

**Sabotaging Patriarchy: La Locura as Feminist Countersociety
in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God***

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Introduction

Ana Castillo's novel *So Far From God* takes place in the rural town of Tome, New Mexico and it recounts the lives of a Chicana matriarch, Sofi, and her four daughters Fe, Esperanza, Caridad and La Loca Santa. With a passive reference to the father of the family having disappeared prior to the novel's opening scene, Castillo paves the way for the development of a Chicana consciousness feminized by the lack of any patriarchal figure.

Castillo's familial rendering suggests a modern-day refashioning of the ancient Christian family of the Martyred Sophia and her three daughters – the Saints Faith, Hope and Charity. According to the Orthodox Church in America, the real-life Sophia was “a pious Christian widow who named her daughters for the three Christian values” of faith, hope, and charity (Martyred Sophia). As the Christian story goes, the three daughters were ordered to appear before the emperor of Rome who demanded that they acknowledge the goddess Artemis. For their unwillingness to acknowledge any authority on the emperor's part over their spiritual lives, the three daughters were ordered to suffer various forms of torture including being burned and beaten with rods. Still the three daughters “remained steadfast in the Faith” until they were each beheaded while their suffering mother looked on (Martyred Sophia).

It is obvious that Castillo deliberately modeled her narrative family on the ancient story of the Martyred Sophia and her three daughters, even maintaining their names in

Spanish translation and setting her story in Tome instead of Rome. Like the three daughters of the Christian version, Castillo's three daughters Esperanza, Fe and Caridad suffer acts of emotional and physical torture in each of their own lives. Esperanza is sexually exploited by her supposedly educated, progressive boyfriend Rubén, and she eventually dies working as a reporter in the Persian Gulf during the first Gulf conflict of the 1990's. Fe's character is also traumatized when rejected by Tom, the man whom she desperately wanted to marry and with whom she wanted to share a normal life. She too eventually gets over the initial trauma caused by her boyfriend, only to be commercially exploited by a large manufacturing corporation that requires her to work with dangerous, radioactive chemicals that eventually kill her. Caridad, the most tenderhearted of the three, also suffers as a result of her romantic relationship with Memo, her high school sweetheart. Upon learning of his infidelity, Caridad loses all sense of herself and takes to "loving anyone she met at the bars who vaguely resembled Memo" (27). Eventually, she is brutally attacked during one of her sexual encounters and is left for dead in a ditch at the side of a dirt road. After her recovery, she becomes a healer and a hermit, and eventually falls in love with the most beautiful woman she has ever seen. Her life also ends when she and her lover are confronted by the threatening presence of an obsessed man, and the two women, cornered, decide to commit suicide by jumping off of a cliff together.

Of interest to this study is the figure of the youngest daughter, known only as La Loca, who does not figure in the original family of the Martyred Sophia and her three daughters and therefore exists outside of any allegorical reference to said family. With the introduction of La Loca's character, Castillo seems to give a feminist "bend" to the

orthodox story, essentially adapting the narrative to a Chicana reality and introducing a fourth daughter who, unlike the other three, has no recollection of, or reference point for, a father figure. Thus, through La Loca's eyes, Castillo is able to explore the discursive potentialities of a Chicana consciousness feminized by the lack of any patriarchal claim to authority and reason.

Chicana Family as Countersociety

This subversion of phallogocentrism, which is defined as "the centrality of the male influence on the shaping of both social relations and forms of discourse" (Mautner 420), is essentially an act of Freudian castration that, according to Julia Kristeva, breaks down the sociosymbolic contract and calls into question the very meaning of things. Kristeva characterizes the resulting void in the signifying activity, which constitutes La Loca's entire life within the novel, as a "*lack*" or "*desire*" that frustrates all social transactions that had meaning previously under the authority of patriarchal discourse (Adams and Searle 469).

The notion of castration, or what I refer to as patriarchal sabotage as it relates to Castillo's novel, is then radically innovative in that it tolerates the constitution of a newly formed subject who must take hold of the sociosymbolic contract in order to make sense of her world by establishing anew the relationship between language and nature. La Loca's assignment cannot be a simple reinscription of meaning or refashioning of traditional gender roles for these endeavors, contradictory as they may seem to patriarchy's authority, are still permitted within its signifying system. That is, a phallogocentric discourse would still be able to *acknowledge*, and thereby *legitimize*, a reinscription of meaning, radical as it may be. Rather, La Loca's assignment is much

more drastic for her character is designed outside of the confines of a patriarchal imperative so that she may fill the position of subject, uniquely burdened with the task of bringing order and meaning to her feminized Chicana world.

