad and doña Felicia catch up with the penitent procession, led by doña Felicia's godson Francisco, who carries a huge wooden cross over his bare shoulders. On that Holy Friday, Caridad falls in love for the first time since Memo. Amid the swarming tourists, she spots a woman sitting on a wall, the most beautiful woman she has ever seen, with black hair and the dark skin of either a Mexican or a Pueblo Indian. At the same moment, the woman turns toward Caridad, but since she is wearing sunglasses, Caridad cannot tell if the woman is actually looking at her. She is completely overwhelmed.

After visiting the chapel and dipping their fingers into the holy earth, Caridad and doña Felicia sit under a tree to eat. The woman is still on the wall, and keeps looking at Caridad, who is so preoccupied she barely responds to doña Felicia. Caridad cannot explain her feelings. Memo was her only love; the string of men before her attack was just anonymous blurs.

Caridad has never talked about her attack to anyone. Only two other people know what really happened that night, La Loca and doña Felicia, and only because Caridad let them know through dreams. There was not a man, or men, which was why she was never able to give a good description to police. Instead, it was a thing, "made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment. It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never ever forget, it was pure force."

This is the *malogra*, a mysterious spirit that comes out at night and waits at the crossroad with nothing better to do. It comes to both doña Felicia and La Loca in their dreams, scaring them half to death, but each time it comes to Caridad, she builds some courage against it.

When the woman disappears from the wall, Caridad goes in search of her and finds her sitting on a hill with another woman. They all say "hi" and then Caridad leaves again. However, from that moment on, she cannot stop thinking about the woman.

When she returns home, Caridad cleans obsessively because she can't sleep, until don□a Felicia, finding her passed out after praying non-stop, tells her to go to Ojo Caliente for a mineral bath and gives her the ten-dollar admission fee. Caridad packs an overnight bag, gets in her pickup truck and leaves. It is the last anybody hears of her for a year, except Francisco el Penitente, who works as a mechanic at the NuMex gas station and filled her tank with the ten dollars don□a Felicia gave her.

Don□a Felicia tries to find her first with Saint Anthony, though he only finds lost things, and then with her Tarot cards. Don Domingo, who does not trust the police to find his daughter, gets together a search party, but no one finds her. Meanwhile, Esperanza is still missing, and Sofi and Domingo's trip to Washington to visit the only senator interested has resulted more in good publicity for the senator than in any hope of rescuing Esperanza.

Lamenting, Sofi tells Father Jerome that by now her daughters ought to be bringing her nothing but their babies to rock on her lap, but not her hijitas (little girls): "I had to produce the kind of species that flies!" In desperation, Sofi asks Fe what she thinks happened to Caridad. Fe is the only one of her daughters still earthbound, though her vocal cords are damaged from her bout of prolonged screaming, and talking to her is like listening to a faulty World War II radio transmitter. Preoccupied still with weddings, Fe suggests that Caridad eloped.

Just before Holy Week, a year later, Francisco el Penitente and two of his friends find Caridad by accident in a cave in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. She's hardly recognizable, having not changed her clothes or spoken to another human being in four seasons. The various jackrabbit pelts and bones tell the men how Caridad stayed alive, but how she kept warm through the bitter winter, no one knows.

When Caridad refuses to come back with them, the men try to carry her. However, despite her slight weight, none of them is able to pick her up. Finally, Francisco el Penitente drops to his knees and tells his friends it is not for them to bring this handmaiden of Christ back to her family; it is not their Lord's will. He says a prayer and they leave her.

The word spreads quickly of "La Armitana," a woman hermit who resisted the strength of three men. People remember the early stories of La Loquita Santa and decide her sister must also have extraordinary abilities. Therefore, they begin coming up the mountain in hope of receiving her blessing, and the story of her resistance quickly grows until she is said to have brought many men to their knees and lifted a horse in the air before putting it benevolently back down. However, the people only frighten Caridad, who retreats into the back of the cave when they come.

Convinced she will not meet the resistance the men did don□a Felicia decides to take her annual pilgrimage to Chimayo and get Caridad afterwards. Fe still maintains Caridad's disappearance had something to do with love. Caridad herself cannot explain what led her up the mountains. After getting lost, she was overcome by sleep and pulled over near the cave, which seemed as good a place as any to rest. The next morning,

she woke to the sun rising like a king over the distant peaks and knew she wanted to stay there forever. Until the men rode up on their horses, she had not thought of time, don□a Felicia, her mother or anyone, but not a day went by that she did not long for the woman on the wall.

However, by the time don□a Felicia makes it to the cave, Caridad has found her pickup and left, remembering only that she was on her way to Ojo Caliente for a mineral bath. When she arrives, she trades a flawless deerskin for a series of visits (having spent the admission fee the year before on gas), and goes inside. As she begins to undress, the attendant, who says she saw Caridad at Chimayo last year, recognizes her. Caridad listens to the woman chatter about her family, thinking she is just a woman; she could not possibly be the woman who had so obsessed her, the woman on the wall. However, when the woman says she had a feeling at Chimayo that they knew each other, Caridad realizes it is.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter represents a turning point for Caridad, who falls in love for the first time since Memo. Her obsession with the woman on the wall, as well as her inability to do anything about it, will define the remainder of her actions. Another crucial character, Francisco el Penitente, is introduced. Francisco, carrying the wooden cross in the procession, represents traditional male-dominated Christianity. The devout Francisco, when he discovers Caridad in the cave and is unable to pick her up, begins to view her as a handmaiden of Christ, though Caridad rejects this role imposed on her by him and the others who come for blessings. This conflict will ultimately destroy them both.

The men's inability to pick up Caridad is another element of magical realism, as is her unlikely disappearance into a cave for a year. Ruled by her obsession with a woman she has only seen once, Caridad ironically discovers the woman at her original destination—the mineral baths.

We also learn in this chapter that Caridad was attacked by the *malogra*, a malevolent spirit. In Spanish, "malogra" means "spoiled" or "ruined," implying that Caridad's indiscriminate sex ruined both her body and spirit. She is physically healed when La Loca prays for her, and her spirit is healed slowly by faith and ritual as she rejects both men and the formal institution of the Church.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Francisco el Penitente is the seventh son of an oldest son whose youngest brother Pedro is a santero. Although he is not the seventh son of a seventh son, Francisco was told by his third-grade teacher that God writes straight in crooked letters, and settles for the idea that the gift for making santos was passed by God in a crooked line to him from his tío (uncle) Pedro.

Francisco's mother and baby sister died of smallpox when he was six, and he was raised by don□a Felicia until he was old enough to come back and help his father with the farm. Having fought in and returned from Vietnam, where he was trained as a mechanic, Francisco had a brief affair with a golden-haired woman who inspired him to enroll in college. However, he had no particular aim and school lost its appeal when the woman moved on to other men.

Francisco lost interest in being a lover, and in truth has never really loved anyone but his sainted mother, his godmother, his living family and his Christ. In New Mexico, being a santero means a life of solitude, with no religious powers except when he is preparing a bulto, a wooden sculpture of a saint. The bulto, used to aid followers devoted to the saint, is made from all natural materials, including paint made from earth, plants, and carbons, and brushes made from yucca fronds or horsehair. As Francisco makes his first bulto, he and his tío Pedro pray and work in silence, as their Spanish ancestors had "for three hundred years on that strange land they felt was so far from God."

Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter mainly serves further to characterize the devout Francisco, whose fanaticism will cause the tragic events to follow. Francisco is a Vietnam veteran who returned from the war mostly numb; as such, he can be perceived as another victim of a meaningless war.

The last line of the chapter, which echoes the title of the book, refers to the Mexican-American War and to a famous quote by Mexican President General Porfirio Diaz: "Poor Mexico! So far from God, and so close to the United States." The Mexican-American War resulted from a dispute between the two countries over Texas, New Mexico and California. It is considered an example of the U.S. government's expansionist policies at that time, and was declared by Ulysses S. Grant to be "one of the most unjust [wars] ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation."

In referring to the quote, Castillo is reiterating the theme of powerlessness against an unjust and self-interested government. She is also reminding us of the tragic and often meaningless outcome of war, which we can see in the characters of both Francisco and Esperanza.

BOOKRAGS

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Sofi met Domingo just before she turned fifteen at a feast day dance, but her father would not allow her to dance with him. His dark, wicked eyes and gap-toothed grin, and thought of no one and nothing else immediately captivated her until she saw him six months later at her *quincean era* (a coming-out ball for Spanish debutantes). They danced all night, Sofi avoiding the disapproval of her father, and then Domingo courted her for the next three years. However, Sofi's family never believed he was good enough for her, and so a week after her eighteenth birthday, they eloped.

However, with a compulsion for cockfights, horses and card games, Domingo sold off all of Sofi's jewelry and the ten acres her grandfather had given them for a wedding present. Knowing there was no limit to his impulses; he left a year and a half after their last daughter's baptism and did not look back.

When he returned, Sofi let him stay in the house, because he was still her husband and the father of her children, but she has only spoken to him of household matters, and they sleep in separate rooms.

One day, Sofi's neighbor comes by to borrow her sewing machine, because her husband is taking her to a dance. This gets Sofi to thinking about the two decades she was left to raise her children alone, and how she never felt comfortable leaving the house because of Loca, who never let anyone but her mother near her. All this time, Sofi has been cooped up in the house, except for eight hours a day, six days a week, when she goes to work at the butcher shop.

When Domingo comes in from fishing, she vents her rage over the last twenty years of celibate living. For the first time since his return, they look directly at each other. Then Domingo puts his head in Sofi's lap and begs her forgiveness. Sofi knows it is not nearly enough, but when she looks at his tear-stained face, the twenty years of separation fall away. She tells him to take her to the dance, and they renew the courtship that began when Sofi was fourteen years old.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter mainly functions to further the subplot introduced when Domingo returned home. Sofi had a choice between making him leave and allowing him to stay. In letting him stay, Sofi bowed to the expectations of society, since Domingo was still her husband. However, it is only in this chapter that she allows herself to vent her rage, and she makes a conscious choice to give him another chance.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

While Caridad was missing, don□a Felicia was forced to rent out her trailer, but let her compassion get the better of her when she chose a young pregnant couple that her better judgment told her could not pay. Soon, the rest of the couple's family moved in, along with a frighteningly mean dog and after a while, the rent, dwindling from month to month, stopped coming at all. One night, they all disappeared, along with Caridad's things.

Don□a Felicia, convinced they will come back for more because they got away with it the first time, has been sitting up at night with her gun—that has not been fired since 1910. When she hears soft footsteps outside, she goes to Caridad's trailer. However, it is Caridad herself, who cannot explain why she disappeared, to don□a Felicia or to her parents. Her psychic ability, however, has fully developed, and she is able to answer the questions of clients, like the one who suspects her husband of cheating, by either focusing her mind and dreaming, or by consulting with spirit guides. She earns a respectable reputation as a medium, but her sister Fe is still convinced that no matter how strange Caridad is, she is not immune to love, and that's why her sister disappeared. Just as Fe's fate was not to marry Tom but her own cousin, whom she first met at Loca's funeral and who pinched her black and blue, Fe believes her sister's fate is also sealed.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Castillo now returns to Caridad's subplot, having built tension by leaving the reader to wonder over the last two chapters. However, Castillo still does not answer the question about the woman on the wall, or what happened after Caridad found her. Instead, she uses Fe's focus on her ex-fiancé and the idea that Caridad's fate is sealed to foreshadow the conclusion of the subplot. In the meantime, Caridad withdraws into the spirit world more than ever, apparently rejecting everything physical, including her desire for the woman.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The story of Francisco's sad demise begins with the adventure of two women from California, Helena and Maria, on their way to explore Maria's ancestral land, specifically the village of Truchas in New Mexico. No longer in love with each other, they make the best of their journey together, "just as a pair of astronauts must do, having been launched into outer space knowing that the person next to her, however much a stranger, is really the only other human being that exists."

They don't make it to Truchas, though later they will get to Maria's grandmother's rancheria, after which they will finally part company for good, an account that strays from this story "about all kinds of beginnings and endings but mostly, like all accounts, about what goes on in the middle. Maria, a tarot reader and pseudo-poet, herself would have said…that even this existence of ours has no start and no finish but is the continuance of a journey on an endless, unpaved road."

Just off the main highway on their way to Truchas, a man in a pickup truck tries to run them off the road. Helena sees that he has a rifle pointed at them and yells at Maria to hit the deck. As both women duck, they hear a blast. Helena peels out and the man in the pickup chases them all the way to a gas station, where he gets out and demands to know what they want around here. Helena is too stunned to reply with anything but "Me?" which she repeats over and over until the man goes inside. Maria tells her they should go; the man is probably high and will leave them alone now, but it only causes the rift between the two to grow wider. Then a woman comes out of the gas station and yells at the attendant to tell the women they are out of gas. The two leave, Helena thinking the town must be the one her brother, a cop, called the Narc Capital of the United States, and that the man in the pickup must have thought they were Narcs. But Maria, whose veins run with the blood of the land, foresees a time when Helena will not be there to yell at her to hit the deck—a time when she will need a warning the most.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter introduces the demise of Francisco el Penitente, a story that will follow later. In the title of the chapter, the narrator begs patience, promising that the connection of the events of this chapter with later events will eventually become clear. What we do learn now is that two women, lovers, are stalked and almost killed by a man in a truck. While Helena wonders if he thought they were Narcs, Maria sees the event as foreshadowing another similar one—which she will be unable to stop.

The idea of existence having no start or finish is one that was introduced in the first chapter, and shown through elements of magical realism. For many of the characters, it is a more acceptable belief than the traditional notion of life having fixed beginning and

end points, as it encourages a focus on the meaning of the journey itself, rather than the outcome.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Two days after her fifty-third birthday, Sofi's washing machine breaks and, fed up with never having anything done to fix the problems all around her, she decides to run for mayor of Tome. She asks her neighbor to be her campaign manager, saying Tome is only getting worse and worse. For generations, the people of Tome have lived off the land, but the land keeps getting smaller because they have to sell it to survive; yet without the land, they have nothing to live on. Many people are moving into Tome, but they are mostly gringos, buying the land, while those who have been here for generations are being forced out by poverty.

Sofi's neighbor thinks she is crazy at first, but Sofi accuses her of being a conformist, which Esperanza had described as "people who just did not give a damn about nothing." Sofi is determined to improve the community, and convinces her neighbor to help.

The two go around to neighbors, parishioners, schools, and the local Y, gathering ideas on community improvement. Eventually, they come up with the idea to begin a sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise called "Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative." At first, people are nervous because the government has no money to lend them, but those with land no longer being used agree to sell or barter it for services. By bartering, people are able to get their farm equipment, homes, cars, and appliances fixed.

Others begin working for the cooperative by learning an aspect of the business. Because unemployment is at an all-time high, there are plenty of volunteers. The second year, a group of twelve women begins a wool-weaving cooperative, which eventually sustains more than two-dozen women. As cooperative owners, the women have paying jobs and can bring their children to work. For some of the women, the greatest benefit is an arrangement with the local junior college, which awards them credit toward an associate's degree in business or fine arts.

The Ganados y Lana Cooperative takes so much of Sofi's time that she sells the butcher shop in shares to her neighbors, who develop a food co-op, which provides a better diet for everyone. She becomes known by the informal title La Mayor Sofi, and has managed to get most of the things fixed around her house by bartering.

However, this makes Domingo uneasy, since he knows he has not contributed anything. So one morning Domingo sets out to finish building Caridad's house. Though he has spent a good portion of the lottery winnings, there is still enough for construction materials, and he enlists the help of friends in exchange for beer. In this way, Domingo forms a cooperative of his own. In six months, the project will be done and Domingo, having shown his mettle, can finally ask Sofi's formal permission to come home.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Many of the male characters in *So Far From God* are shown to be weak, like Domingo, who returns home after twenty years still a gambling addict and just as useless to Sofi around the house. In this chapter, Sofi begins to rebel against the male-dominated traditions of her society by forming a cooperative among women that benefits everyone. She uses Esperanza's definition of "conformists" as people who just do not care about anything to rally people to rebel against the status quo. Through her efforts, the women of the community develop an awareness of the social and political problems around them and are empowered to control their own futures. Ironically, the cooperative tends to exclude men like Domingo who perceive that, having nothing concrete to contribute, they are no longer necessary; in this way, the men of the novel begin to be rendered powerless.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

La Loca's favorite place is the *acequia* (irrigation ditch) running along her mother's house. It is as far as she ever drifts from the house, and although some who spot her there on occasion think she is lost, Loca is much more aware of the world around her than anyone realizes. All the women in her life have at some point gone out into the world and come back disappointed, devastated, or not at all, and Loca simply has no use for society at large.

Even Fe has left now, having moved into an apartment with a woman from her bank. Fe does not remember the details of the days after her break-up with Tom. Like Juan Soldado, the legendary soldier whose ghost hides the entrance of his lost gold mine, Fe got lost in the gold mine of her head. There, she called to Tom, whom she believed must also be lost in the darkness, but he never responded, and at the worst times she believed that like the lost gold mine Tom had never even existed. On the other hand, that like Juan Soldado guarding the entrance to the mine, Tom had purposely hidden the entrance to his miserly heart. Once she awoke from "El Big Grito"—her continuous scream—she had no memory of the preceding days and still believes it was some terrible illness that took her voice.

One Wednesday, Fe gets off work early and stops by her mother's house. There, she finds La Loca running in circles around a tree. She tells Sofi, who goes outside to stop the terrified Loca. Sobbing, Loca tells her mother that a woman in white came to her and told her Esperanza was dead. Sofi receives the official notification a week later, but it contains no details. Although the people in Washington, D.C., know more than anyone else does, they are never able to return Esperanza's body. She receives a posthumous medal.

A bigger mystery than the location of Esperanza's body, though, is the woman in white who delivered the news. Loca says it is La Llorona, who has come to her in the past. This startles Sofi, since no one has ever told Loca the legend of The Weeping Woman, who travels old Mexico and the United States in search of her children, whom she drowned in order to run off with her lover. Punished by God to wander the earth forever, she is usually sighted at night near bodies of water.

The idea of a woman suffering for eternity never appealed to Sofi, so she never repeated it to her daughters. In addition, according to the Church, when people die their souls must wait for the Final Day of Judgment, so Sofi never understood why the Llorona got her punishment early. She used to ask herself this when her father told her the scary bedtime story, but all her father would say was that "La Llorona was a bad woman who had left her husband and home, drowned her babies to run off and have a sinful life, and God punished her for eternity."

Sofi had not left her children; instead, she had been left to raise them herself. However, she did hear of something like that once, and not to make excuses, Sofi figures the mother was only human and anyone is capable when pushed into a corner to devour her babies to save them. A woman, who has been given a bad rap by every generation of her people, La Llorona, before men got in the way, may have been a loving mother goddess. So it was she that Esperanza sent to deliver the news, knowing La Llorona is on a first-name basis with her sister, both of them hanging out down by the ditch.

