

**Everything We Need: Understanding Chicana Environmentalisms through the Lens
of Health in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God***

by Caro Register

Introduction: Health as a Point of Departure for Chicana Environmentalisms

It is no secret that questions of health lie at the heart of Latinx social and environmental justice. Toxic exposure, harmful working conditions, and the cataclysmic impact of climate change on Latinx communities are but a few of the issues that organizations such as United Farm Workers, UPROSE, and Green Latino have broached since the Farmworker movements of the 1960s. Latinx authors steeped in this sociopolitical context, such as Cherrie Moraga, Mayra Montero, Sheila Ortiz Taylor, and Ana Castillo, accordingly foreground these concerns in their works. Although these authors operate within different genres and settings, all these authors possess a similar preoccupation with the ways in which environmental destruction intersects with physical, mental, and spiritual health and how these intersections disproportionately affect Latinx populations.

The present essay examines the entanglement of health and environmentalism within the context of Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*. I propose a framework that acknowledges how questions of health permeate Chicana environmentalisms by combining Transcorporeal Ecofeminist, Decolonial Environmental Justice, and Critical

Health Humanities approaches. Through this lens, I present several instances in which the connection between health and environmental philosophies is most evident in the novel, which I separate into three general categories: the portrayal of curandera practices; the (re)production of toxic spaces under capitalism; the characterization of natural spaces as sites of healing and sanctuary for Chicana women. I argue that examining Chicana environmentalisms through the lens of health reveals decolonial dimensions of Chicana epistemologies and practices that, situated in the context of the United States, form part of a larger decolonial praxis that destabilizes western environmental epistemologies.

So Far from God takes place in the fictional town of Tome on the US side of the US-Mexico border. The story describes the lives of Sofi and her four daughters: Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca. Tragedy and violence inexplicably follow the family throughout the course of the novel. Esperanza, the eldest daughter, mysteriously disappears while working as a journalist reporting on the Persian Gulf War. Caridad, the second oldest, is violently and brutally attacked by an enigmatic evil entity. Though she survives this attack, she is eventually chased off a cliff by an obsessive admirer. The third daughter, Fe, damages her vocal cords after going through a breakup and later dies after contracting cancer in her workplace. La Loca, the youngest of the four, miraculously comes back from the dead shortly after birth. However, a doctor diagnoses her with AIDS towards the end of the novel, and she ultimately dies for a second time. After

losing all her daughters under traumatizing circumstances, Sofi founds an organization called M.O.M.A.S., or Mothers of Martyrs and Saints. She also becomes the unofficial mayor of Tome, through which she assembles and empowers her community through collective action.

It is readily apparent that health is a nodal point of departure for this novel; any changes in characters' physical, spiritual, or mental well-being are what propel forward the novel's events. In this way, *So Far from God* fits into a corpus of Chicana literature and cultural production that "in its pursuit of socioenvironmental justice, strives for well-being by conjoining economic, environmental, and social issues, of which health is key" (Perez-Ramos 130). The interlacing concepts of wellness, illness, healing, and recovery represent the main questions that Castillo investigates; firstly, what are the risks posed to Chicano/a/x bodies, and secondly, how should the Chicano/a/x community respond? Laura Halperin directly addresses the first of these questions in her book entitled *Intersections of Harm*. She analyzes the physical, mental, and political harm enacted on Latinx bodies, and particularly towards Latinas labeled as socially deviant. Halperin argues that this deviance is "entwined with the damage wreaked on Latinas' bodies and minds and on the places they inhabit" (5). In emphasizing the connections between the psychological, physical, spatial, and environmental, Halperin underscores the interplay between collective and individual harm as experienced by Latina women who exist outside of normative institutions and social structures.

In addition to Halperin's work, this article builds on decolonial Environmental Justice frameworks to define the decolonial environmental ethic that Castillo establishes in *So Far from God*. Noting how many Latinx writers and activists hesitate to call themselves environmentalists, Sarah Wald, David J. Vázquez, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, and Sarah Jaquette Ray point to decolonial environmental interventions as a way to expand understanding of the environment despite environmentalism's historical investment in whiteness in their introduction to *LatinX Environmentalisms*:

When considered from these [coloniality] perspectives, it is important to note that the insufficient attention that environmental studies pays to processes of race and racialization, the colonial encounter, and sexualization and heteronormativity is both a manifestation of Western enlightenment rationality and a result of eurocentric forms of knowledge. (Wald et al. 3)

It is equally fundamental to recognize the manner in which Wald et. al. conceptualize environmental frameworks: "social, political, and scholarly interventions generally understood to be 'environmental' prioritize *healing* a rupture between humans and nature," a rupture which these authors trace back to "the rise in western modernity and the colonial encounter" (4, my emphasis). I posit that the use of the word "healing" implies that health (spiritual, physical, environmental) acts as a theoretical and conceptual lynchpin to Latinx decolonial environmental frameworks. Addressing environmental injustice from a decolonial lens requires attention to the wounds left

behind by ongoing colonial violence, which in turn serves as a form of epistemological healing in itself. Although Chicana texts such as *So Far from God* indeed “constitute a rich archive that understands social, political, racial, and environmental justice as intertwined phenomena” (Vázquez 658-59), engagements with health perspectives and mainstream biomedical culture in North America are oftentimes firmly invested in modernity and western epistemological approaches.

