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# "Saint-Making" in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*: Medieval Mysticism as Precedent for an Authoritative Chicana Spirituality[1]

In *So Far From God*, it appears as though Ana Castillo borrows the framework of medieval women mystics in order to explore the power of the female community and a new feminine spirituality. In patterning her character La Loca after medieval women who both gained and suffered, Castillo opens up a new idea of Chicana spirituality, and illustrates a tradition that is both transgressive and traditional. Most crucially, Castillo gives women permission to claim spiritual authority by creating a space in which every woman can be defined as a saint.

Opening the door for everyone to be a saint is an unusual premise, but not an unprecedented one. Originally, all baptized Christians were considered saints, and referred to as *hagioi* in the Greek New Testament. Eventually, however, it became necessary to single out those who were special, and in the times of Roman persecutions, this inevitably meant those who were martyred for their faith. Thus, the term "saint" became reserved solely for martyrs in the first century of Christianity. However, as the Roman persecutions ended and it became acceptable and even preferred to be Christian, a new definition of sainthood had to be established. This began as a grass roots movement, for at that time, the Church had no official canonization process.[2] If someone was considered a good person, he/she garnered the respect of the community, and became an unofficial saint. The cults of the saints began as community sponsored devotions, yet were subsumed by the Church and made a part of its (patriarchal) structure.[3] Thus, when the Papacy reserved the sole right to canonization in 1234 CE, the community voice was suppressed, and only a select few men had the power to confer "sanctity." In *So Far From God*, Castillo seeks a return to a time before the saint-making process became a formal procedure and reincorporates the community voice, and more importantly, the female voice, in bestowing sainthood.

The novel opens with not only an introduction to the female protagonists, but with a miracle—a three year old child, known throughout the novel simply as La Loca,[4] has died and been resurrected. This immediately sets up a collusion of the religious and supernatural worlds with real life in the community, and emphasizes the tensions

between the established structure of the church and the grass roots movements so apparent in *So Far From God*. At La Loca's funeral, Fr. Jerome reminds his congregation that they must not question God's will: "As devoted followers of Christ, we must not show our lack of faith in Him at these times and in His, our Father's fair judgment" (22), suggesting that no matter how painful life is, God knows better than the congregation. Just as the congregation seems to murmur and agree, telling the hysterical Sofi, La Loca's mother, "Please, please, comadre,[5] get up, the Lord alone knows what He does! Listen to the padre"[6] (22), Esperanza,[7] Sofi's oldest daughter, shrieks. The congregation then watches in a mixture of awe and horror as the coffin lid rattles and jiggles, until La Loca emerges alive and seemingly well. The miracle becomes more complex as an antagonistic relationship between priest and child develops: "as Father Jerome moved toward the child she lifted herself up into the air and landed on the church roof. 'Don't touch me, don't touch me!' she warned" (23). The priest, perhaps piqued that a female child upstaged him, perhaps genuinely fearful, throws a pall of suspicion over the miraculous event by asking: "'Is this an act of God or of Satan that brings you back to us, that has flown you up to the roof like a bird? Are you the devil's messenger or a winged angel?'" (23). Sofi retaliates by hitting Fr. Jerome and calling him a pendejo.[8] Naturally the crowd reacts with horror, recoiling at the woman who dared to confront a "holy priest." Fr. Jerome immediately claims that the "miracle" has been sent from the Devil; yet, Sofi and "those with faith" follow La Loca into the church, where she could fulfill her promise, "No, Padre, it is *I* who am here to pray for *you*" (24). Thus, Castillo's work begins with La Loca (and her faithful) triumphing over the Church and rising, both metaphorically and literally, over what the text implies are enslaving religious traditions.

One problem with the miracle lay in La Loca's (for a while dubbed La Loca Santa)[9] aversion to human company. Castillo calls her rejection of human company a "phobia of people," but then further explains that the phobia was due to La Loca's claim to be "repulsed by the smell of humans" (23). These odors, she attested, were reminiscent of the "places she had passed through when she was dead," including hell, *purgatorio*,[10] and heaven. This fantastic journey gave La Loca the authority to pray for people upon her return, utilizing the wisdom she gathered during her pilgrimage. The authority extended into daily life, at least for a short time, as Castillo reports that "people came from all over the state in hopes of receiving her blessing or of her performing of some miracle for them" (25). Soon, however, her disgust of human

scent caused the majority of people to forget her existence, and La Loca became "saint" only to her family, and occasionally to her small community of Tome.

