

Women's Earth-Binding Consciousness in *So Far from God*

By Rebeca Rosell Olmedo

Intrinsically bound to the land of New Mexico, Chicana Ana Castillo's novel, *So Far from God*, emerges from the soil of our continent. Terms such as "anti-Cartesian" and "earth-binding" aptly describe the cosmology that governs the novel.¹ The anti-Cartesian vision is expressed through an aesthetic device associated with Latin American magical realism, for as Gabriel García Márquez makes clear in his 1982 Nobel speech, the reality of this continent cannot be expressed through conventional, Eurocentric aesthetics. Instead of Western rationalism, Castillo's text expresses her characters' reality, one in which extraordinary events take place. The earth-binding consciousness of the women is depicted through their intimate relationship with nature, their spiritual practices, the use of Native-American myths and legends, and the explicit theme of environmental justice.

The Intimate Relationship of the Women with Nature

The novel's principal female characters (e.g., Loca, Sofi, Caridad, and Doña Felicia) relate to nature in a manner that is characteristic of Native American worldviews. Noël Sturgeon summarizes different ideological positions concerning the relationship between women and nature. Some critics believe that when patriarchy identifies women with nature, they're both "degraded" and perceived as "exploitable" (Sturgeon 263). Sturgeon clarifies:

In a culture which is in many ways antinature, which constructs meanings using a

¹ M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer quote Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera*: "Let's all stop importing Greek myths and the Western Cartesian split ... and root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent" (Killingsworth/Palmer Zamora 206). They refer to Peter Matthiessen's book *Indian Country* when they identify "anti-Cartesian" and "earth-binding" as characteristics of traditional peoples (Killingsworth/Palmer Zamora 198).

hierarchical binarism dependent on the assumption of culture's superiority to nature, understanding women as "natural" or closer to "nature" dooms them to an inferior position. Furthermore, in a political economy dependent on the freedom to exploit the environment, a moral and ethical relation to nature is suspect. If women are equated with nature, their struggle for freedom represents a challenge to the idea of a passive, disembodied and objectified nature. (Sturgeon 263)

But Sturgeon points out that some ecofeminists are comfortable with the position of women as closer to nature. They see "the equation of women and nature as empowering" to women and as providing resources for a feminist spirituality and a feminist environmentalism (Sturgeon 264). This article's analysis of Castillo's *So Far from God* supports the latter position.

From the first paragraph of the novel the narrator, in her matter of fact style depicts the interactions between women and nature, and the closeness between women and non-human life. Sofi, the protagonist, tries to understand the animals' warning that there is something wrong with her baby (22).

La Loca was only 3 years old when she died. Her mother Sofi woke at 12 midnight to the howling and neighing of the 5 dogs, 6 cats, and 4 horses, whose custom it was to go freely in and out of the house. Sofi got up and tiptoed out of her room. The animals were kicking and crying and running back and forth with their ears back and fur standing on end, but Sofi couldn't make out what their agitation was about. (19)

Repeatedly the animals show a sensitivity that humans do not have and the animals attempt to communicate with humans. After Loca's initial seizure, they continue to offer a warning when this character is going to suffer a seizure (37).

An unusual closeness exists between the animals and Sofi's family. Fred and Wilma, the two Irish setters help La Loca and Sofi as mother and daughter take care of Fe (30). In Western terminology we might assume a poetic personification of the animals in the narrator report, "The entire household, *including the animals*, [forgot] Fe when Caridad came home mangled as a stray cat" (32) and "Dogs, cats, and women, 28 eyes in all saw Caridad walking" (37). When La Loca got lost "the dogs would not reveal where she was when *Sofi asked them* about La Loca's whereabouts" (33). But the text implies that the animals perceive the miracle as the women do. From a Native American perspective, I would use terms such as "other-than-human persons," and assume that the above sentences describe "the human and other-than-human mutuality" which according to Morrison is the "cosmic ideal" of a native American worldview (Morrison 36). Intelligence and awareness of being are not exclusive attributes of humans.

Loca seeks community in the natural world rather than human society, choosing a simple life and nature's companionship. Sofi's youngest does not go to school, flees from contact with people except her mother and contact she initiates with her sisters as she cares for them. She spends a lot of time by the river and often sleeps with the animals in the stable. When La Loca starts to cry, the dogs and cats whimper, too, empathizing with her (38).

