
Faith, Hope and Service in Denise Chávez's *Face of an Angel*

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Denise Chávez dedicates her book *Face of an Angel* to “all the women, criadas and ayudantes, who have taught me the meaning of the word service.” She navigates a difficult path celebrating service in a tradition—Chicano Catholic culture—that valorizes the complete effacement and martyrdom of women, and also in a secular intellectual culture that views religious beliefs with suspicion. Chávez gives us a hero, Soveida Dosamantes, who struggles to effect change—to stop destructive cycles of privilege—while rejecting a too narrowly defined feminism that might view woman’s service as a dysfunction that must be remedied. The novel traces the protagonist’s progressing struggle to assert a new Chicana identity, but the change comes very slowly, in steps; and Chávez’s structuring of sections after orders of angels in the Catholic tradition underscores and complements Soveida’s journey. The second part of the book’s dedication—“for all my sisters likewise who have waited, will wait”—reflects the focus of the narrative on faith and hope, central to the novel. Soveida Dosamantes learns to wait on herself as well as others.

Chávez’s book is structured around the orders of angels in the Catholic theological tradition: angels, archangels, principalities, powers, virtues, dominations, thrones, cherubim, and seraphim. In explaining why theologians have thus categorized angels, Pope Gregory I cites their varied service: “But why do we touch upon these choirs of steadfast angels by listing them, if not to describe their ministries in a plain manner? We ought to know that whatever angels are called, their name signifies a service” (qtd. in Chase 16). The diverse attributes of each class of angels parallel the different types of service and vocations to which the Chicana may be called as well as the different stages of Soveida’s personal growth and, further, parallel the changing connotation of what constitutes the angelic in the text. The slippery signification of “angel” parallels the treacherous task of the Chicana who wants to reject the “angelic” role of a traditional woman in a male-dominated culture and religious tradition while embracing the virtue of service that is also part of those cultures. *Face of an Angel* examines and negotiates a position that distinguishes between servility and

service and posits service as not only an antidote to power, but as a virtue of the highest order, love in action.

Most Chicano/a writers engage with Catholicism in their creative work for, as Ana Castillo points out, “Catholicism is embedded in our culture, in our psyche” (135). But many critics and scholars note that while Chicana authors employ Catholic symbolism, iconography, and theology in their work, they do not do so uncritically, nor, in doing so, do they wholly accept the Catholic Church or its authority. Because of the extremely patriarchal, oppressive legacy of the Catholic Church, some Chicanas, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, aggressively condemn and reject Catholicism. Other writers, such as Sandra Cisneros, Cherri Moraga, Ana Castillo, Lucha Corpi, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Helena Maria Viramontes, Carla Trujillo, and Denise Chávez recognize the important role Catholicism plays in their ethnic identity and choose instead to critique, subvert, revise, and/or reinterpret Catholicism to better serve their creative purposes and values. Diana Tey Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero note that “Chicanas have looked to their cultural heritage to find myths and archetypes that form a paradigm to their own lived experience and have consciously designed and re-designed myths and archetypes not to their liking” (24).¹ Emily Anderson, addressing Catholicism more specifically, notes that Chicana writers (particularly Chicana lesbians) employ Catholic symbolism and iconography in ways that redefine or supplant patriarchal religion and thus they, and their characters, “rewrite” Catholicism (28). Lara Medina similarly observes how Chicanas “supplant patriarchal religion with their own cultural knowledge, sensibilities, and sense of justice” (189). In a sustained discussion on how various Chicana writers destabilize masculine discourse and definitions of traditional religious icons, such as *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, Phillipa Kafka shows how many writers and their characters “recuperate [saints] for feminist purposes” (91).²

Denise Chávez participates in this Chicana tradition of recuperating or rewriting Catholicism in much of her work.³ Her *Novena Narrativas* is structured around the Catholic religious ritual of the novena—a series of prayers offered over nine successive days for a specific reason—which Alvina Quintana says Chávez transforms into a “creative female form of expression” (110). And in both the *Novena Narrativas* and *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Chávez and her protagonists struggle with what Quintana identifies as the counterpart to *machismo*, the ideology of *Marianismo*, “the cult that views women as semidivine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men” (101). To be a Marianist, Quintana notes, is “to follow the model set by the Virgin Mary, the model of the self-sacrificing, and therefore, spiritually superior, mother. Chicanos are socialized to become aggressive macho types, while women learn to maintain a complementary role of passivity and sacrifice” (Quintana 101).

In Chávez's extensive use of angel imagery in *Face of an Angel*, she employs a more sustained allusion to Catholic theology and uses it to both critique the concept of the "angelic" woman and, at the same time, to reclaim the value of service that she sees as the vocation of angels.

In valorizing service, particularly within discourses and imagery associated with the Catholic Church, Chávez risks being accused of idealizing women within domestic space and of reinscribing patriarchal cultural traditions or "counterfeminist discourses" (Sánchez 354). Indeed, Alvina Quintana argues that in placing *La Virgen de Guadalupe* at the center of her earlier *Novena Narrativas*, Chávez "conforms to the Mexican ideological structures that shape a cultural system with only two models for women: the pure, self-sacrificing wife, mother, girlfriends, or *la mala mujer* (the evil woman)" (110). Rosaura Sánchez and AnaLouise Keating echo Quintana in citing Chávez's focus on women's roles (which, in *Face of an Angel*, include service) as an "exaltation of traditional roles within patriarchy" and an "acceptance of feminine passivity, self-sacrifice, and women's relegation to the private, domestic sphere," calling it "conformism" (Sánchez 354, Keating 76).⁴ Chávez, in *Face of an Angel*, potentially sets herself up for similar criticism by structuring her novel around imagery that has been used in Catholic and Western patriarchal culture in general, to describe the model woman, "angelic" in her purity, passivity, self-sacrifice, and dutiful service. But in the same way that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (along with La Malinche and La Llorona) has been rewritten by many Chicanas to represent a powerful and empowering figure, Chávez consciously "rewrites" angels and the angelic. Francine Ramsey Richter, in her discussion of the romantic elements of *Face of an Angel*, cites what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have identified as the tradition of the "self-sacrificing and angelic woman [that] became the paradigm of renunciatory Christian love" (qtd. in Richter 279) and notes the power of Chávez's ironic use of this spiritual symbol: "Why is Chávez's central image a symbol of the eternal and untouchable, while these women [in the narrative] are touched and used in vile, reprehensible, and sadistic ways? Certainly, the juxtaposition of 'angel' and 'incest victim' makes the deed that much more horrifying" (278). Richter goes on to examine how *Face of an Angel* deconstructs such romantic stereotypes.