This opening glimpse of La Loca's life corresponds well, although certainly not exactly, with the life of a real woman, Christina Mirabilis.[11] Christina (1150-1224 CE) lived in the Brabant-Flanders[12] region during the mystic heyday of the Middle Ages. She, too, had only sisters for siblings, being the youngest of three orphaned girls. At a young age, Christina was sent to tend the flocks; exposure caused her to weaken and die. After the wake, her body was carried into church, but "while Mass was being said for her, suddenly the body stirred in the coffin and immediately was raised up *like a bird and ascended to the rafters of the church*" (de Cantimpré 184, my emphasis). In the language employed by the hagiographer,[13] a link to Castillo's characterization of La Loca is found. Fr. Jerome's words to La Loca "Is this an act of God or of Satan that brings you back to us, that has flown you up to the roof like a bird?" echo the centuries old cry. The hagiography goes on to relate that "all those present fled" (de Cantimpré 184) except for Christina's family. Furthermore, "the subtlety of her spirit was revolted by the smell of human bodies" just as La Loca was (de Cantimpré 184). Significantly, La Loca's death-journey parallels the one taken by Christina Mirabilis, who also began by descending to hell, rising through purgatory, and finishing in heaven. Likewise, Christina declared that since she had chosen to return to earth, her mission was to see to the "improvement of men" (de Cantimpré 185). Loca first indicated that she was returned to earth to save the congregation; however, as the novel progresses, she subsumes herself into the "wilderness" of the family dwelling, shunning society almost completely.

Despite these early similarities, there are subtle differences between the two women's stories. Although both shunned human company, Christina accomplished her need for solitude by fleeing into the desert, where she existed "nourished for nine weeks with the virginal milk from her own breasts" (de Cantimpré 185), only periodically emerging to attend mass or to take communion. La Loca practiced a different sort of isolation. She remained within the community, if only marginally, by continuing to live with her mother and sisters, although "she never went to Mass. . .she did not take her First Holy Communion as each sister in her turn did, nor the Holy Sacrament of Confirmation" (221). Whereas Christina's spiritual journey did not sever her from the traditional rite of the church, she "frequently partook of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord with holy devotion" (de Cantimpré

186), La Loca "flatly refused" (221) to participate in what she considered to be false trappings. Similarly, Christina preached often about the severe pains of hell and purgatory, urging people to repent and avoid the trauma. La Loca, although she did claim to have knowledge of salvation, also said that hell was "overrated" (221), hardly the traditional description.

In implementing her view, Castillo pushes beyond the conventional religious forms to incorporate new female-oriented elements. La Loca is never completely removed from the community, and lives within a female circle in which she holds great authority. Christina, on the other hand, remained primarily isolated, but when she did venture into society, she gained a mixed-gender audience and dispensed religious advice, not domestic capabilities. Nevertheless, it is clear that Castillo chose the life of the unique, and perhaps mad, Christina Mirabilis as a pattern for her multi-faceted character La Loca. The two women even died (and remained deceased, unlike their previous "deaths") in similar fashions. Christina died of a serious, yet mysterious, malady that had no name, and La Loca died of AIDS, which has a name, but in her case, no explanation.

Why would Castillo choose to imitate an outmoded, if not extinct, style of writing like hagiography? Hagiographies, stories of saints' lives, flourished during the Patristic and medieval time periods, but lost popularity after the Protestant Revolution. They do still exist today, and they are still being produced; however, as a form of pop-culture, they no longer take center stage. With her borrowing, Castillo has forefronted the *vitae* of a woman who was venerated in her day, but who now has been forgotten, except by scholars. Thus in using hagiographical typology she is recapturing for her Chicana characters the relative authority enjoyed by certain medieval saints, especially the mystics.

In the predominantly illiterate society, the stories of the saints were told as entertainment, and occasionally took the place of a standard sermon. Through this constant verbal reinforcement, the holy women continued to perpetuate their sanctity, and their acquired authority:

> The liturgical setting of many of these saints' lives reinforced the positive quality of the unwomanly behavior, [and had] a further impact on the congregation . . .by having the priest read from the life of a saint who has rejected all male influences in her life, from father to emperor, . . . gives credence and lends authority to her desires for autonomy. . . [and] recognized a

> type of ritualized emancipation from their religiously appointed roles. (Heffernan, 298-9)

This is one platform through which certain women saints gained spiritual authority long after their death. Living women were not officially declared to be authorities because they would then present a threat to the established order. Female saints' authority also carried on through their proclivity towards receiving visions. Through these visions, holy women communicated directly with Jesus (or the Virgin Mary, or other saints), and then passed the heavenly directives they received on to others. By repeating Jesus' words, the holy women "borrowed" Christ's mantle of authority. The mystic became a tool of Christ, thus becoming regarded as a spiritual authority and was held in awe by others, even if she did not seek out that result.

In order to become holy women, however, medieval women had to give up the one thing that differentiated them from Jesus, and the one thing that truly prevented them from acquiring authority on their own—their womanhood. Throughout its history, the Church has placed a higher value on virginity than on marriage.[14] Sex, sexuality, and women were seen as the downfall of men. The way to combat this human tendency towards sins of the flesh lay with identifying sanctity with virginity less than with identifying sin with sex.[15] Sex, of course, was recognized as necessary for the continuance of the human race, if not for pleasure, and could never be eradicated. Thus, hierarchizing purity over indulgence resulted, inadvertently perhaps, in creating a space for female authority and superiority. In this sin-scheme, a female virgin would be "better than" a married (sexually active) man, at least spiritually. "The convention proposes," writes Heffernan, "that only after having achieved a modicum of independence, having thrown off the yoke of male sexual dominance, . . . [and having] achieved self-control is the holy woman able to free herself from the thrall and to exercise a propensity for her visionary inheritance" (189).

