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Indispensable Lives: Magical Realism and Postcolonial Resistance in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

The idea of economic “winners” and “losers” is one that we tend to view as an inevitable or even natural outcome of modernity and civilization. However, the majority of postcolonial theories make the argument that by tracing the history of colonialism and imperialism, we can pinpoint the origin of this mindset and the oppressive structures it helped create. The colonialism of the 15th century, specifically, set in place a hierarchy of power throughout the world, creating these ideas of “winners” and “losers”—with the colonizers being at the top of this structure (as they still are today). With colonialism, the “New” World experienced several genocides committed against indigenous populations, as well as the institution of slavery, both of which further cemented this hierarchy. Since then, US and European capitalist and patriarchal societal values have formed the hegemonic structures of culture and politics that continue to dominate the world today. These structures manufacture the idea that those who do not fall within them are, to borrow Walter Mignolo’s term, “dispensable”:

It so happened that human agents who controlled knowledge and money had the authority (not necessarily the power) to classify and manage sectors of the human population ... The colonial matrix of power provided and provides legitimacy to constant processes of racialization decreeing human lives dispensable under the progressive and never ending face of economic growth. For that reason, capitalism with a human face is either an honest utopia or a perverse lie. (Mignolo 75-6)

European colonialism in Latin America, specifically, had a substantial effect on the political instability of the region during the 20th century, allowing for the rise of various brutal dictatorships and the formation of oppressive economic hierarchies. Colonial legacy and American neo-colonization continue to have a large presence in these cultures. This presence forms the foundation of Latin American and Caribbean resistance and social criticism literature, with the genre of magical realism tied closely to it.

Today, and throughout the latter half of the 20th century, magical realism is most closely associated with Latin American literature. However, the term was originally used in the early twentieth century by German art historian Franz Roh. He used the term—*magischer realismus*—to describe the aesthetics of a rising form of expressionism that blurred the lines between physical reality and magical elements (Zamora and Faris 33). Competing, in a sense, with the similar aesthetics of new objectivity and magical idealism (which dates back to the 18th century), Roh didn't even place much importance to the term. In the preface to his book, *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (*After Expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of Newest European Painting*), he explains: "I attribute no special value to the title 'magical realism.' Since the work had to have a name that meant something, and the word 'Post-Expressionism' only indicates ancestry and chronological relationship" (Zamora and Faris 16). From the start, magical realism has been difficult to define, and especially difficult to differentiate between other similar aesthetics.

Magical realism didn't find an identity of its own until the 1960s—and that identity remains difficult to express today. Due to its complex history and tricky definition, Guenther refers to it as the “present-day historian’s nightmare” (Zamora and Faris 34). While it’s easy to point out what magical realism *isn't*, landing on a specific definition can prove to be very difficult as well. Luis Leal’s essay, “Magical Realism in Spanish America,” part of Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris’ collection of essays about magical realism, explains magical realism in a way that I find particularly helpful to this essay:

It’s aim, unlike that of magic, is to express emotions, not to evoke them. Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structures ... In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life. (Zamora and Faris 121)

Works of magical realism acknowledge the mysteries of life and tries to “untangle” them in a way that communicates larger idea about reality. In Latin America, specifically, magical realism has often been used to untangle the reality of oppression at the hands of colonial powers and corrupt governments.

The genre of magical realism in Latin American literature, while it certainly derives influence from the European genre, has become synonymous with postcolonial resistance, especially with the global popularity of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien Años de Soledad*:

Magical realism has become a popular narrative mode because it offers to the writer wishing to write against totalitarian regimes a means to attack the definitions and assumptions which support such systems (e.g. colonialism) by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely. (Bowers 4)

In the same way that magical aspects of the genre break down Western/Northern notions of physical reality, magical realist writers use the genre to break down oppressive systems, like (neo) colonialism. However, as I will discuss more towards the end of this paper, defining literature as magical realism can become problematic, since the definition of magical is so fluid. This is an issue specifically when Northern (American/European) readers and critics label cultural beliefs and traditions present in Latin American and U.S. Latino/a literature as magical, rather than acknowledging cultural differences in thought and perception. For this reason, many Latin American and U.S. Latino/a writers have been distancing themselves from this genre (Bowers, 2). In this paper, I will discuss magical realism as a postcolonial genre of resistance in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and whether or not labeling these novels as magical realism is a problematic form of exoticizing and other-ing. I compare these two novels—one written by a Chicana (Mexican-American) woman in 1993, the other written by a Dominican-American man in 2007—to look at the similarities in the way they challenge US/European cultural and political dominance. I also believe that comparing my analysis, along with criticism about the presence of magical realism in these two very different novels, raises important questions about the nature of the definition of this genre.

Castillo and Díaz's criticisms of hegemonic power are what categorize these two novels as postcolonial works of literature. Specifically, they call attention to the neo-colonial power of the US and how this has affected less dominant cultures in particularly harmful ways. By deconstructing the dominant US/European cultures,

Castillo and Díaz place importance on their own cultures, and the cultures of their characters. Ultimately, this resistance places value on the lives that Western capitalism has deemed “dispensable.”

Postcolonial theory developed as a way to discuss writings outside of hegemonic culture, and as a way to formulate a new perspective with which to discuss marginalized experiences. The connection to magical realism stems from this marginalization: “The characteristic of magical realism which makes it such a frequently adopted narrative mode is its inherent transgressive and subversive qualities. It is this feature that has lead many postcolonial, feminist, and cross-cultural writers to embrace it as a means of expressing their ideas” (Bowers 66-7). Bowers argues that the nature of magical realism is “transgressive and subversive,” making it a useful genre for resistance and social criticism. I will now look at the connections between magical realism and resistance in *So Far from God* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

In these two novels, Díaz and Castillo call attention to harmful structures that work to silence their characters, mirroring the way hegemonic powers silence cultures that don’t fall within these structures. Castillo’s Chicana frame of reference, however, is a significant point of contrast between the two, and is important to understand in analyzing her deconstruction of hegemonic consumerism and the patriarchy. Castillo’s main characters, the Santos family—made up of Chicana women living in New Mexico—navigate the worlds that tend to silence the Chicana story. Because of this history of silencing among Chicanas, Alvina Quintana defines Chicana literature as a force of resistance in itself: “As a classification, Chicana

literature crosses disciplinary boundaries because it unifies the cultural, historical, and literary in a way that forces scholars to confront the limitations of artificial barriers” (Quintana, 13). Castillo’s narrative depicts these “barriers,” effectively communicating the cross-cultural experience of Chicana women, and how these barriers to their identity affect and, more specifically, silence them. In her collection of biographical essays, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa explains through her personal experiences how these barriers affected her sense of identity:

Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values ... I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. (Anzaldúa 85)

This type of mindset—that Chicano/as are “zero, nothing, no one”—is exactly what Castillo wants to get rid of in her narrative, and she uses aspects of magical realism to do so.

