

Double Negatives, Present Absences and Other No-Nos: Dialogic Community Action in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*

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Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* works to reconcile multiple civic and cultural institutions that compete for prominence in the American Southwest, a region marked by diverse social and linguistic practices. Amerindian and Chicano cultures, for example, confront their marginalization amidst mainstream economic orders, competing religious dogmas and models of civic government. The resulting intercultural synthesis—endemic to the physical and psychological regions Gloria Anzaldúa defines as “the Borderlands”—surfaces in the narrator's language, which marks her as a non-native speaker of so-called Standard American English. Abundant double negatives and other quirks in her use of English conform to conventional Spanish constructions; as such, they give voice doubly-spoken utterances that can be instructively analyzed in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's account of dialogic discourse. As we will see, such linguistic complexity harbors an empowering capacity to engage lived experience by renaming it; wielded effectively, it may usefully contest and revise conventional patriarchal and socio-economic paradigms that would otherwise restrict human agency. Characters may employ dialogic discourse to speak new realities, in a sense. This reality-making—the naming of that which was formerly inexpressible—finds powerful activation in the narrator's unique sensibility, the arrival, perhaps, of “a new *mestiza* consciousness” that Anzaldúa announces in her work (77). In *So Far From God*, Mourning mother and activist Sofi follows the narrator's model to rise as *la mayor*. In this role, her dialogically expressed *mestiza* consciousness uses cross-language complexity to subvert the powerful systems that have conditioned her village's poverty and

dysfunction. Meanwhile, Sofi's daughter, *la Fe*, fails to successfully voice such a challenge and finds herself relegated to a position of impotent exclusion.

Castillo's narrator's language flaunts some basic features of so-called Standard American English. At heart, the language presents a conversational approximation of the tones and voices common in oral storytelling. Castillo packages a third-person omniscience inside a first-person narrative voice with a pronounced personality. The narrator explicitly uses a plural perspective only occasionally, but a "we" voice nonetheless inflects most of her language, situating her as a member of the community she chronicles. Never named, though, she is entirely uninvolved in the novel's events. This complex perspective takes shape in frequent parenthetical asides, spare use of "I," and a notable self-awareness about the inadequacy of language to relate events in an objective mode. Early in the novel, for example, the narrator invokes her community's shared experience when she gives a cautionary aside qualifying her account of a child's death: "none had died since—well, if memory served right, doña Dolores's last son" (20). Later, she mentions that the circumstances of Fe's death are "hard to relate" (186). She also offers editorial judgments such as when she calls out a courtroom judge as "plain dishonest" (215). Castillo further sustains the illusion of a uniform storytelling personality by infusing the narrator's language with a smattering of Spanish words and syntactic constructions. The word *ese*, for example, Spanish for "this," occurs frequently when the narrator and characters impugn the behaviors of others such as "ese Memo," who "shamefully" betrayed *la Caridad* (135). Similarly, the frequent insertion of the Spanish articles *el* or *la* before proper names to connote respect (such as *la Fe* and *la Caridad*), results, at times, in novel interlingual constructions like "*la* Mrs. Doctor" (224). More broadly, double negatives—a no-no in Standard American English—pervade the speech of narrator and characters alike. This lingering conventional Spanish construction, more frequently perhaps, than any other, situates the novel's language in a non-standard marginality specific to the American Southwest.

But these constructions do more than merely locate the novel's events in a particular regional culture. The narrator's speech asserts itself as a legitimate voice sprung from the intersection of marginal and mainstream cultural valences. In this respect, the speech

functions similarly to the formal innovations described by Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, who situates *So Far From God* amidst a post-modern cultural politics that enacts “an aesthetics of appropriation and pastiche to state a dialogue between Mexican and Anglo-American traditions” (102). Her list of the novel’s genre-melting cultural touchstones includes “the family saga, the *telenovela*, myth (Pueblo, Apache, and Aztec), *cuentos* (oral stories), magic realism, comedy, tragedy, folkloric elements such as *remedios* and recipes, and religious narratives” (102). In its formal and linguistic mixing, the book presents a model not only of negative resistance to oppressive systems, but also of positive, communal action. So doing, it gives life to an instance of what Anzaldúa, in her introduction to *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, calls “my language, a new language” born “at the juncture of cultures” where “languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized.”