Chávez goes further than challenging the anti-feminist, romantic notion of the angelic. Her use of angel imagery underscores the narrative's attempt to reclaim the value of service inasmuch as angels in the Catholic tradition are defined by their service. Thus, she participates in what Amaia Ibararán Bigalondo identifies as the struggle of the Chicana to rewrite her story to "reinterpret the atrophied archetypes" by which she has been defined (90). For example, in the protagonist Soveida's *Book of Service*, Ibararán Bigalondo sees an attempt to dignify a "job that has never been

socially seen as ‘important’ (just like women’s tasks). The fact of naming and talking about the art of serving becomes the process of positivization of the stereotypes of the woman who serves, and at the same time plays an important role within the community” (92). Certainly, within the Chicano/a tradition, service is more often associated with women, but as Christian feminists would argue, Christian theology celebrates Christ as the supreme servant who calls his followers to be servants. In the development of her protagonist, Chávez seems to attempt to reject the patriarchal values of Chicano culture while reclaiming service as a virtue that is not gender specific in Christian theology and should not be gender specific in the ideal world Chávez and her protagonist imagine.

The spiritual journey of her protagonist, Soveida, involves overcoming the obstacles presented by an oppressive patriarchal religious tradition while at the same time reclaiming the value of her work—her service—and, thus, her collective and complete identity. The concept of the spiritual journey is a tradition in much Latino/a literature, as is resistance to the oppression of the Catholic Church in the tradition of Catholic feminists like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Linda Craft, in her investigation into “Mexican-American Women’s Narrative and the Rediscovery of the Spiritual,” notes,

Spirituality, devotion to the divine, wrestling with angels, and faith journeys have been staples of Latin American poetry, fiction, and non-fiction since conquest, when priests arrived with conquistadors in the first Spanish galleons to subdue the native populations, plunder their cities, and extirpate their idols... In the seventeenth century, the great Mexican writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz struggled against the colonization of her intellect, spirit, and body by an oppressive Catholic hierarchy, and left us eloquent written testimony of her resistance and anguish. Others followed to bear her cross. Such is the spiritual and literary heritage of Mexican women today, a legacy which has extended throughout Latin America and to Latinas in the United States. (Craft 32)

Chávez participates in these traditions, and her use of Catholic theology invites us to look more closely at the allusions of the narrative.

The nine sections of *Face of an Angel* correspond to Catholicism’s most traditional classification of angels, which are based primarily on Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy*, the writings of Pope Gregory I (“the Great”), and Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*.⁵ The term “hierarchy” is frequently assigned to the classification of angels and suggests one perspective of theologians that rank *Seraphim* as the highest—or most valued—order, by virtue of their close proximity to God, and *angels* as the lowest order in that they work most closely with humans. Some theologians, however, caution against ranking angelic offices and instead posit that

angels are distinguished by their different vocations, with all orders of angels equal in that their service is equally essential (Chase 20-21).⁶ Chase, in his study on angelic spirituality, notes how Christian theologians over the ages have pointed to the diverse types of angelic service as “providing the framework of the human spiritual journey” (xx). Of significance to Chávez’s narrative as a chronicle of Soveida’s spiritual journey is his further observation: “Angelic spirituality, then consists largely in the awakening of these levels in the human person and in the movement of the soul to greater union with God” (xx).⁷ Because Chávez’s narrative challenges both notions of hierarchy (the last frequently becomes first, and vice versa) and the popular concept of the angelic, one can reasonably assume the narrative endorses this latter egalitarian interpretation of angelic ministry.⁸ Each section of the book investigates stereotypical assumptions of what constitutes the angelic and contrasts those stereotypes with an alternative vision based on the diversity of the types of service and graces represented by the different orders or “choirs” of angels. Titled after each of the orders, beginning with Angels and culminating with Seraphim, each section of the book is also accompanied by the image of a milagro⁹ that helps to illuminate the associated angelic vocation.

Section one, “Angels,” features a title page with the milagro of an ear. According to Catholic tradition, Angels work most closely with humans as guides, guardians, and by listening to and delivering prayers.¹⁰ The epigraph following the preface of the book underscores the angel’s role by praying for a listener: “My grandmother’s voice was rarely heard, it was a whisper, a moan. Who heard? / My mother’s voice cried out in rage and pain. Who heard? / My voice is strong. It is breath. New Life. Song. Who hears?” The narrator and protagonist, Soveida Dosamantes, explains that her story is also the story of her mother, father, brother, sister, cousin, uncles, aunts, husbands, and lovers. “Their memories are mine,” she says, “That sweet telling mine. Mine the ash. It’s a long story” (4). She posits, then, that the angelic office here involves recounting the story—the prayers—of these people, including herself. As a harbinger, she speaks the words that she has always been told she shouldn’t—what her mother refers to as “all that stuff”: “Escandalosa! Soveida,” she says, “don’t talk about all at stuff! They’re things we shouldn’t talk about, not now, not ever. Don’t even think about them” (21). Importantly, the person who will listen to the “prayers” of the story also performs a similar office.

And it is a dark story, as the title of the town suggests: Agua Oscura (dark water). Chávez begins with the romantic tale of her great grandfather, Manuel Dosamantes, who leaves Guanajuato, Mexico, to start a new life. Refusing to marry his employer’s wealthy daughter, he goes on to establish himself as a rancher and farmer. He falls in love with and marries a woman who shares his love for his culture, and together

they create a new and fruitful life in their new country. His efforts to sustain their good work fail, however, when his sons cannot carry on his work and his values and, instead, exercise their male privilege toward their own narcissistic ends. But as Soveida explains, her telling of the story shifts the focus of the narrative: “What stories I know about these people I will share with you. The stories begin with the men and always end with the women; that’s the way it is in our family” (11). Thus, the storytelling always has at least two sides comprising, on the one hand, culturally endorsed stories—those stories, usually featuring the men, that cover traditional subjects and themes—and, on the other hand, the stories of the women that include uncomfortable secrets, unacknowledged work, and uncelebrated service.