The novel's opening scene is detailed *in medias res* as La Loca has just died at the age of three from an epileptic seizure. During the household's upheaval that results from this sudden and tragic event, the author passively notes the absence of a patriarchal figure: "Sofi went back into her room where her baby, the three year old, had slept ever since Sofi's husband disappeared" (19). With the father's disappearance having occurred before the events of the novel's opening scene, the Freudian castration complex is fully realized and La Loca's domestic reality not only *is*, but always *has been*, void of any patriarchal claim to authority. Thus, the signifying activity breaks down, and Sofi is unable to inscribe meaning to her daughter's passing:

Why? Why? That's exactly what Sofi wanted to know at that moment – when all she had ever done was accept God's will. As if it hadn't been punishment enough to be abandoned by her husband, then – for no apparent reason and without warning, save the horrible commotion of the animals that night – her baby was taken away! Oh, why? Why? That's all she wanted to know. (22)

Immediately following her mother's admitted inability to understand the significance of her passing, La Loca is thrust into subjectivity when suddenly she returns to life, opening her own casket and calling for her mother as all the parishioners look on in amazement. Thus, La Loca frustrates the distinction between subject and object,

embodying the Kristevan notion of the abject, which exists outside the symbolic order of meaning.

Up until this moment, Father Jerome has been presiding over La Loca's funeral. He is depicted as a patronizing figure, the stereotypical priest of blind faith that after determining that Sofi "was showing signs of losing it" (22), commandingly advises against questioning God the Father. Symbolizing the patriarchal structure of the Church that serves as the authority on miraculous events, Father Jerome approaches La Loca in order to gain control of the situation. She escapes his advances by floating to the roof of the chapel and discredits his authority as a man of the cloth by warning him not to touch her. In one last attempt to regain command over the situation, Father Jerome impotently asserts a lost sense of patriarchal authority:

"Come down, come down," the priest called to the child. We'll all go in and pray for you. Yes, yes, maybe all this is really true. Maybe you did die, maybe you did see our Lord in His heaven, maybe He did send you back to give us guidance. Let's just go in together, we'll all pray for you."
[...] "No, padre," she corrected him. "Remember, it is *I* who am here to pray for *you*." (24)

With this statement La Loca effectively fulfills her position as subject in the signifying activity by objectifying the Father. Against his self-perceived position of advantage in relation to God, she proclaims an ecclesiastical paradigm shift and positions herself, a three year-old Chicana girl, as the voice of authority in spiritual matters.

La Loca in as much as she exists outside of the sociosymbolic contract promoted by patriarchy serves to inaugurate a feminized *countersociety* which, according to Kristeva, is

...a sort of alter ego of the official society, in which all real or fantasized possibilities for *jouissance* take refuge. Against the sociosymbolic contract, both sacrificial and frustrating, this countersociety is imagined as harmonious, without prohibitions, free and fulfilling. (Adams and Searle 479)

Castillo's rendering of the family, comprised after the patriarch has been purged from the home, serves as the Kristevan countersociety that allows the Chicana toddler to fulfill her life in a way she deems appropriate which is evidenced in her self-positioning as the authoritative voice on spiritual matters.

Indeed, La Loca's nonsensical life continues to unhinge many closed texts of a patriarchal imperative that serve to limit women's actions. As a spiritual leader and healer, La Loca spends most of the novel "healing her sisters from the traumas and injustices they were dealt by society – a society she herself never experienced firsthand" (27). When her sister Caridad is brutally and sexually attacked by a nebulous entity identified only as the legendary Chicano folkloric creature *la Malogra*, it is La Loca who heals her through the act of prayer restoring her sister's body to its pre-attack state. Likewise, La Loca's prayers are answered again when Fe is finally cured from her inability to stop screaming as loudly as her lungs will allow, a trauma resulting from having been abandoned by her boyfriend Tom. Finally, when the eldest sister Esperanza is killed while working as a journalist in the Persian Gulf, it is La Loca who breaks the

news to the family, having conversed with another legendary Chicano folkloric figure – La Llorona – down at the creek’s edge.

Perhaps the most miraculous of all of La Loca’s seemingly illogical actions is her ability to discredit the finality of death. After Esperanza dies in the Persian Gulf, La Loca continues to visit and converse with her departed sister in the backyard by the creek. Thus, La Loca objectifies a traditional understanding of death by voicing a newly feminized reality that discounts its irrevocable nature, which in turn, allows for the other characters in the novel to follow suit. When Caridad and her lesbian lover, for example, choose to commit suicide together in order to escape the male stalker who has cornered them on a cliff, they are effectively choosing to live together eternally without the threat of a male presence on their relationship. The narrator explains that after they had disappeared over the edge of the cliff:

There was nothing. 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. (211)

The veracious tone with which this scene is related sabotages the phallogentric and procreative precepts of a patriarchal claim to authority by imagining them, instead, as the gynocentric and originative precepts of matriarchy.¹ In so doing, Castillo voices a matriarchal claim to mother, or originate, the cultural subject that is capable of living

¹ Indeed, Caridad’s character in many ways can be regarded as an evolved representation of the feminist ideological project initiated by La Loca. It is Caridad who eventually lives her life outside of the social norms promoted by patriarchy. Additionally, in uniting with her lesbian lover for all eternity down “within the soft, moist dark earth,” Caridad’s character invokes the ecofeminist theological principle “Gaia.”

forever within a Kristevan countersociety that is not governed by a traditional patriarchal figure.

