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## The Shame Framework: Queer Faith in Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*

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**Abstract:** This work focuses on queer faith and how queer persons who have struggled with traditional values, public opinion, and lingering violence due to their sexuality, can reclaim their space and voices within religious communities. By redefining purity, exploring an alternative belief system through hybrid spirituality, and understanding the connection between pride and shame, queer persons can establish a dynamic framework, that allows for queer faith to be employed as a method of agency. This is analyzed through a literary perspective, focusing on the work of Ana Castillo's novel, *So Far From God*.

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For queer persons who engage in religious practices, there are many who find difficulty in connecting their sexuality with their own religious faith due to public and internal shame. There is a large void, however, in how queer faith can be achieved when faced with struggles such as traditional values, public opinion, and lingering violence—all firmly attached to the labels “queer” and “shame.” In spite of this, Caridad, one of the characters in Ana Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far from God*, explores the spectrum of shame to create a fluid, dynamic space in which she can experience spiritual healing.

*So Far from God* is a novel classified within the genre of magical realism focusing on the lives of Sofi, a single mother, and her four daughters. The four daughters are: Esperanza who is a political activist and journalist, Fe who is a jaded factory worker, Loca who is a recluse with supernatural abilities, and Caridad who is a traumatized woman who later becomes a *curandera*, or a person who exercises the Mexican folk healing practices (Pabón 2007). The novel is a fast-paced drama that fluctuates between each of these women's lives and their struggles facing oppression within their society and by a patriarchal church. While each woman actively fights back these systems of oppression, this essay focuses on Caridad, who, after becoming despondent over her lover's unfaithfulness, is later found raped, mutilated, and left for dead by the side of the road. She miraculously recovers and works towards becoming a *curandera*. Her main antagonist and literary foil is Francisco, a devout believer who falls in an obsessive love with Caridad and seeks to objectify, demean, and stalk her.

The terms “purity binary,” “hybrid spirituality,” and “queer” are referred to as key concepts that illuminate on the different categories of shame. Purity binary refers to the binary opposition of purity and impurity, which has also been referred to as clean and unclean. This binary affects several aspects of society that will be discussed throughout this essay. As Jordan Rosenblum, professor of Classical Judaism and researcher of the rabbinic movement, states, “Unlike the common translation of this binary as “clean/unclean,” pure/impure highlights the fact that these are statuses—they refer to relationships, not cleanliness” (Rosenblum, 216). As Rosenblum analyzes, this binary is an integral perception that links to the validity and sense of worth of those in question. Hybrid spirituality refers to faith that goes beyond the traditional practices and knowledge of said faith by utilizing other resources to make it more comfortable or inclusive. Theresa Delgadillo, discusses the necessity of hybrid spirituality within the novel as a means to counter the patriarchal church. She explains that those who participate in hybrid spirituality within the novel “. . . accept multiple forms and systems of knowledge, including the intuitive, mystical, native, psychic, folkloric, spiritual, material and rational, as well as traditional practices and ceremonies” (Delgadillo, 891). The term “queer” is used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ persons and those questioning their sexuality, gender identity, or expression. Since Caridad’s sexuality is not explicitly addressed, and considering the reader does not receive her personal thoughts, Caridad best fits under the labels: bisexual, pansexual, or queer based solely on her relationships. The term “queer” was chosen to best fit this narrative’s context.

Shame is a force that allows for the transformation of identity. Margaret Morrison, a prominent critic who specializes in shame politics, argues that queer shame is an integral key to the formation of identity and self (Morrison 17). Morrison builds on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theory about the impossibility of eliminating shame. There is no way to separate oneself from shame. In Morrison’s view, the inability to rid oneself of shame therefore signifies how “shame does indeed become integral to the identity-forming processes [and] it must also become available for the work of metamorphosis” (Morrison 17). In making this comment, Morrison declares that shame not only drives the reconstruction of self because it is ineradicable, but also reveals that this transformation of self is not stagnant. While Morrison persuasively discusses how shame cannot be erased, and how it requires a lengthy process of metamorphosis, Morrison overlooks how the process of shame functions and how these stages, when experienced, produce a variety of modifications to the self and self-image. In *So Far from God*, Caridad’s exploration of queer faith can be categorized by three stages: processing shame manifested from societal expectations and standards, processing shame manifested from the purity vs impurity and male vs female binaries, and processing queer shame.