The sustained angel imagery throughout the text is likewise two-sided: the obvious imagery and its associated cultural connotations are countered by what constitutes the angelic based on types of service or vocation.¹¹ These alternate perceptions are reflected in the family name, “Dosamantes,” or “two lovers.” In the stories of the men, the family name comes to signify their infidelity and promiscuity. In the stories of the women, the name suggests their struggle to love the men and women in their lives while still loving themselves, which involves rejecting the role these people have played in sabotaging that self love. The family name, then, can signify the struggle to embrace the value of service venerated in the larger Latino culture while still loving the self, that is, rejecting the self-effacement expected of “angelic” Latinas.

The foregrounded angel imagery in the first section involves the protagonist’s mother, Dolores. In her youth, Soveida’s mother was said to have the “face of an angel,” which at the age of thirteen attracted the attentions of Luardo Dosamantes, whom she would later marry. In a provocative chapter, Chávez uses two columns per page to juxtapose streams of consciousness of both Luardo and Dolores as they recount their stories. The format underscores the two radically different foci of their stories, which occasionally synchronize over a shared memory. Dolores’ memories involve her family, her “unfortunate vagabond” father, her cold mother, and her loving sister, Lina. Dolores’ story seeks to understand her mother’s distance and her father’s virtual abandonment; but she is pained by their failure to acknowledge the angelic service of their daughter Lina, who faithfully and lovingly serves her withdrawn mother and her little sister in their poverty. She is likewise pained by their failure to recognize her own hunger for love and the failure of her marriage to provide that love. Luardo’s memories likewise concern hunger, specifically his hunger for women. He particularly revels in the bodies of the women in his life, all in service to his needs. He cannot conceive of why Dolores, with her angelic face and beautiful breasts, is no longer hungry for him; and by the time of his reminiscences,

those who know him recognize his two loves as “drinking and screwing” (15). The *amantes* of Dolores and Luardo could not be further apart.

The second section, “Archangels,” focuses largely on Soveida’s cousin Mara, whose childhood is a tragic mixture of abuse and love. Archangels, like Angels, work closely with humans but are distinguished by important, specific tasks. They are messengers at critical moments in history, reveal divine mysteries, and battle Satan and his followers. The milagro presiding over this section—the image of a praying woman—suggests that Mamá Lupita and Dolores, Soveida’s grandmother and mother, represent these archangels whose specific task is protecting Soveida and Mara from what they perceive as evil. Ironically, while they rule over (Arch-) and certainly love the girls in their care, they have submitted to cultural notions of femininity that include subordination of oneself to the male, a double moral standard (including a denial of male culpability), and fear of the danger of female sexuality. They pass on an honorable ethic of service to their daughters, but it is also tainted with a dangerous philosophy of women’s martyrdom, summed up in the chapter “Saints.”

The section begins by showing the orphaned Mara as potential “angel material”: her beauty as one of the angels leading the younger children in their First Holy Communion at Holy Angel Elementary school dazzles the community (43). But as she matures, Mamá’s fears of the sexual danger that Mara’s beauty will attract cause her to be strict to a level of cruelty while at the same time, she refuses to hear Mara’s pleas for help as a victim of Luardo’s sexual abuse. Instead, when Mara begins to have nightmares, Mamá responds by arranging an exorcism: “Now that she looked like a woman and her body had changed to a woman’s and she had the desires of a woman and men looked at her like she was a woman, it was certain as well that the devil had entered her flesh” (85). Continued cruelty ultimately drives Mara away, and when she later returns to town, married and pregnant, she has accepted as inevitable the identity of the suffering “Bride of Christ.” She tells Soveida, “your body betrays you,” and her name—“bitter” in Hebrew—aptly describes the memories of her childhood at the hands of the “angels” who were charged with her care (100).

This section of the book also features Soveida’s struggle with her faith—her desire to be a serving saint rather than a self-centered sinner, her confusion over her emerging sexuality, her anger over Mara’s treatment by Mamá, and her misconception that saints are characterized by the lack of any desire. She interprets the twenty-third Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not *want*” (73). She sees the evil effects of Mamá Lupita, Dolores, and Luardo’s decisions and actions in Mara’s life and at the same time, in her quest for personal perfection, is incredulous at Sister Emilia’s assertion that “we are all saints insofar as we love God and our neighbor”

(78). Flashing forward to a talk with the adult Mara, the narrative reveals Soveida's eventual understanding of the dual nature of the ruling "angels" in her life—how they were both angelic and demonic—and how it was not primarily the treatment but the internalization of negative values that has hurt them most: "I wanted to make her understand once and for all—there was no boogeyman, no bogeywoman, no imaginary darkened face across the room, peering at us from the window or in the mirror, but *ourselves*, saying yes, why not, go on, suffer" (53).

Principalities, the next order of angels, are described as the princes charged with the care of nations, cities, religions, and, according to some popular culture sources, are associated with human sexuality (*New Catholic Dictionary*; Chase 26, 28; Keck 62).¹² They aptly preside over this subdivision of the narrative that describes both Soveida's introduction to waitressing at El Farol, the restaurant that operates like a small kingdom, and her first sexual experiences.¹³ At El Farol, Soveida meets her first sexual encounter and later meets and falls in love with a man she views as a St. Michael-type angel complete with drawn sword: "not the meek and mild-mannered angel who led the small children gently over the bridge that crossed a placid stream, he was the powerful avenging angel who came to save and protect and defend. That is what I wanted then, a man to save me from myself, my shadow-filled world. Ivan was that to me, and more" (131). Principalities are, indeed, associated with saving, protecting, and defending and are also involved with raising people to honorable office (Chase 29-30; Keck 62). Ivan is an educated Chicano who defends and works on behalf of his culture, involving himself in the struggles of migrant farmworkers and unrecognized laborers, cultural struggles Soveida ashamedly knows little about. Most importantly to Soveida, he "saves" her from her family, by acknowledging her beauty and worth, and he awakens her sexuality. But this attractive, charismatic man, who Soveida goes on to marry, proves, like most of the men in her life, unable to be satisfied with just one lover. His infidelity humiliates and eventually crushes Soveida. He is the "Man with Chicken Feet" Mamá warned her against—the suave, handsome stranger who came to a dance at the Dosamante's barn, charmed all the beautiful women, and who, when the lights went out and then came back on, was seen to possess chicken feet (155).¹⁴ The image of the foot milagro thus has a sinister connotation, but also a positive one.