In telling the story of the Santos family, Castillo resists this “alienation” that has resulted in generations of identity-less Chicanos that Anzaldúa accounts. Her use of magical realism is crucial to this resistance:

Magical realism’s assault on these basic structures of rationalism and realism has inevitable ideological impact ... Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women. (Zamora and Faris 6)

In keeping with her Chicana voice as one of resistance, Castillo's narrative calls attention to and criticizes systems of "rationalism and realism," because these are the very systems that have historically alienated the Chicano/a identity. In *So Far from God*, Caridad's narrative, or all four sisters, most directly targets this deconstruction. Caridad is constantly subjected to oppression at the hands of these structures, but her survivorship through both magical and real elements reflects Castillo's criticisms and use of magical realism as a subversive genre.

Caridad, after divorcing her high school sweetheart Memo, creates a reputation for herself after countless encounters with men. She is brutally attacked one night, and until later in the narrative, we are made to believe that a man attacked her and committed acts of sexual violence against her. However, we find out that it wasn't a person who attacked her, but rather a force:

And they three knew that it wasn't a man with a face and a name who had attacked and left Caridad mangled like a run-down rabbit ... It was not a stray and desperate coyote either, but a thing, both tangible and amorphous. A thing that might be described as made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment. It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never ever forget, it was pure force. (Castillo 77)

This force—or "*malogra*" as it's named—and its physical mutilation of Caridad represents the way oppression mutilates, or damages, minority cultures and individual identities. Specifically, *malogra* can be read as a symbol of the patriarchy in the way it exploits Caridad's body and silences her after the attack (her throat is stabbed, among other horrific injuries that leave her unable to speak). "By

envisioning the violence against herself as one caused by the *malogra*, Caridad allows us to see it in all its systemic force—it represents the overarching hegemonic discourse of patriarchy” (Delgadillo 906). *Malogra* is a “systemic” force of oppression, the harms of which are expressed through Caridad’s individual experience. Castillo, in her description of *malogra*, not only recounts how powerful it is as a structure—it holds the “weight of a continent” and is “indelible as ink”—but also how this power brutally affects the individual.

Castillo also forms her criticism through Caridad’s relationship with doña Felicia, a curandera (Mexican folk healer), and her methods that help to heal Caridad after her attack. Doña Felicia takes Caridad under her wing as a curandera, and by watching doña Felicia’s healing methods; Caridad begins to heal completely—physically and mentally:

When they were not treating patients, life became a rhythm of scented baths, tea remedies, rubdowns, and general good feeling for Caridad. Her body, already externally repaired from the mutilation it had undergone, now was slowly restored internally by the psychic attentiveness she received from her teacher and which she learned to give to herself.
(Castillo 63)

Everything about Caridad’s healing process contrasts Western medicine views of healing. Her physical ailments spontaneously heal themselves, without any help from surgery or medicine, and her mental health is perfected by the methods of indigenous Mexican medical practices. Castillo breaks down Western beliefs of health through Caridad’s recovery by detailing the successful methods of the curandera. In his 1968 anthropological study of curanderos/as, Ari Kiev explains the

importance of these beliefs in the ability of curanderos/as to the Mexican-American identity.

The Mexican-Americans who derive from a traditionalist background, continue to lead a life whose basic assumptions and values are often at variance with the pragmatic, present-oriented, and materialist values of American society. The beliefs and customs of the curandero have persisted for much the same reasons as other values and customs, that is, because of their familiarity and utility. (Kiev 22)

Curandero/as are one aspect of Mexican culture that, as Kiev states, stands in stark contrast to American values of pragmatism, conceptions of time, and materialism. Therefore, by including the success of the curanderas' practices, Castillo not only resists these values, but also points out their harmful tendencies. Caridad's most significant healing comes from the native methods of the curandera and the relationships she maintains with the women around her who take care of her, rather than the westernized medical procedures that attempt to heal her right after the attack. The inclusion of these methods is just one example of the way Castillo injects this narrative with important aspects of native Mexican culture as a way to resist total Americanization of her Latina characters.

Similar to *malogra*, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the curse of *fukú americanus* embodies various dominant structures and sources of oppression, and in this way is a representation of simply the idea of hegemonic power—no matter the source. Díaz uses *fukú* to portray the harmful presence of neo-colonialism, capitalism, and the patriarchy in the lives of his characters. Yunió, the narrator, explains *fukú* as, “generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World,” and it was first released with “the arrival of

Europeans on Hispaniola” (Díaz 1). Fukú is a constant reminder of the colonial history of the Dominican Republic, as well as the neo-colonial force of the US over the country. Because fukú is a curse, it also represents the way the Dominican Republic still struggles as a result of its colonial history.

Both *malogra* and fukú are associated with violence, and therefore speak to the cycle of violence that is perpetuated by oppressive forces. However, while *malogra* is a force that magically commits violence against Caridad, fukú manifests itself through the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, who ruled brutally over the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. The majority of the main characters in *Oscar Wao* (Beli, Lola, Oscar), never experience life under the rule of Trujillo. However, because Trujillo and the curse of fukú are so powerful, he maintains a strong presence in each of these characters’ lives. In fact, Trujillo’s force is so evil that it is often portrayed and understood as magical, or supernatural—placing his power on the same level as *malogra*. “Shit was so tight that many people actually believed that Trujillo had supernatural powers! It was whispered that he did not sleep, did not sweat, that he could see, smell, feel events hundreds of miles away, that he was protected by the most evil fukú on the Island” (Díaz 226).

Trujillo’s rule was so incredibly cruel and powerful, that in some instances the only way to comprehend him is to think of him as a supernatural figure. Similarly, the oppression and dominance that *malogra* represents is also so cruel that, for Caridad, it can only be explained as a force. Both Trujillo and *malogra* commit such terrible acts of violence, so atrocious that Castillo and Díaz use elements of magical realism

in order to comprehend and communicate this violence, ultimately to untangle this reality.

While Trujillo is certainly connected to fukú, the curse dates back to the colonization of the Dominican Republic, and is also connected to present day US neo-colonialism over the country. Because fukú is a symbol of oppression of the Dominican people, the US' influence in Trujillo's rise to power connects the US not only as a neo-colonizer, but also as an oppressor.