The aim of this essay is not to provide a single answer to how queer people can understand and utilize their shame or reconnect with faith. That would be a complete desolation of the concept of fluidity and change within the spheres of spirituality and queer spaces. The aim of this essay is to create and employ a framework through fictional analysis that merges several elements of shame. Together, these elements could help queer persons feel more comfortable in establishing their voices within certain faiths and provide a means to overcome obstacles presented in strict, conventional societies as well as religious spaces that perpetuate debilitating shame. Applying this framework to Ana Castillo’s novel *So Far from God*, reveals that Caridad

escapes the confinements of societal shame by redefining purity, exploring an alternative belief system through hybrid spirituality that moves beyond religious queer shame, and by understanding the connection between pride and shame as a tool for agency. These key factors to the shame framework allow Caridad to wield the process of creating productive shame as a means for overcoming the oppression she feels within her society and establishing her voice in the religious sphere.

### **On Societal Shame and Redefining Purity**

The labeling of sexuality in relation to the purity of self has lasting, damaging effects. Shefer and Munt, researchers on feminist politics, argue that the shaming of women directly correlates with societal labels. Shefer and Munt explain, "Research on heterosexualities, and young women's sexualities in particular, illuminates the complex ways in which binaries like whore/madonna operate to shame women and police their sexuality within patriarchal and heteronormative boundaries" (Shefer and Munt 147). This emphasizes that the purity binary, and others like it, pose great harm by shaming women in society's eyes. As *So Far from God* demonstrates, the toxicity of purity culture has damaging effects on trauma victims like Caridad. Caridad was found with "her nipples had been bitten off. She had also been scourged with something, branded like cattle. Worst of all, a tracheotomy was performed because she had also been stabbed in the throat" (Castillo 33). After her mutilation and rape, much of the community still labeled her as a "puta," or a common whore, for sleeping with various men after her previous relationship failed. This labeling emerges most prominently in a scene in which the narrator describes how society treated her after the crime. Little by little, her assault was forgotten by the community, and even those who are placed in society to provide aid, such as the police department and sheriffs, all had little to no sympathy. The narrator specifies, "But there are still those for whom there is no kindness in their hearts for a young woman who has enjoyed life, so to speak" (Castillo 33). This labeling of "puta" and as "used goods" leads to Caridad's first bout of shame: the production of shame via social image. Even though she later overcomes this debilitating shame by acknowledging it and not letting the weight of its isolation ruin the rest of her life, her sense of purity remains questionable to others in her community, like Francisco. Such questions led Caridad to question her abilities to conduct *curanderismo*.

Within conventional faith, expanding far beyond only Western Catholicism, there remains a boundary placed on who is allowed to be an actual believer, and it is often those who fit the societal mold and are worthy of God's attention. Many assume that queer persons are not worthy to be placed in this bracket as their sexuality does not conform to God's holy image. Jay Michaelson, professional LGBTQ+ activist and researcher on spirituality politics, describes the intricate layers of exclusion queer persons face. Michaelson states, "As males, there is a place for them in the tradition. It is as gay men that they are marginalized. By contrast, in many Christian denominations, all women are marginalized. The exclusion of lesbians is a subset of that experience" (Michaelson 55). This illuminates how within Christian faith, (although this text speaks on Catholicism, it is true for other religious faiths), queer women are marginalized from multiple angles due to their intersectional identities. First and foremost, they are marginalized for being women, then for their queerness. The novel supports this argument as Castillo highlights

Francisco and Caridad as literary foils. Francisco, originally depicted as a man who followed the beliefs with precision and passion, relies on the rules laid out for him and relies on his sole connection to God himself. Even when worshipping his saint, “it wasn’t St. Francis the holy man whom Francisco was imagining, the one who cares for the poor . . . but St. Francis in his rightful eternal place in heaven, from which privileged place he was able to work miracles for the all-too-human beings left on earth” (Castillo 101). This validates how Francisco does not participate in faith to help and aid those in need, but because he believes it leads to the ultimate sense of power and purification of the self. He seems to fit into the mold of a good believer, in that he appears as a “pure” male figure with power, not of any “outside” gender, who fixates all his efforts on his heavenly connection to God and solely God, rather than any human connections on Earth. He solidifies the assumption of the lesser purity of women in a religion dominated by man, by a God who is a man, who created man in his image. In his eyes, women are more impure than men as they do not have the inherent link to God that men have. Caridad, on the opposite end of the spectrum, does not fit into the stereotypical mold of someone with religious faith. She does not personify a “pure” person by cause of her trauma and sexual identity, and her status as a woman signifies her deeper disconnect from God. She is a complete “other” and is, therefore, impure. This plague of questionable purity and the shame that is inherent with this public questioning haunts Caridad throughout the novel, is prevalent among everyone she meets, and is embedded in everything she does. It has become a cycle in which, not only does everyone doubt and shame her, but she, too, questions her validity and faith. This emphasizes the idea that society’s role in the production of shame is a crucial key to the shame framework because of its relationship with faith, in particular queer faith.