Like Mermann-Jozwiak, though, most critics stop short of a full discussion of the narrator’s mode of speech, failing to thoroughly account for the ramifications of the book’s interlingual voice. When they have considered language itself, it has been to highlight the language’s truculent, ironic tone or its contribution to the book’s carnivalesque absurdity. Critics Richard McGarry and Silvio Sirias, for example, argue that *So Far From God*’s double negatives voice a revolt “against the normative use of language for narrative” (95), a fitting device for a novel that, in their estimation, “revolves around the theme of rebellion” (94). B.J. Manríquez’ explicit attention to the double negatives she finds “irritating” (40) complements McGarry and Sirias’ position. She instructively sizes up such “lexical distortions” (41) as devices that help Castillo develop the narrator’s rebellious personality as though she is a *mitotera*, a stereotyped Chicana woman, an intruding neighbor who “will expose people’s experiences in order to ridicule and shame, feigning a sympathetic attitude while belittling the person’s action and personality” (40). In Manríquez’ view, *So Far From God*’s narrator switches between “mimicking” the non-standard English used in the novel’s New Mexican village, Tome, and “using the vocabulary and diction of an acculturated Chicana” (40). Thus, in her view, the double negatives work together with other quirks to generate what she calls the story’s “mocking . . . central consciousness” (41), anchored in a speaker who verbally ironizes her story to project “a very different and often opposite, attitude or evaluation” (41).

Manríquez convincingly associates this code-switching with other formal devices similar to those enumerated by Mermann-Jozwiak. But while Mermann-Jozwiak argues that the novelty instantiates experimentation born of “discontinuities in Mexican-American experience” and serves to “ground [Chicana] fiction in historical and material reality” (Mermann-Jozwiak 102), Manríquez marshals them, instead, to detail the novel’s “aesthetics of the absurd” (Manríquez 39).

The two critics’ differing emphases subtly gesture at a deeper disagreement about the consequences of poststructuralist injunctions against the stability of meaning. Both understand the novel to present an irrevocable revision of established meaning through cross-cultural clash. For Manríquez, the *mitotera*’s layered voice is “the vehicle that recombines values and generic codes” (40); the novel’s formal pastiche serves the same function for Mermann-Jozwiak. For the former critic, though, such instabilities in meaning are destructive. The reprocessing serves only to shape the novel’s nihilistic absurdity, to underscore its rebellion “against essentialist beliefs” because “human beings exist in a silent, alien universe that possesses no inherent truth or meaning” (39). In *So Far From God*, however, violence and dysfunction more often result from entrenched orders which present themselves as the standard-bearers of inherent truth or meaning. Patriarchal dominance, for example, and the logic of corporate capitalism pose as exhaustive systems, synonymous with reality, thereby excluding some individuals from freely pursuing meaningful lives. Critics sharing Mermann-Jozwiak’s orientation are likely to be more inclined to identify, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo does, a blueprint for political advocacy. Caminero-Santangelo—concerned as she is with evaluating *So Far From God*’s participation in magical-realist generic conventions—finds that the novel’s overtly political episodes harbor strategies for collective political action, to posit, that is, “collective agency, especially that of women, as an ideal response to the challenges of environmental degradation and economic injustice” (82). By emphasizing the positive, liberating potential that results from undermining powerful orders—the expanded capacity it grants characters to control their own destinies—we may more productively read the narrator’s language as a source of meaning, not its annihilation.

