

We Called Ourselves “Feministas”¹: A Reading of Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God* and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*

This article explores the ways in which Ana Castillo’s 1993 novel So Far From God presents female characters who are more than ‘just’ wives, mothers and daughters (Women Are People, Too!), and celebrates mestiza consciousness as a way to challenge oppression.² Therefore this article focuses on the role of women within the specific Mexican American context which differs significantly from Friedan’s white and middle-class perspective as described in The Feminine Mystique. The connections that are drawn between the two texts offer some insight into the different experiences of Chicanas compared with those whom Friedan describes. The hybridity of Castillo’s characters offer methods of contesting an essentialist reading of Chicana/Mexican American women. Through the multiplicity and plurality of the mestiza consciousness, Castillo gives her female characters agency in their own empowerment and liberation. Focusing on communities of women, Castillo articulates a Chicana feminism fuelled by a female-centred spirituality that challenges the subjugation of women.

Keywords: Castillo, Chicana, Friedan, hybridity, mestiza consciousness

Castillo’s writing is part of a feminist fight for women to be, and to be seen as, more than ‘just’ wives and mothers and in some ways echoes the call to action voiced in Betty’s Friedan’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. However, the situation for Chicanas and women of colour more generally differed, and indeed continues to differ, in significant ways from that described by Friedan. Chicana feminism as an organised movement does not appear in most case studies of second-wave feminism in which the racial composition of the United States is seen as white and black, without shades of brown.³ Castillo’s works forefront the brown in focusing on the lives of Chicana and Mexican American women living in the United States. In her 1993 novel *So Far From God*, Ana Castillo introduces us to life in Tome, New Mexico. The novel has at its centre an all-female family run by Sofi. Having been ‘abandoned’ by her husband, Domingo (he of the Clark Gable moustache and the uncontrollable gambling habit), Sofi is left to hold everything together for her family and later for the whole town. Chicana critic Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano posits that in *So Far From God* Castillo’s characters perform what Gloria Anzaldúa terms mestiza consciousness, whereby individuals ‘speak from a multiplicity of positions’.⁴ The driving forces behind social change in the novel are women, women who live in what Anzaldúa has called the ‘pluralistic mode’, moving beyond binary oppositions in an effort to reconcile the ‘split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our

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¹ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 192.

² Betty Friedan, “I say: Women are people too!,” *Good Housekeeping*, August 1960, 59-61.

³ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 130. See also: Sherna Berger Gluck, Maylei Blackwell, Sharon Cotrell, and Karen S. Harper, “Whose feminism, whose history? Reflections on excavating the history of (the) US Women’s Movement(s),” in *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Nancy Naples (Hoboken, New Jersey: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 31-56.

⁴ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, “The Multiple Subject in the Writing of Ana Castillo,” *Americas Review* 20 (1992): 65-66.

culture, our languages, our thoughts.⁵ This article will both discuss the ways in which Castillo celebrates the *mestiza* as a means of challenging oppression and interweave criticism of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* through exploration of the hybridity of Castillo's characters, in particular the contrasting figures of daughter Fe and her mother Sofi.

In her 2011 book, *A Strange Stirring*, Stephanie Coontz acknowledges that many people did not relate to Friedan's argument in *The Feminine Mystique* because women from African American and white working-class communities 'already worked outside the home due to economic necessity and would have preferred to be full-time housewives.'⁶ Although Coontz discusses African American and white working-class women in the book, women in the Mexican American community were similarly disconnected from the idea of suburban housewifery as described by Friedan. Eleanor Holmes Norton, one of the founders of The National Black Feminist Organization, stated, 'every problem raised by the white feminist movement has a disproportionately heavy impact on blacks.'⁷ While not implying that all African American and Chicana concerns are experienced alike, the disproportionate impact of sexism, racism and classism was felt, and still is, by many communities of women of colour in the United States. The white, Anglo, middle-class, second-wave feminism that Friedan espoused did not resonate with the multiple oppressions experienced by women of colour in the United States. Indeed, at a National Organization for Women (NOW) meeting – the organisation of which Friedan herself was the founding president – Chicana activist Irene Blea recalls that race and gender were explicitly treated as separate(d) issues:

