
FORUM

Teaching Chicana/o Literature in Community College with Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*

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So Far From God, written in 1993, is a fictional novel that covers two decades of a Chicana family originally from Tomé, New Mexico, a land grant in Valencia County, roughly 35 miles south of Albuquerque, and within walking proximity to the University of New Mexico Valencia campus where I teach. The story is told through a series of historic, ethnic, and gender juxtapositions, or rather, collisions. In a quixotic manner, Castillo depicts the life of Sofia and her fated daughters, Fe, Esperanza, Caridad, and La Loca as they navigate Chicana/o confluences of indigenous and Westernized ways of life, language, social and spiritual beliefs. For these reasons, *So Far From God* is a unique and effectual novel to introduce students in the Southwest to regional writing, to have them consider the significances of folklore in contemporary literature, and also to help them understand Chicana/o literary production from a Chicana perspective.

To get a better grasp of the novel, I find it important to give an overview of Chicana/o writing to help students understand the emergence of Chicana/o literature and *So Far From God's* position in this cultural production. Early forms of Chicana/o literature include autobiographies, memoirs and testimonials of landowners, as well as *corridos*: popular narrative songs and poetry derivative from Mexican ballads. Yet in the heyday of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, Chicano literature underwent critical changes that included a flowering of letters, narratives, novels, short stories, and poetry committed to representing the social consciousness of the Chicana/o. The Chicano Movement encompassed a broad cross section of issues—from restoration of land grants, to farm workers' rights, to enhanced education, to voting and political rights, as well as emerging awareness of collective history. Socially, the Chicano Movement addressed what it perceived to be negative ethnic stereotypes of Mexicans in mass media and the American consciousness. A major element of the Movement was the burgeoning of Chicano art fueled by the heightened political activism and energized cultural pride.

Chicano visual art, music, literature, dance, theater, and sculpture, and other forms of expression flourished as well.

The Chicano art movement of the 1960s opened a gate for novels, and other poetry, short stories, essays, and plays, to flow from the pens of contemporary Chicana/o writers. Chicano, Mexican-American, and Hispanic cultural centers, theaters, film festivals, museums, galleries, and numerous other arts and cultural organizations have also grown in number and impact since this time. The Chicano Movement of the 1960s also opened a gate for Chicanas that felt oppressed by Chicano men and masculinist ideologies embedded in the Movement, and the 1980s saw a flood of both Chicana and Chicano writers writing from the margins, namely in feminist and queer texts by Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Richard Rodriguez. The popularity and success of this new pluralistic Chicana writing that gave voice to Chicanas/os living on real and imagined borders was essentially the gestation of a pronounced increase in Chicana/o cultural production that was flourishing in the 1990s that includes authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chavez, and Ana Castillo.

It is in this same spirit that I approach teaching *So Far From God*, as a Chicana/feminist text that demonstrates the beauty of New Mexico, the traditions of the people, and the value of regional writing, while also challenging the notion of a static cultural identity. The novel, rich in folklore, also provides a great opportunity to discuss myth and legend in contemporary Chicana writing. In Chicana literary production, the presence of Mexican folklore demonstrates a symbolic re-remembering, resurrection, and return to what Americo Paredes identifies as the “Folk Base of Chicano Literature.” This return signals an ideological rebirth of Chicana/o cultural identity that is neither androcentric nor nostalgic for “old Mexico”; instead, it marks a resurgence that foregrounds the potential for cultural empowerment in Chicana discourse. Paredes attributes the main factors molding and inciting folk traditions in the United States to be colonization, the westward movement, slavery, immigration, regionalism, the rhetoric of democracy, and the influence of the mass media (*Folktales of Mexico* xii). When looking specifically at Mexican folklore, we need to account for the various groups of the Spanish, creole, mestizo, and Indian viewpoints that were engaged in the process of storytelling, and consider how their experiences of social contact among themselves and to each other further influenced their narrative cultural production.