The contrasting view of the role of Principalities presented in this section focuses on the angelic work of raising people to honorable offices, or vocations, specifically featuring Soveida's new occupation as a waitress at El Farol. Soveida begins her service career under the direction of Milia Ocana, the head waitress of El Farol restaurant, who sees the restaurant as more than just tables and eating people—"I look around and I see a world. A complete world" (109)—and the waitress as more

than a mere server: she is a *bailarina* whose feet move smoothly in the service of others (107, 109). The building is located on the site previously occupied by the town's Community Center and Opera House, with its central patio on the former Opera House stage (105), suggesting an allusion to the Shakespearean notion that "all the world's a stage," but reversed here to suggest the stage is the world, and the themed dining rooms radiating out from the patio—the Kachina, the Stalactite, the Roadrunner, the Tepee, and the Turquoise Rooms—are the diverse nations or "principalities" of the world. The maternal Milia takes Soveida aside and, under the figure of a mother storyteller with "a multitude of her sleeping children," provides her first instruction in service (106). She refers to herself as the "left hand of God" and to her protégé as "the left hand of God extended" and explains: "I say the left hand because I don't want to be so presumptuous to say the right hand" (106). According to Catholic theology, Christ sits at the right hand of God with Cherubim and Seraphim surrounding the throne. Milia, then, places herself in a quite privileged position, one shared with angels in the service of perfect truth and beauty, and thereby presumes a sacred authority for her vocation. The milagro foot imagery signifies the sacred "dance" of the waitress, the grace and balance with which she serves others. In Soveida's *Book of Service*, an epistolary journal filled with what she has learned about life and love and service through waiting on others, she describes the "waitress's shift":

A waitress must depend on her skills as an actress, mind reader, dancer, and acrobat.

There is nothing like the great synchronized orchestration of the waitress's fugue. Otherwise known as the waitress's shift.

There is the initial organizational preparation, the revving up, and then the steady, expanding circle of contact as the rush sets in. As the demands grow greater, the worlds of the client, waitress, and cook soon intersect and transform into one intricate, complex composition. (271)

Tey Diana Rebolledo, in her study of work in Chicana literature, notes of the representation of service work in Chávez's narrative, "In fact, the art of being a waitress goes beyond a fugue, it becomes spiritual and holy. The working together of cook and waitress becomes as complex as a baroque symphony, with the waitress playing the central role" (48).

Powers are those angels, sometimes identified as warriors, who fight against evil spirits, attempting to keep the bad from overcoming the good (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, et al.). The conflict raised in the chapters in this section involves identifying what constitutes evil, that is, how to know one's enemy. Hand imagery, reinforced by the hand milagro often invoked in prayers over one's ability to work, emphasizes

the strong arm with which one combats evil but also the forces behind that evil. Some of the “enemies” are easily identifiable—the narcissistic, racist, misogynist Albert Chanowski (who cannot keep his hands off women), Ivan’s adultery, and the domestic violence in her neighbors’ household—but other evils prove much more difficult to identify.

Soveida muses over the nature of power and its relation to service in her *Book of Service*. In chapter one, “The Service Creed,” she explains, “my waitressing is connected with, some might say based, even bound, in a divine, preordained belief in individual service,” and that service was to be rendered to “God. Country. Men. Not necessarily in that order” (171). She concludes, “Life was, and is, service, no matter what our station in it. Some wrestle more with service than others. It is those to whom more is given from whom more service is demanded” (172). The scripture passage alluded to, Luke 12:48 (“Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more”), is spoken by Christ in the context of parables about the powerful and their servants.¹⁵ Jesus warns his disciples of the hypocrisy of the powerful (specifically, the Pharisees and the rich) and warns of the day to come when that hypocrisy will be revealed: “Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known” (Luke 12:2). He exhorts them not to fear those who have power only over their bodies (and not their souls) but, rather, “fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell” (12:5). Those who understand the locus of true power—God—apparently will be in the company of the angels: “And I tell you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God” (12:8-9). The second half of the chapter discusses the role of the good servant culminating with the scripture referenced in the text (Luke 12:48) expressing that all will be held accountable for what they know and how they have exercised the power they wield.

The narrative’s reference to this biblical principle leads to several interpretations of who wields power. In her patriarchal culture, male prerogative demands the chastity of women and expects the infidelity of men, and in Soveida’s grief over the breakup of her marriage, she begins to understand that her husband’s infidelity is part of a pattern handed down to and unquestioned by both men and women. While Ivan’s trespasses will undoubtedly be reckoned against him, Soveida ponders how his mother and, by extension, all the women she knows, have perpetuated the pattern of behavior. They have uncritically carried forth the traditions and oppressions of the past, like Cap Crenshaw’s mummified head, convinced that it holds some value when in fact it is a worthless, shrunken relic (182). By contrast, Mara starts to let go

of the past in the form of giving away old clothes, those garments that remind her of “another woman, another body” (198). As she reminisces, she values the good and takes a small step toward releasing the bad. The Powers section ends with an ode to Chata Vialpondo, housecleaner extraordinaire, who exemplifies the virtue of service and whose powerful hands—those of laborer and artist—set things in order: Chata, who “knows what it is to work and to love. Because, girl, let me tell you, loving is work!” (217).