Rather, then, than reenacting the meaninglessness of the world that Castillo’s narrator means to contest—instead of “underscor[ing] the absurdity of the characters’ behavior” (Manríquez 41)—the

code-switching, double-voiced *mitotera* has special access to reality. This capacity of language to bear fresh paradigms and modes of being gives Castillo's storytelling a positive power missed in Manríquez' account. Mikhail Bakhtin has identified just such capacities in mixed-language discourse, positive potentialities that do work beyond merely disturbing powerful, hegemonic orders. He describes the tendency of "unitary language" to uphold a "system of linguistic norms . . . officially recognized" and their confrontation with what he calls "the *realities* of heteroglossia" (1198, my emphasis). For Bakhtin, every novel functions as a dialogic linguistic product, harboring the confluence and interplay—the "heteroglossia"—"of speech types and . . . differing individual voices" (1192), which constitute, in his estimation, "the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel" (1193). In novels, "dialogized heteroglossia" serves to resist "monologic" forces that aim "to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world" (1198), source of the "essentialist beliefs" Manríquez rightly says *So Far From God* seeks to dispel (39). More importantly, Bakhtin claims for heteroglossia a closer relationship with reality than that expressed in monologic discourse; dialogic discourse constitutes "the authentic environment of an utterance" (1199).

Most applications of Bakhtin's theories have focused on what Bakhtin calls the "internal stratification of any single national language," the shuffling of a variety of discursive modes such as "social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions" (1192). Ralph Rodriguez, for example, has used Bakhtin's ideas to construe *So Far From God* as a prominent example of what he calls "contestatory literature" (67). Such literature, in his assessment, "employs varying narrative strategies to critique, resist, and oppose racism, sexism, homophobia and/or classism" (67). Rodriguez' account of Castillo's narrative strategies, without mentioning the narrator's actual spoken language, focuses on the novel's "revitaliz[ing] and embolden[ing] of the representation of women, in the face of the ideological construction of supposed preternatural myths" (78), such as the Christian genesis story and those in native-American mythology. Rodriguez' approach astutely traces *So Far From God's* reconciliation of such diverse and overlapping discourses through a range of ideological structures represented and reprocessed in the novel's unique

religious sensibility. Extending Rodriguez' work to describe the book's most basic linguistic structures will show that they, too, facilitate heterogeneous voices.

Thus, to best approach *So Far From God*, we may usefully understand the confluence of the two national languages which we find complicating the narrator's speech as properly dialogic. Indeed, Bakhtin squeezes a special mention of just this variety of heteroglossia into his generic definition of the novel: "The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (1192). Generally speaking, the presence of cross-language heteroglossia is a defining feature of Chicano literature, attended to frequently among critics regarding other works. In a discussion of *corrido* poetry, for example, Jesse Alemán points out that "interlingualism is perhaps Chicano literature's most consistent and obvious process of dialogization in the Bakhtinian sense" (Alemán 61). Interlingualism certainly has priority in the dialogic architecture of *So Far From God*; it is ubiquitous throughout in the speech of narrator and protagonists alike, voicing on every page its conflict with Standard American English.

So Far From God's non-standard linguistic constructions speak a reality that cannot be fully expressed, at least, in the linguistic manifold of mainstream English. The article *la* has a more complex resonance, for example, when attached to *la Loca's* name, confusing its derogatory meaning—*loca* translates as "crazy"—by adding the term of respect but also objectifying her as "the crazy one." Likewise, the *la* added to the names of characters Caridad, Fe and Esperanza render their names as common nouns (charity, faith and hope, respectively), emphasizing the characters' allegorical significance. Unusual inflections arise as well in utterances like the narrator's assertion that Esperanza "had been disappeared" (159), a barely-logical echo of military public relations speech that hides culpability behind the passive voice. *Loca* echoes and inverts this to profound effect in her awkward declaration that Esperanza "is died" (158)—an apt description of *Loca* herself, arguably, since she lives on after her own death. In this case, grammatical confusion undermines death's finality, a situation literally realized in the novel's events. Esperanza remains present in the novel, a fate notably distinct from that of Fe who ends up "plain dead" (186).