The Novel of the Dictator often denounces the connivance or collaboration of the United States in this type of regime that prevented Latin American countries from achieving true political independence. Although on the surface the absolute rulers appear to be omnipotent, sooner or later they are exposed as mere figureheads who hide behind the mask of a supposedly democratic government but are, in effect, controlled and manipulated by the CIA and the U.S. Marine Corps. (López-Calvo 17)

This isn't to say that Trujillo is blameless in his cruel dictatorship, but it's important to recognize the role that the US played in Trujillo's rise to power, and how this connects to fukú. While Trujillo might be some type of manifestation or arbiter of fukú, the source of the curse—like the source of his power—is clearly colonialism and neo-colonialism.

In order to make this connection between fukú and the US, however, I should take a few steps back and portray the neo-colonial influence that the US maintains over the Dominican Republic—both historically and as portrayed in *Oscar Wao*. Throughout the twentieth century, the US military occupied the Dominican Republic for a number of years (1916-24, 1965). In 1907, when the Dominican Republic failed to pay back its debt to the US, the Dominican government was “forced to sign

a humiliating agreement whereby the United States gained direct control of the nation's customs for fifty years," until Trujillo and the American government agreed to end this in 1940 (López-Calvo 16). The United States has been economically dominant over the Dominican Republic for a long time, and this dominance is one of the many hierarchies Díaz is critical of:

Díaz traces a trajectory of hegemonic power structures, from colonialism through the *Trujillato* to the current era of neoliberalism, employing the persistent presence of the *fukú* to suggest that the Dominican Republic has never truly been liberated from the tyranny of colonial rule. (Mahler 121)

Fukú is consistent throughout this novel as a reminder of the harm caused by the dependent economic relationship between the Dominican Republic and the US.

The economic neo-colonization and the unequal power dynamic it creates between the US and Dominican Republic is portrayed specifically through Beli's desires to leave the Dominican Republic as a young girl. Castillo also criticizes the dominance of capitalist values perpetuated especially by the US, and does so through her character Fe. Fe and Beli are so similar in the way they maintain consumerist-driven, romanticized ideas of the American Dream. To start with Beli; when she begins her affair with the Gangster, she constantly dreams of leaving the Dominican Republic and moving to America: "Dismissing her barrio as an 'inferno' and her neighbors as 'brutos' and 'cochincos,' she bragged about how she would be living in Miami soon, wouldn't have to put up with this un-country much longer" (Díaz 128). Beli cares so little for the Dominican Republic that she casts it off as an "un-country," in favor of the American lifestyle that the Gangster promises her, equipped with a husband, big house, and children. When Beli finally gets the

opportunity to move to America—seemingly a dream come true—she never finds this world she'd been idealizing, and actually ends up worse off. "According to the logic of the novel, Beli's attempt at escaping by immigrating to the USA does not move her any further away from the *fukú*, since the source of the curse is the imperial power itself" (Mahler 127). The true source of Beli's problems is not Dominican culture, as she believes, but rather the neo-colonial power of the US.

While Fe, on the other hand, spends her whole life in the US, she too completely rejects her Mexican heritage and culture, preferring instead to undertake very American, consumerist values and dreams. "Fe, the third of Sofi's daughters, was fine. That is, twenty-four, with a steady job at the bank, and a hard-working boyfriend whom she had known forever; she had just announced their engagement" (Castillo 27). Fe lives her life solely to conform to American ideals of hard work and material rewards. She's clearly more preoccupied with the *image* of happiness—getting married, having a nice house—than a deeper harmony that her family members are able to achieve, however temporarily. Throughout the novel, she has trouble relating to her sisters: "while Fe had a little something to talk to Esperanza about, she kept away from her other sisters, her mother, and the animals, because she just didn't understand how they could all be so self-defeating, so unambitious" (Castillo 28). Fe values the system of capitalism and everything that comes with it, like ambition and hard work. This is why Esperanza is the only family member she feels somewhat connected to because, as a journalist, she is the only one with a more traditional type of career. "Her uncritical acceptance of the hegemonic discourse of middle-class America imposes distance between Fe and a

family not considered typically American in such discourses” (Delgadillo 909). Fe’s preference for American middle-class culture contrasts the Mexican culture of her family, which is more focused on spirituality and connections to nature.

However, similar to Beli, Fe’s obsession with the American Dream leads to her destruction. She quits her job at the bank in order to start working for Acme International, a factory where she makes a much larger salary. She makes more money than she did at the bank, but she’s kept in the dark about the materials she works with and what she’s making. It quickly becomes clear to the reader, however, that she works in an extremely dangerous environment with hazardous chemicals. The other women she works with show signs of health issues, but they are all ignorant to the relation between these health problems and the chemicals they’re working with. Fe, too, admits to having constant headaches, she always smells like glue and can’t get rid of it, but she still doesn’t stop working (Castillo 182). She can’t say no to the money she’s earning because that would keep her from reaching the American Dream she’s still so desperately clinging to. “There did seem to be something eerie and full of coincidences about it all to Fe’s mind, but she kept working right through the headaches that by then were part of her daily routine” (Castillo 180). Fe is so brainwashed by the Acme as well as her own consumerist desires that she ignores these red flags. Even after she is diagnosed with cancer, she still goes back to work: “Fe could not even walk, much less go to work—which she still did whenever she felt well enough because of all the payments due on all the things that she and Casey bought on credit” (Castillo 187). Once again, Fe’s material and capitalist desires keep her going back to a job that’s literally killing her. More

than this, however, because she has fallen into this endless cycle of debt—a product of capitalism for those on the “losing” side—she doesn’t really have a choice whether or not to go back to work. “Consumer society offers the illusion of choice to disguise the absence of real agency to change one’s life” (Caminero-Santangelo 95). When Fe started at Acme, she believed that her inevitable financial independence would grant her “real agency” over her life, but this is all just an “illusion.” Because of this illusion, Fe places higher significance on material success than the spirituality and connection to nature that the rest of her family, and Chicano/a culture overall, values. Beli, too, chooses to place higher significance on chasing after the illusion that is the American Dream, over that of her Dominican heritage. Beli, while eventually able to leave Santo Domingo as she’d hoped to, never finds the ideal American lifestyle she seeks. Her entire life is summed up as she sits on the plane headed to New York:

What she doesn’t yet know: the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías, the loneliness of Diaspora, that she will never again live in Santo Domingo, her own heart. What else she doesn’t know: that the man next to her would end up being her husband and father of her two children, that after two years together he would leave her, her third and final heartbreak, and she would never love again” (Díaz 164).