The resurgence of mysticism during the low Middle Ages, and its increasing popularity throughout the era brought with it a new view of women's authority within the Church and society.[16] The possibility of speaking, and perhaps teaching women, was a sincere threat to the Church's established male hierarchy. Elizabeth Petroff writes that "there is only one real transgression for a woman: to go public, to be a visible, speaking, informed moral leader" (176). In *So Far From God*, although La Loca barricades herself away form the world, through her steadying influence and her gradual assumption of familial duties, Sofi

is freed from her daily tasks and eventually becomes La Mayor.[17] In becoming a public official, even in unincorporated Tome, Sofi becomes a public voice in the tradition of the mystic saints, acquiring a mantle of authority.

Sofi becomes a visible voice within her community while retaining her femininity, at least to some degree. Throughout the beginning of the book, she is called La Abandonada[18] by the community, but after the return of her husband, Domingo, she becomes La Mayor. However, Domingo, although no longer the center of Sofi's world, is still incorporated into her female world, and accompanies Sofi on trips, such as the voyages she undertakes to Washington, D.C., until she divorces him. La Loca is a different type of authority. Like many of the early Patristic and medieval saints, her authority stems, in part, from her purity, if not her virginity.[19] For women, sexual purity equaled spiritual purity.[20] It is through these hagiographical stories that the sanctity of the saint is recognized and understood, and most importantly, it is through the female saints' virginity that they are endowed with any authority at all. Thus, it was crucial to La Loca's saintly status that she loathed the touch of other humans, and remained pure. It was also through hagiographies that the common people learned how to live their lives, despite the discrepancy between the common life of an overworked mother and the "clean" life of a remote virgin saint. Heffernan has suggested that elements were incorporated into these stories to make the virgin saints more popular with mothers. For instance, St. Agnes, whose breasts were cut off with hot pincers, was transformed into a symbol of the nursing mother, and the legend of St. Margaret was changed to include pieces of local folklore, including traditional charms for childbirth, which were cleverly "disguised" as prayers. A similar process occurs with La Loca. Although she eventually withdraws from society so completely that she has contact only with her family, and limited contact even with them, she became the font of familial knowledge:

> [T]here were the things she knew about women's bodies. She had never delivered a human baby, but she knew all about a woman's pregnancy cycle. . . Among other domestic talents that Loca cultivated, such as embroidery, coming out with the most beautiful pillowcases and ruanas[21] as Crismas [sic] presents, Loca had become a one hundred percent manita[22] cook. (164)

Remote virgin saints relied on their verbal acumen to save them, in essence becoming men themselves, whereas Loca's domestic activities, such as embroidery, suggest that she subsumed herself into the traditional female role garnering additional authority from it instead. This is but one feminine triumph in Castillo's novel.

The feminine victory in *So Far From God* is a subtle subversion, as the characters use tradition against itself. Similarly, as mentioned previously, the early mystics acquired knowledge, and subsequently authority, from the divine presence. In turn, they likely passed this knowledge on to others. For example, in 1422, a Winchester woman had a vision in which a nun named Margaret appeared to her. In this vision, Margaret described in detail how to obtain a soul's early release from Purgatory—she specified a list of prayers, she gave reasons for each action, and she described the manner in which the priest was to pray. Sylvia Federico notes that "Margaret's discourse is potentially subversive insofar as it displaces the priests' authoritative role" (60). A woman, Margaret, purported to know more than the priest did about what God wanted. She claimed superior spiritual knowledge, and then directed that knowledge towards instructing others. In effect, by assisting fellow sinners, she took over the priest's role. This is precisely what Castillo has La Loca doing, not only at the beginning of the novel when she tells Fr. Jerome how and when to pray, but also at later points in the novel. For instance, La Loca would casually say, at someone's admonishment regarding hell, "I've already been there" (221). Federico goes on to say that Margaret became an active spiritual authority, while the priest became a passive recipient of her knowledge. (61) The only way to achieve her goal, the salvation of sinners, was to transgress the social code of "proper" behavior for women and speak from a position of authority. Of course, unlike La Loca who openly defied Fr. Jerome, Margaret did not knowingly seek to usurp the priest's place; yet, her directions given to an ordained member of the clergy were certainly "transgression[s] of the hierarchical relationship between women and priests" (Federico 62). In evoking the mystic tradition, Castillo deliberately plays upon the acquired authority of mystical saints. Loca would likely have been regarded as a "freak" because of her epilepsy had she not learned how to pray on her journey.

In the shaping of her saintly characters, Castillo also deliberately echoes another medieval tradition, a more subversive sect called the beguines. In general, beguines were women who, without ever professing any formal vows, decided to live together and to pray together.[23] Central to the idea of the beguines was community, specifically a female

community that would aid and protect its members form the harshness of a male-dominated society.[24] Petroff believes that:

> the emotional fulfillment that may have been lacking in the medieval notion of marriage and motherhood was found by Beguine women in their relationship with the divine and, no doubt, was reinforced by their living and working together to create a supportive environment. (173)

It is this notion of support—financial, emotional, and spiritual—that Castillo purloins from the lives of the medieval holy women on whom her characters are based. The hierarchic reversals, where a three-year old La Loca challenges Fr. Jerome, witnessed in the book's opening depict Castillo's ability to place women in positions of power and authority, an ability which extends to female children confronted by established male clergy. This sounds like many stories of the medieval mystics, with one significant difference: awareness. Although the characters themselves are not actively aware of their actions, Castillo deliberately manipulates their actions to secure women's place in the spiritual realm. La Loca tells the priest how to pray, and shoulders the burden of sinners' salvation herself.

