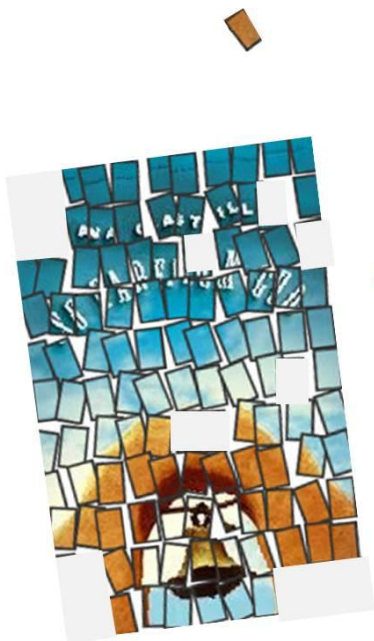




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(So Far from God: A Novel, 2005)

Magic realism "encourages readers to participate in the deconstruction, rather than the validation, of established worldviews" (Henitiuk, 2003, p. 418).

The Use and Purpose of Magic Realism in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*

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To the children in my life, who are my source of magic

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Abstract

This thesis examines the way Ana Castillo uses magic realism in *So Far from God* (1993) and the purpose for such a use. The need for this study derives from the little critical knowledge available on this respect due to either a generalised focus on other aspects of the novel or to a structural perspective taken in analyses of its genre. This work, therefore, explores the use of magic realism in *So Far from God* based on postmodern theories which allow for contributions of other approaches. Magic realism is analysed in terms of the criteria proposed by Bortolussi (2003) in relation to the novel's plot, narrator, narrative style and author. These categories are analysed by means of a qualitative and interpretive methodology.

The present study reveals that *So Far from God* (1993) is characterized by an incongruous plot, a matter-of-fact narrator that seems to believe in this fictional world, a narrative style that flouts the notions of mimesis and reference, and by the presence of an ironic implied author. Furthermore, it concludes that the purpose behind which Castillo may have used magic realism in her novel is to foreground the human capacity for constructing different worldviews.

Key words: *So Far from God* – magic realism – postmodernism

Resumen

Esta tesis estudia la forma en que Ana Castillo usa el realismo mágico en *So Far from God* (1993) y el propósito para tal uso. La necesidad de este estudio yace en el poco conocimiento crítico disponible al respecto debido a un foco generalizado en otros aspectos de la novela o a una perspectiva principalmente estructural en los análisis de su género. Este trabajo, por lo tanto, explora el uso del género basado en teorías postmodernas que permiten la contribución de otros enfoques. El realismo mágico es analizado en términos de los criterios propuestos por Bortolussi (2003) en relación al argumento, el narrador, el estilo narrativo y el autor implícito de la novela. Estas categorías son analizadas a través de una metodología cualitativa e interpretativa.

El presente estudio revela que *So Far from God* se caracteriza por un argumento incongruente, un narrador indiferente que parece creer en este mundo ficticio, un estilo narrativo que no respeta las nociones de mimesis y referencia, y un autor implícito irónico. Asimismo, concluye que el propósito por el cual Castillo puede haber usado realismo mágico en su novela es para enfatizar la capacidad de los humanos de construir diferentes visiones del mundo.

Palabras clave: *So Far from God* – realismo mágico – postmodernismo

1. Introduction

Originally considered as the expression of an authentically magical world, the literary genre magic realism was born in a context of seductive exoticism. Although many theorists have made important contributions now considered as valid by most critics in the field, the real meaning of magic realism remains elusive. The existence of elements from the two codes of the supernatural and the real is one of the few certainties criticism of the genre has; however, for some critics, there is a prominence of realism interrupted by magical events, whereas others find that these two codes are fused into one incoherent fictional world. As controversial as this aspect of magic realism, ideas about the role of the narrator, the narrative strategies and the author's purpose, among others, are also at issue. On the other hand, to further obscure any attempt at theoretical certainty, the number and variety—in terms of characteristics, literary devices, origins and purposes—of fictional works classified as magical realist not only from the critical perspective but also from the marketing one, is bewildering. The result is a controversially and contradictorily defined genre.

So Far from God (1993) by the Chicana author Ana Castillo is one among many other fictional works widely acknowledged as magic realist. However, little has been proved on this matter by the body of criticism studying the novel. In fact, the novel has been mainly studied from perspectives that take its thematic content, rather than its generic one, as their focus. *So Far from God* (1993) tells the story of Sofia, a Chicana woman and mother of four daughters, in her evolution from a submissive woman towards one who struggles for her rights against patriarchal, social and economical forces. This learning process is the result of her suffering after she loses her four daughters whose cruel deaths follow no less cruel lives. The story takes place in Tome, which according to Platt (as cited in Rosell Olmedo, 2012) is a real small town in the American Southwest suffering from high levels of pollution. Due to its dealing with themes of racism, political and environmental

injustice, patriarchal oppression, materialism and the influence of Catholicism, *So Far from God* has majorly been studied from feminist and postcolonial perspectives. In this line of studies, it is asserted by most of the critics that the purpose of the novel is the subversion of traditional ideas and the empowering of previously silenced voices.

Unlike most critical works on *So Far from God* (1993), this thesis focuses on magic realism in the novel and, in so doing, it seeks to contribute to a better understanding from the perspective of its genre. With this as the fundamental query of this work, attention will be given to the characteristics of the use Ana Castillo makes of magic realism in her novel and to the possible purpose(s) she pursues. The study mainly addresses Bortolussi's (2003) theory whose ideas allow for an integration of the postmodern point of view with insights from other approaches.

This introductory section is followed by seven sections. The state of the arts reviews the critical literature on *So Far from God*, with a focus on whether the different studies deal with the novel's genre and on how they do it. Inasmuch as this review shows a need for an analysis of magic realism in the novel based on a cogent theory, the research focus is presented and followed by the objectives of this work. Subsequently, the theoretical framework presents the ideas on which the research was grounded. This section comprises two main theoretical approaches. The first of these approaches deals with magic realism. Given the fact that the evolution of the term has greatly affected its vague conceptualisation, attention is given to the process by which magic realism came to exist. Afterwards, the genre is defined and characterised by mainly resorting to Bortolussi's (2003) theory and including other critics' contributions as well. The second perspective aims at providing the necessary knowledge about the historical, social and cultural context into which the novel has been set. The section that follows explains the methodological decisions made in this research and presents the analytical categories that were explored in relation to the novel. Next, the analysis and

interpretation section discusses the use and purpose of magic realism in *So Far from God*. These two aspects of the genre are presented separately in the section. A conclusion, which precedes the reference list, including the main points discussed brings this dissertation to close.

2. State of the arts

The critical works analysing Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* that have been considered as relevant to this thesis can be divided in two big groups. There is a group of critics that, though taking for granted the novel belongs to magic realism, focuses on other aspects which directly or indirectly relate to the categories this thesis presents as typical of magic realism. The studies in the other group make the genre their focal point.

The first group of studies takes the use of magic realism for granted and, instead, discusses the way the novel explores themes of patriarchal oppression and social injustice. In other words, the novel is mainly analysed from two perspectives: feminist and postcolonialist. The novel's subversion of patriarchal notions is studied from feminist approaches by Sirias and McGarry (2000), Rodríguez (2000), Lanza (1998), Rosell Olmedo (2012) and Sauer (2000). For Sirias and McGarry (2000), *So Far from God* strongly attacks patriarchal tradition through three main devices: naming, the questioning of gender roles and the deconstruction of Catholic tenets. Rodríguez (2000), in his article "Chicana/o Fiction from Resistance to Contestation: The Role of Creation in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*", explores the aim of Castillo in her opposition to patriarchy. After strictly analysing Harlow's definition of "resistance literature" understood as literature that is "directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (as cited in Rodríguez, 2000, p. 64), Rodríguez coins the term "contestatory literature" to define those literary works that

question a particular idea without being part of a social movement, but in more subtle ways. For him, *So Far from God*, surfaces this contestatory strategy particularly through the revisioning of religious beliefs. Other three feminist analyses consider that the novel provides an opportunity for exalting women and their role. Lanza (1998) views the home as the place where the women in *So Far from God* can find support and protection from an outside world that hurts them and as the place from which they can wage their struggle against this world. Rosell Olmedo (2012) proposes that through the heroines' "earth-binding consciousness" (p. 1), Castillo dignifies the often underscored idea of a close-knit relation of Chicana women to nature. Finally, Sauer (2000) believes that by depicting women who do not comply with religious codes as saints, not only does Castillo oppose to patriarchal impositions, but she also gives authority to women's spirituality. On the other hand, Walter (1998) and Lasa (2011) concentrate on the postcolonial issues explored in *So Far from God*. In an analysis of Castillo's narrative, Walter examines three of her works and considers *So Far from God* as an example of the strategy of relocation in its search for collective self-definition. Quoting concepts by Spivak, Bhabha and Said, Walter explains his ideas while touching on issues of gender and race as discussed in *So Far from God*. Lasa (2011) grounds her analysis on a concept of the borderlands as a space where opposing discourses meet and new ontological notions are born. Thus, she shows how the different binary oppositions the novel explores—urban and rural life, the sacred and the profane, English and Spanish and the magical and the real—allow for new constructions.

Among the critics that analyse the novel from the perspective of its genre are Aldakheel's (2008), Faris (1995), Mermann-Jozwiak (2000) and Noriega Sánchez (2000). Their insights are mainly structuralist, following Chanady's ideas. It is worth discussing Chanady's taxonomy before analysing the contributions made by this set of critics. In 1985, Chanady attempted to define the genre in relation to three criteria (Bortolussi, 2003; Noriega Sánchez, 2000):

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1. co-existence of two “autonomous coherent levels of reality” (Noriega Sánchez, 2000, p. 13): the natural and the supernatural,
2. resolved antinomy allowing co-existence of these two autonomous worlds, and
3. authorial reticence to judge the veracity of the facts.

As Bortolussi (2003) puts it, Chanady's theory has not received the critical treatment it deserves, but rather it has been widely and unquestionably used. Through a careful reading of this taxonomy, Bortolussi concludes in its inaccuracy. The co-existence of two autonomous codes is refuted by Bortolussi (2003), arguing that if the rational world admits magical occurrences, it could not be called autonomous, and viceversa. The cancellation of the first criteria, invalidates the second one since, from an ontological perspective, the fusion of two worlds does not correspond with the tension that should arise from an antinomy. Finally, the last criteria, that of authorial reticence to explain the facts, is also argued against by Bortolussi, for whom it is not clear what constitutes an explanation and who claims that if magical events could be traced back to myths or beliefs of other sorts, then that could be considered as an implicit explanation in itself. The third criterion, therefore, could or not exist in magical realist works losing its defining condition. Apart from the inaccuracy of the taxonomy, it is not sufficient to define magic realism leaving aside other aspects of the genre, like the role of the narrator, which may distinguish it from other literary genres.

Aldakheel's (2008) research, in spite of having the purpose of examining the role of magic realism of the novel to make the metamorphoses of the characters possible, offers a very general view of the genre in question. Magic realism is not defined and, instead of being referred to as a genre, it is said to be an element. In her article about the main characteristics of magic realism as an international movement, Faris (1995) resorts to examples of such characteristics from eleven novels, among which *So Far from God* is included. Due to this quite large set of literary works, the use of magic realism in the novel is, again, only generally

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reviewed. Although not directly investigating magic realism, Mermann-Joswiak (2000) offers some insight on the use of parody and revision of traditional discourses, which are part of the genre. Mermann-Jozwiak (2000) asserts that in its use of these postmodern strategies, besides responding to postmodernism, *So Far from God* also modifies postmodern paradigms adding a political dimension to this movement. Noriega Sánchez's (2000) research is one of the few studies that really focuses on the novel from the perspective of its genre. In her analysis of magic realism, Noriega Sánchez (2000) sees the genre as central to postmodernism. Her comprehensive work called *Magic Realism in Contemporary American Women's Fiction* analyses the use of magic realism in several literary works and concludes that magic realism in *So Far from God* places special emphasis on gender and on the grotesque. Noriega Sánchez (2000) contributes with sound observations as to the ironic purpose of magic realism in the novel made explicit through parodic and metafictional dimensions. However, even though she recognises the irony behind the genre, she defines magic realism by mainly resorting to Chanady's taxonomy. In this sense, there is a contradiction in Noriega Sánchez's work between her assertion that magic realism is a postmodern strategy and her use of a taxonomy that does not effectively nor sufficiently define the genre and fails to consider aspects that are important from a postmodern perspective.