Beli’s dreams of America (having a huge house in Miami) are completely different than what she experiences. That’s because, even though the American Dream is an illusion perpetuated by capitalism and consumerism, for Beli, as an immigrant, she is just that more out of reach from it. Instead, she experiences the “loneliness of Diaspora,” and leads the rest of her life never loving again, away from her “own

heart.” It is no coincidence that both Fe and Beli die of cancer, a disease that inflicts people in the US more than in most other countries.

In his anthropological study of *curanderos/as* and Mexican culture, Kiev analyzes this type of rejection of heritage in favor of an American lifestyle. He explains this as an actual mental disease associated with dependency:

Conflicts over dependency are particularly accentuated in those who have renounced their families and become acculturated to the American way of life. Such people are called *agringados* and are usually social climbers, prostitutes, drunkards, and others who have broken with Mexican traditions ... By trying to become something he is not, an individual loses his inborn sources of strength, incurs the wrath of God, and becomes subject to the dangers of overwhelming ambition. Such individuals are likely to become sick furthermore, because they are not *contentado*, or satisfied. (Kiev 65)

While Kiev’s study focuses specifically on Mexican culture, Beli can easily be labeled as an *agringada* in the same way that Fe is. Both are guilty of being “social climber[s]” and of being discontent with the cultures they come from. Symptoms of being an *agringada*, like “overwhelming ambition” and the desire to always want more are key aspects of pursuing the American Dream and participating in consumer culture. Fe, especially, suffers from this “overwhelming ambition,” as it is the reason she takes the job at Acme in the first place. Her desire for material wealth blocks her from seeing the harm this job is causing to her physical body. Fe and Beli, through the deterioration of their health from cancer, both lose their “inborn sources of strength.”

Fe’s character is another way Castillo uses her narrative to convey Chicana resistance of the “capitalist neocolonization” of Chicanas (Alarcón). “Tired of being

second class citizens in dominant Anglo American culture, Mexican Americans ... began accounting for their oppression through a model of internal colonization where they were the colonized and Anglo Americans were the colonizers” (Alvarez 13). Fe and Beli’s desperate attempts at Americanization portray this colonized/colonizer relationship, and specifically how harmful this power dynamic is to the colonized especially. Theresa Delgadillo explains, in reference specifically to *So Far from God*, “The novel’s stress on the harm caused by such notions of progress rests on both this negative history and the continued presence of Western conceptions of progress in the lives of its characters” (Delgadillo 891). Fe and Beli’s acceptance of “Western conceptions of progress” is the means by which Castillo and Díaz resist these exact concepts.

Fe and Beli’s desires for the traditional American lifestyle is why these two have such similar narratives: both see their attainment of the American Dream in terms of the success of their romantic relationships with men and the future these men promise them, both are let down by these men, but ultimately, both are able to achieve some slight version of the American Dream they once imaged—Fe through her marriage to Casey and the brief financial success she experiences before the total destruction of her health, and Beli through leaving Santo Domingo and her few years with Oscar and Lola’s father.

In the same way that American capitalist neo-colonization oppresses Fe, *malogra*, and it’s representation of the patriarchy and therefore the shaming of women’s sexuality, oppresses Caridad. Caridad, however, is able to overcome the *malogra* attack with the help of the female relationships in her life, as well as

through her deep reconnection to nature. Caridad's healing process, spanning a large portion of the novel, contains multiple magical aspects as well. When she first heals physically from the attack, it is due to the efforts of Sofí and La Loca, who haven't taken care of her and prayed for her:

Sofí stepped back when she saw, not what had been left of her daughter, half repaired by modern medical technology, tubes through her throat, bandages over skin that was gone, surgery piecing together flesh that was once her daughter's breasts, but Caridad as she was before. Furthermore, a calm Fe was holding her sister, rocking her, stroking her forehead, humming softly to her. Caridad was whole.
(Castillo 38)

Caridad overcomes the physical violence that *malogra* inflicted upon her body in this very tender scene with her sisters and her mother. While Caridad also manages to heal physically, she also helps Fe heal from her own heartbreak. After Fe's fiancée leaves her, she goes into frenzy where she screams non-stop, day and night. However, as if inspired by Caridad's sudden restoration to her old self, she gets quiet: "Fe?" Said Esperanza—who was equally taken aback by Fe's transformation. She had stopped screaming" (Castillo 38). This form of healing for Caridad and Fe—so reliant on the relationships with her sisters in this scene—contrasts that of Caridad under the care of Westernized medicine—"tubes," "bandages," "surgery piecing" and holding her together—with a magical healing process that comes from her sisters' and her mother's love and prayers. This aspect of Caridad's healing process—that is, the feminine presence in her life—is a form of resistance in itself against the patriarchal system. Caridad isn't defeated by the attack or by the oppression of the patriarchy—instead, the female relationships and care in her life bring her back even stronger.

This power behind female relationships and assemblage is also present in *Oscar Wao*. When Trujillo's sister (the wife of the Gangster) finds out about Beli and the Gangster's affair, she has two men—the ones who end up almost killing her—follow Beli and intimidate her. As this is going on, La Inca knows just how much danger Beli is in, and she resorts to prayer in order to save her:

Shrugging off her weariness, she did what many women of her background would have done. Posted herself beside her portrait of La Virgen de Altagracia and prayed ... she was joined by a flock of women, young and old, fierce and mansa, serious and alegre ... In no time at all the room was filled with the faithful and pulsed with a spirit so dense that it was rumored that the Devil himself had to avoid the Sur for months afterward. (Díaz 144-5)

Díaz communicates the power of women when they join together and use the spiritual as a way to resist oppression. Every type of woman joins the group in this scene, which reflects the importance of collective agency among women in resisting the patriarchy. While praying for one woman in particular, this group of women uses their connections to one another—as well as their spiritual connection to La Virgen de Altagracia, a *female* religious figure—in order to fight against the systemic power of the patriarchy and the almost omnipotent power of Trujillo.

Another aspect of resistance present in Caridad and Beli's survivorship is their connection to nature. Caridad spends a year living in a cave, developing a deep relationship with nature and completely forgetting the society that surrounds her:

A year passed before Caridad was found one day living in a cave in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains ... the young woman was hardly recognizable ... more than likely she had bathed in the stream that ran a few miles down below ... At least we know what her water supply was and from the other things the men found that day, jackrabbit pelts and the bones of

other similar small animals, it was also apparent as to how she kept herself alive. (Castillo 86)

Caridad lives harmoniously with nature over the course of this year—using its resources to continue her healing process. When the men who find her, one of which being Francisco el Penitente who later provokes Caridad’s death, try to get her out of the cave and take her back into society, Caridad fights them off with a new “herculean strength” that she has acquired (Castillo 87).