Equally noteworthy is how Latinx scholars position environmental frameworks in relation to health. In her seminal work *Ecological Borderlands*, Christina Holmes points out that borderland environmentalism

derives from multiple sources, including action for land grants; water access; culturally significant uses of the land (e.g., animal grazing, keeping a garden for curandera work); displacement as a result of the sitings of freeways, prisons, and incinerators; workplace dangers such as pesticides and chemicals used in factory work; food insecurity; and health-care access. (22)

Laura Pulido likewise identifies negative health outcomes for vulnerable populations that result from environmental injustice: “The fact that it is disproportionately people of color who are bearing the burden of industrial pollution enables industry to continue despite a mounting death toll” (“Geographies of Race and Ethnicity” 6). Instead of centering health as a foundational aspect of Latinx environmental philosophies, health tends to be

mentioned in passing as one of many consequences of racial capitalism and/or modern colonial violence. While I do not disagree that systems of racial capitalism and violence cause and perpetuate environmental injustice, this article demonstrates how health is a foundational component of Chicana environmentalisms rather than an incidental one. If health constitutes a primary lens through which Chicana populations conceptualize their relationship to the natural world, then Environmental Justice frameworks must center health in a more intentional way.

Owing much to the work of scholars such as Halperin, Pulido, Wald, Vázquez, Ybarra, and Jaquette Ray, among others, this article acknowledges and works from the premise that environmental, physical, and psychological harm are in constant confluence. Rather than focus exclusively on the mechanisms of harm, however, I combine critical health humanities and decolonial Environmental Justice approaches to elucidate the ways in which Chicana philosophies on health more broadly inform a distinct Chicana environmentalism. The choice to opt for the term health instead of harm (which is what Halperin uses) is intentional; health captures the concepts of wellness, healing, and recovery in addition to terms like harm and illness, and thus illuminates both the ways in which oppression operates and how Chicana characters attempt to survive and resist against the harm continually enacted upon them.

My implementation of a critical health humanities framework in this essay comes from that which Therese Jones et al. elaborate in their 2014 *Health Humanities Reader*

and Irène Mathieu and Benjamin Martin's 2023 article entitled "The Art of Equity: Critical Health Humanities in Practice." Evolving from the field of medical humanities, the health humanities consider the cultural practice of health care both within and beyond medical contexts. Paul Crawford, founder of the Health Humanities Network, additionally argues for "embracing interdisciplinarity and engaging with the contributions of those marginalized from the medical humanities" (4). In a similar vein, Irène Mathieu and Benjamin Martin note:

the critical health humanities represents an opportunity to enmesh study of the human body and its pathologies with the social, political, historical, and environmental contexts in which that body exists, so that biomedical and humanities disciplines are 'productively entangled' to engender more nuanced and holistic perspectives among learners." (2)

I posit that including this approach permits us to more productively examine the ways that Chicanas conceptualize health, which can include more holistic practices and belief systems that exist outside of the confines of a traditional medical setting.

Conceptualizing healthcare outside the confines of traditional medical contexts allows for the exploration of marginalized practices that are oftentimes not validated under traditional frameworks. This approach, in combination with Decolonial Environmental Justice, gets at "the nexus of environmental and social justice," which is "the reworking of social institutions and relationships" (*Environmental Justice Poetics* 2). It is through

this lens that we can fully disentangle the complex ways in which Chicana environmental philosophies and practices interact with mainstream biomedical culture in *So Far from God*.

Curanderismo: A Transcorporeal Approach to Health

The term “curanderismo” encompasses a wide breadth of practices. Its practitioners can come from a diverse swath of backgrounds and operate within an extensive range of different sociocultural contexts. To seek out an overarching definition of curanderismo risks being totalizing or monolithic, so for this reason, I look to Castillo’s own framework featured in her essay collection, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, to establish a baseline for Castillo’s understanding of curanderismo in the context of *So Far from God*. Castillo defines curanderismo as a folk practice whose methods “apply the use of mental, physical, and material expertise” and “descend from Native American, European, Eastern, and Middle Eastern philosophies and knowledge” (*Massacre of the Dreamers* 154). This description of the practice reveals an inherent hybridity to curanderismo wherein it is epistemologically, philosophically, and essentially entangled.

This inherent inseparability reflects the experience of Tome’s principal curandera, doña Felicia, who serves as the reader’s introduction to curanderismo in *So Far from God*. Chapter three begins by describing doña Felicia’s life story; she was born and raised in Méjico Viejo during the Mexican Revolution (*So Far from God* 59), she trained

as a nurse in the United States (61), and she even married a Frenchman before he would leave her for his family in Lyon (61). Doña Felicia's life loosely aligns with what Castillo describes as the cultural origins of curanderismo in *Massacre of Dreamers*, and her practice amalgamates both Western and non-Western knowledge, traditions, and symbols, all of which inform her healing practices as a curandera. While she commonly pays homage to the Judeo-Christian god and a multitude of Catholic saints, stating that "nothing you attempt to do with regards to healing will work without first placing your faith completely in God" (59), she also utilizes medicinal practices such as tea baths, herbal remedies, cleansings, and massages at various points throughout the novel, which do not align with the philosophies and methods typically associated with the Western tradition. In her reading of this novel, Sarah Jaquette Ray points out how *So Far from God* "draws casual, material connections between disparate events and places" (148). While Jaquette Ray is primarily referring to the novel's narrative structure and plot, this observation is equally salient with respect to *So Far from God's* portrayal of curanderismo. Curanderismo's intercultural meshing eschews any single geography or epistemic tradition, arising primarily from violent colonial encounters of cultural and religious syncretism.

