

The Chicana Narrator as Healer: Reconciliation in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*

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Abstract: This article argues that the narrator of Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* is a postmodernist ontological narrator whose project is to heal the Chicana mestizaje's identity through storytelling. Through the privileging of the female identity, returning to oral history and uncovering of subjugated Native American female origin myths, the narrator attempts to reconstruct the female identity. Although the narrator is not fully characterised, unlike other female protagonists in the novel, this essay aims to explore how the narrator is one of the female figures in the novel, and similarly, how she attempts not only to bring about the displacement of the male figure and reposition of the female, but also acts as a healer for her community.

Keywords:

Female identity,
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Bir Şifacı Olarak Chicana Anlatıcısı: Ana Castillo'nun *Tanrı'dan Çok Uzak* Romanında Uzlaşma

Öz: Bu makale, Ana Castillo'nun *Tanrı'dan Çok Uzak* romanının anlatıcısının, amacı Chicana mestizaje'nin kimliğini hikâye anlatımı yoluyla iyileştirmek olan postmodernist bir ontolojik anlatıcı olduğunu tartışmaktadır. Anlatıcı, kadın kimliğini ön plana çıkararak, sözlü tarihe geri dönerek ve bastırılmış yerli Amerikalı kadın kökenli mitleri ortaya çıkararak, kadın kimliğini yeniden inşa etmeye girişir. Anlatıcı romandaki diğer kadın kahramanların aksine tam olarak tanımlanmamış olsa da, bu makale, anlatıcının romandaki kadın figürlerden biri olduğunu, aynı şekilde baskın erkek figürünün konumunu yıkmayı ve kadın figürünün yeniden konumlandırılmasını amaçladığını ve aynı zamanda ait olduğu topluluğu için bir şifacı olarak hareket ettiğini tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Kadın kimliği,
Şifacı,
Sözlü tarih,
Köken mitleri,
Hikâye anlatımı

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In Ana Castillo's (1953–...) *So Far From God* (1993), which is written in a conversational and magic realist style, the tumultuous lives of four Latina-American sisters are narrated. In addition to its many other points, the novel widely focuses on the sisters' cultural dislocation and loss of identity in an attempt to help them heal and eventually reconcile with their selves. Castillo's *So Far From God* itself is a quote, derived from Porfirio Diaz's seminal lament: "So far from God – so near the United States". As the novel's single epigraph suggests, Castillo consciously positions her text within the long-established and ongoing dialogue concerning Mexican-American relations, and in the figurative and literal borderlands in which the sisters are "lost, decentered, godforsaken, dispossessed . . . so far from Mexico, their genealogical and spiritual center" (Gillman and Floyd-Thomas 161). Unsurprisingly, the tension between place, language, and loss which is indicative in the work's title also pervades the novel, most importantly in the sisters' attempts to negotiate their unstable or fractured identities that follow in its wake.

The female protagonists in the novel attempt to heal Chicana identity through counter-narratives that serve to subvert the narratives of dominant patriarchal discourse. In the novel, La Loca's resurrection offers a counter-narrative to male-dominated religious history. She becomes the focal point, the "glue," that holds her household together. Sofi replaces her husband as head of the family and later takes the provider role to the rest of her community, becoming the informal mayor of La Tome. She spearheads two cooperatives, one economic and one spiritual. Both organizations allow the community to turn away from the poverty plaguing their community and raise the morale of the town. Esperanza, a political activist, symbolises the role of the female in the Chicano/a movement. Her lover remembers her fondly after her death while fighting to have Chicano studies in the curriculum. The narrator describes her as "consolidat[ing] the spiritual with the practical side of things" (Castillo 37). Doña Felicia, more agile and self-sufficient than any male character in the novel, is said to have picked up the memories of her mother and incorporated them into her storytelling. Like the narrator, thus, she weaves the stories of females which heal the fragments of her community and bring them together. These female figures represent the multiple identities of the Chicana *mestizaje*¹, and because of the single isolated consciousness employed by the speaker, the narrator encapsulates the female ontological being of the Chicana *mestizaje*.