Caridad’s newfound strength threatens the men who try to take her away from the cave, and ultimately brings them back to her, apologizing: “... the act of many men brought to their knees before the holy hermit, all begging forgiveness for their audacious attempt at manhandling her” (Castillo 88). The physical strength that Caridad has developed—arguably magical—represents the strength to be found when women reconnect with nature. This strength is so threatening to the patriarchy that it literally brings men to their knees in front of Caridad, begging her forgiveness and apologizing for “manhandling” her body. Caridad’s connection to nature begins to deconstruct patriarchal tendencies to exploit women’s bodies as well as the Earth’s resources.

Caridad’s connection to nature, one that represents an inherent connection between women and the Earth, relates to ideas that form the foundation of ecofeminist theory. According to one aspect of this theory, the connection between women and nature derives, in part, from the fact that both women’s bodies and Earth’s landscapes are exploited by hegemonic power structures like the patriarchy and capitalism. Both are viewed as “dispensable” in the desire for economic and sexual power. Caridad’s connection to nature and supernatural strength, however,

“stands in stark contrast to the Western view of earth as surface, as female body to be exploited” (Delgadillo 899). Castillo deconstructs this Western capitalistic system of exploitation by communicating how Caridad and the Earth’s landscape are indispensable, and weren’t created for patriarchal, economic progress.

Castillo’s criticism of the patriarchy isn’t only directed at American/western patriarchal cultures, however. Francisco el Penitente’s persistent stalking of Caridad disturbs her to such a deep level that she is driven to commit suicide with Esmeralda, and also connects to Castillo’s larger criticism of the male dominance over Catholicism. Francisco’s obsession with Caridad begins after seeing her in the cave, and he determined that she had “proven herself to be all that was chaste and humble with that year of self-imposed ascetic life” (Castillo 192). Rather than recognizing the empowerment Caridad receives from her connection to nature, as explored earlier, Francisco instead chooses to believe that Caridad has redeemed herself of her poor reputation with men by choosing to live a life of chastity. Even though Francisco respects Caridad in this scene, this respect is still a form of oppression in the way it shames Caridad’s sexuality.

Once Francisco learns of Caridad’s homosexual feelings for Esmeralda, his obsession takes a dark turn. After abducting Esmeralda (although he isn’t physically forceful or violent with her, this “abduction” certainly seems to affect Esmeralda mentally), he follows her and Caridad to Acoma, where his obsession compels the two women to plummet to their death. The two women jump from the mesa, but their bodies are never seen or found. Instead, the spirit of Tsichtinako, or “The Invisible One,” “guide[s] 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). Caridad and Esmeralda’s deaths portray the ultimate union between the female body and the earth, and it’s extremely significant that this death results from running away from the obsession and gaze of a man.

In her explanation of the folk Catholicism practiced by many Chicano families on the border, Gloria Anzaldúa explains, “The male-dominated Azteca-Mexican culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes” (Anzaldúa 49). While Anzaldúa is speaking metaphorically, because many female deities in Mexican folk Catholicism are given physical characteristics of animals rather than humans, this is literally what happens to Caridad and Esmeralda. Francisco el Penitente tries to label Caridad and Esperanza’s lesbian relationship as “monstrous,” literally and symbolically driving them into the ground by doing this. However, this death is actually a liberation for Caridad and Esmeralda: “Caridad and Esmeralda’s leap from the top of the mesa at Acoma poignantly illustrates the idea that humans are of nature, rather than above nature ... the earth is not a coffin, but ‘alive in the same sense that human beings are alive’” (Delgadillo 899). By disappearing into the Earth, Caridad and Esmeralda find a space where they can be at one with nature, as well as “safe” to explore their homosexuality without patriarchal oppression. Even though Francisco’s male dominance drives these women to their death, at the same time, they are freed from oppression and turned into to deities because of their union with the earth.

Caridad and Esmeralda's freedom from Francisco through their death mirrors the liberation that Castillo views for lesbian Chicanas from the patriarchy. In her essay, "Queering Chicano/a Narratives: Lesbian as Healer, Saint and Warrior in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*" Colette Morrow details how lesbianism has historically been ignored in Chicano/a culture, and dismissed as an "Anglo thing" by this community (66). She quotes Carla Trujillo, "Chicana lesbians are perceived as a greater threat to the Chicano community because their existence disrupts the established order of male dominance, and raises the consciousness of many Chicanas regarding their own independence and control" (qtd. in Morrow 66-7). Because pursuing a lesbian relationship with Esmeralda is another female relationship that continues Caridad's healing after the attack of the *malogra*, Caridad continues to break down the patriarchal system that has violently oppressed her. This also explains Francisco's disturbing obsession with Caridad – her homosexual feelings towards Esmeralda are terrifying to him because it questions not only his dominance as a man, but also his belief that Caridad is "all that is chaste."

Díaz also points his criticism toward the patriarchal values of Dominican society. Díaz characterizes ideal Dominican hyper-masculinity countless throughout the novel, specifically in explaining how Oscar does not fit in—at all—with this ideal. "Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands" (Díaz 24). This hyper-masculinity is so associated with Dominican culture, and is completely based on having sex with as

many women as possible. By repeating these standards for “normal” Dominican men, Díaz sets up the oppressive force of the patriarchy, and its strong presence throughout this novel. Just one page over from this passage describing Oscar’s inability to “pull bitches in with both hands,” we learn of Lola’s history with sexual violence:

When she was in fourth grade she’d been attacked by an older acquaintance ... Recently she’d cut her hair short ... partially I think because when she’d been little her family had let it grow down past her ass, a source of pride, something I’m sure her attacker noticed and admired. (Díaz 25)

By juxtaposing the Dominican ideals of masculinity that Oscar does not live up to with Lola’s attack, Díaz reveals the connection between hyper-masculinity and sexual violence. When Lola tries to live up to Dominican ideals of femininity—with her hair grown “down past her ass,” she almost automatically becomes a victim of the hyper-masculine patriarchal values. Díaz also explains how these ideals harm Oscar: “victimized by the other boys—punches and pushes and wedgies and broken glasses” (Díaz 22). In doing this, Díaz reveals the harm that the patriarchy has on both female lives and male lives and the way it perpetuates violence in many different forms.