I was at a NOW meeting and being told by women in Denver, you have to choose between being Chicana and being female... and what I'm saying is "I cannot separate the fact that I'm brown and I'm female, I cannot do it physically to this body, I cannot do it emotionally, I cannot do it spiritually."⁸

In emphatically stating the inability to split her physical, spiritual and emotional self, Blea voices a concern shared among the Chicana community that the white middle-class feminism of women like Friedan was not applicable for all women. Chicana feminist Leticia Hernández explicitly stated the distinction for Chicanas in stating 'we called ourselves "feministas"', thus differentiating the Chicana cause from other feminist movements of the time.⁹

In *So Far From God*, the role of the protagonist, Sofi, as a mother is central to her ability to deal with and overcome the numerous difficulties thrown her way. The family plays an integral role in Mexican American society, and it shapes and moulds the value system by which many Mexican Americans live. As Richard Rodríguez states, 'the family is a crucial symbol and organizing principle that by and large frames the history of Mexican Americans in the United States.'¹⁰ Castillo, in common with many

⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 80.

⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 121.

⁷ Eleanor Holmes Norton, quoted in Susan Hartman, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 191.

⁸ Irene Blea, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2000, quoted in Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 1.

⁹ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 192.

¹⁰ Richard T. Rodríguez, *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009), 2.

other Chicana writers, is interested in the preordained roles of women in the family as wives and mothers, sisters and daughters. Indeed, the family setup, 'as buttressed by religious and secular law, as well as social customs that evolve from them, is the single most critiqued institution in the works of Latina writers.'¹¹ Castillo's work contains characters that are in themselves unique but share a common wish to break free of the traditional functions of females in Mexican American society; they search for 'a self who is rooted in the ethnic experience, who defines herself in relation to family, community, and its traditions.'¹²

In Mexican American culture, *la familia* means more than mother, father and children: it is synonymous with community and neighbourhood. The *compadrazgo* of extended family found in the histories and stories of Latinas/os is often described as an expansive support network, especially when confronted with an alien, and sometimes aggressive, Anglo American society. While this support network is vital to many communities, the family can also stifle individual development, particularly for women as they have been traditionally assigned roles that are subservient to men. There is a complex ambiguity found in the relationships Chicanas have with their families as they both support and suppress, protect and imprison. It is important to emphasise, as Jane Hood does, that the ideal of the stay-at-home mother and male provider, intrinsic to Friedan's work, has historically been an unrealistic standard for families outside the middle and upper classes.¹³ Moreover, the suburban housewife trap is less common in the Mexican American community and, in fact, for many Chicanas, home and support from extended family represent economic and cultural survival. Activist Enriqueta Longeaux y Vázquez underlines the different experience of family for Chicanas stating that 'when a family is involved in a human rights movement, as in the Mexican American family, there is little room for a woman's liberation movement alone.'¹⁴ The key word here is 'alone', since in the Chicana feminist experience there are varied and multiple fronts on which to battle. Yet woman's liberation is crucial as is resistance to traditional family roles, and these themes are explored in depth in the works of many Chicanas.¹⁵ Through the strong, nuanced and complex female characters presented in their writing, Chicana authors counter a persistent stereotype of Mexican American women as passive individuals who are victimised in an oppressive patriarchal society and as subordinates within the family.

In *So Far From God*, Castillo presents the reader with different types of women who attempt various ways to negotiate their womanhood in the Mexican American context. Castillo's allegorical characters and Sofi's daughters are Esperanza (Hope), the Chicana campus radical turned career woman and TV presenter; Caridad (Charity), the nurse who dulls the pain of being jilted with alcohol

¹¹ Phillipa Kafka, *Saddling La Gringa: Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), xviii-xix.

¹² Annie O. Eysturoy, *Daughters of Self-Creation: The Contemporary Chicana Novel* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 138.

¹³ See Jane C. Hood, "The Provider Role: Its Meaning and Measurement," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 48 (1986): 349-359.

¹⁴ Enriqueta Longeaux y Vázquez, "The Woman of *La Raza*," in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma García (New York: Routledge, 1997), 31.