The novel emphasises the importance of recovering cultural traditions, knowledges, and history as an important step in healing the complex individual and collective traumas of cultural dislocation and internalised racism which can be read as a crucial step in the journey toward the reconciliation of the sisters' selfhood. Considering that the narrator is attempting to re-establish the female agency, and is asserting that the female is a healer, creator, and storyteller, narrating the lives of powerful female figures,

¹ It is a term used to refer to racial mixture between ethnic and cultural groups of Latin American descent.

it is only necessary for the novel to be voiced by a female figure. Her voice mimics the female figures throughout the novel, and thus the female voice gains agency and transcends a form of spirituality. The consolidation of female figures into one speaker reflects the doubly marginalised, hybrid, and polyvocal identity of the Chicana, that is contained in a single consciousness spoken by a subjective "I." The narrator, therefore, appears to be the collective consciousness of the seemingly fragmented identity of the women in the borderlands. She epitomises a collective communal sensibility and presents the narrative as if it is coming out of a personal experience, as if the experience of the female characters is her own experience.

One of the most notable aspects of the novel is its deployment of a first-person unreliable narrator speaking directly to her reader, the "you." Because of the tone, language, and syntax, the narrator seems to be racializing her ideal reader, addressing a reader whom she has an intimate communal relationship with, and admonishing them to explore, if not recover, this relationship. Furthermore, the direct address creates a multi-faceted dialogue, one that heightens the ongoing relationship between the reader and the speaker. It creates tension on the identity and knowledge claimed by the "I" that is imparted to the reader. While there is always an implicit relationship between narrator and reader in any narrative, postmodern fiction always assumes a "dialogue among author, narrator and the other characters and the reader" (Booth 155). However, in *So Far From God*, this relationship is explicit and heightened and is central to the narrative.

For Castillo writing represents a tactic of resistance, as well as a means of working through the cultural dislocation experienced by her female characters. By employing these various postmodern techniques of non-linearity, multilingualism, magic realism, genre switching, and multiple perspectives, Castillo is able to extend the dialogue beyond her respective storylines and envision or elaborate strategies of resistance and healing that are suggested, unrealised, or beyond the confines of her novel. For Laura Gillman and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, novels are more than fiction, they are a "political act" (159), a space for the "intentional expression of women's values, realities, spiritualities, sense of justice, and agency," where "creative dialogues . . . speak to realities of marginalized women's lives, histories, and cultures" (160). Read in such a way, Castillo's novel becomes further transgressive and enlarges the potential for imagining bicultural Latina-American identity. Fiction then, becomes a crucial site "bound . . . by a common location in consciousness, a common psychic and spiritual terrain emerging from similar experiences of colonization" (Gillman and Floyd-Thomas 160) in which these traumas of cultural dislocation can begin to be undone.

Brian McHale analyses the postmodern text and traces the discursive shift in modernist and postmodernist fiction. This shift, he contends, is a movement from authoritative to doubtful or dubious. Modernist fictions are concerned with epistemological interpretation, the problem of "unknowability" (McHale 9) or the limits of knowledge, and the consequence of certainty or reliability at which the knowledge is

transmitted from one knower to another. On the other hand, postmodern narratives deploy a different strategy of engaging and foreground questions in that they are more concerned not about the world one lives in but the aim of a “description of a universe” (Pavel qtd. in McHale 27). Postmodernist writer foregrounds the possibility or the impossibility of describing a universe. He further elaborates this contention by acknowledging Dick Higgins’s suggestion that postmodernism is concerned with the “post-cognitive,” that is the way that postmodern asks not the reliability of knowledge, but what the self is to do with knowledge(s) in the world in which they live in (10).

While there are distinct differences between modern and postmodern concerns, McHale observes that the move from epistemological to ontological concerns is not clearly discernible. There is not so much a difference, he suggests, but more of a trace between the movements. He notes that

intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: put epistemological questions far enough and they “tip over” into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions – the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible. (11)

In *Unnatural Voices*, Brian Richardson demonstrates the difficulty of pointing out or defining a narrator in a postmodern text. He observes that many modernist and postmodern texts use the “we” as a singular point of view. However, in postmodern texts, singular or unified speakers are often unlocalizable, unlocatable, and utter no voice of their own or are mimetically impossible, what he calls “impossible narrations” (76). Albeit it is true that the speaker of *So Far From God* is mimetically impossible in that a singular “I” cannot possibly speak for an entire community, she, however, as a character in the novel uses the “I” perspective with a “we” consciousness. Richardson notes that the “we” voice has been used by a substantial number of colonial and postcolonial authors to “express their struggles against imperial powers.” He contends that postcolonial writers have found the first-person plural form to be an especially fitting linguistic device to represent a number of shared concerns (46). Aside from postcolonial writers, feminists have also favoured the “we” voice because of its explicit multivocality and its emphasis on the construction of a powerful collective identity.

