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Power and Place: Magical Realism as Feminist Resistance in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*

Ana Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far from God* and Karen Tei Yamashita's 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange* share several defining features, including their focus on political topics and Chicano/a identity, and have been scholarly and popularly described as magical realist literature (Delgadillo 888-914; Caminero-Santangelo 81-103; Simal-González 123-144). While definitions of magical realism differ, most scholars agree that magical realist authors consciously blend the fantastic with the real to produce statements on social issues (Scarano 27). Castillo and Yamashita both employ fantastic elements within their novels, namely literalized miracles and a physical Tropic of Cancer, to defamiliarize Chicano/a and intersectional identity within the United States. This essay, however, will focus on Castillo and Yamashita's use of magical realism elements in their novels as a feminist literary device. Specifically, I argue that both authors use a mythicized version of magical realism to subvert traditional associations of women and the domestic sphere. I will focus on the inward movement of the character Caridad in *So Far from God* towards an indigenous hyper domesticity, and the outward push against Christian representations of women through the character Rafaela Cortes in *Tropic of Orange* to do so, showing how magical realism may be considered a rhetorical technique for upholding marginalized voices.

Reading Castillo and Yamashita's novels as feminist works that consider the domestic role of women is not new. Scholars Carmela Delia Lanza and Theresa Delgadillo note Castillo's unique blend of "*mestiza*" identity with strong female characters who use the home as a feminist refuge from personal and collective traumas (65-66; 892). Scholar Nathan Dwight Frank argues that Yamashita subverts patriarchal ideas of place through the domesticizing of public places and a reversal of the "male gaze" (30). No scholarship so far, however, has considered these authors' depictions of feminist resistance directly through their use of magical realism as a literary technique.

So Far from God follows the story of Sofia and her four daughters, Fe, Esperanza, Caridad, and the reclusive La Loca, as they navigate the traumas and cultural diversity of 20th-century New Mexico. Through a series of literalized miracles, including La Loca's resurrection and Caridad's mutilating attack, sudden recovery, and transformation into a *curandera*, Castillo explores the effects of (post)colonialism, leading each of Sofia's daughters to their own symbolic deaths (22-23, 32-33, 37-38). While La Loca, who leaves the vicinity of her house only twice, offers an interesting representation of localized women's power, I will focus on Caridad, whose journey away from patriarchal domesticity towards an empowered indigenous home shows Castillo's use of magical realism to deconstruct societal expectations of women (245). Caridad's magical realist "miracles" help to delineate her mythicized journey into four main parts: her accident and self-healing, her power to heal others as a *curandera*, her retreat into the wilderness for one year, and her absorption into the earth through the Acoma deity Tsichtinako (Castillo 72-81, 211). As with many magical realist works, these events occur in a consciously mythicized way that elevates Caridad to a feminist symbol for resisting the equation of "women" and "home" through an overt drive towards a non-Western conception of domesticity (Scarano 15).

The first part of Caridad's journey establishes a baseline for gender roles in the patriarchal society that Sofia's daughters, excepting La Loca, venture into. Caridad begins as the antithesis of the quiet, monogamous, and subservient "ideal" woman, yet she achieves this through an appeal to male attention, as Castillo describes how Caridad embraces her beauty through drinking and promiscuity (26-27). While Caridad's subversion of patriarchal ideals is ostensibly feminist, her later attack, which Castillo describes as a "mutilation," and the law's failure to find a suspect—with the implication that she was "asking for it"—reveal Caridad's freedom as limited by the patriarchal system in which she participates (32-33). Through this series of events early in the novel, Castillo shows that empowerment cannot come from within the system of the oppressor. Caridad's first true turn towards agency occurs only when she starts her mythical journey towards creating her own domestic space in the world. This begins with her miraculous self-healing that returns her to how "she was before" (Castillo 38). Caridad's return to wholeness through her own will represents the first magical realist guidepost of her transformation towards feminist self-realization. It is only in healing herself, outside of Western structures of medicine, that Caridad can find a release from the traumas of colonialism and the patriarchy, traumas that are literalized and transmuted through her injuries and healing.