Similar to Castillo, Díaz also uses connections to nature as a form of resistance against patriarchal oppression. If fukú in *Oscar Wao* represents hegemonic structures and neo-colonial influence, the repetition of the golden mongoose throughout the narrative serves as a (magical) symbol for nature and resistance. The golden mongoose first appears when Beli is lying in the sugar cane fields after being beaten up by Trujillo’s men. Trujillo’s sister, after learning of her

husband's affair with Beli, sends men to kidnap and beat her—so badly that her unborn child dies in her womb. The men leave Beli for dead, but she has a vision of the mongoose that helps her survive:

So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large and placed its intelligent little paws on her chest and stared down at her. *You have to rise. My baby, Beli wept. Mi hijo precioso. Hypatía, your baby is dead. No, no, no, no, no. It pulled at her unbroken arm. You have to rise now or you'll never have the son or the daughter. What son? she wailed. What daughter? The ones who await. It was dark and her legs trembled beneath her like smoke. You have to follow*" (Díaz 149).

It's unclear here whether Beli is dreaming or conscious, but this is one of the more magical elements of the novel. The mongoose convinces Beli to survive this brutal attack, and therefore the oppressive systems associated with Trujillo and fukú. Beli's magical connection and conversation with this mongoose is a significant aspect of their resistance against fukú. Díaz explains the mongoose as a source of resistance in itself:

The Mongoose, one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers. Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean. Since its earliest appearance in the written record ... the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. Believed to be an ally of Man. Many Watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived to our world from another, but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed. (Díaz 151)

The mongoose, described as almost a magical animal here—Yunior doesn't really refute the idea that it's not from another world—has historically been on the side of the oppressed, against "kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies." This is also

depicted in the migration of the mongoose: from Africa, to India, to the “other India,” in the way it has been present in many regions that faced colonial oppression. Beli’s connection to the mongoose connects her to centuries of resistance against oppressive forces in both a magical and very real way. Because this scene is also set in the canefields, Beli is also connected to countless other lives that were deemed dispensable by the hegemonic powers. This is because the canefields represent the institution and oppression of slavery, since that is where slaves most often worked in the Dominican Republic (Mahler 128). Beli uses the strength from her connection to nature through the mongoose as well as her connection to these other oppressed lives to summon herself out of the canefields and survive this violence.

In keeping with the cycle of violence that stems from oppression, years later, Oscar is faced with almost the exact same situation. When he travels to Santo Domingo, he falls for Ybón, his grandmothers “semi-retired” prostitute neighbor, who also happens to be the girlfriend of a very corrupt cop, the Capitán (Díaz 279). The Capitán, angered by Oscar’s relentless pursuit of Ybón, sends two of his men to kidnap and beat Oscar, in a scene almost identical to Beli’s. Oscar also has a conversation with the Mongoose, and it convinces him to survive in the same way it convinced Beli:

Oscar remembers having a dream where a mongoose was chatting with him. Except the mongoose was the Mongoose. What will it be, muchacho? it demanded. More or less? And for a moment he almost said less. So tired, and so much pain—Less! Less! Less!—but then in the back of his head he remembered his family. Lola and his mother and Nena Inca. Remembered how he used to be when he was younger and more optimistic ... More, he croaked. -----, said the Mongoose, and then the wind swept him back into darkness. (Díaz 301)

Oscar is so weighed down by the oppressive forces that target him, that at first he gives up and tells the mongoose, "Less! Less! Less!" However, Oscar, just like Beli, is inspired by the resistance that the mongoose embodies and is ultimately able to say, "More." He rejects giving up, and in doing so rejects fukú and oppression that seek to silence him. While Oscar, as a man, does not have the same connection to nature as some of the female characters I've discussed, he does connect to it through the mongoose in the way that he's been oppressed by the same hegemonic structures that exploit the Earth and women's bodies. Oscar also feels the same connection to the canefields and other lives lost and treated as dispensable in this area that Beli felt. The memory of oppression and violence, along with these other connections to nature, motivate Oscar to survive, and at least start to speak out against the oppressive forces responsible for these acts of violence.

After the attack, Oscar starts to have very fantastical dreams of his family members. These dreams include Abelard, Beli's father and Oscar and Lola's grandfather, wearing a mask, showing Oscar a blank book, representative of the book about Trujillo that Abelard was never able to publish (Díaz 302). Oscar also dreams that rather than him being beaten in the cane field, it's Lola and Beli, and instead of helping them he runs away (Díaz 306). These dreams connect to the overall theme of silencing in this novel, and this theme speaks to the voiceless experience of those within postcolonial cultures. Abelard is the first member of the Cabral/de León to experience this silencing. He is arrested, tortured, and killed, supposedly because he won't allow Trujillo near his extremely beautiful, fourteen-year-old daughter (knowing that he will rape her). After telling this version of the

story, Yunior, however, brings up a “secret history” of Abelard that, while not proven, is more likely to be the cause of his murder.

Sometime in 1944 (so the story goes), while Abelard was still worried about whether he was in trouble with Trujillo, he started writing a book about—what else?—Trujillo. By 1945 there was already a tradition of ex-officials writing tell-all books about the Trujillo regime. But that apparently was not the kind of book Abelard was writing. His shit, if we are to believe the whispers, was an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime! A book about the Dark Powers of the President, a book in which Abelard argued that the tales of the common people told about the president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some ways have been *true*. (Díaz 245).]

Yunior then goes on to explain that not only were all potential copies of Abelard’s book destroyed, but even samples of his handwriting are nowhere to be found—“not one single example of his handwriting remains” (Díaz 246). Not only is Abelard silenced in his death, but also any possible legacy of knowledge and criticism he could have left behind are completely destroyed.

In *So Far from God*, each of the four Santos sisters’ narratives communicates criticism and resistance. Caridad, Esperanza, and La Loca all experience somewhat magical deaths—both Caridad and Esperanza die in very mysterious ways (no one is actually sure *how* they die) and are seen and communicated with after their deaths. The first time La Loca “dies,” she is “resurrected,” and the second time her death resembles more of a transcendence than a death. Fe, on the other hand, the most Americanized of the sisters, dies in a very “American” way: “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

the first prognosis, Fe just died” (Castillo 186). Because Fe is so connected to American culture, she does not return magically like her other sisters.

However, Fe’s death is a result of the systems of capitalism and consumerism’s exploitation of her life, and, although not magical, in this way her death is comparable to those of her sisters. All four daughters die throughout the course of this novel, representing the systematic silencing of Chicana women.

