

THE CURANDERA AS XICANISTA: HYBRID SPIRITUALITY AS A MEANS OF  
PROVOKING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE

A Thesis

by

MEGAN ELIZABETH NIETO

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2013

Major Subject: English

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Change

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my sisters—Erin, Kaela, and Keegan—the bravest, most beautiful, intelligent women in the world. From you, I learned the necessity and power of female solidarity and imagination. My brother, Jarryd, I dedicate this to you for never failing to make me laugh or smile. You, my four siblings, are the greatest gifts I have been given in this life. I love you and am eternally thankful for each of you, for the laughter and tears we have shared, the times we have spent reading and writing together, and my amazing nephew and nieces. I would also like to dedicate this to my parents: my father, who stressed the importance of education and whom I spent much of my life attempting to differentiate myself from, only to realize how much I am like you and how grateful I am to be; and my mother, who first put a pen in my hand and encouraged me to write, who taught me that books not only allow learning and critical thinking but healing as well, and whose voice and smile I share—I love you. Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my husband, Pablo, my best friend, for all the late-night dinners, laughter, love, patience, and support you have given me these past seven years—I cannot imagine my life without you.

## ABSTRACT

The Curandera as Xicanista: Hybrid Spirituality as a Means of Provoking Social and Political Change (May 2013)

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This thesis explores the suitability of Chicana feminists or Xicanistas modeling themselves on the figure of the curandera, a Mexican American folk healer whose treatments must be utilized as a means of bettering not only the lives of individuals but society as a whole. It discusses the curandera characters depicted in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo Puro Cuento* in order to present the need for curanderas to find a balance between the interests of the Self and of society. These curanderas' failure to provoke and participate in social change limits their effectiveness as models for Chicana feminism. Furthermore, this thesis discusses two characters, Sofia and Celaya, who do not serve as official healers yet embody many curandera traits and practices and are successful in utilizing these methods as a means of revealing social injustices, both historical and contemporary, and advocating for and contributing to societal and political change. Finally, this thesis serves to define *curandera writing*—a form of magical realism that resists the dominant culture and attempts to heal societal ills—and to present Castillo and Cisneros as practitioners of this writing that fuses the political, the spiritual, and the literary.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) held its 39<sup>th</sup> annual conference, titled “NACCS @ 40: Celebrating Scholarship and Activism.” The prime focus of this gathering was addressing the twenty-first century’s “new era of Jim Crow attacks” on Chicano/a and Latino/a populations residing in the U.S. One of the most notorious attacks on Latinos/as is Arizona’s House Bill 2281 law that bans ethnic studies from the Tucson Unified School District’s curriculum (NACCS). In an interview with Arizona’s Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal, NPR host of *Tell Me More* Michel Martin notes that the Mexican American Studies program was banned as legislators claimed its courses “encourage resentment toward a race or class of people”—in this case, White America. Huppenthal asserts that his role in drafting and enforcing this policy was motivated by various economic and educational concerns. Becoming increasingly more flustered throughout the interview, however, Huppenthal admits that he was not familiar with this policy area prior to his work on the bill, and he refutes his own assertion that the program was dangerous and required censorship due to its racialized approach to education—he uses the misnomer “racemized”—when he acknowledges that slavery cannot and should not be taught without a discussion of racial issues. Furthermore, he is unable to pinpoint a particular aspect of Tucson’s Mexican American Studies program that nurtured students’ bias “toward a race or class of people.” Cultural productions that attest to historical and contemporary oppression are viewed as combative and dangerous, and because of this, states like Arizona have issued legislation that bans minority literature from primary and

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This thesis follows the style of *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*.

secondary educational institutions. This censorship is aligned with other attacks on the Chicano/a population, such as the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and strict immigration laws. In order to counter this “new era of Jim Crow attacks,” scholars of various disciplines and other concerned citizens are writing, speaking publicly, and participating in organized activism to demand a space for the marginalized, free from persecution and inequalities, in academia, the publishing world, and American society.

It is only in the past few decades, prior to Arizona’s HB2281 law, that Chicano/a and other minority voices have entered American Studies. José David Saldívar is one scholar who asserted the legitimacy of and demanded a space for Chicano/a literature in U.S. Cultural Studies. In *Border Matters* (1997), Saldívar advocates for a more inclusive approach to cultural studies in the United States. His focus is on the lived experiences of populations residing on the geographical border that divides Mexico from the U.S. This Chicano/a, border culture has acquired its own unique identity yet is composed of various influences. Its cultural productions illustrate this hybridity, and therefore, Saldívar’s purpose in incorporating the idea of the borderlands in American Studies is to “begin to undo the militarized frontier field-Imaginary” (xii). In other words, the U.S. is a nation constructed of diverse ethnic populations, and this diversity must be reflected in its cultural scholarship. In his text, which revolutionized American Studies at the turn of the century, Saldívar cites various Chicano/a, borderland cultural productions in order to reinterpret and revise canonical U.S. history and legitimize the inclusion of border literature in U.S. Cultural Studies. In his newer work *Trans-Americanity* (2012), Saldívar explores minority experiences and “the coloniality of power” and argues for a more global approach to American Studies (xviii). By delving into literary works by writers of various

ethnicities and nationalities, he expands Americanness far beyond the limits of the Americas. Thus, Saldívar advocates for “an outernationalist approach” to U.S. Studies (x).

In their introduction to *Between Woman and Nation*, Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan, and Mino Moallem discuss the role global capitalism, neoliberal ideology, and political and cultural resistance have played in the lessening of the “totalizable possibility” of the nation-state that Saldívar discusses (5). Issues of ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, and social class, not simply nationhood, decide one’s cultural identity. Because of this, marginalized, borderland populations often resist the dominant national culture, finding refuge in “imagined communities” (6).<sup>1</sup> These communities, however, are often perceived and treated as illegitimate and with hostility.

The Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s created an imagined community to allow for the unification of Mexican Americans living in the southwestern United States and titled this space “Aztlán” after the mythical land of the Aztecs (Hames-Garcia 104). Laura Elisa Pérez describes the dominant U.S. culture’s view of this imagined nation as “unauthorized” and, therefore, illegitimate; she counters, however, that “for Chicana/os, ‘nation’ is made to signify differently, and symbolic language is made to course through alternative venues than the ones imagined, colonized, and legitimized by the order that denies oppressed peoples access to its centers of articulation” (“El Desorden” 19). Pérez argues that the creation of Aztlán provided an imaginary space in which Chicana/o identity could be formed, nurtured, and legitimized and as a site from which resistance via cultural productions emerged. Through this formulation, Chicanos/as resist and “disorder” the dominant U.S. culture.

Based on Marxist ideology, the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, termed “La Familia de la Raza,” structured itself on the model of the family. In “El Plan Espiritual de

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<sup>1</sup> “Imagined communities” is a concept coined by Benedict Anderson in his work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

Aztlán” (1969), a Chicano manifesto, the anonymous writer outlines the Movement’s intended social, political, economic, and cultural means of resistance. Cultural productions and values are depicted as contributing to and reflecting the Chicano identity and cause. Speaking specifically of the Mexican American view of communal ties, the writer states, “Our cultural values of life, family, and home will serve as a powerful weapon to defeat the gringo dollar value system and encourage the process of love and brotherhood” (“Plan Espiritual”). With this statement, the Movement places itself in opposition to American individualism and advocates for a re-imagined society based on kinship and community, a prime concern which was often the focus of Chicano literature.

Concerned chiefly with Chicano nationalism and finding solutions to socioeconomic oppression, however, the Movement did not address issues of gender and sexuality and, because of this, according to Chicana feminist scholar Sonia Lopez, lost much of its efficacy circa 1970 (qtd. in Saldivar-Hull 31). Based on the concept of brotherhood and the traditional *familia*, the Chicano Movement privileged men over women and demanded submission and obedience from the female sex. Thus, few roles were allotted to women in the Chicano Movement. In “Queer Aztlán: The Reformation of Chicano Tribe,” Cherríe Moraga explains how modeling the Movement on the traditional view of the family contributed to the oppression of Chicanas: “The preservation of the Chicano familia became the Movimiento’s mandate and within this constricted ‘familia’ structure, Chicano politicians ensured that the patriarchal father figure remained in charge both in their private and political lives. Women were, at most, allowed to serve as modern-day ‘Adelitas,’ performing the ‘three fs’ [...]: ‘feeding, fighting, and fucking’” (231). Thus, the Movement mandated female servitude and submission to her male counterparts and viewed woman’s value merely in her ability to reproduce, nurture, and support Chicano

males. It must be noted that this view of womanhood is not unique to the U.S.-Mexico border or Chicano/a culture but, rather, exists on a global scale due to eighteenth and nineteenth century European imperialism. Scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty asserts that “colonial rule operated by setting up visible, rigid, and hierarchical distinctions between the colonizers and colonized,” viewing “white men as ‘naturally’ born to rule” (59). Thus, the Victorian view of woman as holding value merely in her ability to perform the role of wife and mother was spread globally as European empires expanded.

The Chicano Movement, unlike traditional Marxist societies, did not sever its members from institutionalized religion, and due to this continued allegiance with Catholicism, Chicanas have experienced oppression deemed legitimate by the Church. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Xicanista writer and scholar, Ana Castillo, discusses the role this equation of institutionalized religion and spirituality played in the oppression of Chicanas.<sup>2</sup> Castillo asserts that the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church contributes to the suppression of female spirituality and sexuality (13). One vehicle by which Catholicism fetters Mexican and Chicana women to their mandated gender role is La Virgen de Guadalupe, the indigenous variant of the Christian icon the Virgin Mary. Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, notes that “Guadalupe has been used by the Church to mete out institutionalized oppression” on women, ethnic and national minorities, and doubly on women of color (53). The use of La Virgen as a model for Mexican and Chicana women advocates for female submission to men. She is a figure whose only power lies in her womb, from which the Son of the male God was born in human form. Her virginity contributes to the patriarchal mandate that women remain chaste and pure.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Xicanista” has been coined by Castillo to describe a Chicana feminist who is less theoretical, more practical in her methods, and highly concerned with activism. “Xicanisma” refers to the variant of Chicana feminism practiced by Xicanistas (*Massacre* 11).

Furthermore, Chicana feminists struggled to “fit in” to White feminism, which viewed women as a monolithic population and did not address issues of ethnicity, nationality, and socioeconomic class. For instance, Second Wave white feminist Betty Friedan, in her monumental work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), advocates for female access to higher education and careers, as opposed to being restrained in the home as housewives, yet fails to acknowledge that many low-income ethnic women were already in the workforce—though not in prestigious careers—and had little or no schooling or the ability to pay for an education. In her description of Second Wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, writer and activist Kristen Rowe-Finkbeiner notes that Friedan and Gloria Steinem, two of the leading feminists of the time, “through legislative action and electoral engagement championed [...] increased gender equality in the workplace, access to reproductive health care and sexuality information, and civil-rights legislation that made discrimination on the basis of sex or race illegal” (26). However, by viewing feminism as a “totalizing concept of sisterhood,” White American and European feminists silenced and continue to silence ethnic and Third World feminist voices, concerns, and their methods and sites of resistance (Saldivar-Hull 37).<sup>3</sup> Castillo notes “that most renowned white feminists have come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds” and, thus, are unaware of the experiences and concerns of working class women of color (*Massacre* 4). Because of this silencing of ethnic women, little space has been allowed for Chicana writing in the publishing world until only recently.

In response to White feminism’s failure to address the lived experiences of women of color, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa compiled and published *This Bridge Called My Back*

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<sup>3</sup> “Third World” is a label that has been critiqued by modern scholarship as a simplified term that fails to acknowledge difference within diverse populations and places non-Western societies in a subordinate position on the global scale. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, however, defends the use of this term as she recodifies it as a label that unites Third World women in order “to resist and work against [...] ‘Western feminist discourse’” (17). This project’s use of the term “Third World” is aligned with Mohanty’s recodification of the label.

(1981). This monumental anthology brought issues of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and female sexuality—both hetero- and homosexual—into feminist discourse. The text includes a variety of literary genres written by women of various ethnicities and national origins, deconstructing the traditional Western view of scholarly writing. The contributors to the book demand acknowledgement of difference within the female population and advocate for a new, more inclusive and critical approach to feminism. In their introduction to the anthology, Moraga and Anzaldúa define their project as “a catalyst, not a definitive statement on ‘Third World Feminism in the U.S.’” (xxvi). Thus, the purpose of *This Bridge Called My Back* was to provoke political and social activism through the means of Third World female solidarity and women writing women. Chicana scholars, literary writers, and activists—and hybrids of the three—in roughly the past three decades, have responded to Moraga and Anzaldúa’s call to action by contemplating and attempting to legitimize Chicana identities and their diverse lived experiences of both subjugation and resistance. Furthermore, the need to revisit and revise the historical canon of the Americas in order to excavate and reveal silenced, ethnic female experiences has been emphasized and practiced widely by Chicana feminist writers. Castillo notes that Chicana women must “become akin to archaeologists” in order to excavate the indigenous culture(s) largely excluded from educational and publishing institutions (*Massacre* 6).

One historical figure who has been “reclaimed” and “reinvented” often in Chicana scholarship and literature is Malintzín Tenepat. Renamed La Malinche in Western societies, Malintzín is known as the mother of the mestizo population (Messinger Cypess 14). Translator and lover of conquistador Hernan Cortés, Malintzín has been blamed for the betrayal of her people to the Spanish colonizers. Chicana feminists were accused of embodying the dominant Anglo culture’s value of individualism that the Chicano Movement’s politicized *familia* opposed

and, thus, were seen as hostile traitors; because of the aggression aimed at Chicana feminists, they identified with La Malinche (Gaspar de Alba 48). The Mexican culture has renamed Malintzín “la Chingada—the fucked one” to make Chicanas/os “ashamed of [their] Indian side” and to keep the female sex in a subordinate position. In this regard, La Malinche is synonymous to the biblical Eve who has been perceived and utilized as a means of female subjugation in Judeo-Christian societies (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 44, 53). Many Chicana writers have reinvented La Malinche as an early feminist who serves as a suitable model for Chicana feminism.<sup>4</sup> She has been re-envisioned as a woman with power who utilized her intellect and multilingualism to survive amid two patriarchal cultures, the imperialist Spaniards *and* Aztecs, while maintaining much of her indigenous way of life. La Malinche’s ability to accept some cultural artifacts and practices from the colonizing culture while not abandoning her native customs is one quality that allows this historical, yet mythical, woman to serve as an appropriate model for Chicana feminists, whose identities, like Malintzín’s, are constructed of various cultures, languages, and spiritualities (Messinger Cypess 24).