In contrast to her sister, Fe does not associate with the animals, is very clean, always has a neat hairdo along with polished nails, and buys into consumerism and the American Dream. She unconsciously subscribes to a vision that degrades women closely connected with nature.

Embarrassed by her family, Fe considers her sister Loca retarded. But the first person, anonymous narrator presents a positive, alternative vision of the links between nature and woman. For Sofi, Loca, Caridad and Doña Felicia, the bond with nature signals another kind of intelligence or imagination to which they relate.

Similarly to Loca, Caridad, Sofi's second daughter, identifies with her young mare, Corazón, who becomes "Caridad's only companion" until Corazón dies (44). Their names clearly convey the mutual, compassionate sensitivity that nurtures their relationship. Doña Felicia, the community *curandera*, indicates Corazón's understanding of her human companion when she declares, "Los animales entienden más que la gente a veces" (44). (Sometimes animals understand more than people [my translation]). When Caridad spends a year away from civilization in the mountains, she feels perfectly at peace in her "cave home" (89). The land, akin to Mother Earth, welcomes Caridad who seems to regress from the cares of adult life. In love with Esmeralda, Caridad has difficulty accepting the awareness of a new sexual orientation and so she returns to the primal warmth of womb and breast by retreating to the feminine landscape. Nature receives and nurtures her human child so that Caridad can rest. She falls into a deep sleep "undisturbed by the cold mountain winds" and "The following dawn, when she woke to a delicate scar in the horizon that gradually bled into day and saw the sun then raise itself like a king from its throne over the distant peaks, Caridad only knew that she wanted to stay there and be the lone witness to that miracle every dawn" (89). Here, it seems to me, there is an image of Mother Earth giving birth to the sun each morning, "dando a luz," to use a bilingual play upon words. (The expression "to give light" in Spanish means to give birth.) Caridad is being restored by her contact with the life giving earth.

Perhaps the most striking example of woman's earth-binding consciousness occurs when three men try to take Caridad away from her mountain home yet they cannot pick her up and carry her away. Drawing on Paula Gunn Allen's concept of the earthforce and Annette Kolodny's "Unearthing Her Story," the reader could infer that after four seasons in the cave Caridad has become one with Mother Earth, the primal womb and cannot be separated. Having returned to the first landscape Caridad now has in her the earthforce. As one with nature she does not perceive the environment as something separate from herself. Val Plumwood's concept of radical exclusion expands on how "An anthropocentric viewpoint [of nature] treats nature as radically other, and humans as hyperseparated from nature and from animals" (Plumwood 340). That is not the case with Caridad who, in contrast, hyperseparates from human society to commune and find herself in non-human life. When pilgrims invade her mountain, Caridad seeks refuge by going "deeper into the cave" (90).

Caridad's ability to become imbedded with nature refutes Cartesian logic while epitomizing what Alejo Carpentier called *lo real maravilloso americano* (marvelous American reality or the American marvelous real). The literary critic can look at Caridad's experience through the lens of an autochthonous cosmovision, i.e., Carpentier's ontologically marvelous American continent. Similarly to the Latin American writers that Carpentier refers to in his theory, Castillo also avails herself of primal, inherently American, continental matter, and gives it narrative form.

The Spiritual Practices of the Women

The novel associates women's spiritual practices with healing as well as service to family and community. The miracles that take place as a result of women's prayers and spiritual vision once again exemplify *lo real maravilloso americano* or (to use a better known term) the magical

realism that permeates the novel.² Castillo succeeds in communicating a worldview that doesn't conform to Cartesian categories of rationality, as neither the narrator nor the characters express doubt when they witness the resurrection of the protagonist's young daughter, Loca, or the extraordinary healings of Fe and Caridad. As Carpentier asserted about our American continent, "Here the strange is commonplace, and always was commonplace" (Carpentier 104). The unseen is seen on a daily basis because of the inherently American marvelous real.