Fe is the only daughter in the novel who does not explore all the freedom and fulfillment of the novel's countersociety that La Loca has inaugurated. Instead, she aspired to escape the familial context of the novel which she perceived as an inferior existence in relation to the traditions of mainstream society (read: patriarchy) even though it was within this context that she was able to be cured of her incessant screaming that resulted from being abandoned by her boyfriend. Her escape plan had always been to marry a man, buy a house and raise a big family. In this way, Fe, unlike her sisters before her, does not acknowledge the freedom, fulfillment, and harmony that La Loca's countersociety offers and thereby remains governed by the traditions of patriarchy.

Eventually Fe marries and gets a good job with Acme International, a corporate giant that 'outsources' particular jobs to rural Chicana/o areas. The narrator reveals that "Fe was intent on moving up quick at Acme International, therefore from the start she took on every gritty job available, just to prove to the company what a good worker she was" (178). Her industriousness does indeed pay off as she soon moves from a labor-intensive assembly position to a managerial rank.

After having suffered a miscarriage, Fe becomes aware of intervals of nausea and headaches, all of which do not curb her appetite for corporate success: "All in a day's work, she told herself all day. Yawning all the time never killed nobody was another thing she kept telling herself, down there alone" (182-83). Soon afterward, Fe died from a cancer that was "eating her insides like acid" (186). Fe's death is significant in that it is the only incidence of an uncompromising finality in the lives of any of the principal

women characters in the novel, who, up to this point, have followed La Loca's lead and been born, not simply resurrected, into the feminist countersociety and permitted eternal life within its newly designed sociosymbolic contract. With compassion, the narrator explains the magnitude of Fe's refusal to incorporate herself within this countersociety, which spelled her definitive end:

The rest of the story is hard to relate. Because after Fe died, she did not resurrect as La Loca did at age three. She also did not return ectoplasmically like her tenacious earth-bound sister Esperanza. Very shortly after that first prognosis, Fe just died. And when someone dies that plain dead, it is hard to talk about. (186).

Fe dies an absolute death because she does not participate in the signifying activity of a newly feminized countersociety, an act that would have enabled her to survive her particular experience.

With the passing of Fe, La Loca's last surviving sister, the novel begins to draw to a close. Quite paradoxically, since she instinctively fears humans and refuses to touch anyone except in the moments in which she is healing her sisters, La Loca somehow contracts the human immunodeficiency virus. The narrator faintly deduces a possible cause for such an improbable illness: "But it made sense that even if Loca never left home and seemed to have no use for society, some of her own sisters' experiences had affected her" (222). It is telling that La Loca, who has completed her assignment to initiate a feminist countersociety void of any patriarchal claim to authority, ultimately succumbs to a disease predicated on intimate, heterosexual contact via the lived

experiences of her sisters. This serves to imply that the patriarchal imperative poses an incessant threat on such a harmonious, feminized space.

La Loca does indeed die, and like her sisters Esperanza and Caridad before her, she succeeds in rendering a feminist conceptualization of her death as a transformation, yet another birth into another existence. From within this *post-mortem* existence, La Loca, like her sisters, is permitted an eternal presence within the familial context insofar as it resists yielding to the patriarchal imperative, thereby maintaining itself as a Kristevan feminist countersociety.

Even Sofi comes to acknowledge this newly voiced reality and takes La Loca's initiative even further, conceptualizing and organizing a group of mothers devoted to this very cause:

In the years to come, la pobre Sofia – encouraged not only by vecinos and comadres, but by the hundreds of petitions she received in the mail everyday, asking for prayers from the mother of the little crazy saint who died twice and her similarly ethereal sisters – became the founder and la first presidenta of what would later be known worldwide as the very prestigious (if not a little elitist) organization M.O.M.A.S., Mothers of Martyrs and Saints. (247)

This organization, M.O.M.A.S., is the tangible manifestation of the abstract countersociety defined by patriarchal sabotage in which La Loca lived and operated. Therefore, La Loca is permitted to exist eternally within its expressive margins: “she made very occasional ectoplasmic appearances at the national and international conventions” (248).