Esperanza, too, can occasionally be seen there, as well as in Caridad's trailer complex, where Caridad has long one-sided conversations with her. Politically minded Esperanza talks a lot about the war and the president's misguided policies and getting results by refusing to pay taxes, but Caridad, who does not understand politics, mostly nods so as not to offend her.

Because of the news of Esperanza's death, it is some months before Fe gets around to the reason she came by that day. She thinks she is in love again, this time with her cousin Casimiro. She believes a wedding is not far off, and wants Loca to teach her how to cook. Therefore, Loca, glad she is better at one thing than her haughty, perfectionist sister, begins instructing her in the art of cooking traditional food from scratch.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The appearance of La Llorona and later Esperanza's spirit are elements of magical realism that Castillo uses to two purposes. One, although Esperanza's death has been essentially meaningless (in that she was a civilian having nothing to do with the war), her existence has not ended, making her death less tragic and ensuring that her influence continues to be felt.

Second, the appearance of La Llorona, or The Weeping Woman, highlights the role of the Church as a patriarchal institution that uses sin to punish women. Sofi, who has struggled her entire life in the face of poverty and a continuous stream of tragedies, understands what could compel a woman to murder her children in order to save them. While her father uses the story to warn her about the consequences of sin, the women characters like Sofi and Esperanza suspect The Weeping Woman may have been a loving deity before men adapted her to suit their purposes.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Fe is killed the month of her first wedding anniversary by the new job that bought her long-dreamed-of dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart and VCR. A year earlier, she married her cousin Casimiro- not in the large fancy wedding she had dreamed of, but in a small, intimate one. Fe was no longer as much of a snob about her family, but she doubted her sisters—one of whom was transparent, one of whom wouldn't touch anyone, much less a man taking her down the aisle, and one of whom never wore anything but the white tunics don□a Felicia made her—were pastel chiffon material. In addition, she had discovered, Casimiro had a habit of bleating.

Casimiro descends from a long line of sheepherders, though in the last half-century, like most large ranchers in the territory, his family lost its profits and moved on to other lines of work. His father had taken the family to Phoenix, where he had begun a cement business, and Casey had gotten a degree in accounting. However, more than seven generations of sheepherding had gotten into Casey's blood and he tends to bleat, a distinct ba-aaa sound, in his office at night as well as in public in broad daylight. For this reason, Fe limits the wedding to close family—her parents and sisters (who attend in spirit rather than in person) and Casimiro's bleating relatives.

Unable to get a promotion at the bank because of her speech impediment, Fe takes a job at Acme International, where a co-worker tells her she can make a lot more money. Acme cleans high-tech weapons parts for larger companies that then assemble the weapons for the Pentagon. What the co-worker fails to tell her about is the nausea and headaches that increase in severity by the day. In fact, many of the women have complained to the nurse, who blames the symptoms on pre-menopause.

The job promises bonuses and steady raises, and Fe throws herself into it, deciding to work her way up as quickly as possible before she begins having babies. She takes on every tough job available, earning raises based on what a supervisor calls "utilization and efficiency." Fe, being the queen of efficiency, is promoted in no time, and she and Casimiro settle into a three-bedroom tract house, buy a new car and treat themselves to regular dinners out and dancing. Fe never complains about the job, despite constant headaches, the ring around her nose, or the chemicals that glow in the dark. She does not even complain when Casimiro tells her that her breath has begun to smell like glue. When she miscarries, the other women at work console her, saying at least she can have more babies; many of them have had to have hysterectomies.

Then Fe is given a three-month assignment to wash stubborn parts in a special chemical in the poorly ventilated basement. The supervisor tells her the chemical is ether, but when she is caught pouring it down the drain one night, as they do all the other chemicals, the supervisor bawls her out and tells her to leave it to evaporate.

After Fe completes the assignment, a couple of men from the U.S. Attorney General's Office come to see her. They tell her she is going to be subpoenaed, but they will not say why, and they instruct her not to tell anyone. This makes Fe so nervous she goes to her mother for advice. Sofi and Casimiro both tell Fe her job is not worth such anxiety—or the glue breath or ring around her nose or big dry spots on her legs.

Casimiro, who is utterly devoted to his perfect wife, has not pressed the issue of seeing a doctor, but Sofi insists. The next morning, they take Fe to the hospital, where she is diagnosed with cancer. The chemicals she has been absorbing have been eating her from the inside out, while a previously undiagnosed melanoma has been eating her from the outside in. By now, there is no stopping it. In addition, because of the melanoma, her lawyer tells them, they cannot sue Acme International.

Fe returns to work, because she still has to pay for all the things she and Casey bought on credit, but the FBI continues to visit her. They tell her that the chemical in the basement was not ether but some other illegal chemical, which, in going down the drain, had traveled on into the water supply. As the only person who used the chemical, they say, it was Fe's fault. Eventually, the matter is dropped, and Fe is put on a kind of unpaid probation at Acme.

When Fe dies, it is especially sad, because she does not resurrect like La Loca or ectoplasmically return like Esperanza. Shortly after her prognosis, she just dies, plain dead. The Church approves her cremation, because there is so little left of her, and Acme International pays for her Mass, given by Father Jerome.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Fe's death is filled with tragic irony. The character who most embraces the traditions of her society, she is destroyed by that same desire to live a "T.V. life," demonstrating the consequences of believing "the lies told to us" in life, something Loca warned about in the first chapter.

Fe is hard working, diligent, and does everything she has been taught she is supposed to do, believing that if she follows the rules she will be rewarded. However, her first fiancé dumps her and, unable to comprehend it, Fe screams for days on end. This screaming damages her vocal cords, leaving her unable to speak. Because she is now partially mute, she cannot get a promotion at the bank, so she takes the job at Acme.

In the novel, Acme is a clear symbol of institutional exploitation. In participating in war efforts, the company destroys the health of its workers as well as the surrounding community, which eventually suffers from the contamination of the water and soil. Predictably, it fails to take responsibility, and Fe is ultimately blamed for the contamination. In an ironic twist, Fe is unable to sue because of a previously undiagnosed melanoma—a type of skin cancer commonly associated with the fair (or "gringo") skin Fe so prized. Fe's faith in society and the rules and values it imposes on her proves completely misplaced, and her death becomes the most tragic of all.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Francisco el Penitente has not spoken in days, having decided to shed his old skin and dress in mortification and repentance. As Caridad has become more fixed in his mind, Francisco has become more determined to exorcise her. He thinks of her both as a "Hunter's Trap," entrapping sinners, and as a kind of Mary, having proven herself chaste and humble in her year of ascetic life in the cave.

His uncle's friend Sullivan tells Francisco he needs a woman, but Francisco says he is waiting for a sign. Francisco's aunt and uncle think if he does not get on with his life, something is sure to blow. However, it only gets worse. Caridad, since her return, has grown despondent, and Francisco cannot get her to acknowledge him. Afraid that Caridad holds a grudge against him for trying to make her leave the cave, Francisco decides it is enough to stay close to her, and spends his days on the ground outside her trailer. It is a boring exercise, since Caridad hardly ever leaves.

However, one afternoon, he sees some hummingbirds nesting above her door. Since hummingbirds are an omen of true love, Francisco takes it as a sign. Excited, he returns at sunset to keep vigil outside her door; but this time, Caridad's truck is gone. He waits all night, and she finally returns at dawn.

Upset, Francisco returns the next afternoon, where he waits until sunset for Caridad to leave. He follows her to a small house in the South Valley, where she parks across the street. She never gets out of the car; instead, Caridad waits in her truck all night, watching the house while Francisco watches her.

The next night he follows her again to the same house, where she again spends the night watching from her truck. This happens every night except weekends, which everyone apparently takes off. Finally, Francisco goes to the house to see if he can find out who lives there. On the mailbox are the names of two women, Maria and Esmeralda. Unable to stand not knowing what Caridad is doing, Francisco asks don□a Felicia if she knows the women. Don□a Felicia says she gives Maria massages while Esmeralda waits in Caridad's trailer, but Caridad is so shy she just hides in her room.

Francisco decides he can never lay eyes on Caridad again, and leaves. Meanwhile, Caridad's own obsession is still the woman on the wall, later the woman at Ojo Caliente. However, Caridad can barely bring herself to pronounce Esmeralda's name, much less love her, for a number of reasons. First, Esmeralda loves someone else, and second, Caridad is convinced she has a fatal touch, since everyone she has loved has died, or close enough. She will not take the risk of letting beautiful Esmeralda die, too.

Therefore, every night she pacifies her yearning by keeping an eye on Esmeralda's little home. It makes her feel good to be close by, just as it makes Francisco feel good to be

close by Caridad, who knows he's there, because she can sense his own yearning for the impossible, so akin to hers. In addition, Esmeralda continues to visit Caridad, comforted by the thought of Caridad praying for her. Esmeralda does not know why Caridad is praying for her, because no one is talking to anyone else, which is understandable, since everyone is spooked, feeling watched all the time, since of course they are.

This is why Esmeralda, a rape crisis counselor, does not follow her own advice when she confronts Francisco outside her office one day. She has noticed he has been parked there all day, watching her, and she wants to know what is going on. Before she knows it, Francisco abducts her.

Maria paces the house waiting for Esmeralda, "suspecting the worst, and the worst was what had happened." When Francisco drops Esmeralda in front of the house, Maria tells her they will call the police, but Esmeralda fails to respond. Therefore, Maria does not stop her when Esmeralda leaves with Caridad. Instead, knowing she will never see Esmeralda again, Maria goes to don□a Felicia's, where she wants to be when she receives the news.

Followed by Francisco, Caridad and Esmeralda drive up to see Esmeralda's grandmother in Sky City, the oldest inhabited city in the Americas. He cannot follow them up the mesa, since only relatives are allowed, but Caridad is nervous he might find a place to hide with the tour group in front of the church. Despite her clairvoyance, Caridad cannot quite put her finger on Francisco, who has always seemed somewhat opaque to her, as elusive as a shadow. With no clue to his motives, Caridad waits outside of Esmeralda's grandmother's house, where she overhears them talking just inside. That is when something hits her like a lightning bolt, and she wonders how she could have been so blind.

Esmeralda hears her loud sobs and comes out, but when she recognizes Francisco among the members of the tour group, she starts to run. Caridad runs after her, screaming at her to stop, but suddenly Esmeralda is flying off the mesa like a broken-winged moth, Caridad holding tight to her hand.

Tsichtinako is calling, and everyone hears: Esmeralda's grandmother, the Pueblo tour guide, the priest at the church, and even the dogs who begin to bark. The Acoma people know it is the voice of the Invisible One, who nourished the first two humans, who were also female.

Meanwhile, Francisco has watched paralyzed as the women leapt together into the air. He goes to the edge of the mesa with the other tourists, who peek down at the results. But to everyone's surprise, there are no bodies on the ground—just "Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun's rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever."

Although Francisco's aunt and uncle will not know for a long time the whole story, don□a Felicia knows that same night because Maria has told her what she knows. Later, police come to tell her that her godson was found that evening hanging from a tall pin□on at the far end of his uncle's land. His uncle Pedro, who, with his wife and friend Sullivan, heard Francisco's lament across the cornfields as he called Caridad's name, discovered him.

Chapter 12 Analysis

This chapter forms the climax of Caridad's subplot. Francisco, who has progressed from devout to fanatic, has become obsessed with Caridad, a symbol in his mind of religious purity. He stalks her, much like the man in the truck stalked Maria (Esmeralda's lover) and Helena in Chapter 8. Caridad rejects Francisco, who represents the male-dominated Catholic Church, just as she rejects the role he insists on imposing on her. When Francisco finally discovers Caridad's homosexuality, a sin in the Church, he is driven to destroy both her and the object of her love.

However, in death, Caridad, who was never able to embrace her homosexual feelings, is finally able to be with Esmeralda, kept safe forever by Tsichtinako, the Invisible One in Pueblo myth who nourished the first two human beings, who were also women. They are taken into the moist earth, a common feminine symbol, having been set free when they leapt from the mesa.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Fe's death has been particularly hard for Domingo and Sofi, who personally fought the battle with Fe and lost. After Fe's death, Domingo takes up his old cockfighting habit again and loses the house in a bet to a judge. The house was passed down to Sofi from her grandfather, and then her parents; she was born and raised in it, and gave birth to her daughters in it, but because of community property laws, Domingo was able to sign it away. This is the last straw for Sofi, who suddenly remembers it was she who had made Domingo leave twenty years ago. She did not divorce him then because she was afraid of being excommunicated and even more afraid of her mother, who to Sofi embodied the Church. Now Sofi's mother is dead and, having little left to lose, serves Domingo with divorce papers.

Sofi tries to reason with the judge, because cockfighting is after all illegal, but the judge keeps the house, letting her stay in it for a monthly rent. Sofi lets Domingo live in the house he built for Caridad, for the price of the rent the judge is charging her, and in this way they can say to come out even, though they don't, since Domingo's gambling keeps him from paying rent most months.

In the divorce settlement, Domingo signs over his share of Caridad's house to Loca, acknowledging it probably is not safe in his hands anyway. Sofi does the same, wanting to keep one small house for her daughter to live in. Unfortunately, Loca is not destined to live in the house either.

Since her sisters' deaths, Loca has lost interest in everything around her. Caridad's jeans, which Loca has taken to wearing, become baggier and baggier, and Loca assumes her father's habit of sitting for hours in front of the T.V. Prompted by a show, she cuts the label out of her jeans, and when Sofi asks why, Loca tells her some people in a factory are boycotting the company that makes the jeans. The woman on the show reminded Loca of Esperanza. When Sofi asks if she cut out the label because she was mad about her sisters' deaths, Loca tells her no; she did it because they said on T.V. that if you tear out the label to protest it would make people ask why. Loca knew her mother would see the jeans and would tell someone, which is what Sofi does at a community meeting that evening.

In another show, Loca sees a report about a woman from Medjugorje who experienced a vision of the Virgin Mary when she was a teenager. Loca calls to Sofi, who is startled to hear the woman describe a tour of heaven, hell and purgatory. Loca begins to frown as the woman explains what she saw: hell is "a fiery pit of men and women turning into beasts and blaspheming God," purgatory is just "ashes," and heaven is a "happy place, where people floated on clouds with little angels on their shoulders." Sofi looks to Loca for verification, but Loca just gets up and walks out the door.

Concerned about Loca's depression and weight loss, Sofi consults Doctor Tolentino, the old Filipino country doctor who delivered Sofi and all of her daughters. Doctor Tolentino had been away when Loca died, so she had been forced to take Loca to the clinic, where the inept young doctor had pronounced her dead. Now, Doctor Tolentino tells Sofi that Loca has AIDS, though where Loca would have gotten it Sofi has no idea. That night, Doctor Tolentino performs on Loca a psychic treatment he learned from his mother. Pronouncing the words, "We are now in the age of the Spirit," he makes an opening in Loca's stomach with his left hand while using his right to pull out a blood clot, some cystic fibroids and a tumor. When he is done, only a small red mark remains on Loca's belly. Having told Sofi that she must place her faith in the Great Spirit, he leaves them, knowing that although sometimes a disease can be stopped, death is inevitable.

Chapter 13 Analysis

When Domingo loses Sofi's house to the judge, Sofi completes her rebellion as a Catholic and a wife. No longer concerned about being excommunicated, she serves him with divorce papers. Her realization that it was she who actually made Domingo leave the first time implies that Sofi is finally able to admit her rebellion and control her own life by making conscious choices.

The fact that the judge charges Sofi rent to live in her own home, a home he won in an illegal bet, again highlights the themes of exploitation and powerlessness. The police were useless to Caridad; the politicians in Washington were useless to Esperanza, though they were responsible for the war that killed her; the legal system was useless to Fe, who was exploited by a company that was supposed to be regulated by the government that blames her instead; and the judge, an icon of power in the legal system, takes advantage of Sofi.

La Loca's AIDS diagnosis is as inexplicable as her earlier death and resurrection. However, the illness, which is viewed as a social epidemic, is a symbol of all the social and political ills that have destroyed her family.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Sofi also consults don□a Felicia on Loca's illness, as well as a number of other curanderas throughout the region, whose visits Loca permits in her final months. It has been more than twenty years since her resurrection, but many still believe in La Loquita Santa, and a wave of sadness covers the region at the news that she is dying again. Fearing that all her years of practice have not done her a bit of good in the face of this dreadful disease, don□a Felicia puts aside her pride and tries every *tratamiento* (treatment) known to the region. She and Doctor Tolentino meet each other on occasion in Sofi's house, while one is going out while the other is going in, each beginning with a prayer. On one occasion, they sit down outside over a cup of coffee and trade stories, as well as treatments that cannot be found anywhere but along the Rio Abajo.

Chapter 14 Analysis

This chapter mainly describes the wide variety of psychic and medicinal treatments common in the Mexican-American and Native communities in the region. It also foreshadows La Loca's death, though it focuses primarily on the positive aspects of don□a Felicia and Doctor Tolentino's cooperation in their efforts to save her.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

The Way of the Cross Procession on Holy Friday is unlike any other Procession of the past. For only the second time in her life (the first being to Albuquerque at the age of three), Loca ventures out of the house, riding her horse Gato Negro in the Procession to city and wearing Esperanza's blue chenille robe. Rubén found the robe early that morning in his house, having perhaps been directed by the spirit of Esperanza, whose presence he still feels and whom he never forgot, even during his marriage to the white chick with the sports car. Before bringing the robe to Loca, he bunches it up like a pillow and cries into it.

This year, the Procession is filled with people wearing photographs of loved ones who died from toxic exposure, and at each station someone speaks on the social and environmental calamities destroying the world, and their community in particular: the dumping of radioactive waste into the sewer, the fact that most Native and hispano families in the land live below the poverty level, uranium contamination on the reservation resulting in babies born with brain damage and cancer, joblessness, livestock drinking from the contaminated canals in which children play. AIDS is a merciless plague, likened to the Murder of the Innocents. One woman remarks that while the environmentalists, in saving the dolphins, are recognizing the interconnectedness of all things on earth, they need to save themselves right now.

Nearly six months after Holy Friday, Loca is so weak she is mainly bedridden. Lonely for her sisters, who were the meaning of her life, Loca is comforted by the visits of a mysterious nun in a blue robe. One day, the Lady in Blue pushes aside her manta and opens her habit to show Loca the horsehair vest cutting into her body. Loca decides that alive or not, she must be related to Francisco el Penitente, though in response, the nun only says yes, she has "known a few."