Caridad continues her turn towards the domestic in the third part of her journey with her new role as a "*curandera*" (Castillo 56). Her turn from working in a hospital to sharing her healing powers through traditional medicine administered at home further symbolizes the move away from Western ideals and epistemology (Castillo 50-56). During this time, Caridad creates her own physical home, decorating her "trailer" with secondhand and homemade goods, as well as religious imagery that depict what Delgadillo calls "hybrid spirituality," a blend of Catholic and indigenous beliefs and rituals (51; 888). At this point, Caridad gains more autonomy and

power through the creation of her sanctuary via her "magical" powers. Caridad's first major step into a re-envisioned domestic sphere contrasts with the "American Dream" of commercial success and female subordination that her sister, Fe, desires (Castillo 171). By retreating into her own version of non-Western domesticity, Caridad transforms the home into a place of power defined by her ability to perform miracles of healing that Western medicine cannot.

The third part of Caridad's journey marks an even greater transformation of what is considered "home." Caridad's year-long retreat into her "cave home" and miraculous survival in the wilderness after falling in love at first sight with a woman is a heightened, mythical withdrawal into a domestic space that is detached from the traditional home by both values and physical space (Castillo 72-81). Castillo clarifies this connection when a group of men who discover Caridad—one of whom is Francisco el Penitente, who later drives Caridad even further into herself—cannot move Caridad despite all their strength (86-87). This magical realist scene works as another sign that Caridad's feminine power has grown so strong that men cannot touch her anymore. This power directly comes from Caridad's choice to remove herself from the dominant society. Rather than running in fear, Caridad creates a place that is almost fully her own—what Castillo recognizes as "her mountain" (90). This agency is only disrupted when Catholic faith coopts her journey by naming her the "saint" called "La Armitaña"; Caridad's denial of her saintly status and return to her work in the trailer park as a *curandera*, her healing powers now enhanced, shows her increasing denial of the patriarchal roles forced upon her (Castillo 87-88).

Caridad's fourth and final turn towards her own "home" is the most powerful and symbolic. After a pursuit of Caridad and her love, Esmeralda, by Francisco—a pursuit that Castillo implies is sexually violent—Esmeralda and Caridad jump off a cliff at Sky City in

Acoma Pueblo and are absorbed into the earth by the Acoma deity Tsichtinako, who "guide[s] the two women back…deep within the soft, moist earth where [they]…would be safe and live forever" (211). This moment of magical realist imagery—two women disappearing into the ground—is Caridad's ultimate act of denial towards the dominant patriarchal society, represented by Caridad's attacker, Western medicine, and Francisco's Catholic obsession, that chases Caridad throughout her journey. Rather than acquiesce to masculine violence, Caridad chooses to create her own domestic safety in the earth where the sacred women of creation in Acoma belief live (Delgadillo 900-901). Caridad's new home in the earth finalizes her constant inward retreat towards her own subversive, indigenous, and syncretic idea of domesticity that undermines the sexist ideal of women at home. In each step, she creates her own spaces within the world, gaining agency and power. This hyper domesticity is doubly subversive, as it doesn't take the typical radical route of moving away from stereotypes of women as healers and homemakers. Instead, Caridad completely rejects the stigma that Western society has placed upon such "female" roles by discovering alternatives in her complex ancestral legacy. While Caridad is constantly running from male violence, both personal and systemic, her flight is one of feminist power, both literal and symbolic, as she denies the roles of either "slut" or "saint" that society pushes upon her. Her death, while tragic, does not represent defeat or patriarchal success, because viewing death as an "end" or "failure" is itself a flaw of the black-and-white Western-centric thinking that dismisses the spiritual world as finality rather than continuation. In the end, Caridad has simply begun a new journey in her own domestic space.