It is precisely this intermeshing through which the natural world, body, mind, and spirit become intertwined. Similarly to how curanderismo manages to be paradoxically both local and global in origin and practice, it negates exclusive Cartesian dichotomies

between the material and the immaterial, with its practitioners being well versed in their interstices and intersections. Caridad finds herself particularly concerned about this as she undergoes her training in the third chapter, stating that she wasn't sure if "she could truly decipher the symptoms and complaints of other people, nor could she determine which were based on physical ailments, which were spiritual factors, and which were 'psychological'—and therefore to be treated solely with generous doses of compassion" (*So Far from God* 66). Furthermore, this holistic view of health explicitly includes the natural world. When Caridad learns about the most common ailments, she discovers that they "had to do as much with the body as with the spirit; and aigre" (66). These scenes echo Halperin's generative observations regarding the limits of western medical philosophies in *Intersections of Harm*. According to Halperin, Castillo frequently highlights how "certain things just cannot be explained under the dictates of rationality or scientific reasoning upon which mainstream medical thought was built" (102). Although she offers this insight in the context of La Loca's initial death, this equally applies to mainstream understandings of diagnosis and pathology.

At first glance, discussions of coloniality seem well plumbed within the scholarship on this novel. Representations of curanderismo in *So Far from God* have been explored by many scholars since the novel's release in 1993, and many of these studies explicitly identify curanderismo as a site of resistance against western hegemony. Liana Hakobyan describes the healing practices in *So Far from God* as a

“potent de-linking technology” that resists Western modes of modernity (12) and Valerie Amyot similarly points out how holistic approaches to healing provide alternative knowledge to the invasive procedures of Western science, with specific attention to how “the figure of the curandera attempts to counteract and remedy the way in which patriarchy and capitalism exert destructive forces on the Chicana body” (11). Both authors correctly identify how conventional modern medicine, as it is practiced in the United States, forms part of the colonial matrix of power.¹ Given that the foundational science of modern medicine is rooted in Western knowledge, they argue that, as a practice that integrates and validates non-western understandings of health and wellness, curanderismo issues an epistemic challenge to the dominance of western medical philosophies.

What is missing from these discussions of curanderismo, however, is the way in which these healing practices also inform a decolonial environmental ethic in *So Far from God*. Towards the end of the third chapter, doña Felicia loosely translates *aigre* as “bad air” and refers to it as an “internal draft.” Doña Felicia goes on to state that “anyone at any time can be susceptible to bad air”, whether they are living or dead (So

¹ I draw here from Walter Mignolo’s work on colonial modernities, which he defines as “a period expanding from the late fifteenth century to the current stage of globalization” which “has subalternized other kinds of knowledge” (52), as well as Aníbal Quijano’s concept of the coloniality of power, which he defines as “that specific basic element of the new pattern of world power that was based on the idea of ‘race’ and in the ‘racial’ social classification of world population - expressed in the ‘racial’ distribution of work, in the imposition of new ‘racial’ geocultural identities, in the concentration of the control of productive resources and capital, as social relations, including salary, as a privilege of ‘Whiteness’” (218).

Far from God 66). *Aigre* is a pathology that acknowledges wind as an actor. *Aigre* operates by “entering” both the living and non-living human bodies, as a draft of wind or a bad spirit, respectively. In the case of living people who have a case of *aigre*, the internal draft physically cools down their bodies, and thus the cure usually is to warm the person back up.

This view of nature rings true to Stacy Alaimo’s transcorporeal feminist writings. On the question of non-human agency, Alaimo’s theory engenders a reconception of agency outside of humanist modes of free will. She proposes instead a form of agency based on Karen Barad’s interpretation of “intra-activity” wherein things do not precede relations, and agency is conceptualized as a perpetual becoming rather than a personal subjectivity (803). Iovino and Opperman also emphasize the importance of acknowledging non-human-agentic capacity, describing how “agency assumes many forms, all of which are characterized by an important feature: they are material, and the meanings they produce influence in various ways the existence of both human and non-human natures” (3). Harkening back to the case of *aigre*, Doña Felicia acknowledges the wind as not just enacting influence on the body, but as being a fully active participant in both the world’s “becoming” as well as our own embodied experiences as humans. This contrasts with the Western understanding of nature “as a passive resource for the exploits of Man” (Alaimo 244) or as “inert, unable to convey meaning” (Iovino and Opperman 2) highlights that the Cartesian split “developed in relation to the

colonial encounter in the Americas and subsequent rational thinking during the Enlightenment” (Vázquez 663). Curanderismo thus becomes a conduit through which Castillo can examine how health and the environment are intertwined and shows the ways in which Chicana environmentalisms function as a site of epistemic resistance to Western hegemony, and precisely how this purview influences the way in which the curanderas in *So Far from God* value the natural world.