As the two languages work together, *So Far From God's* double negatives have a particularly profound creative potential. Beyond establishing the narrator as a *mitotera*, beyond merely offering a formal linguistic rebellion, double negatives shape one of *So Far From God's* central motifs, the experienced presence of objects and circumstances that are literally absent. Often, a double-negative sentence precludes the possibility of denying something's existence or of declaring its absence. An expression like "without admitting nothing" (103), used by the narrator to describe the way Sofi converses with a neighbor, literally approaches the opposite of its intended sense, hinting but failing to fully express that she admitted *something*. And though context may preclude understanding the statement in this way, its literal sense continues to resonate as an abstract presence; the admitted *nothing* haunts the discourse as a felt absence, the thing she did not admit—in this instance "her long sparse social life" during Domingo's absence (103). This particular case points to one of the novel's defining present absences. The novel's men are characterized principally as absent, an absence which exists as a deeply efficacious feature of Tome's reality. When one character, Tom, bails on his marriage plans with Fe—"It's not that I don't love you" (30), he writes in a letter—his absence radically alters her personality and the course of her life. She becomes a recluse when "she can't even face [people at work] no more" (31). More poignantly, Fe's would-be mother-in-law declares that the breakup "hasn't cost [Fe] nothing" (31). This, of course, literally means that it will cost her *something*, the presence of the woman's son Tom; her syntax hints at what will stay with Fe, Tom's absence.

Present absences surface in a wide range of incarnations throughout *So Far From God*. In one case, for example, they confront Sofi in a manipulative rationality. When Domingo gambles away Sofi's *hacienda*, Judge Julano wields the law to uphold the legitimacy of his own winnings from illegal cock fighting as though two wrongs had made a right. The judge heads off Sofi's objection with a negative-presence of his own creation; his "not putting" (216) her husband in jail hangs as a threat that silences Sofi's protest. To take another example, Loca's anti-corporate activism subverts a factory's branding when she removes her blue jeans' label, its absence thus serving as a provocative call to boycott. The turnstile logic of presence in absence also characterizes the narrator's treatment of the magical as perceived by young Frank, who observes Loca's childhood levitation. For children magic

is always a trick, she opines, because “to them [it] falls within the realm of possibility” (192); the absence of a concept of magic from the world (it is not, not present, after all) confirms magic’s existence and colors the novel’s treatment of the plot’s numerous miracles. To take up again, Tome’s truant men, Domingo’s twenty-year absence—the result of a marriage “nobody could say nothing about” (21)—hovers over Sofi’s social identity; in Tome she is known as “la Abandonada” (215), the abandoned one, even though it was she who had thrown him out. The community’s perception underscores Domingo’s felt absence, especially as Sofi “forbade anyone to mention his name in her presence” (21). Later, Sofi’s official divorce from Domingo gives rise to her new status as a divorcee, a condition defined by a lack of marriage, a reality which, like her identification as *la Abandonada*, exists after a simple act of renaming.

Castillo’s narrator uses interlingual constructions to disrupt the ontologies assumed in casual discourse, the implied absence or presence of objects, people and circumstances. She models linguistic creativity as a viable, empowering response to marginalization. As such, her model matches the strategies that enable the emergence of Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza” consciousness, which “copes by developing a tolerance for contradiction and for ambiguity,” and by learning to “juggle cultures” (79). Exercising what I have called the reality-making potential of dialogic discourse as signaled by Bakhtin, Anzaldúa’s borderland consciousness effects a “plural personality” that can “sustain contradictions” and “turn the ambivalence into *something* else” (79, my emphasis). Thus, the book’s characters may follow the narrator’s example to overcome their oppression or, on the other hand, fail to exercise their dialogic potential. Sofi, for example, harnesses poly-linguistic complexity in a successful community revolution, but not before her daughter, *la Fe*, succumbs too easily to the monologic discourse of industry and business.