In *Tropic of Orange*, Karen Tei Yamashita similarly uses magical realism to produce a feminist transformation through the character Rafaela Cortes. Through a complex interwoven narrative, Yamashita's novel follows one week in the lives of seven characters who are

connected in various ways to a 20th-century Los Angeles. The first of these characters, Rafaela Cortes, works as a housekeeper at her L.A.-based boss Gabriel Balboa's Mexican retreat-in-progress that lies along the Tropic of Cancer (Yamashita 7-9). Through the discovery of a thin line stretched through an out-of-season orange on the property, which turns out to be a literalized, physical Tropic of Cancer, Rafaela embarks on a journey northward with her son, Sol, and the moving Tropic via the orange (Yamashita 13-15). Throughout this surreal series of events, Rafaela enacts a personal, mythicized journey towards a non-Western feminist agency and resistance, just as Caridad does in Castillo's novel. Yamashita, however, envisions this transformation as an outward push against stereotypes of women in the home, and Rafaela ultimately finds strength in a rejection of societal and Christian feminine roles by embracing the Chicano/a myth of Aztlán in her battle against the drug and infant organ smuggler Hernando (Yamashita 188-190). By weaving together mythic and magical realist imagery, Yamashita connects critical commentary on colonialism, racism, and immigration with Rafaela's move away from the strictures that come with the expectation for women to be quiet, domestic workers and towards a role of power and historical significance.

Rafaela Cortes begins the novel in a domestic role, "barefoot" and "sweeping" insects and crabs off the floor of Gabriel's house (Yamashita 7-9). Unlike La Loca or Caridad, Rafaela is the caretaker of a house that isn't even hers. Gabriel's fated orange, one of the plants not suited to the local climate that Rafaela must futilely try to grow for her boss, and the strange crabs that later inundate the house are two magical realist elements—both references to Gabriel García-Márquez's work—that show how Rafaela is disempowered and a victim of the fantastic events that occur around her (Yamashita 13, 58-60). As with Caridad, however, Rafaela is also in some ways already resistant to the limiting rolls imposed upon her by society. Though caught up in the

strange events that unfold as the Tropic of Cancer moves northward, dragging along the history, people, and traumas of Latin America into the United States and creating a confusion of distorted time and space, Rafaela manages to make Gabriel's property her own (Yamashita 181-230). She does so by recognizing Gabriel's inability to understand the local climate, planting her own garden with practical food and "medicinal herbs," and reading palms (Yamashita 8-13). These are moments of quiet protest, but the violence that Rafaela later undergoes, like Caridad's attack, shows that resisting from within the framework of a dominant power is not enough.

Yamashita also uses aestheticized magical realist imagery to reveal Rafaela's place in a restrictive, religiously patriarchal society. Scholars have noted the connection between magical realism and art, specifically Surrealism, and magical realist authors' tendency to focus on highly aestheticized objects, both realistic and fantastic (Scarano 15-16). Yamashita's use of detailed language imbues her prose with an artistic quality, but she also uses objects as symbols for hidden social realities. Rafaela's association with the fruit of a tree—the orange—that brings great change, recurring snake imagery, "an old fig tree," and her role as mother to the Christ figure Sol, the "sun" that moves northward with the orange and her literal son, connect her with Christian imagery of Eve and Mary (Yamashita 14-15, 62, 100, 129). Even more, Rafaela's understanding of "the importance of the surviving tree," her fearful intuition after the orange falls off the tree, and the fact that her knowledge of Hernando's smuggling leads to her kidnapping and climactic fight further relate her to the trope of original sin and the supposed importance of women to hide away in their safe domestic spaces to avoid causing trouble (Yamashita 3, 58, 102-103). Through these aesthetic magical realist elements, Yamashita places Rafaela's powerlessness within a larger context and makes her an amalgamation of patriarchal Christian female roles tied to Gabriel's home as both a pre and postlapsarian Eden.