When the funeral procession for Sofi's baby daughter stops in front of the church, along with details such as the 118 degree day that causes the priest to wipe his brow as he stands next to the coffin, the narrator adds nonchalantly:

The lid ...pushed all the way open and the little girl inside sat up, just as sweetly as if she had woken from a nap, rubbing her eyes and yawning. "¿Mami?" she called, looking around and squinting her eyes against the harsh light. Father Jerome got hold of himself and sprinkled holy water in the direction of the child,

² Carpentier postulates the difference between magical realism and the marvelous real by contrasting the American marvelous real with Franz Roh's magical realism and Breton's Surrealism. Roh simply combined the real in a way that did not conform to daily reality. The German art critic also considered "that Chagal was a magical realist, with his painted cows flying, donkeys on rooftops, upside-down people, musicians among the clouds—elements of reality but transferred to a dreamlike atmosphere..." For Carpentier Surrealists "premeditated and calculated to produce a sensation of strangeness" (Carpentier 103). Instead of the European, "a manufactured mystery," the American marvelous real "is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American" (Carpentier 104).

Faris and Parkinson Zamora's conception of magical realism aptly describes Castillo's use of the genre. In their introduction to *Magical Realism* they conclude that "magical realism is a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. They suggest that "Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems, that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction." Parkinson Zamora and Faris maintain that "magical realist texts admit a plurality of worlds" and "often situate themselves ... in phenomenal or spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis [and] dissolution are possible" (Faris/Parkinson Zamora 5-6).

but for a moment was too stunned to utter so much as a word of prayer. Then, as if all this was not amazing enough, as Father Jerome moved toward the child she lifted herself up into the air and landed on the church roof. (22-3)

In typical magical realist fashion the “real” details of the 118 degree heat, the sweat, and the bright light combine with a lack of skepticism by a narrator who in no way discredits the facticity of the resurrection nor the young girl’s flight. The narrator never attempts to explain the resurrection and ascent to the top of the church roof by the little girl. Sofi is practicing her Catholic faith when she pronounces the event a miracle in answer to the prayers of a broken hearted mother. Unlike Sofi and the narrator, the stunned Father Jerome questions the unexplained “magic” of the resurrection. As the representative of the institutional church, the priest attempts to ascertain the source of power for the supernatural phenomena in an orthodox manner: “¡Hija, hija! Father Jerome called up to her, hands clenched in the air. “Is this an act of God or of Satan that brings you back to us, that has flown you up the roof like a bird? Are you the devil’s messenger or a winged angel?” (23). Patriarchal religion stands in contrast to women-centered spirituality throughout the novel:

At that point Sofi, despite her shock, rose from the ground, unable to tolerate the mere suggestion by Father Jerome that her daughter, her blessed, sweet baby, could by any means be the devil’s own. “Don’t you dare! She screamed at Father Jerome, charging at him and beating him with her fists. “Don’t you dare start this about my baby! If our Lord in heaven has sent my child back to me, don’t you dare 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, ¡hombre necio, pendejo...!” (23)

Sofi doesn't accept the priest's sole authority to interpret religious experience. Her combative response to the priest exemplifies what Ana María Isasi-Díaz labels *la lucha* for a *mujerista* theology, one based on women's lived experience. Father Jerome tries to impose an official, institutional religion monitored by religious specialists. Women, according to Isasi-Díaz, struggle against what church and society regulate as normative (Isasi-Díaz 61-63). Like her mother, Loca also refuses to remain passive and submissive. They both assert their religious participation vis-à-vis a patriarchal church that denies their agency.

“Come down, come down,” the priest called to the child. “We'll all go in and pray for you. Yes, yes, maybe all this is really true. Maybe you did die, maybe you did see our Lord in his heaven, maybe He did send you back to give us guidance. Let's just go in together, we'll all pray for you.”

With the delicate and effortless motion of a monarch butterfly the child brought herself back to the ground, landing gently on her bare feet, her ruffled chiffon nightdress, bought for the occasion of her burial, fluttering softly in the air. “No, Padre,” she corrected him. “Remember, it is *I* who am here to pray for *you*.” With that stated, she went into the church and those with faith followed.