Such discourse constructs the tyranny of Acme International over the ill-fated *Fe*. *Fe* is not successful in dialogic reality-making because her own speech conforms to dominant monologues. Prior to her employment at Acme, *Fe* had been incapable of subverting the present absence she faced when the bank left her “without . . . prospect to get a real raise, neither” (177). Her speech has developed an aphasia that blots out every second or third word she tries to say, filling each sentence with holes: “what do ___ mean, handi___?” (177), she begs

of her former employer. Her stunted speech symbolizes the fragmented field of discourse that has given rise to the circumstances that brought the non-raise into being. Because Fe's language cannot fluidly bring into being the realities her bank would presumably like to see proliferate—new accounts—her non-promotion haunts the unnamed margins of reality like the words missing from her speech. Just as holes in Fe's speech constitute a positive reality, a "handicap" (177), the non-existent raise has tangible consequences; indeed, it sparks a series of events that will culminate in her collapse into non-being, negating first her reproductive capacities and, later, her life. Like the missing raise, like the felt presence of circumstances doubly-negated, the words missing from Fe's speech—which most people "never said nothing about" (177)—confront her as present and completely out of her control. This situation and the quasi-humorous desperation that infuses Fe's voice figure the hopelessness that will undo Fe in her eager work for the mega-corporation, Acme International.

Seeking the professional rewards she once commanded at the bank, Fe succumbs to monologic language that serves the interests of Acme. Working there, Fe must imagine her own importance in terms learned at her former bank job, clinging to the "official feeling" of the word "station" and pretending her desk is her own to "never let nobody get near" (180), another double negative signaling what she knows but denies, that she is powerless to prevent other employees from using the desk during other shifts. Her speech converges with Acme's preferred language most completely, perhaps, when the narrator reveals that, on the job, Fe "considered herself a kind of specialty person" because of her willingness to work with volatile chemicals, and that "as a matter of fact that is exactly what she was called officially" (184). Similarly, Acme International refuses to name whatever syndrome—probably the result of lead and radiation poisoning—plagues its female employees with migraine headaches and hampers their fertility, and the women do not name it either. As a result, meaningful absences haunt the cafeteria conversation Fe has with her coworkers after her own miscarriage. The workers describe their own truncated reproductive hopes and the conversation gravitates toward one's lament for her absent husband—reprise of the presence-in-absence motif involving *So Far From God's* men. Fe and the other women, hooked on Acme's promotions and bonuses, are complicit in denying the company's pollution and malpractice. Incapable of voicing

that which remains nameless in Acme's discourse, the women accept a consensus among company nurses that the illnesses are nothing more than signs of menopause, categorically blocking the emergence into establishment- reality of a disease the company likely created. This present absence—the disease that no one names—begets a generation of absent offspring, the thwarted progeny of the pining Acme women.

But Acme's undermining of medicine's ends—to service the company rather than individuals—and its subversion of paradigms of meaningful work (its supplanting of birth-labor with wage-labor, for example) are not merely side-products of the company's mode of operation. Rather, they are further instances of its central mission: to obliterate reality into a profitable absence. Fe cleans parts that "in and of themselves [do] not seem all that dangerous" (180), though they will later go into weapons destined for purely destructive ends—the destruction in warfare of individuals, beings and realities. Fe's ultimate collapse into absence—first through the loss of her meaningful productivity and reproductivity and, finally, through the loss of her own life—services the company's reproduction. The special promotion she earns because of her excellence at "utilization and efficiency" (181) isolates her in a sealed room to work with unnamed chemicals, including one that "actually glowed in the dark" (181) and another that is "heavier than air" (188). Because Acme cannot dispose of the chemicals in the drain a supervisor tells Fe to let them evaporate. With nowhere else for the chemicals to go, her body literally facilitates the company's denial of their existence by absorbing them. She does not "complain about it or nothing" (181) until it is far too late, well after her body and mind have precipitously deteriorated. Her unsuccessful attempt to hold the company accountable for her demise makes her non-existence in the company's reality clear; she finds the plant remodeled with a labyrinth of impenetrable cubicles, a nihilistic space where, the narrator observes, "nobody and nothing [were] able to know what was going on around them no more" (189). No combination of negatives will render the company present to Fe in a way that is useful to her cause. Her speech will not register meaningfully in the company's totalizing logic. Thus, Fe's cry amidst the cubicles emphasizes her own lack of presence to the company, a lack of presence which governs her story, for the novel has already asserted Fe's death before it becomes a temporally-located narrative fact. At the outset of chapter 11,