Yamashita uses Rafaela's connection to such limiting societal roles to reinterpret both Christian and indigenous myth into an outward statement of feminist resistance in the dramatic scene of Rafaela and Hernando's fight. In this scene, which uses what Begoña Simal-González identifies as the magical realist transfiguration from self to "(non)human Other," Rafaela transforms into a powerful, "muscular serpent" while Hernando turns into a jaguar after the brand of his car (130; Yamashita 188). In their fight, which Yamashita describes in terms of "[b]attles passed as memories," Rafaela and Hernando turn into symbols of Mexico's colonial past, patriarchal mythic roles, and masculine violence (189). When Rafaela returns to her human form, she finds that she has consumed Hernando and gained power over her attackers, both literal and societal (Yamashita 189). This is not, however, a simple transferal of power. While Rafaela does gain agency over her situation and freedom from the restraints of domesticity, her victory is also a form of justice and an emotional processing of the collective grief and trauma caused by colonization. Hernando's own name refers to the Spanish colonizer of Mexico Hernán Cortés, and as a character he represents evil, patriarchal violence, and the violence of colonization. Interestingly, however, Rafaela's own last name of Cortes hints at their shared history—Yamashita seems to suggest that the history of colonization is complex and invades both the colonizers and the colonized.

This magical realist symbolism of Rafaela and Hernando's fight also allows Yamashita to re-envision the Christian role of woman through the indigenous myth of Aztlán. The chapter in which Rafaela and Hernando fight is titled "*Aztlán*," suggesting that the scene is a reenactment of the indigenous legend of Tenochtitlan, with the eagle and the serpent, and the "fulfillment of the return to Aztlán" as "the original land of the Mexican people" (Yamashita 188; Jansen 112). Yamashita, however, writes these myths as a specifically feminist reenactment and

reinterpretation of Christian imagery. Here, Rafaela transforms the Edenic serpent of sin and evil into the Aztec feminine earth serpent. By conquering the colonizer—the jaguar form of Hernando—Rafaela rejects her given role as the bringer of original sin, consuming Western gender roles, transcending Western-centric patriarchal visions of women, and turning herself and the serpent into a symbol of feminist resistance, empowerment, and rebellion against sexism, racism, anti-immigration sentiments, and the traumas of colonization. Yamashita further complicates this transformation, however, when Rafaela returns to Sol, who has brought the myth of Aztlán to fruition in L.A. through the movement of Mexico's border into the United States via the "forbidden fruit" of the orange-as-Tropic-of-Cancer, reassociating herself with the Biblical role of Mary (220-225). Like Caridad, Rafaela does not gain power by giving in to the patriarchy through assuming a masculine role, but finds a way to incorporate a syncretic Western and indigenous faith to gain agency outside of the oppressive system, rewriting traditions and freeing herself from domestic limitations.

This analysis shows two main ways in which Castillo and Yamashita use similar magical realist tactics to explore Chicana and Latina feminism in their novels. By using magical realist events, images, and themes, *So Far from God* and *Tropic of Orange* revision patriarchal Western roles of women into new myths of syncretic faith. Through the characters of Caridad and Rafaela, Castillo and Yamashita explore feminist resistance by starting within the patriarchal domestic sphere and providing mythicized, magical realist journeys towards agency. Both authors accomplish this differently, as Castillo moves Caridad inward towards a liberatory hyper domesticity, while Yamashita takes Rafaela away from the symbolic prison of Gabriel's home and towards a larger destiny. In other parts of her novel, however, Yamashita expands the domestic sphere to an egalitarian, gender-inclusive, and public space through the homeless

takeover of an L.A. freeway, undermining the idea of "home" as a private or necessarily feminized space (Frank 32-36). The multilevel domestic shifts in both Castillo's and Yamashita's novels suggest the need for further research into the role of place in *So Far from God* and *Tropic of Orange*.

The complexity of these novels also suggests implications for the role of magical realism as a method for examining trauma. Simal-González hypothesizes one origin and use of "magical realist techniques" to cope with "personal and collective trauma" (135). Castillo and Yamashita's works provide examples of magical realism used as a defamiliarizing technique for discussing the complexities of race, gender, colonialism, and identity. Analyzing their novels from the lenses of disability, critical theory, and intersectionality would deepen an understanding of how magical realist literature deals with trauma. This also suggests that magical realism may be understood as a technique rather than just a genre, and additional research may elucidate an expanded definition beyond geographic and temporal limitations.

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