Through folkloric elements, Chicana literary cultural production is simultaneously a repository for past and future traditions: it takes elements from the past in the form of myth and legend, and ensures their sustainability by retelling them to a new generation of Chicanas/os who, through either language

or geographical boundaries, would not have access to these tales which became particularly resonant after the Chicano Movement when Chicanas/as turned to Aztec and Mayan myths and legends for inspiration. In addition to Spanish influence, inspiration for the production of a distinct Chicana/o folklore also came out of the cultural conflicts that took place during the Spanish colonization of Mexico in the late 1500s and early 1600s; out of the cultural conflicts between the United States and Mexico between 1821-1848 when Anglos were beginning to settle in Texas; during the Mexican American War (1846-1848); and when the first post-war generation Mexicans of the Mexican American War were becoming U.S. citizens (1848-1910).

This symbolic re-membling emerges as a critical tool for understanding Chicana notions of identity, politics, aesthetics, and the conflicted dynamics of their culture. However, contemporary Chicana writers are not reiterating the damaging mythology that reinforces a fragmented female subjectivity; instead, they are revising Chicana/o mythology to depict female figures as whole, and thus rewriting the grotesque history of Chicana/o culture.

In "From Chingada to Chingona: La Malinche Redefined, Or, A Long Line of Hermanas," Rita Cano Alcalá maintains that the re-evaluation of female mythological figures "constitutes a symbolic reclaiming of a feminine indigenous voice, one that has been silenced and discredited because of its threat to institutionalized patriarchy, beginning with the ideological state apparatus of the family and ending in the pages of its national myths and histories" (52). These writers' non-traditional representation of ancient and colonial myth reformulates and ultimately queers existing paradigms at work in both Chicana/o and Anglo cultures. Catrióna Rueda Esquibel also argues that Chicana art and fiction is not only important for what it says about Chicanas, but also for what it says about Chicano/a culture and American society (xvi). Esquibel attributes her narrative perspective to Hayden White's and Emma Pérez's theories of metahistory and emplotment. White's rhetorical impulse of connecting "imaginary events" of myths onto "real events" of narrative structures constitutes what he terms the "emplotment of history" (31-38). For White, because history relies on the narrative form, it is emplotted along the lines of romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire, and can be discussed through the literary tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (4). In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Pérez applies a similar formulation to analyze the roles of Chicanas in history: "I am, in a sense, exposing how historians have participated in a politics of historical writing in which erasure—the erasure of race, gender, sexualities, and especially differences—was not intentional, but rather a symptom of the type of narrative emplotment unconsciously chosen by

the historians” (27). Thus, as Esquibel asserts, Chicanas and Chicana lesbians have since created their own historical identity and identity politics through their own writing.

This same rhetorical impulse is enacted in the rewriting of pre-Columbian and post-conquest myth and legend by contemporary Chicanas. Anzaldúa argues that myth and fiction create reality, and have historically been used against women to control, regulate, and manipulate them; thus, rewriting mythology is a way of responding to oppressing paradigms and correcting the historical malaise of women perpetuated through a negative mythology (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 219). Barbara Cook also claims that the act of rewriting gives a voice to those that have been historically silenced and is a method of obtaining self-agency:

Rewriting of traditional communal stories are acts of cultural resistance.... Through the revision of their own traditional narratives, Chicana writers ... challenge prevailing ideas that see storytelling as just serving a creative end. Focusing on Mexican-American folktales and legends about feminine cultural icons, Chicana writers have learned how to use cultural differences and make them strengths.... The revision of these traditional stories, rooted in cultural tradition, create both identity and community in a marginalized group, and act as a site of resistance to change language and concepts of dominant history. (125)

While this rewriting is subversive and disruptive, its inherent power leads to communal healing within both the Chicana community and within the larger Chicana/o body politic. This process is initiated by recognizing the contemporary resonance of folkloric figures. Anzaldúa states:

A lot of our writing exposes what's hidden from us in terms of our sexuality and our bodies and exposes how women are conditioned and controlled. Making a connection between all these oppressions and figures like la Llorona helps me to formulate theories about where the oppressions connect and where I can create empowering ways—whether physical, emotional, derived from activism or from writing. So the figures are a shorthand for me. (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 221)

While these divisions represent a fragmentation and a division in the community, they foreshadow a rupture with male-centered, heteronormative assumptions about Chicana/o identity. Thus, through revisionist mythmaking, Chicana writers are picking up the pieces and re-membling the Chicana/o body.