¹⁵ This is reflected in the lives of the Chicana writers themselves. Indeed, Sandra Cisneros, a well-known Chicana writer, said that 'marriage and children would leave no time and no energy for creativity.' Quoted in Deborah L. Madsen, *Understanding contemporary Chicana literature* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 127.

and casual sex; Fe (Faith), the painfully prim and proper bank employee; and La Loca (The Crazy One), who seems to live on an alternate plane of existence and whose 'death' and subsequent resurrection at the tender age of three has beatified her and makes her strangely attuned to higher spiritual frequencies. They all leave the home, driven by a variety of factors (economic, political, spiritual) but 'had all eventually returned to their mother's home.'¹⁶ It is the character Fe that will be explored here and then discussed in contrast to her mother, Sofi.

Fe, the third of Sofi's daughters, 'was fine'.¹⁷ That is, twenty-four, with a steady job at the bank and a hard-working, long-term boyfriend. At the beginning of the novel she has just announced their engagement.¹⁸ Light-skinned Fe wants to leave Tome. Her mode of escape is through assimilation into middle-class, capitalist, patriarchal America. She hopes to gain access to this world through imitation, with her 'weekly manicured fingernails and a neat coiffure.'¹⁹ Fe judges her family as 'self-defeating' and 'unambitious' because they don't share her interest in waged work. She feels 'disappointment and disgust' for La Loca, and she has 'no desire to copy Esperanza's La Raza politics'.²⁰ Her family do not conform to her model of Americanisation so she tries to minimise her interactions with them as far as possible.

Despite her attempts to fulfil the expectations of white middle-class America, Fe is denied admission. Her fiancé, Tom, jilts her, and she loses her job at the bank. The effect on Fe is devastating. As her life breaks down around her, so too does her ability to communicate. Fe stops speaking and instead lets out 'one loud continuous scream that could have woken the dead.'²¹ This scream lasts days, and it is only the return of her sister Caridad from hospital (after being attacked and left a wreck) that she begins to speak again but in broken, disjointed fragments. As her mother, Sofi, describes:

Fe had severely damaged her vocal cords during the days when she had so violently and ceaselessly screamed; as a result, when she spoke 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.²²

Through this loss of communication, her contact with the world of superficial poise and grace is broken, and Castillo sets Fe up for the now seemingly inevitable fall (thanks in no small part to an explicit connection with Amelia Earhart). Her silence and severed communication, both as a result of her long *grito* (scream) and also her (chosen) isolation from her family, leads to suffering and loss. Yet regardless of this, it is her family, or more specifically her mother, who still comprehend Fe through her 'scratchy-sounding' vocals: 'Sofi understood her daughter, while exercising to the fullest the patience granted to her to endure the particular life she had been given.'²³ Thus although broken

¹⁶ Castillo, *So Far From God*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²² *Ibid.*, 85.

²³ *Ibid.*

socially, emotionally, and vocally, Castillo underlines that Fe still has the support of her family and in doing so emphasises the nurturing quality of the Chicana family.

Desperate to salvage some of the middle-class lifestyle she so craves, Fe moves away from her home and takes on a job at the Acme Chemical factory. In her new life in the suburbs, having married her cousin Casimiro, she continues to attempt to buy her happiness with 'the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR'.²⁴ At the chemical factory, Fe works hard to please her bosses and prove she is a valuable employee. As a result of her diligent work, Fe soon becomes something of 'speciality worker' and gets given the toughest job as she is, after all, 'the queen of utilisation and efficiency'.²⁵ It turns out, however, the jobs she has been doing are 'specialist' because she is the only one who will do them:

After the first day of what she called Ether Hell, she got used to the constant lethargy and just went with it. She was getting better bonuses, too. It was a lot of work, though, even for someone like Fe, so she was really earning them. When another girl was put on the same job for a few days, she went right back to the assembly line because she couldn't handle the smell or having to lug those burdensome parts down all day, neither.²⁶

The brand new super-efficient chemical they had brought in for her to clean the parts is an incredibly hazardous product. María Patricia Fernández-Kelly states several characteristics that make women like Fe attractive to industry employers, not only because of lower wages, but also because

[a]ccording to maquiladora managers and promoters, women are hired because of their putative higher levels of skill and performance; because of the quality of their handwork; because of their willingness to comply with monotonous, repetitive and highly exhausting work assignments; and because of their docility, which discourages organizing effort by union leaders.²⁷

Along with these characteristics, it is also a result of her disjointed speech that Fe suffers this work for so long. Even as her weekly manicured fingernails fall off one by one, Fe remains doggedly professional and only asks politely in her broken voice for some gloves while she works. Although manifested in a different way by Fe here, the vulnerability suffered due to an inability to communicate is experienced by many workers for whom English is not their first language. Chicana critic Anna Nieto Gomez has asserted that for the 'monolingual or marginal English speaking [woman], opportunities in the labor market are primarily menial'.²⁸ In her desperate attempts to make money and please her employers, Fe sacrifices everything. After only one appointment at the hospital which makes the abuse that her body has suffered horribly clear, Fe dies: 'And when

²⁴ Ibid., 171.