Claudia Sadowski-Smith, in *Border Fictions* (2008), notes that fiction allows one to utilize imagination as a means of re-envisioning historical, contemporary, and future realities (2-3). In doing so, border fiction writers critique U.S. Imperialism, both domestic and foreign, and advocate for a new, fairer and more inclusive vision of American society and U.S. Studies (6). Significant to this project, Sadowski-Smith discusses the many shared literary devices practiced by ethnic and border writers, magical realism being one of the most common aesthetic techniques. She writes that magical realism is useful for border writers as this device “draws attention to and dissolves boundaries, such as those between locally grounded narrative traditions

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<sup>4</sup> For various Chicana revisions of the historical La Malinche, see articles in *Feminism, Nation, and Myth: La Malinche*.



and the European realistic novel” (9-10). The Latino Boom in fiction, which occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, corresponding with the Chicano Movement and ubiquitous political turmoil in Latin America, came to be associated, and often equated, with magical realism (Christian 122-23).

The curandera—a Mexican American, supernatural, folk healer—often appears as a character in Chicano/a magical realist texts. This figure shares the idea of hybridity with La Malinche, presenting the curandera as a suitable model for Chicana feminists to emulate. Folk healers may be male or female; however, the focus of this project is on female curanderas as this occupation allows Chicana women agency, empowerment, and the means to provoke social change. The curandera derives her spirituality and methods of healing from various cultures, both ancient and modern. In their study of curanderismo in the Rio Grande Valley region in south Texas, anthropologists Robert T. Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira note six influences that have contributed to this hybrid spirituality: “Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals; early Arabic medicine and health practices (combined with Greek humoral medicine, revived during the Spanish Renaissance); medieval and later European witchcraft; Native American herbal lore and health practices; modern beliefs about spiritualism and psychic phenomena; and scientific medicine” (25). In addition to these influences, R.N., M.S.N., and practicing curandera Elena Avila and ethnographer Joy Parker discuss how the Transatlantic Slave Trade brought African spirituality and healing methods to the Americas, which subsequently became incorporated in curanderismo (22). Thus, the curandera utilizes multiple cultural knowledges in her attempts to heal clients and better the community. Her hybridity aligns the curandera with Chicanas and Xicanistas, specifically, as she enacts agency in the selection of practices that she perceives as beneficial. Thus, the curandera is non-exclusionary

yet critically selective. In addition to the curandera's "crossing" of national and cultural boundaries, she also transcends temporal limits through her incorporation of indigenous pre-Columbian and African faiths. This idea is important to this project's argument as the inclusion of various spiritualities serves to reject the institutionalized religion—Catholicism—that was forced on native peoples residing in Mexico and what is now the U.S.-Mexico border region by Spanish colonizers. Thus, the curandera adopts an egalitarian worldview that does not hierarchize one faith or culture but, rather, is accepting of and legitimizes various beliefs and ideologies.

The curandera views health as a state of harmony or balance. Her hybrid spirituality is "an alternative system of healthcare [that] places a strong emphasis on the social, psychological, and spiritual factors contributing to illness and poor health" (Trotter and Chavira 45). According to the curandera belief system, an individual must live in harmony with both the social and natural worlds (Avila and Parker 19). Therefore, diseases or illnesses may be caused by various factors, including social, spiritual, or supernatural imbalance. It must be noted that, although many curanderas credit their healing powers to the Christian and most often Catholic depiction of God, others view their craft as non-secular in origin (Trotter and Chavira 16, 23). This view of curanderismo as gifted from a non-secular source may be interpreted as Chicana feminist resistance against the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church. Thus, curanderismo is malleable and can be modified and adapted to suit the needs and values of the curandera herself, the geographical location of her practice, and/or the spiritual beliefs of her clients, for instance.

Although curanderas treat both men and women, many female folk healers specialize in women's issues and tend to have a majority of female patients. Luis D. Leon asserts that "women relate to [the curandera] not only as an ambassador of the sacred, but as another woman whose

experiences of the world are mediated by those things universal to women's embodied experience—especially women who occupy bronze bodies racialized in peculiar ways by North American society” (99). Elena Avila notes female-specific traumas she often encounters and attempts to help her patients overcome: rape, menopause, domestic violence, abortion, and child birth (20). Furthermore, many Mexican American women feel more comfortable visiting a curandera, which is an intimate experience, rather than an impersonal, bureaucratic doctor's office or hospital (Trotter and Chavira 44).

The belief that folk healing can be learned and practiced by all is another important aspect that allows curanderas to serve as models for Xicanistas. It is believed that certain people are blessed with a more advanced power of healing, referred to as “el don,” yet anyone can learn curandera techniques (Trotter and Chavira 16). For instance, Trotter and Chavira describe mothers of all colors as curandera-like due to their use of home remedies to treat their children's illnesses (52). In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Ana Castillo asserts that various members of Mexican American communities may diagnose and provide treatments though they are not practicing curanderas/os. Castillo provides a personal anecdote from her youth as evidence of curandera-like women serving as unofficial healers: “I experienced ‘susto’ as a result of being approached and followed on the street one night after work by a strange man. A good friend of my sister told her mother, who then sent over herbs for me to take as tea. [...] Based on traditional beliefs, our community, whether urban or rural in the United States, is close knit and gives a sense of tribal affiliations. Therefore, while I had never met the woman, her prognosis was accepted” (Castillo, *Massacre* 154-55). Any woman who desires to be of assistance to her Chicano/a community may perform as a curandera or practice curandera methods of healing. Additionally, many folk healers and believers in curanderismo assert that all humans have the

power to communicate with the deceased but may not be attuned to this ability (Castillo, *Massacre* 156). Thus, according to this belief, not only is natural healing accessible to all, but so, too, are supernatural powers. Now, in regards to Chicana feminism, this supernatural ability need not be taken literally. Communication with the dead serves as a metaphor for the Xicanista task of returning to and revising history as a means of locating and revealing women of color's oppression, power, and resistance to domination.

The key component that allows curanderas to serve as a model for Xicanistas is the social aspect of their practice, which, according to the curanderismo belief system, must be used to provoke and contribute to societal change and improvement. Curanderas, like the Chicana feminists Moraga and Anzaldúa hoped to provoke, are active in the creation of social change and the betterment of community. Curanderas tackle larger political issues, not simply folk illnesses. Leon notes in his study of a Los Angeles curandera, Dolores Multiplicadas, that one gifted with a sophisticated *don* must employ it in the assistance of others, or she or he will “suffer [...] Because the healer has received a gift from God [or a non-Christian or even non-secular source], she or he must in turn give healing to those who seek it, and in return the persons seeking healing must gift the healers and others” (101). In this regard, the curandera serves as a catalyst for continued change. In “Hybrid Spiritualities and Chicana Altar-Based Art,” Laura E. Pérez defines “hybrid spirituality” as “a ‘politicizing spirituality’” as it stresses the necessity of action, not simply faith (338). Pérez’s article focuses “on the intersections of the spiritual, the political, and art,” and this scholar views Chicana cultural productions that utilize spirituality as a means of provoking social and political change as necessary and legitimate (351).

Because of the power and respect attributed to curanderas in Mexican American cultures, folk healers have been featured as characters in Chicano/a literature for a variety of purposes.

Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1971), for instance, delineates the roles of men and women in patriarchal Chicano society, specifically in the Movement, and in the domestic sphere.

Through his depiction of the curandera Ultima's relationship with the child-protagonist Antonio, Anaya presents his curandera as Antonio's "mentor and reservoir of cultural heritage" (Nolacea Harris xi). Ultima is a seer, and her function in the novel is to help Antonio develop into a strong, determined, and capable Chicano activist (Rebolledo 84). Although Ultima is revered and respected by her fellow characters, she is attributed value merely in her role as nurturer of the Chicano male. Thus, she serves as an agent that upholds patriarchy, rather than as an empowered Chicana feminist.

More recent Chicana writers have also featured the curandera as a literary figure in their works. The children's books, Monica Brown's *Clara and the Curandera* (2011) and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado* (1993), for instance, also include curanderas. Brown's book presents the curandera woman much as Anaya does, yet rather than mentoring a male child, the wise and respected curandera nurtures and instructs a female child. Clara ultimately learns the importance of family, helping others, and education through her interaction with the curandera. Clara's lessons are very different from that of Anaya's Antonio, however. Whereas Antonio is taught that he will serve as the head of the family because of his sex, Clara is taught to be selfless and to prioritize the happiness of her family over her own. Furthermore, the means by which this female protagonist "helps others" is based on prescribed gender roles that require the female sex to complete domestic work. It is important to note that the curandera in this children's book is a nameless woman and, therefore, is presented as a figure whose abilities as a healer are significant merely as they help members in her immediate community and not as a tool of ethnic, female self-empowerment. Thus, both Clara and the

curandera in Brown's book may be read as selfless females who submit to the mandates of patriarchal society.

Anzaldua's *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado* tells the story of a female child named Prietita who meets Joaquin, a boy who has migrated to the U.S. illegally from Mexico with his mother in search of a better life. When Border Patrol agents come to inspect their neighborhood, Prietita takes Joaquin and his mother to hide at the curandera's home. In this scene, the curandera as a literary figure is politicized and resists the militarization of the border by protecting immigrants from deportation. The Border Patrol agents stop at every house except for the curandera's home, implying that her private "space"—as a place of spirituality and healing—transcends governmental intervention and is exempt from unjust searches. At the end of Anzaldúa's narrative, the curandera tells Prietita she will teach her the practices of curanderismo.

In these three books written by Anaya, Brown, and Anzaldúa, the curanderas are all depicted as teachers or mentors of the next generation of Chicanos/as. Anaya's *Ultima* nurtures Antonio's Chicanismo, and Brown's nameless curandera teaches Clara to put the needs of the community over her own. Anzaldúa's curandera, however, confirms the legitimacy of both Prietita's female self-empowerment and her desire and ability to *act* as a means of countering social injustice—protecting undocumented immigrants living in poverty and in fear of deportation and violence—and vows to instruct her in the practice of curanderismo. Thus, Prietita will serve as a Xicanista-curandera and better the lives of others and her own. It is this type of curandera, socially conscious and politicized, who may serve as a suitable model for Xicanistas. Writers Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros in *So Far from God* and *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, respectively, present curanderas as Chicana feminists who embrace their sexuality and

hybrid spirituality and have the power to provoke, and contribute to, socioeconomic and political change through their service to and interaction with their community. However, because the curanderas featured in these novels reach a tragic end—death, low socioeconomic status, isolation, and/or loss of power and respect—the writers demonstrate how focusing purely on one’s self-fulfillment ultimately limits and is detrimental to the Chicana cause. Rather, to fully embody Xicanisma, one must make her social consciousness and personal resistance practical in order to better her community and society at large.

Although the four curanderas featured in these novels—Castillo’s Doña Felicia and Caridad and Cisneros’ Exaltación Henerosa and María Sabina—fail to make their folk healing practical to the Chicana cause, each writer portrays a curandera-like, Xicanista character who effectively utilizes Chicana feminist ideas as a means of provoking and creating social justice. Sofia in *So Far from God* and Celaya in *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, by acquiring solidarity and working to create change in society, are presented as Xicanistas who succeed in making their individual resistance meaningful. Patriarchal constructions, La Malinche and La Virgen, serve as limiting, oppressive, and opposing positions for Mexican and Chicana women to occupy; Sofia and Celaya, however, resist these limited, dichotomous roles and, rather, are diverse and complex characters that embody the epitome of Xicanisma. In Castillo’s and Cisneros’ novels, Sofia and Celaya attempt to provide the “healing” of both historical and contemporary injustices enacted on women and men of all colors yet focus on issues that are especially relevant to Chicanas living in the U.S.-Mexico border region, either physically or culturally.

Through these depictions of curanderas and curandera-like women and their various levels of success in exposing injustices and working toward change, Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros, self-proclaimed Chicana feminists and practitioners of hybrid spirituality, employ the

magical realist inclusion of the supernatural curandera to critique existing ideologies, legitimize ethnic female identities, and advocate for a more active Chicana feminism or Xicanisma.

Furthermore, through writing, Castillo and Cisneros may be seen as curanderas who diagnose causes of social ills, attempt to heal the oppressed, and advocate for solidarity and social action.

Thus, Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros may be seen as practitioners of *curandera writing*, a form of magical realism that reveals historical and contemporary injustices enacted on ethnic female populations, attempts to provoke solidarity across gender, cultural, national, and temporal boundaries, and notes the necessity of social and political activism.



## CHAPTER II

### THE NEED FOR POLITICIZED CURANDERISMO:

#### THE DOWNFALL OF FOUR CURANDERAS

The practice of curanderismo allows Chicanas the power and agency necessary to demand and fight for social and political change and, in fact, asserts the need for curanderas to do so. This aspect of hybrid spirituality is not always actualized, however. Ana Castillo's Doña Felicia and Caridad and Sandra Cisneros' Exaltación Henerosa and María Sabina in *So Far from God* and *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, respectively, are curanderas who embody many feminist traits yet ultimately fail to make their curandera-feminism practical in society. It must be noted that much of the focus in Chicana scholarship has been placed on identity and the empowerment of the ethnic female Self, which was and is necessary work as the Chicano culture and Movement have historically denied Chicanas individuality. However, this must not be the ultimate goal of Chicana feminist scholarship. Rather, Xicanistas must make their feminism active in the assistance of others and the betterment of the world in order to avoid replicating the Western patriarchal ideology that values individualism and self-reliance and views the less fortunate or oppressed as failures in self-advancement. This Western view essentially allows and condones social and political injustices enacted on ethnic, national, and gendered *others* in the name of progress, and Chicana feminists who embody this viewpoint contribute, in part, to the continued repression of others. The curanderas in Castillo and Cisneros' novels are unable to find a suitable balance between the self and the world, largely due to external forces that oppress women of color. The writers do not demonize these characters for their failures but, rather, present them as models, ineffective as they may be, that provide a list of "dos and don'ts" for Chicana feminists, or Xicanistas.