(24)

The young girl contests the priest's headship and leads the faithful, who recognize her authority, into the church. But the girl's spiritual power within an institution that denies women's ordination is short lived since society and the church will brand as insane that which they cannot control. Thus Sofi's youngest will grow up identified as “La Loca,” a nickname which symbolizes her marginalization and heterodoxy. La Loca accepts her name while redefining sanity through her life, as Castillo defines sanity in her essay “Brujas

and Curanderas a Lived Spirituality:” “Sanity remains defined simply by the ability to cope with insane conditions” (148). From her marginal, “insane” position, Loca spends her life in prayer and service to others. She is a woman whose religious practices offer an alternative to the patriarchal religion represented by the male characters Father Jerome, Francisco el Penitente (whose religious beliefs are examined under Native American Myths and Legends), and Rubén, Esperanza’s Chicano boyfriend.

Rubén, “with his Native and Chicano male friends,” excludes Esperanza from their philosophical discussions “about the order and reason of the universe,” and about “woman’s role” in it (36). Esperanza attends “the teepee meetings of the Native-American Church” with him without fully participating. Rubén sings, drums, keeps the fire, and teaches her “the role of women and the role of men and how they are not to be questioned” (36). Esperanza eventually realizes that she functions as a “symbol, like a staff or a rattle” in Rubén’s religious rituals (36). His male-centered world separates the spiritual from everyday life and although financially dependent on her, he refers to her career in a derogatory manner.

Officially disregarded, Sofi and Loca care and pray for Caridad when she comes home from the hospital after being brutally attacked and mutilated by the *malogra*.³ The prayers and care of mother and sister result in a miraculous healing that the impersonal, institutional hospital lacked the power to effect with all its scientific knowledge. Instead of what Gutiérrez labels a “medical metaphysics,” modern faith in the power of medicine and science (Gutiérrez 38), women in the novel seek to bring order to the cosmos through their domestic religious practices.

³ Cornier along with other critics agree that the *malogra* represents patriarchal force and violence. She also believes that the *malogra* represents “the imbalances of the world” and that Caridad “has tapped” into the spiritual dimension where a “battle rages. The novel presents a mixture of alternative spiritual and psychic powers tied to a caring, nurturing approach as a means of overcoming the ravages of a male-centered world” (Comier138).

Caridad, through the influence of Doña Felicia, becomes a *curandera*.⁴ Doña Felicia's practice and transmission of *curanderismo* to Caridad highlights the notion of a home-centered, healing, matriarchal, spiritual heritage. The older woman teaches Caridad that, "a curandera not only [has] the health of her patient in her own hands but the spirit as well." The *curandera*'s earth-binding qualities are exemplified in Doña Felicia's advice to Caridad: "Everything we need for healing is found in our natural surroundings" (62).

A year after publishing *So Far from God*, Castillo published *Massacre of the Dreamers*, a series of essays on Chicana empowerment which she named *xicanisma*. In the above mentioned chapter on *curanderismo*, "Brujas and Curanderas a Lived Spirituality," Castillo affirms the search for non-Western ways and *curanderismo*'s connection to the American continent: "We have unearthed the ways of our Mexic Amerindian ancestors preserved by our mestizo elders, most often, women, in the form of curanderismo" (145).

Furthermore, in her essay, Castillo recommends a process of self-healing to recover "from the devastating blows [Chicanas] receive from society for having been born poor, non-white, and female in a hierarchical society" (153). Her healing method includes ritual and the "construction of altars" (153). We see a parallel in the novel as Caridad's new home includes an altar, and she develops home rituals strongly connected to her creative and spiritual life:

Ritual, in addition to its potent symbolic meanings, was a calming force, Tuesdays and Fridays she prepared a baño for herself. Sundays she cleaned her altar, dusting the statues and pictures of saints she prayed to and the framed

⁴ From the Spanish verb, "*curar*," (to heal or to cure) the *curandero* (male healer) or *curandera* (female healer) practice their craft in traditional Hispanic cultures. The interrelatedness of the material and the spiritual is seen in the healing practices of Doña Felicia, Caridad and Loca in opposition to the hospital that just patches up the body impersonally. The women use prayer, the touch, herbs and other natural *remedios* (medicine).

photographs of her loved ones--with special care to the one of Esperanza...