Castillo suggests a need for spiritual healing and reconstruction by women for women, but also moves beyond this internal spiritual awakening and pushes forward into the political arena. Castillo herself has said that she is "still very politically committed to my identity as a Chicana" (Navarro 113). This commitment is illustrated in her literature. Castillo continually condemns entrenched societal influences such as factories, medical technology, and the Church which counteract community restructuring. The title of her work, *So Far From God*, can be interpreted as emphasizing the oppression felt by her Chicano/a characters from the Church and its restrictiveness. In fact, in Castillo's work, the Church only serves to splinter the Chicano/a society into irretrievable fragments. Women are pitted against men, heterosexuals combat homosexuals, modern ideals conflict with ancient traditions. Women grow up constantly being defined in a male context, just as the medieval saints did.[25] They were always "daddy's girl," "Johnny's girlfriend," or someone's wife or mother. Carla Trujillo writes that "every Chicana is socialized to believe that our chief purpose in life is raising children," which understandably causes difficulties for both lesbians and saints, yet "all women are expected to take part in this male ego-centric ritual. We carry on their genes through their sperm" (121).

The medieval saints were described in a similar male context: Jesus' spouse, the abbess' daughter, her order's aspirant, or (a very few) a good wife. Just as the medieval mystics broke this pattern and claimed their own authority and their own identity, so, too, do Castillo's characters, such as Sofi becoming La Mayor. More importantly, however, Castillo makes an effort—not unlike the beguines—to name every woman a "saint."

Trujillo goes on to name the everyday Chicana woman a saint, "the concept of motherhood and martyrdom go hand in hand in the [Chicana perspective of the] Catholic religion; the Virgen de Guadalupe personifies this concept. *So Far From God* contains both the Virgin and the martyr—La Loca is visited by the "Lady in Blue," and "for those with charity in their hearts, the mutilation of the lovely young woman [Caridad] was akin to martyrdom" (33). Yet, Castillo does not stop with these two literal inclusions. While being a martyr automatically qualified a medieval woman for sainthood, the ordinary Chicana need not die to achieve martyrdom in Castillo's work. She must only struggle through the marginalizing practices of the Church to become a "bloodless" martyr. Norma Alarcón defines this process: "In order for a female speaker to recover the full meaningful impact of herself, she still must address how that self figures in the 'heterosexual erotic contract'" (7). Within this contract, the female body is a site of both reproduction and the erotic, the mother/whore dichotomy.

In a patriarchal world, women can be forced to choose between the two areas of her life that may be intertwined, and choice leads to sacrifice, a martyring of part of your being. It is impossible to be a mother without some form of the erotic entering into play.[26] This is similar to the case of the medieval mystics who were forced to choose between the body and the spiritual if they were to become, and remain, holy. Alarcón claims that "the speaker's in Castillo's works refuse to make such choices" (8). Choosing one option or the other leads them into defined domains of both the masculine and the feminine. Expectations of "heterosexual erotic bliss" overshadow any self-image of womanhood, instead making women an erotic image within the confines of patriarchy. If Castillo's characters do make a choice, it is a choice to embrace all, and to reunify the community as a whole. When Sofi becomes *La Mayor*, she does not retaliate against the men for the oppressive patriarchal system. But when Domingo leaves her again, she does not revert back to being la Abandonada, but instead "had her peacock-raising lawyer serve the papers he figured were twenty years overdue" (218).

*So Far From God* is a composite of stories that examine issues of faith without the trappings of organized, male-dominated religion. This is a spiritually-centered work which focuses on the everyday ramifications of what it means to be a woman and a minority, a realm in which one has a multi-layered faith in worldly concepts. Yet, the ultimate faith, faith in God, is not eliminated, but rather reevaluated and readjusted. "Women do not want to give up their faith in a higher being," claims Castillo, "despite their dismal circumstances because it is that very faith that often keeps them from despair" (*Massacre of the Dreamers* 100). And despair, although present in this work, is softened through the unyielding support of the feminine community. Again, this links back to the beguine tradition, in which women, fleeing from urban crowding, economic depression, and rigid Church oppression, banded together to combat suffering.