The counterpart to Powers are Virtues, those angels who protect the good, help people fight temptation, frustrate demonic assaults, and bestow blessings (Chase 28; Keck 174; “Nine Choirs”). This section is complemented by a heart milagro, what appears to be the Immaculate Heart of Mary, pierced to signify sorrow.¹⁶ Virtues protect the good, but identifying the “good,” and in this case, the truth about Veryl, Soveida’s second husband, is as difficult as identifying the “enemy” in the preceding section, and the result is heartbreaking. Chávez offers a glimpse into the indeterminate nature of Veryl’s virtue with an allusion to Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, which Veryl is reading when Soveida first meets him. Like the jury—and the reader—in Stendhal’s narrative, we have the job of trying to evaluate and determine Veryl’s virtue. The changing perspective of Stendhal’s narrator parallels Soveida’s (and the reader’s) perception of Veryl, particularly the traumatic event that has rendered him impotent. Both narratives suggest the elusive nature of truth and in this case, the reader wonders if Soveida’s love for this pitiful man can be considered a virtue. Veryl, with his “heart of chiseled stone,” seems to be a misguided Christ figure, posing as Jesus on the cross for photos, suffering acutely from the effects of (his own) sin, and dying for those sins—in Veryl’s case, suicide. The last image of the chapter has Soveida as a brokenhearted Mary, inconsolable in her loss: “I held him in my arms, a sorrowful Pietà, my heart chiseled in stone” (260). But the reader wonders whether she or Veryl possesses the heart of stone.

Soveida sinks in her tragic grief until Oralia, Mamá Lupita’s lifelong servant and companion, intervenes to fight for Soveida’s soul. Oralia is described as a “bridge between cultures, languages, and beliefs...a representative of that bygone ideal of service, a thing of the past, only now and then remembered in this highly individualistic society” (306). To Soveida, Oralia is “more family than family. More than a servant, more than a maid, more committed than a housekeeper, she was a laundress, a scrubwoman, a cook, a nurse, a dishwasher, a nanny, but never a slave” (306-307). Oralia, a curandera and apt representation of a Virtue, helps Soveida fight her temptation to give in to grief, explaining that “darkness calls with such a lovely voice” that one’s “soul may fly away” (264). In a beautiful passage, the narrative describes the *limpia*, or cleansing ceremony, that facilitates Soveida’s journey

of healing and enlightenment. Oralia instructs Soveida to call up the burdens she carries, “lay each one aside, as if it were a small, heavy child. Then ask la diosita, the Guadalupe, and all the spirits of life, to come into your heart and turn these children into angels. . . . Look at these angels and thank them. They will begin to leave, one by one” (265). The lessons Soveida learns from the burdens, the heartaches of her life, become her virtues.

Dominations, the angels of the next segment of the book, are said to have the authority to direct Powers and Virtues. As angels of leadership, they establish wise government: regulate, establish and maintain order, supervise (“bring ministries to completion”), and do so while exemplifying humility to humankind (Chase 28; “Nine Choirs”; *New Catholic Dictionary*). The complementary milagro imagery of this section—eyes—suggests the Dominations’ powers of observation and close watch over other angels. When the narrative introduces J.V. Velasquez, professor of Chicano studies courses at the local community college, he is closely observing Soveida much like the course involves carefully observing Chicano culture. He does not, however, supervise her studies with humility but, rather, condescendingly responds to her work. And while she is attracted to him, a more mature Soveida is not blinded by his charm, like she was with her first husband. She “sees” him with much greater discernment. Another authority figure is Larry Larragoite, owner and manager of El Farol restaurant. Larry is a strange proprietor of a Mexican restaurant, to be sure. This “Spanish white man” hates waiting on tables, despises Mexican food, mispronounces the food on his menus, and seems to initiate chaos rather than order (150). His leadership skills, or lack thereof, take center stage in the comic “Night of the Cucas,” when Chuy, the janitor, follows Larry’s instructions to spray for cockroaches, which flee into the dining rooms during the dinner rush. Larry is concerned only with placing blame, and his attack on the elderly Chuy represents a violation of one of Latino culture’s central ethics: respect for one’s elders. Later, Larry impulsively and inadvisedly decides to discontinue free meals for the staff. Chaos ensues; the staff strikes; and order is restored only after they work out the problem together.

Countering these unwise governors is Soveida, whose *Book of Service* is now addressed specifically to her new trainee, Dede. Her description of the good server sounds much like the role of the Dominations: to be a “directress of order and guardian of discipline,” and to do so not condescendingly but as a “member of the same basic human family” (271). Harking back to Miliá’s instructions to the young Soveida, the waitress is the good observer, one who notices details like the cleanliness of the table settings and the state of the condiments, and who can interpret the signs and sounds of the customers (106). What the waitress/servant,

is *not*, Soveida tells Mara in a disputatious conversation, is a slave. When Mara calls Oralia and Chata “slaves,” Soveida counters, “Oh, Mara, you’re wrong. They’re not slaves, they’re women who serve. There’s a difference. You just don’t get it” (270). Later, in an interview with Oralia for her Chicano Studies course, Oralia explains how the work one does is interconnected with everything in life: “Everything we do, no matter how small, is part of the work of living” (307). Like the ministries of angels, no one vocation is more important than another—all are equally essential. Those who serve with humility like Oralia are not *servile* but, rather, cognizant of their equal status in God’s eyes, which explains Soveida’s assertion to Dede that the waitress is the “observer/observed sanctified by food” (271). Reinforcement of this important lesson comes in conjunction with the most dominating eye imagery in this section—the *Ojo de Dios* (God’s eye) that gazes down from a prominent position on the wall of the Turquoise Room. When Mr. Tangee chokes on his Tampico steak, all hands rush to Heimlich, pray, and, when their attempts fail, weep over him, ultimately doing the “best that could have been done” (294)—all under the watchful *Ojo de Dios* that reminds them of their shared class as *watched over*.