In addition to demonstrating the transcorporeal health approaches of doña Felicia’s curandera practice, Castillo’s novel underscores the tension between and the necessary interweaving of both western and non-western traditions by positioning Chicana healing philosophies within the context of the United States’s biomedical culture. Before Caridad becomes a curandera, she is attacked by an unknown force where “her nipples had been bitten off,” she had been “scourged with something, branded like cattle,” and “stabbed in the throat” (*So Far from God* 33). The doctors at the hospital save Caridad’s life, but the novel implies that her recovery is not made complete: “What was left of Caridad had been brought home from the hospital” (33), but “after her physical recuperation, she had run a fever for many weeks” (45). However, once Caridad finds out that doña Felicia is a healer, she has a “revitalized” expression, and doña Felicia has this to say about her recovery and her job helping at the hospital:

I believe you are meant to help people a lot more than wiping their behinds like they make you do in the hospital. Don’t think I am degrading your work. It’s

honest and necessary work, ma cheri, and I know more than anybody about hard work. But you are destined to help people as even those trained doctors and nurses can't do. Look at what you did for yourself! All they did at the hospital is patch you up and send you home more dead than alive. (55)

This demonstrates that neither Caridad, nor Sofi, nor doña Felicia is convinced that Caridad has achieved a full recovery after being treated solely through her hospitalization. These protagonists do not argue against the importance of hospitals and modern medicine for physical healing, but their recognition of allopathic medicine as not sufficient on its own serves to “denaturalize the biomedical sciences without diminishing their power to affect change” (Goyal and Hegele 1). This is especially important in the case of Chicana populations, whose cultural and medical belief systems are regularly marginalized, and who often encounter accessibility barriers when seeking out care. In her reading of Castillo’s poem “Since the Creation of My Son and My First Book,” Suzanne Bost notes that “Anzaldúa’s, Moraga’s, and Castillo’s writings on pain and illness critique the institutions (political, medical, and intellectual) that manipulate bodies in the interests of the dominant culture and outline (or, rather, fill in) detailed Chicana feminist models for resisting, and overflowing the boundaries of these institutions” (6). This observation is relevant not only to Castillo’s lived experience of childbirth but also to Caridad’s fictional recovery experience. Curanderismo and other cultural/spiritual

healing practices resist the hegemonic tendencies of western modernity and its impulse to separate the mental, physical, spiritual, and environmental.

Toxic Capitalism: (Re)production of Toxins Within a Toxic System

While *So Far From God* does not promote a reductive view of hospitals and western medical institutions, the novel does not shy away from the downsides of operating within the medical, cultural, and environmental frameworks of the United States. Curandera practices resist many of the philosophical and ethical tenets of capitalist views of both nature and medicine, but they are unable to address the far-reaching effects of capitalism and the institutional harm wreaked upon marginalized Chicana characters. Doña Felicia suggests that “Everything we need for healing is found in our natural surroundings” (*So Far from God* 66), but this claim becomes complicated when toxins are synthetically produced, propagated, and unregulated under capitalist models of production. *So Far from God* presents late-stage neoliberal capitalist systems as not just producing physical toxins, but as mentally, spiritually, corporeally, and environmentally damaging systems in themselves, especially for Chicana women.

Fe’s employment history emblemizes the storied history of Chicano labor rights in connection with human and environmental health. After her fiancé, Tom, unexpectedly breaks up with her, Fe screams uncontrollably for weeks (33). As a result, her vocal cords suffer permanent damage; throughout the rest of the novel, her sentences are peppered

with vocal lapses, represented in the text as underscores (85). The bank employing Fe at the time of her breakup ostensibly fires her, but in stereotypical corporatized language, they state that although they “didn’t want to discriminate against her ‘handicap’, her irregular speech really did not lend itself to working with the public” (*So Far from God*, 177). On the topic of medicalization of Latinidad, Halperin states that it speaks to “power, control, and coercion in relation to structural subjugation” and furthermore that the treatment of Latina bodies can be “linked to broader, collective struggles with institutional oppression” (4). Fe’s disability makes her more vulnerable to discrimination and subjugation because she is no longer viewed as a useful employee. By highlighting the way in which the bank handled Fe’s disability, the novel immediately draws attention to how utilitarian objectification of workers under capitalism interlocks with health to produce poor outcomes for Chicana women, and especially those who have disabilities and/or chronic health conditions.²

After the bank, Fe takes up a new job as an assembler at Acme International, a company tasked with cleaning weapons parts and sending them back to manufacturers. At Acme, Fe quickly rises through the ranks since the company seemingly rewards its

² While I do not use Critical Disability Studies/Crip theory approaches for this paper, I found many of Julie Minich’s ideas and methodological tools useful here: “The methodology of disability studies scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations” (3). I also look to Suzanne Bost’s work in *Encarnación*, when conceptualizing the connections between chronic illness, bodily permeability, and environmental degradation. Bost proposes that “illness leads to new forms of identification based on the permeability, suffering, and interdependence of bodies” (5).

employees for what Fe's supervisor describes as "utilization and efficiency" (178). What no one tells her, however, is that the chemicals that she is working with are poisoning her and the other women working for the company, who were "getting nausea and headaches everyday" (178). Even when the affected women complain about the symptoms that they are experiencing, Acme-hired nurses would go on to dismiss any claim that chemical exposure is responsible (178). Before working at Acme, Fe had a "clean bill of health," but as soon as she starts working for them, she experiences the same nausea and headaches as her coworkers and even suffers from a miscarriage (179). Fe eventually learns that many of these symptoms are the result of melanoma, and she dies soon after.