The Spanish colonial period is the most historical significant period in the establishment of Chicana folklore since it is during this time that the myths and legends of La Malinche (1519), the much maligned interpreter, advisor, lover, and intermediary for Hernán Cortés; the Virgin of Guadalupe (1531), the Mexican

iteration of Mother Mary; and La Llorona emerged as models of *meztizajanness* born out of the dominant European and indigenous cultural strands. In *So Far From God*, Castillo narrates how myths from this colonial period, specifically La Llorona and La Malogra, are perpetuated in Hispanic New Mexican culture. La Llorona, the Wailing or Weeping Woman, is a confluence of European and indigenous cultural influences. Legend has it that La Llorona was a mestiza woman who was jilted by her Spanish lover, and in an act of revenge, drowned their children. As a result of God's punishment, she forever roams the earth's waterways looking for her children while wailing in the night. A Native American version relates her to the Aztec Goddess Cihuacótl who steals babies from their cribs and leaves behind an obsidian knife; and another version dates back to pre-conquest and has her appearing before men, covered with chalk and wailing, while wearing obsidian earplugs. Mexican Americans often use the folk legend to socialize their children: they better not misbehave or La Llorona will get them.

In *So Far From God*, La Llorona and other examples of traditional Mexican-American mythology figure prominently in the narrative and is rewritten to challenge narrow androcentric understandings of Chicana/o discourse. The novel tells the story of a poor family of Chicanas from the small village of Tomé, and how through a variety of feminisms, is able to challenge the cultural hegemony of an Anglo-American dominant culture. As is the case in Cisneros' "Woman Hollering Creek," Castillo's Llorona is rewritten to portray a strong female identity, and critically explores the complexities of class, sexuality, and spiritualism within a hybrid existence. Similar to the original story, Castillo's La Llorona functions as a cautionary tale; yet she addresses modern concerns about environmental racism and other areas of socio-economic oppression. La Llorona specifically functions as an agent of change in the lives of Sofi's daughters Fe and La Loca. For Fe, La Llorona's resistance is manifested over environmental concerns, while for La Loca, her resistance materializes in the rejection of a westernized logocentrism. Castillo draws on myth to underscore the psychic and physical consequences that can result from internalizing oppressive dominant ideologies (as is the case with Fe), and from challenging them (as La Loca demonstrates).

Castillo's La Llorona departs from these negative associations and appears as a sympathetic presence, one that is able to relate to the simple ways of Sofi's youngest, beatific, and idiotic daughter, La Loca. La Loca's constant communication with La Llorona enables her to predict other people's deaths. In the chapter partially titled "Wherein Sofia Discovers La Loca's Playmate by the Acequia Has an Uncanny Resemblance to the Legendary Llorona," La Llorona gives La Loca the news of her oldest sister's death:

Who better but La Llorona could the spirit of Esperanza have found, come to think of it, if not a woman who had been given a bad rap by every generation of her people since the beginning of time and yet, to Esperanza's spirit-mind, La Llorona in the beginning (before men got in the way of it all) may have been nothing short of a loving mother goddess. (163)

Referred to by the narrator as "the Chicana international astral-traveler," La Llorona is reinvented and reclaimed as a feminist force. As a phenomenon and a mestiza, La Llorona is represented in the novel as a hybridized figure dealing with four distinct spheres: reality and fantasy, and a European and indigenous status. Seen through the eyes of La Loca who does not privilege reality over phenomena, La Llorona's presence posits one of the many marvelous sequence of events surrounding La Loca's life, which many critics have characterized as a form of magic realism. Unlike the traditional Western version of realism which is narratively singular, objective, and thus intended to be universally ideological and hegemonic, the eccentricity of magic realism creates space for interactions of diversity. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris argue that "in magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation" (3). By having narratives that are drawn from non-Western cultures that value mystery, empathy, and tradition over empiricism, technology, and innovation, magic realist texts call attention to cultural and political contrasts. In this context, magic realism is a mode suited to exploring and transgressing ontological, political, and geographical boundaries by displacing mind/body, spirit/matter, life/death, real/imaginary, self/other, and male/female normative oppositions.¹ This suspension of traditional logic is inherent to the grotesque since it also displaces, confuses, interpenetrates, and distorts the different spheres of the "magic" world with the "real" world through hyperbolic narrative. The subversive power in Castillo's rewrite of La Llorona shifts power from the dominant paradigm to an alternative outlook, thus redefining conceptions of reality from a marginal perspective and legitimizing the Chicana point of view.