From this overview of the current knowledge about *So Far from God*, it is possible to identify the need for a study of the use of magic realism in the novel from a perspective that considers not only the work's structure, but also other aspects of it, like postcolonial and postmodern claims, which may affect its genre.

3. Research Focus

As seen above, critical studies on Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* acknowledge that the genre of the novel is magic realism. However, most of them analyse other aspects of the novel (Sirias and McGarry, 2000; Rodríguez, 2000; Lanza, 1998; Rosell Olmedo, 2012; and Sauer, 2000). Furthermore, although a few works do concentrate on magic realism as used in *So Far from God* (Aldakheel's, 2008; Faris, 1995; Mermann-Jozwiak, 2000; and Noriega Sánchez 2000), their findings result ineffective to understand the genre's characteristics and purpose. The use and purpose of magic realism in *So Far from God* needs to be further explored by means of a cogent theoretical framework that provides sound criteria to define the genre. Therefore, this thesis resorts to Bortolussi's criteria to define magic realism since not only do they examine the genre's structural aspects, but they also consider other aspects, like the postmodern statements the genre makes.

Therefore, with the general aim of attaining sounder critical knowledge of magic realism in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, the specific objectives of this work are:

- to characterise the use of literary techniques, tools and devices related to magic realism that Ana Castillo makes in her aforementioned novel, and
- to determine her purpose(s) in using the genre.

4. Theoretical Framework

As it has been argued in the State of the Arts section, there is a need for a conceptualisation of magic realism based not only on formalist views, which aim at determining the structure behind magic realist texts, but also grounded on approaches that give importance to other features of the text like the purpose and the context. Given this need, the theoretical framework here proposed integrates ideas of critics that see the genre's structure as well as its political and ontological

claims as essential if we are to define magic realism. Preceding these formalist, postcolonial and postmodern ideas and aiming at a contextualisation of them, an account of the origin and evolution of the term is offered.

In close relation to the political statements the genre makes and because an understanding of the context in which Castillo's *So Far from God* was created may provide better insight of the novel, there is a brief reference to Chicano's culture in the final part of this section.

4.1. Magic Realism: Formalist, Postcolonial and Postmodern contributions.

4.1.1. Origin.

The term "magic realism", since it was first coined until it definitely acquired its meaning of a literary genre, has been used to express different ideas in different fields.

Literary critics generally present Roh as the person who first coined the words in 1925 (Guenther, 1995; Leal, 1995; Simpkins, 1995; Slemon, 1995, among others). However, Warnes' article "Naturalising the Supernatural: Faith, Irreverence and Magic Realism" (2005) distinguishes itself from most other studies on this genre by crediting the introduction of such a term to the German writer and philosopher Novalis in his notebook in 1798. According to Warnes, the term "magical realist" is used by Novalis to signal someone "who would not be bound by the limits that govern the lives of ordinary humans" (p. 2). Yet the term was not further developed by Novalis.

The commonly-proclaimed creator of the term, Roh, later applied the term in an aesthetic context using it to describe a new style in German painting which "present[s] familiar things in unusual ways" (Simpkins, 1995, p. 150). The fact that many magic realists frequently apply this strategy has led to the belief that magic literature derives from magic realist painting, "one of the principal misconceptions that has contributed to cloud the theoretical legitimacy (...) of the genre" (Takolander, 2007, p. 243). As Takolander notices, though some magic realist

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authors do portray the ordinary as magical, one of the fundamental characteristics of magic realism is exactly the opposite, i.e., the portrayal of the supernatural as if it were natural.

The first use of the term in relation to literature occurred in Italy in 1927, when Bontempelli referred to a new European tendency in the first editions of his journal "900", and it was first applied to describe Latin American literature by the Venezuelan Uslar-Pietri in 1948 (Guenther, 1995; Warnes, 2005). In words of Guenther (1995), "it is in Latin America that the concept was primarily seized by literary criticism and was, through translation and literary appropriation, transformed" (p. 61).

The Latin American writers Carpentier, Flores and Leal produced "the first sustained pieces of literary criticism" (Warnes, 2005, p.4) in 1949, 1954 and 1967, respectively. For them, what magic realism does, portraying a reality in which magic events are considered as normal occurrences, is nothing but a true depiction of the Latin American reality, another misconception in relation to the genre (Bortolussi, 2003; Takolander, 2007; Warnes, 2005; Gesicka, 2003).

Carpentier and Asturias are attributed to have written the first magical realist novels: *El Reino de Este Mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*) (1949) and *Hombres de Maiz* (*Men of Maize*) (1949), respectively (Guenther, 1995; Warnes, 2005). The very much acclaimed works of Latin American writers like Borges¹ and García Márquez gave place to the so-called Latin American Boom of the late 1950s and 1960s, mainly characterized for its use of magic realism (D'haen, 1995; Simpkins, 1995; Slemon, 1995; Warnes, 2005).

Many other magical realist works and literary studies followed, structuralist and poststructuralist ones, not only from Latin American origin, but also from other

¹ Not all critics agree in considering Borges as a Magic Realist. See, for example, the discussions on Borges and his relation to magic realism of Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Realismo mágico versus literatura fantástica: un diálogo de sordos," in *Otros mundos otros fuegos: Fantasía y realismo mágico en Iberoamérica*, ed. Donald Yates (East Lansing, Mich.: Latin American Studies Center, 1975), pp. 25.37 and Roberto González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at home* (Ithaca: University Press, 1977)

origins, which has led critics such as Faris (2002) and Hegerfeldt (2001) to propose analyses of magic realism as an international genre.

The current state of criticism on the field may then be summarized attending to Bortolussi's (2003) ideas. She distinguishes two main types of critical studies: those with a formalist approach -with Chanady's seminal taxonomy of the genre as its main exponent- attempting to define the genre, and the post-structuralist ones, which study the genre in relation to postmodernist and postcolonial ideas. In Bortolussi's view there have been important misconceptions in these theories which have caused the theoretical uncertainty the genre suffers from. Bortolussi (2003) then argues that "a more productive future integration of formal and contextual approaches" (p.290) is necessary to understand the genre of magic realism.

Magic realism, therefore, came to be considered as a genre after a long process of conceptualisation. This process has had "its waxings and wanings" (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 5) since the term was coined, when the characteristics of a style in painting were adapted to literary works. This unfinished process still suffers from a lack of theoretical certainty, mainly in relation to what the genre really is, and how and why it is used.

4.1.2. Conceptualisation.

Magic realism is a literary genre in which the two oppositional codes of the rational and the irrational merge (Bortolussi, 2003). In words of Slemon (1995):

The term "magic realism" is an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy. (...) Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the "other" [and] never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy. (pp. 409-410)

Slemon's very much quoted definition of magic realism can be further detailed by analysing the genre's similarities and differences to the other two genres among which magic realism lingers since "magical realist narrative itself inhabits a peripheral space at the border that separates the two genres of fantasy and realism" (Takolander, 2007, p. 13).

Similar to realist texts—and contrary to fantastic ones which portray imaginary worlds—the fictional world in magic realist texts is "geographically identifiable, and the narrative, aside from the instances of the unreal, is often even historically verifiable" (Baker, as cited in Takolander, 2007, p. 34). These references to the real world, however, are not enough to perform the functions of mimesis and reference belonging to the realistic tradition (Faris, 1995; Zamora & Faris, 1995; Bortolussi, 2003; Chanady, 2003) mainly because of "an irreducible element" (Faris, 1995, p.167; Takolander, 2007, p. 22) of magic–fantastic events—in magic realist texts that refuses to be explained logically.

In relation to the genre's differences with the fantastic, Bortolussi (2003) and Takolander (2007) have made some valuable contributions. According to Bortolussi, the fusion of the two worlds of the rational and the supernatural is a characteristic of both the fantastic and magic realism. What distinguishes them is the effect of the way these events are presented. In fantastic texts, "all the magical, supernatural, fantastic, or bizarre events ensue from one single, obvious source, and are thus united by a coherent logic" (p. 358), which explains the magic. Furthermore, the narrator presents these events with a serious attitude, thus confirming the plausibility of the facts. The result is that these fantastic events make sense and are acceptable within this fictional world. In magic realism, on the other hand, magical occurrences are not the product of a unique and coherent source. The narrator's stance, as in the fantastic, is one of seriousness also confirming the occurrence of magical events. However, whereas this serious stance in the fantastic makes the supernatural events seem plausible, an undoubting narrator "towards a world that is inherently incongruous [in magic

realism] undermines the very authority of the narrator" (p. 361). This is the creation of an ironic author who aims at parodying the mimetic codes of realism. Takolander (2007) agrees with Bortolussi (2003) in characterizing the tone in magic realism as ironic. For the former, the quality that sets magic realism apart from the fantastic is its "ironic nonchalance [which becomes] a self-reflexive commentary on the farfetched events" (p. 33) that are related.

A last determining feature of magic realism is its strong commitment to the situation in which it is born. The marginal position of magic realism between two genres coincides with the marginal position of the places it generally emerges from. For D'haen (1995), in fact, "it is precisely the notion of the ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place 'other' than 'the' or 'a' center" that distinguishes magic realism from other genres" (p. 194). At first, according to Takolander (2007), authors with postcolonial agendas, such as Latin American or Indian writers, were the ones who wrote magic realism; but then other cultural minorities, such as women and homosexuals, started to produce magic realist texts. In every case, not only do magic realist narratives "speak from the margin", but they speak about them as well, not by the presentation of a magical reality as Carpentier asserted, but by their "cultural and, particularly, historical 'enrootedness'" (p.188) as a strategy for resistance against hegemonic historical accounts.

In brief, magic realism is the literary genre where realism and the fantastic are combined in such a way that none can outstrip the other. Realistic techniques enable the text to make allusion to the real world though not sufficiently as to perform the realistic functions of mimesis and reference. This is due to the presence of the magical events, the main feature of fantasy; however, magic realism cannot be considered as part of the latter because of a multitude of arbitrary magical events -provoked by a multitude of different causes- impeding the reader's acceptance of such an implausible world. This purposeful fictional manipulation by the author is related to the last basic notion to conceptualise magic

realism: that of irony. Magic realist authors ironically play with literary devices to challenge hegemonically established conventions.

4.1.3. Characteristics.

Magic realism has been a topic of critical discussion since the 1950s, but it has generally been only vaguely characterised. In her article "Towards a Revised Theory of Magic Realism", Bortolussi (2003), noticing the need for a sound theory, proposes a set of [four] criteria for characterising the genre that relate to the plot, the narrator, the narrative style and the author.

- a) About the plot, Bortolussi observes the "lack of any (...) single cause of the magic or unifying logic underlying all the magical events" (p. 358) thus challenging any coherent explanation for these magical events. The fantastic events related in a magic realist text belong to "different systems of belief: isolated mythologies, folkloric traditions, legends, popular superstitions, some literary heritage (fairy tales), even jokes" (p. 359) among others. The absence of such a "unifying logic" causes a sense of disconnection, incongruity and implausibility in the plot.
- b) The narrator in magic realist texts presents these incongruous events in a matter-of-fact way showing his/her belief in them and, thus, appearing innocent and even childlike. The effect on the reader of such a "playful and humoristic irony invested in the narrator's discourse by the author" (p. 361) is, therefore, one of perplexity and suspicion towards both the fictional world and the narrator.
- c) The narrative style is another strategy by which the plausibility of the fictional world is undermined. In this matter, Bortolussi briefly mentions the ideas of Danow and Lopez that feature magic realism "poetics of excess" (Danow, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003, p. 362). Other critics who follow the line of thought Bortolussi proposes, such as Faris (1995) Gesicka (2003), Henitiuk (2003) and Takolander (2007), have also described the genre's

typical textual properties. The characteristics of the magic realist narrative style these critics generally agree upon may be grouped in three criteria:

- excesses and incongruities through exaggerations, tall tales, hyperboles, aesthetic of the monstrous, humour and unnecessarily detailed description of the fictional world (Danow and Lopez as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Gesicka, 2003; Henitiuk, 2003);
- questioning of received ideas—like those of time, space and identity—based on reason and science through the use of other systems of belief such as myths, gossip and local lore (Lopez, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Gesicka, 2003; Hegerfeldt, 2002; Henitiuk, 2003);
- metafictional dimensions (Bortolussi, 2003; Danow, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Henitiuk, 2003; Takolander, 2007)

d) The author's "playfully irreverent" tone produces an ironic distance between the narrator and the reader. By the creation of an ingenuous narrator and of an implausible world in which readers cannot simply believe, the author parodies the illusion of a unifying code sought for by other genres like the fantastic (Bortolussi, 2003; Higgins, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Takolander, 2007).