²⁵ Ibid., 181.

²⁶ Ibid., 183.

²⁷ María Patricia Fernández-Kelly, "Mexican Border Industrialization, Female Labour Force Participation and Migration," in *Women, Men and the International Division of Labour*, eds. June Nash and María Patricia Fernández-Kelly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 219.

²⁸ Anna Nieto Gomez, "Chicanas in the Labor Force," *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma M. García (London: Routledge, 1997), 128.

someone dies that plain dead, it is hard to talk about.²⁹ Fe is thus singled out in the family as her sisters all experience one form of resurrection or spiritual transcendence in the novel. For the final time, Fe is silenced. Her fate tragically confirms Tey Diana Rebolledo's observation that 'silence and overcoming it...are significant concerns in Chicana literature.'³⁰

With the devastating and tragic fate of Fe, Castillo unmistakably warns of the dangers of attempted assimilation. Critic Deborah Madsen argues that Fe's demise is as a result of her 'denial of her family, her ancestry, and her Chicana self [which is itself] always a form of death.'³¹ Her agonising death from cancer demonstrates not only the devastating physical effects of dangerous chemicals, but also the hazards of buying into a consumerist culture and underlines how damaging isolation from her family, community and heritage can be. There never was any escape through white American capitalist society as it is still firmly rooted in both patriarchal and racist notions of a woman's role in society. In her chase for the elusive American Dream, Fe finds only disappointment, deception and death, a death that, unlike her sisters' deaths, offers no possibility for transformation or resurrection.

Fe's attempts to find satisfaction in the world of waged work seem to agree with Friedan's promotion of the benefits of employment in *The Feminine Mystique*. However, as Estelle Freedman notes, 'when Betty Friedan called for liberating women from the home through employment, women of colour who had always worked knew that joining the men of their race on the job meant they would still encounter discrimination.'³² In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan offers paid employment as the solution to 'the problem that has no name', stating that work is essential, 'not merely as the means of biological survival, but as the giver of self and the transcender of self, as the creator of human identity and human evolution.'³³ For Friedan, then, work is not just about employment and earning money, but more deeply a question of identity and a way of maintaining a sense of self. While Friedan makes an effort to appreciate the difficulties of finding work, she does so only within the limited scope of white middle-class women. To quote Friedan fully, she states that:

There are, of course, a number of practical problems involved in making a serious professional commitment. But somehow those problems only seem insurmountable when a woman is still half-submerged in the false dilemmas and guilts of the feminine mystique – or when her desire for "something more" is only phantasy, and she is unwilling to make the necessary effort.³⁴

This not only demeans white middle-class women's struggle with finding waged work, it also neglects to account for the situation for working-class white women and women of colour. For many women of colour, waged work is not a panacea for an identity crisis but rather an economic necessity. For Chicana and Mexican American women it was not, and still is not, a case of being 'half-submerged in the false dilemmas and guilts of the feminine mystique', rather they are faced with the

²⁹ *So Far From God*, 186.

³⁰ Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 123.

³¹ Madsen, *Understanding contemporary Chicana literature*, 100.

³² Estelle B. Freedman, "Race and the Politics of Identity in U.S. Feminism," in *Unequal Sisters: An Inclusive Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 10.

³³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: W. W. Norton, 2013), 402.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 421.

often insurmountable obstacles of racial, gender and class inequality for women of colour living in the United States. Thus when Friedan discusses the 'obstacles and rationalizations' that keep women from applying for a job or writing a letter to that old connection in the publishing world, she ignores the realities for women of colour who do not have access to the same resources, contacts and opportunities as white middle-class women.³⁵ For the community of women that Castillo writes about, availability of and access to waged work are not halted by the pervasive attitude of 'the problem that has no name', but rather by social and political barriers that specifically hinder women of colour.