One evening, the Lady in Blue sings softly about a woman who had been left by her French soldier lover, a song she says is from a faraway land called Portugal. As Loca goes to sleep, she thinks that although she has only traveled as far as Albuquerque twice, she knows quite a bit about the world, not to mention the world beyond.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Dressed in her blue robe and mounted on her horse in the Way of the Cross Procession, La Loca is shown as a kind of embodiment of Jesus, but in a female form. The characterization of each station with a political message illustrates the influence of Sofi and her daughters on the community, which is more politically and socially aware than ever before.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

In the years after La Loca is buried, Sofi, encouraged by the daily petitions for prayers from the mother of the little crazy saint who died twice, founds the Mothers of Martyrs and Saints, or M.O.M.A.S. Eventually, the annual conference becomes larger than the World Series and the Olympics, providing a gathering place for the members and their transcended offspring (some transparent and some not), as well as droves of spectators hoping to have various ailments cured and vendors selling souvenirs.

The favorite souvenir is the La Loca Santa and her Sisters Tarot Deck drawn by an artist in Italy. In it, both the Empress card and the Queen of Swords represent Sofi as a mother, "a quick-witted, dance-loving strong woman who was nevertheless powerless to the sorrow she suffered." Esperanza appears as the Knight of Swords, "driven by her yang as much as her yin for the sake of what she believed." Caridad is both the High Priestess and the Page of Wands, guided by spirituality. Fe is the Queen of Wands, tending to her home and seeing herself as "güera," or white-skinned. La Loca is represented by the Fool, as "one who walked without fear, aware of the choices she made in the journey of life, life itself being defined as a state of courage and wisdom and not an uncontrollable participation in society, as many people experienced their lives."

At the reunions, the santito and martyred converse with their mothers, passing along news and advice that the mothers then pass on to relatives, friends, and the faithful, as well as community agencies and local and federal governments, who accept the advice with equal measures of generosity and skepticism.

As a prestigious (if not elitist) organization, M.O.M.A.S. fights rumors of discrimination during Sofi's thirty-eight-year presidency. These are mainly started by the mother of Fe's ex-fiancé Tom, who repeatedly applies for admission without success, and accuses the organization of discriminating against the mothers of men. However, since the crucial criterion of the potential martyr or saint is that he or she has to have transcended already, and Tom actually outlives his own mother, Sofi tells the committee Mrs. Torres is only upset because Tom never amounted to anything more than the manager of a gas station.

However, the decision as to whether a "jito" of a member is designated a martyr or saint is a touchy subject for many. To be a martyr is a lot easier than being considered a saint, since saints have the potential to perform miracles while martyrs are just considered emissaries to the saints. In many cases, this is an almost impossible distinction to make, except in Sofi's. La Loca never had to prove her sainthood to anyone, and remains as ornery after her transcendence as she was when incarnated; she does not tend to answer pleas now any more than she did when she was alive.

In M.O.M.A.S., you do not have to be the mother of a daughter to be considered; nor do you have to prove you are actually a mother (or could be one). Unlike the Church, which once made its popes sit on a special chair to prove they were men (after a woman passing herself off as a man was elected pope and then dragged through the streets and stoned for it), M.O.M.A.S. uses no special chair, as some rumors maintain. After all, just because some obstinate people once went out of their way to prove they had no potential to become mothers, why should there "come a time when someone would be made to *prove* that she did?"

Chapter 16 Analysis

By the end of the novel, Sofi has lost all of her daughters, but has gained immeasurable wisdom. She puts this wisdom to good use by completely rejecting the traditional expectations of her male-dominated society and forming a religious organization that, by its nature, excludes men. Women are admitted to the organization by virtue of their suffering, and it provides a means with which they can make their own rules and receive guidance from the children they have lost to the ills of society.

Sofi's own sainted and martyred daughters are redeemed, in that their deaths are not meaningless after all. Rather, they are immortalized by such symbols as the tarot cards, which illustrate the positive ideals for which the matriarchal institution recognizes them. Sofi's final triumph is the popularity of M.O.M.A.S., which exceeds that of the male-organized World Series and Olympics.

Characters

Caridad

Caridad is the third and most beautiful of Sofi's daughters. She is vibrant, sensual, and sexually active. She loved one man and when he broke her heart by cheating on her after their wedding, Caridad turned her back on love. For several years, she gets involved with dangerous men, heavy drinking, and lots of sex. She has three abortions, all performed by her sister, La Loca, and is severely beaten by a supernatural beast. Following a year in a coma, the same year Fe is screaming, Caridad discovers a new side to herself in her "holy recovery." She realizes that she has the potential to be a spiritual healer and channeler. She begins to train with Dona Felicia and her year of wilderness solitude only enhances her reputation. Unfortunately, Caridad becomes the object of a stalker's attentions. Her stalker, Francisco el Penitente, is mentally unbalanced and believes that the only way to get Caridad out of his mind is to kill her. Caridad, rather than be murdered, jumps to her death off an ancient Pueblo Indian cliff dwelling. Her death represents the cultural forces working on women to suppress their sexuality and remove their control over their own lives.

Domingo

Domingo is Sofi's husband and the father of her children. He is also a gambler. He abandons the family soon after La Loca's birth because he cannot stay in one place. He returns immediately after Caridad's "holy restoration"□a twenty-year absence. Sofi allows him to stay and they are happy for a while. He builds Caridad a house with his winnings from the Illinois lottery and continues to gamble without Sofi's knowledge. When he loses Sofi's house and four-acre lot to a Federal judge in an illegal card game, Sofi finally divorces her husband. He moves into the house that he built for Caridad and leaves the narrative.

Dona Felicia

Dona Felicia, much like Sofi, is an older woman whose life has been anything but peaceful. Married, widowed, and abandoned several times, Felicia has buried all of her children and lost any faith in organized religion. She is a spiritual healer who trains Caridad as a channeler. She feels responsible for Caridad's death since it is Felicia's godson who stalks her. She tries to save La Loca, but her skills are useless against AIDS. Dona Felicia tries to help Sofi cope with the loss of all of her children.

Esperanza

Esperanza is the eldest of Sofi's daughters. She is the only one to complete college and to "discover" her ethnicity. Esperanza was a bit of an activist in college, marching and

picketing for the cause of Hispanic Brotherhood. She became a journalist, working at a local television station before accepting a national job based in Washington. She accepted the job only after both of her sisters recovered and she felt no longer needed. Esperanza went to cover the 1991 Persian Gulf War and was killed in action. The hypocrisy surrounding the U.S. military and American treatment of Hispanic women becomes obvious in the way the authorities treated her death and their patronizing attitude toward her parents.

Fe

Fe is Sofi's second daughter, often considered the "normal" one. She worked at the local bank since graduating from high school and was engaged to a nice, normal guy, Tom Torres. Fe is embarrassed by her family and tries very hard not to invite her friends over or to involve her family in her professional life. When Tom breaks off their engagement, Fe goes crazy, screaming and beating her head against the walls of the family home for one year. After her recovery, which is just as sudden as her screaming fit, she returns to work, not realizing the damage her screaming has done to her voice. She marries her cousin and goes to work in a partscleaning plant for more money. She volunteers to do hazardous work duty, not knowing that the chemicals were hazardous, and eventually dies from cancer. Like Esperanza's death, Fe's death exposes the dangers and terrible working conditions faced by Hispanic women, as well as the callous attitudes white corporate American holds towards its workforce.

La Loca

Although readers never learn her real name, Sofi's fourth daughter, La Loca, is aptly named. La Loca gets her name from events surrounding her first death and funeral when she was three years old. After an epileptic fit leaves her comatose, La Loca's family believes that she is dead and plans to bury her. She awakes just as the priest is muttering over her casket. The child "flies" to the roof of the church and tells everyone that she has been to Hell and has come back. La Loca changes greatly: she can no longer stand people touching her, nor can she handle the smell of any people other than her family, she talks to animals, ghosts, and other spirits. La Loca is considered a saint at first, but her odd behavior soon makes the townspeople drop the "Santa" part and refer to her as La Loca, the Crazy One. Like her sisters, La Loca does not live a long and happy life. Soon after Fe's and Caridad's deaths, she is diagnosed with AIDS. How she contracted the disease is never revealed, but since she never had a boyfriend or a blood transfusion, her illness becomes as supernatural as her life. La Loca's death inspired her mother to form Mothers of Martyrs and Saints (M.O.M.A.S.), an organization dedicated to keeping alive the memories of people killed when young.

Sofi

Sofi is one of the major characters in *So Far From God*. She is the mother of four daughters and towards the end of the novel, she becomes the unofficial mayor of the town. Her devout Catholicism and her personal strength are the things that allow Sofi to survive her husband's behavior and desertion and the deaths of all her children. Sofi grows from a dependent, superstitious woman to a strong, dominant political force in southern Arizona. Throughout the novel, Sofi works to keep her family together. As the novel's title suggests, Sofi is always just beyond the touch of the divine. Only when she stops trying to be the perfect wife and mother does she realize and embrace herself as a woman and becomes free.

Themes

Woman as Daughter, Wife, and Mother

One of the major themes in *So Far From God* is the idea of a woman's role in society. Traditionally, Hispanic women are taught to serve three people: father, husband, and child. These roles can be confining, particularly for modern women, and Castillo challenges this image of woman in her novel. The daughters, Esperanza, Fe, Caridad, and La Loca all try to be dutiful daughters and wives, yet they are unsuccessful in these roles. Esperanza's boyfriend leaves her for another woman, while Fe's husband drives her to a job that kills her. Caridad's marriage falls apart as do all of her other relationships, while La Loca's hatred of people effectively rules out romance. Even Sofi acts like a dutiful daughter and passes up the chance for true love. However Castillo complicates this theme by making the alternatives to the traditional role just as unsuccessful. Esperanza puts her career ahead of family and is killed, while her three sisters all choose paths that lead away from the traditional wife and mother syndrome and they all die childless as well. Castillo suggests that until women can see themselves as human beings first, they will be ultimately unsuccessful. Sofi loses everything her culture tells her is important: her husband, her children, and even her home. Only when she has nothing left to lose does Sofi realize that she must live her life for herself as a woman, not as someone's daughter or wife or mother.

Exploitation of Women

The idea of exploitation runs throughout twentieth- century American literature, and *So Far From God* is no different. Here the exploitation extends to women at home as well as work. Esperanza gives her life for her job as does Fe, but Fe's experience is much harsher. Her employers at the bank and the factory do not really care about her as a human being. In fact, the factory manager takes advantage of Fe's willingness to do whatever job to make a good impression and earn a bonus. She soon discov ers that the chemicals she has been using are lethal and the company couldn't care less. Her death is painful and extended as the cancer eats away at her body. Sofi, too, falls victim to emotional and illegal exploitation. Her husband continues to gamble and loses her house and property in a card game. Even though the judge, who won Domingo's bet, knows that his actions were illegal since Domingo neither owned the land, nor could the judge take it, he still forces Sofi to pay rent on her own home. She cannot sue him because of his status as a judge and so, he exploits her ignorance and fear for his own benefit. Caridad is exploited as well, both before and after her "holy recovery." She allows herself to become a sexual plaything using sex as a way to forget her pain. After she becomes aware of her spirituality, she allows Dona Felicia and others in her community to use her talents, her struggles, and her faith to their own ends. Caridad's exploitation also costs her her life. Castillo seems to be arguing that exploitation of any kind is unavoidable for women.

Religion

Religion and devotion to a faith causes most of the problems in this novel. The major flash-points deal with how women are supposed to interact with a sexist religion and still remain women. Catholicism, as described in *So Far From God*, does not allow the female characters any way out. They must submit to male authority or die. Dona Felicia and, at the end, Sofi both reject this kind of religion and are freed from its constraints, but both have lost everything that they hold dear. Caridad tries to rework her religious beliefs, but she cannot escape the effect she has on other people. They mill around her, invade her privacy, and, in the end, force her leap to her death as the only means of escape. Castillo casts religion as a fundamental part of human existence, but argues against the confining rules of organized religion and its evil effects on society at large.

Family Space

Family, traditionally, invokes ideas of warmth, security, and safety. Much as she does with religion, Castillo turns this idea on its head. Family space becomes a place where pain, death, and fear dominate. Fe learns that her life, as she knows it, is over at home when Tom sends her a "dear Jane" letter, while Sofi loses her home to her husband's gambling problem. Even Caridad's home (the trailer she rents from Felicia and the house her father builds) become sites of pain and victims of theft. Family and family space become sites of loss and pain, forcing readers to rethink their own ideas about security and peace.

Spiritual vs. Physical

Along these same lines, Castillo presents the conflict between spiritual and physical identities. For the women in the novel, spiritual needs are subdued to the needs of the physical. Fe and Esperanza neglect their spiritual needs and are killed for their troubles. However, living totally in the spiritual realm is not an option either. Both Caridad and La Loca choose to ignore the physical world for the spiritual and they, too, die. Castillo seems to suggest that extremes are unhealthy and fatal, but that moderation does not come easily. The conflict between the physical and the spiritual realms is one fought and re-fought by every generation.

Style

Point of View

So Far From God is told by a third-person fully omniscient narrator who intrudes in the text as almost a separate character. She is funny, witty, and irreverent. Each chapter begins with a lengthy title similar to the "argument" before each canto of an epic poem. The narrator then enters the text with a funny summary of the coming action. However, all this plot preview in no way detracts from the novel's excitement or the reader's enjoyment. Rather, it builds anticipation by letting readers know what is going to happen and then letting them sit back and enjoy the ride.

Language

In her interview with Simon Romero, Castillo explains that though she did not grow up or live in the New Mexico area, she wanted to capture the style of language spoken there. She suggests that the English and the Spanish are highly localized and unlike the language spoken in California or Chicago. She mixes Spanish phrases into the text with great regularity and tries to elongate the sentences, to mimic the conversation style of the peoples of the area. In her use of Englished Spanish and Spanished English, Castillo attempts to create a new language, one that all her readers can understand and enjoy.

Epic Fiction

So Far From God is written as a kind of satirical prose epic in the tradition of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Castillo's use of the supernatural, high language, episodic structure, and the witty narrator all contribute to this form. Sofi's tragedies and triumphs are described in epic terms and the story of a no-name woman in the middle of a tiny Hispanic New Mexico town takes on great themes and ideas. Sofi rises from being an abandoned wife to the head of an international organization. Castillo's novel is full of wit, humor, and a sadness that challenges her readers to redefine what being great and successful means.

Historical Context

The Feminist Chicana Movement

The Chicano/a Movement was born in the wine-growing region of California in the early 1970s when Cesar Chavez organized the mainly Hispanic migrant farmworkers into an effective, vocal labor union. Within a few years authors, poets, actors, and politicians were demonstrating and demanding equal rights for Americans of Hispanic descent in terms of language recognition, cultural integrity, and political power. As the movement grew, many women within the movement began to feel left out or misunderstood. Writers like Sandra Cisneros, Josaphina Lopez, and Gloria Anzaldua argued for a pro-female wing to the movement, saying that the concerns of Hispanic women were being ignored by the traditional macho attitude of the male leaders. Ana Castillo enlivened the debate by casting doubts on both the traditional definitions of womanhood and the newer "liberated" Hispanic woman put forward by the Feminist Chicana Movement.

OSHA/EPA Enforcement

So Far From God also criticizes the lack of enforcement of the federal government's rules in the workplace (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) and the environment (Environmental Protection Agency). Castillo subtly argues, through the tragic death of Fe, that most of this enforcement comes too little, too late. OSHA is a federal agency that is supposed to monitor working conditions and the health of America's workers. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, OSHA's policies were relaxed and the numbers of inspectors was reduced. The federal government of the period preferred a more business-friendly policy and so did not rigorously enforce OSHA regulations. The EPA was run in a similar manner. Castillo's novel attacks this "hands-off" approach as being deadly and dangerous.

Critical Overview

The 1993 publication of *So Far From God* was met with great applause. Castillo had already made her critical and popular reputation with her previously published poetry collections and her novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. The *Washington Post Book World* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* claimed it was a novel of great power and worth. While Chicana/o literature, as a whole, has not really penetrated the national reading market, leading intellectuals of the Chicana/o Movement also praised the novel as lyrical, moving, and authentic in tone, voice, and characterization. Scholars such as Theresa Delgadillo, Carmela Delia Lanza, Kamala Platt, and Roland Walter have investigated various aspects of Castillo's novel, mainly focusing on the use of language and family.

Theresa Delgadillo, in her article "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance: Hybrid Spirituality in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*," argues that Castillo's use of spirituality and feminism are unique in Chicana literature. She explores how the novel reconciles the ideas of a patriarchal religion (Catholic Christianity) with ideas of equality, feminism, and the "special" role of Hispanic women as wives and mothers. Kamala Platt, on the other hand, sees Castillo's great achievement as the ability to define elements of environmentalism as integral to feminism. Platt suggests that in order for women, or men for that matter, to be truly concerned about equality between the genders, then they must also, according to her reading of Castillo, be concerned with balance and equality between nature and humanity.

The other major area of scholarly interest in Castillo's novel deals with how she manipulates ideas of home and family. Both Carmela Delia Lanza and Roland Walter explore how Castillo uses language and family to produce disharmony and discomfort with traditional ideas of domestic life. Working from bell hooks's ideas of domestic space, Lanza argues that Castillo "constructs the home as a 'site of resistance' for the woman of color living in a racist and sexist world" thus "deconstructing physical, political, and spiritual boundaries." Walter argues that Castillo creates characters who are borderline people, not comfortable in either mainstream American or Hispanic culture.

Castillo's reputation for creating readable, witty, thought-provoking fiction advances to a higher degree in *So Far From God*. She uses the tragedies in the lives of a single family to create a novel that, as Sandra Cisneros says, is "wacky, wild, y bien funny."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7
- Critical Essay #8
- Critical Essay #9
- Critical Essay #10
- Critical Essay #11
- Critical Essay #12
- Critical Essay #13

Critical Essay #1

Rex discusses the development of Sofi as a human being outside of the traditional roles for Hispanic women of daughter, wife, and mother.

Ana Castillo's 1993 novel, *So Far From God*, explores the relationship between family members and their community in a traditional Hispanic community, making this community more accessible to non-Hispanic cultures. While critics like bell hooks and Theresa Delgadillo have argued that the home in this novel is a place where spirituality and selfhood get reworked and re-organized, the idea that Sofi rebels against the traditions of daughter, wife, and mother have generally been under-examined and have not been explored in the context of Sofi's "failed" yet successful rebellion.

Sofi's resistance to the patriarchal attitudes of her culture begins early in her life, but comes as a flashback in the novel. Sofi attends her cousin's coming-out party and meets Domingo. He is universally disliked by her middle-class Hispanic family, but Sofi is in love. She challenges the rules and her family by marrying him over her family's and her community's objections. Even the local priest refuses to perform the ceremony. From a traditional feminist point of view, Sofi's rebellion is a powerful act of independence. However, Castillo seems to cast it in a much more negative light. From the very beginning of the novel, Castillo paints Domingo as a loser, a gambler, and a player. In the flashback episode, Domingo is young and suave and just a bit dangerous. By rebelling against the social order, Sofi is opening herself up to a dangerous man. While Castillo seems to be suggesting that women should remain in the traditional role as dutiful daughters who always do what Daddy says, the subtext of the novel makes it clear that it is Sofi's family's fault that she ends up with Domingo. Castillo is critiquing Hispanic (and American) culture by suggesting that if Sofi's family had not been so dead-set against Domingo, she would not have fallen so hard for him and ruined her life.