Fe's tragic death highlights the often-overlooked intersections between the harm enacted upon Chicana women and the environment by the United States government and its interests. In his book *Manufactured Sites: Rethinking Post-Industrial Landscapes*, landscape architecture scholar Niall Kirkwood points out how contemporary American societies are being forced to reckon with the environmental consequences of factories, manufacturers, and landfills:

These little used, economically and environmentally degraded landscapes, often contaminated in varying degrees with a noxious mix of toxic chemicals, pose major challenges at every level: for soil and groundwater sciences, engineering,

legal and regulatory agencies, for the politicians, for planning and design, and for neighborhood community and the public at large. (xii)

Tome is not characterized as a dilapidated post-industrial site, but it nonetheless embodies the kind of conditions that create derelict post-industrial landscapes. Chronic illness befalling the employees of Acme, in conjunction with the company's irresponsible handling and disposal of toxic chemicals, considers the consequences of industrial activities from an intersectional lens where planetary and human health are not just interrelated, but inseparable.

So Far from God notably also asks which humans are the most vulnerable and why. Acme International is not an actual weapons manufacturer, but rather a company contracted by the manufacturers, which are contracted by the Pentagon to construct weapons. As a peripheral limb carrying out the will of a centralized power, those who are involved in greenlighting these dangerous construction processes that produce toxic materials have made a concerted effort to remove themselves as much as possible from the potential consequences of postindustrial wastelands. In the factory that employs Fe, most of the assemblers who clean the sheets of metal spend their day on the manufacturing floor with very few safeguards in place to protect them. As for the particularly difficult cleaning jobs, which are sold to eager employees as special tasks without disclosure of the risks, this work takes place in even deeper isolation down in the basement (*So Far from God* 172). The only other employees who are directly exposed

to the chemicals are the foremen who, unlike the assemblers, work in shorter shifts on the manufacturing floor and are constantly rotating in and out (173).

In the introduction of her article on environmental justice in *So Far from God*, Kamala Platt astutely points out that the term environmental justice poses certain questions for environmentalism, such as whose environment is protected and whose environment is neglected (“Ecocritical Chicana Literature” 68). Laura Pulido and Liana Hakobyan get even more specific with regard to the ways in which racial capitalism operates to make women of color more vulnerable. Pulido highlights the disposability of racialized bodies as ‘sinks’ for industry and manufacturing pollution (“Geographies of Race and Ethnicity II” 6) while Hakobyan discusses the colonial logics of neoliberal economic systems: “such flat dismissal of health conditions caused by the toxicity of modern economies is symptomatic of a colonial logic in a global neoliberal economy where the bodies of the oppressed-especially women of color, immigrants, Indigenous, and other minoritized communities-are utilized for the economic advancement of multimillion companies” (16). *So Far from God* reminds us that non-white women from lower socioeconomic classes are blatantly considered expendable lives occupying expendable environments. Acme is willing to pay for Fe’s funeral, yet they are unwilling to protect her with effective safety measures while she is still alive. The question is thus not whether neoliberal capitalism functions in a toxic way, but rather how and to whom this harm is directed; Fe’s hard work and willingness to pull herself up by the proverbial

bootstraps do not actually make her more valuable and worthy of protection. In this same vein, placing factories in marginalized communities, while offering an additional source of employment, demonstrates that the lands occupied by marginalized individuals are likewise considered less valuable. These systems operate to siphon harm towards marginalized groups and marginalized lands.

Hakobyan's argument about the colonial logic of the economy also begins to scratch the surface of an immaterial understanding of toxicity beyond the corporeal or medical sense of the term. Although the poisonous effects of toxic chemicals on the body and the natural world cannot and should not be ignored in favor of metaphor, it merits mentioning that Castillo is not merely levying a critique of the tangible effects of poisonous substances on human beings and their environments. She demonstrates how capitalism itself is a toxic system not just in the physical damage that it causes, but also in the destructive manner by which it functions to target "disproportionately people of color who are bearing the burden of industrial pollution," which "enables industry to continue despite a mounting death toll" ("Geographies of Race and Ethnicity II" 6).

When Fe attempts to voice her concerns, she is not only dismissed by the nurses, but the company subpoenas her when she discloses her cancer diagnosis to them (*So Far from God* 184). Being forced into legal silence is not a chemical that corporeally poisons the bodies of Chicana workers, but it is indeed a mechanism by which Acme can

weaponize Fe's marginalized status, which is instrumental to creating toxic workplaces, cultures, and environments.