In *So Far From God*, rather than demonstrating the value of employment for women, Castillo highlights the exploitation of women in the labour market. As Nieto Gomez states, because Mexican American women, 'suffer from sex discrimination as well as from racial discrimination, [their] income is at the bottom of the economic ladder.'³⁶ Irene Mata notes that this is particularly the case for women like Fe who work in large factories, where the 'gendering [of this work] not only situates women within the lower strata of the global assembly line, but it also invites several labor practices that specifically exploit female workers.'³⁷ Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* explores the discrimination and exploitation of Mexican and Mexican American women in the labour market with particular reference to femicides on the U.S.-Mexico border.³⁸ The novel, a work of fiction but part of an ongoing project to tell the true stories of the disappeared women of Juárez, brings to light the appalling disposability of these female workers.³⁹ This is not to say that all Mexican/Mexican American women (or women of colour more generally) should be seen as victims in the labour market. Vicki L. Ruíz's 1987 work *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives* explores the positive connections between work, culture and gender as well as the relationship between women's networks and unionisation.⁴⁰ While acknowledging the exploitation of Mexicans in the labour market, Ruíz's work also focuses on their great successes in their roles as labour activists. Castillo adds her voice to a growing number of Latina artists and scholars who challenge and explore the place of women within the labour market.

³⁵ Ibid., 421.

³⁶ Nieto Gomez, "Chicanas in the Labor Force," 126.

³⁷ Irene Mata, "Markings on the Walls: Writing in Opposition in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*", in *Transnational Borderlands in Women's Global Networks: The Making of Cultural Resistance*, eds. Marta Sierra and Clara Román-Odio (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 49.

³⁸ Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press, 2007).

³⁹ For more on this and exploitation of women with particular reference to *maquiladoras*, see: Patricia María Fernández-Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); Rosa Linda Fregosa, *meXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Alicia Schmidt Camacho, "Body Counts on the Mexico-U.S. Border: Femicidio, Reification, and the Theft of Mexicana Subjectivity," *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 4 (2004): 22-60; "Giving a Voice to Maquiladora Workers", Women on the Border website, <http://womenontheborder.org/> (accessed 23 June 2015).

⁴⁰ Vicki Ruíz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Woman, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987). Denise A. Segura also examines the different attitudes towards waged work within the broad Mexican American community, exploring the differences between immigrant Mexicana women and Chicanas [U.S.-born women of Mexican heritage] juggling waged work with family life. For more on this see Denise A. Segura, "Working at Motherhood: Chicana and Mexican Immigrant Mothers and Employment," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*, eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (Brighton: Psychology Press, 1994), 211-235.

To emphasise the focal position of women in Mexican American society and in this novel, Castillo from the outset of *So Far From God* places them front and centre, pushing the only significant male character to the periphery. Having abandoned his family years previously, Don Domingo, Sofi's husband and the father of her four daughters, makes a surprising return to his hometown. Despite this unexpected appearance after so long, his return is treated as unexceptional. Domingo's deflated arrival illustrates his passivity with regards to family affairs and is remarkable only in its insignificance. Don Domingo takes an entirely inactive role within the family, and Castillo makes this apparent as the story of his absence is largely ignored in the village. His mysterious departure years ago and subsequent homecoming are dismissed as being only worthy of *chismes* (rumours), and even these have been fabricated by Don Domingo himself in an (unsuccessful) effort to prove his own importance.

Castillo parodies the idea of the father as the powerful *deus absconditus* (a hidden God): 'silent and noncommitted, dictat[ing] his wishes from afar.'⁴¹ Don Domingo does not dictate anything in this family. He is 'noncommitted' not in any grandiose, superior manner, but simply because he seems incapable. Indeed, the only direct action associated with him is destructive. Early in their marriage Don Domingo single-handedly demolished Sofi's family inheritance, having gambled away her home, pawned her family jewellery and sold the ten acres of land which had been given to them by her grandfather. His presence in the family and in the novel is peripheral to the plot, highlighting the woman-centred structure of this household.