Castillo's *So Far from God*, published in 1993, narrates the experiences of a family living in the village of Tome, New Mexico. Sofia is a single mother who struggles yet succeeds to provide for her four daughters Esperanza, Fe, Caridad, and La Loca. Castillo's text includes magical realist elements as a means of resisting the dominant U.S. culture. In the novel, Doña Felicia is a devoted curandera who serves the community of Tome. She attends Catholic mass and utilizes many of its artifacts and practices, yet she also resists the patriarchal structure of the Church by purchasing prayer candles from stores, rather than the Church, and creating holy water in her own home (Castillo 67). She, thus, performs the role of a male priest and supplants the necessity of visiting the church by producing sacred tools in her own home. Scholar Gail Pérez asserts that the "function of the home, then, is to provide the social space that articulates indigenous values, chiefly in the healing practices of curanderismo"—practices that do not require assistance from a cleric (59). Although Felicia does embody female empowerment in her performance of priestly work and in healing members of her community, she fails to acknowledge this power and, rather, views herself as a mere servant of the male Christian God. She instructs Caridad, "What we must remember above all is that it is He who performs the work and we are only His servants made of vulgar flesh here on this earth" (70). Doña Felicia does not seem to fully acknowledge her own gift and clearly hierarchizes Catholicism over indigenous faiths. She began her life wary of Catholicism as it failed to provide relief for the poor; however, as she grew older, she seems to have conformed to the beliefs of her traditional Chicano/a culture. The narrator states that Felicia "came to see her God not only as Lord but as a guiding light, with His retinue of saints, His army, and her as a lowly foot soldier. And she was content to do His work and bidding" (60). Here, it is explicitly noted that Felicia views her curandera practices as the work of the Catholic God, and not her own. This mentality allows complacency

in that she perceives herself as powerless or limited in power in regards to creating social change. Felicia only acts according to “His,” or God’s, will, denying herself agency and the ability to forge a new, more just society. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo asserts that women “have been forced into believing that [...] women only existed to serve man under the guise of serving Father God,” an idea Felicia clearly believes and, because of this, is unable to fully embody Xicanisma (13). In her article “Forms of Chicana Feminist Resistance,” Theresa Delgadillo asserts that Doña Felicia embodies Gloria Anzaldua’s “new meztiza consciousness” which accepts and embraces hybridity “and creates the possibility for change” (904). However, one may argue that Felicia’s embrace of Catholicism late in life distorts her hybrid spirituality and limits her possibility for provoking change.

Because of Felicia’s belief that she is a mere vessel for the Christian God to act through, her effectiveness as a curandera whose goal is to provoke societal change is limited as she fails to acknowledge her own power. When Caridad’s sister, Esperanza, is kidnapped on assignment as a journalist in Saudi Arabia, Felicia attempts to learn about her current location and predicament. Felicia “tried to divine some news through the Tarot, sticks, and a raw egg dropped in a glass, but only had vague images of Esperanza” (64). None of these methods of divination are effective for Felicia as her spirituality is predominately Catholic. Furthermore, the fact that Felicia does not overtly contribute to political and social change seems to affect her ability to “see” the prisoner of war, Esperanza. Felicia lacks access to Caridad’s sister precisely because Esperanza is an empowered, politicized female, whereas this curandera serves primarily to heal folk illnesses and lacks political motivations. When her apprentice Caridad leaves Tome for a year, Felicia attempts to find her via curandera practices but, again, is limited in her abilities. She employs multiple methods of divination, all of which fail to provide her with quality information

as to Caridad's whereabouts or reason for leaving (82). Furthermore, when her godson, Francisco, who has become obsessed with Caridad visits her, Felicia reveals confidential information about her clients and apprentice, unable to perceive that doing so is dangerous and unethical. She fails to "see" or divine that Francisco is monomaniacal and dangerous. When he leaves her home, she notices a change in him—observing that he "looked [...] about ready to fly up and circle above dying prey"—yet she fails to act, ultimately allowing the rape of one of her patients, Esmeralda, and Esmeralda's joint death with Caridad (204). Thus, Felicia limits her own abilities by viewing God as the sole source of her power, is ineffective in contributing to societal and political change, and, in essence, upholds patriarchy rather than challenging it.

Felicia, it must be noted, has been aware of the need to make one's spirituality practical as a means of bettering the world since she was a young child. Castillo writes that Felicia had been "suspicious of the religion [Catholicism] that did not help the destitute all around her despite their devotion" (60). Thus, Felicia was critical of the Catholic Church that allowed members of her community, like her mother, to starve to death. Her implicit critique of the Church is that it is not active enough in the bettering of society and, rather, preaches acceptance of social injustice and the promise of reward for suffering in the afterlife. Gloria Anzaldúa shares this idea, as stated in her work *Borderlands/La Frontera*: "the Catholic Church fails to give meaning to [...] daily acts," is unable to effectively provoke change, and, rather, "encourage[s] fear and distrust of life and the body" (59). Furthermore, Felicia's description of the purpose of curanderismo signifies her knowledge that spirituality must serve as a catalyst for social activism: "The purpose then of a cleansing is to restore peace of mind to the individual, to give him a clear head so that he will know what practical things he [or she] must do to improve his [or her] lot," such as organizing with members of his/her community in order to better social and

political realities (69). Thus, Felicia views her curandera work as a means of motivating continued change to be performed by the client who has been “healed.” Though this is Felicia’s intent, she is ultimately unable to adequately utilize her practice as a means of transforming society.

Like Doña Felicia, Caridad serves as a curandera in the village of Tome. She is a medium who falls into trances and receives prophecies or supernatural visions, and unlike her mentor, Caridad does not attribute her *don* primarily to the Christian God (46-50, 65). This young curandera falls in love with another woman, Esmeralda, at a spiritual pilgrimage, and throughout the course of the novel, has continuous interactions with her. In her insightful article “La Malinche and Post-Movement Feminism,” Amanda Nolacea Harris notes that lesbianism may be perceived as a form of Chicana resistance and comments on the hostility often aimed at Chicana lesbians, both historically in the Movement and in contemporary society: “Lesbianism in its challenge to male familial authority becomes stigmatized as anti-community, anti-Chicano, and thus malinchista” (xix). In “Queering Chicano/a Narratives,” Collette Morrow argues that Castillo counters this traditional Chicano view of lesbianism in her depiction of Caridad, representing “lesbian desire as empowering and sanctifying” and “repudiat[ing] the sexist/heterosexist belief that it is evil for women to claim their sexuality and take pleasure in it” (73). Caridad’s lesbian desire, however, does not lead her to actualize a relationship with Esmeralda but to abandon her family, community, and duties as a curandera. Her “brief meeting [with Esmeralda] overwhelmed Caridad, who [...] turned right around and went back down the hill,” and when praying is ineffective in dissolving her romantic feelings, she leaves Tome for an entire year (80-81, 86). She does not embrace her sexuality but denies and escapes from it. Scholar Michelle M. Sauer argues that when Caridad “falls in love with Esmeralda [...], the love

transforms and completes her. It does not bring pain and shame like her marriage had, nor does it interfere with her calling” (84). This assertion, however, dismisses the possibility that Caridad’s decision to abandon her family, community, and curanderismo for a year seems to imply a sense of shame in her relationship, and indeed, this abandonment does, for a time, “interfere with her calling.” Rather than serve as one who heals her community and works to create social change, Caridad opts out in favor of isolation. In her article “‘The Pleas of the Desperate’: Collective Agency versus Magical Realism,” Marta Caminero-Santangelo asserts that “Caridad’s year in hermitage” is presented in Castillo’s novel as “social isolation and even social apathy” (91). Caridad, thus, allows her obsessive, never actualized love to interfere with her purposes as a curandera.

Francisco’s obsession with and stalking of Caridad is mirrored in her own distorted relationship with Esmeralda. In his surveillance, Francisco discovers that Caridad spends nights sleeping in her truck outside the home of Esmeralda and her girlfriend, Maria (201). Caridad never reveals her feelings to Esmeralda and, rather, employs stalking as a means of being close to her. Furthermore, Caridad ensures that her desire is never voiced by limiting her conversations with Esmeralda. The narrator provides reasons for Caridad’s silence: the fact that Esmeralda was in a relationship with Maria and because Caridad had already lost many of her loved ones and could not bear to lose another (204). These excuses—though the former may be considered noble and respectful—present Caridad as a woman who chooses complacency and inappropriate means of enacting a relationship—stalking—over effective and legitimate action—voicing her desires. Castillo writes that “voice, [...] one that truly articulates [one’s] particular experience in society” is a necessary “step for [one’s] personal transformation as [a] Xicanista as well as for [the] advancement [of Chicanas/os] in society as a people” (*Massacre* 83). It is in this regard that

Caridad fails. Furthermore, the narrator asserts that Caridad had been aware of Francisco stalking her yet allowed this practice as she performed it as well (105). Because of Caridad's silence and her mentor Doña Felicia's inability to truly "see" her godson's motives, Francisco, jealous and hostile toward Caridad's love for another woman, kidnaps and likely rapes Esmeralda (207). Caridad fails as a seer or medium to recognize the danger Francisco poses, and her silence about Francisco's stalking, caused in part by her own obsession, allows this patriarchal violence.

Finally, Caridad's joint "death" with Esmeralda has been interpreted—rightfully though partially so—as a feminist act, yet it must be noted that, through this event, Caridad abandons her activist duties as a self-proclaimed curandera. Caridad drives Esmeralda to Sky City where they notice Francisco following them. Frightened, Esmeralda begins running, and Caridad runs after her, screaming; it is in this instance that Caridad and Esmeralda, holding hands, run off the mesa (210-11). The narrator notes that "there were no morbid remains of splintered bodies tossed to the ground [...] Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun's rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever" (Castillo 211). Scholar Ralph E. Rodriguez explores Castillo's use of the matrilineal Acoma culture's creation myth as a means of countering the patriarchal, biblical creation story (77-78).<sup>5</sup> This myth, in which two female humans act as world builders through the assistance of a female spirit deity who teaches them the necessities of survival, is in contrast to the Judeochristian creation story, in which the male God creates the world and produces woman *for* man and ultimately demonizes the female sex as the cause of the Fall of Man. Indeed, Castillo selects a myth that does not repress or demonize women and allows Caridad and Esmeralda to "escape" violent male oppression, personified by Francisco; however, it must be noted that Caridad's "death,"

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed summary of the matrilineal Acoma culture's creation myth, see Rodriguez.

unconventional as it may be, “constitutes the ultimate escapism” (Caminero-Santangelo 92). Caridad’s decision to accompany Esmeralda off the mesa seems impulsive and ultimately prevents her from performing the role of a Xicanista-curandera. Of course, the urgency of the situation does not allow significant time for contemplation, yet Caridad, who never gained the courage to tell Esmeralda how she felt, literally “jumps” to this decision, performing a feeble attempt at solidarity. She does, indeed, seemingly provide support for Esmeralda; however, this support and, perhaps, “healing” is merely enacted on one woman, rather than on various members of society, as mandated by the principles of curanderismo. A curandera need not be entirely selfless, yet she must participate in the “negotiat [ion] [of] large-scale social changes for the community” (Morrow 68). In this regard, Caridad fails, largely due to her doubt in her own female power, both as a sexual being and as a curandera.

The curanderas in Castillo’s novel may be interpreted as women who are passive and fail to enact change in society as they do not fully acknowledge their own female powers. Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo or Puro Cuento* relates the transnational, hybrid experiences of narrator-protagonist Celaya Reyes and her extended family. Celaya narrates the silenced histories of both her family members and the Chicano/a and Mexican populations. In this novel, curanderas Exaltación Henerosa and María Sabina seem aware of their powers, both supernatural and practical; however, their strength is ultimately inefficient in provoking social change as well, and in fact, both women are ultimately perceived as and limited to the role of Malinche-figures—traitors to their people. Exaltación Henerosa is a healer whose community of San Mateo del Mar Vivo attributes her power and knowledge of herbal remedies to “witchcraft”; the narrator asserts, however, that Exaltación’s “magic was that she didn’t care to put a man at the center of her life” (172). She is described as “a woman of a woman [...] a woman ferocious,” who “knew the merit



of attracting attention” and marketing in order to prosper from selling and bartering goods (168-69). Exaltación refuses to perform the submissive, silent, and virginal role deemed legitimate for women by patriarchal society, specifically the Catholic Church in its image of the Virgin Mary as a suitable model for the female sex to emulate. Chicana feminist theorist Emma Pérez notes that Mexican feminism from the early twentieth century—the time in which this portion of the novel takes place—was known as “Marianismo” and merely “empowered women in the household” (222-23). The goal of this feminism was to “improve a wife morally and intellectually for her husband and the nation” (Pérez 225). Exaltación, however, rejects the role of wife, restricted to the domestic sphere, and, in this regard and in her economic and emotional independence, may be perceived as a curandera-feminist.