On Sundays Caridad always lit at least one white candle so as to start the week with her head clear, changed the manta on the altar, and cleaned out the incense brazier. (63-4)

Her spiritual practices include chores like cleaning her incense brazier and dusting her altar. In the conventional private/public sphere divisions of space assigned to men and women, Turner's study of the history of home altars describes them as "predominantly a women's tradition in a male-dominated Church" (Turner 315). Yet according to Turner, this globally encountered folk practice of the Roman Catholic faith "is denied any formal history by the institution" (Turner 316).

Gutiérrez points to how historically "the hierarchy of power that the Catholic Church ascribe[s] to the sacred [is] visually represented on the ornamental altar screens" of churches (Gutiérrez 43). Beezly documents the long history of home altars in Europe, Africa and America and points to them as a site of contestation that at times threatens the Church's authority. Caridad exemplifies this as she erects her home altar, replacing the images of heavenly order of church altar screens with more individualistic symbols and personal references such as "the framed In contrast, the narrator associates attendance.

Caridad's rituals incorporate the practice of natural medicine. Her home-made remedies include a series of herb teas, "rue" to regulate her "moon," "te de anis for anxiety," and a daily cup of "romero, the woman's herb" (64). Stressing the utilization of natural medicine by the women in the home, Teresa Delgadillo points to this space as "a center of survival, recovery and self-knowledge" (Delgadillo 903). She adds that "although these women 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 natural *remedios* and action” (Delgadillo 904).

Sofi’s actions include becoming mayor of Tome and organizing a cooperative in the community. Her name and character explicitly associate her with divine wisdom, a feminine figure in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. Old Testament scholar Leonard Swidler explains the Hebrew personification of wisdom:

Wisdom is feminine not only grammatically (*hokmah* in Hebrew, *sophia* in Greek) but also in the way she is depicted in the literature, i.e., as a woman... In Hebrew both the adjectives and the verb forms the feminine gender of the subject—this in addition to the *ah* feminine ending of the noun *hokmah*. All this makes the Hebrew reader constantly aware of the feminine quality of divine wisdom, Hokmah. (Swidler 36)

Sofi’s voice and actions parallel Lady Wisdom in the Old Testament. She raises her voice against the priest just as Lady Wisdom raises her voice in the public streets in Proverbs 8:1: “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?” Sofi develops understanding and strength as she helps her neighbors organize. Her actions echo the words of Lady Wisdom, “And now my children listen to me...I have good advice, I have insight, I have strength...” (Proverbs 8:14 NRSV). Swidler underscores that just as in the Judeo-Christian scriptures fatherhood is a masculine image of God, lady wisdom, a canonized version of the ancient Goddess, is a feminine image of the divine (Swidler 36-37). In the novel Sofi, an image of Lady Wisdom presents an alternative to Father Jerome’s parenthood.

Native American Myths and Legends

So Far from God asserts indigenous cosmology through the use of Native American myths and symbols such as: Lozen, Warm Springs Apache Mystic Woman, the figure of Coyote, a matrilineal Acoma Indian creation story, and the number four. Gunn Allen maintains in *The Sacred Hoop* that four is the most sacred of numbers in the Native American understanding of the universe. She defines the meaning of sacred for tribal peoples as “something that is filled with an intangible but very real power or force, for good or for bad” (Allen 72).

Interestingly, in this novel there are four sisters/daughters, La Loca, Fe, Caridad, Esperanza. Caridad sleeps for four days and nights before her trip to the mountain. She remains in her mountain home for four seasons and the three men who try to take her away cannot move her. Is this because four also “represents the unused earth force” (Allen 72)? The three men here may be symbolic of the trinity and patriarchal Christianity. In contrast, the narrator associates Caridad with Lozen, Warm Springs Apache Mystic Woman Warrior who turns toward the four directions when asking her God for guidance through the wilderness (88).

Esmeralda also exemplifies how Castillo’s literary creation emerges from the soil of this continent and is intrinsically bound to the land of New Mexico. Because Esmeralda’s heritage is that of the matrilineal Acoma Pueblo, her grandmother lives in “a thousand-year-old house” in Sky City, “the oldest city in all the Americas that has had constant habitation” (208). Patrick Murphy’s concepts of inhabitation and historical residence prove useful here as the physical world plays a role in the formation of human intersubjectivity. Murphy refers to Tewa Indian educator Gregory Cajete’s notion of “geopsyche,” which constructs human notions of self “always and invariably proceeding by means of an intersubjectivity that is not only ideational

and linguistic, but also corporeal and ecological” (Murphy 124). The physical nature and psyche of Esmeralda and her people have been formed by the place that they have inhabited since time immemorial.