Fe's death "Which Lingers Among Us All Heavier than Air," (170) is a foregone conclusion that lingers, as well, over the chapter. But while her absence conditions the reader's experience of her story, it has also conditioned her exploitation by Acme. The company farms her negative presence much as it does the non-fruits of warfare's oblivion; Fe's non-existence defines her appropriation into the company's monologic linguistic paradigm and conditions the company's survival via the ubiquity of its preferred reality. Fittingly, Fe is the novel's only central character whose death is represented as final.

The isolation of Acme's cubicles and Fe's wasting therein stand in stark contrast to Sofi's successful expression of possibilities available in her polysemous language. Though she is hard-pressed to protect her daughters, Sofi embraces the dialogic discursive strategies that vitalize the narrator's language. Almost from scratch, Sofi transforms the village in a community revolution. A deliberate disturbance of monologic civic discourses catalyzes her effort, a disturbance that keys off of first-rate "culture juggling" and the embrace of contradiction and ambiguity called for by Anzaldúa. Sofi becomes *la mayor*, reversing a stereotypically masculine role and undermining the mainstream model of public leadership; her first step has been to fuse the position's title with the gender-specific article from Spanish. But even this is not a direct reversal, for proper Spanish syntax would feminize the noun with an "a" ending—*la mayora*; Sofi is content to let the paradoxical, gender-bending term stand. Furthermore, Tome, which "never had no mayor" (137), is unincorporated and, thus, does not qualify to elect and maintain standard bodies of local government. The felt absence of a mayor and local leadership—a further echo, perhaps, of the motif of Tome's missing men—conditions Sofi's ironic appropriation of the role she "don't know nothing about" (138).

As Castillo has chosen a *mitotera* narrator to demonstrate the possibilities of dialogic language, Sofi chooses a friend known to her as *la comadre*, "the biggest *mitotera* among all her neighbors" (140) to manage her campaign. This act renders problematic a standard Chicana binary, invoking just such a "plural personality" and "pluralistic mode" as Anzaldúa describes (79). As Manríquez defines it in her essay, a *comadre*—a gossip companion—is the natural foil for a *mitotera*. In Sofi's new order, *la comadre* may serve as both, further signaling the reversal *la mayor* has dreamed up. And this linguistic shuffling, as with *la mayor*, directly disturbs monologic patriarchal

codes. *Comadre* is the feminine counterpart to the masculine *compadre*, the two terms carrying the same connotations as *godparent*, *neighbor* and *friend*. *Comadre*, however, translates also as *gossip*, a derogatory nuance reserved only for women. Sofi's campaign embraces her neighbor as *la comadre*—*the gossip*—now resonating like a titled position in her unusual cabinet. In still another turn, *la comadre* affectionately refers to Sofi as “comadre” (139), too, leveling the hierarchies that typically characterize political power.