María Sabina similarly is depicted as a woman who is aware of her power. María Sabina is the healer Narciso visits after being heartbroken by Exaltación. Cisneros fictionalizes this historical curandera who lived in Oaxaca and describes her as highly spiritual and wise. The narrator notes that, even at a young age, she had “a reputation as a shamaness” (Cisneros 192). Furthermore, although she lives in poverty, María is presented, like Exaltación, as an independent, self-sufficient woman: she is pregnant and has many children, but no man is present in her home (193). She is not dependent on a male to support herself and her children financially. Furthermore, the fact that a husband is not mentioned signifies her sexual freedom and refusal to submit to the role of a chaste, submissive woman. When Narciso first encounters María, she is supernaturally aware of his purpose for meeting with her, even going as far as describing Exaltación’s iguana headdress. María’s cure, however, is more practical than supernatural; she tells him that if he wants Exaltación to return to him, he must “forget her [...] The more you let someone go, the more they fly back to you. The more you cage them, the more they try to

escape” (194). In this encounter with Narciso, María is presented as a wise healer who is capable of “treating” illnesses “that are [not] recognized [...] in Western medicine,” such as Narciso’s “broken heart” (Avila and Parker 41). Furthermore, it is important to note that María is described as a “witch woman” (193). A witch—or “bruja” in Spanish—is often used synonymously to refer to a curandera; however, many view these roles as dichotomous. Rebolledo notes the distinction between the two terms: “In general, the curandera/partera is the positive side—a woman whose life is devoted to healing, curing, helping— [...] attributes commonly associated with the Virgin Mary. The other side, the bruja, is more problematic [...] because the curandera is always also the witch; that is, she has the power to become one, but she may never choose to do so” (83). Cisneros, however, reclaims the term “witch,” typically assigned solely to practitioners of “black magic,” and uses it to describe a woman of color with power. María and Exaltación are both described as “witch women” as they are attuned to their powers as healers; both curanderas, however, fail in the ultimate goal of curanderismo: to transform the world. Rather, they use their abilities merely for self-fulfillment and, thus, embody U.S. individualism which prioritizes the Self over society.<sup>6</sup>

While Exaltación heals the narrator’s grandfather Narciso and other members of her community, the narration does not provide mention of this curandera provoking or participating in social or political change. Narciso first visits Exaltación because of an eye infection (Cisneros 171). She is successful in this healing, yet this treatment is not meaningful in society and, therefore, lacks value as a curandera-feminist act. In Tey Diana Rebolledo’s analysis of the curandera figure in Chicana literature, she writes that the curandera “has the capacity to fight

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Good Society*, writers Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton assert that both the U.S. and other societies would benefit in myriad ways if Western individualism is questioned and revised, ultimately allowing the creation of a fairer, more harmonious world. Thus, the writers advocate “an American public philosophy less trapped in the clichés of rugged individualism and more open to an invigorating, fulfilling sense of social responsibility” (15).

social evils [...] She fulfills our desires to seek justice against those perceived as more powerful” (88). Exaltación does not provoke change in society, however, but merely Narciso’s obsession, implying that, though she utilizes feminist practices, she does so simply for her own benefit and enjoyment—either economic or sexual—rather than as a means of bettering the lives of others. Thus, Exaltación seems incapable of finding a suitable balance between the interests of the individual and of society.

Exaltación’s sexuality—both her heterosexuality and lesbianism—presents this character as a Chicana feminist. In her relationship with Narciso, Exaltación performs the role traditionally assigned to men—sexually driven and indifferent—while Narciso plays the part of the doting, emotional female. Exaltación is late to meet Narciso at the circus, and after nervously and eagerly awaiting her arrival, he sees her and “came running up to her like a child” (Cisneros 177). He is mesmerized by and obsessed with Exaltación because of her brazen female sexuality and independence, and his running after her is a physical embodiment of Narciso’s child-like love for her. Furthermore, she is aware that she may utilize her sexuality as a means of power; after leaving the circus, Exaltación has sex with Narciso in order to persuade him to leave her home: “He made a pest of himself until the only way she could get rid of him was by inviting him in, servicing him haphazardly, and then getting him to leave only by promising she’d see him again” the following day (178). Although embracing female sexuality may be perceived as Chicana resistance, it must be noted that Exaltación’s use of sex in this instance seems forced; she does not want to have sexual intercourse with Narciso but does, so he will leave her home peacefully, allowing her to run off with Pánfila Palafox, a female singer she fell in love with at the circus (178-79).

Cheryl Clarke, in “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” claims, “For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture [...] is an act of resistance” (128). Thus, Exaltación’s relationship with Pánfila may be interpreted as Chicana resistance against the traditional *familia* view in the Chicano culture that demands female heterosexuality. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality” (41). It must be noted, however, that, in pursuing this love affair—essentially prioritizing self-fulfillment over social and political concern—Exaltación abandons her duties as a curandera and fails to serve as a catalyst for societal change. Castillo comments on the common occurrence of Mexican and Chicana lesbian women being driven to abandon an aspect of their identity in order to survive: “The Mexican-Catholic lesbian, rejected by family and ostracized by her immediate community, may find it painful and even impossible to acknowledge a direct connection between her faith and the rejection she suffers as a woman who loves women because Catholicism is so much a part of her sense of self,” whether she practices curanderismo or not (*Massacre* 139). Exaltación perhaps felt forced to flee from her community due to her lesbian relationship with Pánfila; however, the fact remains that, in so doing, she abandons her role as a curandera who contributes to social change.

Because Exaltación abandons Narciso and her community for another woman, she is limited to the role of and perceived as a Malinche-figure until she is “reclaimed” and “revised” by Celaya.<sup>7</sup> The first alignment between this fictional curandera and the historical Malintzín Tenepat is subtle; Cisneros writes that Exaltación was as “wide-waisted as the Tula tree Cortés is

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<sup>7</sup> Celaya’s reclaiming and revision of Exaltación-as-Malinche will be explored in-depth in this project’s discussion of successful curandera-like Xicanistas. See Chapter 2.

said to have slept under” (168). This statement is interesting as it both presents her as synonymous with La Malinche and portrays her as a woman who used sex in order to survive. This statement is made in Exaltación’s early introduction, yet the depiction of her as Malinche-like continues throughout the novel. After reuniting with his wife, Narciso dreams of Exaltación, and his view of her as guilty of betrayal and worthy of hostility is clearly presented in his nightmare:

—You betray me every night, he heard himself tell her.

—Betray you? she said laughing. —You’re married! [...]

Then he tried to strangle her, but when he reached for her she turned into a fish and slipped through his fingers. (202)

In his dream, Narciso accuses Exaltación of treachery for abandoning him—a Mexican male—for a woman, much as La Malinche has been blamed for “selling out” her people to her lover and employer Hernan Cortés (Messinger Cypess 14). Narciso’s view of Exaltación as a *malinchista* is derived purely from his personal relationship with her; however, his hostility serves as a metaphor for Exaltación’s community’s probable resentment aimed at her due to the abandonment of her healing practice in San Mateo Del Vivo.

Although María Sabina was revered and respected as a healer in her early life, she ultimately suffers hostility and poverty and is perceived as a Malinche-figure who betrayed her people to American and European “invaders.” These outsiders visited María to purchase and experiment with Ndijixito, “magic mushrooms [...] which took one to trippier trips, it was said, than LSD” (Cisneros 195). María profited off the sale of indigenous healing methods, a practice that may be perceived as a betrayal of her spirituality and role as a healer. Curanderismo was traditionally based on a relationship of gifting. Luis D. Leon states that conventionally “the gift

that seekers would offer to healers was never fixed or predetermined; it was at the discretion of the seeker and conformed to whatever means he or she possessed” (116). As global capitalism has emerged, however, gifting as a means of payment has been replaced with “the rationale of capitalist ideology,” a rationale María Sabina clearly adopts (116).

Furthermore, it seems that achieving fame and respect was another driving force that contributed to María selling the mushrooms to outsiders. The narrator notes various historical and cultural icons that went to Oaxaca in the 1960s and 1970s to consume these hallucinogens, including “the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, [and] Bob Dylan” (195). Furthermore, countless other wealthy and powerful Americans and Europeans visited her to purchase a traditional cure for recreational drug use. In María’s experience with these outsiders, she is no longer limited merely to the mountains of Oaxaca but achieves power and fame on a global scale. It must be noted, however, that this achieved authority is not made practical as a means of bettering the world but merely for María Sabina’s own self-fulfillment. Because of her self-interest, María’s fame and the reverence originally attributed to her by locals evolves into infamy which ultimately leads to devastation for this curandera. The narrator states, “María became infamously famous, so famous that the sister of a Mexican president would come and visit her, and everyone would have their picture taken beside her as if she were a holy relic, and restaurants named ‘María Sabina’ [...] would profit from her celebrity” (195). Just as this curandera commodified traditional cures, she, herself, becomes a commodity. Although she is described as a “holy relic,” she is not treated this way, but rather as an objectified woman who lacks agency and merely serves as a tourist attraction with which one can be photographed. María’s fame is not positive, and she “die[s] penniless” when “everyone from professors to writers and politicians to television crews,

absolutely everyone ran off” (195). Her ultimate poverty seems a punishment for her distorted motives—the acquisition of wealth and renown—in sharing Ndjixito with outsiders.

As a curandera, María not only fails to contribute to or provoke social or political change, but she, in fact, also allows, or perhaps causes, atrocities to occur in her homeland. María is blamed for the destruction caused by the foreigners who commodified and exploited indigenous healing methods: “Some leapt from the windows of hotels [...], some became a public nuisance [...], some chased each other around the zócalo bandstand naked [...], and some camping carelessly in the woods caused a terrible fire that burned thousands of acres of forests and fields and threatened half a dozen Indian villages, and all because that María Sabina gave those fools the mushrooms” (195). Because of María’s actions, indigenous populations and their homes are put in danger. She is also partially responsible for the destruction of the land, a grave environmental injustice. Furthermore, the narrator notes that, because this curandera sold Ndjixito to foreigners who perceived these mushrooms as recreational drugs, rather than as tools for healing, María lost much of her powers, “until finally she was acabada, finished, worn, done” (195). She becomes a Malinche-figure who has betrayed her people and homeland, causing environmental and social problems, and dies in poverty, no longer a respected healer.

The four curanderas mentioned in Castillo and Cisneros’ novels are not entirely responsible for their ineffectiveness in making their curandera feminism practical in society. They are oppressed on multiple fronts and nurtured in societies that view women of color as inferior and powerless. Nevertheless, they fail as curandera-feminists as they are unable to utilize their powers to create social change. *So Far from God*, published in 1993, pre-NAFTA, is less concerned with capitalism, migration, and the Western commodification of minority cultures than Cisneros’ novel which was published in 2002. Castillo’s curanderas—Doña Felicia and

Caridad—fail to make their curanderismo meaningful in society largely due to the force the patriarchal Catholic Church has in Chicana women’s lives: Felicia hierarchizes Catholicism in her practice, and Caridad flees from her predominately Catholic society as it is hostile toward her lesbianism. In *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, Exaltación, like Caridad, abandons her community because of her love for a woman, yet she, unlike Castillo’s curandera, actualizes this relationship. Furthermore, Cisneros’ inclusion of the historical María Sabina is significant as this curandera’s failure is derived from Western society’s presence in Mexico due to global capitalism and the resultant commodification and exploitation of indigenous Mexican culture. It must be noted that these four curanderas do not acquire meaningful solidarity with multiple members of their community or with other cultures. Caridad and Exaltación may be said to offer support to and feel a sense of harmony with Esmeralda and Pánfila, respectively; however, uniting with one person is limited, and ultimately futile, in affecting social change. The curanderas in these novels, though Chicana feminists in many regards, fall short in improving their societies. Female empowerment should not be a Xicanista’s ultimate goal, but rather, she must utilize her acquired voice and authority in order to “heal” society and improve the world. This is a necessary task in order for Xicanistas to avoid reproducing the Western indifference to the oppression of ethnic, gendered, national, and sexual *others*.



### CHAPTER III

#### CURANDERA-LIKE WOMEN AS XICANISTAS

Although the four curanderas in *So Far from God* and *Caramelo or Puro Cuento* are ultimately unable to make their hybrid spirituality practical in society, Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros provide empowered curandera-like characters in their novels that succeed in raising social awareness, acquiring solidarity, and provoking and contributing to societal and political change. Castillo's Sofia, or Sofí, is the single parent of four girls for two decades after being abandoned by her husband. She is self-sufficient, nurturing, and independent and uses these feminist qualities to reveal social injustices and advocate for change. Cisneros' narrator-protagonist Celaya, referred to also by her nickname Lala, struggles to come to terms with her identity as a young transnational Chicana yet, in the process, discovers a suitable means of "healing" the split within herself, her family, and the Chicana/o community at large: storytelling. Whereas Doña Felicia, Caridad, Exaltación Henerosa, and María Sabina fail to make their curandera-feminism meaningful in society, Xicanistas Sofia and Celaya succeed.

Before discussing the means Sofia utilizes to better society, it is important to discuss Castillo's characterization of this fictional woman that allows her to be perceived as a curandera-like feminist, namely as capable of healing, supernaturally inclined, self-sufficient, and not emotionally dependant on or defined by a man. Firstly, throughout *So Far from God*, Sofia is depicted as a woman who heals or attempts to heal. When her daughter Fe is abandoned by her fiancé Tom via a letter and screams endlessly, Sofia attempts to care for her: "Sofi shook her daughter hard, but when that didn't silence Fe, she gave her a good slap as she had seen people do on T.V. lots of times" (30). When this is ineffective, Sofi decides to visit Tom and demands he speak with Fe (31). Furthermore, after Caridad's attack, "Sofia spoon-fed her and took care of

all her needs until Caridad was strong enough to get up and do things on her own” (45). When her youngest daughter Loca mysteriously contracts HIV and there is no possibility of modern medicine curing her, Sofi allows and participates in a psychic surgery led by Dr. Tolentino and his wife, known as “Mrs. Doctor.” The narrator notes that Dr. Tolentino “took [Loca’s] hand in his, in his other hand he held his wife’s, and Sofi held his wife’s hand and Loca’s, all connected [...] Then they closed their eyes and prayed” before the unconventional procedure begins (Castillo 228). Desperate to heal her daughter, even by untested, supernatural means, Sofia continues her work as a pseudo-curandera. In their discussion of Mexican American housewives who utilize home remedies as a means of healing their children, Trotter and Chavira assert, “This type of healing is probably the most common form in all cultures, and, as with other kinds of healing systems, some people show a special aptitude for it. They gain enough knowledge of the subject to be considered especially good at healing, perhaps even experts, by their circle of acquaintances” (51-52). Although Sofia is unable to cure all her daughters’ woes and illnesses, she is nurturing and continuously attempts to heal her wronged children, a practice that is ultimately transferred to society at large in her activist work.

In addition to her desire and power to “heal,” Sofia is also presented as curandera-like because of her supernatural abilities. She is able to “see” her deceased daughter Esperanza, “and once [...] 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). Death has not severed Sofi’s access to her daughter. Furthermore, this magical realist occurrence is significant as it portrays the curandera belief that healing, or comforting, can be enacted through supernatural powers. Additionally, Sofia receives a psychic “vision” through unconventional means: “And though no one would have ever thought of the television as any kind of psychic

vehicle, one Sunday evening while Loca was staring at one of those ‘news magazine’ shows, Sofi got a premonition from it, and with a deep sigh, resigned herself to the fact that she was going to die alone” (Castillo 219). What Sofia “saw” is not noted in the narration; however, what she learned from this vision is provided: she will spend the remainder of her life without family, a prophecy that is actualized when her youngest daughter dies at the end of the novel. Through these supernatural occurrences, Sofi embodies *curanderismo* although she does not identify herself as a practicing *curandera*. Castillo asserts, “In terms of *curanderismo*, magic is directly related to the supernatural realm of our reality. I use the term supernatural loosely because supernatural implies a probable reality beyond natural forces. However, for *curanderas* the supernatural *is* a reality based on the natural forces of the universe” (Massacre 155). To Sofia, her otherworldly experiences and visions are authentic; they are not distinct from the reality of her lived experience, and because of this, she may be seen as a *curandera*-like character.