Sofi is the real head of the family. As a forthright and determined woman, she takes matters into her own hands when she finally decides to serve her husband with divorce papers – something a traditional *mujer mexicana* would not dare do for fear of excommunication – and in Sofi's personal case the even greater fear of castigation from her mother. She feels the deep frustration of having wasted her time trying to be what was expected of her, and she condemns the social forces that have placed these responsibilities upon her. The laws of marriage have denied Sofi the right to individual ownership of her home, and now that her husband has gambled away the house, her very foundations have been destabilised. Sofi's vexation is clear as she bemoans her situation: '[she] had devoted her life to being a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother, or at least had given it a hell of a good try, and now she asked herself – “¿Y pa' qué? ¡Chingao!” ["And for what? For fuck's sake!"]'⁴² The tone of her condemnation here is ambiguous as she simultaneously feels the frustration of patriarchal familial structures while also having enjoyed being mother to her four daughters. She sorely feels the loss of her family – of her daughters through death and her marriage through divorce. Without her family to look after, Sofi laments that now she has 'nothing to look out for no more, except for la Loquita, her eternal baby.'⁴³ Although she is an independent woman who has demonstrated great resilience, at this moment she feels empty without her family. Her role as mother (and to some extent as wife, despite Domingo's failure as a husband) is still one she has enjoyed, distinguished herself in and will miss.

⁴¹ Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (Harper Collins: New York, 1995), 108.

⁴² *So Far From God*, 218.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

However Sofi does not sit and mourn the loss of her status as mother or wife; rather she sets about keeping herself busy and offering her nurturing talents to the wider community. Chapter Nine is defiantly entitled: 'Sofi, Who Would Never Again Let Her Husband Have the Last Word, Announces to the Amazement of Her Familia and Vecinos Her Decision to Run for la Mayor of Tome'.⁴⁴ As she is regarded by the community as '*la abandonada*' (the abandoned woman) who 'did her best, turning out her girls however she could under the conditions and test that God put on her,' this act of political will is seen as outrageous by the townspeople.⁴⁵ In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan underlines the importance of women taking on roles outside the house, and Sofi arguably fits the mould of those 'women who were strong enough, independent enough, [who] seized the opportunity and were leaders and innovators in these new communities.'⁴⁶

However, the context of Friedan's community differs dramatically from that found in *So Far From God*. The suburban life of a housewife who stays at home looking after the children and the household while her husband works is far removed from the reality for Sofi in the town of Tome, New Mexico. In addition, although Friedan suggests some positive influences of community work, she is scathing about women's club's activities believing that a long-term job is preferable. Friedan recalls an interview with one woman who had involved herself in 'an endless whirl of worthwhile community activities', but for whom ultimately they 'led in no direction for her own future, nor did they truly utilize her exceptional intelligence.'⁴⁷ For Friedan, then, community organisation should be seen as a means to a (greater) end and not as a solution in its own right. The experiences of Chicanas engaged in community work does not reflect this attitude. As Mary Pardo found in her study of Eastside Los Angelinas, gender identity, ethnic identity and class/community identity give meaning to community work: 'when they spent endless hours prepping the Mexican food preparing for parish fund-raisers, they did so as women who were members of a Mexican community.'⁴⁸ Chicana community workers' endeavours are more than a diversionary pastime: not only do they play an integral role in their neighbourhoods, but they also augment their own feelings of self-confidence and empowerment.⁴⁹

In contrast to her daughter Fe and Friedan's tenets, Sofi takes her own path. She embraces a collectivist approach that benefits herself and her community rather than focus on individualistic goals of consumerist culture. Deciding to run for Mayor of Tome – a position that does not even exist until she runs for it – she takes her daughters' advice and refuses to give up. Running for office in the traditionally male-dominated role of mayor demonstrates Sofi's hybridity and ability to see past the confines of her prescribed role as a woman. Instead of using community engagement as a way only to improve her own self-esteem, Sofi envisages the mutual benefits that can be brought by sharing her perspective with her townspeople. In return, she not only receives the eminent title of La Mayor

⁴⁴Ibid., 130.

⁴⁵Ibid., 134.

⁴⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 291.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 417.

⁴⁸ Mary Pardo, "Creating Community: Mexican American Women in Eastside Los Angeles," *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Nancy Naples (Hoboken, New Jersey: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 298.

⁴⁹ Nancy Naples, "Activist Mothering: Cross-Generational Continuity in the Community Work of Women from Low-Income Urban Neighborhoods," *Gender and Society* 69 (1992): 441-463.