Sofi herself realizes what she has given up after her daughter Caridad's death. She realizes that her duty to her parents should not supersede her duty to herself, but at the same time, her parents failed in their duty to her by making life with Domingo so attractive. These same ideas about family duty are illustrated in the ways Sofi's daughters behave as daughters. Unlike their mother, Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca are free to do what they want with their lives, marry whomever they please, find their own career paths, and do everything that Sofi did not. Yet here, too, Castillo shifts the terms of the feminist debate by making the outcomes of these daughters' actions just as painful and ultimately unsuccessful as Sofi's own choices.

Sofi's behavior as a wife again goes against the traditional role of Hispanic wife and therefore the definition of a "good" Hispanic woman. For most of her married life, Sofi did follow the traditional path. She married Domingo instead of just sleeping with him; she took care of the house and her husband, and even welcomed him back after a fifteen-year absence. In feminist terms, Sofi is a victim of patriarchal rage because she does not do anything for herself. She allows Domingo to leave and then accepts him

back with no questions asked. However, she does start to stand up for herself when Domingo loses the house and butcher shop in a card game. Sofi makes the decision to divorce her husband. While divorce is common in American culture and many Hispanic women do divorce every year, the idea of divorce is not culturally accepted in Chicana/o culture. Due in part to the overwhelming influence of Catholicism, divorce is a fate to be avoided at all costs. Sofi displays her understanding of this by having not divorced Domingo when he left her the first time. However, her reason for not divorcing Domingo had nothing to do with any love she had for him; it was merely to keep up appearances. Sofi worries more about how she appears than whether or not she is happy. Happiness is not part of the equation for a wife in Sofi's mindset. Sofi is finally able to break this pattern when she finds out that Domingo has lost her land and her house. She has been the long-suffering wife. She put up with his gambling, his desertion, his broken promises, and his lies. She sacrificed everything to play the role of a good wife. Domingo bet her house□the house was hers, not his, a gift from her father□on the turn of a card. He lost. And like a traditional Hispanic wife, she lost right along with him. Sofi had finally had enough. She divorced Domingo and forced him to sign over his half of the house he had built for Caridad so that La Loca would have a place to live when Sofi died. She completely wrote him out of her life. It is in her rejection of the role of wife that Sofi acts most like a feminist heroine.

Sofi's rejection of the traditional roles for Hispanic women comes to it fullest expression in the way she mothers her four daughters: Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca. Throughout the novel, Sofi never encourages her daughters to be anything, not even traditional Hispanic women. She does not discourage them either, but she does not raise her daughters the way she was raised. She allows all of her daughters room to express their sexuality, their talents, and their realities. But it does not do her any good. All four of her daughters die in tragic circumstances, leaving Sofi more devastated and alone each time.

Esperanza has never been Sofi's favorite, but Sofi does care for her eldest daughter. She tries to advise her on sex without being overbearing and does not voice objections to her career decisions. It is only after Esperanza's death during the Gulf War that Sofi starts to question her parenting methods. She realizes that she hardly knows her daughters, but, at the same time, feels that it is too late to do anything about it. Sofi did exactly what her culture told her to do in all such situations.

When Tom breaks off his engagement to Fe, Sofi's third daughter, she suffers a breakdown and spends an entire year screaming and banging her head against the walls of her house. Sofi behaves like the "good" mother. She does not interfere, but tries to get Fe to eat and come to her senses. Sofi is much more active in Fe's life because she knows about love. She approaches Tom and his mother and accuses him of destroying her daughter. She attacks him verbally as only a mother can and relishes her part in the drama. Yet, she goes back home without seeing Tom himself and lets her daughter scream her head off. Sofi does not try to end Fe's behavior, but then neither does she punish her for it. After Fe recovers, she is still welcome in her mother's house and no mention is made about the way she speaks or behaves. Sofi does not encourage Fe's engagement to Casimiro, but neither does she stand in the way of Fe's

chance at happiness. Sofi seems almost detached from her daughters' lives after Esperanza's death, afraid that getting too close will bring bad luck. She deals with Fe's death in this stoic fashion. Sofi is still caught up in her public appearance and cannot see what her daughters need from her.

Perhaps her most traditional yet unconventional expression of motherhood is the way Sofi deals with Caridad and La Loca. Caridad seems to be her favorite child and throughout the novel, Sofi is either excusing her behavior or finding ways to justify it. After Caridad is attacked and beaten, Sofi dedicates all of her energy to nursing her daughter, yet she can do nothing more than sit by her bedside and pray. After Caridad's "miraculous" recovery, Sofi plays down her maternal role by letting her daughter move out of the house and into a trailer of her own. Even the death of Caridad's horse and her own year-long disappearance in the mountains cannot shake Sofi's determination to play the good mother. As tragedies mount around her, Sofi gives up more and more of her own self to be the good mother that society tells her she must be. Even after Caridad's death, Sofi feels that she must continue to play the good-mother role. She turns her attention to her remaining daughter and her community.

Sofi's relationship with her youngest daughter, known as La Loca, the Crazy One, is complicated at best. She witnessed her daughter's "death" at age three, was prepared to bury her, and smothered her with mothering after she rose from the dead at her own funeral. Sofi never tries to make La Loca fit into society; she never takes her to school or church nor does she push her to socialize in any way. La Loca is her crazy one, her eternal baby. Yet, she does express genuine concern for her strange daughter. Sofi questions her daughter's relationship with the ghosts and the animals and insists that she wear clean clothes. Sofi tries to make her daughter's last months comfortable and realizes that she is not in control of events but is merely an observer to the unfolding of her family's lives.

In this characterization, Castillo seems to be condemning the traditional role of motherhood as one that cannot really affect how people or things turn out. Yet, in a blast of heavy-handed sarcasm, Castillo creates a character who turns her failed role of mother into a successful national role as the president and founder of an organization devoted to memorializing children who have died or been killed young. Sofi also takes on the role of mothering her entire community; she is able to do for her town what she cannot do for her children. Sofi is able to provide ways of getting living wages for the farm hands, providing better food through a co-op program, and provide better medical and utility services through a real hospital and decent sewer and water systems.

It is only when Sofi has lost everything that she realizes that she, as a person, must matter before she can do anything worthwhile. "Sofi had devoted her life to being a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother, . . . and now there was no mother to honor, no father to respect, no 'jitas (children) to sacrifice for, no rancho to maintain, and no land left to work." It is through the characterization of Sofi, a woman who loses everything that her society says makes her a woman, that Castillo argues most passionately for a new definition of womanhood both for Hispanic women and women all over the world.

Source: Michael Rex, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay on Ana Castillo's novel So Far From God*, Roland Walter examines the politics of dislocation and relocation as a "locus of possibility" for Castillo's female characters, who, he argues, relocate their consciousness from separateness to collective, radical mestiza-based consciousness which allows them a strategy of "empowerment and liberation".*

In *So Far From God* Castillo creates communitydefined by Tomas Rivera as "place, values, personal relationships, and conversation" by means of a "speakerly" magico-realist narrative texture. The driving forces of this process are women: women who think, dream, act and relate in what Anzaldua has called a "pluralistic mode," transcending binary oppositions, a rational "dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness," in an effort to heal "the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts" (Borderlands). The keyword of this worldview, carried as in Sapogonia by a discourse in which the natural and supernatural categories of reality are harmoniously intertwined, is faith: a faith that facilitates a dynamic relationship between human beings and their surroundings and an implicit magico-realist conception of the world in which the imaginary is regarded as factual reality. Faith is the fundamental principle which underlies La Loca's resurrection, Caridad's miraculous recovery and predictions, Felicia's holistic treatments, and the appearance of living (mythical) spirits. This peculiar type of faith, which is revised and actualized through female agency, is the driving force behind the collective activism and the implicit alternative mode of living and relating outlined in the novel; a counter-hegemonic mode conceived as possible solution to the postmodern fragmentation and dislocation experienced in the borderlands.

This magico-realist worldview, whose fundamental essence resides in "the interconnectedness of things", is expressed by means of a "speakerly" texture in which a skaz-like discourse, being at work in and acting on the actual discourse, an unnamed narrator, who as a storyteller represents both a communal and an individual voice, and the use of multiple points of view and perspectives recreate and interweave individual and collective experiences as the novel's political unconscious. A telling example of this fluid dialogical texture is the episode in which Sofi, La Loca's mother, announces to a comadre her plan to run for mayor of Tome. On entering Sofi's house just before the actual dialogue between the two women, the comadre, whose namelessness suggests her collective identity, is lost in thoughts about Sofi and her family. Introduced by the phrase, ". . .for when she repeated the story later to the other in the Chicano borderlands through an affirmation of otherness□an otherness not imposed but recreated: an identity based on difference with the capacity to relocate, a "differential consciousness"□ whose nature shifts from individual separateness to collective multiplicity that posits no "ultimate answers, no terminal utopia. . .no predictable final outcomes" but transcends hegemony via concrete utopia, a strategic use of deconstructive differance that traces the necessity for change and anticipates the possibility of an alternative lifestyle. By locating the agency of change in the mestiza□ the re-creation of woman as creator who has a vision, is not "afraid to speak that vision"

(Saeta Interview), and, most importantly, acts accordingly. And by restoring their indigenous roots, Castillo invests her female characters with a historicized and politicized consciousness□a nonessentialized consciousness based on a radical mestiza subjectivity, that is, a subversive position of intelligibility and mode of knowing necessary for the transformation of cultural practices□as strategy of empowerment and liberation. For that reason I read her politics of dislocation and relocation as resistance Xicanisma that envisions the mestiza consciousness as "a crossroads sin fronteras," (*Borderlands*) a "locus of possibility" (Sandoval), a motivating force behind "the development of an alternative social system" (Castillo Massacre). The deconstructive nature of this undertaking resides in the revelation of the necessity for insurgency/activism without legitimating the envisioned results as transcendental truths: a "talking back" whose echos do not spiral down into abyme but create a "real state of emergency" (Benjamin) that carries the possibility of "new life and new growth," (Hooks) or to use Heidegger's phrase, "something begins its presencing" in the Chicano borderlands (Bhabha).

Source: Roland Walter, "The Cultural Politics of Disclocation and Relocation in the Novels of Ana Castillo," in *MELUS,* Vol.23, No. 1, Spring, 1998, pp. 81-97.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Carmela Delia Lanza examines author Ana Castillo's deconstruction of women's physical, political, and spiritual boundaries within her novel So Far From God *and explores how both the author and her characters seek to merge these arenas, connecting their domestic and public lives.*

In the nineteenth century, Louisa May Alcott made subjects of objects when she wrote her domestic novel *Little Women*, which centered on four sisters and their mother during the American Civil War. Alcott created a home for the March girls that was removed from the world of war and male supremacy. In the twentieth century most critics who have devoted their attention to home space and domestic ritual have concentrated on white, middle-class homes (Matthews). It is necessary, however, to begin including working-class homes and the homes of women of color in this dialectic. The subject of home space has not gone unnoticed by some women of color, like cultural theorists bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldua, and novelist Toni Morrison. Each of these writers is re-visioning the home space and its significance regarding gender roles, racism and spirituality in the homes of working-class women of color. For example, in her essay, "Homeplace: a Site of Resistance," bell hooks is not interested in further exploration of the "white bourgeois norms (where home is conceptualized as politically neutral space). "Instead, she uses her theory to examine the "homeplace" of African American women, a space she defines as a "site of resistance and liberation struggle."

bell hooks's theory on "the homeplace" can be used to explore the domestic world that Ana Castillo has created in her novel, *So Far From God*. In this novel, Castillo, like hooks and other women writers of color, constructs the home as a "site of resistance" for the woman of color living in a racist and sexist world. Deconstructing physical, political and spiritual boundaries, Castillo takes on the role Gloria Anzaldua describes in her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, as "the new mestiza." With its playful and ironic style, and its insistence on ambiguity and contradictions, So Far From God offers a postmodern inversion of Alcott's *Little Women*. Both works are American novels dealing with the primary relationships of four sisters; however, Castillo's novel is concerned with four Chicana sisters and a mother living a working class life in Tome, New Mexico. According to Cordelia Chavez Candelaria, Castillo is "one of the earliest Chicana voices to articulate a sexual politics through textual poetics," and this is clearly seen in *So Far From God*. Unlike Alcott's created home space that for the most part is politically neutral, the home space in Castillo's novel is infused with political resistance. It is a place where women of color have an "opportunity to grow and develop" spiritually and politically, which is not always possible or allowable in a "culture of white supremacy."

The daughters in *So Far From God* are dealing with power relations that the March girls in nineteenth century middle class America did not even have to think about. The March girls, despite their own oppression in a patriarchal culture and their own sympathy for the poor and destitute, were part of the hegemony of white culture. The sisters in *So Far From God*, on the other hand, must construct a home space that will offer them sustenance, security and spirituality in order to move into a white world as subjects.

This is crucial, for according to hooks, "when a people no longer have the space to construct homeplace, we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance." The daughters in *So Far From God* are given the opportunity to "reconceptualize ideas of homeplace, once again considering the primacy of domesticity as a site for subversion. . ." (hooks).

I am sitting at my kitchen table, thinking about the anger in Ana Castillo's novel□and how it is masked in humor. A narrator's voice disguising rage with flippancy, telling the story of four daughters who cannot live their entire lives in their mother's home, womb, female space. My baby starts to cry□he is angry because he's hungry, and I have to stop thinking about why Caridad is wearing Fe's wedding gown when she floats across the room in her healing vision. I get a bottle for the baby and it is love in action; it is a political act; it is a moment when my private sphere, my home space is directly connected to the growth of another human being. I think about what Louise Erdrich said regarding mothering and how that relates to my home, my socalled private life:

One reason there is not a great deal written about what
it is like to be the mother of a new infant is that there is
rarely a moment to think of anything else besides that
infant's needs. Endless time with a small baby is spent
asking, "What do you want? What do you want?"

It is the opposite of war. The ego is put aside; ideas, philosophies, theories all shrink down in the chthonic force of sustaining life□feeding another person.

It is in this continuous state of childbirth, moving into grace with all my resistance that I want to say, "Leave me alone, I'm busy." But I don't. According to Clarissa Pinkola Estes "There is a saying, 'You can't go home again.' It is not true. While you cannot crawl back into the uterus again, you can return to the soul-home. It is not only possible, it is requisite." I wash and sweep within the four walls and create stories; and like Ana Castillo, Toni Morrison, Gloria Anzaldua, and Louise Erdrich, I want to give voice to the "cultural silence of the domestic sphere" (Wright). Writing a poem while writing a poem in my home space.

In the first chapter of *So Far From God*, the voice of the matriarchy is clearly heard through the mother, Sofi, when her daughter, La Loca, comes back from the dead. After Loca awakens from her other state of consciousness (whether she actually dies or suffers from epilepsy is irrelevant), opens her coffin and flies up to the church roof, the priest immediately declares his judgement by asking, "'Are you the devil's messenger or a winged angel?'" He is embodying the voice of institutions-Christianity, patriarchy. La Loca can either be a devil or an angel, a virgin or a whore according to his linear thinking. Sofi, however, will not allow this destructive language of dichotomy to continue. She demands in the voices of Coatlicue, Hestia, Demeter, Guadalupe:

'Don't you dare!. . .Don't you dare start this about my
baby! If our Lord in this heaven has sent my child
back to me, don't you start this backward thinking

against her; the devil doesn't produce miracles! And
this is a miracle, an answer to the prayers of a
brokenhearted mother. . .'

Sofi is the head of her home, a home she has created for her daughters. For one daughter, Loca, the home is the only space she can call her own. She stays home, not playing the role of angel or devil, and is "without exception, healing her sisters from the traumas and injustices they were dealt by society- a society she herself never experienced firsthand." As for the other daughters, they "had gone out into the world and had all eventually returned to their mother's home." They become trapped in the "quest-pattern that has dominated Western literature" (Romines). They are unwilling to accept what Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi describes in her book about spirituality and domesticity, *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*, as the "positive face of chaos, a letting go into possibilities that freedom from externally fixed routine allows" and that external routine is the world of male domination and the world of racism. In the novel, the daughters can only face chaos when they reenter their mother's home and re-discover their identity, their spirituality, and their strength. Eventually all of the daughters, including La Loca, experience loss in the collision of their need to create a home space with the destructive forces outside.

where I am born, I fall in the snow you and I cannot open our mouths to the ice house of rules and minutes, quick thoughts of before buildings and I feel muscles in every brick, steel girder, I cannot breathe and try to explain what it feels like to live in a world as an alien. What is our place in the universe at a time that goddess and poet have both made their excuses leaving us biting our nails in the dark trying to turn the highway into a bowl, melting another iceberg with our tongues, "Suck on this," "housework doesn't suck because if it did, men would love it," From a greeting card that was given to a friend. We wait inside Emily's poem, the freezing people walking in circles making our tombstone from a home and we can no longer resign or revision or remember our honey moon.

The first daughter to move away from the home and into the perilous and destructive outside world is Esperanza. She enters her "quest-pattern" when she chooses to leave home and work as a television anchorwoman in Washington, D.C. On the surface, her decision appears sensible: ". . .it was pretty clear to her that there was no need of her on the homefront. Her sisters had recovered" from their encounters with physical and emotional abuse. Esperanza also believes her mother no longer needs her because her father has returned home years after abandoning the family. Esperanza, however, misjudges her own position and the source of power within her family. In turning away from her home, her mother, her sisters, she is turning away from "the great and terrifying mother earth from whom all life emerges, but to whom it likewise all returns" (Rabuzzi). Her sisters continue to need her and her father is as ineffective now as he has always been. Esperanza is deceived by the male values that dominate the outside world in the novel; in turning from the female world of her home space (which her mother and sisters created) to the male world of war, she is moving towards self-destruction and can only return home after she is dead, in the form of a spirit. At first she speaks through La Llorona, who is described in the novel as "a loving mother goddess." La Llorona is a messenger who informs La Loca (they were on a "first-name

basis") that Esperanza has died. After that, Esperanza is seen by all the members of the family including the father who is a bit disturbed by his "transparent daughter. "Sofi sees Esperanza as a little girl who "had had a nightmare and went to be near her mother for comfort." Caridad has one-sided conversations with Esperanza talking mostly about politics, and La Loca sees and talks to her by the river behind their home.