Silence also serves the function of reproducing and perpetuating the systems that it helps to create. As she is dying, Fe goes to the factory to try to find the answers that Acme and its representatives refused to dignify with a response. What she discovers is devastating; the illegal chemicals that she was given were heavier than air and improperly stored, demonstrating malicious negligence on the part of Acme and a complete disregard for her well-being (*So Far from God* 188). As she is yelling at one of the foremen, Fe suddenly notices that the entire factory had been reconfigured soon after she had left, with every station now being partitioned off rather than open. It is then that Fe comes to an even more startling realization: "And all the stations, not just the foreman's, which used to be open to everybody and everything, were partitioned off. Nobody and nothing able to know what was going on around them no more. And everybody, meanwhile, was working in silence as usual" (*So Far from God* 189). Rather than invest in proper protections for its employees, the chapter concludes with Acme using its power over its employees to isolate them even further to marginalize them.

The connection between workplace conditions for Chicano laborers and the impact that these conditions have on the environment does not emerge solely from the imagination of the author. Castillo clearly draws from UFW and other social movements that critiqued the way in which pesticides damaged the health of both the environment

and the workers, most of whom were Mexican Americans or Mexican immigrants of lower socioeconomic status. In her 1993 study on the pesticide campaigns of the 1960's, Laura Pulido draws attention to contemporary debates surrounding Chicano labor movements and their connection to environmentalism. She elaborates that "some have suggested that the farmworkers' pesticide struggle is not an environmental issue but an economic struggle with an environmental component" and in turn argues that "by fully appreciating the conditions structuring the lives of the subaltern and their precarious economic circumstances, it becomes apparent how NSM and subaltern environmental concerns differ dramatically, resulting in the need for a new understanding of environmentalism" ("The Pesticide Campaign" 58). Fe's experience as an Acme employee can also be understood from this perspective since "human bodies and minds, cultural identities, and natural sites and resources...are all affected by the same political and economic practices" within the novel (Pérez-Ramos 130). While it would be easy to interpret this chapter of the novel as a critique of the treatment of Chicana workers with environmental elements, it becomes apparent that Chicana workers perceive the disregard for their health as being inherently interconnected with disregard for the environment. After all, as Fe screams out at the conclusion of chapter 11, "WHERE DID _ GO, PENDE, SON-_A [...] IF NOT IN_ME?" (*So Far from God* 189).

Natural Places as Sanctuaries of Healing and Empowerment

Juxtaposed with the toxic industrial spaces of capitalist production, *So Far from God* takes care to characterize natural spaces as critical sites of resistance and recovery. Although the natural world is certainly not immune to the devastating impacts of toxic waste, various locations within *So Far from God*'s natural world serve as sanctuaries where Chicana characters can go to recuperate physically, mentally, and spiritually. This is particularly the case for Caridad and La Loca, who are arguably the most outwardly defiant of the heteronormative, neoliberal society in which they live. Caridad self-isolates for nearly a year, residing in a cave after becoming infatuated with a woman she sees while on a pilgrimage to Chimayo with Doña Felicia (*So Far from God* 81). In the case of La Loca, she rejects almost all human contact after her initial reincarnation. She instead prefers to spend time under a cottonwood tree near the acequia (150). Both characters also form bonds with nonhuman animals: Caridad with her horse companion Corazón, and La Loca with the family's farm animals.

Nature is a sanctuary for the socially deviant queers, insofar as natural spaces exist on the margins of the heteronormative, capitalist society of the United States. Understanding nature as queer demands that we critically reevaluate and account for "not merely natural forces and social forces, but the differential constitution of forces such as the natural and social" (Barad 123). Unlike human civilization, which is strictly governed by social, cultural, and environmental dictates that have actively harmed them, Caridad's cave and La Loca's cottonwood tree are spaces that are not characterized by

the oppression that has caused them direct harm and are not surveilled as strictly by these destructive institutions, thus providing a sense of refuge. In the introduction to their book entitled *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, and Desire*, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson point out how the wilderness, despite being traditionally coded as a space reserved for masculine performativity, can still be a site for queer possibility and experimentation, using the film *Brokeback Mountain* as a key example of this subversion (3). In the case of *So Far from God*, the notion of nature as a site of mental and spiritual healing, growth, and discovery does not merely subvert heterosexist norms but additionally resists western hegemonic discourses of health and the environment due to the experiences, traditions, and cultures that the protagonists' identities engender.

The events preceding Caridad's extended time away in her cave are, in part, a result of her traumatizing personal experiences. Right before she disappears, she laments the fact that she is such a terrible apprentice:

'Ay! doña Felicia,' Caridad said. 'I'm a lousy student for you! I see mirages and am filled with bad dreams! Right now I was dreaming of being pursued by a creature with huge wings like a giant eagle, but he had these small horns—or maybe it was a she—and he or she was wearing armor and I was flying as fast as I could to escape it until I hit a telephone wire and crash-landed. Good thing you woke me up and saved me!' (*So Far from God* 81)

It is impossible to know whether this enigmatic dream creature had posed a threat to Caridad's safety in the physical realm, although this possibility must not be dismissed, considering that the novel often eschews rationality and does not conform to the aesthetics of realism. What does remain clear is that Caridad's brutal assault from the beginning of the novel continues to affect her *perception* of her safety. Once again, she continues to suffer mentally and emotionally, even though she has recovered from her physical wounds.