4.1.4. Purposes.

While the subversive power of magic realism is, in general, a feature upon which most critics agree, its specific agendas, that is, what the genre reacts against, is a more controversial issue: the most established view is to consider the validation of other systems of thought over the hegemonic one as the main purpose of magic realist authors; for some recent studies, however, these works aim at showing that all systems of thought are simply human constructions of reality.

Postcolonial studies align with the first idea. Postcolonial criticism studies texts coming from cultures which have been dominated by European Empire and

analyses how these texts defy the “false images and myths of the Third (postcolonial) World (...) which have conveniently justified Western exploitation and domination” (Murfin and Ray, 1998, p. 295). In relation to magic realism, postcolonial studies see the strategies of resistance of magical realist texts as a reaction against the marginal position they hold with the purpose of giving the “ex-centric and un-privileged” (D’haen, 1995, p. 195) a voice. In this sense, magical realist texts are considered to work towards the construction of an identity, helping the “symbolic nation-building” (Chanady, 2003, p. 437) process of every postcolonial community, one that goes against the imperial center. These strategies of both construction and resistance are found not only in postcolonial texts, but also in other marginal cultures reacting against centers of power. Members of the second world, women and homosexuals share “their historical marginalization by Western-centric, imperialistic, masculinist, heterosexist or otherwise biased hegemonic representations of the real” (Takolander, 2007, p. 195). Concluding, for these set of critics, apart from casting doubt upon political impositions, magic realist texts also question other cultural hegemonic constructs like “versions of history” (Takolander, 2007, p. 192) and “totalizing systems of [literary] generic classification” (Slemon, 195, p. 408).

Although they recognise the existent relation between these political margins and magic realism, other critics who analyse the genre from a postmodern perspective do not think about magic realism as a response to this marginal position only. For them, in their claiming that the main purpose of magic realism is the reaffirmation of the Other and a validation of its own identity, postcolonial studies fail to dissociate from Chanady’s and Carpentier’s ideas provoking, in this way, a romanticisation and exotification of the Third World (Bortolussi, 2003).

The postmodern approach views literature as a reality in itself and not a representation of reality. For postmodernists, reality “is partially the truth of the questions we pose about it and thus, in some sense, ‘a figment of the imagination’” (Wheeler as cited in Murfin and Ray, 1998, p. 298), and thus, a construction.

Postmodern analyses attribute the choice of magic realism to the intention of exposing the nature of all realities as human constructions. For Lopez this is achieved by the creation of an impossible world no reader could believe in:

... our knowledge of the world creates an irreducible distance between reader and character that makes it impossible for us to share the latter's magical perception of the object; we simply know too much to believe such a thing and it is precisely this knowledge which renders us unable to share the character's magical worldview. (Lopez, as cited in Bortolussi, 2003, p.362)

Other critics focus on a textual property through which magic realism challenges universally accepted notions and laws: the carnivalesque (Danow, 2003; Gesicka, 2003; Henitiuk, 2003). In her study of the carnivalesque in magic realism, Gesicka (2003) finds that in their mixing of magical elements from totally different origins unrelated to each other, magic realism does portray a magical worldview, but "it is its arbitrary nature that is foregrounded" (p. 393). This fictional manipulation is achieved through the carnivalesque which, with its transgressing of limits and flaunting of rational laws, "gives magic realism its unique capacity of relativizing every single truth or world-view by degrading, mocking and undermining its validity" (Gesicka, 2003, p. 397).

Either through the distancing effect Lopez talks about or through the use of the carnivalesque Gesicka refers to, what magic realist authors set out to prove from this postmodern perspective is "the illogical, constructed, mythical nature of all representations of reality" (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 362). Bortolussi goes on to explain that instead of aiming at the validation of the Other and its beliefs and worldviews, magic realism aims at exposing all beliefs and worldviews as "invalid and irrational" (p. 465). From this, it can be concluded that even though there are no universal worldviews, what is universal is the "myth-making function of the human mind" (p. 364).

The misunderstanding, deriving mainly from Carpentier's premise, that magic realism portrays a marginal reality, is then widely recognised. The genre's subversive nature is, also, a concept that remains beyond question. Whether the ideas the genre tries to subvert are considered political, literary, cultural, or ontological depends on the critical approach it is analysed from.

4.2. Contextual framework: Chicanos and their Culture

Chicano culture has distinct qualities that clearly portray their past and present of inbetweenness and oppression. It seems appropriate, therefore, to inquire into their history before analysing their cultural manifestations.

As Noriega Sánchez (2000) tells us, current Chicanos claim to be the descendants of the original owners of the land Chicanos now inhabit. Aztlán, Aztecs' place of origin, is said to have been located in what nowadays is the American Southwest and it is considered the place from where the Aztecs migrated to the current Mexico and Central America in 1168 A.D. (Noriega Sánchez, 2000; Rodriguez, 2000). When the Spanish conquest started around the year 1492, the Spanish took some Natives and mestizos to explore and inhabit the American southwest. The Hispanic period left a trace in several aspects of Chicanos' culture since Spanish culture—their language, religion, customs, lifestyle, system of government, among others—was cruelly enforced on them (Noriega Sánchez, 2000). Known as the greatest genocide of human history, the Spanish colonisation meant diseases, massacres and enslavement of the Native population, which was reduced from 25 million to less than 1 million (González, as cited in Orozco-Mendoza, 2008). Spanish occupation lasted until 1821 when Mexico became independent. However, Mexican lands were not going to be under their rule for long.

Aldakeel (2008) describes the loss of Mexican lands to the United States as “undeniably one of the ugliest chapters in the U.S. history” (p. 24). As Orozco-Mendoza (2008) argues, many were the factors that played a role in America’s annexation of these lands. The expansionist movement of the American colonies together with the lack of Mexican people living in the area led to open trade between the two nations and to illegal American settlement. This invasion and the atrocities America committed against Mexican people, like the annexation of Texas, were justified with racist ideas of American superiority over colored people and with doctrines that maintained they had natural right to the lands—“America for the Americans [Monroe doctrine] and Manifest Destiny” (González, as cited in Orozco-Mendoza, 2008, p. 21). In 1846, the United States declared war on Mexico; this war, known as the Mexican War, ended in 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. As Orozco-Mendoza (2008) puts it, the war meant “glory, triumph, and success for the United States while for Mexicans it signified shame, anger, humiliation, and defeat” (p. 21). Mexico lost thousands of lives and half its lands—what now is Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California—and around 100,000 Mexicans who lived in the area and were given American citizenship (Noriega Sánchez, 2000) in exchange for only 15 million dollars (Noriega Sánchez, 2000; Orozco-Mendoza, 2008; Rodriguez, 2000). These newly American citizens, or in their self-appointed name Chicanos, were never fully integrated to the American system: they were dispossessed of their lands and “had little or no participation [of sectors like] education, housing, health services and employment” (Orozco-Mendoza, 2008, p. 24). Therefore, the promises of the American dream are meaningless for Chicanos (Noriega Sánchez, 2000). Sabine Ulibarri’s words clearly show this:

We never left our native land. New Mexico is our native land ... We never set out in Search of the American Dream. The American Dream came to us unannounced and uninvited [and] remains just that, a dream, unfulfilled and

unrealized. The mainstream has marginalized us. (Ulibarri as cited in Noriega Sánchez, 2000, p.180)

Chicanos, as a consequence, have never fully acculturated to a nation that oppresses them. In fact, theirs is a unique bilingual and bicultural identity that expresses their borderland experience.

One of the strongest forces informing Chicanos' identity is undeniably Catholicism, a religion brutally imposed by the Spanish conquest. However, though Mexicans and Chicanos are deeply religious, theirs is a faith mixed up with native beliefs that remain part of their identity, albeit not openly (Noriega Sánchez, 2000 & Nostrand, as cited in Orozco-Mendoza, 2008). In the same way, Catholic Church has been charged with the appropriation of Native beliefs to make their principles more acceptable for Native and mestizos. Noriega Sánchez exemplifies this with the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe. As this critic tells us, Guadalupe's apparition occurred in 1531 in the same hill where Nahuatls worshipped their goddess Tonantzin, that is "Our Lady Mother" (p. 195). In Nahuatl she introduced herself to the Native Juan Diego—his name denoting his Christianisation—as Coatloapeuh, meaning "she who has dominions over serpents" (p. 195). The Catholic image was the result of the Spanish adaptation of these two deities into one that allowed the Spanish to propagate their religion more easily: the pronunciation of the Spanish name Guadalupe sounded similar to Coatloapeuh and her maternal love could be related by the Nahuatl to their lady mother. The fact that the patroness of the Mexicans merges Native and Hispanic cultures is another indication of the complexity of Chicanos' and Mexicans' identity.

Catholicism also served as a way of establishing patriarchal ideas of gender roles. Chicana women are culturally assigned a role similar to that of Eve; that is, they are indoctrinated to depend on men in the realisation of their destinies (Rodriguez, 2000). With the justification that by serving man, they serve God, religion becomes another patriarchal oppressing force. As Castillo maintains, "the

key to that spiritual oppression has been the repression of [women's] sexuality, primarily through the control of [their] reproductive ability and bodies" (as cited in Rodriguez, 2000, p. 73).

Patriarchal imposed notions do not result from Catholicism in Latin America only; in fact, Native ancient customs and beliefs also support ideas of the superiority of men over women. In an effort to contest and resist these ideas, most Chicana and Mexican authors rewrite the myths, legends and beliefs that have helped reinforce patriarchal order (Noriega Sánchez, 2000). In this way, they debunk the stereotype of the "submissive [Chicana] wife" that has no control against an "abusive macho husband" (Noriega Sánchez, 2000, p. 206).

The archetype of *La Llorona* is the most revisioned myth in Chicano and Mexican literature as Noriega Sanchez observes. This legend tells the story of a woman who, having murdered her own children to either escape with her lover or to protect them from her lover, is punished to cry over her crime for eternity. Since she has drowned them, she is often seen looking for her children, near bodies of water. It is also said that she takes other girls and boys to compensate for her loss and, in this sense, she serves as a threat for children to behave. Most importantly, she serves as "a way of stressing cultural, political and social assumptions about women" (Noriega Sánchez, 2000, p. 194).

Chicana writers' strategies to resist patriarchy do not end with the rewriting of myths and legends. Through the exploration or rather "appropriation", in words of Syrias and McGarry (2000, p. 83), of taboo topics such as "physical and sexual abuse, and heterosexual and lesbian sexuality" not only have Chicanas expanded the range of themes predominant in their literature, but they have also created a discourse that is both "rebellious and (...) very subversive" (Syrias and McGarry, 2000, p. 83).

Also recurrent in Chicano writings are those myths and legends related to ideas of nature's power. This is achieved both through the explicit reference to Native myths belonging to the different *pueblos*—Acoma, Navajo, Apache, among

others—and through practices of *curanderismo*. *Curanderismo* is, as Noriega Sánchez puts it, a reference to many cultures: through the Spanish influence, Euro-Spanish traditions from the Middle Ages and Arab healing customs made their way into Chicano culture; the teachings from Native Americans (Mexican and southwestern) that resort to the power of herbs have also had an effect on the current practices of *curanderas*. Making this web of influences even more complex, Catholic prayers to God and to saints and African rituals introduced by the slaves in America have also been integrated in the healing practices of *curanderismo*.

Thus, multiple forces have come into play to nurture Chicano culture, giving it a unique complex and intricate nature. Chicano cultural manifestations make this complexity explicit by referring to the different influences that have informed Chicano identity and by both embracing and challenging their own customs, traditions and beliefs.

5. Methodology

The methodology used in this work is qualitative, hermeneutical and interpretive. The main features of this methodology are its flexibility and inductive logic, which allow for a “hermeneutic circle” (Murfin and Ray, 1998, p. 155)—from the whole to its parts and vice versa, and from the theoretical framework to the research practice and vice versa—and a holistic approach, which aims at a more integrated view of the object of study, in this case, the interpretation of *So Far from God* (1993) from the perspective of magic realism (Dalmaroni, 2009).

From a qualitative logic, the object of study was analysed from a hermeneutic literary approach. “Literary hermeneutics is the theory of exegesis, *interpretatio* or interpretation, of literary works” and its purpose is to discover the *sensus spiritualis* of a literary work (Szondi, 1995, p. 1). In other words, it intends to achieve a better understanding of a literary text through the exploration of its different possible

meanings. It consists of analysing different aspects of what is included in a text to unveil its underlying coherence or sense (Taylor, 1985).