As a spirit, Esperanza returns to the home space to be comforted by her mother and sisters and to also teach them. Once Esperanza becomes a spirit, she is no longer a victim or an object of the white world. She belongs to a world that Anzaldua boldly asserts exists, a spiritual world that "the whites are so adamant in denying." It is no accident that the dead Esperanza communicates with La Llorona, "a woman who had been given a bad rap by every generation of people since the beginning of time. . ." (Castillo). While she lived, Esperanza was also given a "bad rap." But in death, La Llorona is revisioned and so is Esperanza. Both are liberated from the boundaries of white culture. Both can finally return home-and the home can be a river or a mother's arms.

After Esperanza accepts her job in Washington, D.C., she is assigned to Saudi Arabia, a place about to erupt in war. Esperanza accepts this fate because she desires to move away from the home where the "mothers are the ones who actually have to change, feed, and connect with children for all their bodily functions," and move towards the "male saviors" whose "relative absence. . .from homelife automatically places them in a privileged position" (Rabuzzi). It is ironic (or maybe not so ironic) that Esperanza, in choosing the male hero as her modelleaving home, participating in a patriarchal institution, war, because "'it's part of my job'"□is really choosing torture and death. Esperanza is experiencing what Anzaldua aptly describes in La Frontera as "shutting down." She is living with the fear of rejection from the outside culture and she is also living with the fear of losing her home, her mother, "La Raza." Esperanza experiences this psychic paralysis. She is a woman of color who is:

Alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the
dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel
safe with the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't
respond, her face caught between los intersticios, the
spaces between the different worlds she inhabits.

It is only after Esperanza has died that she can return to her "mother culture."

Smoothing the sheets down on the bed,
stroking a window pane,
carrying a book to the table
and I think of hands making him soup,
carrying dirty underwear to the washing machine,
ripping lettuce under cold water,
stretching the chicken legs apart,
slamming the ice tray against the table,
holding, pushing, patting, kneading,

punching the pillow down under my stomach and
looking at the light spilling out to the street,
"you are not my mother and you never will be,"
tasting my blood with honey
on my finger, around the corners of my mouth
and I wonder how I have lasted another
moon cycle
in this place.

Fe is another one of the daughters in *So Far From God* who chooses a patriarchal institution that moves her away from her home space and eventually destroys her. Fe chooses marriage and in a literal and symbolic way, it poisons her to death.

The daughter who chooses marriage, chooses to create a new domestic environment echoes the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Persephone does leave her mother but she eventually returns to her for at least some of the year's cycle:

Persephone therefore has two homes: her home of origins with her mother and her present adult home with her husband. Because the story is told from the perspective of her mother, Persephone's homecoming is her ascent to Demeter, not her descent to Hades. (Rabuzzi)

Anzaldua discusses her own separation and return to her origins which involves the dance of rebelling, celebrating, and defending aspects of her own Chicana culture. She asserts that it was necessary for her to leave home in order "to live life on my own." Yet she concludes, "in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because lo mexicano is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back." Fe, in marrying Casimiro and moving to the land of "the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart and the VCR," is trying in her own way to return to her mother but she cannot truly find her way back because of her inability to view her home and her culture in all of its complexity. She can only look at her mother's home and her sisters as a source of embarrassment or pity:

As it was, while Fe had a little something to talk to
Esperanza about, she kept away from her other sisters,
her mother, and the animals, because she just didn't
understand how they could all be so self-defeating,
so unambitious.

Fe wants desperately to re-vision her mother's home by making it sterile, shiny, closer to the definition of home by mainstream white culture. She cannot see the spiritual richness in her home. In fact, Fe describes one of her sisters, La Loca, as "a soulless creature" because she always wears the same clothes and doesn't bother with shoes. For herself, Fe insists on imitating the mainstream culture with a considerable amount of effort: "Fe was beyond reproach. She maintained her image above all-from the organized desk at work to weekly manicured fingernails and a neat coiffure." Anzaldua

points out that fear is the cause of this denial of home, a kind of "homophobia." She states:

We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. . .To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts in the shadows. Which leaves only one fear□that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage.

At the beginning of the novel, Fe embraces mainstream white culture; she wants to be like the white women she works with. She chooses "three gabachas" from her job to be her bridesmaids instead of her sisters. But instead of gaining any power, she ends up wrapped in the shower curtain, screaming her way back to the matriarchal circle of her mother and sisters. Her first boyfriend, Tom, decides he isn't ready for intimacy and commitment. And it is her mother and her sisters who become the healers and nurse, who clean and pray over Fe. Fe loses her voice as a result of her constant screaming yet she still does not learn how to integrate her home space with the world outside.

Eventually, Fe marries one of her cousins, Casimiro. She still desires to live in a suburb in a house that does not smell the way her mother's house smells.

Fe's journey does end back at home and she is finally able to see her home as a source of comfort, wisdom and spirituality but it is only after the outside world has done its best to destroy her. After being exposed unknowingly to a very toxic chemical, Fe goes home to die:

A year from the time of her wedding, everything ended, dreams and nightmares alike, for that daughter of Sofi who had all her life sought to escape her mother's depressing home-with its smell of animal urine and hot animal breath and its couch and cobijas that itched with ticks and fleas; where the coming and goings of the vecinos had become routine because of her mom's mayoral calling. . .Despite all this and more, Fe found herself wanting to go nowhere else but back to her mom and La Loca and even to the animals to die just before her twenty-seventh birthday. Sofia's chaotic home became a sanctuary from the even more incomprehensible world that Fe encountered that last year of her pathetic life.

In Fe's chase for the American Dream, she only finds infertility, deception, and ultimately a death that unlike her sisters' deaths, offers no spiritual transformation or resurrection: "Fe just died. And when someone dies that plain dead, it is hard to talk about."

Caridad, the other sister who leaves, like Fe and Esperanza also finds violence and ultimate destruction in the world outside the home. Early in the novel Caridad is physically attacked. It is a brutal sexual invasion, an attack on the female body:

Sofi was told that her daughter's nipples had been
bitten off. She had also been scourged with something,
branded like cattle. Worst of all, a tracheotomy
was performed because she had also been stabbed in
the throat.

Caridad's attack is treated by her society as merely a cause for prayer, because "the mutilation of the lovely young woman was akin to martyrdom." And it is treated with contempt by the police department who felt she deserved what she got because of her sexual promiscuity. In the end Caridad is "left in the hands of her family, a nightmare incarnated." Caridad's attack is an attack on the female, on what is closest to home□death, birth, blood. According to Anzaldua in *Borderlands/ La Frontera* :

The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and
blood in her stomach (she bleeds every month but
does not die), by virtue by being in tune with nature's
cycles, is feared. Because, according to Christianity
and most major religions, woman is carnal, animal,
and closer to the undivine, she must be protected.
Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the
other. She is man's recognized nightmarish pieces, his
Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into a
frenzy of anger and fear.

Caridad becomes "the stranger, the other" when she is attacked, and she is only healed through her sisters and mother at home. She floats through the living room wearing Fe's wedding gown and is beautiful again; her wounds all vanish because La Loca prays for her. She moves into a transcendent world by no longer existing as an object for the world. Instead, Caridad meets an older woman, Dona Felicia, a surrogate mother who teachers her to become a healer. Dona Felicia is the one who points out the power that Caridad and her family possess:

All they did at the hospital was patch you up and send
you home, more dead than alive. It was with the help
of God, heaven knows how He watches over that
house where you come from. . . .

Therefore, it is through the rituals of the home that Caridad enters into a spiritual life. Caridad's renewed life "became a rhythm of scented baths, tea remedies, rubdowns, and general good feeling." She makes particular chores like dusting her altar and her statues and pictures of saints, taking baths, and cleaning her incense brazier part of her spiritual life. She takes on the role of a priestess, who "enacts her purification rites primarily for her own benefit" (Rabuzzi).

In the outside dominant culture where "We've been taught that the spirit is outside our bodies or above our heads somewhere up in the sky with God" (Anzaldua), Caridad's actions may be perceived as "cultlike" or even superstitious. But for women of color, her actions not only contradict what hooks identified as "white bourgeois norms (where home is conceptualized as politically neutral space)," they re-connect and re-member the home to the body to the spirit.

Caridad's mentor, Dona Felicia, creates a home in her trailer that is overflowing with the smells of beans cooking and incense burning. She is creating in her home "the spiritual life and ceremonies of multi-colored people" (Anzaldua) and is moving out of the "consciousness of duality" (Anzaldua). There is nothing neutral about her home (as there is nothing neutral about Sofi's home, filled with the smells of animals). They do not imitate the white culture with the "white sterility they have in their kitchens, bathrooms, hospitals, mortuaries and missile bases" (Anzaldua). Instead, Caridad and Dona Felicia's homes echo Anzaldua's words on institutionalized religions and home:

Institutionalized religion fears trafficking with the spirit world and stigmatizes it as witchcraft. . . . In my own life, the Catholic Church fails to give meaning to my daily acts, to my continuing encounters with the 'other world.' It and other institutionalized religions impoverish all life, beauty, pleasure.

Anzaldua also writes about her own home rituals and how they are strongly connected to her creative and spiritual life:

I make my offerings of incense and cracked corn, light my candle. In my head I sometimes will say a prayer□ an affirmation and a voicing of intent. Then I run water, wash the dishes or my underthings, take a bath, or mop the kitchen floor.

Despite Caridad's rejection of institutionalized religions and her attempts to create a protective home space for herself, whether it is in a trailer or in a cave, she is again terrorized by the outside world. The woman she loves, Esmeralda, is raped by Francisco, a man who is obsessed with Caridad. Because of this man's desire to own a woman at any cost, because of his "machismo," which Anzaldua defines as a need to "put down women and even to brutalize them" (a concept which Anzaldua connects to racism and shame), Caridad and Esperanza both commit suicide at Acoma. They go to Acoma after Esmeralda's attack, and when Caridad realizes that Esmeralda was violated, and that Francisco followed them, they hold hands and jump off the mesa and are taken by Tsichtinako, "the Invisible One who had nourished the first two humans, who were also both females." This spirit leads both women back to the womb, back to a safe home: not out toward the sun's rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever.

we cannot talk, it is better to only hear
the water running in the kitchen sink
dreaming of rooms and you sitting
across from me saying "yes, yes
I will defend you, I know exactly what I will say"
but after you leave your words change,
you lie and eat food my dead grandmother prepares and
I know I must change all my poems now,
throwing books at you in front of my parents' house
and you laugh and hold your breath waiting
for the hysterical woman to stop so you can
go on walking down the street,
so you can go on driving in the car,
so you can go on your horse
to another town and fuck another woman
with your words, your money and your gun.

As long as woman is put down, the Indian and the Black in all of us is put down. The struggle of the mestiza is above all a feminist one. As long as los hombres think they have to chingar mujeres and each other to be men, as long as men are taught that they are superior and therefore culturally favored over la mujer, as long as to be a vieja is a thing of derision, there can be no real healing of our psyches. We're halfway there□we have such love of the Mother, the good mother. The first step is to unlearn the puta/virgin dichotomy and to see CoatlapopeuhCoatlicue in the Mother, Guadalupe. (Anzaldua)

The two women in the novel who do not leave home are the mother, Sofi, and one daughter, La Loca. Both women look to their home space as a source for spiritual growth and as a reconnection between their own culture and the outside dominating culture. Neither Sofi nor Loca desire the objects, the static role or the sterile, domestic environment of mainstream white culture. They are rooted in their own history and at the same time, they accept their world in its playful state of constant change, and contradictions. This tension between rootedness and flexibility is observed by Anzaldua in *Borderlands/ La Frontera:*

Los Chicanos, how patient we seem, how very patient.
. . We know how to survive. When other races
have given up their tongue, we've kept ours. We know
what it is to live under the hammer blow of the
dominant norteamericano culture. But more than we
count the blows, we count the days the weeks the
years the centuries the eons until the white laws and
commerce and customs will rot in the deserts they've
created, lie bleached. Humildes yet proud, quietos yet
wild, nosotros los mexicanos-Chicanos will walk by
the crumbling ashes as we go about our business.
Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet

possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable,
we, the mestizas and mestizos, will remain.

Sofi was married to a gambler, Domingo, who was:

little by little betting away the land she [Sofi] had
inherited from her father, and finally she couldn't take
no more and gave him his walking papers. Just like
that, she said, 'Go, hombre, before you leave us all out
on the street

Domingo returns years later and attempts to win back Sofi's affection but she has no desire to share a life with him again. She will no longer accept his perceptions as law: "'And don't call me 'silly Sofi' no more neither.' . . . 'Do I look like a silly woman to you, Domingo?'" Sofi is participating in what Norma Alarcon describes as "the ironically erotic dance that Castillo's speaking subjects often take up with men"; however, Sofi is no longer allowing herself to be victimized by the dance.

Domingo makes the mistake of losing Sofi's house in a gambling bet and that is one mistake Sofi cannot forgive, for her identity, her history is her house:

But the house, that home of mud and straw and stucco
and in some places brick□which had been her mother's
and father's and her grandparents', for that matter,
and in which she and her sister had been born and
raised□that house had belonged to her.

Domingo's insensitivity and carelessness concerning this loss is what finally pushes Sofi to file divorce papers. She also manages to hold on to her house. Like the matriarchal goddess, Hestia, who will not allow any god to "share her strictly matriarchal province," and who nurtures a fire in the hearth that was "the center of the earth," (Walker), Sofi cannot let the fires in her home go out or let the fires consume her in rage. In her book, *The Sacred and the Feminine,* Rabuzzi describes this balancing act of the housewife who must carefully dance between her own home rituals, which includes spirituality, and outside influence:

. . .all the domestic rites a housewife performs are
designed to maintain Hestia's fire properly. If she
allows the fire to go out, her house is no longer a
home. . .if a homemaker allows the fire to rage out of
control, her home will vanish along with its physical
embodiment. (Rabuzzi)

Sofi balances her dedication to her home, her duty to "La Loquita, her eternal baby" and her devotion to herself when she decides to finally bring closure to her failed marriage. Sofi does not act in a fit of rage; in fact with a charitable and flexible nature, she offers him a small house in Chimayo (which was built for Caridad). She may not want to be married to Domingo but she refuses to see him homeless.

This balancing act is also evident when Sofi, despite the fact that her own grandparents built the house, accepts an arrangement with the judge who won the house in a cockfight. He allows Sofi to "reside in her own home after she agreed to pay him a modest rent."

Like her mother, La Loca uses the home space as a source of spiritual nourishment and a source of strength. Loca does all her work, whether it is healing her sisters or talking to La Llorona, within the domestic sphere. While living in her mother's home, Loca becomes a mythic force in her own right. She becomes a player in a scene far older and larger than her individual self. No longer does she participate in profane historical time; instead she is participating in mythic time (Rabuzza). Loca visits hell, heals her sisters Fe and Caridad, and can smell other people's agony. She participates in a "mortal collision between the rituals of a house" (Romines) when she describes to Sofi how she can smell her father's spiritual pain:

Mom, 'La Loca said, 'I smell my dad. And he was
in hell, too. . . .
Mom, I been to hell. You never forget that smell.
And my dad. . .he was there, too.'
'So you think I should forgive your dad for
leaving me, for leaving us all those years?'
Sofi asked.
'Here we don't forgive, Mom. . . . Only in hell do
we learn to forgive and you got to die
first. . . . Mom, hell is where you go to
see yourself.
This dad out there, sitting watching T.V., he was
in hell a long time.'

Loca, like Hestia, is a virgin who is "the representative of pure homelife" (Rabuzzi). Since her experience of death and resurrection at age three, Loca never leaves home, and she only allows her mother to come close to her. She never went to school, to mass, to any social activity. Her entire world is the house, the stalls, and the river by the house. She does not attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture like her sisters, Fe and Esperanza. She plays the violin without having to go to a teacher outside the home; she just learns using her own ability and talent. Loca doesn't rely on mainstream institutions for anything, whether it be to gain knowledge or spirituality in her life.

Yet the world comes to Loca in the shape of a disease, AIDS. Castillo does not explain how Loca contracts the disease, which adds to Loca's role in the novel as a character who is larger than her own self (Rabuzzi). The disease, which Castillo describes as the "Murder of the Innocent," seeks Loca out.

In the end, like Caridad, Loca is taken away by a female deity, the Lady in Blue who is wearing a horsehair vest under her habit. The lady can be Guadalupe, La Llorona, "My-

Mother-Who-Gives" Coatlicue□all aspects of the goddess who was "usurped of ancient feminine prerogatives" (Walker) by the outside culture but has found a voice within the home space. Loca, within her domestic sphere, is still disrupted by the racism and sexism of the patriarchy. She is the representative feminist healer and speaker operating from within the home. She is also the queer that Anzaldua speaks about when she says, "People, listen to what your joteria is saying." And because of the disease she contracts, a disease of the postmodern world, she, like her sisters, Esperanza, Fe and Caridad, is a representative victim of the patriarchy. For only Sofi remains at the end of the novel, as the president of Mothers of Martyrs and Saints, an organization that worships another symbol of the home, the womb.

I wanted to write about this dream and call it
"peeling garlic" smelling my fingers
hours after I cooked
and no, I do not believe women would start a war
because they are not looking
at the beginning or the end

What is home? Is it "the space in which you feel secure enough to be most fully yourself" (Rabuzzi)? Is domestic ritual only a private act? "I am writing a book, performing a public act that seems a far cry from my turkey dressing," writes Romines. Is it? What do women learn in the home? Is the "place where all that truly mattered in life took place-the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith" (hooks). Anzaldua writes, "I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry home on my back." I stand outside, bleeding. I watch the lunar eclipse, a heavy moon pulling on my womb; the moon is slowly disappearing above my house, and I hear my baby breathing under my skin. Five months ago, home for him was my body. I want to join the voices of the private and public that will not look at what is done in the home as disconnected to what is done outside the home, that will not disconnect the female body from the female spirit. I want to join the force "making a new culture□una cultura mestiza□with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture" (Anzaldua).

Source: Carmela Delia Lanza, "Hearing the Voices: Women and Home and Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*," in *MELUS,* Vol. 23, No. 1, Spring, 1998, pp. 65-79.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #4

In her review of Ana Castillo's novel So Far From God*, Theresa Delgadillo describes how Castillo, through the voices of four Chicano women, presents "women as agents of social change," challenging cultural, political, and religious forms of oppression.*

Ana Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far from God* counters a pervasive stereotype of Chicanas as passive individuals victimized by oppression or subordinated by a patriarchal church by presenting a cast of female characters who resist domination every day of their lives□though some days more successfully than others. The awakenings that these characters experience emerge from a continual battle against subjugation in which they shift the terms and tactics of their struggle as circumstances permit. The novel insists that the transformative effort of human life engaged in struggle also finds expression in the spiritual, metaphysical, and religious life of the oppressed. Through an emphasis on communities of women, a Chicana feminism fueled by a womancentered spirituality emerges to challenge the subjugation of women within and without Chicana/o cultures, the marginalization of other sectors of U.S. society, and the destruction of the environment. Because it highlights the centrality of hybrid spirituality in the lives of characters engaged in cultural and political resistance, the novel challenges pervasive notions of religion as an obstacle to progressive action and perceptions of the sway of Catholicism in Chicana communities. It also asks us to see cultural resistance alongside political resistance, and to recognize women as agents of social change.