In *So Far From God*, Castillo seems to have utilised the various functions of the modern “we” narrator, particularly in the way that the narrator delivers multiple perspectives of various characters and transgresses the natural limits of content and perception of a single consciousness, but extending this further by using a singular person voice to chronicle a collective consciousness. Even though the multiple perspectives collapsed in the “I” make the narrator irreducible to a single character, at the same time, she is fully figured in the text. The novel avoids explicit biographical information about the narrator, but the speaker has a very invariable idiosyncratic subjectivity that is characteristic of a single individual. She is particularly self-reflexive, calling herself a

“highly opinionated narrator,” who confesses that her function is to dispense “rumours... once and for all” (250). Her sharp wit and dark humour are also particularly distinct and seem to characterise the neighbour whom Sofi has asked for advice about running for mayor; for example, when Sofi reveals her plans of running, the neighbour mocks internally: “Then why stop at mayor? Why not elect herself la juez de paz or la comandante of Tome as they had had in the old days? Why not be Queen of Tome for that matter?” (137). This humour is very distinct and consistent throughout the text. She makes fun of her characters at their expense even in the most tragic episodes. Because of her “interruptive voice,” it can be argued that she is so much at the forefront of the novel, and she is both narrator and protagonist. At the same time, considering that she is an embodiment of all her female characters and the politics of her narration gestures on inclusivity, telling the reader that the story she is narrating is “our story,” she is placing her community forward and making them the protagonist of the novel.

The “we” consciousness spoken in an “I” perspective is much closer to a native autobiographer’s voice, which Hertha D. Wong has analysed in her study of traditional and recent Native-American women’s autobiographies. She observes that the use of a single “I” to consolidate a perspective in stories, oral and literary, has been somewhat uncommon in Western narratives, this practice is typical of Native-American storytellers. She notes that the native autobiographer, “whether speaking or a writing subject, often implies, if not announces, the first-person plural – we – even when speaking in the first person singular” (171). *So Far From God*, in its representation of multiple subjectivities bound in a single voice or self, reflects the Native American narrator.

As the native autobiographer of her community, the narrator is omniscient. She is at the heels of the figures, detailing the setting, and scene, describing all the actions and thoughts, slipping easily, with an unlimited view of events. She gives internal insults privy only to an onlooker. She divulges the feelings and motivations of characters, dispenses rumours and gossip, and contextualises a wide range of subjects from politics to metanarratives. She does not merely comment but owns the comment, directly addressing the reader of her thought about a character or a scene. At times, she drops names as if the reader has a personal connection with the various minute characters in the novel. Other times, she withholds naming, as if to do so would misrepresent an actual neighbour, as when she says, “whose name it is best not to reveal here for this reason as well as some others that we shall soon see” (131). This textual style of digression and commenting gives the narrator an appearance of a certain degree of unreliability, which Wayne C. Booth describes as a “direct and authoritative rhetoric” (6) one that disrupts the reader’s suspension of disbelief and emphasises that the narrator is guiding the reader toward a conclusion.

However, far from being merely an omniscient nosy neighbour, the narrator also has an excellent knowledge of her community’s material, culture, history, and people. She frequently dispels (and is fond of) Native American mythology, particularly those that are

subjugated. Sometimes, she suspends the plot temporarily to relay stories of powerful female Native-American mythological figures; other times, she weaves myths into characters' lives.

The narrator moves through space just like one of her female mythical figures La Llorona, as an "astral-traveller," and speaks like a "*mitotera*, a stereotyped Chicana woman, an intruding neighbour" (Teubner 69) who much likes oral literature, describes the events in circular and nonlinear style, going back and forth in the events, interrupting the forward flow by linguistically marking it with words such as "years later." One of the most interesting styles deployed by the novel is its consistent lack of foreshadowing. She deconstructs the suspension of information typical of traditional novels by divulging to the readers what would usually be revealed in the end, or what typical literature would keep the novel a "page turner." For example, after describing the disappearance of Esperanza, the narrator immediately reveals to the reader that Esperanza is in fact dead: "[I]t was still assumed by the press that Esperanza was alive and being held captive" (64). Similarly, the use of sub-titles for each chapter breaks the expectation of the reader and summarises (and sometimes humourises) the coming event. The sub-title, for example, of chapter six reads: "The Renewed Courtship of La Loca's Mom and Dad and How in '49 Sofia Got Swept Off Her Feet by Doming's Clark Gable Mustache, Despite her Familia's Opinion of the Charlatan Actor" (103).