In response to Caridad's distress about being an unworthy student, doña Felicia advises that she go to Ojo Caliente to take a mineral bath and offers her ten dollars to do so. Caridad accepts the ten dollars and thereafter disappears into the Sangre de Cristo mountains, only returning after a year of complete disconnection from human beings and human society. When praying in an effort to locate Caridad, doña Felicia surmises that she is probably safe and that it is highly likely that Santo Niño de Atocha has guided her to a refuge (*So Far from God* 83). As usual, doña Felicia turns out to be correct. After stumbling across the cave and staying there to escape the elements, Caridad finds that she enjoys the cave's seclusion because she can sleep peacefully and witnesses the sunrise every morning, which she describes as a "miracle" that she wanted to be the lone witness to (89). Furthermore, Caridad is clearly thrilled that her solace had remained "peacefully unbroken" up until the nearby community began to harass her about her healing capabilities, and she indicates that her day-to-day life in

the cave up to that point had been tranquil (89). This is a stark contrast to what she had experienced in Tome, where she was subject to extreme violence and had to watch her family endure various hardships.

This cave serves as a physical and spiritual refuge, and as a sanctuary while Caridad tries to reconcile her complete physical recovery with her not-yet-complete spiritual and emotional one. In utilizing the term “miracle” to describe the natural phenomenon of the sunset alongside terminology such as “refuge,” Castillo’s writing evokes the Sanctuary movement of the 1980s, in which the church took a stand against hardline immigration policy by harboring many Central American migrants in houses of worship while they fought for their right to claim asylum (Barba and Castillo-Ramos 4). These sanctuaries permitted migrants existing outside of US legal frameworks safety and security, and granted them reprieve from racist violence and xenophobic policies. The natural world in this novel functions similarly to the sanctuaries in that they are islands of safety amidst structural violence.

A key difference between Caridad’s experience and that of the migrants seeking refuge in churches lies in the fact that Caridad is a citizen of the United States, yet still finds herself the victim of political, biomedical, and femicidal violence. The novel, therefore, questions what sanctuary looks like for the population of Chicano/a/x people who live in the United States and challenges the idea of citizenship as a way of formalizing one’s belonging. In the case of *So Far from God*, the natural world performs

the same role as the church; they are sacred spaces of healing and spiritual, mental, and physical recovery outside the normative medical and societal boundaries

Strangely enough, Caridad's time away from human society is often glossed over in many existing analyses of *So Far from God*, even in ecocritical readings. In places where it is mentioned, interpretations of this section of the text are diverse and occasionally contradictory. Scholars such as Muhammed Amir and Rebeca Olmedo heavily refer to the concept of Mother Earth in their studies. Amir's position on Caridad's time in the cave is that it was a "refining" and "sublimatory" process for Caridad, rather than being radical or transformational (66). For Olmedo, this period represents an inseparable, transcorporeal entanglement of Mother Earth and Caridad after Mother Earth nourishes and restores her (4). While the latter in particular acknowledges the restorative power of the natural world, both scholars neglect to mention how Caridad's time in her cave home engages with biomedical discourses. Nature bestows spiritual and mental healing that was not granted to her within the practices of western medicine, which challenges the inherent dominance of western medical ideologies.

Approaching the text from a critical ecofeminist lens, Halperin views this scene differently. She asserts that the community's shifting perception of Caridad is a broader commentary on the relationship between women's bodies and purity culture. Halperin further argues that "the community suddenly reveres her, believing that she now has miraculous healing powers" and that her return indicates "an adherence to a strict

virgin/whore dichotomy,” and points out that it was only after Caridad hides both herself and her body from the world that she is venerated (141). Although the harassment of Caridad is indeed a microcosm of the systemic patriarchal violence occurring in the United States, it would be remiss not to acknowledge Caridad’s personal transformation alongside the reactions of others upon her return. Even if society views her flight from civilization as an act of concealment, her time away from normative social structures not only grants her more confidence but also newfound abilities that help her to resist societal oppression.

This empowerment is immediately evident when Francisco el Penitente and two other men attempt to physically lift Caridad to take her back to town. When Francisco attempts to lift her, he finds himself befuddled by how heavy she is. When all three men attempt to lift her together after Francisco fails, one of the brothers accompanying him grows irate because “his strength seemed to be no match for such a slight person” and proceeds to yank her by her hair, only stopping when Francisco intervenes, calling Caridad divine (*So Far from God* 87). Notably, it is not her healing powers here that initially incite the awe of onlookers; it is, in fact, her “herculean strength” and ability to resist the violent and forced disruption of her sanctuary. This narrative, I argue, is what Christina Holmes would call “performative subversion of intersubjectivity” (28), where Castillo destabilizes ideas of women and nature without reifying ideas of femininity and naturalness (32). In this moment, Caridad is not a passive recipient of patriarchal

violence. She can defend herself from the crop of men who attempt to forcibly lay their hands on her against her will in the cave. It is not a coincidence that this attempt at nonconsensual contact is reminiscent of the harm that was originally enacted on her, and what will be enacted on her towards the novel's conclusion.