Literary hermeneutics considers the role of the epistemological stance as fundamental. For this approach, not only does the epistemological stance determine the interpretation of the text but it also conditions it (Szondi, 1995). Due to this, the present work adopts as its epistemological stance the Reader-Response Theory for which no given text has a single, correct meaning, but can be “rationally interpreted in numerous ways” (Murfin and Ray, 1998, p. 232). In this sense, the present work views the critic, in his roles of reader and analyst of the literary work, its genre and context, as inevitably conditioned by “the confluence and interplay of their ‘horizon of expectations’ and textual elements that confirm or challenge those expectations” (Murfin and Ray, 1998, p. 232). Finally, this research is unavoidably grounded in post modernity. This era, characterised by the defiance of conventions, ironies, contradictions, and hybridisation and decentralisation of ideas, has allowed for different views of the genre analysed in this work. Taking a postmodern perspective to study the use and purpose of magic realism in *So Far from God* (1993) implies rejecting the idea of achieving a single and objective meaning of this object of study. In the same way, such a perspective allows for an analysis of the meaning of magic realism in the aforementioned novel through the exploration of ideas derived from different, and apparently contradictory, approaches.

This work has followed the methodological steps proposed by Maciel Rodriguez (2011) for the hermeneutic analysis of a literary text:

1. Reading and segmentation of the text for its later interpretation.
2. Pre-analysis and exploration of the text considering its temporal organisation (plot, themes, chronotopes, characters, narrator, implied author, narrative style).
3. Identification in the text of categories based on the theory.
4. Redefinition of categories and recurrent data.

5. Interpretation of the categories based on the theoretical models proposed.
6. Synthesis of the analysis.

The analysis of the genre in *So Far from God* (1993) was conducted by first studying its characteristics and secondly, based on these findings, by attending to the purpose behind such use of the genre. The categories of analysis defined *a priori* were, therefore, characteristics and purpose. As part of the genre's characterisation, four other subcategories of analysis, taken from Bortolussi's (2003) theory, were also established *a priori*: plot, narrator, narrative style and author. In the stage of redefinition of categories, it was decided not to include the last of these categories at the same level as the rest because it was considered that the construct "author" was qualified through the analysis of the purpose of the genre in *So Far from God* (1993). Taking into consideration the concept of the implied author, that is, "the image evoked by a work and constituted by the stylistic, ideological, and aesthetic properties (...) found in the text" ("Implied Author, 2013), it was understood that the category "author" could be built indirectly through the analysis of the other categories, especially that of the purpose.

6. Analysis and Interpretation

6.1. Magic Realism in *So Far from God*: characteristics

Taking Slemon's (1995) definition of magic realism, *So Far from God*² (1993) can be considered as a magic realist novel since there is a fusion of the two oppositional codes of fantasy and realism. A strong presence of a marginal reality, not only in terms of setting but also of themes, which D'haen (1995) and Takolander (2007) posit as one of the main tenets of the genre, is also found in Castillo's novel. The story of Sofi and her four daughters—Esperanza, Caridad, Fé

² All the references of this work are from the 1993 Penguin Books USA Inc. publication. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

and *La Loca*—is a story of pain and suffering due to the marginal condition they hold for being not only Chicanas, but also women. This, therefore, corresponds with D'haen's argument that magic realist texts speak from and about the margins. *So Far from God* is deeply rooted in Chicana women's culture and history providing a subversion of hegemonic accounts. How these two worlds, the real and the fantastic, relate to each other will be better analysed if attention is paid to the characteristics proposed by Bortolussi (2003): plot, narrator and narrative style.

6.1.1. The plot: Flights of Fancy

So Far from God presents a typical magic realist plot; that is, supernatural events deriving from too different sources or from no source at all feature prominently in this novel. The absence of a single cause that explains these events results in a plot that defies any notion of coherence.

The origin of many magical events in *So Far from God* can be traced back to Chicanos' beliefs of different sorts. The very first magical occurrence narrated in the text is *La Loca*'s resurrection after her visit to hell, purgatory and heaven, which can be related to the Catholic account of Jesus's resurrection and to the three afterlife states according to Catholic doctrine. Her lifting herself to the roof in order to avoid being touched is less directly related to Catholicism although apocryphal texts like "The Acts of Peter" (James, trans. 1924) mention cases of saints or pagan people flying in mid-air. *Caridad*'s miraculous recovery after she has been attacked by *La malogra* and the visits of the Lady in Blue to *La Loca* could also be attributed to Catholic beliefs. The explicit explanation given for *Caridad*'s "holy restoration" (p. 43) is *La Loca*'s assurance that she "prayed really hard" (p. 38). As to the Lady in Blue, it has been assumed by critics like Noriega Sánchez (2000) that she might be the symbolic image of *Lucía Santos*, one of the witnesses of the apparitions of Our Lady of Fátima, based on her looking like a Carmelite nun and on her singing a Portuguese *fado*. These instances of magic, therefore, have a clear causal related to Chicano's deeply held Catholic faith.

Several other magical happenings in the novel are tied to myths and legends from different cultures. From Mexican culture, the archetypal figures of *La malogra* and *La Llorona*—*La malogra* is the evil force that attacks Caridad and *La Llorona*, the lady in white who comes to tell Loca about Esperanza's death—are recurrent in the novel. These two mythical figures have been part of Mexican culture since the pre-Hispanic period (Noriega Sánchez, 2000). On the other hand, there are references to the beliefs of other indigenous peoples. When Caridad and Esmeralda jump off a mesa and die, though their bodies are never found, a Native American story of the creation of the world is the explanation given for their deaths. According to this story, the Acoma goddess *Tsichtinako* sends two sisters out of the earth to create the universe. After Caridad and Esmeralda disappear down the mesa, people run to look for their bodies, but find nothing, “just the spirit deity *Tsichtinako* calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back” (p. 211). The Acoma story of creation, therefore, is explicitly presented as the explanation for Caridad's and Esmeralda's disappearance at the bottom of the mesa. Also, Asian beliefs (Drury, 2002) are referred to by Doctor Tolentino's “psychic surgery” of Loca, a treatment he has learnt from his mother in Philippines. The treatment consists in penetrating Loca's flesh with his “spirit' hand” (p. 229) and taking out blood clots, fibroids and even a tumour, leaving no mark in her flesh at the end of this procedure. Mexican, Native American and Philippine beliefs, thus, add up to the different explanations given for magical events.

Furthermore, fantastic stories alluding to universal popular beliefs are recurrent in *So Far from God*. Such are the many stories of ghosts' apparitions. Two of Sofi's daughters, Esperanza and Loca, become ghosts and they pay visits to the living. Esperanza's ghost often goes to Caridad's trailer to discuss politics and is also present in Fé's wedding, “seen there by some, but not by everybody” (p. 176). Loca dies for the second time in the final chapter of the novel and her ghost can be seen by different people and in different places. She is seen for a long time after her death in Tomé near her *acequia*. Occasionally her “ectoplasmic apparitions

[are seen] at the national and international conventions" (p. 248) of M.O.M.A.S, the organisation of Mothers of Martyrs and Saints that Sofi founds years after Loca's death. These are not the only ghosts included in the novel since we also read that other "santito and martyred 'jitos" (p. 251) attend the M.O.M.A.S. conventions. Another universally held belief is the possibility of knowing more than our senses can perceive. Both Loca and Caridad have clairvoyant abilities and can communicate with spiritual forces. Loca's clairvoyance seems to be more natural because she has had this power since she was a child whereas Caridad gradually develops it and her contact with "spirit guides" results from her sleeping or from her "[falling] into semiconscious trances" (p. 119).

Each of these magic happenings is explicitly or implicitly explained on the bases of popular beliefs—Amerindian, Native American, Asian, religious and universal. However, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to believe in the existence of such a world in which all these events with very different origins occur. Castillo's claims, then, seem to point to the fictionality of all beliefs, rather than to the validity of each of them. With this, Castillo creates in the plot a feeling of disconnection, incongruity and implausibility.

This implausibility in the plot is further enhanced by the inclusion of events that, though possible, seem improbable. The most noticeable of these is Sofia's life itself, with all the sufferings she goes through, which strikes us as almost impossible. Sofia loses her four daughters who die in extremely tragic ways. Esperanza, who is sent to Saudi Arabia as a war correspondent, is killed there and her body is never recovered by the U.S. government. Caridad is brutally attacked by the *malogra*, but magically recovers. She then becomes a channeller and falls in love with Esmeralda. But they cannot enjoy their love because they are stalked by Francisco, a religious fanatic, who loves Caridad and cannot bear their homosexuality; so they decide to commit suicide by throwing themselves from a mesa. Fé, whose dream is to get married and have a fully-furnished house, is abandoned by her boyfriend Tom and this leads her to scream for about a year,

which leaves her vocal cords seriously damaged. Eventually she does fulfil her dream, but at the expense of her health since with the aim of earning more and more money, she accepts working with dangerous chemicals, which leads her to die of cancer in less than a year. La Loca dies and resurrects at the age of 5 and ever since that moment she becomes an outcast, never leaving the house nor allowing anyone except Sofia to touch her. Paradoxically, she gets infected with AIDS and dies at the end of the novel. Not only does Sofia have to suffer the loss of her daughters one after the other, but she also loses her property which she has inherited from her ancestors and which her husband, a gambling addict, bets to a judge. All these tragedies happen in just a short period of Sofi's life—though it is not stated, we can assume these events occur in less than 5 years.

Improbable events like Loca's getting AIDS in spite of her never allowing anyone to touch her are given without any explanation. The plot in *So Far from God* is rich in such details. Caridad's power of resistance to be moved by three men is an unlikely situation given that, when she is found by them, she has been living in a cave and eating small animals for a year. In the belief that it will be easy, the three men fail in moving her. As improbable is the fact that Sofia, more than twenty years after Domingo's disappearance, suddenly remembers that it was hers, and not his, the decision that he should leave in the past. She and everyone else "had forgotten that one little detail" which changes the story so much that Sofi would no longer be "la 'Pobre Sofi' y la 'Abandonada'" (p. 215). That she has forgotten such a detail, in spite of how much she hates to be called that way, and that a whole community has forgotten it as well, seems far-fetched. No cause is offered to explain these occurrences, but they are mentioned as if they were completely usual situations.

Thus, while the recurrent apparition of ghosts or other mythical images and the occurrence of magical recoveries, levitation, clairvoyance and psychic surgeries can be tied to beliefs, though of different kinds, it is not possible to attribute other events in *So Far from God* to any popular idea that could work as an explanation.

There is no logic that accounts for the “panoply of magical events [that] remains discontinuous or disconnected, and therefore incongruous” (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 360).

6.1.2. The narrator: A Liar or a Fool?

If the absence of any coherent logic in the plot may baffle the reader, the attitude of the narrator in *So Far from God* is all the more perplexing. The narrator—who according to Rodriguez (2000) is a female narrator, but has actually not been deeply studied—tells her/his story assuming the nonchalant, matter-of-fact and even childlike attitude most researchers have noticed in magic realist works (Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Henitiuk, 2003; among others). The omniscient narrator in *So Far from God* tells her/his story from the perspective of Chicano community; in fact, s/he seems to be part of this community as can be inferred from her/his use of the language and from many of her/his comments. S/he tells her/his story in English, but Spanish permeates her/his use of the language. Many words and expressions in Spanish are included and Spanish linguistic structures are translated into English at the expense of accuracy. Besides, when referring to white Americans, s/he says the “Anglo[s]” (p. 132) or the “gringos” (p. 139), denoting s/he does not consider her/himself as part of them. The explanations the narrator provides also imply her/his belonging to the Chicano community. When Felicia refers to “the Jornada del Muerto” (p. 117), the narrator interrupts the dialogue to point out that she/he is talking about the “treacherous desert road that traders used in times past to travel from Méjico Viejo to Méjico Nuevo” (p. 117). Moreover, the fact that s/he talks about Sofia and her family as if s/he knew them well with comments like “Ayy! And how that sinvergüenzo [Domingo] could dance!” (p. 105), also suggest her/his being part of Sofia’s community. Finally, from comments like these, in which s/he shows to have knowledge about Chicano’s world and to have personally seen Domingo as a young man, we can also assume s/he is an adult.