The Thrones uphold justice and are associated with the notion of the judgment seat of God (*Catholic Encyclopedia, New Catholic Encyclopedia*). The chariots seen by the prophet Ezekiel are thought to have been Thrones (Ezekiel 1:13-19), and Daniel’s vision similarly describes them: “his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him. . . the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened” (Daniel 7:9-10). The image of a leg milagro ironically graces this section concerned with judgment *seats* and featuring characters who have lost the use of their legs: Luardo through his stroke, Tia Adelaida with her paralysis, and Dona Trancha, with the amputation of her legs due to diabetes. The narrative records the deaths of Luardo and the wheelchair-bound Doña Trancha, as well as the diseases and illnesses of other characters, perhaps referencing the unusual characteristic of Thrones, which are said to reside in the threshold where heaven meets earth (“Nine Choirs”), where “life” meets “death,” or the afterlife. As Luardo lay dying from a stroke, Oralia comments that many people’s hearts “are like the swirling wind, without a place to rest. Como el dicho: Quien siembra vientos recoge tempestades. Who sows the wind reaps the whirlwind,” a reference to Hosea 8:7 in which the whirlwind represents the judgment of God (401). Luardo’s slow death may perhaps be considered poetic justice for all the years he has used his legs to run around on Dolores and also for his sexual abuse of Mara and Soveida. By contrast, Tia may have lost the use of her legs, but she lived a long and good life in the loving care of her sister. Dolly explains to Soveida, “Paralyzed? Mi Tía Adelaida? She’s not paralyzed. She just can’t walk. Paralyzed is your father. Now, there are paralyzed

people and there are paralyzed people” (332). Miguel Angel Fortuna, husband of the tragic Lina, violates his namesakes by using his legs to walk out on his wife and child. The misfortunate, abandoned Lina unjustly dies a tragic and painful death from complications of childbirth.

Larry Larragoite deals with death by preparing a will and requiring all members of his staff to write out their wills and deposit them in the restaurant safe, presumably for the power it grants him in knowing who and what his employees value. Wills are like a last judgment: our individual opportunity to decide who deserves our earthly goods. The two holdouts, Soveida and Pito, seem reluctant to pass such judgment. An amusing conversation between Larry and Pito illustrates how those who value no earthly goods wield a power over those for whom material goods are important. In such a case, the power dynamics are reversed, and the first becomes last (Matt. 20:16).¹⁷ When Pito insists that he wants to leave everything to God (including his good frying pan), Larry’s frustration reveals his inability to consider a perspective that sees no boundary between heaven and earth: “How can you leave everything to God, Pito?... God isn’t a person. I mean, he’s a person, but he’s not human. He’s dead, I mean, he’s not dead, he’s alive, well, in a manner of speaking, he’s alive. You can’t leave everything to God, Pito, and that’s all there is to it” (383). Later when Pito asks Soveida to go over his will with him, he explains that the only thing of real value in life is the nurturing care he has received:

“Remember when I was real sick with pneumonia, Soveida, and you brought me food? You stayed with me that night? That’s when I was the closest ever to dying. I knew what it was like to be old, like my mom, and sick, like Freddie. I was everybody I ever knew and other people I didn’t know as well. I was old ladies and old men and babies. I was my dad with that hole in his throat where the cancer said hello.”

“I’ve been that sick, too, Pito. When you’re sick like that, things around you don’t mean anything. They’re just things.”

“You called the priest, Soveida, and he prayed over me and put oil on my forehead and on my hands. After that, I felt a small little fire, a light in my heart, like a burning candle that was lit. That’s why I want to leave everything to God.” (388)

Pito reports that in his illness, he was “everybody,” that is, he was a human needing the help of others. Recognition of such interdependence diminishes the value of human possessions and makes judgment of others an ominous concept, indeed.

The angels of the last two sections of the book—Cherubim and Seraphim—are, next to archangels, the best known. They are said to be the guardians of God’s glory, serving God around the throne. The Cherubim, from the Hebrew word meaning

“the fullness of knowledge” presumably because they are “allowed to behold the glory of God more closely,” dispense wisdom and enlightenment (*New Catholic Dictionary*). At this point in the narrative, the Cherubim, consistent with the milagro of a woman’s head, would represent those wise and enlightened women in Soveida’s life, particularly Oralia, whose legacy will enable Soveida to complete her journey, as well as Soveida herself, who has become wise as a result of her own life experiences. These chapters recount several of the great lessons Soveida has learned from the knowledge she has gained.

As Soveida looks back on her relationships with men in her life, she realizes what she has learned, even from her father: “He taught me what love was through his lovelessness, and what loyalty was, and yes, trust, through his lack of both. Perhaps we learn the most valuable lessons from those we’ve ceased to understand” (403). Soveida has grown to the point where she can speak the words that have been haunting her story up to this point, acknowledging that she was also a victim of Luardo’s sexual abuse: “I remembered him hurting Mara, and then me” (402). As Maya Socolovsky notes, acknowledging the heretofore unspeakable was facilitated by Soveida’s formal education process: “her narrative strategy for articulating the unspeakable is to convey it in her term paper...showing how the formal adopted discourse of academia serves to express the trauma of both personal and national history” (190). In a note attached to her term paper, we learn that she has been attending and promoting “Family of Survivors of Abuse” meetings. It is this enlightened and strengthened Soveida who begins to question and act.

When Soveida learns that her brother, Hector, is already cheating on his fiancée, Ada, she informs her in the hopes that Ada will not have to suffer the betrayal she has experienced; but Ada, like most Latinas she knows, denies the possibility. Soveida overhears her brother crassly express to a friend (referring either to his fiancée or another lover) that “she has the face of an angel and likes to fuck” (375). This reference to the “face of an angel” takes us back to the beginning of the book when Luardo uses the term to describe Dolores in her youth, signaling that Hector will continue the cycle of infidelity passed down to him by his father (375). But Soveida is determined to break the cycle: when Dolly responds to Hector’s cheating by remarking, “he’s that way,” Soveida retorts, “How did he get *that way*? Weren’t you around back then, Dolores, to see that he didn’t become *that way*?” (376). In her term paper, “Mothers, Teach Your Sons,” Soveida writes,