Sofi, but also develops the town's economic and social standing through collaboration with her friends and *vecinas* (neighbours). Critic Roland Walter praises the novel for its multiplicity and its representation of community, reading the collective activism as 'a utopian solution to the loss of identity, assimilation, and the spread of Anglo culture.'⁵⁰ Although the dreadful fate of her daughters makes Sofi's life less than utopian, she is able to learn from them, survive and flourish. It is Sofi's *mestizidad*, her ability to 'speak from a multiplicity of positions', which allows her to do this.⁵¹ Thus Sofi successfully changes her title from the passive 'abandonada' to the active, and activist, Mayor of Tome.

Castillo endows Sofi with the ability to understand the importance of, and get pleasure from, the traditional familial role of wife and mother, but at the same time she has the ability to move on and escape the constraints of these roles when they break down – both through her own choice in divorce and through the unavoidable fates of her daughters. Indeed, by the end of the novel, Sofi remembers that twenty years previously it was not that Don Domingo had walked out of the family, but, in fact, she kicked him out. That Sofi and the community of Tome had forgotten this 'one little detail' highlights that there were no roles open to women other than either the traditional wife/mother, or the abandoned wife/mother.⁵² Castillo refuses to portray weak women. She actively defies 'the popular image of Mexican-American women as victims of social and political forces and instead builds on their long-standing tradition of community involvement.'⁵³ The emphasis is placed on Sofi's capacity to be more than just a wife and mother as she fulfils these roles but also those of friend, neighbour, mayor and *presidenta*. In addition, Castillo confronts the concept of an individualism that encourages living in the present moment while ignoring pasts and futures. Sofi weaves past, present and future into her life and is influenced by the combination of all three, thus creating new possibilities from her mestiza, pluralistic viewpoint. She creates an alternative to the archetype of individualism representing 'the strength of male power, while community becomes equated with female weakness.'⁵⁴ Through Domingo's actions, and marital/familial inaction, Castillo shows the reader how this is detrimental to women, and to the community more widely.

As Sofi herself laments, she has 'devoted her life to being a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother [...], and now she asked herself – "¿Y pa'qué? ¡Chingao!" ["And for what? For fuck's sake!"]'⁵⁵ This moment of exasperation does not make Sofi throw in the towel. She *has* been a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother. Far from succumbing to the misfortune that infiltrates her life, Sofi is strengthened in her resolve, not by deciding to move away from the traditional woman's role but by broadening the scope of this role. By adding politician, social reformer and business person, she redefines it on her own terms. Sofi uses multiplicity and her plural mestiza consciousness as a strategy of empowerment and liberation. She embodies and lives the mestiza identity that Anzaldúa describes as: '[s]tubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing

⁵⁰ Roland Walter, "The Cultural Politics of Dislocation and Relocation in the Novels of Ana Castillo," *MELUS* 23 (1998): 91.

⁵¹ Yarbro-Bejarano, "The Multiple Subject," 65-66.

⁵² *So Far From God*, 215.

⁵³ Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, "Gritos desde la Frontera: Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Postmodernism," *MELUS* 25 (2000): 105.

⁵⁴ Bonnie TuSmith, *All My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literatures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 22.

⁵⁵ *So Far From God*, 218.

a malleability that renders us unbreakable.⁵⁶ Sofi, as the emblem of female activism, is shown by the experiences of her daughters that choices need to be made in life, and that life should be defined as 'a state of courage and wisdom and not an uncontrollable participation in society.'⁵⁷ Thus in Sofi, Castillo emphasises the power of women to be more than 'just' wives and mothers; something that chimes with other articles in this special journal issue on Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*. For although the experiences for Chicanas may differ considerably from those of other women in discussion in this issue, there is value in that difference that does not necessarily detract from the commonality of the shared experiences of all women. In *So Far From God*, Castillo presents the reader with a new type of writing and new types of women: multi-faceted, multi-talented, complex and determined. She focuses on communities of women reflecting a Chicana feminism fuelled by a female-centred spirituality that challenges the subjugation of women. She is part of a group of Latina writers committed to revealing these complex female characters previously neglected both within a male-dominated Chicano literary canon and in second-wave feminist texts such as Friedan's. Castillo writes women for women who are more than 'just' wives and mothers.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 63-64.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 250.