Disruption is one of the many features of her storytelling, recognizable in the intermittent opinions she discloses. Similarly, she questions her omniscience to pose an ontological question and recognise multiple possibilities, worlds, and truths. This postmodern aspect is an imposing feature of the novel: the unreliable narrator is concerned about her role as a storyteller and her own role in presenting truths and possibly distorting it. The narrator's awareness is marked by various syntactical techniques in her presentation. At times, she would give parenthetical intermissions either to add a comment or disagree or at other times, she would outright interrupt the flow of the story mid-paragraph to say "actually." Similarly, while the narrator is able to move from consciousness to consciousness, she also abandons them to tell her opinion. Such interruptive devices that interrogate the truth are common throughout the text. Deliberately she makes this very pronounced at the beginning of the novel. In chapter one, for example, the story is temporarily paused to give an intermission. She tells the reader, "[W]ell, if memory served right" (20). This intermission signals to the reader first, that the story she is telling is from of memory and second, that her own memory, like that of any being, is susceptible to forgetting or distortion.

Strategically, because she questions her own role as a storyteller and provider of "truth," she forces the reader to participate in resisting or questioning forms of absolute truths. Her use of confessing, self-reflexivity, and self-conscious narration highlights the metafictional elements of the written narrative to not only deconstruct her own omniscience as a narrator but further comment on the traditional function of the narrator

associated with fabricators of truths in literary texts. While she seems to be knowledgeable and omniscient, she interrupts the text to confess her limitations of knowledge to the reader. She does not pretend to deceive the reader to tell them she knows all there is to say about her identity, but rather categorically states that her own omniscience is fallible; for example, while at times, she would divulge to the reader "factual" events, like when she mentions that Esperanza is already dead and contradicts American press who are reporting that she was still kidnapped. At other times she would outright admit that she does not know, as when she tells the reader after Caridad goes missing that "Now, how she kept herself warm during that bitter winter that had just passed, besides with animal skins and maintaining a fire, no one will ever know" (86). The narrator systematically asks the readers to question, if not destroy, the integrity of "truth," not only of commonly accepted norms but the construction of it. She recognises that fictional narratives are also governed by the same history, in their biases, erasures and lack of recognition.

In the same chapter, the narrator tells the story of the origin of cookies and indirectly asks the reader to participate in the interrogation of the truth-value of objects. She says, "Biscochitos are Spanish cookies or Mexican cookies, depending on who you talk to. Dona Felicia, for instance, would tell you they were dreamt up by Mexican nuns to please some Church official, like a mole. Sofia, on the other hand, was told by her grandmother that the recipe came from space" (167). Thus, while the passage itself is ambiguous about the origin of biscochitos, it acknowledges that both can be true, that in its postmodern sense it just depends on which explanation one prefers to accept. Furthermore, her use of a direct address, the "you," admonishes and foregrounds the ability of the reader, as receiver of "truth." For her, they must create their own fictions and their own truths.

Because "normalized" ideas have "wounded" the perception about Chicanos and Chicanas, she asks the readers then to rethink or apply a certain degree of scepticism to their understanding of truth, and consequently, to their own reading. She asks them to participate in the deconstruction of historical objectivity, of liminal and subjective accounts of events, and recognise that primary resources and re-presented objects are tainted with a particular influence, bias, or predisposition, similar to the ones that have relegated people of the border in the margin. In recognizing those ways of thinking have distorted Chicano/an identity, reconciliation can occur.

This denial or questioning of the possibility of objective truth is employed throughout the novel. The narrator, at every turn, employs a postmodern "attack on truth" where truths become "stories we choose to believe" (Lawson xi). She makes the reader aware of alternative perspectives to critique empirical or epistemological, Christian or indigenous objectivity. As an alternative to normalised "truths," she hybridises science and spirituality where neither one is true(r) over the other; for example, the novel accepts the "death" of La Loca both as a spiritual death and a medical/epileptic episode. For the