La Loca's refuge by the acequia is a restorative space that is similarly under threat. La Loca repeatedly refuses to go to the hospital and see most doctors because of "the atrocities that she saw Fe suffer in her last days on the Acme International Medical Group Plan," but "if she had ever been pregnant, she certainly would have been capable of delivering her own baby, probably in the stalls of the soft hay, where she had delivered the colts, or down by the acequia, squatting, arms tight around the cottonwood, with no one around (*So Far from God* 230-31). Firstly, the role of the acequia as the ideal medical setting for La Loca not only emphasizes the relationship between the natural world and healthcare, but also the discomfort that she feels in hospitals and with doctors trained to perform what she describes as "modern medical treatments" (230). La Loca's comment about insurance is particularly telling since insurance is one of the most prominent barriers that Latina women face when navigating the US healthcare system (Brener et al. 1078 and Velasco-Mondragon et al. 9), especially given that she presumably does not have insurance as an unemployed person living at home.

Secondly, the way in which the novel describes the acequia emphasizes its role as a decolonial site of cultural and environmental resistance and survival. For La Loca, the

acequia is “her place to play and hide since she learned to walk” and “her own place to be—until the invasion of the peacock, which seemed to have the same sense of proprietorship over the acequia as she did” (151). The symbolic contrast between the peacock and the acequia is palpable. Acequias are a water management system that “posit[s] a system of principles and values that supports and guides cooperative, independent economic practice” (Rodríguez 583). They are deeply rooted in Chicana cultural and environmental practices and history. They exemplify how “local cultures sometimes fulfill ‘keystone’ functions in ecosystems by providing a habitat for numerous species of native flora and fauna.” (Peña 59), and perhaps most importantly, “it is largely through the institution of the acequia, that the Hispano-Mexican irrigators have persisted in place for so long, against the odds and despite the doctrines imposed by the over-layering of Anglo water law” (60). The peacock, on the other hand, is a foreign bird imported to the area that La Loca is unable to relate to (*So Far from God* 151). The awkward encounter between La Loca and the “invading” peacock represents the advent of Anglo farmers taking over Chicana ancestral lands and imposing both toxic and unsustainable practices. Such practices not only threaten the physical health of Chicano communities, but also the ability of these communities to continue existing in these spaces that hold an important cultural and ecological role.³ This scene invites us to

³ There are several instances in which Chicano communities in the southwestern US have actively rebelled against initiatives that threatened the acequias since the 1980s and 90s. Devon Peña, for instance, refers to the industrial-scale logging of the Taylor Ranch and the protests launched in response (62-3).

consider how the colonial logics of land ownership and use operate to turn ancestral land into a commodity and put marginalized populations at risk.

Both the acequia and the cave are portrayed as simultaneously rife with tension and imbued with importance culturally, environmentally, and in terms of health. Both Caridad and La Loca look to the natural world for reprieve, healing, and/or empowerment, but the invasive nature of racial capitalism and patriarchy threatens the physical, environmental, and community health of Chicano communities in the Southwestern United States. The preservation and health of the land are inherently interconnected with the health of the individuals living there, so in this way, the novel communicates that a threat to the land acts as a threat to the survival of Chicana people, culture, and environments.

Conclusion

Even though *So Far from God* was published in 1993, the issues presented within the novel have only become more pronounced since its release. As I write this conclusion, Hispanic communities in the United States are being actively targeted by the federal government. Not only is the current administration militarizing against “liberal” cities in order to deport *en masse*, but large-scale deregulation and the advancement of corporate interests have caused the environmental and health crises within Hispanic communities to metastasize at an exponential rate. The North Carolina Farmworker

Health Program has published alarming statistics relating to the health of migrant workers: Farmworkers suffer from higher blood pressure compared to their peers, nearly five out of ten farmworkers suffer from food insecurity, farmworkers face six times the risk of other groups of contracting diseases such as tuberculosis, and 53% of children in migrant farmworker families in eastern North Carolina have an unmet medical need ("Farmworker Health Facts"). Central to this issue is also accessibility. Higher poverty rates, limited cultural sensitivity, high costs, lack of insurance, and a shortage of Hispanic providers are all barriers to healthcare for Hispanic populations (Velasco-Mondragon et al., 2; Cristancho et al., 634). When most healthcare options are inaccessible, communities find creative ways to get "everything we need."

Though literature and cultural production in itself cannot rectify the issues that arise from systemic violence and subjugation, Chicana and Latinx literature and cultural studies encompass a wide range of different environmental and healthcare philosophies that give voice to alternative modes of knowledge and being. David Vázquez says it best:

Perhaps our best hope for combating global risks lies in identifying sources of environmental thinking that disturb racial capitalism. Expanding the range of ideas and representations that we consider in our work as progressive environmental and antiracist scholars can only benefit the knowledge we produce and the possibilities we can envision. (664)

It is for this reason that illness, harm, healing, and recovery must be centered as indispensable components of Chicana environmentalisms and Environmental Justice. Engagement with critical health humanities perspectives does not simply open up new avenues for understanding Chicana environmental philosophies, but it is a necessary consideration for understanding survival strategies, community health, and the relationship between environmental degradation, racial capitalism's toxic proliferation, and the healthcare barriers encountered by Chicana populations in normative medical contexts.

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