Loca's older sister, Fe, similarly has a twofold connection to La Llorona; it lies in the nickname, *la gritona*, given to her by her family after she was deserted by her fiancé and cried "one continuous scream" for weeks, and also in the parallels between her personal life and the traditional legend surrounding La Llorona. In this regard, Castillo is drawing on the version of La Llorona that serves as a cautionary tale against crossing boundaries, but rewrites the story so that instead of killing her children, Fe dies childless as a result from being exposed to poisonous chemicals

produced by a factory that exploits its poor female laborers. Instead of having Fe bear the responsibility of killing her children and aligning her with a misogynistic interpretation of La Llorona, Castillo shifts the responsibility to the patriarchal institution of the military arms industry that leaves Fe sterile and inverts the tale of La Llorona into a critique of the institutions responsible for the environmental crises affecting countless regions that are populated by poor minorities.

Cook points out Castillo's criticism of dominant ideology when Fe, dying of cancer, is questioned by the FBI about the plant's illegal use of chemicals rather than her terminal illness that resulted from exposure to the chemicals. In Castillo's revision of the story of female cultural history, female strength appears and creates other opportunities and possibilities at the same time she is calling attention to environmental issues. The story embodies the weeping so it becomes a voice that calls attention to both loss and the possibilities of resistance (130). While Fe dies as a consequence of internalizing an oppressive construction of the American dream, at the end she is able to draw the strength to protest the toxic environmental state that is a ramification of the ideology behind that dream. In this sense, Castillo is channeling a nationalistic political subtext for the Chicana/o community to illustrate a contemporary need to collectively protest violence directed at ethnic laborers, but instead of relying on a masculinist based ethos of the 1960s and 1970s, she transposes the mythology to be inclusive of the female perspective. Fe's act of resistance parallels Castillo's rhetorical impulse to rewrite, or heal, the ways in which Chicanas/os and other minorities interact with dominant systems of power.

In an interview, Castillo states: "I cannot say I am a citizen of the world as Virginia Woolf, speaking as an Anglo woman born to economic means, declared herself; nor can I make the same claim to U.S. citizenship as Adrienne Rich does despite her universal feel for humanity. As a mestiza born to the lower strata, I am treated at best, as a second class citizen, at worst as a nonentity" (*Ana Castillo*). We see this treatment, this dismissal, manifested in the attack of Sofia's most beautiful daughter, Caridad. Returning home "as mangled as a stray cat" (32), Caridad's extensive damages include bite, burn, and stab wounds; yet, despite her massive bleeding and mangled body, the sheriff's department refuses to investigate her case and fails to convict someone. After being prodded, tubed, and stapled together by the hospital, Caridad is sent home looking like a "nightmare incarnated" (33).

It is only after Caridad is healing and preparing to be a *curandera* (a traditional folk healer) with doña Felicia that Caridad first speaks of the attack. This leads doña Felicia to identify the violator as *la malogra*. According to New Mexican folklore, the *malora*, also pronounced *malogra*, or "the evil one," wanders about

during night, namely at crossroads, and terrorizes women that wander alone. The *malogra* is said to usually don a large lock of wool or the whole fleece of a sheep and rarely takes on a human form. According to folklorist Aurelio M. Espinosa, “it is generally believed that a person who sees *la malora*, like one who sees a ghost (*un difunto*), forever remains senseless. When asked for detailed information about this myth, the New Mexicans give the general reply, ‘*es cosa mala*, it is an evil thing’” (Espinosa 401). In *So Far From God*, Caridad’s *malogra* is described as something