So Far from God tells the story of a family of women including Sofi, a single mother for much of her daughters' lives, and her four daughters: Esperanza, a political activist and broadcast journalist; Caridad, who is first a nurse's aide, then a battered woman, and, finally, a *curandera* (healer); Fe, a jilted bride whose job as a factory worker leads to her death by cancer; and Loca, a childhood saint, a recluse, and a healer.

Through its depiction of these lives the novel creates what Ramón Saldívar terms an "oppositional ideological form" that can serve "both a unifying communal function as well as an oppositional and differentiating end." Saldívar argues that Chicano narrative goes beyond realism to facilitate social change by systematically uncovering "the underlying structures by which real men and women may either perpetuate or reformulate" the "world of social hardship and economic deprivation." Castillo's novel embraces the creative and transformative truth-telling that Saldívar sees as characteristic of Chicano narrative.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #5

Central in this process is the recovery of the india/mestiza voice, what Norma Alarcón describes as the "recodification of the native woman" essential to a sense of self and communal identity that can combat cultural, political, social, and economic oppression. In many ways, this novel follows the lead established by Alarcón in her seminal article, "Chicana's Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzin/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object," by retracing, albeit fictionally, a history of india/mestiza women's subjugation and resistance. For Loca and Esperanza, in particular, the hybrid spirituality they practice becomes one with their political action. The link between their faith and their action parallels the practice of liberation theology, as, for example, in Nicaragua, where Christians were inspired by their faith to participate in a revolution (Betto). As in the exercise of liberation theology, this hybrid spirituality makes concrete the connection between the spiritual and the material, and between the personal and the public not only for Loca and Esperanza, but for Caridad, Fe, and Sofi as well. However, the radical nature of this hybrid spirituality's challenge to the status quo arises not from a reinterpretation of Christianity, but from its embrace of both indigenous and Christian elements. In the Americas, a sense of the abiding validity of native beliefs and practices springs both from existence in the materiality (topography, landscape) of these continents and their human communities, as well as from the uninterrupted insistence of native populations on defining the world and themselves, that is, from their history of resistance to oppression. Castillo's novel more specifically links itself to what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the "Indian woman's history of resistance," creating a narrative that corresponds to Arnold Krupat's conception of "anti-imperial translation" because, like Native American literature, it is "saturated with the worldviews and the performative conventions of traditional, oral, Native American expressive genres" (Krupat). The acceptance of Christianity and native beliefs allows for the incorporation of diverse ways of knowing and interpreting the world.

Although the novel offers examples of religious syncretism, which are inevitable where hybrid spirituality is possible, it does not take a syncretic view of spirituality. That is, it does not attempt to fuse divergent spiritual and religious practices into a unified whole. Instead, the novel emphasizes differing traditions and practices coexisting in the same world as aspects of the multiple subjectivities that define its characters. Though divergent traditions inform the lives of the characters in *So Far from God*, Castillo often takes the "heterodoxical stance" toward both indigenous- and Christian-inspired practices that Kimberly Blaeser notes is also a feature of much Native American fiction.

This novel asserts that indigenous cosmologies and perspectives that challenge not only Western conceptions of history as linear and teleological but also Western notions of progress form an essential component of resistance. It thereby challenges Western epistemology, particularly what Ashis Nandy terms the "unilinear pathway from primitivism to modernity, and from political immaturity to political adulthood, which the ideology of colonialism would have the subject society and the 'child races' walk." Because the hybridity that results is neither accomodationist nor assimilationist, but disruptive, the novel's religious interlacing becomes a site for radical change.

BOOKRAGS

In the Americas that "unilinear pathway" became the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, and, as Castillo deftly conveys in relation to one community and one family in *So Far from God*, its achievements were far from progress for those whose suffering was their price. These accomplishments include the genocide and subjugation of indigenous peoples from New England to Hawaii, the institution of chattel slavery, the Mexican-American War, and the invasions of Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Grenada, and Panama.

The novel's stress on the harm caused by such notions of progress rests on both this negative history and the continued presence of Western conceptions of progress in the lives of its characters. Yet, the novel challenges those conceptions by emphasizing not one past but many, and by bringing these into the present. The narrative offers stories about past events, such as the Mexican Revolution and the Chicano student movement, that reveal the officially unrecognized role of women. Castillo's characters also occasionally become the figures of indigenous myths□new versions of old stories. Finally, Sofi and Esperanza both confront patriarchal views of their roles and lives only by remembering their own past. Homi Bhabha argues that in "redefining the signifying relation to a disjunctive 'present'" by "staging the past as *symbol*, myth, memory, history, the ancestral□but a past whose iterative *value as sign* reinscribes the 'lessons of the past' into the very textuality of the present," the postcolonial subject, the subordinated, the native, determines her "identification with" and "interrogation of" modernity. She has agency. Castillo's narrative undoubtedly creates Chicana characters who actively participate in the construction of their world, yet the text goes beyond questioning to confront, as Nandy has described it, the responsibility that Western conceptions of history, progress, and political economy bear for the "genocides, ecodisasters and ethnocides" that have affected the entire globe. From this perspective flows Nandy's "defence of non-modern cultures and traditions" as integral to resistant hybridity, a position that Castillo's text also sustains.

Practitioners of the hybrid spirituality of *So Far from God* accept multiple forms and systems of knowledge, including the intuitive, mythical, native, psychic, folkloric, spiritual, material, and rational, as well as traditional practices and ceremonies. The novel's identification with indigenous cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions speaks to the complexity of the experience of the colonized and oppressed. Its hybridity expresses this life experience□ not the genetic makeup□of subordinated groups, and in so doing it challenges the corruption, exploitation, and environmental destruction of the strictly rational center from its previously silenced margins.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* James Scott argues that subordinate or marginalized populations seek to improve or reverse the conditions of their subordination both covertly and overtly; his discussion clarifies the link between seeming submission and overt rebellion. As Scott explains, "relations of domination are, at the same time, relations of resistance." This continual negotiation of power reveals itself in both the public roles played by the powerful and powerless as well as the private roles and practices each group allows itself when "hidden" from view of others. Although Scott does not suggest that the privacy from which one critiques power necessarily requires a particular physical space, spatialization of resistance can be important. For

example, domestic space□gendered as the space of women□or barrio space can nurture covert resistance to domination, not because these are "safe" sites (they often are not), but because they are mostly hidden from the view of dominants. Scott's discussion of what he terms the "hidden transcript," the exchanges, communications, and actions of each group invisible to the others allows us to see subordinate group members not simply as victims who are not yet aware of their own oppression, but as actors engaged in a process of struggle that sometimes has room to erupt publicly. Scott sees in the religious practices of subordinate groups their imaginative capacity "to reverse or negate dominant ideologies." This ideological resistance is not limited to the locus of the hidden transcript, but also asserts itself in public and may influence a dominant group to accept a practice of subordinates in order to protect the public performance of their power. In this novel the home functions as the restricted space where the hidden transcript can unfold, while the community of Tome shifts between public and restricted space. Here we see women attempting, in myriad ways and with varying degrees of success, to deflect subordination and to effect changes that will gain them power.

Through an exploration of the experiences, perspectives, and imaginations of subordinated populations, Scott, Bhabha, and Nandy challenge notions of subjectivity and culture as static and unitary, and of culture as the terrain of dominants alone. Unlike the concept of syncretism, which emphasizes the reconciliation of diverse beliefs, systems, or practices in a new form, the conceptions of cultural hybridity that these theorists offer allow us to recognize the heterogeneity and ongoing negotiations that constitute culture in general, and the unique way in which this is performed in Castillo's text.

Given the contentious history of the Chicana/o population in U.S., it is not surprising that much of its literature is politically charged or deals with political, economic, social, and cultural resistance to oppression. It is not unusual for the literature of this heterogeneous community to grapple with con- flicting claims and demands, for its characters engage a discourse of identity in which issues of power and opposition to the dominant society are central. Consequently, Chicana/o literature has demonstrated a preoccupation with the multiplicity of subject positions that colonized and oppressed people must of necessity occupy in their experiences. In this respect, Castillo's novel is no exception, representing a virtual catalog of the subjectivities, often in opposition to one another, in Chicana communities. Alarcón suggests that this is one of Castillo's trademarks ("Sardonic Powers"), while Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano notes that Castillo's characters perform what Anzaldúa terms mestiza consciousness, whereby individual subjects "speak from a multiplicity of positions." However, *So Far from God* also expands our definitions of what constitutes "resistance," of what is "political," and of who is capable of effecting social change by focusing on the defiance that characterizes the family of women at its center and the insurgency that erupts as they engage in ongoing battles.

Critical Essay #6

The death of the child La Loca and her funeral are powerful opening images that indicate clearly and strongly the direction of this story. From unexplained violence to Sleeping-Beauty-like death, then to rebellion, which transforms her to a living and respected female healer, La Loca's journey in the first few pages presages the journeys of each of her sisters and her mother in the rest of the novel.

Significantly, La Loca's journey is four-part and she is also one of four sisters/daughters□Loca, Fe, Caridad, and Esperanza. The number four is particularly important in many Native American cosmologies because it represents the earth's directions and air currents. It is symbolic of a balance of elements, including both the material and spiritual, as well as the links between them. In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen cites numerous examples of the prevalence of four as an organizing number in ritual and ceremony of many Native American nations. In *Literature of the American Indian*, edited by Sanders and Peek, documents, stories, and poems from diverse tribes also attest to the widespread use of the number four as an organizing principle in oratory and literature. In fact, Allen believes that the uses of the number four among Laguna and other nations indicates that "four is a categorical symbolstatement about the primacy of female power in tribal ritual life" (*The Sacred Hoop*).

The prevalence of fours in this text de-emphasizes the centrality of Catholic hierarchy, and yet coexists with the three of the Holy Trinity that Father Jerome represents. Despite his strict devotion, or perhaps because of it, the priest appears to be little more than a figurehead, unable to establish a relationship with La Loca, either at her resurrection or later in her life. Father Jerome is also notably absent from the Holy Friday procession in chapter 15 that melds spiritual with cultural and political resistance. His religion is a rarefied practice, divorced from the material, emotional, and social world around him. However, as the novel demonstrates, it is not the priest or the Catholic hierarchy who determine what faith is nor how it is practiced.

The opening scene of the novel frames the issue of woman-centered healing in opposition to the patriarchal church that predominates throughout the narrative. Loca's resurrection as well as her ability to fly to the top of the church confound Father Jerome, who asks her, "Are you the devil's messenger or a winged angel?" (Castillo). Father Jerome's words have several effects. Unsure about what he sees, he asks for clarification and thereby implicates Loca, a female, in deception. Second, his question calls attention to the possible presence of a dangerous power as well as a healing one, emphasizing a dualistic view of good and evil. Third, his question reflects a preoccupation with the institution and doctrine of the church rather than its adherents.

Father Jerome, "a little concerned about the grieving mother," stops the funeral from proceeding into the church, despite the intense outdoor heat, because he wants to avoid a scene inside. Father Jerome's decision to detain the funeral procession outside, in 118□degree heat, for what, as our narrator tells us, is a lecture on "funeral decorum" reveals how, for him, doctrine comes before people. Sofi's intense grief is juxtaposed

with this callous act of a representative of what he claims is a compassionate institution. Despite his sermon, Sofi cries out in agony over what is to her the inexplicable death of her daughter.

Sofi's cry challenges Father Jerome's sermon and insists on her own right and ability to "know" why her daughter has died. Her very human reaction of grief and the stir it creates could also well be the catalyst for waking Loca up from the "dead," or what is later described as a type of epileptic coma. Hence, Sofi's action also has practical repercussions in changing the course of events because Loca does awaken, to the surprise and fear of all present, and ascends to the church roof, primarily to avoid contact with Father Jerome. This striking scene suggests that Castillo is engaged in revisionism on a small scale, substituting a Chicana resurrection for Christ's resurrection, and accordingly creating an alternate religious history or perhaps a new myth. La Loca's resurrection at the beginning of the novel indicates that this will be a story about the recovery of Chicana power and voice. Perhaps, in keeping with Jarold Ramsey's view of how myths tell their audience "who they are," Loca's resurrection, and Sofi's role in bringing it about, speaks to Chicanas about their individual and collective qualities.

When Father Jerome suggests that Loca might be a messenger of the devil, Sofi defends Loca, and by extension herself and every other woman, and scolds the priest, rejecting his authority to name or define the phenomenon before him. Sofi's action here, while mildly censured by the surrounding crowd, is indicative of the kind of independence of spirit that her daughters inherit.

The third challenge to Father Jerome's authority to interpret faith occurs when the priest calls La Loca down from the roof of the building and tells her, "we'll all pray for you." Loca does float down to the ground but corrects the father, saying, "Remember, it is I who am here to pray for you." By insisting on the miraculousness of her experience and her communion with other realms, Loca insists on her spiritual power and agency. She is a character whose very presence refutes the Church's propositions that she is either merely a victim, offered by Father Jerome, or the product of an ignorant family and community, a position later taken by the Bishop.

The three challenges to the doctrine represented by Father Jerome comprise strong evidence of Castillo's revisionism. In this case, she has placed Father Jerome in the position of St. Peter, who denies his association with Jesus three times follow ing the Last Supper. In the Bible, Peter realizes his error and repents, but Father Jerome experiences no such realization about the power or equality of women. After many unsuccessful attempts to bring La Loca into his flock, he decides to take "pity on her and finally dismisse[s] Loca as a person who [is] really not responsible for her mind."

Critical Essay #7

Loca's funeral procession is only one of several important public rituals in the novel. A second important procession is the pilgrimage to Chimayo or Tsimayo. The alternate spellings and different pronunciations of this sacred site—"ch" versus "ts"—highlight the distinction between Catholic and indigenous traditions of worship at this site: Castillo uses the "ch" spelling when describing *doña* Felicia's annual Lenten Week trip, but offers the "ts" spelling when locating the site within "the land of the Tewa." Embedded in each spelling of the word is a distinct cultural, social, political, and economic history of divergent populations defining the same space for themselves. Although the use of the Spanish sound "ch" may appear to be simply an attempt to render the sound of native pronunciation in Spanish, the effort to make the word part of the Spanish language becomes emblematic of the adoption of indigenous religious practice. The word, however, comes from a native language, although there have been varied opinions on its origin and meaning: "The word chimayo is seemingly Maya in origin. It meant the dark wood of a tree particularly favored by cabinet makers in their work. Others claim it to be a Tewa word meaning 'good flaking stone'" (Stanley).

Caridad, beginning her apprenticeship as a *curandera* , accompanies *doña* Felicia on the pilgrimage. The narrative informs us of the history of worship at Tsimayo/Chimayo as well as the later Catholic adoption of the site as sacred. Both the Catholic Our Lord of Esquipulas and the natural earth are worshipped at Tsimayo/Chimayo, but the narrative emphasizes this Catholic adoption of native practice when it describes the long lines of Catholics waiting to collect a little bit of the holy earth that heals from a small dirt well in the chapel. Historically, the worship of Our Lord of Esquipulas at this site began in the latter half of the eighteenth century, although native peoples had valued the "curing potentials of the mud and dirt" at Tsimayo/ Chimayo since before the arrival of whites (Stanley), a resource embraced later by Catholics who referred to the site as the "Lourdes of New Mexico" (Stanley).

Caridad, in making the pilgrimage, understands that "the Catholic Church endorsed as sacred what the Native peoples had known all along since the beginning of time" (Castillo). Her attitude toward the Church's adoption of the veneration at Tsimayo/ Chimayo is ironic, meant to draw our attention to the social and economic reasons for such a gesture on the part of the Catholic Church. Her comment also points to the convergence of religious practices and beliefs in the site itself and among the people there—a syncretic rather than hybrid site for many who worship there (but not including Caridad) because it fuses two spiritual traditions.

The devotion at Tsimayo/Chimayo also suggests other instances of Catholic acceptance of native practice, especially Guadalupe worship. A common view of this practice, expressed by Saldívar, regards it as a manifestation of Catholic hegemony over Mexican women: "the holy mother Catholic Church has enforced on Mexican women a cultural model of passivity and guilt figured in the Virgin of Guadalupe to ensure their allegiance to a transcendental, phallocentric Logos." Castillo's novel, however, asks us to see in the worship of Our Lady of Guadalupe not the ever-brilliant colonizers duping

those poor Indians, but instead the possibility that an indigenous practice continues under a different name: "Just like a country changed its name, so did the names of their legends change" (Castillo). Many have argued that the worship of Guadalupe is the Catholic version or name for "Tonantzin, the mother goddess of the Mexica, whose temple or center of devotion was at the hill of Tepeyac" (Poole), and who was "sometimes identified with two other mother deities, Coatlicue (serpent skirt) and Cihuacoatl (woman serpent)" (Poole).

Guadalupe-worship illustrates how a type of covert critique of domination by subordinates□the assertion of agency in maintaining one's ability to define the world that is inherent in the maintenance of native cosmologies and epistemologies by colonized populations□can become part of the public transcript of power relations. The sixteenth-century historian of pre-Hispanic life in Mexico, Bernardino de Sahagún, "considered the devotion itself to smack of neopaganism." (Poole). Instead of a clever ploy by the conquering Spaniards to convert the Indians, Guadalupe worship appeared to at least some of those conquering Spaniards to show that, in fact, the Indians had transformed one of their indigenous deities into an object of the Spaniards' worship.

Contemporary Chicana critical theory and Chicana visual and literary art have altered our view of the syncretism of Guadalupe worship, encouraging us to revalue the survival of native female power in this figure. Anzaldúa suggests that the veneration of Guadalupe may have origins in the matrilineal Azteca/Mexica culture that was overturned by Aztec centralization and forced into a covert existence, a view that problematizes any notion of a romantically unified indigenous past and expands our understanding of that past by identifying indigenous women's resistance. The analogy that Castillo's text creates between Caridad and La Virgen de Guadalupe brings the history of Indian women's resistance into the present: the dark-skinned Caridad who has suffered beating and mutilation, who has begun an apprenticeship as *curandera,* and who has rediscovered love for women, is taken for a saint and compared both to Guadalupe and the Apache woman warrior Lozen when discovered alone on the mountain to which she retreated.

Historically, Our Lady of Guadalupe has been deployed in the service of both accommodation, that is, to win Indian converts to the Church, and rebellion, to symbolize Mexican nationalism against Spanish domination in the revolution launched by Miguel Hidalgo in 1810 and to figure native claims to land and other rights for Emiliano Zapata's army a century later (Poole). In the 1960s, members and supporters of the United Farm Workers in California marched under banners of Guadalupe. Playwright Luis Valdez described the significance of this as follows: "The Virgin of Guadalupe was the first hint to farm workers that the pilgrimage [to Sacramento in the spring of 1966] implied social revolution" (qtd. in Chávez). Devotion to her, then, can hardly be characterized simply as an exercise in submission.