This [sexual] yoke was fashioned by the fathers, refined by the sons, continued by their brothers, and carried into other generations by the uncles, cousins, brothers-in-law, handed down from person to person, through the ages, family to family, women partaking in the cycle, by looking the other way, in their obvious deferment

to the male, assuming responsibility for both father and son, and in the seemingly loving act of “mothering.” (318)

While Soveida’s journey of knowledge includes a more comprehensive understanding of the complicity of women in their own oppression, she also understands that the strong bonds between grandmothers, mothers, and daughters are what grants her strength. She learns from Mamá the story of the biblical Ruth and Noemi, that celebrated tale of love between women who console and support each other (Exodus 15). Mamá identifies with Noemi in the story, with Dolores as her Ruth. When Soveida learns that Mara was named after Noemi, who took the name (“bitterness”) in her sorrow and loss, she realizes that all along Mamá has identified strongly with the orphaned, loveless child who was in her care. Mamá projected her self-hatred onto Mara, but over the years, and the course of the narrative, Mamá changes significantly, from a strong and bitter woman to a mellowed (if not sweet), wiser, still strong, mother hoping for forgiveness. Mamá prays that Mara will return to see her before she dies and “that when she comes to Agua Oscura her bitterness becomes sweet water” (410). But true wisdom acknowledges the limits of knowledge, the point at which faith takes over. When Oralia, the exemplar of wisdom in the narrative, dies, we are told that her “life moved on to the great unknown and floated away to God. It was beautiful to behold” (417). The medieval visionary Saint Umiltà of Faenza believed that the ministry of angels comprises their song—“Whenever they unfurl their wings in flight and then gather them gracefully together again, they make their ministry a sweet song” (qtd. in Chase 17)—and Oralia’s name, Milcantos, meaning a thousand songs, evinces the scope of her service (418).

The book ends with the section “Seraphim,” those angels surrounding the throne of God and blazing with pure passion and love. They are described as beings of pure light (from the Hebrew *seraph*, fire) who complement Cherubim knowledge with a burning love (*Catholic Encyclopedia*; “Nine Choirs”; Chase 22). The Seraphim make their most prominent appearance in the Bible in Isaiah’s vision of God. Isaiah sees God’s glory and the Seraphim surrounding the throne and declares, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5). One of the seraphim flies to him with coals from the altar, touches his mouth, and purges him, making him clean. God then sends Isaiah to *speak*, to tell the story to a hard-hearted people who will probably fail to understand his message. The passage recalls the earlier words with which Soveida started her story: “Their memories are mine. That sweet telling mine. Mine the ash. It’s a long story” (4). If hers is the ash,

this last section suggests Soveida rises from those ashes, apparently purified through the service of the angels in her life.

Two additional “angels” operate toward the end of the narrative, complementing Oralia’s service and accompanying Soveida to the end of her journey. Soveida’s old friend Lizzie, the feminist lesbian nun, confirms for her that serving is, indeed, loving, and “each of us chooses our service” (445).¹⁸ Lizzie recounts her visit with one of their old schoolteachers, now in a retirement home, who, upon hearing of Lizzie’s decision to become a nun, pronounced a benediction: “My prayers will go with you as you find your way to that great question of loving. Of service” (443). As Soveida sets out on a final quest to find answers about her dead husband, his only living relative, Mae Lu, proves an unlikely, if not absurd, angel—a poor, pitifully arthritic masseuse who nevertheless ministers to the broken Soveida by providing some of the answers she seeks. Mae Lu then soaks Soveida’s feet in a dishpan and massages her hands and feet, an allusion to the servant-Christ who washed his disciple’s feet. The ministrations of Mae Lu, Lizzie, and Oralia together effect a healing in the broken and weary Soveida.

According to Saint Bonaventure, Seraphim “signify the culmination of the creature’s return to God” (Keck 150), and thus are an apt emblem for the end of the journey of the narrative, as is the house milagro marking this section. Soveida has reached a point of relative enlightenment, described as a type of homecoming, aided by the service of wise and loving women. And the description of the face of an angel now starkly counters those perverse perspectives of Luardo and Hector: it is the “The Waitress’s Face,” “A face that pacifies the children when they cry, soothes old men when they are sad, and appeases hungry people who want more than food. An all-giving, all-loving face that never lies” (437). By the end of the narrative, Soveida has reached an understanding of the difficult task of negotiating a path toward redemptive service to oneself and to others, and she believes she has found the strength to break the dysfunctional cycles of her family. She tells Lizzie, “If I ever have a child, I will name her Milagro. She won’t be like the women I always knew: lonely, clinging, afraid. She’ll be someone new. Someone to behold. Milagro. In a room crowded with other women, she will always be herself. Miracle. Loving the others. Blessing them. Wishing them peace. Milagro. Miracle” (399).

Chávez’s sustained focus on angel imagery no doubt reminds the reader of the feminist problem with the Angel in the House, who Virginia Woolf described as the woman who is everything that, and only what, men want and need her to be, the angel that the woman writer must kill before she can work effectively. While Chávez clearly acknowledges the problem of the “angel in the house” with whom western feminists have grappled, rather than killing it, she posits a new, more powerful angel

who counters a culture that mistakenly believes women exist only to serve men and also the men *and women* who would perpetuate such a misconception and injustice. In her celebration of service, Chávez redefines the angel and acknowledges the diversity in work performed not for men but in service to the good and true. Chávez ends her book with Soveida moving into her new home—a remodeled version of Mamá Lupita’s blue house, signifying not a total abandonment of her heritage but, rather, an improvement to it—to raise her child in the light of what she has learned. Thus, Chávez installs a new, alternative angel in the house, described as a homecoming. In explaining how humans are called to share in angelic ministries, Pope Gregory I speaks in terms of coming home: “Lead yourself home into your inner most self, that is, into the core of your being. Examine the merits of your inner secrets and inmost understanding. Look inside yourself and see if what you are doing now is good. . . . see if you are among the number of those bands of spirits [angels]; see if you find your vocation among them” (qtd. in Chase 34). Chávez’s vocation involves denouncing the destructive cycles of male privilege in Chicano/a Catholic culture, and the oppression it perpetuates, while simultaneously affirming that culture’s valorization of service. Thus, Chávez attempts to purge a culture and tradition of its destructive characteristics and retaining something true and beautiful. ✱

Notes

¹The most commonly revised myths and archetypes in Chicana literature include La Malinche, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and La Llorona.