Conclusion

Castillo's ideological project is not without its problematic implications. Through the character of La Loca, Castillo succeeds in subverting a patriarchal claim to authority as each member of the Chicana family, except for Fe, has been able to affirm her own eternal existence within the feminized family. However, the fact that La Loca succeeds in thwarting a patriarchal paradigm seems paradoxical, at least superficially, since her character lays claim to its authority by positioning herself clearly within the parameters of Catholicism, an institution that is symbolic, if not the generator, of the patriarchal paradigm within Chicana/o culture. That is to say, la Loca sabotages patriarchy by claiming a notion of authority that results from the fact that she inhabits a space nearer to the definitive patriarch – God the Father.

Additionally, the endorsement of such a feminist organization (M.O.M.A.S.) makes La Loca's abstract countersociety into a substantial entity which also seems counterproductive to Castillo's feminist ideological project in the novel since, presumably, M.O.M.A.S. lays claim to a widespread authority over maternal and spiritual matters which would only serve to conform to the precepts of patriarchy inasmuch as such an endeavor is essentially an act of reverse castration – patriarchy is no longer sabotaged but simply renamed. Kristeva recognizes the inherent danger of undertaking such a lofty task as Castillo's, and she warns:

As with any society, the countersociety is based on the expulsion of an excluded element, a scapegoat charged with the evil of which the community duly constituted can then purge itself; a purge which will

finally exonerate that community of any future criticism. Modern protest movements have often reiterated this logic, locating the guilty one – in order to fend off criticism – in the foreign, in capital alone, in the other religion, in the other sex. Does not feminism become a kind of inverted sexism when this logic is followed to its conclusion? (Adams and Searle 480)

M.O.M.A.S. then, if adhering to the same exclusionary tendencies inherent in patriarchy's discourse, would seem to fit this bill. Castillo, through the voice of her ever-sardonic narrator, acknowledges this paradoxical, and perhaps unavoidable consequence of M.O.M.A.S.'s existence in the last pages of the novel:

Y one final rumor I would like to dispense with once and for all that followed Las mothers for a long time, but which I know for a fact was never true. To be a member of M.O.M.A.S. of course you had to have issued the *declared* santo or martyr from your own womb [...]

If you applied as a mother and were accepted, your word of having given birth was honored. You were La Blessed Mom, a mother of the new santita or martyr, and as long as you could pay your own way, you got to attend the regional and international conventions y ya. (251-52)

Castillo seems to have fallen into her own trap which, again, is doubtlessly unavoidable. Men represent the “excluded element,” the scapegoats that are not afforded the same claim to authority since they are not capable of being mothers. Thus, it would seem Castillo simply has turned phallogocentrism on its head, objectifying men by subjectifying women. However, Luce Irigaray cautions us against this understanding:

[T]he issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men's equals in knowledge. That they do not claim to be rivaling men in constructing a logic of the feminine that would still take onto-theo-logic as its model, but that they are rather attempting to wrest this question away from the economy of the logoi. [...] [T]hey should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side. (Irigaray 78)

The ideological project that La Loca's character symbolizes in *So Far From God* should not be regarded as an attempt to produce a newly feminized 'truth' but rather a singular attempt "to jam the theoretical machinery," that is, to sabotage patriarchy.

In shaping a Chicana consciousness that omits any notion of a patriarchal imperative from within the larger framework of Roman Catholicism, Castillo frustrates any previously held understanding of the latter. Likewise, in defining M.O.M.A.S. as a feminist countersociety that sabotages patriarchy insofar as it prohibits men, and specifically fathers, from becoming members, she is exploring the "disruptive excess" present in the logic of patriarchy itself.

In *So Far From God*, Castillo has opened up a discursive space of identity exploration wherein Chicanas may experience the freedom to be and to become whomever they must, unhindered by the limiting effects of a patriarchal claim to authority. The fact that her endeavor results in the marginalization of men means that

perhaps one day it will be possible to theorize a post-feminist ideological project that is capable of avoiding such exclusion. Perhaps Utopia is on the horizon.

So Far From God goes beyond an undemanding novel written in the tradition of magical realism, for this literary movement has been given meaning according to the sociosymbolic contract supported by the patriarchal imperative. Indeed, Castillo has sabotaged that imperative and, instead, we are gifted a novel that gives voice to a newly feminized tradition. The fact that La Loca's life can be defined as paradoxical, even bordering on the nonsensical (she flies, she converses with the dead, she dies from AIDS without ever having any physical contact with a human being other than her mother), only serves to support the feminist ideological project that Castillo is promoting, for to sabotage patriarchy is to privilege the illogical.

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