Sofia is also a self-sufficient business owner of a *carnecería*, or butcher shop, presenting her as a feminist who is economically independent, much like the *curanderas* mentioned in both Castillo and Cisneros’ novels. The narrator notes that “Sofi single-handedly ran the *Carne Buena Carnecería* she inherited from her parents. She raised most of the livestock that she herself (with the help of La Loca) butchered for the store, managed all its finances, and ran the house to boot” (28). Sofia has found a balance between work and family. She provides for herself and her children by running her own shop yet still finds time to be a mother and caretaker to her four daughters. Furthermore, it is important to note that Loca assists Sofi with her business. In this partnership, Sofi and Loca acquire female solidarity and work together to support the family. Chandra Talpade Mohanty “define[s] solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships,” and Sofia and Loca’s relationship

is clearly presented in this manner, not one merely based on genetics (7). Furthermore, even when Sofi's husband Domingo returns and she is no longer alone, she must still perform as a single-mother as Domingo does not contribute to the household income (40). In an argument with Domingo, Sofi yells, "While you were gone [...] gambling your soul away [...] I have been hanging the rumps of pigs and lambs and getting arthritis from the freezer and praying to God to give me strength to do the best by my girls alone" (111). Economic survival has been difficult for Sofia and has required backbreaking labor. Sofi has compromised her health and carried out work—the butchering of animals—that most Americans have never seen conducted or would ever wish to complete. A capable, hardworking, devoted mother, Sofia supports herself and her daughters, presenting herself an independent, self-sufficient Chicana feminist, like the *curanderas* depicted in this novel. Sofia, unlike Doña Felicia and Caridad, however, is ultimately successful in making her feminism, derived from hybrid spirituality, meaningful in society.

In addition to not requiring a man for economic reasons, Sofia is also not emotionally dependent on Domingo, nor does she define herself merely as "his wife." She, unlike Felicia, is fully aware of her ability to achieve female power. The narrator describes Sofi and Domingo's early relationship and implies that Sofia was fooled by his charm and specifically by his "acting, even if it wasn't on stage" and "magic tricks" (104-05). Enduring years of hardship as a single mother, however, she is no longer the "silly Sofi" of her youth. Rather, she has abandoned the belief that a woman needs a man in order to live a happy and fulfilled life. Upon his return, Sofia perceives him merely "like an old chair in the corner of the room or a table passed on from one generation to the next that is just there for the purpose of eating off. They slept not only in separate beds but in separate rooms, and hardly shared a meal together" (109). Although Sofi accepts Domingo back into her home, she did so not with the intent that she would perform the

role of the obedient, loving wife. A key event occurs which allows Sofia to fully perceive herself as an emotionally strong woman, independent from Domingo: she remembers “how back in those early days Domingo was little by little betting away the land she had inherited [...] and finally she couldn’t take no more and gave him his walking papers. Just like that she said, ‘Go, hombre, before you leave us all out on the street!’” (214). This memory allows Sofi to revise her own personal history. Delgadillo writes, “The fact that this ‘one little detail’ was ‘forgotten’ by Sofi and everybody else in the community suggests that there were no other roles for women beyond wife/mother or abandoned wife/mother” (910). Sofia, however, chooses to no longer perform the role of “silly Sofi,” nor the powerless “la Abandonada,” the abandoned (215). Instead, she becomes a woman with agency who acknowledges that she made wise decisions for the betterment of her family. The first time Sofi threw Domingo out of her home, she did not divorce him due to the Catholic Church’s view of this practice as immoral; however, when Domingo loses the home that had been in Sofi’s family for generations, she has had enough and finally serves him divorce papers. She is no longer afraid of being excommunicated from the Catholic Church or of “her mother’s disapproval” (215-18). This decision to divorce Domingo further presents Sofia as curandera-like as she severs herself from Catholic edicts that she views as oppressive and inapplicable to her everyday life.

Many of Sofi’s curandera-like traits are shared by the curanderas in both Castillo and Cisneros’ novels; what distinguishes her from these other characters, however, is that Sofia acquires solidarity with others and consequently contributes to the bettering of her immediate community and reveals larger social and political injustices through her participation in organized activism. Sofia adapts her methods of caring for her daughters, both emotionally and financially, to the community at large, viewing her fellow townspeople as extended family

members who will all contribute to the livelihood of Tome and its inhabitants.<sup>8</sup> When she first tells her *comadre*, a neighbor and friend, that she wants to become mayor and organize the villagers to create change, Sofi is surprised that her *comadre* is not open to the idea; however, once they acknowledge their shared oppression—the loss of their family’s land to outsiders—Sofi’s neighbor becomes excited about working together to make changes in Tome (Castillo 139).<sup>9</sup> Next, Sofi and her *comadre* “started their campaign by going around for months talking to neighbors, to fellow parishioners, people at the schools, at the local Y, and other places to get ideas and help; and little by little, people began to respond to Sofi’s ‘campaign,’ which they did not see as a mayoral one so much as one to rescue Tome” (Castillo 146). Curandera-like Sofi is successful in enlisting others to both help plan and participate in “community improvement” (138). In so doing, she “becomes a public voice” that inspires and motivates all to contribute to her cause that is not merely personal, though it derived from her domestic experiences, but also social (Sauer 77). Furthermore, the cooperatives the town creates are modeled after another village’s, implying a sense of community with populations outside of Tome.<sup>10</sup> The narrator notes that acquiring solidarity was not simple for Sofi, and she faced much skepticism. Yet, “it became a debate of either everyone doing it all together or nobody doing anything at all,” and the townspeople agree to all serve as contributors to the betterment of their community (146).

Because of Sofi’s months of hard work convincing others to work together to create a better life

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<sup>8</sup> Additionally, scholar Roland Walter notes that Sofi is motivated to participate in social action by her daughters—“La Loca’s and Caridad’s faith in an expanded reality, Esperanza’s rebellious restiveness, and Fe’s suicidal materialist attitude”—and their early deaths caused by various oppressive forces—namely pandemic disease, male violence, war, and chemical contamination, respectively (90).

<sup>9</sup> “Comadre” is a Spanish word that translates to “co-mother” in English and is a term used to refer to the godmother of one’s child. It is often utilized as a term of endearment for a female friend or sister, whether or not she serves as an official godmother. The fact that Sofia first shares her plan with her *comadre* is significant as this relationship implies a sense of female solidarity in Chicana/o and Mexican cultures.

<sup>10</sup> Additionally, cooperatives, or co-ops, are stores or organizations in which members each share ownership, again reinforcing the idea of community solidarity.

for the present and future generations residing in Tome, the community bands together and reclaims ownership of the town and their own livelihoods.

Sofi's decision to organize her community and make changes in Tome derives from her domestic experiences. One day, she acknowledges that she cannot count on Domingo to fix what their broken or damaged items and that she will have to find a way to do it herself (130, 142). In "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers," Gloria Anzaldúa reflects on this idea that Chicana feminists must become active in the betterment of one's own life: "It's too easy, blaming it all on the white man or white feminists or society or on our own parents. What we say and what we do ultimately comes back to us, so let us own our responsibility, place it in our own hands and carry it with dignity and strength. No one's going to do my shitwork, I pick up after myself" (171). As Xicanisma mandates, Sofi transfers this idea to the betterment of the community. Sofi, in solidarity with the townspeople, works to fix what needs fixing in Tome. Firstly, they establish "a sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise, 'Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative'" to develop "some form of economic self-sufficiency" in the town (146). Landowners who were no longer capable of working their land due to a lack of necessary funds sold or bartered it for the co-op's use and, in exchange, received services, such as the reparation of a variety of items and appliances (146-47). Involving everyone in the co-op in some regard allowed for the town's unemployment rate to drop. Through Sofi's efforts, her townspeople are given work they can complete in order to support their families and improve their lives. The co-op, however, does face hardships, such as the loss of many sheep, but the community's shared dream allows them to continue their shared efforts until they attain economic stability and social justice. The success of Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative leads Sofi to sell her *carnicería* in shares to her neighbors and friends as a food co-op as well. Furthermore, once the co-ops were

“fairly secure, they also established a low-interest loan fund for their members” for small-business start-up funds (148). Inspired by this success in economic stability, the townspeople begin addressing other social issues, such as Tome’s drug problem and the contamination of meat and vegetables by big corporations. In response to these problems, the town creates a SWAT team to address issues with drugs and begins producing hormone-free meat and growing organic produce (147-48). Even Domingo learns from Sofi’s example. He goes to Chimayo to build the house he said he would for Caridad. Because he has little funds to do so, he barter for assistance, offering “a cold beer in exchange” for help (149). Because of Sofi’s desire to unite her friends and neighbors in order to fix what needed fixing—both in her home and in Tome—change is created, and lives are improved.

In addition to these improvements that bettered the lives of all Tome’s villagers, many changes are especially beneficial for much of the Chicana population. The narrator notes that “the second year after the start of the sheep-grazing enterprise a core group of twelve women began the wool-weaving cooperative” (147). This female-owned co-op ultimately allows more than twenty women to provide for themselves and their families financially. Furthermore, this joint business allows women to bring their children to work. Although Sofi’s plan affects male and female, old and young, citizens, the wool-weaving co-op allows for the bettering of Chicana lives, specifically single mothers who, otherwise, would struggle to support their families. They are able to save money that they would have had to spend on daycare or may have even prevented them from working—as the cost of childcare often exceeds the pay a woman of color receives at a minimum wage job. Furthermore, the women who are co-owners in the wool-weaving enterprise are given the opportunity to earn degrees at the community college, as an arrangement between the co-op and school was made: “Due to the wide range of skills they



learned from running their own business, those who were interested could work for college credit and potentially earn an associate's degree in business or in fine arts. And no years of cleaning the houses of [the rich] or serving tables in restaurants could ever get them that!" (147). These women receive an opportunity perhaps unimaginable prior to Sofi's work to improve her community. They become college-educated in programs that are meaningful to their lived experiences. They learn skills that will help them better contribute to their town or to provide a foundation for more learning and job advancement in an area outside of Tome. Latin American and Women's Studies scholar Kelli Lyon Johnson asserts that these "women participate in their own world building and their own autonomy," an occurrence allowable because of curandera-like Sofia's desire and ability to organize members of her community in order to enact change (56).

Furthermore, Sofia's social activism is not limited merely to her village and the Chicana/o culture; she also addresses political issues that extend far beyond Tome and affect populations of various ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and nationalities. Sofi unites with the other villagers of Tome to perform the Stations of the Cross in the Holy Friday Procession. They, however, revise this Catholic ritual by assigning a political or social injustice to each of the stations, thus politicizing a traditional religious event.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, the procession may be interpreted as the work of hybrid spirituality or curanderismo and addresses issues of poverty and environmental injustice. The music performed at the pageant is not from the traditional liturgy but rather concerns low-income "workers and women strikers" (241). Furthermore, Jesus bearing his cross is aligned with the ubiquitous poverty experienced by "most of the Native and hispano families throughout the land" (242). This implies that the burden of many minority populations

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<sup>11</sup> The Stations of the Cross is a reenactment of Jesus Christ's last hours prior to his crucifixion. They are often depicted in sculptural form at Catholic Churches or performed theatrically at Holy Friday Processions.

residing in the United States is unfair access to education and high-paying jobs. Additionally, the villagers expose the need for organized social activism by assigning the loss of jobs to the station in which Simon helps Jesus carry the cross. The traditional station of the cross symbolizes compassion as a precursor to solidarity, and by aligning this to unemployment, the participants in the procession assert that the poor must unite in order to demand and work toward change. Thus, “the necessity for activism [...] is a matter of [economic] survival” (Walter 91). Although curandera Doña Felicia acknowledges at an early age that the Catholic Church of her community did little to improve the lives of the poor, she fails to address this issue meaningfully, whereas Sofia draws attention to this social problem by organizing the procession and demanding that the realities of poverty be exposed.

In addition to these socioeconomic injustices addressed in the procession, the villagers also reveal environmental oppression. In “La Llorona and a Call for Environmental Justice in the Borderlands,” Barbara J. Cook comments extensively on Castillo’s discussion of environmental injustice in the novel with a specific focus on Fe, one of Sofia’s daughters who dies of cancer because of her work with deadly chemicals at Acme International (129-30). In response to Fe’s unjust death, Sofi and many other villagers, replacing the traditional, submissive Virgin Mary who meets Jesus as he carries his cross, “carried photographs of their loved ones who died due to toxic exposure hung around the necks like scapulars” (241). Furthermore, the narrator notes, “At each station along their route, the crowd stopped and prayed and people spoke on the many things that were killing their land and turning the people of those lands into an endangered species” (241-42). It is important to note the relation between spirituality and politics in this scene; prayer and political speeches are woven together as a means of exposing oppression and provoking social change. Various other environmental issues are noted in the procession as well:

“radioactive waste in the sewer,” “uranium contamination” in Navajo reservations, the pollution of drinking water, “nuclear power plants,” and “deadly pesticides” sprayed on food, animals, and human beings (241-43). These governmentally sanctioned practices that cause illness, death, and birth defects affect not only Chicanas/os but all populations; however, environmental injustices tend to be enacted mostly on ethnic minorities, specifically ethnic female populations (Mohanty 232, 234). By addressing these issues at the Holy Friday Procession, Sofi and the other members of her community make their spirituality practical as a means of demanding acknowledgement of environmental oppression in order to create social and political change.

It is important to note that Tome’s revision of the Holy Friday Procession gives voice to minority populations living in poverty whose plights are often silenced or simplified as one’s individual failure to achieve the American Dream—this simplification fails to acknowledge that not all populations are given the same opportunities in the U.S. Furthermore, various ethnicities are represented at the procession (242-43). This solidarity despite ethnic diversity is one of curandera-like Sofia’s greatest Xicanista achievements. By sharing knowledge, experiences, and effort across racial and national boundaries, change can occur in the world. Castillo’s depiction of Sofia asserts that spirituality may serve as a catalyst for political change. When Sofia first tells her comadre about her plan, the comadre accused her of having “always had a lot of [...] imagination”; to which, Sofi responds, “It’s not ‘imagination’ that I’ve always had, comadre, it’s *faith!* Faith has kept me going” (137-38). It is Sofi’s politicized hybrid spirituality that enabled her to survive and overcome innumerable hardships as a single mother of color and which she utilizes as a foundation to create change in society.