At its inception, Sofi's campaign takes aim at the monologic discourses that buttress standard gender constructs, challenging patently patriarchal conceptions of which issues count as legitimate public concerns. The void created by male abandonment—figured at times in Domingo's lack of industriousness—assumes expanded efficacy when Sofi makes it the starting point for the village's revitalization. Sofi's inspiration to bring everyone “together [to] try to do something about it” starts with practical domestic improvement, a to-do list of broken implements in her own home including “the washing machine, the screen door, [and] the stall for the horses” (142). Domingo feels the affront, for all of Sofi's first projects involve things he had “been planning on fixing” but hadn't yet because “sometimes a man can't find enough time in a day” (143). The domestic inflection of the campaign is not lost on *la comadre* either, who wants to “*engender* some new spirit back into Tome” (140, my italics). In this scene, Castillo underlines the campaign's clash with patriarchal order when the two women clash with Domingo, who obtrudes in their kitchen conversation. His presence interferes with the revolution; the comadre “wished he would get out of the kitchen so they could go on making their campaign plans” (143). Domingo's response to the proposal is tellingly confused; at first he is stricken with a kind of vertigo, “dumbfounded” (141) by the incomprehensibility, perhaps, of Sofi's acrobatic dialogic shifts. The plan so perplexes his accustomed frame of reference he cannot decide “whether to be concerned or to laugh” (141). But he is sure that it is not he, but Sofi who is “obviously experiencing some psychological breakdown” (144); he takes her plan as a personal attack, proof that Sofi will never “completely forgive him” (143) for his twenty-year absence.

Beyond Sofi's kitchen, the non-public, patently domestic center where she hatches her plan, the discursive character of her activism—nominally a campaign for mayor, but really “one to rescue Tome”

(146)—finds legs as a revitalized debate, a surging public discourse, where conversation had been absent before. She and *la comadre* recruit neighbors and other locals to supply “ideas and help” (146), practical involvement in development projects rather than the more nebulous political support that typically drives civic movements. A series of “community-based meetings” and “debates” (146) launches three cooperatives that eventually “sustained the livelihoods” (147) of dozens of women, many of them in the highly-skilled, creative enterprise of wool-weaving. Sofi encourages mutually beneficial, non-economic relationships that undermine the vacuous standard models of wage labor and ownership that characterized Tome in ruin; initially, much of the labor at the cooperatives, for example, comes from volunteers who, in return, learn aspects of the business. Sofi’s initial cooperative act, in fact, had been at her campaign’s inception when she forgave *la comadre*’s debts—a broken sewing machine and a past-due grocery bill—in the spirit of a neighborly give and take that, as the narrator puts it, “all evens out” (131). Barter as a mode of economic exchange mocks the dollar-value abstractions of market economics. In the depressed Tome, the felt absence of money—“the government had no money to lend them” (146)—had prevented exchange from happening at all, so that property and tools were “no longer used for nothing” (146) and land was “no longer farmed or used for nothing” (146). Following Sofi’s model, however, a wave of pragmatic problem solving infuses the area with a revitalized surge of economic activity; through bartering, Tome’s citizens fix up “their run-down farm equipment, homes, home appliances, cars, and trucks” (147). Because of Sofi’s efforts and her creative language, the community lifts itself out of an civic and economic void.

So Far From God’s dialogic shuffling of monologic systems finds expression in a variety of ideological structures uniquely represented in the worldviews of characters like Sofi. Each of these reprocessed systems—shared meanings and ideas that inform the experience of *So Far From God*’s characters—mix and refract in the novel’s central consciousness, accessible in the narrator’s polyphonic language. In this respect, Castillo and her *mitotera* narrator have effectively given voice to what Anzaldúa calls an “alien consciousness” risen from “this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination” (Anzaldúa 77). Interestingly, the resulting alternative perspective positions many readers as outsiders. Those, at least, who are native

speakers of Standard American English may feel threatened by what Manríquez calls “reader alienation and disorientation” (40). In crafting the story in a marginal English-Spanish hybrid and granting storytelling authority to the subaltern Chicana community, Castillo has claimed the central ground. By forcing many of her readers to grapple with a language and perspective they must reach to understand, by flaunting what they will likely register as ungrammatical speech, the novel enacts the strategy modeled by the narrator’s language and picked up by the most successful characters. Readers, that is, may experience such exclusion as is usually undergone by people who, like most of the novel’s characters, are immersed in dominant national languages they do not fully command. Thus, *So Far From God*, in the most obvious structures of its language, interpellates readers into a new reality, that born of the “new mestiza consciousness . . . of the Borderlands” (Anzaldúa 77).

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