Even the seemingly harsh view of the Penitente Brothers becomes a complex exploration of the power relations and cultural values inscribed in the practices of this society:

While it's not every day that you see a crowd following
a Christ-like figure carrying a cross along the
highway (unless your people are from Chimayo or
Tome or similar places throughout the territory controlled
by the Spanish queen and friars for centuries
with such ferocity that neither Mexican nor U.S.
appropriation diluted the religious practices of the
descendants of the Spaniards who settled there, including
this procession that has been performed annually
for two hundred years and will probably go on for
two hundred more, such is their fervent devotion). (Castillo)

This passage emphasizes "control" over territory coupled with the historical facts of Spanish, Mexican, then U.S. appropriation, thereby suggesting that the cultural value of a group practice can shift relative to the political and economic power of that group. The practices of the Penitente Brothers are clearly cultural markers of a now less-powerful population. By also focusing on the "ferocity" of possession and linking it to the depth of cultural practice, the text demonstrates how seemingly contradictory cultural practices can exist side by side because they become embedded in a social and material landscape. The text, therefore, qualifies the notion of complete conquest by revealing the complexity of the past and continued negotiation between dominants and subordinates from the perspective of the native, rather than that of the conqueror.

Critical Essay #8

The affinity with the natural world and natural order characteristic of a native spirituality that these Chicana characters embrace leads to a site of female strength and power in this novel: "La Loca was only three years old when she died. Her mother Sofi woke at twelve midnight to the howling and neighing of the five dogs, six cats, and four horses, whose custom it was to go freely in and out of the house" (Castillo).

The sensitivity of the animals, the intensity of their attempts at communication, and their proximity to the members of the household are striking. Sofi listens, gets up to check the house, and discovers the baby in convulsions. The scene highlights the interconnection between human and animal, and communication between the two, a dialogue that continues throughout the novel, as, for example, when the animals signal that Caridad has fully recovered (Castillo).

Loca subsequently spends much time outdoors and with animals, rather than in the house, indicating her own individual affinity with the surrounding natural world. She is not, however, the only female character who places herself in the natural world instead of the man-made world. She and other women in this novel do so in a very distinct fashion. In a discussion of the relationship between the natural world and humans evident in contemporary women's writing, Alicia Ostriker notes Annette Kolodny's view that "the power of men's fantasies depends consistently on a vision of nature and woman, as alive, fecund, and essentially mindless. Women who identify their own bodies with earth, however, tend not merely to celebrate the concept of fecundity but to link earth's powers with a critical and subversive intelligence, or with the creative imagination itself." For many contemporary female writers "nature [. . .] is always that in which we are embedded rather than that from which we are divided" (Ostriker). The women of *So Far from God*, and in particular the *curanderas*, are examples of the phenomenon in contemporary writing of imagining a relationship to nature different from the one that predominates in our society and of linking this distinctive relationship with another kind of intelligence. This kind of writing eliminates the dichotomy between the individual and what Allen calls the "out there" (*Sacred Hoop*).

Caridad and Esmeralda's leap from the top of the mesa at Acoma poignantly illustrates the idea that humans are of nature, rather than above nature. When Francisco and others look over to see what happened to Esmeralda and Caridad, they don't see anything but hear "the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun's rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever." In this image, the earth is not a coffin, but "alive in the same sense that human beings are alive" (*Sacred Hoop*). This image stands in stark contrast to the Western view of earth as surface, as female body to be exploited.

At first, this scene might appear to minimize the demise of two women who have been stalked by an obviously disturbed man. The text conveys, however, the intertwining relationships between human and natural worlds in its vision of a world beneath ours.

This scene suggests both the Laguna creation story of the four worlds beneath ours from which humans emerged (Silko) and versions of the *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (Sanders and Peek; Allen, *Spider*)stories that challenge the singleminded conception of land as exploitable resource. In the Seneca story, the act of falling is not a metaphorical representation of destruction, but instead a birth into another world and therefore an act of creation (Sanders and Peek). By linking Chicana characters with Native American worldviews, Castillo identifies and valorizes an indigenist aspect of Chicana/o identity. By refusing to sensationalize the demise of Caridad and Esmeralda, the text also counterposes the assumed importance of human death with the often unconsidered issue of destruction of the living earth.

Most importantly, the scene of Caridad and Esmeralda's death contrasts their way of living in this world with that of Francisco el Penitente. The two women share a perspective that helps them understand their world, a spirituality consistently grounded in the landscape and people around them, a religious practice that values their selves and their bodies, and a life dedicated to helping others Esmeralda as a rape counselor and Caridad as a *curandera*. Both women also participate in hybrid worship at Chimayo/Tsimayowhere they first meet.

Francisco, on the other hand, follows another kind of faith. The text describes his initiation into the *santero* (a shaman/artist who creates religious figures and images, a sanctuary-keeper) practice as a move driven by his deep respect and love for the men of his family who had always been "devoted to their homes and land" (Castillo). When Francisco joins his *tío* (uncle) Pedro in the process of creating a *bulto* (a carved or sculpted image of a holy figure or saint)carefully selecting a tree for wood, preparing and carving the wood, harvesting plants and soils for painthe seems, like Caridad, Loca, and even Sofi, to combine contemplative silence and engagement with the surrounding world in his religious practice. Yet the text also suggests that the tradition of creating *bultos*, handed down through the generations, continues to embody the feeling of those first Spanish *santeros* in what is now New Mexico that they were in a "strange land" that was "so far from God."

Later, Francisco's faith becomes increasingly defined by abnegation, as, for example, when he mixes ashes with his food. While working on a *bulto* of San Isidro for a neighbor, his ritual repetition of prayer seems aimed not at focusing on the place where he is but at forgetting and denying that place and his own developing love interest in Caridad. Francisco's veneration of his deceased mother, coupled with his alternating disgust for and adoration of Caridad, comprise the dangerous extremes of the objectification of womenan attitude that is not simply a product of Penitente membership but has multiple sourcesthat will eventually lead him to violence against Caridad and Esmeralda. Francisco's religion is not entirely responsible for everything else in his life, although, at times, he clearly longs for such a situation. The text veers away from stereotyping Francisco as simply a fanatic Penitente by bringing other elements into the picture. His troubled state is, in part, attributable to his service in the Vietnam War, a life-and therefore also faithaltering experience. He also seems to have been the unwitting exotic foil for a privileged young white woman's sexual experimentation. Although we might attribute greater significance to Francisco's war

experience in influencing his later behavior, the example of a short-lived relationship with a white woman serves to remind us of the numerous, perhaps even seemingly trivial, manifestations of his marginalization in Anglo society that affect his individual psyche.

By including a Penitente brother among a cast of characters who practice a home-centered faith, such as Sofi, Loca, and *doña* Felicia, the text offers us another example of an alternative religious tradition: what Anthony Stevens-Arroyo describes as the "indifference to the institutional church" yet "loyalty to Catholic heritage" that has characterized Latino experience over four centuries. Historically, the Penitente societies emerged to lead the communal practice of faith at a time when there were few priests in the region, and the *bultos*, *retablos* (religious altar pieces), and other religious decorative items they produced were not valued by the French and Mexican clergy (Wallis, Ortega, Stanley). Some analyses of Penitente traditions stress their origins in a conceptualization of religious life offered by early Franciscan missionaries in New Mexico (Hewett and Fisher, Wallis). However, Jose Amaro Hernandez cites evidence that suggests Penitente associations were native to New Mexico. A reading of Ramón Gutiérrez's *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away* reveals similarities between Penitente activities and some Pueblo religious practices. According to Hernandez, in addition to religious and spiritual activities, Penitente associations functioned as mutual aid organizations and agricultural cooperatives dedicated to maintaining communities. The traditional institutional schism between the Catholic Church and Penitente societies became even more pronounced in the post-1848 period, when the Catholic Church replaced the primarily Spanish-origin clergy throughout the Southwest with French and Anglo priests, exacerbating the cultural conflict. During this period, Penitente associations were subjected to the combined prejudice of newly arrived Anglo and French Catholic clergy as well as Protestant ministers (Hernandez). Nonetheless, they were for a short time also able to exert some influence on the political events and legislation affecting the now-dispossessed population of Chicanos (Hernandez). Their history as a lay confraternity is, therefore, not devoid of conflict with the institutional Church or surrounding populations; in recent years, Penitentes have again faced discriminatory attacks, this time from hateful vandals. The Penitentes, too, are heirs to a history of resistance to social, political, and cultural domination.

Like the female characters in this novel□each of whom is defined not only by her spiritual practice, but also by her race, class, and gender, that is, by her place in the material world around her□ Francisco is not simply a Penitente. Despite the fact that he carves a *bulto* for a neighboring farmer, his family history, economic opportunities, education, war experience, and social status all contribute to shaping a religious practice that is not primarily concerned with community, but with self-testing. Consequently Francisco leaves this world alone, while Caridad and Esmeralda accompany each other. Francisco's story challenges readers to consider, first, how culpable is religion in Francisco's action? And, second, has the resistant character of a traditional practice been altered through the generations? By bringing Francisco, Caridad, and Esmeralda together to illustrate the contradictions among divergent spiritual practices as they intersect with other aspects of existence, the text rejects a

type of happy-ending fusion of all interests into a superior culture□a sentimental version of multiculturalism□ and instead advocates a greater acceptance of the "American Indian universe" "based on dynamic self-esteem," in contrast to the more widely accepted "Christian universe" that is "based primarily on a sense of separation and loss" (Allen, *Sacred*). Yet it does so without rejecting those aspects of Christianity that have engendered resistance.

The voice that calls to Caridad and Esmeralda as they descend, Tsichtinako or Tse che nako, is Thought Woman in the Keres cosmology, the female spirit and intelligence that is everywhere and is everything, (Allen, *Sacred*), who "is the true creatrix for she is thought itself." The presence of an originary female spirit here, a common figure in Native American belief systems (Allen, *Sacred*), points to the "affirmation of tribal values, tribal thought, and tribal understandings," which "can result in a real decrease in human and planetary destruction and in a real increase in quality of life for all inhabitants of planet earth." In reclaiming a woman-centered spirituality in which women are also healers, Castillo constructs a feminist, indigenist cultural identity, and, as Alvina Quintana points out, deconstructs male cultural paradigms that oppress Chicanas□and everybody else, too (Quintana).

Critical Essay #9

The hybridity that Caridad and Esmeralda display in this text is even more pronounced in the figure of *doña* Felicia, who blends indigenous and Catholic beliefs in the vocations of living and healing. *Doña* Felicia's acceptance of Catholic holy figures and natural spirits parallels that of the Nahuas, who "freely accepted other gods into their pantheon, where they were worshiped together with the ancestral gods" (Poole). *Doña* Felicia's hybrid spirituality also suggests the new mestiza consciousness that Anzaldúa delineates as the hope of the future in an increasingly hybrid universe—a "tolerance for contradictions" fueled by "continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" and creates the possibility for change.

Doña Felicia's embrace of Catholicism comes late in life, and is "based not on an institution but on the bits and pieces of the souls and knowledge of the wise teachers that she met along the way" (Castillo). The narrator describes her faith as "a compromise with the religion of her people" that develops into a greater reverence for God and the Catholic saints. Key in this description of *doña* Felicia is her attentiveness to those around her, for in this way she learns not only about Catholicism, but also about indigenous healing. She later trains Caridad in the skills of observation and listening essential to the practice of a *curandera*, and schools Caridad in the natural elements that can be used in healing. Considering the life that Caridad previously led—drowning her sorrows in alcohol—and the brutal assault that ended this phase of her existence, *doña* Felicia's lessons would also appear to be immediate and sound advice for Caridad.

In this novel women (with the exception of Dr. Tolentino) practice natural medicine primarily in the home, where the hidden transcript unfolds. This space is revealed to be a center of survival, recovery, and self-knowledge. For example, Esperanza returns home after college and the break-up with Cuauhtemoc/Rubén. The sisters, together, help Fe recover from her broken engagement at home, and later, on a visit home, Sofi insists that Fe see a doctor about her poor health. Caridad experiences a miraculous recovery at home following the attack on her. Loca assists each of her sisters through these difficulties, but when her own health fails, she, too, is cared for at home by several pairs of loving hands. That these sisters support and nurture each other in times of need, yet remain childless, strengthens the novel's feminist positioning by replacing the tendency to biologize compassion and nurturance with a depiction of the active formation of solidarity among women who are oppressed. Although these women directly feel the effects of a sexist, racist, and exploitative society, they also manifest the power to heal themselves and their communities through prayer, the application of traditional *remedios* (cures) and action.

Stevens-Arroyo notes the centrality of the home in Latino religious practice, which he attributes to a form of "popular religiosity": "the home-centered aspects of Catholicism are much stronger among Latinos than among Euro-American Catholics, assuming a primacy over clerically dominated and institutionally-based traditions like mass attendance and obedience to the clergy." Stevens-Arroyo maintains that this "home-

centered religion" forms a "resistance against imperialism," particularly in the late 60s and early 70s period of political upheaval. In *So Far from God*, Loca epitomizes what Stevens-Arroyo describes as a Latino variation of Catholicism, but as we have seen, Loca is only one of many healers, all of whom rely on both Catholic and traditional forms of healing, thereby transforming their homes into sites of hybrid healing practice.

Yet Caridad, Esperanza, Fe, and Loca die. Except for Loca's first miraculous resurrection, there are no quick fixes, no easy solutions, no sure cures. Neither the hybrid practice of faith nor indigenous medicine and spirituality can prevent their deaths. And this fact makes this aspect of the text all the more clear: faith, spirituality, and religion are also about how we live in this world, not just about what happens to us after we die.

By privileging indigenous culture and history, and indigenous women's healing practices, the novelist reclaims an aspect of the ancestral past that Ortega and Sternbach call the delineation of "a matriarchal heritage" common in Latina literary discourse, to create agency and subjectivity for her mestiza and native characters. An aspect of Castillo's embrace of this cultural heritage includes her attention to the centrality of the *curandera,* who as Tey Diana Rebolledo suggests, "has emerged as a powerful figure in the writing of women and men" and whose appearance "demonstrates not only her enduring representational qualities as myth and symbol but also the close identification of the culture with her mystic and spiritual qualities."

Critical Essay #10

In *So Far from God*, Caridad, who has fallen into a life of drink and one-night stands with men she meets in bars, suffers a brutal and overpowering physical attack. The narrator reports that some townspeople regard the attack as the natural outcome of what they consider Caridad's questionable behavior, and we are left with the impression that Caridad has learned "the bitter truth" about the violent enforcement of women's second-class status in this society (Ostriker). However, while Castillo shows us the real physical oppression that all women face in the figure of a beaten and mutilated Caridad, she does not simply point the finger at men.

Caridad, Loca, and *doña* Felicia know that

it wasn't a man with a face and a name who had
attacked and left Caridad mangled like a run-down
rabbit. Nor two or three men. That was why she had
never been able to give no information to the police. It
was not a stray and desperate coyote either, but a
thing, both tangible and amorphous. A thing that
might be described as made of sharp metal and
splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment.
It held the weight of a continent and was
indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as
a young wolf.

Rather than the all-too-familiar story of a woman's brutalization, Caridad's experience directs us to the purpose of re-visioning Chicana and Chicano lives, for what is so destructive and evil, always present yet not always easy to pin down, but the sexism of our society? Similar to the power of the state swooping down on an Indian family like a "thing coming out of the sky with barbs and chains" in Louise Erdrich's "American Horse," Castillo's *malogra* (evil spirit) metaphorically describes the force of the institutionalized patriarchal relations that foster disregard for women at every level of society. When these ideas take hold of individuals and then are practiced by them, they can create the kind of violence against women experienced by Caridad. By envisioning the violence against herself as one caused by the *malogra,* Caridad allows us to see it in all its systemic force—it represents the overarching hegemonic discourse of patriarchy to and from which, as Rosaura Sánchez points out, individuals either consent or dissent. Francisco, and even Caridad herself at this point in her life, consent. Castillo thereby illuminates both the real physical threats that women face and the ideological discourse that authorizes that violence.

This episode of Caridad's life, however, does not end with mutilation but with renewal. Sánchez's caution to remember that "human beings are both products and producers of the society they inhabit" speaks directly to Castillo's portrayals of women. Because Caridad shifts from a position of consent to one of dissent in relation to the ideology that endorses violence against her and other women, she demonstrates that both men and

women can alter the underlying reasons for violence against women. The stages of her physical and spiritual transformation pose the challenges of engaging in this process. Looked down upon by the police who found her (Castillo) and "half repaired by modern medical technology" (Castillo)—both highly representative of the dominant power and the difficulty of undertaking to alter that power—Caridad returns home to experience a miraculous recovery while in the care of her sisters and mother. She then dedicates her life to helping others by learning how to become a *curandera.* But the realization that she finds herself attracted to another woman leads Caridad to a year of isolation and reflection; this experience strengthens her to such a degree that when she is discovered in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains she is literally immovable despite her small physical size. When Francisco and several other men attempt to relocate her from the cave where they find her, they are both angry and stumped by her amazing power (Castillo). Like her sister Loca, Caridad's *curanderismo* and spiritual life, combining attention to her own health with a vocation for healing others, allows her to challenge her own marginality and to assume agency. Her acceptance of love for women is a part of this change and contrasts sharply with her previous relations with men.

So Far from God confirms Rebolledo's observation that "silence, and overcoming it, are signifi- cant concerns in Chicana literature." In this novel several characters labor to overcome silence and testify to their own lives, a process that allows them to break out of their isolation and join together with other women. For Esperanza, Fe, and Caridad, silence leads to suffering and destruction. Esperanza, though a political activist and broadcast journalist, does not protest the way in which Rubén treats her, and consequently falls victim to his selfishness. Her inability to demand more from Rubén stems in part from societal constraints against female self-fulfillment that lead her to feel "like a woman with brains was as good as dead for all the happiness it brought her in the love department."