MAGIC REALISM IN CASTILLO'S SO FAR FROM GOD

When introducing magical events, not only does the narrator avoid giving explanations but s/he never questions nor even doubts their veracity. The first magical occurrence, that of La Loca's resurrection and later levitation, is said to have caused surprise and even fear in the community as expressed by Father Jerome who wonders if "[this is] an act of God or of Satan that brings you back to us, that has flown you up to the roof like a bird?" (p. 23). In spite of their shock, the reality of the event is never questioned:

"Oh, my God!" others uttered, crossing themselves at hearing Sofi call the priest a pendejo, which was a blasphemy, crossing themselves all the more because although the verdict was still open as to whether they were witnessing a true miracle or a mirage of the devil, Sofi's behaviour was giving way to the latter (pp. 23-24)

The cause of confusion here is not the magical event itself but rather who the author is, God or the devil. The whole situation is presented nonchalantly by the narrator who instead of expressing surprise or discredit at the extraordinary events, diverts the attention of the readers on irrelevant details. When s/he tells us of the girl's flying to the ground again, for example, s/he focuses on how the girl's "ruffled chiffon nightdress, bought for the occasion of her burial, flutter[s] softly in the air" (p. 24). Similarly, after Loca has told her people about her mission to pray for them, someone asserts this is an act of the devil. As the narrator describes, the speaker "refrain[s] from continuing when Sofi turn[s] to see who it was" (p. 24). The narrator does not attempt to confirm nor distrust the magical occurrence that the girl has resurrected and is flying but, instead, adds minor and colourful details to the scene. As Noriega Sánchez puts it, these apparent irrelevancies serve to naturalise "such an extraordinary event as a baby being resurrected and flying to the top of a church" (Noriega Sánchez, 2000, p.191).

The same narratorial strategy of naturalising the supernatural is employed every time a magical event is presented, especially those related to ghosts. Ghost encounters, which would normally cause fear or, at least, surprise, are narrated in

ways different from expected. Instead of portraying them as scary or mystic experiences, the narrator perplexes the reader by lingering about very ordinary and absurd details. When Doña Felicia discovers that Esperanza's ghost visits Caridad and discusses politics with her, her reaction is one of anger at the arrogance of the ghost for not visiting her to discuss these issues (p. 164). The passage about the ghosts' presence at the M.O.M.A.S conventions is more about the different ways they look—"jitos from all over the world, some transparent, some looking incarnated" (p. 251)—than about the veracity of their existence. In the same way, the encounters of La Loca with the Lady in Blue, the ghost nun, are described as everyday encounters telling us about their often playing "La Loteria" with "three cards [each] to better [their] odds" (p. 245). Consequently, not only is the event never questioned but also the narrator distances her/himself from the readers diverting their attention from the magical element towards irrelevant details and, thus, undermining its importance.

This matter-of-fact attitude is maintained to narrate all magical events as well as hyperbolic ones, that is, utterly improbable facts which are rife in the novel. Examples are the narrator's naturally asserting that "by the time 'La Loca' was twenty-one no one remembered her Christian name" (p. 25), "the dogs would not reveal where [Loca] was, staring blankly at Sofi when she asked them about La Loca's whereabouts" (p. 33), or "either [Caridad] did not sleep at all, or she slept for days and even weeks at a time, usually before or right after making a prophecy" (p. 205).

The fact that the narrator tells us almost impossible stories with no hint of a doubt gives her/him an air of ingeniousness that Faris has described as childlike (1995). S/he adds her/his views upon the narrated situations as if to clarify them, but these clarifications are what make her/him seem childlike. In a naive aside comment, s/he asserts that the martyrs and saints present at M.O.M.A.S. conventions have offered their advice to the governments, but that these have rejected their help because that is "the nature of politics" (p. 251). As ingenuously

as that, this naive narrator feels the need to clarify that when Caridad is said to be hit with “something (...) like a terrible lightning bolt” (p. 210), she is not really stricken. Caridad has just overheard what Esmeralda is telling her grandmother—what Esmeralda says is never revealed, although we know it is an awful story. The narrator later explains that the “expression [something hit her like a terrible lightning bolt] was only to show how hard it all hit [her], all in an instant” (p. 210), which seems unnecessary for idioms do not have literal meaning, especially in the case of this quite common expression. This is, of course, an innocence created by Ana Castillo to render the narrator unreliable and enhance, in this way, the reader's suspicion of the fictional world.

6.1.3. Narrative Style: So Far from Realism

Another strategy by which the fictionality of the story told in *So Far from God* is foregrounded has to do with the different narrative devices employed in the text, which fall under what Danow has called “poetics of excess” (as cited in Bortolussi, 2003, p.362). According to this, the narrative style in a magical realist work is typified by three main features: a) excesses and incongruities (Danow and Lopez as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Gesicka, 2003; Henitiuk, 2003); b) questioning of received ideas (Lopez as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Gesicka, 2003; Hegerfeldt, 2002; Henitiuk, 2003); and c) metafictional dimensions (Bortolussi, 2003; Danow as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Henitiuk, 2003; Takolander, 2007).

a) Excesses and incongruities:

The fictional world in magic realism is defined not only by its inclusion of magical events; in this world most of the events are narrated in such a way that the ideas of mimesis and reference typical of realism are challenged and, thus, these events stop being realist. *So Far from God* does not fall short of exaggerations, hyperboles, monstrous details, humour and apparently unnecessary descriptions.

Many of these exaggerations are related to the challenging of our notions of the world. The concept of space is flouted when, for instance, Caridad's small trailer is inhabited by six adults, five children and a dog, which, given the capacity of a trailer, seems physically impossible. Doña Felicia's age illustrates how the concept of time is defied. She is said to have a "good century of practice" (p. 232) which would mean that she is much older. Active as Doña Felicia is—she goes to the three-day pilgrimage of Chimayo every year—it seems impossible to believe she would be so old. Other instances of the notion of time being flaunted are Caridad's and La Loca's sleeping patterns and Fé's long lasting scream. Caridad can sleep for fourteen days when a prediction is near her and La Loca, as a baby, sleeps for about a year, since the moment Domingo leaves them until she dies for the first time. As for Fé, she starts screaming when she receives a letter from her boyfriend breaking their engagement; never, except when she sleeps for an hour or two, does she stop screaming. Fé's hyperbolic scream, or "El big grito" (p. 155) as her mother and sisters call it, lasts a year and becomes, as Noriega Sánchez points out, a much more effective way to express Fé's pain than any other realistic device (2000). Fé's is a case of what Faris (1995) calls the literalisation of a metaphor since the metaphor of crying for ages is made real in the fictional world of the story. The same strategy is used with the affliction Casimiro, Fé's husband, suffers from. His family's past business, which is shepherding, is made literal in the story through the occasional "soft but distinct ba-aaa sound" (p. 175) he makes. Besides giving the story a hilarious tone, all these exaggerations bring to the fore the fictional nature of the narration.

Humour is one of the most frequently used devices working for the achievement of the excessive and incongruous world in *So Far from God*. Funny expressions, hilarious situations and even black humour invade the narration. Esmeralda is comically referred to as "Woman-on-the-wall-later-woman-on-a-hill-with-someone-else" (p. 81)—this name making allusion to the

situation under which Caridad falls in love with her in a few words. A similar device is used with “*La Llorona*, Chicana international astral-traveller” (p. 162), an expression that summarises how La Loca learns about Esperanza’s death in Saudi Arabia through this mythical spirit. An extremely amusing situation is the exchange between Domingo and their neighbour, the *comadre*, when Domingo is questioning Sofi’s idea of running for mayor. The argument begins when he excuses his lack of help in the house by saying that “sometimes a man can’t find enough time in a day for all that he has to do!” (p. 143). Their gossipy neighbour, not being able to keep her ideas to herself, lets out a popular saying: “‘Semos como los frijoles, unos pa’riba y otros pa’bajo...’ We are like beans boiling, some are going up and some are going down.” (p. 143) Domingo, although he tries to control himself, suddenly says: “‘¡En boca cerrada no entra mosca!’ In a close mouth no fly comes in.” (p. 144). This results in a verbal battle in which the quick reply matters more than what is actually said:

... this time, turning about-face, she looked Domingo right in the eye. This was no indirecta but said directly at that scoundrel: “¡Bocado sin hueso!” By this dicho, she was implying Domingo to be a freeloader.

“¡El mal vecino ve lo que entra y no lo que sale!” A bad neighbour sees what goes in but not what goes out. Zás! Domingo, who had a few dichos handy himself, came right back with one for the metiche.

But she was just as quick to the draw. “¡A quien mala fama tiene, ni acompañes ni quieras bien!” He who has a bad reputation, do not accompany nor love too dearly.

“Cuerpo de tentación y cara de arrepentimiento!” Tempting body and face of regret!

“¡Serás payaso, pero a mi no me entretienes!” You may be a clown, but you don’t entertain *me*! (pp. 144-145)

Fed up with the argument, Sofi stops them; by this time, it has taken a much more personal tone. The literal translation into English of every saying makes it all the more amusing since the real meaning of the sayings is lost and the whole passage may seem senseless to an English speaking reader.

Tragedies and cruelties are presented through the use of a disrespectful black humour or through too explicit and morbid details associated with an aesthetic of the monstrous. The narrator describes the damage to Fé's voice in a very irreverent if not macabre way:

... her voice was scratchy-sounding, similar to a faulty World War II radio transmitter, over which half of what she was saying did not get through, something like talking to Amelia Earhart just before contact was broken off altogether and she went down. (p. 85)

Even when directly reporting Fe's words of how she met Casimiro, this speaking impediment is disrespectfully represented: "Well, he ___ came into ___ bank one day ___ open ___ ___ new account and there I was. ___ there he was. And ___ rest ___ history... we liv___ happily ___ ___ ter!" (p. 169). Also unsympathetic towards the characters' suffering is the narrator's inclusion of details that, for being so grotesque and explicit, may provoke the reader's disgust. In the description of how La Loca resurrected, the image of innocence and sweetness that a baby can provoke is broken by the grotesque image of a baby opening a coffin and raising herself to the roof. The aesthetics of the monstrous is more prominently present in the extremely graphic details of Fe's and La Loca's illnesses and Caridad's attack by the *malogra*. These accounts tell the reader about "body (...) remains" (p. 246) since "so little was left" of them (p. 186), dissolved nails, "scarred (...) flesh" (p. 186), "eat[en] (...) insides like acid" (p. 186) and "nipples (...) bitten off, scourged with something, branded like cattle" (p. 33). Irreverence, black humour and monstrous aesthetics successfully help the narrator tell her/his story of misery

in a way that further detaches the reader from the narration, either because the cruelty is made fun of or because it is made repulsive.

Apart from the aforementioned strategy of offering realistic details to divert the attention from the magical events, the narrator offers an excess of details that apparently have no relevance even when realism dominates the discourse. Chapter 3 is almost totally about Felicia's remedies for different ailments like *empacho*, *aigre*, *mal de ojo* and *limpias*. In it, Felicia extensively explains the different treatments and ways of diagnosing illnesses. The final section of chapter 10 is also mainly instructive, this time presenting Loca's recipes of her three favourite dishes. These instructive passages seem to be presented to show how Felicia taught Caridad to cure as a *curandera* and how La Loca taught Fé to cook. However, and even when the narrator her/himself explicitly declares to include Loca's recipes "to wet [the readers'] appetite" (p. 165), the underlying reason for the inclusion of such long samples of instructive discourse might be to mock realism. If the realist notions of mimesis and reference were to be followed strictly, then, entire conversations or monologues, as in these two cases, would have to be narrated. Such narrations look, as aforementioned, apparently excessive and unnecessary; therefore, what Castillo may be trying to show by mocking these realist notions is that reality cannot be but fictionally constructed, rather than portrayed as a single and absolute truth. In the following example, the narrator could have said that even though Sofi is divorcing Domingo, she does not want to see him in prison for illegally gambling her property; instead, with the intention of mocking realism and its functions of mimesis and reference, s/he says:

... not really wanting to see him suffer in prison, with his rheumatism and his bad days—after losing the girls one after the next worked itself into his joints and if he wasn't out gambling, he was just sitting there all demoralized in his Lazy Boy in front of the television watching telenovelas, and predictions by *Walter*, the Puerto Rican mystic, or talk shows like Cara

a Cara, where they brought on experts on devil worship in East Los Angeles or discussed marital infidelity or one really weird time where they had the mother of a woman whose dead seventeen-year-old virgin daughter was exhumed and raped by the camposanto caretakers in Miami (¡Hijola!) and fifteen-minute cooking programs sponsored by Goya Foods—Sofi quietly let the matter go (p. 216)

In short, in magic realism, realism and its purpose of truthful depiction of the world through the functions of mimesis and reference are flouted. The depiction of the world done by magic realist narrative style is exaggerated, grotesque, unpleasant and/or unnecessary. Most likely, the choice of these narrative strategies does not lie in the intention of portraying the world as it is, but of showing the endless capacities of fiction.

b) Questioning of received ideas

The Western worldview is mainly based on reason, science and positivist ideas of objectivity and factuality (Hegerfeldt, 2002). In magic realism, our rational and scientific notions of time, space and identity, to mention a few concepts, are called into question. This is achieved by accounts embedded in myths, gossip and local lore (Lopez as cited in Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 1995; Gesicka, 2003; Henitiux, 2003).