Chicana feminists particularly have a long history of being silenced, both outside of the more dominant Chicano movement, as well as within it. In describing the history of Chicana literature and how it fits within the larger Chicano movement, Norma Alarcón explains, “Unfortunately, much of [the] early work by Chicanas often goes unrecognized which is indicative of the process of erasure and exclusion of raced ethnic women within a patriarchal cultural and political economy” (Alarcón 249). While all the Santos sisters are silenced in their deaths, Fe’s narrative shows most clearly how the capitalist system silences minority women especially. After Fe is diagnosed with cancer, she revisits the plant and realizes that her entire story has been covered up, and she, along with the rest of the women working there, have been effectively silenced:

The whole plant had been completely remodeled in the short time since she had been let go, down to the replaced sheetrock. And all the stations, not just the foreman’s ... were partitioned off. Nobody and nothing was able to know what was going on around them no more. And everybody, meanwhile, was working in silence as usual. (Castillo 189)

Acme silences and erases its workers’ stories even before they die—and it’s no coincidence that these are mostly Mexican-American women who are being silenced by this work. Alarcón explains one of the biggest forms of oppression of Chicana

women is the consumerist economy of the US: “In fact most of these women have been (and continue to be) the surplus sources of cheap labor in the field, the canneries, the maquiladora border industries, and domestic service” (Alarcón 250-1). Fe’s narrative depicts how Chicana women can be exploited by the capitalist structures of the US, and how this structure also works to silence those that it exploits. This connects to the ecofeminist reading of Caridad’s relationship with nature—both Fe and the ecosystem are exploited by Acme’s practices, and neither have a voice to call attention to this injustice.

While the lives of many of the characters in *So Far from God* and *Oscar Wao* are treated as dispensable by the hegemonic systems in place, their voices still seem to linger on after death. Towards the end of each of these narratives, we begin to see that their voices and stories gain some traction towards change—however slight. In *Oscar Wao*, even though Abelard’s book and all his work is completely destroyed, Oscar still dreams of him holding up a blank book, trying to communicate with him. However, some time after his attack in the canefields, it’s clear that Oscar is changing, and starting to find a voice for his family members who have lost theirs:

Six weeks after the Colossal Beatdown he dreamed about the cane again. But instead of bolting when the cries began, when the bones started breaking, he summoned all the courage he ever had, would ever have, and forced himself to do the one thing he did not want to do, that he could not bear to do. He listened. (Díaz 307)

By listening and acknowledging the forces of oppression weighing down on Oscar and his family, Oscar begins to find a voice through which to communicate these injustices. However, the voice that Oscar finds doesn’t actually directly affect the system which it criticizes after his death—his family, similar to the Santos family

after Fe dies, tries to report Oscar's murder, but nothing comes of it. "Four times the family hired lawyers but no charges were ever filed. The embassy didn't help and neither did the government" (Díaz 323). Not surprisingly, Oscar never receives justice from the system; however, where he does make change is by empowering Yuniór's voice to tell the *story* of Oscar and the Cabral family. After Oscar dies, Yuniór explains that he starts to have fantastical dreams, very similar to the ones Oscar had about Abelard holding up a blank book. However, in Yuniór's dreams, it is Oscar holding up the book to him:

He's standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the eyeholes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes. Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look, and I recognize this scene from one of his crazy movies. I want to run from him, and for a long time that's what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling. *Zafa*. (Díaz 325)

In this dream, *zafa*—the "counterspell" to *fukú* (Díaz 7)—is represented in the blank book. The voice that is crucial to Oscar, the Cabral family, and all victims of *fukú* and oppressive forces, is found through story telling. After Oscar chooses to listen to the voices that were being silenced in his own dream, he passes these voices on to Yuniór, the only character that can then communicate these voices to the world.

Another hopeful instance of finding a voice as resistance against oppressive forces is through Lola's daughter, Isis. She is the youngest generation in this novel, and Yuniór predicts that she too will have questions about her family:

If she's her family's daughter—as I suspect she is—one day she will stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers...One day when I'm least expecting there will be a

knock on my door. Soy Isis. Hija de Dolores de León...I'll take her down to my basement and open the four refrigerators where I store her tio's books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers—refrigerators the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything...And maybe, just maybe if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it. (Díaz 330-1)

Yunior's act of storing Oscar's writing in refrigerators, as well as sharing them with Isis in the future, is how Yunior resists the silencing forces that once silenced Abelard by destroying his writing and seek to silence Oscar as well. Isis represents hope by asking questions about her family history. By talking about her family, she breaks down the tradition of silence, and in doing so can possibly "put an end" to the oppressive forces, or at least their effect on her family. The repeated image of the blank book suggests that Abelard is silenced, representing the silencing of all forms of resistance or criticism against hegemonic structures. However, because Yunior and Oscar both dream about this blank book, Díaz suggests that this voice can be rediscovered and used by future generations to end oppression.

In *So Far from God*, while the youngest generation, the Santos daughters, all die as a result of the oppression they face, Sofí, their mother, is able to find a voice through her trauma. After becoming the first mayor of Tome, Sofí also becomes the president of M.O.M.A.S., or "Mother's of Martyrs and Saints," a collective of mothers who celebrate the sainthood and martyrdom of their children (Castillo 247). By starting this organization, Sofí not only finds a way to memorialize her daughters, but she also does so in a way that continues resistance against the patriarchy, specifically that which is present in Catholicism. The M.O.M.A.S. are completely

woman-centric: “you had to be the mother of a *daughter* to even be considered” (Castillo 247). Some critics argue that the M.O.M.A.S. are a form of resistance that ends this novel with an optimistic view of deconstructing hegemonic discourse: “the feminist utopian gesture of this chapter positively attempts to reverse the patriarchal power of the Catholic church throughout history” (Heide 307). While I do believe that the M.O.M.A.S. are a force of resistance against the patriarchy of religion, I doubt that Castillo really envisions their work as creating a “feminist utopia.” She’s too realistic to depict such a drastic societal change—in fact, the M.O.M.A.S. eventually become victims of the same capitalist system that was so detrimental to the Santos sisters. “Every year the number of vendors of basically more useless products and souvenirs than what I tourist could find on a given day at Disney World grew” (Castillo 249). The M.O.M.A.S. is definitely a step in the right direction toward deconstructing the patriarchy. However, Castillo isn’t necessarily making the leap to a “feminist utopia” that some critics have suggested she does. This is central to her focus with this novel, however, on the decentralization of hegemonic power. While the M.O.M.A.S. aren’t a perfect manifestation of resistance, they still work to bring back the voices of those martyrs and saints who have lost theirs, like Sofi’s daughters.