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 night, and mostly, as Caridad, would never, ever forget, it was pure force. (77)

With its amorphous shape, its tools and mined minerals, and its brittle parchment of old maps, *la malogra* embodies colonial impact, imperialistic violence, and the effects of war resulting in redistribution of property that speaks to Tomé’s history as a land grant. At the same time, the *malogra* proves to be a pivotal force that razes boundaries and necessitates change. Caridad’s encounter with *la malogra* does affect change: she stops drinking and engaging in pernicious relationships and becomes interested in *curanderismo*—a form of folk healing that includes various techniques such as prayer, herbal medicine, healing rituals, spiritualism, massage, and psychic healing—certainly a “senseless” practice in the eyes of traditional Western biomedicine, but the only effective treatment for Caridad’s broken body and broken heart. Her so-called “senselessness” is what leads to her physical and spiritual healing. Instead of simply re-telling this tale, Castillo inverts *la malogra*’s original interpretation as an oppressive force against women into a way of re-evaluating problematic constructs that still need to be addressed in Chicana/o communities.

Like all of her sisters’, Caridad’s life is cut short in an unusual way. She plunges off a cliff with her unrequited love, Esmeralda, but their remains are never found: “there were no morbid remains of splintered bodies tossed to the ground, down, down, like bad pottery or glass or old bread. There weren’t even whole bodies lying peaceful. There was nothing” (211). Instead of suicide, Caridad’s death is a mythical re-enactment and return home to her indigenous roots. Ralph E. Rodriguez calls it “a romantic connection to the earth and a rebirth.... They have returned to what the Acoma myth of creation refers to as the earth’s womb” (qtd. in Camnerio-Santiago 90). In the Acoma origin myth, the spirit, Tsichtinako, instructs the two sisters Nautsiti and Iatiku to give life to the earth. Yet, before they are able to proceed, they need to grow underground. Caridad and Esmeralda respond to Tsichtnako’s call and fall to back into the earth in a symbolic return

home: “*Tsichtinako was calling!* ... The Acoma people heard it and knew it was the voice of the Invisible One who had nourished the first two humans, who were also both female, although no one had heard it in a long time and some had never heard it before. But all still knew who It was” (Castillo 211). Just as the myth of Montezuma suggests, the Acoma creation story has its origins beneath the earth and in the grotesque. Caridad’s death becomes an expression of what Rodriguez calls “a deep feeling of spirituality” that she has been seeking since her encounter with La Malogra. While Castillo relies on traditional folklore to narrate Caridad’s attack and suicide, her feminist rewriting of these events sublimates a feminine and non-linear worldview to invoke a holistic interpretation of Chicana/o mythology.

Castillo’s treatment of Caridad, as well as Moraga’s, Anzaldúa’s, and Cisneros’ revisionist mythmaking, show how Chicanas can counter issues of poverty, environmental racism, and gendered violence being perpetuated by oppressive dominant cultures and institutions. By rewriting Chicana/o mythology from a feminist perspective, Chicana writers demonstrate how the grotesque is a disruptive, subversive, and powerful agent for transformation and collective healing. Most importantly, their contributions to Chicana/o cultural production demonstrates the interdependency between self-writing and self-formation. In this symbolic act of giving birth to oneself all over again, these writers “re-member” the dismembered history of Chicana identities.

Pedagogically, Castillo’s *So Far From God* is not only useful in introducing students to regional writing. It also helps us teach the importance of myth in cultural identity and the value of healthy opposition. While conventional writing is dominated by values that are patriarchal, rationalistic, logocentric, and linear, *So Far From God*, especially through folkloric representations, breaks out of these conceptual molds and provides creative alternatives for thinking about cultural identity. By re-membering mythology and legend into contemporary literature, Castillo explores and transgresses ontological, political, and gendered boundaries by displacing life/death, self/other, and male/female normative oppositions. Her novel demonstrates that old myths, stories, and legends are indeed culturally active forces in our present lives, and ultimately reminds us of the power of mystery inherent in the Southwest, whether you are an English major or not.

Notes

¹ According to Zamora and Faris, “Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women” (5-6).

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