The fictional world present in *So Far from God* is one which challenges a rational worldview. As it has been argued, time and space are not rationally depicted in this novel. A world in which people can be exaggeratedly old, or where they can sleep or scream for a year is not a world governed by reason. In the same way as time is irrationally portrayed in these cases, the idea of space does not respond to scientifically explainable facts either since it admits rationally impossible occurrences like a crowd of eleven people and a dog living in a trailer or the existence of mythical figures like the *malogra*, *La Llorona*, the Lady in blue and other spirits. Science and its certainties are also

subject of doubt in the novel: doctors, as a symbol of scientific knowledge, cannot cure Caridad when she is attacked by the *Malogra* nor can they save Fé or Loca. This claim made against science is underlined by the fact that it is through Loca's and Sofi's prayers and cares that Caridad is cured. In fact, Loca refuses to die in a hospital because for her that "was what she figured hospitals were really for" (p. 231). Finally, the choice of creating almost an entire chapter on the topic of *curanderismo*, as is chapter 3, explicitly brings local lore to the fore.

The most challenged notions are those related to the characters' marginalised position. Originally, Chicanos were the native inhabitants of the land, who were then colonised by Spaniards and invaded by the American. These two hegemonic centers imposed ideas that are subverted in *So Far from God*.

Spanish rule left its trace in Chicanos' religious beliefs, imposing Catholicism on them. The Catholic Church is a recurrently contested force in the novel through the use of different strategies. On the one hand, several Catholic beliefs are questioned. The novel revisits the Catholic account of the creation of the universe, that is, the Book of Genesis. Briefly speaking, this account tells us that the universe was created by God in seven days and that Eve's creation is the result of her being taken from Adam's rib, implying women's dependence on men. Subverting this story, Castillo includes the Acoma creation narrative as a reason for Caridad's and Esmeralda's deaths. By the claim that they have been called back by *Tsichitinako*, it is suggested that Caridad and Esmeralda are the two sisters who helped the goddess create the world. In this way, neither is the universe the work of one male God, nor is the role of women a secondary one. Also questioned is the validity of the Catholic belief of the Holy Child of Atocha, an image of Jesus as an infant, very popular in Mexico. As the narrator explains, the Holy Child is believed to have helped Christians against Muslims and Spaniards against Natives (p. 82).

Doña Felicia finds the fact that “the little saint (...) save[s] souls or abandon[s] them depending on their nationalistic faith” (p. 82) unacceptable. Through Doña Felicia, who has decided not to pray to the Holy Child of Atocha, not only is the value of this image questioned but also the possibility that Christian beliefs are arguable is opened. In fact, Doña Felicia’s “suspicion[s] of the religion that did not help the destitute all around her despite their devotion” and her decision of having her own religion “based not on an institution but on the bits and pieces of the souls and knowledge of wise teachers that she met” (p. 60) puts the finishing touch to Castillo’s subversion of Catholic principles through the use of other systems of belief. On the other hand, the characters in *So Far from God* become another strategy by which the author lays claims against Catholic religion. The heroines in the story, like Felicia, develop their own religion whereas those characters who harm the heroines are unquestionably Catholic. Loca, Sofia and Caridad rebel against Catholic codes and customs. Loca, ever since she returns from her journey to Heaven, Purgatory and Hell, refuses to go to Mass and even to receive the First Holy Communion, one of the most important sacraments in Catholic Religion. However, she is said to have become a saint after she dies at the end of the story. Caridad does not go to Mass either, though she does pray to her favourite saints and to her loved ones. She has a home altar with statues and photos of these. Hers, therefore, is a more personal version of religion. Sofia’s attitudes also serve as way of questioning the institution of the Catholic Church. At the beginning of the novel, she wonders why God punishes her with her baby’s death instead of seeing this as, in Father Jerome’s words, “our Father’s fair judgement” (p. 22). Her refusal to accept the church’s impositions leads her to found M.O.M.A.S. by the end of the novel, an organisation that, for example, allows women to both hold Mass and get married. Thus, once again, Castillo’s claims on Catholicism can be seen in her creating heroines who revisit religion and make it their own. As a consequence of this strategy, the

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characters that remain faithful to Catholicism are somehow ridiculed. Father Jerome is called a “pendejo” (p. 23) by Sofi when he tries to console her for her loss of Loca. Francisco, a santero, is portrayed as a religious fanatic who eats ashes, says prayers even when he sleeps and becomes so obsessed with Caridad that stalks her until she commits suicide. Through the revision of Catholic accounts, the creation of women who react against church and the portrayal of religious men as ridiculous, Castillo casts doubt upon Catholic ideas imposed on Chicanos by the Spanish conquest.

Chicano identity is also informed by American influences: the language, the idea of the American Dream and certain historical accounts are some of the received ideas from such an influence that are defied in *So Far from God*. The constant inclusion of Spanish words and expressions, the use of Spanish linguistic structures with English words and the ungrammaticality of many English passages are a way in which the English language is appropriated by Chicanos. An example of this appropriation of the English language is the expression “he came medio asustao because he knew by his Sofia’s tone that something had her frightened” (p. 45) which, besides including the Spanish terms “medio asustao”, has a word-by-word translation of the Spanish expression “algo la tenía asustada”; thus, instead of the correct equivalent “something had frightened her”, the phrase “something had her frightened” results extremely unnatural. The American Dream and the received ideas of consumerism, justice and equality related to it are subverted by Castillo as well. Fé is the only materialistic and consumerist of Sofia’s daughters. Happiness for her is having a household with an “automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR’ (p. 171)” and she pursuits her dream so fiercely that puts her health in danger and finally dies. Hers is portrayed as a senseless death that makes statements about the falseness of the idea of happiness based on material success and of prosperity achieved with hard work. Moreover, capitalism is implicitly criticised through the portrayal of the

company Fé works for as unfair and indifferent towards the atrocities they commit against their workers. The employees at ACME, a company that represents capitalism in *So Far from God*, are poor, uneducated women who cannot speak English, so they cannot react against the unjust treatment they receive: for very little money, they have to work cleaning weapons with dangerous chemicals that harm their health and leave them unable to have children. Finally, the idea of the United States of America as the land of equal opportunities so rooted in the American Dream is constantly challenged in the novel. Tome is an unincorporated village, which shows the American government's indifference towards the people living there. These Chicanos are the original owners of this land that now belongs to America. Doña Rita of Belén, Sofia's comadre, talks to Sofi about the loss of her lands:

First the gringos took most of our land away when they took over the territory from Mexico—right after Mexico had taken it from Spain and like my vis-abuelo used to say, “Ni no’ habíamos dado cuenta,” it all happened so fast! Then, little by little, my familia had to give it up ‘cause they couldn’t afford it no more, losing business (...)

Now all I have is my casita, too. (...) And we manage on the little we get from our pension, I guess. (p. 217)

Rita's situation is common to most Chicanos in Tome who have been disposed of their lands and, what is more, also have to undergo other hardships. It is for their economic necessity and ignorance that most women accept working with dangerous chemicals in ACME International. The American government does not intervene in this mistreatment of workers and when it does, it is for supporting the company, like in Fé's case. A few months before Fé dies, she is visited several times by FBI agents who, in the end, blame her for accepting to use illegal substances. The American government's interest in “who was to blame” and its lack of concern “about her who was dying in front of their eyes” (p. 187), stands as a strong example of its indifference towards Chicanos. The

high levels of poverty and unemployment, the effects of toxic exposure from the factories on their land, on livestock and on themselves and the indifference of the government towards these injustices are said to have transformed the "Land of Enchantment", that land of equal opportunities, into the "Land of Entrapment" (p. 172).

Not only is the marginalised condition of the Chicano community challenged, but also that of Chicana women in particular. This is achieved by the contestation of patriarchal ideas. Chicano community is one in which patriarchal gender roles are deeply rooted and Castillo questions them most obviously through the way she portrays women and men in *So Far from God*. In a patriarchal system, women are expected to be virtuous and virginal, to submissively respect their husbands and to stay at home to raise their children. Women in *So Far from God* do not conform to these ideas. Previous to being attacked by the *malogra*, Caridad has several abortions and has sex with any man that resembles her ex-husband. The fact that Castillo decides that, during the time Caridad lives this promiscuous life, she is raped by the *malogra*, could be understood as the intention of showing that she was punished by her promiscuity. However, Castillo uses this event to criticise the patriarchal idea that women have to be chaste and that those who fail to be so deserve to be punished. When this attack happens, no one except her family helps Caridad and some even say "that she had for all intents and purposes 'asked for it' when she was attacked" (p. 83). The narrator reacts to this lack of solidarity by describing these people as having "no kindness in their hearts for a young woman who has enjoyed life" (p. 33). Through the narrator's words, Castillo makes her critique of patriarchal sentencing. After Caridad suffers the attack, she stops having sex with the men she meets at bars; however, this does not mean she submits to the moral codes of chastity expected from women since she soon falls for Esmeralda. Their deaths are the product of patriarchal oppression. Francisco, who is the representation of patriarchy, sees Caridad

as a virginal saint comparable to the Virgin Mary. Caridad's short-lived lesbian relationship with Esmeralda is so unacceptable for him that he starts stalking them until they decide to escape from his oppression by jumping to the bottom of a mesa. The most important character in the novel, Sofia, also serves to question patriarchal expectations. Her decision of divorcing Domingo after he has lost her house in a bet subverts the idea that Chicana women have to be loyal wives no matter what. She has always been "a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother" but as she herself puts it "¿Y pa' qué? ¡Chingao!" (p. 218). The concept that women have to stay at home is questioned by Sofia as well, who decides to run as the mayor of Tomé though she is never actually elected. Finally, it is Esperanza who mainly contests this concept. Her words echo in Sofia's mind and lead her to take a more active role in the community:

"You know, Domingo," Sofia said solemnly, "our 'jita, Esperanza, always tried to tell me about how we needed to go out and fight for our rights. She always talked about things like working to change the 'system'. I never paid no attention to her then. (...) But now I see her point for the first time. I don't really know how to explain myself right yet, but I see that the only way things are going to get better around here, is if we, all of us together, try to do something about it." (p. 142)

For Chicano community, Esperanza has always been negatively seen as a "mitotera" meaning "a troublemaker" (p. 138). Esperanza is the first of Sofia's daughters who dies; nevertheless, her presence keeps being strong not only in her family's memories but also through her frequent visits to them, visits that, as it has been described, show her political commitment. Thus, through the creation of such female characters, Castillo confronts deeply rooted ideas of what is accepted in Chicana women.

Similarly, Castillo creates male characters that allow her to criticise patriarchal ideas of male roles. Almost every man in *So Far from God* is portrayed as unworthy of admiration or respect. In this way, patriarchal ideas of

male's superiority are mocked. Francisco's Christian fanaticism is ridiculed when his strange eating and praying habits are described and when his obsession with Caridad makes him be held responsible for her death as the title of chapter 12 implies: "Of the hideous crime of Francisco el penitente" (p. 190). His suicide, contrary to the deaths of Caridad and Esmeralda which are portrayed as triumphant, is depicted as sad since he is found "dangling sorrowful-like" (p. 212) after his "pathetic calls" (p. 190), "a tenor lament" from his "low and mournful" voice (p. 212), are heard.

Another character whose actions are perilous for women is Domingo. He abandons his family when Loca, their fourth daughter, is a year and a half, leaving Sofia

hanging the rumps of pigs and lambs and getting arthritis from the freezer and praying to God to give [her] the strength to do the best by [her] girls alone and with the wits [she] had left after what [she]'d been through with them, starting from when Loca died! (p. 111)

When he comes back, which he does as if nothing had happened in the twenty years he has been absent, he goes on betting in cockfights until he loses the deed to the house in a bet against a judge. Sofi now has to pay a rent to the judge to live in the house her family built, but the worst thing for her is that she "would no longer even have the satisfaction of knowing that she would die in her own home. And that really was the final straw for her" (p. 217). Sofi asks for a divorce and he leaves offering no resistance. Thus, Domingo's role in the lives of his wife and daughters is totally different from what patriarchal notions dictate for a man; that is, Domingo does not provide for his family, nor is he the strong and aggressive male exerting dominance over women.