The novel then subverts the notion of purity by dissecting who within society demands purity and labels impurity onto others Castillo simultaneously utilizes Caridad’s and Francisco’s intertwining narrative as two ends of the spectrum of binaries that ultimately collapses in on itself. To illustrate, Caridad begins the novel as the one labeled impure by cause of her trauma, her gender, and her queer faith. Her trauma drives her to become a *curandera*. She embodies kindness and compassion due to what she has faced, and realizes how necessary they are in her religious practices, within her community, and as a connection to nature and God. The novel flips the binary of male purity by centering on Francisco’s debilitating mental health and psychotic attitude towards the latter half of the novel, all done in the name of love and God (Castillo 102). Francisco is seen as a pure believer in God, owed to his gender and faith practices. However, he transforms from a strictly devout subject of God to a monster of myth, transforming into the beast, the *malogra*, that Caridad recalls having seen the night of her assault. In his obsessive need to rid his mind of Caridad and to be pure of the flesh, he abducts Esmeralda, the woman Caridad falls in love with, and rapes her. He not only becomes the image of impurity, but one who transfers it to others as well as himself. He becomes the one who brings death, and the one who brings impurity onto himself as he is responsible for Caridad’s and Esmeralda’s deaths by the end of the novel (Castillo 208-212). Throughout the novel, Castillo contradicts the notion of the essentialness of the purity vs impurity binary by undermining the view that binaries are themselves pure, and therefore just, by positioning Caridad and Francisco as foils of each other. This foil showcases how societal standards in

religious spaces influence the production of shame for queer persons and how queer persons, like Caridad, do not fit into the stereotypical mold of the purity binary.

### **On Queer Shame and Hybrid Spirituality**

Hybrid spirituality creates a profound connection between queer persons and queer faith since it allows for a space in which they can explore different religious beliefs and combine them in order to promote fluidity in identity and practice. This is especially valuable within strict religious communities where persons may not feel welcomed due to the shame associated with being an “other”, or not finding satisfaction with faith observing only traditional practices. Magali Cornier Michael, a professor and scholar of contemporary fiction, highlights some of the hybrid practices of spirituality the women in Castillo’s novel observe and why they are necessary. Cornier Michael details how Castillo’s novel wields alternative spiritual practices and knowledge, such as “Latin American liberation theology, Mexican and Mexican American populist Catholicism inflected by Native American forms of spirituality and feminist spirituality” -- all of which are “linked to social change and [are] thus a rich source of activism” (Cornier Michael 114). This supports the idea that hybrid forms of spirituality generate a way for persons, especially queer persons, to establish their voice in a faith they feel they are excluded from, or not as connected to, due to queer shame. Hybrid spirituality is one of the foundational tools for queer faith being that queer faith is, at its core, a method of resistance, activism, and peace.

The manifestation and construction of queer faith can only be achieved by processing not only queer shame, but also any other form of shame that correlates with it, since all forms of shame link to each other even if categorized differently. A prominent critic of Castillo’s work, Colette Morrow, asserts that certain religious spaces, in this case Catholicism, do not allow for feminist action. Morrow states, “Such narratives are composed within the patriarchal cultures of Roman and Mexican Catholicism and have long been critiqued by feminists for socializing women into traditional, limiting gender roles” (Morrow 72). By stating this, Morrow agrees that Caridad, as she is a queer woman, is limited within the Catholic society she resides in. These patriarchal systems sculpt women into their own image which traps them in a limiting role of performative femininity that is not compatible with their true selves. Caridad is trapped in this mold due to the fact that she is not only a woman defying the traditional method of faith these cultures stress by practicing hybrid modes of spirituality, but also because she is a queer woman. Her queerness is central to this limitation since the traditional women’s gender role exalted by patriarchal society affirms that it does not accept a place in society for women who love other women. The core of this principle is “machismo,” otherwise known as aggressive, obtrusive male pride, where a man’s opinion and desire are first. This “machismo” is a core “truth” to Caridad’s society which is what perpetuates the feelings of queer shame. All of which correlate as to why there is a necessity for hybrid forms of spirituality to counteract and null this concept.