In *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, Cisneros’ narrator-protagonist, Celaya/Lala, may be interpreted as curandera-like as she is capable of healing through practical and supernatural

means. She employs storytelling as a method for healing and reveals silenced oppressions that have affected her family and culture, specifically, yet also society at large. For instance, Celaya addresses the fact that her father Inocencio has never openly acknowledged his illegitimate daughter Candelaria by including her half-sister in their family's history. This inclusion is enacted to provide a sense of healing to multiple members of the family, including Celaya herself. Candelaria is the illegitimate daughter of Inocencio and the washerwoman Amparo who works for Celaya's grandmother in Mexico City. Celaya's cousin Antonieta Araceli refers to the washerwoman's daughter as "an Indian" and views this label as evidence that Lala should not play with her (36). This introduces Celaya to the issue of racial discrimination within the Mexican culture that views indigenous populations as inferior. Candelaria is dark-skinned, "the color of a caramelo," a caramel candy (Cisneros 34). She does not share the light skin of Celaya's father and grandmother, and it is because of this and due to her affection for Candelaria that the narrator-protagonist revises her view of beauty to also include indigenous characteristics (34-35). In this regard, Celaya has healed a split within herself that rejected the Indian aspect of her culture and identity, and because of this, she may be seen as curandera-like due to curanderismo's acceptance and embrace of the indigenous (Avila and Parker 28-33).

Most importantly, Celaya includes Candelaria in her family narrative to correct her father's unjust abandonment of his eldest daughter, serving as a sort of curandera whose power allows her the agency to heal others' wrongs. It is through intuition that Celaya first realizes that Candelaria is her half-sister; observing her at the beach, Lala notes, "When she turns her head squinting that squint, it's then I know. Without knowing I know" (78). Her ability to "see" this truth when other members of her family are unable to further presents her as curandera-like. One evening, her father tells her he has something to admit, but rather than confess his abandonment

of Candelaria, Inocencio tells his daughter that his mother conceived him when she was unmarried (426-27). Celaya is momentarily angry that her father fails to admit his own wrong, viewing him as a hypocrite, yet this experience ultimately allows her to realize her role as a healer-storyteller: “Maybe it’s my job to separate the strands and knot the words together for everyone who can’t say them, and make it all right in the end. This is what I’m thinking” (428). In this passage, Celaya acknowledges her own power as a curandera-like healer, as one who can correct wrongs that others are unable to resolve. By weaving her family’s stories like the weaving of a rebozo, Lala provides redemption for her father and the healing of her own hostility because of her father’s failure to parent all his children. In her article on the novel, Heather Alumbaugh presents Celaya as a “narrative coyote” who “smuggles [...] her own family history from the past to the present, from Mexico to the US” and “finally becomes aware of the power of the storyteller as a border crosser who excavates, reclaims, and preserves history” (54, 71). Celaya realizes the importance of voicing silenced histories, both personal and societal, in order to politicize traditional narratives.

Celaya’s storytelling also involves supernatural intervention, further presenting Cisneros’ narrator-protagonist as curandera-like. Readers are alerted in the second part of the novel that Lala, as narrator, allows input from her deceased grandmother in her storytelling. Later in the text, the reason behind this is noted: to provide redemption for the “Awful Grandmother,” Soledad. Her grandmother begs Celaya to tell her story, so she can “be forgiven” and “cross over”—escape purgatory (Cisneros 408). When Lala asks her grandmother if anyone else can help her, Soledad responds, “But who? You’re the only one who can see me” (408). Celaya is gifted with a *don* that allows her to communicate with her grandmother, and this power allows her to redeem and save the matriarch of her family. Furthermore, through telling the

grandmother's story, Celaya also heals herself. She accuses Soledad of haunting her; to which, the Awful Grandmother responds, "Me? Haunting you? It's *you*, Celaya, who's haunting me. I can't bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? To live as I did? There's no sin in falling in love [...], but wait till you're old enough to love yourself first. How do you know what love is?" (406). Here, the grandmother is referring to Celaya's running away to Mexico with the plan that she and her boyfriend, Ernesto, would marry. Thus, Soledad is warning her granddaughter to not devote her life to the first male she falls in love with, as the Awful Grandmother did with Narciso, despite his faults. By telling Soledad's story and communicating with her via supernatural means, Celaya provides healing for both herself and her grandmother (Alumbaugh 53). This communication with the dead may be aligned with the Xicanista tasks of "revisiting" and "revising" history and acquiring solidarity despite diversity. Therefore, Celaya may be interpreted as a curandera-like character that ultimately succeeds in making her Chicana feminism meaningful.

Celaya's "healing" herself involves the acceptance of various influences that have contributed to her Chicana identity and the rejection of roles she deems limiting or oppressive, much as a curandera's spirituality is all-inclusive yet critically selective. Her family's multiple migrations throughout the novel both within the boundaries of the U.S. and Mexico and between the two countries play a significant role in the formation of her hybrid identity. Moving to San Antonio as a teenager, Celaya encounters hostility for seeming "less Mexican" and "more American" than the other students. A bully, Cookie Cantú, tells her, "What are you looking at, *bolilla*? Think you're so smart because you talk like a white girl. [...] You think you're better than us [...] [but] you're nothing but *basura*" (356)<sup>12,13</sup> Cookie and her friends then physically

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<sup>12</sup> A "bolilla" is a white bread roll, yet the term is often used colloquially to refer to Anglo American females or, more commonly, to Mexican or Chicana women and girls who "act white."

attack Celaya, forcing her to flee. It is immediately following this experience that Lala first hears her deceased grandmother speak to her, which she finds comforting though she does not initially realize it is Soledad she hears (356-57). Although this experience is negative, when she returns home, she “lock[s] herself in the bathroom, undress[es], and assess[es] the damage, examining all the parts of [her]self that are bruised, or skinned, or throbbing” and tells herself, “Celaya. I’m still myself. Still Celaya. Still alive” (357). Because of her family’s many migrations through the Americas, Lala has trouble “fitting in” in San Antonio and is ostracized and assaulted due to her difference. She, however, does not view herself as a victim, unable to resist and achieve power; rather, Celaya learns from her experiences not to allow others’ prejudices to dictate her identity and gains a better understanding of the complexity of her transnational Chicana existence. Scholar Marci L. Carrasquillo clarifies this idea: “the transnational roadtrip,” as depicted in Cisneros’ novel, “serves not only to facilitate [Celaya’s] personal development but also enables the traveler to redefine herself in relation to the multiple cultures and communities of which she is a part” (84). Though Celaya often struggled with her nepantlism caused by the transnational nature of her family’s existence, she learns to embrace hybridity and acquires power as a curandera-like Xicanista through this acceptance.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, she also comes to terms with being a female in the traditional Chicano *familia* and culture which may be compared to the curandera belief that one must accept all aspects that have contributed to one’s identity in order to fully enact one’s power. As a teenager, Lala discusses the possibility of moving out of her father’s home after graduating from high school. He is shocked and warns, “Good girls don’t leave their father’s house until they marry, and not before” (Cisneros 359). Inocencio stresses that in order for Lala to be considered a “good

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<sup>13</sup> The Spanish word “basura” translates to “trash.”

<sup>14</sup> Nepantlism is “an Aztec word meaning torn between ways” and is used to describe the “psychic restlessness” often experienced by Chicanas who do not easily submit to monolithic identities (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 100).

girl,” she must remain under the protection, control, and surveillance of her father until his role is transferred to her husband through marriage. Inocencio’s view of how a young woman should act corresponds with the patriarchal depiction of La Virgen, which Gloria Anzaldúa asserts has been utilized in Mexican and Chicano cultures to make women “docile and enduring” (53). With Celaya’s first love, Ernesto, she resists the role of the “virgen” and rather, one may argue, embodies the other end of Anzaldúa’s “virgen/puta (whore) dichotomy,” at least in her own perspective and the view of her father, brothers, and eventually Ernesto himself (53).<sup>15</sup> Celaya and Ernesto run off to Mexico City with the hope that once Lala is “pregnant, then [their families will] have to give [...] their blessing,” and they “can get married” (381-82). She begins to feel shame for her actions, however, and imagines a “plaster angel” in their hotel room accusing her of sinfulness (383). Ernesto, after attending Mass, begins to share this view of their relationship as sinful and illegitimate and abandons her, leaving her devastated (386-87). Wandering the streets of Mexico City in this state of emotional distress, however, she encounters the church built in dedication to La Virgen de Guadalupe and has an epiphany that helps cement her role as a curandera-like Xicanista: “I didn’t expect *this*. I mean the faith. I mixed up the Pope with *this*, with all *this*, *this* light, *this* energy, *this* love. [...] But I didn’t realize about the strength and power of *la fe*” (388-89). With this realization that institutionalized religion and spirituality are not synonymous, Celaya learns that she need not feel limited to the dichotomous roles of the “puta/virgen.” In other words, she need not feel shame when deviating from the gender role prescribed to Chicanas that demands submission to the Christian God, one’s father, and ultimately, one’s husband. Her spirituality is no longer dictated by the Catholic Church but is personal, meaningful, and a hybrid faith. With this, Celaya acquires the power and agency to

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<sup>15</sup> The “puta/virgen dichotomy” is a term that presents the patriarchal construction of women as having an either/or identity, rather than being complex, hybrid entities who may be both spiritual and sexual, nurturing and resistant (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 53).



resist her father, though she loves and respects him. After Inocencio reveals that his mother conceived him out of wedlock, he makes her promise never to reveal this and other family secrets. She promises, yet through her narration, Celaya reveals her grandparents' indiscretion, along with many of her family's other "healthy lies."

Like Sofia, Celaya acquires solidarity with others, and this harmony may be observed in her description and analysis of her family and friends dancing a *cumbia* at her parents' anniversary party.<sup>16</sup> The DJ hired for the party plays a variety of music, but only the cumbia he plays "get[s] all the generations rising from their seats at the same time" (423). Each of Celaya's family members and friends participates in this dance, though Lala, as narrator, simply observes the scene (423-24). Through this observation, Celaya realizes that they are all connected, not merely through their bloodlines—as the dancers come from various socioeconomic, ethnic, and national backgrounds—but also through shared histories, stories, and experiences, both positive and negative. Celaya also includes various characters, both alive and dead, in her family's history that are not physically present at the dance, including her half-sister Candelaria, her grandmother, and the two healers Exaltación Henerosa and María Sabina (425). Thus, Celaya forges her own "imagined community" in her depiction of the cumbia dance, a community "which leads [one] away from essentialist notions [...], suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance" (Mohanty 46). Celaya revises the earlier depictions of the two curandera women: María is a "tiny witch woman [...] dancing [barefoot] in her raggedy" garments while Exaltación is "*cumbia*-ing arm in arm with the woman who ran off with her heart [...] Pánfila dressed in campesino whites" (425). María is no longer a betrayer of her spirituality and homeland but a woman whose poverty—emphasized by her raggedy clothes and lack of

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<sup>16</sup> A cumbia is a musical genre that is popular in Mexico, other Latin American countries, and in the Chicano/a borderlands of the United States. This type of song is typically danced in a circle around the dance floor, and participants may follow along alone or with a partner.

shoes—drove her to make unwise decisions, namely commodifying traditional healing methods for profit. Exaltación, too, is no longer a Malinche-figure as Celaya’s grandfather perceived her but merely as a woman in love who was forced to abandon her community in order to actualize a relationship deemed sinful by the Catholicism that pervades Mexican and Chicano/a cultures. Closing her description of the cumbia, Celaya notes, “Everyone, big and little, old and young, dead and living, imagined and real high-stepping past in the big *cumbia* circle of life” (425). It is by witnessing this cyclical dance that Lala acknowledges the importance of solidarity, and by placing “imagined” dancers in the cumbia circle, curandera-like storyteller Celaya heals and extends harmony to those who “in real life” were not treated justly.

Thus far, we have seen how Celaya has provided healing to herself and others through storytelling, has come to terms with her identity as a transnational Mexican American female living in the U.S., and finally, has accepted the need—inescapability, even—of interpersonal bonds. These curandera-like practices and realizations ultimately give Celaya the strength, power, and motivation to reveal social and political injustices, demand the need for change, and revise oppressive histories. One means by which Lala completes her task as a curandera-like Xicanista who makes her Chicana feminism applicable to the betterment of the world is through her inclusion of footnotes in her narration that reveal and revise silenced, forgotten, or distorted histories. In “The Criticality of Latino/a Fiction in the Twenty-First Century,” Theresa Delgadillo writes that *Caramelo* and other contemporary Latino/a novels include “digressions and interruptions, backtracking and temporal shifts as characters recall past events and other spaces that impinge on the novelistic present” (603). This deconstruction of the traditional linear narrative structure serves to expose historical oppression’s continued effect in contemporary societies by bringing the past into the novel’s present. For instance, Celaya notes the temporary

reign of Emperor Ferdinand Maximilian and Empress Charlotte, or Carlota, in Mexico in the second half of the nineteenth century (96). They were placed in power by “Mexican conservatives and clergy who believed foreign intervention would stabilize Mexico after the disastrous years of Santa Anna, who, as we recall, gave away half of Mexico to the United States” (96). It is important to note the brief reference to Santa Anna, the Mexican American War, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in which Mexico lost the land which is now the southwestern U.S. The Emperors Maximilian and Carlota are described as “puppet rulers” who were foolish and unaware that they were seen as outsiders by the Mexican people and not viewed as legitimate monarchs. They were ultimately overthrown: Maximilian was executed, and Carlota returned to Europe, suffered a mental breakdown, and died in isolation (96). Celaya ends this footnote by asserting, “I forgot to mention, Maximiliano was ousted by none other than Benito Juárez, the only pure-blooded Indian to rule Mexico” (96). With this statement, the narrator reveals successful historical indigenous resistance against European imperialists that allowed for Juárez, considered an ethnic inferior in Mexico, to serve as president. Thus, in this footnote, Celaya reveals both Europe and the U.S.’s interference in Mexico’s political history yet does not present the Mexican people as powerless or victimized; rather, she notes a revolutionary who acquired solidarity with others and fought for political and social change, a purpose curandera-like Celaya shares with Juárez. Thus, not only does she assert that remnants of historical oppression still exist in the present; the power to resist the dominant culture has also bypassed temporal boundaries.