²Also see Charlene Villaseñor Black, Alvina E. Quintana, Maria Gonzalez, Carla Trujillo, Jeanette Rodríguez, and Linda Craft on ways Chicanas have “rewritten” Catholic tradition, iconography, mythology, and theology.

³Chávez attended Catholic schools and acknowledges the deep influence of Catholicism in her life but also considers herself skeptical toward the Church. She identifies as “deeply spiritual” and “interdenominational,” and still occasionally attends Catholic Church (see her interview with Annie O. Eysturoy, 159-160).

⁴Quintana, Sánchez, and Keating are referring to the *Novena Narrativas* and *The Last of the Menu Girls*, and their comments predate the publication of *Face of an Angel*, which they may view differently. Chávez seems much more intentional in *Face of an Angel* about qualifying the concept of service and critiquing stereotypes of feminine purity and passivity.

⁵These perspectives are summed up in general reference resources, from which the general information on angel orders in this discussion are derived, including the *Catholic*

Encyclopedia, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, the *New Catholic Dictionary*, and *Catholic Online*, as well as other cited texts.

⁶Steven Chase explains that “hierarchy” did not originally refer to a power system but an “organizational pattern”: “hierarchy originally was simply the sacred or holy (*hier*) source or first principle (*archia*). As such, it was a structure of process grounded in divine reality” (xx, 20). He suggests envisioning hierarchy “not in terms of a ladder or steps in which those on a ‘higher’ rung are somehow closer to God or in a position to oppress those on a ‘lower’ rung but rather as a circle. Thought of in this way, the celestial hierarchy is a circle containing within it concentric circles at the very center of which is God” (21). To assume that angels are lower in rank because they work more closely with humans suggests a devaluation of the physical in favor of the spiritual, and while this notion underlies the thinking of some theologians who theorize such a ranking among angels, other orthodox theologians reject this reasoning, citing the incarnation as the decisive divine endorsement of the value of the physical world.

⁷The Introduction to Chase’s study discusses the role of angels in detail, synthesizing the commentary of every major Christian theologian of the medieval period and earlier, whose views form the foundation of Catholic thought and tradition. Of further relevance to Chávez’s use of angels in the narrative are Chase’s observations that “angelic spirituality is less concerned with the natural world, or even the celestial world as a whole, than it is with the particular world of human relationships” and, “It is perhaps appropriate that angels are most clearly revealed through their ministry as it is pursued in the order of human relations” (16, 18). Chávez’s application of angelic spirituality to the domestic relationships of her narrative is nicely consistent with this tradition.

⁸In Maya Socolovsky’s insightful discussion of the narrative strategies in *Face of an Angel*, she suggests the focus on the spiritual in the text might be a transcendence strategy (that is, turning to religion as a strategy to cope with the psychological effects of physical trauma) related to the unspoken abuse below the surface of the text (200). She apparently presumes that Chávez’s reference to the hierarchy as “the lowest order to the highest” (Chávez, “Denise Chávez: Chicana” 39) suggests a subordination of the physical to the spiritual. But Chávez does not refer to a “better ‘angel self,’” as Socolovsky states (200), but to a “deeper and higher or angel self” (Chávez, “Denise Chávez: Chicana” 39); thus she suggests the “angel self” is the enlightened self, which in this case could be interpreted as the self that has integrated all the various characteristics of the different angels. Because Chávez’s narrative similarly celebrates the physical—the body—particularly in the characters of Chata, Oralia, and Soveida (as Socolovsky nicely delineates), as well as the spiritual, the theological view of the equality among classes of angels would seem to rule in the narrative.

⁹Milagros (literally, miracles) are small metal charms in the Latino folk art tradition that come in different shapes related to human affairs and concerns and are invoked in prayers and vows over related needs; for example, a heart milagro may be worn or pinned on a personal altar when praying for a physical or emotional heart ailment.

¹⁰Capitalization is used throughout this discussion when referring to a specific order of angels to distinguish them from their generic meaning.

¹¹Another “side”—or interpretation of the angelic—would include consideration of the notion of fallen angels, which are quite dominant in popular culture contexts. While an examination of fallen angels is beyond the scope of this article, the complex theological debate surrounding them would surely provide some interesting applications to the text. The “ghosts” of the text that Maya Socolovsky discusses could perhaps be interpreted as fallen angels.

¹²Some sources argue that the Principalities are a fallen order of angels (see “Nine Choirs”). Popular culture sources citing the tie to sexuality (associated specifically with the angel Anael) are ubiquitous on the internet and seem to be drawn from a number of sources, including Milton, Francis Barrett (*The Magus* 1801) and Longfellow’s *The Golden Legend*.

¹³“El Farol” in Spanish means a light or lantern/streetlight, but it also signifies a bluff (as in card games), thus it is telling that Soveida’s first sexual encounter is with a man nicknamed “Jester.” There is also among Mexican Americans an idiomatic phrase—*adelante con los faroles*—that might translate “onward in the light!” or “keep up the good work,” which signifies nicely the changes in Soveida’s life that come about through El Farol.

¹⁴This story is a popular folk legend in several cultures with minor changes—often the man has cloven hooves rather than chicken feet.

¹⁵All scripture references are from the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition of the Bible. Luke 12 may serve as an effective frame for Chávez’s entire narrative, complementing her themes of service, listening, whispers and lies, responsibility and accountability, and loving and serving truth. The chapter ends with a message about how serving God, or championing the truth, rather than cultural values and the culturally powerful, can put one at odds with family.

¹⁶The image of the Immaculate Heart of Mary ranks in popularity with the Sacred Heart of Jesus among Catholic heart imagery.

¹⁷Chávez comically notes that the first will be last “Except when serving food” (381).

¹⁸“Lizzie, the feminist lesbian nun” rolls off the tongue, sounding something like a superhero, which perhaps Chávez intended.

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