Against this backdrop of communal awareness, Castillo depicts the lives of five women, Sofi and her four daughters. Although La Loca and Sofi most clearly fit into the superstructure of medieval hagiography, Fe,[27] Esperanza, and Caridad[28] contribute to the female community as a whole. Literally, as faith, hope, and charity, the three graces, they are the support network of La Loca, who never leaves the family dwelling, but who nevertheless contributes through the community by aiding her sisters. In exploring these community ties, Castillo offers a new look at faith. The women in *So Far From God* rely upon each other emotional and physically, and this network is strengthened by their sense of faith. Faith in this sense is comprised of many aspects—faith in one's self, faith in the community, faith in *la familia*.[29] The women look after each other, and they listen to Sofi's political plans. And while aspects of Catholicism are at the root of this community, it is reflected differently within each of the women. Castillo draws upon the solid roots of Catholicism, and builds up this new community using materials from a variety of beliefs, including indigenous religions and feminism. Each character responds uniquely to this blend. Fe, for instance, has little or no traditional religious faith, as she places her faith in hard work, responsibility, and marriage instead. She scorns La Loca, ascribing Loca's condition not to saintliness, but rather to "mental illness." We learn little of the youthful Caridad's faith, but after her brutal disfigurement and miraculous recovery, she turns not to organized religion, but to alternate options. She learns spiritual and herbal healing from Doña Felicia. And, once she had learned the healing arts, and once she became a *curandera*,[30] "Caridad never went to Mass; instead, a new student of yoga, she rose with a salute to the sun" (65). Esperanza was "Catholic

heart and soul" while younger, but in college she became involved with Rubén, and dabbled in Marxism, atheism, and native religions. Ultimately each of these women abandons traditional Catholicism for some mystic blend of community, politics, passion, and/or personal fulfillment.[31]

In the midst of this socio-political upheaval, the patriarchal cultural ideal of marriage is explored by Castillo as yet another facet of the "saint-making" process. In the Middle Ages, only a few married women were considered excellent examples of spiritual worthiness.[32] Castillo both upholds the traditional view and explodes it. The character Fe, who builds her whole life around desire for marriage, is the only woman who is spiritually dead. She has faith in nothing but tangible gains, be they a promotion, a man, or her "long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR" (171). Ironically, this daughter, the one who refused all forms of religion, was the only one who stayed "permanently dead." Fe's most serious failing, however, lay in her insistence on remaining defined in a male context—first as Tom's ex, and secondly as Casimiro's wife—and in her stubbornness about love. To Fe, darkness descended not when she was cut off from family, friends, or religion, but when she was without a man:

> In the internal caverns of her mind in which Fe had gotten lost, she could not accept lost love. She once had Tom's devotion and would find it again, if it took a hundred years. Even if she had to search through slimy darkness forever, she would get the Tom that had loved her to materialize again as her bridegroom, in that tuxedo he had picked out to rent for their wedding. (155)

In pining for her lost love, Fe lost part of her voice, and with it, the ability to be promoted at the bank, which in turn proved the catalyst for her accepting a job at Acme International; this suggests that her dependence upon a man accompanied her destruction and death. Another of her great sins lay in Fe's persistent refusal to (re)join the female community. She began by physically distancing herself from the rest of the family, as "shortly after her 'recovery' la Fe had moved out. She took a little apartment with a roommate, a gringa[33] who also worked at the bank" (153). Furthermore, Fe is described in several places as "light-skinned." The text implies that this "whiteness" and the *gringa* roommate served as means of distancing herself from the rest of the Chicano/a community as well as from her family. This was the true "killing blow."

When Christina Mirabilis or other medieval women removed themselves from one community, it was to strengthen the Christian community as a whole that they did so. Fe's removal was not only damaging, but selfish. Her sisters, although not a part of the traditional Church community, contribute to the new female-bound community erupting in Tome. Even her mother has gained a new perspective after finally freeing herself from Domingo, as Fe discovered:

> Meanwhile Fe could only blink back a few tears at her mother's challenge. Her mom had really changed in the past year. She had never raised her voice like that to any of her daughters, but since becoming La Mayor of the Village Council, even if it wasn't official (nor was the village council, for that matter, since Tome was not incorporated), there was just no stopping Fe's mom from ever speaking her mind no more. (157)

Despite her inherent disapproval of Sofi's new-found, and newly-expressed, independence, Fe unconsciously accepts her mother's acquired authority when she identifies Sofi as "La Mayor" and "Fe's mom" instead of "La Abandonada" and "Domingo's wife." The idea of labels was perhaps the one barrier that medieval holy women could not escape; however, they also did not undertake their holy lifestyle as a political statement. Instead, they worked to better themselves and help others. The mission that Caridad takes upon herself when she becomes a *curandera* is the mission to aid the community, not just herself. Once again, Castillo is revising and expanding the rules of becoming a saint, this time including not only community responsibility, but also allowing for the possibility of sexuality: Loca retains her virginity, Sofi dabbles with the returned Domingo, Esperanza combines sex and sweat with religion, and Caridad strikes out in a new direction.