Lala provides another footnote that focuses on Woodrow Wilson’s authorization of the U.S. invasion of Mexico in 1914 and, furthermore, discusses the U.S.’s wavering support of and hostility toward various Mexican revolutionaries and rulers. Celaya notes that “Wilson

authorized the Marines to invade the port city of Tampico after American sailors entered a restricted dock and were arrested” (135). The sailors were released almost immediately; however, the U.S. president still ordered the Marines to invade Veracruz where a battle that killed hundreds of civilians occurred (136). Furthermore, Celaya exposes the fact that the U.S. provided revolutionary Pancho Villa with guns in the hopes of his overthrowing General Huerta, though the U.S. supported Huerta in his coup that allowed him to take control from Francisco Madero (135-36). This footnote, in combination with the previous one discussed, reveals the often silenced historical relationship between the United States and Mexico. Again, Lala does not present the Mexican people as victims but as agents of resistance. She writes that “mobs looted U.S.-owned businesses, destroyed a statue of George Washington, and scared the hell out of American tourists” (136). Furthermore, she describes a historical event that is often omitted or distorted from American history books: Pancho Villa’s invasion of Columbus, New Mexico. Because of this encounter, Wilson sent thousands of “troops into Mexico to find Villa. But Villa and his men eluded them to the end. Wilson withdrew the forces in January of 1917, \$130 million later” (136). In Celaya’s revision of history, the U.S., personified by President Wilson, is foolish, compulsive, and undiplomatic, whereas Villa and other Mexican nationals are not demonized, as is often the case in the American historical canon, but are presented as righteous in their hostility toward the United States due to its common interventions in Mexico.

Celaya’s Xicanisma is not enacted in social activism as Sofia’s is. Rather, Celaya exposes injustices, revises histories that demonize or silence minority populations, and attempts to heal through storytelling. Both women, however, raise social awareness, provide large-scale healing, and empower others to make changes in society. They may be seen as curandera-like Xicanistas for this reason and for their abilities to accept the multiple facets that have contributed to their

identities and spiritualities while rejecting practices and beliefs that they view as limiting or oppressive. While curanderas Doña Felicia, Caridad, Exaltación Henerosa, and María Sabina all embody many Chicana feminist traits and behaviors, they fail to expose political injustices and provoke social change, whereas Celaya and Sofia, although they are not official curanderas, succeed in making their hybrid spirituality meaningful in society. They find a suitable balance between the self and the world, ensuring that both are nurtured and the interests of neither is abandoned. In politicizing their spiritualities, Sofia and Celaya serve as curandera-like Xicanistas who are active in the betterment of social realities. Thus, Castillo and Cisneros, through these female characters, seem to imply that labels or titles—such as “curandera” and “feminist”—are not meaningful unless those who occupy these roles ensure that they are utilized as a means of bettering the world and not merely for self-fulfillment.

## CHAPTER IV

### XICANISTA RESISTANCE THROUGH CURANDERA WRITING:

#### ANA CASTILLO AND SANDRA CISNEROS AS SPIRITUAL VOICES FOR CHANGE

The curanderas depicted in Ana Castillo's and Sandra Cisneros' novels are not simple one-dimensional characters. Each may be perceived as a Chicana feminist in many regards; however, they are ultimately unable to provoke or participate in social change, a key component of curanderismo. Thus, the writers show that feminism derived from hybrid spirituality does not guarantee large-scale social and political improvements. In order for this to occur, Chicana feminists must take a further step and make their acquired power and sense of self practical in the bettering of the lives of others. Failing to do so places Chicana feminists in a position in which they merely replicate the ideology and forces they reject in theory, such as the Western value of individualism. Sofia and Celaya embody curandera-like traits and abilities and are effective in making their Chicana feminism practical in the bettering of the world. This magical realist inclusion of curanderas and curandera-like female characters is utilized as a means of revealing silenced histories, attempting to heal social injustices, and calling for solidarity and a more active feminism. Thus, Castillo and Cisneros, self-proclaimed practitioners of hybrid spirituality, may be seen as curandera-writers who perceive female creativity and imagination as supernatural, view writing as a means of healing both history and contemporary societies, and participate in social activism. Furthermore, the hybrid narrative form utilized by these novelists may be seen as curandera-like in that it pulls from various influences. This chapter serves to further define *curandera writing* and to present Castillo and Cisneros as practitioners of this magical realist form.

In both interviews and their essays, Castillo and Cisneros have described writing as a spiritual or even supernatural process. This view of composition presents these novelists as curandera-writers as they perceive the female imagination as a spiritual site from which societal change may be provoked. In her introduction to *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Ana Castillo discusses the slaughter, ordered by Aztec emperor Moctezuma, of “thousands of dreamers who [...] prophesied the arrival of Cortés and the subsequent annihilation of the Empire” (16). She identifies with these dreamers, these prophets, who foresaw pending doom and voiced it, despite the risk of hostility and violence for seeing beyond the material world. Although the sex of these dreamers is not mentioned, Castillo, an ethnic woman, identifies with them as an oppressed population that was treated unjustly due to their difference and willingness to speak up. Castillo shows the connection between this historical massacre and contemporary society’s treatment of oppressed populations and the writers and activists who voice silenced histories and demand the need for change: “The dreamer, the poet, the visionary is banished at the point when his/her society becomes based on the denigration of life and annihilation of the spirit for the sake of phallogocentric aggrandizement and the accumulation of wealth by a militant elite. This is accompanied by a fierce sense of nationalism and ‘ethnic pride.’ This was the case with ‘The Massacre of the Dreamers’ in the Mexica Empire and is happening again throughout the globe” (16). It is important to note that Castillo presents spirituality as a polar opposite to patriarchal, individualist ideology that values the acquisition of wealth and power and defends this authority with military might and ideas of neoliberal ideology. She asserts that “a fierce sense of nationalism,” whether Aztec or American, often attacks others who are different, as is the case with the Arizona legislature that has banned Mexican American Studies for being “un-American” or hostile to the dominant American ideology. Furthermore, Castillo aligns writers, or

poets, with visionaries and prophets, asserting her view of writing as both spiritual and revolutionary in nature. In the chapter titled “Brujas and Curanderas,” Castillo depicts female imagination as powerful and necessary as a means of bettering the world. She writes, “There are no mysteries experienced in life that we cannot unlock from within our own imaginations” (157). Thus, writing, to Castillo, may be seen as a spiritual or supernatural process that allows one to transcend the limits of oppressive realities to imagine and outline a new, more just society.

Cisneros, too, seems to perceive writing as spiritual and the female imagination as a site for power and resistance and, thus, may be seen as a curandera-writer. In “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” she connects sexuality with writing and describes both as spiritual acts. With sex, “like writing, for a slip of a moment it could be spiritual, the cosmos pivoting on a pin, could empty and fill you all at once like a Ganges, a Piazzolla tango, a tulip bending in the wind. I was no one, I was nothing, and I was everything in the universe little and large” (176). In this description of sexuality, Cisneros comments on the alignment between imagination and spirituality. Writers create a new world in fiction and, through this world building, acquire power and authority. It is important to note that the writer does not view her authority as superior or more valid than others’, but rather, as Saldívar asserts in *Trans-Americanity*, “By deferring the end of the narration, [the novelist] and her various narrators [...] dramatize the inability of any one of the narrators to tell the whole story of Greater Mexico and the Reyes family” (175). Thus, Cisneros’ novel seems to advocate for the active involvement of various members of society in the formation of *cuentos* and new histories. She, therefore, views both spirituality and writing as vehicles that can provoke change and that are accessible to all. Cisneros further comments on the power she acquires through composition in her identification with Coatlicue, an indigenous goddess whom the writer connects with Guadalupe in her article: “Most days, I too feel like the



creative/destructive goddess Coatlicue, especially the days I'm writing, capable of fabricating pretty tales with pretty words, as well as doing the demolition work with a volley of palabrotas if I want to" ("Guadalupe" 177).<sup>17</sup> As a writer, Cisneros acquires the power to construct new worlds and destroy historical or existing realities that she deems oppressive. In this regard, she aligns herself with the supernatural and powerful Coatlicue. This connection between the novelist and an indigenous goddess presents Cisneros as a curandera-writer as it both emphasizes her hybrid spirituality and presents the female imagination as a site that allows ethnic women power in white, male-dominated society. To Cisneros, writing is a spiritual act that may be described as supernatural and allows her the ability to provoke and demand social change.

The spiritual nature of female imagination and composition that both Castillo and Cisneros acknowledge allows for writing to serve as a means of healing the Chicana Self, historical wrongs, and contemporary and future societies. The novelists may be seen as curandera-writers due to this view of writing as healing. In the introduction to the third edition of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez comments on the ability of writing to serve as a tool for healing the Latina woman's sense of nepantilism: "I began to write out of necessity, a way to integrate the many selves, to understand the confusion [...] My writing was [...] a lonely way to make sense of divisions. To drown out, momentarily what the larger culture was telling me—something was wrong with me for not being able to assimilate." Thus, through writing, this ethnic female writer healed her psyche; she learned to accept the multiple influences that contribute to her hybrid identity. In an interview conducted by Erin Caldwell for the online publication *Superstition Review*, Cisneros shares a similar sentiment. She states, "You start writing from wherever you are, whether it's rage, or depression, or envy, or any evil energy [...] and like a meditation, you work towards elimination. So maybe

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<sup>17</sup> "Palabrota" translates literally to "a big word" but is a term that is used to refer to a "curse word."

you start angry [...] but if you keep at it long enough, it will take you towards the light [...] that will take you to your higher self if you keep writing” (“Interview with Sandra Cisneros”).

Cisneros views the writing process as a meditation—as a means of getting to know the Self and overcoming various ill feelings. Reflection, imagination, and composition, thus, allow ethnic women a suitable means of healing the split within one’s self. Gloria Anzaldúa describes the writing process in a similar manner: “To write is to confront one’s demons, look them in the face and live to write about them” (“Speaking in Tongues” 171). Thus, to novelists, such as Castillo and Cisneros, composition allows them to heal the internalization of various prejudices and legitimize their identities as Chicana writers.

In addition to healing the Self, writing also enables Castillo and Cisneros to recover and rewrite history in order to legitimize the Chicana identity in contemporary America. This act may be aligned with the curandera’s practice of utilizing multiple faiths’ tools and beliefs yet revising the use of these to suit her purposes. In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Pérez asserts that “there is no pure, authentic, original history. There are only stories—many stories,” and she views her task as a Chicana scholar to take “the ‘his’ out of the ‘story,’ the story that also becomes the universalist narrative in which women’s experience is negated” (xv, xiv). Castillo shares this purpose as she states in an interview conducted by Bruce Milligan: “Being raised in this country with a certain background, there is so much about us that has been repressed and rejected [...] So in that sense, [...] I would say that I was trying to recover things. My mission in that book is also to reinstate self-esteem” (24). Thus, Castillo’s purpose in writing is often to reveal silenced histories in order to help heal both the present and the future. She does so in *So Far from God* by exposing historical injustices that affect the population of Tome, specifically, yet also other communities. The narrator notes that families have lost and continue to lose their

land to outsiders because “they just couldn’t live off of it no more, and the taxes were too high, and the children went off to Albuquerque or even farther to work [...] The truth was that most people had not been able to live off their land for [...] fifty years. Outsiders in the past had overused the land so that in some cases it was no good for raising crops or grazing livestock” (Castillo 139). This passage is significant as it provides a historical reason, the overuse of land, for countless Chicano/as having to leave their homelands, and likely abandon aspects of their culture and identity, in order to find work. Furthermore, Castillo utilizes magical realist techniques, such as the inclusion of curanderas and other supernatural events, “not [...] as a gimmick, but rather as an intervention against the trajectory of conventional national history” (Hanna 509). Thus, Castillo is aware of the power of writing which allows one to expose historical injustices and revise the canon in order to locate the resistance and agency of oppressed populations. Furthermore, she seems aware that replicating the traditional Western narrative serves to legitimize the dominant culture and, rather, weaves magical events into her novel as a means of resistance.

Sandra Cisneros also writes to revise history in order to legitimize the identities of Chicano/as living in the United States. Her magical realist inclusion of curanderas and a “ghost story”—Soledad’s interaction with Celaya, post-mortem—serves to deconstruct and resist the Western approach to narratives and histories (Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity* 165). In an interview conducted by Jake Silverstein for *Texas Monthly*, Cisneros comments on the historical oppression of Chicano/as and the effects this has had on the diverse population’s identity: “Who knows more about inferiority than Chicanos? We grew up being ashamed because the history that is taught to us makes us ashamed. The whole colonial experience surrounding the Alamo is meant to make you feel ashamed” (“The Artist and the City”). This acknowledgment that history

is subjective and continues to affect marginalized populations in contemporary society clarifies Cisneros' inclusion of a "Chronology" at the end of *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*. This timeline does not merely trace various forms of governmental oppression enacted on Chicano/as but also on other ethnic peoples in the United States. Thus, it serves as an authorial tool that revises the historical canon of the U.S. by revealing injustices. Cisneros begins her chronology in 1519, the year the Spanish, led by Cortés, first encountered Moctezuma in Tenochtitlán (435). It is important to note that she refers to this city by its Western name, Mexico City, stressing the influence European and American imperialists have had on indigenous cultures. Cisneros continues her timeline by noting the first deportations in 1639 of "pauper aliens" and various other immigration acts that have been targeted at, for instance, Chinese, Irish, Jewish, Mexican, Japanese, and German immigrants (435-38). Her entries expose the fact that immigrants have been treated with more hostility in American history during times of economic crisis; for instance, she notes the "Mexican Scare" in the 1930s: "In [the] early years of [the] Great Depression, [the government] round[ed] up and deport[ed] hundreds of thousands of Mexicans from the U.S." (437). This is significant when reflecting on the current "Jim Crow attacks" on the Chicano/a population in the twenty-first century.<sup>18</sup> Cisneros notes, however, that in times of economic prosperity, immigrants are welcomed as sources of cheap labor. In the early twentieth century, for example, the U.S. "import[ed] Mexican laborers to California to harvest sugar beets" (436). Thus, this chronology presents the U.S. government as prejudicial in its treatment of non-white immigrants, and its legislation and ideology are depicted as purely economically driven.