narrator, both are truths, as it is similarly true for both indigenous and Christian spirituality to coexist and be practiced without contradiction. Even for the devout doña Felicia, there seems to be no conflict between indigenous spirituality and religious practice. As when she asks St. Anthony for help after Caridad goes missing and the saint “fails” to deliver, she turns the statue upside down to “persuade him to cooperate” (83). The narrator then says that “the truth is, St. Anthony probably just didn't know where Caridad went, since... he is for finding things, not people” (82). While the physical inversion of the material statue represents the metaphorical reversal of a patriarchal religion, it also gestures toward representing the hybridity of traditional and indigenous religions, one that can work hand in hand. At the same time, the scene also comments on the appropriation of symbolic images. St. Anthony, who is known as a saint for missing objects, when taken out of his original context will be appropriated (and rightly so). Truth, therefore, is negotiable in that the narrator’s awareness of spiritualities allows the practice of religion and spirituality without a sense of contradiction.

Critiquing objective truth, and particularly the construction of female identity through the various patriarchal and hegemonic discourses is a recurring motif in the novel. The beginning of the text describes La Loca, who is presumed dead and rises from her coffin to the roof of the church. The priest/father figure, who is himself unsure, asks the girl-child if her miracle is of God or the devil, which earns the rebuke of the child’s mother, Sofi. Moments later, the priest pleads for La Loca to come down so he can pray for her. But La Loca tells him that it is she who is to pray for him, which is the second time a female character chastises the father figure, displacing him of his role. This opening scene opens the novel and asks the readers to presume an alternative reading strategy, one that actively involves the reader in the creation of the plot as they are confronted with perpetual uncertainty because of the reading experience.

Similarly, the narrator asks the reader to reassess the value of indigenous myths in their own spirituality and recover mother figures in indigenous cosmologies who have been relegated to the margin. To do so, she retells myths and validates various mythologies, particularly Native-American origin stories as in the forgotten “Tsichtinako” whom the Acoma considered the “invisible one” and “nourished the first two humans, who were both female” (211). Likewise, as Theresa Delgadillo observes, the novel’s central focus is making analogies with various indigenous female myths and juxtaposing them with the female figures in the novel. He notes that Castillo makes an analogy between Caridad, la Virgen de Guadalupe, and the Apache warrior Loren by juxtaposing the protagonist’s dark skin, her apprenticeship as a curandera (healer), and her discovery alone on the mountains when she retreated (888).

In the middle of the novel, the narrator describes the transformation of La Llorona. According to the narrator, La Llorona exemplifies a Chicana female figure whose identity has assumed various personages throughout history, most of it has been vilified, side-

lined, or reduced to a stereotype, as in the case of the Mexican women who were considered pious or domesticated women. The narrator says:

Just like a country changed its name, so did the names of their legends change. Once, La Llorona may have been Matlaciuatl, the goddess of the Mexica who was said to prey upon men like a vampire! Or she might have been Ciuapiltin, the goddess in flowing robes who stole babies from their cradles and left in their place an obsidian blade, or Cihuacoatl, the patron of women who died in childbirth, who all wailed and wept and moaned in the night air. (161)

In this scene, the narrator laments that La Llorona's identity was transformed from the one who cried over the loss of thousands to a kind of "boogey-woman." Scenes such as these elucidate a postmodern narrative and narrator who, as Brenda K. Marshall notes, resist totalization, and instead privileges "use-value identities and local and contingent truths" (6).

In conclusion, the unearthing of indigenous female origin mythical figures gestures toward the reconstruction and reconfiguration of the hybridised, fragmented Chicana identity through the act of storytelling. The role of the new narrator is to explore and unearth subjugated female stories that were once central to her community, and use them as models for female agency, as bodies for negotiation of political and ethical problems that plague female bodies in the borderland. The female storyteller must take on the role of compiler, narrate the testimonies and the common struggle of the lived Chicana experience, and directly impart them to her people. She must recover/reconstruct the ontological being of the female Chicana, the new mestizaje, not only for the female but for her community. She must displace accepted spatiality and temporality and instead project a new world of multiple ontologies, a world where being Western or native is not seen as such nor as contradictory to objective reality, but one that is in practice functional. She must highlight the contested boundaries between worlds. As the Navajo woman in the novel says, her role is to retell and reiterate the "story of interconnectedness of things... and the responsibility we have with 'Our Mother,' and to seven generations after our own" (242). At the same time, the appeal to the reader as "you" is a direct transference of knowledge to the next generation. The "you," the groups of marginalised people whose history may seem disparate but in essence is identical, must coalesce as a community.

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