One way of "reshaping" sainthood is to redefine sexuality and its acceptance. Castillo suggests lesbianism as an alternative to traditionally binding heterosexual marriage. In looking at the hagiographic tradition, Castillo chose aggressively political models in the beguines, and in her advocacy of lesbianism as a possible alternative sexuality, Castillo pushes those boundaries even further. In medieval Europe, the possibility of woman-woman eroticism was suppressed to the point of non-existence. In looking at the history of lesbianism in the Christian past, "there is the difficulty of speaking about women's lives in a society that was solidly patriarchal in both its Roman and Teutonic roots, and which made very little provision for women except as objects for or

possessions of men" (Matter 51). Furthermore, society as a whole was sexually hostile, if not sexually repressive. "The thought that women could bring sexual pleasure to each other without the aid of a man occurred to very few theologians and physicians" (Matter 62). The acknowledgment of this lesbian desire, whether or not it was ever physically consummated, challenged the patriarchal structure by reconfiguring the definition of desire. No longer was the definition centered on the man; no longer was a man necessary to create desire. It appears that the greatest issue with lesbianism was not its non-reproductive aspect, although that was certainly a fear, but rather its exclusion of the male.

In *So Far From God*, lesbianism is a subplot with important political implications. The exclusion of the male is not dangerous—it can be both healing and spiritual. When women look away from men, their identities as people alter, and "there is no need to submit to or placate the patriarchal structure" (Alarcón 14). When Caridad abandons heterosexual sex, she forges a "true" identity, one that is spiritual and physical, with the help of her supportive female community. Even *la comadre*, a woman at the fringes of this female community, notices the change: "men were now the last thing on Caridad's mind . . . and that really was a milagro[34]" (135). Caridad becomes a woman with a purpose, a respected *curandera*, no longer defined by her associations with men and called "whore." When she falls in love with Esmerelda, Woman on the Wall, the love transforms and completes her. It does not bring pain and shame like her marriage had, nor does it interfere with her calling; instead, this love is a quiet presence that leads to a spiritual union that transcends both life and death. Caridad and her love are joined forever with Tsichtinako, "deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmerelda and Caridad would be safe and live forever" (211). Her spiritual quest has brought her into a network of natural vitality. Throughout the book, Caridad had moved from loving only her family and Corazón (her horse) to loving herself and another woman. Expressing love for Esmerelda, first through intuition, and later through sensual affinity, completes Caridad's growth, and affirms her sanctity.

Even though only one woman, La Loca, "officially" becomes a saint (according to MOMAS[35], if not the Church) all the women have become, in Castillo's work, saints in their own right.[36] The final candidate for sainthood in the novel is Esperanza, the only sister to become a ghostly manifestation. When Christina Mirabilis (or any other medieval ascetic saint) wandered into the desert away from the vast human crowds, she sought a stillness in the desert that would eventually bring

her closer to God, and the spiritual authority she gained was an accidental by-product of this separation. Esperanza came the closest to being a martyr. At first, she, like her sisters Fe and Caridad, allowed herself to be distracted by men, or in her case, a man, Rubén. Even after he left her for a "blond wife and their three-bedroom house, coyote kid, dog, and minivan" (35) when Rubén came back into her life, Esperanza was willing to sacrifice a new job in Houston for Native-American sweat lodge inspired sex. Only after witnessing Caridad's and Fe's spontaneous recoveries did she realize that Rubén was using her:

> He talked to her on the phone like she was a casual friend. A casual friend whom he could not call to ask on a given day how she was doing. . .a casual friend who accepted her gifts of groceries, the rides in *her* car with *her* gas, all up and down the Southwest to attend meetings, who called her collect. . .who always let her pick up the tab. . . (40; Castillo's emphasis)

After this sudden realization, Esperanza accepted a job offer in Washington, D.C. By doing so, she firmly rejected Rubén, but also came perilously close to making the same mistake Fe made. Esperanza grew up being "used to her mother's preoccupation with her younger sisters" (34) and felt compelled to seize the opportunity to travel to Saudi Arabia not just because it was a "big-time opportunity," but also because "it was pretty clear to her that there was no need of her on the homefront" (46). But before she embarked on the journey, Esperanza came home to her family, who despite Caridad's premonition of disaster[37] bolstered her with love, prayer, and her favorite foods. Despite their prayers and precautions, Esperanza was killed while on assignment, and the letter Sofi received described how "Esperanza died an American hero" (159), essentially a martyr for her country. But the family learned of her death via other mystical means, as the mysterious lady told Loca to tell her mother that "Esperanza is died [sic]" (162). Esperanza teetered on the edge of the female community Castillo carefully built, but before her final departure, she made sure to heal any ruptures that may have existed. And even after her physical demise, her spirit still joined her family, even as a spirit showing affection, "Esperanza came and lay down next to her mother, cuddled up as she had when she was a little girl and had had a nightmare and went to be near her mother for comfort" (163). Caridad continued to have long conversations with Esperanza, who was never severed from the community. Of course, the Church would not authenticate the appearances.