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<sup>18</sup> In the press release titled "National Association For Chicana and Chicano Studies 39th Annual Conference," NACCS lists several of the current "Jim Crow attacks" enacted on the Chicano/a population: "educational discrimination, immigration restrictions, disproportionate environmental impacts," and legislation "that questions the loyalty of citizens based on race, ethnicity or national origin."

Cisneros revises the view of America as a nation that welcomes and provides opportunities for immigrants.

Her historical timeline does not present immigrants and ethnic minorities in the U.S. as mere victims, however, but legitimizes these populations as powerful agents who have resisted the dominant culture through political and social means and have participated in America as Americans, though they are often denied this status. In noting that more Chicanos received medals of honor in both World War II and the Vietnam War, Cisneros attempts to legitimize Mexican Americans as significant actors in American history (437, 439). Furthermore, the novelist reveals a long tradition of Mexican resistance through one short entry attributed to the year 1994; she writes, “Zapata is not dead, but rises up again in Chiapas” (438). Here, she is referring to the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), a mostly indigenous group that opposes the Mexican government due to various political, social, and economic injustices performed on the Mexican people. EZLN takes its name from Emiliano Zapata, a Mexican revolutionary, and thus, Cisneros asserts that the Mexican people have had a long history of opposing unjust regimes and must continue to do so in order for widespread change to occur. The last entry of the novelist’s chronology is not given a date but, rather, floats below the neatly outlined timeline. It reads, “All over the world, millions leave their homes and cross borders illegally” (439). Here, she is not speaking merely of those of Mexican descent but of all immigrants. The practice of migration transcends time. It is not limited to a specific year or years. Furthermore, Cisneros presents the arbitrariness of the geographical border and the U.S. legislation that deems who may enter the country “legally” by presenting five centuries of migration to the Americas by various cultures—both welcomed and rejected—and then asserting that millions migrate “illegally” in her final entry. The use of this term is ironic in that she has

exposed that it is those in power, typically white males in the U.S., who decide what immigrants are granted legal status. Thus, in her chronology, Cisneros both exposes historical oppression and legitimizes the Chicano/a culture and immigrant populations in order to revise oppressive histories that silence the marginalized. The writer's revisionist tasks present her as curandera-like in that Mexican American female folk healers adapt various practices and beliefs to best suit their needs and the health of their clients.

In addition to their writing, both Castillo and Cisneros also participate in and demand the need for social activism, a key component of curanderismo. Concerned with social issues at an early age, Ana Castillo joined the Chicano Movement when she was only seventeen, yet she notes that her "efforts to bring unity and courage to the majority of [the Chicano/a] people was short lived; they did not embrace" Chicanas (*Massacre* 26). She attempted to find another outlet in which she could work to create a fairer, more inclusive society and entered academia as a means of doing so. She earned an "M.A. from the University of Chicago in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Social Sciences Division" (Milligan 24). This background in social sciences further contributed to her desire and ability to work toward social and political change. In coining the term "Xicanisma," Castillo expressed the need for Chicana feminism to be active and made practical as a means of bettering the world. She notes, "Xicanisma, therefore, includes an ongoing awareness of our responsibility to ourselves, to those in our personal lives, to those we make alliances with, and to the environment" (*Massacre* 224). Here, she emphasizes the necessity of finding a balance between the needs and interests of the Self and society at large. She sees improving social, political, and environmental realities as an essential task of the Xicanista. Furthermore, Castillo has participated in various ethnic and feminist causes and, most recently, has concerned herself with Arizona's banning of ethnic studies from its school

curriculum. In an article published in the *Huffington Post*, Jeff Biggers notes that Castillo hoped to meet and speak with Tucson students who had previously participated in Mexican American Studies courses but was denied access; she was, however, allowed to read her work and discuss the censorship of minority literature at a local venue. In this location, free from the school district's bureaucratic pressures, Castillo, a concerned social activist, addressed governmental oppression enacted on marginalized populations and demanded the need for solidarity as a means of provoking change in society.

Sandra Cisneros also asserts the need for and participates in organized activism. She has created the Macondo Foundation, which her website defines as “a community of poets, novelists, journalists, performance artists, and creative writers of all genres whose work is socially engaged” and who take on the “task of community-building and non-violent social change.” Furthermore, she has also founded Los MacArturos, a foundation in which the members attempt “to assist one another in [their] individual activist efforts, and to share [their] creativity and expertise with” the community, specifically with young people (“Los MacArturos”). Through these organizations, Cisneros participates in work that aims to better the social, political, and economic conditions of various populations through writing and activism. She asserts the importance of being an active member in the bettering of society: “I do believe that the highest work that anyone can do is that of volunteering, and it is important that writers volunteer and do community work” (“Community Activism”). Like Castillo, Cisneros has also addressed the recent debate over the banning of ethnic studies in Tucson schools. In Erin Caldwell's interview with the writer, Cisneros asserts that Arizona's censorship of minority literature does not dishearten her but gives her hope, in that the banning raises social awareness and provokes activism: “I can tell that from these actions, there has to come reaction. [...] People who may not

have been aware of these books are now suddenly aware [...]. We're living in a time when books, in general, don't get a lot of press, so I think they've done a wonderful thing by bringing books to the forefront. And suddenly people are organizing, and when people organize, it helps to create a positive dialogue that we didn't have before" ("Interview with Sandra Cisneros"). Thus, Cisneros may be perceived as a curandera-writer who is aware of the need for social action as a means of bettering society. She, like Castillo, has been effective in participating in and demanding the need for organized activism.

It is important to note that the novels discussed in this project may be seen as curandera-like in structure as both *So Far from God* and *Caramelo or Puro Cuento* pull from various sources and may be described as hybrid narratives. In her article, Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak asserts that both writers use the postmodern technique of "pastiche to stage a dialogue between Mexican and Anglo-American traditions" (102). This mixture of genres may be aligned with hybrid spirituality and is evident in both Chicana writers' works. Scholar Karen Christian notes Castillo's use of pastiche in her novel: the writer "mixes lofty sounding chapter titles á la Cervantes with local dialect, recipes, and folk remedies, weaving in constant feminist and political commentary" (142). *So Far from God's* narrative structure features chapter titles influenced by "Spanish Golden Age literature," yet these are modified for modern purposes (Christian 142). Furthermore, Castillo's use of recipes, colloquial language, and curandera healing techniques serves to legitimize the hybrid Chicana/o identities. This harmony between high and low culture presents each influence that contributes to the Chicana/o culture as valid. Additionally, Castillo utilizes Catholic hagiography in the construction of her female characters yet also pulls from other sources, such as Native American mythology, as is the case with her use of the Acoma creation myth (Sauer 72; Rodriguez 77). Like the belief system and practices of



curanderismo, Ana Castillo's novel is a fusion of various cultures and genres, aiming to deconstruct the traditional narrative and reflect the hybridity of Chicana/os.

*Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, a transnational, trans-temporal text, also resists the traditional format of a novel. The writer blends various genres and techniques and even includes multiple narrators. In "Sandra Cisneros and Her Trade of the Free Word," Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs comments on the novel's division: "the first part [...] is the opening to the familial saga," the second weaves in the grandmother's history and allows her voice to enter the discourse, and the final section is "the traditionally feminist part of the novel" (27-29). The blending of genres—the family saga, the Mexican telenovela, the traditional bildungsroman, histories, and ethnic and feminist social commentary—in this novel both reflects and legitimizes the Chicana identity and serves to resist the restrictive format of the Western narrative (Mermann-Jozwiak 113; Alumbaugh 60). Additionally, the mixture of languages—Spanish, English, and Spanglish—further presents the novel as a hybrid text. Cisneros' narration, therefore, may be described as "rasquache" in that it is composed of multiple influences and reflects the balancing between cultures that the narrator Celaya and other Chicanas experience (Alumbaugh 61). Cisneros clarifies this term in her interview with Jake Silverstein: "*Rasquache* is when you make or repair things with whatever you have at hand. You don't go to Home Depot. If you have a hole in your roof, you put a hubcap on there. Or you fix your fence with some rope. That's *rasquache*" ("The Artist and the City"). Thus, this concept, applied to writing, may be aligned with the idea of pastiche, mixing various genres in order to produce a hybrid and more effective whole. Furthermore, Cisneros allows the interaction between narrators, Celaya and Soledad, in order to "make the narrative communal" (Alumbaugh 61). She deconstructs the traditional novel by including characteristics typical of oral storytelling and allowing multiple voices, languages, and

genres to construct her narrative. Thus, Cisneros' novel, like the writer herself, may be perceived as curandera-like in its hybrid structure.

Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros, through writing and activism, attempt to heal society's ills. They have acquired solidarity with other writers, scholars, and oppressed populations in order to work toward creating a more just society. Furthermore, they participate in the Xicanista task of recovering and rewriting history as a means of exposing injustices and locating and voicing the silenced resistance and power of marginalized populations. Castillo and Cisneros, therefore, may be seen as practitioners of *curandera writing*. This form of magical realism aims to heal the ethnic female individual and the world and advocates for a balance between the needs of both. This desire to restore harmony between the Self and society is the ultimate goal of curanderismo, and through the depiction of curanderas and curandera-like women in *So Far from God* and *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, one can see the need of finding this balance. Whereas Doña Felicia, Caridad, Exaltación Henerosa, and María Sabina fail to make their curanderismo practical in creating substantial political or societal change, Sofia and Celaya, as well as Castillo and Cisneros, succeed in making their Chicana feminism, derived in part from their hybrid spirituality, applicable to the bettering of the world. Thus, serving as a curandera does not guarantee that one will provoke social change. Rather, she must be a politicized, socially conscious woman whose goal is not merely to heal folk illnesses but larger social issues as well.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

As this project has attempted to illustrate, curanderas have the power and ability to serve as effective models for Xicanistas; practicing curanderismo, however, does not guarantee social and political activism. *So Far from God* and *Caramelo or Puro Cuento* feature curanderas who are unable to make their feminism practical as a means of improving social conditions. They fail to find a balance between the Self and society and reach tragic ends. Sofia and Celaya, though not official curanderas, embody many curandera-like traits and behaviors and utilize their politicized, hybrid spirituality to reveal and attempt to heal historical and contemporary injustices. Through storytelling and activism, change may occur—an idea that novelists Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros share, practice, and advocate in their writing. Only by exposing silenced histories and existing oppressions can social and political realities be transformed. This is the goal of curandera writing, and the magical realist occurrences in Castillo and Cisneros' novels further serve to resist the dominant culture and legitimize Chicanas as active agents with voice and the power to provoke and contribute to the betterment of the world.

It is important to return to the idea that anyone with a desire to heal and better the lives of others can practice curanderismo or be perceived as curandera-like. As Trotter and Chavira note, mothers may be seen as curanderas in their use of home remedies and nurturing techniques to ease and even cure their children's emotional and spiritual distresses and physical illnesses (52). This idea of mothering or nurturing as a means of healing the individual may be transferred to society at large. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Ana Castillo asserts, "Although the responsibility of mothering is placed on the biological mother, anyone can be motherly. An incorporation of mothering qualities into our value system would radically change our world" (186). She argues

that the feminine principle has been denigrated and largely omitted from contemporary and historical value systems, asserting that, “throughout history, the further man moved away from his connection with woman as creatrix, the more spirituality was also disconnected from the human body” (*Massacre* 13). This distancing from woman and spirituality has allowed and contributed to ubiquitous patriarchal oppression enacted on women of all colors. Thus, in order for curanderas to serve as effective Xicanistas, they must apply their spirituality and healing abilities to society, not merely to their individual clients, in order to improve political and social realities.

A more practical approach to feminism is needed in order to counter the multiple oppressions enacted on ethnic female populations. Castillo terms this Xicanisma, yet other feminist scholars have advocated for a similar approach. Chandra Talpade Mohanty asserts “that solidarity is always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences. It is this praxis-oriented, active political struggle embodied in this notion of solidarity that is important” (7). Thus, by acquiring solidarity despite differences, ethnic female populations may unite in order to make their feminist ideals practical as a means of bettering the lives of marginalized populations, the environment, and global relations. Furthermore, Mohanty, like Saldívar-Hull, critiques the white European and American feminism’s “totalizing concept of sisterhood” as an idea that fails to recognize differences among women of various nationalities, colors, sexualities, and socioeconomic classes (37). Mohanty writes, “Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances” (7). In defining solidarity in political terms, as opposed to national or ethnic,

Mohanty presents her “feminism without borders” as all-inclusive and as a suitable vehicle by which social and political change may occur (46). In these regards, Mohanty’s approach to feminism may be aligned with *curanderismo* and *Xicanisma*, in that all three are non-exclusionary and female-centered. Furthermore, Mohanty’s “feminism without borders,” *Xicanisma*, and *curanderismo* all embrace various influences and attempt to heal societal ills.

The twenty-first century is witnessing “a new era of Jim Crow attacks” enacted on Chicano/a and Latino/a populations (NACCS). The banning of ethnic studies from the Tucson Unified School District’s curriculum is merely one illustration of the institutionalized racism being performed in contemporary U.S. society. With oppression, however, comes organized activism and resistance. Writers, scholars, and activists, such as Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros, refuse to be silenced and, rather, have united with others in order to counter this repression and demand and work toward change. In Michel Martin’s interview with Arizona’s Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal, the state official asserts that the Mexican American Studies program was cut as its courses “encourage resentment toward a race or class of people.” Although Huppenthal is unable to provide an example that illustrates this assertion, one can imagine where this idea comes from: the dominant culture’s guilt, whether conscious or not, derived from centuries of oppressing marginalized populations in the United States. The books banned in Arizona may not incite a violent rebellion as some seem to believe, but minority literature does have power—a power that transcends oppressive realities and has the ability to change the way a person thinks, and yes, perhaps even to “encourage resentment.” This should not be discouraged or feared, however, but must be embraced.

Literature, specifically minority literature, serves as a vehicle by which change in society may be provoked, and writing and activism allow ethnic female populations a voice in a world

that has attempted and continues to attempt to silence the lived experiences of gendered, racialized, and national *others*. In “Speaking in Tongues,” Gloria Anzaldúa comments on the power of writing in the hands of the oppressed: “Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared” (171). Thus, what I term *curandera writing* serves as a tool by which Chicanas and other subjugated populations may obtain and exercise voice and utilize this acquired power as a means of bettering the world.

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