It is at Sky City when Caridad and Esmeralda visit the grandmother that Esmeralda perceives the stalking Francisco as Coyote. There, the voice of the goddess Tsichtinako, Thinking Woman, is heard. In the scene where Esmeralda and Caridad jump off the mesa, two important native-American myths are interwoven: the figure of Coyote and the voice of Thinking Woman, Tsichitinako. Esmeralda starts to run and flies off the mesa because she realizes that Francisco has followed them to Sky City pretending to be part of a tour group: “She recognized among the small group with the guide a tall, lean, lonely coyote trying to camouflage himself as a tourist” (210). Francisco, el Penitente, who in the novel generally represents a Christian, patriarchal tradition which contrasts with how the women practice their faith, is here identified with Old Man Coyote, the ubiquitous trickster/creator in Navajo myths and legends. According to William Bright, Coyote is usually not the original creator but one who has changed the ideal creation into “the world as it is” (Bright 20-1). He is a symbol of mankind and a spoiler of a perfect creation for the Navajo who call him Ma’i:

There is no possible distinction between Ma’i the animal we recognize as coyote in the fields, and Ma’i, the personification of Coyote power in all coyotes, and Ma’i, the character (trickster, creator) in legends and tales, and Ma’i, the symbolic character of disorder in the myths. (Bright 20-1)

A creation myth of the matrilineal Acoma Indians locates their origins in “the underground mother womb” of “the great goddess Tsichtinako... Their ancient Sky City on top of a six-hundred foot maternal mound...is clearly associated with the birth process” (Bright 95).

Two sisters emerge from the earth to help Tsichtinako in the creation of plants and animals. Esmeralda and Caridad allude to these two sisters who can hear the voice of the mother Tsichtinako and find her to be a refuge from the oppressive patriarchal world represented by stalking Francisco. When they jump off the mesa, Caridad and Esmeralda do not experience a violent, tragic death. Instead, those who look for their shattered bodies at the bottom witness a miracle since “the spirit deity Tsichtinako” has guided “Esmeralda and Caridad within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad [will] be safe and live forever” (211).

Coyote and Tsichtinako present co-existing traditions in a novel that contrasts masculine and feminine spiritualities. As a *santero*, Francisco’s ego centered, ascetic, hermit religion, is also associated with the European colonizer who feels separated from the land he seeks to conquer. The women’s spirituality is linked to the Earth Mother Goddess that heals and sustains, a spirituality which forms and transforms community as it attempts to solve social problems. The narrative presents a New Mexico *santero*⁵ who struggles with a land which he does not inhabit, where he has not made a home as the Acoma Pueblo have. In making their *bultos*, the New Mexico *santeros*:

did not have the actual relics of the saints to mix with their paints like the Russian monks who produced Byzantine icons, they labored with the natural elements, sun, air and earth and prayed all the while as they worked together in silence—like their Spanish ancestors had done for nearly 300 years on that **strange land that was so far from God.** [my emphasis] (102)

⁵ The New Mexican *santeros* were at first Franciscan monks and later artists who painted and carved *santos* (images of saints) used in Catholic worship. Two dimensional *santos* are called *retablos*, and three dimensional ones *bultos*.

The land is seen from the perspective of the male, Spanish human colonizer as essentially strange and distanced from God. This is the only place where the narrative refers to its title, *So Far from God*, and the “illocutionary force” of this particular quote derives from its relationship to the title of the novel. According to Gérard Genette, the title of a work functions to make known an intention or interpretation of the author, and may indeed dictate a message or “ideological investment” (Genette 1-15).

My analysis points to a masculine vision of a God who has his headquarters in Christian Europe in contrast to a feminine spirituality connected to the American ecosystem. The women conceive of the land as a nurturing Mother Goddess and a secure refuge where they find strength and healing power. Differing from an Earth-bound feminine spirituality, Francisco’s tradition perceives the colonized land as the colonized Other, and therefore practices radical exclusion. Closeness to God and civilization justifies the Other’s devaluation and conquest. In view of the fact that the “strange land” is Other in this tradition, there is no identification and sympathy with nature or those close to nature who are neither Christian nor civilized. The colonized are deprived of or accorded lesser rights, which in the novel has the natural consequence of environmental racism and injustice.