Overall, though, Church validation is of little actual importance within this family of women. Instead, their commitment to each other sustains them. Castillo believes that women are a "splendid source for companionship, spiritual uplifting, [and] positive affirmation" (*Massacre of the Dreamers* 191). Part of this female-connection can be described as a sensual kinship. In fact, sensual spirituality contributes a major ingredient to *So Far From God*. La Loca, although she has no contact with the outside world, possesses intimate knowledge about pregnancy and women's bodies. Esperanza practices a sensual spirituality that combines lust and sexual ritual with the ancient sweat lodge and the supernatural. Eventually she comes to embody the supernatural when she makes her "ectoplasmic return" (150). Caridad as *curandera* works with the natural world (herbs), the religious traditions (candles and prayers), and the spiritual plane (psychic connection). She most of all becomes identified with a potent natural spirituality, greeting the sun instead of attending Mass with Doña Felicia, claiming a natural worship which stems from inside herself. In a move reminiscent of the medieval mystics, Caridad moves away from things that are outside, like the hierarchical and patriarchal strictures of society, while moving towards a feminine mode of thinking, acting, and being. This powerful combination of sexuality/sensuality and spirituality is the same force that fueled the medieval mystics.[38] Although ascetic philosophy demanded that bodily desire be replaced by spiritual desire, the result was still the firm entrenchment within the confines of desire. In many cases, this desire ultimately became expressed in erotic and sexually explicit language directed towards the Saviour. Castillo has come full circle. Her new spirituality also seeks to negate views that attempt to separate sexuality from spirituality. She expressly illustrates how Chicana spirituality cannot be disconnected from literal physical and sensual bodies, and their figurative community bodies. Castillo works to express the body because "women historically have been associated with the body, which we know is perishable and therefore of no value" (*Massacre of the Dreamers* 143). By constructing a community of women, Castillo shows that the body is not perishable but continuing, as yet another facet of union with divinity.

Like the medieval mystic movement, Castillo's Chicana spirituality is a spirituality that permeates culture, class, and sociopolitical borders. Heffernan's term, "sacred biographies," can be applied to Castillo's characters. Castillo's female protagonists are all situated within spiritual stories designed to teach the community. The spirituality Castillo uncovers is a unique blend of Catholicism, feminism, and

indigenous beliefs built within a solid foundation of community. Women are a fellowship, sharing similar struggles against patriarchy. At its deepest level, Castillo's feminine principle provides courage to renew the spirit as well as to transform social structures. The mystics, too, accomplished this transformation—through their prayers and indulgences, they reassured many, giving the faithful courage to change their lives. And while their challenges to the male spiritual authority were probably not a conscious effort, the effect is nonetheless evident in history. Castillo, while being more aware of this function, illustrates that the reconstructive feminine principle can activate a political awareness. Her crusade does change lives. Alvina Quintana says that, "Castillo's work illustrates how Chicanas, caught between two cultures, move closer to self discovery . . ." (164). A Chicana must learn to love herself as a woman, as a sexual being, and as a "spiritual sister," looking towards the day when the Chicana community as a whole, lesbian and straight, can, and do, become saints.

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## NOTES

[1] I would like to thank Adam Bures for all of his support and editing skills. Also, I appreciate the careful and considerate reviews of the *Mester* editors.

[2] The practice of "official" (i.e. Church-sanctioned) canonization began c. 1000 AD. In 1234 AD, the right to canonize was reserved for the papacy alone. Since then, there have been fewer than 300. Two good resources regarding saints and canonization are Kenneth Woodward's *Making Saints*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990, and Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.

[3] Once absorbed by the Church, a community's practices, while retained on the surface were substantially changed to conform to the orthodox ideals of Christianity. For example, the date of the Easter celebration was derived from the Beltane Feast, a Celtic fertility ritual; yet, while the overall theme of rebirth and renewal has been retained, all traces of sexuality have been removed. Adaptation of a region's beliefs was considered by the early Church to be one of the most effective conversion tools.

[4] "Crazy one."

[5] Literally, the godmother of one's child or mother of one' godchild. Used somewhat generically as it is here, the term serves to emphasize not only

the smallness of the community, but also the closeness of its members, particularly the female members.

[6] Priest.

[7] Literally "my only hope."

[8] Slang term roughly analogous to everything from "dumb" or "nerd" to much stronger four-letter words; in any case irreverent towards a priest.

[9] Saint.

[10] Purgatory. I use the Spanish here as Castillo did.

[11] Also known as Christina of St. Trond; Christine of Sint-Truiden. *Mirabilis*, Latin for "amazing," was the epithet given to her by her earliest biographer, Thomas de Cantimpré.

[12] de Cantimpré gives the exact location as Hasbania. The historical entity Flanders is somewhat imprecise, and often "Flanders" encompasses the entirety of the Southern Low Countries.

[13] That is someone who writes the biography of a saint.

[14] Hence St. Paul's famous discussion of marriage, 1 Corinthians vii.

[15] Despite early attempts to discourage marriage (or at least to encourage chaste marriage), the Church bowed to the inevitable asserting that marriage was also a sanctified vocation if done properly. Also, when faced with the Gnostic heresy, which rejected all material reality including the body, orthodox thought reaffirmed marriage's acceptable (if lesser) status. Interestingly enough, while marriage is a sacrament, perpetual virginity does not hold that distinction, even if it is the preferred calling.

[16] By the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, mysticism was falling into disrepute as many "mystics" were eventually declared to be heretical in their teachings. Nevertheless, this does not counteract the fact that many of the most enduringly popular and prominent saints and other "holy ones" were mystics. These would include Catherine of Siena, Bernard of Clairvaux, Julian of Norwich, and St. Clare of Assisi among others.

[17] The mayor. I have chosen to refer to Sofi as La Mayor because that is how it appears in Castillo's book.