Similarly unhappy, Fe, shocked by the refusal of her fiancé Tom to go through with their wedding and plans for living the American Dream, unleashes an unending scream. Fe's overt expression of pain, rage, and frustration temporarily brings her closer to what is in her view an overly emotional and superstitious family from whom she had previously remained aloof. Her release, however, is only a partial escape from her dependence on dominant ideologies. When Fe finally stops screaming, her vocal chords are damaged, signaling that her recovery is incomplete. Though no longer dependent on Tom, she remains vulnerable to the consumerist American Dream of life, buying her way to happiness and then placing herself at the service of Acme International in her quest to get ahead, a company whose illegal and environmentally unsound practices kill her. Fe spurns her family, particularly her sister Loca, in her drive to assimilate. Embarrassed by what she sees as an odd family, she moves away from her home and neighborhood. Her uncritical acceptance of the hegemonic discourse of middleclass America imposes distance between Fe and a family not considered typically American in such discourses because of its gender composition, race, ethnicity, and culture (Sánchez). Fe's isolation contributes to a silence and passivity that eventually kills her. She recognizes this in her last visit to the Acme plant even if the realization comes too late to save her: "The whole plant had been completely remodeled . . . all the stations . . . which used to be open to everybody and everything, were partitioned off. Nobody and nothing able to know what

was going on around them no more. And everybody, meanwhile, was working in silence as usual." In light of her newly acquired knowledge about the poisonous work environment at Acme and the company's practice of releasing toxic pollutants outside of the plant, Fe's graphic description of the physical divisions between silent workers indicates a developing class-consciousness that was previously blocked by her acceptance of dominant discourses. But her observation on the silence of the workers also speaks to a re-evaluation of her cultural, ethnic, and racial consciousness as well. Previously, Fe considered Sofi, Loca, and Caridad "self-defeating" and "unambitious" because they were not interested in becoming wage-workers; she felt "disappointment and disgust" for Loca's condition; although she respected Esperanza's television job, she "had no desire to copy Esperanza's La Raza politics." Because her family did not fit the profile of the American Dream, Fe limited her interaction with them and maintained silence regarding her own life and plans. The scene of her return to the Acme plant represents her awakening to the many divisions that Fe has unwittingly allowed to dominate her life.

Sofi overcomes her own longstanding silence when she notices the disintegration invading her community. The people, and especially the men, on whom Sofi had always relied to keep things running smoothly seem unable to do anything to solve the town's problems. As unofficial Mayor of Tome, she organizes a town-wide cooperative project, involving both women and men, and wins the respect of her community. When her husband Domingo soon gambles away their income from the effort, Sofi finally remembers that twenty years before it was not he who had walked out on his family but she who had kicked him out.

The fact that this "one little detail" was "forgotten" by Sofi and everybody else in the community suggests that there were no other roles for women beyond wife/mother or abandoned wife/ mother. Sofi could not, in a sense, truly speak her life until she had created new roles for women in which she and others could be appreciated for something other than being a wife/mother. When this happens, Sofi remembers this story of her breakup with Domingo. In the meantime however, she has, with difficulty, lived an independent life apart from this unsatisfying relationship, even if disguised in abandonment. Although for many years Sofi's effort to avoid the pattern of subordination forced on other women is covert, her resistance does eventually become a public effort to include women fully in communal governance.

These characters reveal the many ways that Chicanas have been silenced by the dominant society and by their communities, as well as the ways that Chicanas have struggled against this erasure. Although Fe's rejection of her sisters is most pronounced, both Caridad and Esperanza also distance themselves from a family of women that somehow shames them; yet for all three, and even for Sofi, too, that distance is bridged by the communal sharing of grief, caring, and healing that the women together provide for one in need.

Critical Essay #11

Though this novel focuses on Chicana characters, it does not do so at the expense of other women or other struggles. Manifesting a commitment to alliances with other marginalized groups, the text creates a bridge between the divergent populations it describes in the Holy Friday procession scene. The novel thereby fashions a creative and fictional counterpart to the voices of women united in the collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, in which Audre Lorde says that joining with others in battle is essential to one's own freedom: "Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression." In the foreword to the second edition of this collection both Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga underscore the urgency of building alliances globally and of doing this through action; Anzaldúa says, "Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar (Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks)." The women of Tome do walk in the final Holy Friday ceremony, not just for themselves but for future generations, and not by themselves but in unison with others. The visit to each station of the cross in this procession symbolically creates the bridge between those in struggle. In contrast to earlier scenes of the Penitente ceremony that literally recreates Christ's suffering at Tsimayo/Chimayo, this ceremony exposes the widespread suffering caused by capitalist exploitation. Rather than accepting suffering as the route to salvation, the participants in this Holy Friday ceremony enact a protest against the destruction of the environment. As one Navajo woman says, "[W]e are trying very hard now to save ourselves before it's too late. Don't anybody care about that?" (Castillo).

La Loca, who has spent much of her life caring for her sisters, not only participates in this public event, but is figured as a central character of its drama. Weak from illness, Loca rides her horse in the procession, in effect presiding over it. The description of her attire alludes to the familiar folk wisdom regarding the garments to be worn on one's wedding day. Loca wears something borrowed— her father's suspenders and her mother's boots; something blue—her sister Esperanza's blue chenille robe; and something old—jeans with holes where there was a brand-name tag that Loca has cut off to honor a boycott of the company. Her outfit, significantly, is missing something new. In a ceremony that enacts a renewed commitment to struggle, Loca's garb highlights the old while the ceremony itself suggests that commitment to a community may be more important than commitment to an individual marriage. In fact, few of the marriages described in this novel endure.

The cultural and political activities of the women— linked throughout the novel—culminate in the Holy Friday procession, in which each station of the cross marks the contemporary suffering of working peoples and oppressed populations. Fe's presence is particularly felt in this scene. Her painful death from cancer illustrates the future awaiting a woman and a community who buy into the consumerist American Dream, who live only in the present and not also in the past and future. Her mother Sofi carries a picture of Fe in the procession. This act simultaneously honors Fe and joins her in struggle with all those participating in the Holy Friday march, a gesture

reminiscent of the many declarations of "*Presente!*" ("Present!") heard among the peoples of Latin America when honoring the martyrs and heroes of revolutionary battle.

Sofi's action testifies to her daughters' and her own struggle against oppression, which, as Rebolledo suggests, is an integral aspect of Chicana literature that is often personal and collective, often including the names and stories of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and friends (Rebolledo). Castillo writes the lives not only of four sisters and their mother but also includes the stories of *doña* Felicia, Maria, Esmeralda, Helena, Rita de Belen, Mrs. Torres, *doña* Severa, garment workers on strike, workers suffering toxic poisoning at work, Navajo women trying to save future generations from uranium contamination, the many suffering from AIDS, and more. These characters exemplify the emergence of a Chicana subjectivity that defines itself within the context of community and in league with the struggles of others attempting to overcome marginality, subordination, and silence. This chapter embodies an idea that Sonia Saldívar-Hull articulates: "For the Chicana feminists it is through our affiliation with the struggles of other Third World people that we find our theories and our methods" The Holy Friday procession merges the concerns of Chicanas, working people, Native people, environmentalists, and antiwar activists, and in doing so it parallels the complex subjectivities in the community of Tome, particularly those of the five women whose lives are at the center of the novel. In the blend of Catholicism, native belief, self-respect, political action, and reflection, the procession epitomizes the power of a hybrid resistance.

Critical Essay #12

Sofi's lament to her *comadre* (intimate female friend) that they are all "so poor and forgotten" echoes Francisco's sentiments (Castillo). Yet Sofi and her *comadre* both come to understand that they can get closer to "God" through their own actions. The efforts they initiate to improve the economic self-sufficiency of Tome for the benefit of everyone in the community also succeed in restoring communal social relations and dignity. Sánchez says that the "concept of centering subjectivity in collectivities is an important cultural and political construct in Chicano literature." This novel allows us to see the multiple—sometimes competing, sometimes converging— interests in Chicana subjectivity through female characters who struggle to name, assert, and lead their complicated selves against societies that continually seek to categorize them with one-dimensional labels, such as single mother, jilted woman, slut, devil, Catholic, troublemaker, or loyal worker. What Sofi and her *comadre* accomplish in Tome results just as much from their religious faith as it does from their ethnic, gender, and class identifications, and it demonstrates that spirituality and religious faith both shape and are shaped by questions of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. The strength of the women in this novel flows from their ability to embrace all aspects of themselves to effect such astonishing change. Like other characters, Sofi and her *comadre* are grounded in the multiple material, social, economic, political, and religious realities of their world.

By focusing on communities of women who engage in resistance, the text offers an alternative to the dominant literary paradigms wherein "individualism often represents the strength of male power, while community becomes equated with female weakness" (TuSmith). This novel attacks the individualism that fuels a chaotic live-for-themoment mentality by showing us how that individualist ethic harms women, communities, and the environment.

Their spiritual hybridity is central to the process of self-discovery, assertion, and union with others in which Castillo's female characters engage. Their practice of Catholicism represents endurance, survival, and sometimes conformity, but it is also a faith shaped by its practitioners into what they need. And yet, as Anita Valerio explains, "Some would like to believe that the values of the Roman Catholic Church and the values of the Native American tribal religions are one and the same." They are not. A hybrid practice also maintains and recovers the knowledge of a spirituality wherein women partake and heal. Some women gain this knowledge directly, as in the case of Caridad, Loca, and *doña* Felicia, while others acquire it indirectly—for example, Sofi learns from her daughters—but all are empowered and fortified by it. When Sofi and her *comadre* enlist other women and men in revitalizing the town of Tome, they create a contemporary version of the Pueblo historical legacy of matriarchy, a system in which women shared equally with men the governance of the economic and spiritual life of their communities. Setting the novel in Tome, New Mexico, creates a textual link to a specific history of indigenous women that reminds us of the constructedness of patriarchal economic relations.

So Far from God illustrates the complexity of Chicana lives and the varied perspectives necessary to enact transformation because it depicts a community both defined and moved to action by diverse subjects. The novelist adds to an economic analysis the cultural resistance of oppressed nationalities and honors the role of women in this resistance. By doing so, she reveals a strength, not an obstacle, in her culture.

Source: Theresa Delgadillo, "Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance: Hybrid Spirituality in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*," in *Modern Fiction Studies,* Vol. 44, No. 4, Winter, 1998, pp. 888-916.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #13

In this brief review, Ilan Stavans describes Ana Castillo's So Far From God *as a novel that attempts to be both a parody of well-known Spanish-speaking soap operas and a social satire but unfortunately fails to find a balance between these perspectives.*

The recent renaissance of Latino letters is led by a number of very accomplished women. This, of course, is good news. It has, after all, taken far too long to find Hispanic women a room of their own in the library of world literature. With the exception of Sor Juana Ines de La Cruz, a seventeenth-century Mexican nun who astonished the Spanish-speaking world with her conceptual sonnets and philosophical prose (Octavio Paz wrote a spellbinding biogra phy, *Sor Juana Or*, *The Traps of Faith*, [see *Commonweal*, January 27, 1989]), women have rarely been read and discussed by mainstream Latino culture. Rosario Castellanos, Isabel Allende, Elena Poniatowska, and Gabriela Mistral□the latter received the 1945 Nobel Prize□are a few of the better-known women authors. Prominent among the new wave of Latino writers in English are Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, and Cristina Garcia. In opening a window across gender lines, each revisits the Hispanic's innermost fears and hopes.

On the very same list is Ana Castillo, a veteran novelist, poet, translator, and editor whose previous books were published by small presses in Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico. Unfortunately, Castillo remains relatively unnoticed by the media. She is the most daring and experimental of Latino novelists, and as American novelists Robert Coover and William Gaddis well know, experimentalism has its costs. Born in 1953 in Chicago and now living in Albuquerque, Castillo was educated at Northern Illinois University and the University of Chicago. She is the author of *Sapogonia: An Anti-Romance* in 3/8 Meter, published in 1989, and of the poetry collections *Women Are Not Roses*, *The Invitation* and *My Father Was a Toltec*. Her most memorable work, to my mind, is *The Mixquiahuala Letters* , an avant-garde epistolary novel published in 1986 and recently reissued by Anchor-Doubleday. Letters received a Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award.

The novel concerns the friendship of two independent Hispanic women, Alicia and Teresa, whom we accompany, through the device of introspective letters, from their youthful travels to Mexico to their middle-years in the United States. Stylistically *Letters* is a tribute to Julio Cortazar, the Argentine master responsible for *Hopscotch*, a novel typical of the sixties' French nouveau roman, and is designed as a labyrinth in which the writer suggests at least two possible sequences for reading□two possible ways of ordering the chapters. Similarly, Castillo's book offers three alternative readings: one for the conformist, another for the cynic, and the last for the Quixotic. Among the very few people I know who have read *The Maxquiahuala Letters*, none (including me) has had the patience to attempt each of the three possibilities.

While Castillo's experimental spirit, much like Carlos Fuentes's, often strikes me as derivative and academically fashionable, her desire to find creative alternatives and to take risks is admirable. An accomplished parodist, Castillo's obsession, it seems, is to

turn popular and sophisticated genres upside down□to revisit their structure by decomposing them. In recent years, however, her avant-garde ambitions seem to be fading. Lately, she has become a client of Susan Bergholtz, a powerful New York literary agent whose list includes such Latino writers as Cisneros, Alvarez, and Rudolfo A. Anaya. In many ways, Bergholtz is occupying a role similar to that of Carmen Balcells in Barcelona, who launched the careers of south-of-the-border luminaries such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Mario Vargas Llosa. Bergholtz is convincing major publishing houses to put big bucks into novels by and about Hispanics. Moving from the periphery to the center necessarily entails sacrifice, however. *So Far from God* is a case in point: the experimental spirit is absent here.

The novel's intent is original: to parody the Spanish-speaking telenovela, e.g., the popular television soap operas that enchant millions in Mexico and South America. Framed by two decades of life in Tome, a small hamlet in central New Mexico, the novel tells the story of a Chicana mother, Sofia, and her four daughters: Fe, Esperanza, Caridad (their names, as Spanish speakers can testify, recall a famous south-of-the-border melodrama), and La Loca. The terrain is overtly sentimental and cartoonish. Magic realism is combined with social satire: whores, miracles, prophecies, resurrections, and a visit to the Chicano activism of the late sixties intertwine.

Melodrama is indeed the key word here. Castillo is involved in a dramatic embroidery characterized by heavy reliance on suspense, sensational episodes, and romantic sentiment. Any parody works through a tacit agreement between writer and reader, who share the knowledge of the genre parodied and understand the rules of the game. Unfortunately, with an overabundance of stereotypes and its crowded cast of theatrical characters, *So Far from God* stumbles from the outset. Castillo loses control of her marionettes. Even more disturbing, Castillo is never quite sure whether to ridicule her characters or idealize them in spite of their superficiality. As a result, the novel is uneven, conventional, and often annoying.

Still, we must pay attention to Ana Castillo. In due time, her creativity will match her passion to experiment and the outcome will be formidable. In fact, of all the Hispanic writers in the firmament of the current Latino renaissance, she strikes in me as the most intellectually sophisticated and thus might end up producing the most intriguing books. Unlike most of her colleagues, a sense of tradition can be found in Castillo's approach to the novel. She is a deeply committed reader whose art, I'm afraid, is not necessarily for the masses. Her tastes are singular, but she has yet to write the book that will display her talent in its full splendor.

Source: Ilan Stavans, "And so close to the United States□ *So Far From God* by Ana Castillo," in *Commonweal,* Vol. 121, Issue 1, January 14, 1994, p. 37.

Topics for Further Study

After researching the effects of gambling addiction and its prevalence in states with lotteries, race tracks, and casinos, compare the way gambling addiction works to Domingo's situation in the novel.

Compare the spiritual and psychic healing methods practiced by Dona Felicia and Dr. Tolentino to both more traditional forms of Western medicine and faith-healing.

How do Fe's work experiences and Sofi's local activism compare to the more national program of labor and social reformers of the Hispanic and African-American communities?

Considering how the Chicano/a movement began in the U.S., how does the novel illustrate the difficulties of being female and Hispanic in American culture?

Research and view some Spanish language "telenovellas," (Hispanic soap operas). Compare the narrative structure of these "tele-novellas" to *So Far From God*.

What Do I Read Next?

Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands: La Frontera* (1987) is a collection of personal essays and poetry from one of the major authors of the Chicana/o movement. The first half of the work (personal essays) deals with how Anzaldua sees herself as a woman, an Hispanic, and a lesbian. The second half is a collection of poetry written from Anzaldua's soul which speaks of heartbreak, joy, lost, and triumph. The text is written in English with a large amount of Spanish without an attempt at translation. Anzaldua argues that her use of Spanish in an English text makes her non-Spanish readers feel just like Hispanic people do in an English only world.

The House on Mango Street (1989) and *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) are the two major works by Sandra Cisneros, perhaps the most recognized writer of the Chicana/o Movement. Both works, the first a novel, the second a collection of short stories, deal with the problems of being female and Hispanic in Anglo-America. *The House on Mango Street* is a coming of age novel about a Chicago girl named Esperanza, who through coming to grips with the poverty, class hatred, and ethnic stereotypes, creates a world of her own. *Woman Hollering Creek* is a collection of stories dealing with a vast array of Hispanic women from the young girl discovery sex to a professional woman trying to break the chains of Hispanic wifedom and motherhood.

Gabriella Ibieta's 1993 collection of short stories by Latin American writers, contains thirty stories by twenty-two authors from a variety of countries and cultures. The stories are all translated or written in English and display the wide range of themes, similarities, and differences within the Latin community. There are stories by world renowned authors like Jorge Luis Borges and Juan Rulfo as well as lesser known authors like Luisa Valenzuela and Augusto Roa Bastos.

Ana Castillo's novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) and collection *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe* (1997) explore issues of femininity, family, and spirituality. *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is a novel written in letter or epistolary form telling the story of a friendship between two artists. One is Anglo, the other Hispanic. The novel traces their friendship over twenty years in a kind of odd-couple pairing of opposites who find that they need each other after all. Castillo's collection of essays, stories, and poems dealing with the Virgin of Guadalupe explores similar ground as her novels, but in a different way. Here, she is exploring the way spirituality makes identity and how the use of a "native" saint makes Hispanic spirituality different from other forms of Catholicism.

Mexican author Laura Esquivel's 1992 *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (translated by Carol and Thomas Christensen as *Like Water for Chocolate*) took America by storm in the early 1990s. This novel, told in a series of monthly installments with recipes and romances, explores rural life in turn of the twentieth century Mexico. The heart-breaking story of Tita and her lover Pedro, captures the hearts and minds of readers. The 1993 film version became the highest grossing foreign film in American history and the novel won the 1994 ABBY award from the American Booksellers Association.

The idea of womanist prose was defined in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. This collection of essays, put together in 1983, explores the meaning, lives, and troubles of being female and Black in modern-day America. Much like what Castillo does for Hispanic women in her novel, Walker does in her essays and the 1981 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*. Walker's works strive to complete the picture of American life by opening the doors to the Black female experience.

Further Study

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Gonzalez, Maria, "Love and Conflict: Mexican American Women Writers as Daughters," in *Women of Color: Mother- Daughter Relationships in 20th-Century Literature*, edited by Brown, Guillory, and Elizabeth, University of Texas Press, 1996, pp. 153-71.

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamedfor instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as The Narrator and alphabetized as Narrator. If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name Jean Louise Finch would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname Scout Finch.
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

BOOKRAGS

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Literature of Developing Nations for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535