Looking at my analysis of resistance in these two novels, there are various magical aspects that are key to this resistance and efforts to end the tradition of silence. However, there are also many cases of very realistic forms of resistance as well. In this way, defining/categorizing these U.S. Latino/a works of literature under the genre of magical realism can be problematic, especially since the magical

elements within these novels aren't overtly "magical." As explained earlier, the term "magical" is difficult to define—there are no clear lines as to what is magical and what is realistic, especially when using a cross-cultural perspective. Perceptions of these two realms are based on cultural beliefs and practices, leaving their definitions in constant flux. What North Americans may think of as magical, other cultures may point to as another realm of reality. Gloria Anzaldúa describes her experiences with the spiritual realm, which she perceived as reality, from her Chicana point of view, and also how she dismissed this perception in order to conform to Northern rationality:

Like many Indians and Mexicans, I did not deem my psychic experiences real ... I allowed white rationality to tell me that the existence of the 'other world' was mere pagan superstition. I accepted their reality, the 'official' reality of the rational, reasoning mode which is connected with the external reality ... and is considered the most developed consciousness ... While anthropologists claim that Indians have 'primitive' and therefore deficient minds, that we cannot think in the higher mode of the consciousness—rationality. They are fascinated by what they call the 'magical' mind, the 'savage' mind, the *participation mystique* of the mind that says the world of the imagination—the world of the soul—and of the spirit is just as real as physical reality" (Anzaldúa 59).

By recounting her Chicana experiences and perception of the spiritual world as "physical reality," Anzaldúa pinpoints the problems with the genre of magical realism. Northern/US ideologies tend to only deem rational events and occurrences as reality, labeling every other perception as "magical." This is problematic because, as Anzaldúa suggests, this writes off all other perspectives that would argue that the spiritual world is just as "real" as the rational one. Instead, rational thinkers dismiss these points of views as "savage," and therefore inferior.

Analyzing the role of the curandera, specifically, in *So Far from God* raises questions about whether the aspects of this novel that are characterized as magical are truly magical, or if they are depictions of Mexican spirituality and culture. From the perspective of a Northern/American reader, the idea of a curandera, or a spiritual healer, seems magical in a way:

Both traditionally and in contemporary practice, the curandera mediates multiple domains – spiritual, temporal, and cultural – for the community because she is understood as simultaneously occupying the borders of the natural and the supernatural. (Morrow 68)

The curandera, in navigating both the “natural and supernatural,” seems to be an element of magical realism in the novel—at least, this is the understanding produced from a North American perspective. Marta Caminero-Santangelo is critical of this understanding: “Critics continue to conflate the novel’s representation of miracles with magical realism” (Caminero-Santangelo 83). This is a way in which US/Northern perspectives are guilty of other-ing Castillo’s perspective by deeming elements like the curandera magical. “As a sign of the exotic, ethnic ‘other’ especially in a US context, magical realism sells” (Caminero-Santangelo 84). Caminero-Santangelo is critical of the way US readers label Castillo’s novel as magical realism, rather than acknowledging that these “magical” aspects are actually perceived as reality within certain Mexican cultural beliefs. This essentially lumps her with other Latin American magical realists just because of their geographic location.

At the same time, both Castillo and Díaz seem to be well aware that they are blurring the lines and confusing the definition of magical realism in their works in order to make a larger argument.

Where a text displays fidelity to a set of cultural modalities—where it puts its faith in the cultural verities excluded from western ways of seeing—it may, metonymically, use magical realism to generate an effect of granting access to the modes of perception that characterize that culture’s world view. While this process might appear to be phenomenological, rather than ontological, the line between the two is often deliberately blurred in order to enable the assertion of a specific cultural identity. In other words, certain ways of seeing the world become the basis for assertions about the way that part of the world, othered by metropolitan powers, really is. (Warnes 15)

Both Castillo and Díaz were aware that their novels would be categorized as works of magical realism, but they purposefully blurred the magical elements in their novels with cultural beliefs in order to communicate and “assert” their own cultural identity. This connects to Castillo and Díaz’s resistance of hegemonic structures, in favor of a more decentralized cultural system. They don’t just criticize the cultural dominance of the Global North, but they also criticize hegemonic structures in place within their cultures as well (Castillo of Chicano rejection of the Chicana experience and the patriarchy of the Catholic Church, Díaz of the hyper-masculine tendencies of Dominican culture and Trujillo’s legacy). Díaz and Castillo resist the idea of dominance as a whole, acknowledging the harm that it causes to those on the margins. Ashcroft explains that postcolonial literature “refutes the notions that often attract postcolonial critics: that cultural practices can return to some ‘pure’ and unsullied cultural condition, and that such practices themselves ... can embody [such] an authenticity” (Ashcroft 41-2). Rather than asserting a “pure” native culture over the hegemony they criticize (like many postcolonial theorists would assume), Castillo and Díaz work towards decentralizing all types of dominant culture,

ultimately working to create a system that places all perspectives and identities at an equal level.

While I think it's important to acknowledge the problems with the genre of magical realism, I will not come to any definite conclusion as to whether or not *So Far from God* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* fall within this genre. Doing so, I believe, would be counterproductive to my goal with this essay. Rather, I want to highlight that Castillo and Díaz create their own space within literature for their characters, their novels, and for them as writers. While they are critical of hegemonic discourse, and resist neo-colonialism, they also create a voice, by intentionally confusing the genre of magical realism, that isn't solely defined by being an "other."

"I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white ... my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (Anzaldúa 81). Castillo and Díaz use fictional characters and narratives to truly "overcome the tradition of silence," both creating and asserting this voice. Díaz does this through his unique mixture of fantasy and magical realism, and Castillo does this through her unique connections between indigenous Mexican beliefs and magical realism. Díaz and Castillo refuse to allow their perspectives of reality—as encompassing both the physical and the spiritual—to be silenced, diminished, or placed inferior to hegemonic beliefs. In creating this voice, they force Northern/US readers and critics to listen and question the definition of magical realism and its application to certain literatures. Most importantly, however, by creating these voices, Castillo and Díaz reject the idea that

colonialism, capitalism, and the patriarchy are all formulated on: that any life is dispensable. By asserting that *all* lives are indispensable, Castillo and Díaz progress toward a decentralized balance of power among cultures, governments, and individuals.

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