[18] the abandonèd one (woman)

[19] Among the earliest, most popular, and long-lived legends of the saints are those of the virgin martyrs like Sts. Agatha, Lucy, and Agnes.

[20] And while there are several cases of famous male saints having lived a debauched lifestyle before reclaiming their sexual continence, there is only one celebrated woman, Mary Magdalene, who did the same. According to legend, Mary turned to a life of prostitution after being abandoned by her husband before their marriage was consummated. Later, after meeting Jesus, Mary vowed to change her life, and became a chaste woman who spread the teachings of Christianity while aiding the poor. For a developed study on this saint, see Susan Haskins' *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1993).

[21] Ponchos.

[22] Handy.

[23] The beguines were never a formal religious order, but neither were they completely part of the laity. The members of the movement instead occupied a liminal space that existed between "sworn and unsworn," or as Grundmann terms it "athwart the ecclesiastical categories" (140). Grundmann further describes this liminal space: "beguines belonged just as little to the lay world of *sæculares*, since beguines had left the *sæculum*, sworn chastity, and led a *vita religiosa* permitted by Honorius III and recognized as legitimate in letters of protection and privileges from popes, legates, and bishops" (140). Yet at the same time, there was freedom within the movement to form whatever type of community was most appropriate for the particular women involved. In this, the beguine movement was totally unique in the world of women's spirituality. The most commonly binding factor was an urban environment, but even that was no prerequisite. The numbers of beguines grew rapidly, and some communities even grew wealthy and powerful, while still others grew in the less secular direction and built "convents" of sorts in which all the women resided together.[23] This growth and expansion without the direct supervision of the Church or any other male authority caused the beguine movement to be hated and feared. In fact, the Church ruthlessly suppressed the movement which was all but killed off by the French Revolution. In the meantime, the Church did its best to reincorporate the beguines into the patriarchal structure: "Spiritual guidance for these communities was generally provided by the friars, Franciscan or Dominican, who were supposed to preach and hear confession regularly" (Petroff 172). However, the women generally resisted full incorporation into existing communities, and eventually the movement was thoroughly condemned, and many of its members were exiled, excommunicated, or burned as heretics. For instance, the Inquisition held a public burning of beguines at Narbonne in 1317. One of the most famous Beguines who was executed was Marguerite Porete, whose most famous work was *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, which was subsequently banned and burned by the Inquisition. In this book, Marguerite sets out her idea of the Free Spirit, which holds that a soul joined with God while still on earth is sin-free. Although banned by the Church, her book was so popular that it was translated into several Continental languages and numerous copies survived. Oddly, some of her ideas have grounding within the teachings of the great Cistercian fathers, Bernard of Clairvaux and Wiliam of St. Thierry. Similar ideas also appeared in many works by other beguines.

[24] Technically, beguines did not need to reside together in a single dwelling in order to be part of their community.

[25] While this defining process was most prominently displayed among female saints, several male saints also placed themselves in the role of Jesus' lover, His spouse, etc.

[26] I believe a case could even be made for artificial insemination since some sort of autoeroticism must originally occur in order for the donors to produce, although this is an admittedly tenuous connection.

[27] Literally "faith"

[28] Literally "charity"

[29] "the family." I use the Spanish here as Castillo did in her novel.

[30] Folk healer

[31] Even death does not stop these women from connecting with each other. This connection is similar to the case of the medieval mystic, Christina Mirabilis, who was considered mad, retreated to the wilderness, and appeared only at odd moments when needed by others. Esperanza, after becoming transparent, still hovered at the fringes of her family, appearing when necessary. Most medieval holy women existed at the fringes of society as did Sofi and her daughters.

[32] The majority of married saints lived in chaste marriages. For more information on that phenomenon, see Dyan Elliott's *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, Princeton UP: 1993).

[33] Foreigner (from a non-Spanish speaking country), perhaps fair-haired.

[34] Miracle.

[35] "Mothers of Martyrs and Saints." This is the organization founded by Sofi after La Loca's death.

[36] *La comadre* wanted to give Caridad, in her new incarnation as La Armitaña the honorific "santa", but "*la comadre* quickly dropped the 'santa' from that daughter's new 'title' after la Caridad had neglected to go out and bless her crops" (134).

[37] Upon hearing of Esperanza's assignment, she moaned, "Esperanza is going far away . . and she's afraid. . .,We should keep her home, Mama. . ." (46, punctuation Castillo's)

[38] It was a standard trope for female saints to look upon Jesus as their lover, literally and figuratively. There has been a wide variety of literature written in recent years on this subject. Particularly recommended is Carolyn Walker Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), and on the subject of Christ as courtly lover, "Ancrene Wisse and The Wohunge of Ure Lauerd: The Thirteenth-Century Female Reader and the Lover-Knight" by Catherine Innes-Parker. In *Women, the Book and the Godly: Selected Proceedings of the St. Hilda's Conference, 1993*, eds. Lesley Smith and Jane H. Taylor. Cambridge, Eng.: Brewer, 1995. pp. 137-

[39] This tradition described Christ as the perfect courtly lover, attractive, gentle, chivalrous, etc.

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