Other minor male characters are also created to mock patriarchal stereotypes. Rubén, Esperanza's college sweetheart, never takes her seriously. He first leaves her for a white girl, and years later, when they are dating again, he is solely with Esperanza so that she can be part of the Native-

American Church rituals he practises. In fact, he refuses to share any other activities with her, underestimating Esperanza by calling her a “careerist” (p. 36). However, after she dies, Rubén remembers Esperanza’s political struggle and, realising how much she means to him, he cries for having lost her while hugging her robe. Tom, Fé’s first fiancée, breaks their engagement through a note, causing Fé to scream for a year. Like Rubén, he later regrets having left her and he “[cries] himself to sleep on most Saturday nights” (p. 173). Finally, Casimiro is a weak man who always letting his wife Fé make decisions, does nothing when he notices that Fé, who is working with chemicals, often suffers from headaches, has a red ring around her nose and her breath smells like glue. Not until Sofia sees her daughter and insists on Casimiro’s doing something does he take Fé to hospital and to see a lawyer. By this time, there was no stopping of Fé’s cancer. The characterisation of Francisco, Domingo, Rubén, Tom and Casimiro serves to question male genders dictated by patriarchy.

The subversion of patriarchal ideas is also accomplished through other strategies. One of these is the revision Castillo makes of the myth of *La Llorona*, which deserves special attention. This myth tells us of a woman who, having drowned her children to be with her lover, is doomed to cry over her crime feeling guilty for her failure as a mother. This story has important pedagogical and enculturating functions since it serves as a lesson about what it means to be a bad woman. Sofia has never told her daughters about this legend because “the idea of a wailing woman suffering throughout eternity because of God’s punishment never appealed to [her]” (p. 160). She, in fact, explicitly doubts the veracity of the myth by wondering why, if the Final Day of Judgement is yet to come, *La Llorona* has already been punished. The tale is also difficult to believe for Sofia who has always been surrounded by “at least one woman (...) like her, left alone, abandoned, divorced, or widowed, to raise her children, and none of them [has] ever tried to kill their babies” (p. 161).

Besides this, instead of being the scary “boogy-woman” (p. 160) *La Llorona* is said to be, she has a positive role in *So Far from God* since she has been friends with Loca for a long time and it is through her that Loca and Sofia learn about Esperanza’s death. Esperanza chooses *La Llorona* to give this terrible news to her family because, as the narrator explains, “who better but *La Llorona* (...). a woman who had been given a bad rap by every generation of people and yet (...) might have been nothing short of a loving mother goddess” (pp. 162-163). By means of both portraying *La Llorona* as an affectionate friend to Loca and of casting doubt upon the stories that picture her as a bad woman, Castillo vindicates her and questions the Chicano cultural assumptions about the role of women.

It is through the inclusion of other systems of belief, usually considered unfounded or invalid, that ideas from dominant systems of thought are contested in *So Far from God*, if not, undermined. Rational ideas—of time, space and science—are flouted exaggeratedly. Ideas imposed on Chicanos by the different hegemonic centers that have exerted dominance over them are also called into question in multiple ways.

c) Metafictional dimensions

Metafictional techniques are recurrently employed in *So Far from God*. The text explicitly refers to itself as fiction through different devices like the use of metalanguage, intertextuality and parody. With these prominent metafictional dimensions in her text, Castillo crowns her project of distancing the reader from the fictional world.

Self-referential commentary, i.e. the text referring to itself as a story, occurs in several different ways. The explicit naming of elements of fiction, metalanguage, is quite a common device in the novel. Chapter 15, for example, is entitled “La Loca Santa Returns to the world via Albuquerque before her transcendental departure; and a few random political remarks from

the highly opinionated narrator” (p. 238). Here, not only does the narrator acknowledge her/himself as “narrator”, but she/he also posits a comment upon her/his expressing ideas strongly and frequently, something that does happen all throughout the story. Also, the reader is explicitly mentioned or addressed when the narrator seeks to interact with her/him with expressions like “as the reader might well imagine” (p. 137) or “you and I both know” (p. 219). Finally, the most direct way in which the story is featured as such, is when the narrator draws attention towards its fictionality. When in chapter 10, Loca is teaching Fé to cook and her recipes are included in instructional discourse, the narrator justifies her/his being precise: “Next, you roll it out on the board to about a third of an inch thick. (Loca would not say a third of an inch, of course, but for our purposes here, I am adding specific measurements myself.)” (p. 167). As it has been argued before, it is not the purpose of the author to teach readers to cook, but to ironically show the invalidity of the realist notions of mimesis and reference. The comments “Loca would not say a third of an inch” or “I am adding specific measurements myself” (p. 167) serve both to underscore this ironic purpose and to show that the story is constructed and does not equal reality. Very interesting metafictional comments are given in chapter 8, which is the most intriguing chapter in the novel since there is no clear relation of the events narrated here with the rest of the story. Apparently understanding this, the narrator explains in the title of the chapter: “What appears to be a deviation of our story but wherein, with some patience, the reader will discover that there is always more than the eye can see to any account” (p. 120). Admitting the possibility of different versions of a story and, once again, emphasizing its fictional nature, the narrator says that the two women presented in this chapter, Helena and Maria may or not be considered as responsible for Francisco’s suicide “all depend[ing] on who is telling the story” (p. 120). The narrator ironically adds that s/he will “do [her/his] best from here on to keep this story to the telling of the events” (p. 124). As Henitiuk (2003) states, these metafictional

strategies foreground “the inherently unreal nature of the story and of literature in general, no matter how realistically rendered” (p. 417).

Literature in general is foregrounded, apart from the self-conscious devices mentioned, through the interaction of the text with other texts. Intertextual devices such as quotation and allusion are examples of this interaction. The words of “ese Hamlet” (that Hamlet), “brevity is the noble soul of wit” (p. 124), are quoted by the narrator to explain why s/he will tell the story of Helena and Maria briefly. Hamlet is not the only fictional character mentioned in the novel. By the end of the story, Sofi and Loca take part in a Cross Procession which, instead of paying tribute to Jesus’s ordeal, focuses on the terrible living conditions Chicano community is suffering; a woman called Pastora joins them with her protest songs. This is an example of allusion since Pastora is the main character in Castillo’s previous novel *Sapogonia: An anti-romance in 3/8 meter* (1990), whose dream is to follow a singing career and who is deeply committed with the Chicano community.

So Far from God also enters in contact with other texts in a much less direct form through the metafictional device of parody. The instructional texts included in the novel are a clear example of non fictional texts being parodied. Felicia’s remedies are presented as if they were encyclopedic entries: the name of the ailment in Spanish, followed by its translation into English and information about its causes, treatment and other considerations. This parodies scientific discourse since neither the ailments nor the treatments are scientifically proved:

Empacho (gastrointestinal obstruction): “Now, there are many kinds of causes of empacho—eating too much of one item, too many oranges, let’s say, or food that’s too ‘cold’ for your system, food that’s gone rancid and so on—or perhaps you have been given something to eat by someone who wants to do harm to you and it gets ‘stuck’ somewhere in your intestines (p. 65)

Fictional texts are also subject of parody. By naming the main characters with names of Christian values—Sofia, Esperanza, Caridad and Fé (wisdom, hope, charity and faith, respectively)—Castillo gives them symbolic significance and seems to parody Christian allegorical texts. In *So Far from God*, contrary to these allegories which were meant to teach the Catholic faith, the lesson taught by the narration of the tragic lives of these symbolic characters seems to contradict that of the Church. As Mermann-Jozwiak (2000) notices, the novel also parodies Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (2004). As in *Little Women*, this is the story of a woman and her four daughters in America. However, the story in *So Far from God* differs greatly from that of the American classic; some of these differences are that the father does not leave to go to war for his country, but abandons his family due to his problems with gambling and that the efforts of the characters do not lead to success and happiness but to sufferings and death.

As a conclusion, the use Castillo makes of magic realism in *So Far from God*, therefore, corresponds with what Danow calls “poetics of excess” (as cited in Bortolussi, 2003, p.362). The textual properties belonging to this “poetics of excess”, that is, excesses and exaggerations, questioning of received ideas and metafictional strategies are rife in Castillo's novel. These characteristics of the narrative style add up to the effect of distancing the reader achieved by presenting a fictional world that is too incoherent to be believed in and a narrator that is too naïve to question this incredible world. A plot featuring an incongruous world, a narrator that blindly believes in it and a mixture of narrative techniques that enhance its incongruity result in a work in which the story is too difficult to be accepted as real.

6.2. Magic Realism in *So Far from God*: purpose

Castillo's use of magical realism in *So Far from God* corresponds to the three first criteria proposed by Bortolussi (2003): the story is interspersed with magic and improbable events which cannot be traced back to a unique cause resulting in an incoherent plot; the narrator presents these events in a matter-of-fact way never doubting their veracity, which gives her/him a perplexing image of credulity and innocence; and, the narrative techniques used—exaggerations, questioning of received ideas through the use of systems of thought considered unfounded and metafictional devices—constantly contradict the ideas of mimesis and reference realism is based upon. The question remains as to why these strategies are used.

For postcolonial critics, magic realist authors create their texts in response to the marginal position, in political, social, economic and cultural terms, of the communities they speak from. They are said to do so with the purpose of giving those “ex-centric and unprivileged” communities a voice (D'haen, 1995, p. 195) and, in this process, these writers aim at a validation of these marginalised systems of thought over the hegemonic one(s). *So Far from God*, as it has been argued, clearly questions hegemonic ideas through the inclusion of other less accepted systems of thought. Catholic accounts are challenged in several ways; imposed ideas of the United States of America as the land of equal opportunities are subverted by the portrayal of the conditions under which Chicanos live; and, patriarchally assigned gender roles are constantly defied with characters that do not match these ideas and through the questioning of the myth of *La Llorona*. This might imply that the reason why Castillo so explicitly confronts these received ideas is to give Chicanos, and especially Chicana women, a voice and to construct a counter-hegemonic discourse. However, when an analysis is done of how ex-centric ideas are presented in the novel, such conclusion seems inaccurate.

So Far from God does not only question hegemonically imposed ideas. In fact, the truthfulness of ex-centric beliefs is also doubted and their nature of human

constructions is constantly foregrounded. This is achieved, on the one hand, by referring to the process by which these beliefs came to be created. When Caridad is found after she has been living in a cave, she is soon considered to have supernatural powers by both “mejicano-style Spanish Catholics” and “Natives from the pueblos, some of who were Christian and some who were not” (p. 87). She is visited by hundreds of people who ask for her blessing and who start to make up stories about her. The story of how she was first found is modified extensively, so much so that she is said to have resisted droves of men, instead of three, to have raised one of them with his horse in the air and to have lowered them so as not to hurt them. Her alleged healing powers win her the name of “santita armitaña” (p. 90) and people treat her as such:

One man said that when he laid eyes on her, he saw a beautiful halo radiate around her whole body, like the Virgen de Guadalupe, and that she had relieved him of his drinking problem. One woman showed the press a small scrap of cloth that she said she had torn from la Santita Armitaña's robe! (p. 90)

Since Domingo, Sofia and Doña Felicia all suspect that these stories of Caridad might not be true, which in fact are not, the portrayal of beliefs as fictions that do not necessarily equal reality is achieved. A similar case occurs with La Loca who becomes “Patrona de las criaturas—Patron of all of God's creatures, animal and human alike” (p. 232). The narrator recounts how when La Loca dies for the second time, someone makes a drawing of her, based on how she looked the last time she was seen in public. The drawing does not entirely respect Loca's image since the chenille bathrobe she was wearing at the time looks more like a Roman robe in the picture. It is then used by a factory to sell votive candles together with a “special prayer to La Loca and instructions for those who wanted to dedicate a novena to her”. People place her picture in altars together with “candles, and requests, and flowers and (...) wedding cookies” because there was a rumour she liked “*biscochitos*” (p. 232). The image of “La Loca Santa, Patrona de las criaturas”

(p. 232) is by the end of this account very different from what Loca really was when she was alive. The narration of how Loca and Caridad come to be regarded as saints by their community seems to be included to illustrate the all too human tendency to create myths and the "arbitrary and constructed character" of such creations (Gesicka, 2003, p. 407).