Environmental Justice

Chapter 11 of the novel explicitly raises the question of environmental justice and corporate responsibility for environmental racism. In order to “have a life like people do on T.V.,” Fe begins work with ACME International. At ACME, employees use “some nasty smelling chemical” to “clean... parts for high tech weapons” (180). When Fe and the other women suffer from nausea, headaches, and infertility, they go see the company nurse who gives

them Ibuprofen and informs them that being a woman is causing their problems, and that their “feeling lousy ... had nothing to do with working with chemicals” (178).

The narrator underscores the plight of a community where poor people are willing to do any kind of work to get out of poverty. Fe hears that “Acme was a big new company and though the work was, let’s face it, shit, the girl told Fe, the pay was real good” (177). The narrator points to environmental equity when she comments that “most of the people that surrounded Fe didn’t understand what was slowly killing them ... or didn’t want to think about it, or if they did, didn’t know what to do about it anyway...” They carry on “despite dead cows in the pasture, or sick sheep,” and the week when it rains starlings every morning (172).

According to Kamala Platt, ACME is an acronym for a real life corporation and this chapter had to be rewritten for fear that real people would be recognized and that they might sue. She quotes an interview with Castillo where the author reveals:

I am dealing with environmental issues in New Mexico which are very serious for all of us. But they were afraid of the possibility of someone recognizing himself in there and going after the big New York publisher and the rich novelist. I said, “Wait a minute! What rich novelist?” So, I had a telephone conference with my editor and their lawyer and they recommended that one particular chapter had to be redone, to protect them...They were concerned that one of the characters—and I don’t know these people personally—was based on somebody that might say, “This is me.” (Platt 148)

Platt also points out that Tome is a real town “downriver from Los Alamos” and quotes data which proves that pollution is indeed a threat in the area:

Suzanne Ruta reports in *The Nation* that “traces of plutonium have been detected in chilies” downstream from New Mexico’s Los Alamos National Laboratory, where 2,400 sites are “suspected of contamination with plutonium, uranium, strontium 90, tritium, lead, mercury, nitrates, cyanides, pesticides and other leftovers from a half century of weapons research and production.” (Platt 147)

Chiles are a symbol of contamination in chapter 11 where New Mexico’s “Land of Enchantment” becomes a “Land of Entrapment” for the impoverished minorities who are in desperate need of employment.

The female workforce at ACME is composed of poverty-stricken, uneducated, minority women who only speak broken English. The company seems to take advantage of the women’s “race, socioeconomic status or perceived inability to oppose” deplorable working conditions thereby breaking “a social contract” (Taylor 42). ACME does not come close to abiding by the demands of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit which “affirms the Sacredness of Mother Earth” and “the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment... [and] protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages... (Taylor 42-3). Fe chooses an unsafe livelihood and pays with her life because the toxic chemicals from her work place at ACME International cause her cancer. Neither she nor her family receives any compensation for health damages that result in her death. Race, class and gender condemn people to suffer a disproportionately high negative environmental impact.

Throughout the novel, Fe continually separates herself from her heritage. Among many things, this means an estrangement from Mother Earth, severing the ties that bind her people to the land. In their interpretation of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Killingworth and Palmer point to how those living in the border suffer from alienation and injustice while at the same time they identify with the brown earth. According to these critics, within her alienation Anzaldúa discovers "what she understands to be the voice of the earth, the living body of the world alienated from modern consciousness" (Killingworth/ Palmer Zamora 200). Fe's alienation differs because Fe identifies with a modern consumer society that is not in touch with "the living body of the world" (Killingworth/ Palmer Zamora 200). In her striving to become white, she sacrifices her brown body and the brown body of the earth. Unlike the death of her sisters, her death is final. Focusing on the life of poor Mestizas in New Mexico, the novel, *So Far from God*, presents a clear ecopolitical message in which anthropocentrism, treating the earth as Other, is related to other centrisms, which perpetuate the domination of some at the high price of the oppression and destruction of many.

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