On the other hand, the character of constructions that beliefs hold, both hegemonic and ex-centric, is also demonstrated in *So Far from God* through the reference to the possibility of their having different versions. Francisco's vocation of *santero* means he creates sculptures of saints and this ability is guided by the saint whose sculpture is being created. But this concept is not common to all communities. As the narrator explains, "a santero means many things in many places" (p. 95). S/He tells us that a santero in the Caribbean can be a man or a woman and, through African rituals of music and dance, can work miracles and exorcise people. Thus, through the presentation of these two versions, Castillo draws attention to the quality of arbitrary construction of both the concept of santero based on Catholicism and the one derived from African notions, an hegemonic and an ex-centric belief respectively.

This idea that there may be more than one version to a story or belief features more prominently in the field of *curanderismo*. When Felicia is teaching her remedies to Caridad, the pattern of a certain disease or ailment having too many different ways of being cured is recurrent. To cleanse a person or thing from a bad spirit, for example, Felicia mentions no less than eleven possibilities: "keep[ing] a jar of fresh water somewhere near the door"; "form[ing] salt into the shape of a cross beneath our beds" (p. 69), or the same with tupertine; fumigating incense; "hav[ing] a sting of garlic near the door", or of onion; "sprinkling holy water around the rooms" (p. 70); cleaning the house with ammonia; brushing the person or thing with rue bush, rosemary and hierba de cruz, or with "the egg of a black hen, or sometimes us[ing] the chicken itself as a seeping instrument" (p. 70). The existence of so many different methods reduces their efficacy; in fact, the

suggestion would seem to be that almost anything that is done can work. This is also the case in the presentation of one of the remedies to cure "aigre", an ailment defined by Doña Felicia as "internal draft" (p. 66). As Felicia explains:

In the old days, I used candles that were brought from the church, but now I use store-bought candles. If I remember I take them to be blessed by the priest and if I can't do that, I dip them in holy water, and when I can't get to the church to have the priest do it, I just say an Our Father over a jar of water. (p. 67)

As illustrated here, the same effect can be achieved with or without blessed candles or blessed water. In fact, candles which are not blessed are shown as equally important—or equally unimportant—as blessed ones. It could be concluded that the reason why Castillo mentions the original remedy—the one Felicia practised "in the old days" (p. 67)—is to undermine its value later on. In this sense, the inclusion of different versions of reality may be possibly making allusions to the invalidity of all worldviews.

Not only are ex-centric worldviews doubted and shown as constructions but, at times, they are also questioned. It would seem that the practice of *curanderismo* is validated by the fact that most of Chapter 3 is devoted to the presentation of Doña Felicia's remedies and treatments; however, the many allusions to Felicia's failing throughout the novel suggest the opposite. *Curanderas/os* are believed to have supernatural powers of prediction and of clairvoyance, among other skills. In the novel, there is no attempt at divining a present or future event in which Felicia succeeds. During the time of Esperanza's disappearance in Saudi Arabia, Felicia tries to find out news of her using tarot sticks and an egg in a glass but fails each time. The same happens when she unsuccessfully "lit[s] a candle for Saint Anthony, turn[s] it upside down, use[s] divining sticks and her Tarot cards" (p. 82) to discover what has happened to Caridad. Neither can she detect the many signs indicating Francisco's destiny of becoming a santero. Finally, her ability to distinguish reliable from unreliable people does not work either when she accepts

as tenants a couple who bring their family to live with them, resulting in a crowd of eleven people living in Caridad's trailer without paying a cent for it. The narrator's saying that "**this time**³ she really missed the mark" (p. 114) may baffle the reader who, after reading about so many of Felicia's failures, could find this assertion as sheerly ironic. *Curanderismo* is also undermined when in several occurrences its practices are portrayed as senseless as in the case of the advice Felicia is given by different *curanderas* regarding her treatment of Loca's AIDS. Doña Severa suggests the use of mercury and asserts that it is "effective precisely because it is dangerous" (p. 234). The lack of logic of her assertion might be a way in which Castillo ridicules these ancient ex-centric practices.

Less directly, other ex-centric ideas are also questioned. Caridad's clairvoyance episodes, instead of having a prophetic character, are referred to as "domestic" and "not very interesting to the world at large" (p. 50). Caridad's supernatural power, for example, reveals a winning lottery number, the return to the house of a lost bitch and Caridad's own departure from her mother's house, if this last one were to be considered as a prediction since, as the narrator points out, it could also be seen as an announcement. Such accounts cast doubt upon the validity of practices of clairvoyance. Also indirectly is the Native American patriarchal organisation criticised. Esperanza, though she has her suspicions, decides to believe in Rubén's teachings about gender roles according to Native American systems. As Rubén has taught her, "they [are] not to be questioned" (p. 36). This shows how Native American systems can be as oppressive as hegemonic ones.

Summarising the ideas argued so far, Castillo resorts to different strategies in her presentation of ex-centric and hegemonic worldviews. Through the narration of how beliefs come to be created and the inclusion of different versions of the same story, their arbitrary and constructed nature is brought to the fore. Furthermore, by

³ My emphasis.

portraying ex-centric beliefs as unsuccessful like Felicia's powers of prediction, insignificant or inefficient like Caridad's revelations, and oppressive like Native American patriarchal ideas, the authority of these notions is evidently defied. This treatment of ex-centric worldviews is not consistent with the purpose of giving voice to the voiceless through the validation of their beliefs that postcolonial critics attribute to magic realism. It would seem instead that an analysis of Castillo's purpose would be more effectively done from a postmodern perspective.

In this line of critical studies, Gesicka's (2003) argues that it is through the carnivalesque spirit, with its "relativizing every single 'truth' or world-view" (p. 397), that magic realism invalidates them. *So Far from God* is crowded with carnivalesque associations. The occurrence of magic and realist events unrelated to each other is but one way in which the carnivalesque spirit is present in the novel. Castillo "brings together, unifies, weds and combines sacred and profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, and the wise with the stupid", in Gardiner's words about the carnival (as cited in Gesicka, 2003, p. 395). Such is the case of Caridad's visit to a channeller in New York to ask about Francisco's intentions in following her:

but neither the New Yorker nor the two-thousand-year spirit had ever heard of Francisco el Penitente. In fact, neither of them even knew what a penitente was. 'Where did you say you were from?' Caridad asked the channeler.

'Which one of us?' the channeler asked.

'Either one,' Caridad said.

'Long Island and Egypt, respectively.' The woman answered in a kind of stereophonic-sounding voice. (p. 209)

The possible effect of the Egyptian spirit presence, and the ideas of sacredness, greatness and wisdom that might be associated with it, are mitigated by the colloquial tone and the everyday character of the exchange. In the same way, many other situations offer carnivalesque associations of extremes. Esperanza's ghost goes into monologues about political issues. The ancient mythical figure of

La Llorona is irreverently referred to as 'Chicana international astral-traveler'(p. 162). Finally, during her visits to La Loca, the Lady in Blue plays "La Loteria" with La Loca and doña Felicia, each "with three cards to better her odds" (245). Ghosts apparitions are constantly contrasted with domestic details that undermine their importance.

The incoherent combination of elements unrelated to each other, typical of the carnival, is also achieved inside some chapters of the novel which mix these events in such a way that what could be considered as a major event is put at the same level as a minor occurrence. The name of chapter ten reads "Wherein Sofia discovers La Loca's playmate by the acequia has an uncanny resemblance to the legendary Llorona; the ectoplasmic return of Sofi's eldest daughter; Fe falls in love again; and some culinary advice from La Loca" (150). This title summarises the contents of the chapter very clearly. As can be assumed from its name, the chapter is an agglomeration of different events and texts.

This apparent incoherence, however, has a common thread that explains all the strategies used. Most probably, this unifying idea is not related to the author's wanting her readers to believe in the true existence of such realities. What is common to all the devices employed in this magic realist novel is the foregrounding of all worldviews as constructions. By casting doubt upon them, questioning them, exposing them as fictional, and contrasting them in carnivalesque associations, Castillo shows us that magic realism can be used with ontological purposes, rather than with identity-oriented postcolonial aims; that is, magic realism serves to show that what all perspectives, hegemonic and ex-centric, have in common is that they "all partake of a (...) universal, archetypal myth-making function of the human mind" (p. 364).

7. Conclusion

Magic realism has long held a problematic status in the critical literature which has attempted to understand the genre. Considered at first as an expression of a real magic world, the genre was mystified from the very beginning. With Chanady and other critics in the structuralist line, it was framed under a set of specific rules; this important advancement resulted in the unquestioned adoption by many critics, not only from structuralist approaches, of Chanady's taxonomy. This taxonomy, thus, was not further developed and its limitations were left unattended. On the other hand, important insights were also contributed by postmodern and postcolonial analysis of the genre. With this as a theoretical background, magic realism continues to cause controversy.

So Far from God, by Ana Castillo, makes use of magic realism and, although this has been generally acknowledged by the critics who have studied the novel, there is little criticism on the novel's genre that can help consolidate our knowledge of it. The lack of theoretical certainty in relation to magic realism together with the strong tendency of the novel to be analysed from feminist and/or postcolonial perspectives call for studies of the novel that focus on Castillo's choice of genre. In *So Far from God*, there is much more to magic realism than the fusion of two oppositional codes and there is much more to the novel than the recuperation of silenced voices. Bortolussi's (2003) theory offers an integration of structuralist and poststructuralist views which may allow for a better understanding of the genre in Castillo's novel. The analysis undertaken in this thesis has attempted to achieve such a goal. Attention has been given to the characteristics of the use Castillo makes of magic realism and to the purpose behind her choice of genre using the criteria proposed by Bortolussi (2003) as its main framework.

The present work has proved that in *So Far from God* the four criteria Bortolussi (2003) has observed in magic realist works are present. The plot defies notions of coherence since there is an absence of a unifying idea that may explain

the occurrence of all magic events and of highly improbably ones. Resurrection, levitation, ghosts, mythical figures, doctors who can take tumours through psychic surgery, and people who are almost impossibly old or strong, among others, point to different systems of belief—that may not be compatible with each other—or to none at all. The narrator, not distrusting in any way the facticity of the story, seems to blindly accept it as true and asserts these incredible facts without any judgement; instead s/he tends to deviate the attention towards other apparently irrelevant details. The final touch in the creation of this fictional world is accomplished with narrative strategies like exaggerations, black humour, crude language, irrelevances, metafictional comments and the questioning of received ideas. This is a perplexing fictional world, one which the reader simply cannot consider as real. In this way, magic realist authors undermine the realist notion that texts may portray reality as it is.

The criterion that considers the author as ironic is also present in *So Far from God*. The irony of the author lies mainly in the way different approaches to reality—rational and irrational, as well as central and marginal—are questioned and it is related to her purpose in the use of magic realism. It has been widely accepted that Ana Castillo, in *So Far from God*, subverts hegemonically imposed ideologies by confronting them to less accepted systems of thought. However, these other systems of thought are not always shown as powerful. On the contrary, this thesis has shown how the novel features several examples of the invalidation of these views as well. This does not mean Castillo's aim is to undermine these worldviews. In fact, her focus does not seem to be on a particular perspective, but rather on demonstrating that all perspectives are subjective and inconsistent human representations of the truth, and not the truth itself. All these worldviews are shown as constructions through the narration of how they came to exist, through the demonstration of their possibility of having more than one version, all equally valid or invalid, and through the analysis of their carnivalesque associations. It is interesting to notice, however, that of all the views exerting an influence in the

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women in *So Far from God*, Chicana women's worldview seems to be the least contested one. On the contrary, women and everything that might be related to a female world are not undermined. It is not surprising, then, that the novel has been mainly analysed from feminist perspectives.

In any case, magic realism as used in *So Far from God* has proved its subversive power. Through the analysis of the characteristics and purpose of magic realism, this thesis has found that the genre brings to the fore the "incongruity of the human myth-making function, by means of which individuals can recast mythological or religious elements to construct reality in accordance with their particular needs, interests, and abilities" (Bortolussi, 2003, p. 359). In this sense, magic realism is central to postmodernism and its ontological claims. The message of *So Far from God* about how individuals conceive the world seems to be well-expressed in the narrator's words when describing Felicia's process of construction of her own faith: "finally she did develop faith, based not on an institution but on the bits and pieces of the souls and knowledge of the wise teachers that she met along the way." (p. 60)

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