One of the core reasons hybrid spirituality can be utilized by queer persons is because of its ability to ease the patriarchal conceptions placed by certain faiths and add a true connection to faith. In order for Caridad to come to terms with her practices of faith, she establishes a sort of routine that becomes a necessary ritual she adopts for healing and meditation: “Sundays she

cleaned the altar, dusting her statues and pictures of saints she prayed to and the framed photographs of her loved ones” (Castillo 63). Caridad’s altar is cleansed and made purposeful by placing, not pictures of gods, but of the people she loves, along with saints and gods she admires, who all remind her of why she chooses to become a *curandera* in the first place (Castillo 63). Carmela Delia Lanza, dedicated poet and educator, wrote on the importance of home space and home spirituality for the women in Castillo’s *So Far from God*. She prioritizes the idea that Caridad, by utilizing her hybrid practices, “re-connect(s) and re-member(s) to the body and the spirit” (Lanza 73). Lanza explains that by practicing hybrid forms of spirituality, Caridad is creating a deeper connection with herself and with her faith as an accepted queer woman. She focuses less on the shame of her queerness or on the shame of using different practices. Instead, she reaffirms to herself that her faith lies in a connection between the divine, the spiritual world, and the living world. She reaffirms that everything is connected and deserves to be nurtured and respected. This connection solidifies why community work, healing, and creative activism is a large part of her faith, and is a valid form of spirituality.

The shame framework when applied to queer faith, intertwines a multitude of elements that creates this identity, shaping how queer faith is understood by the individual. Caridad experiences a great bout of confusion, specifically seen in her scattered thoughts and rushed narrative, when she first meets Esmeralda, the woman she is instantly attracted to (Castillo 76); as she notices her on the retreat with Dona, she begins to question if she was truly faithful when she felt more attraction to a woman rather than a man. Her process of acknowledging and overcoming her shame is significantly more severe, which led her to feel isolated from the people around her, and isolated from a connection to her faith. However, Caridad acknowledges the shame she feels towards her queerness and works to establish a means of agency and acceptance through hybrid spirituality.

### **Pride and Shame**

A key factor to the process of transforming debilitating shame into productive shame that can be used as a tool for agency is to acknowledge one’s shame and accept it. Tamara Shefer and Sally Munt, in their article *A Feminist Politics of Shame*, emphasize how silencing and shame interconnect with sexual violence. According to Shefer and Munt, the stigma and shame behind sexual assault set women up as “responsible for their own protection and therefore to be blamed in the event of violence and abuse” (Shefer and Munt 148). They assert that women are responsible for their own sexual assaults and rape because women are responsible for their bodies and reputation; the responsibility of carrying the weight of the assault does not fall on the perpetrator in society’s eyes. Additionally, Panteá Farvid, Virginia Braun, and Casey Rowney, researchers in modern day double standards and sex politics, explore how casual sex and female sexuality are viewed. They state how “those who display an openly desirous and active sexuality run the risk of being labelled promiscuous or slutty,” and that female status is ranked and “regulated as a tool of sexual reputation” (Farvid, Braun, Rowney). Thus, women are responsible for their own sexual reputation, which makes them “deserving” of holding the labels “slut” or “promiscuous.” Castillo’s novel exemplifies this stigma as Caridad’s shame about her mutilation and how the rape is attributed to her reputation debilitates her mental and physical

health to the point where no one thought she could be a functioning person again, much less a well-respected woman. After Caridad recovers, and the scars from the act are no longer visible, Caridad learns the hard way that she must reconcile with what is left of her shame. She is constantly reminded of her sexual assault, and simultaneously recognizes that shame will stay in her memory and in her soul, becoming an ingrained part of her identity. This scene from the novel showcases how shame cannot be taken away or masked under a sense of pride. Only once she decides to utilize her shame for agency, to help both herself heal by becoming a *curandera* and to help others overcome their shame and guilt, can Caridad claim pride. This work of processing and acknowledging the lasting presence of her shame signifies the beginning of claiming her queer faith. Caridad realizes that queer pride, and general pride for one's self, can only be claimed when she can reclaim her shame as well. In this manner, Caridad embraces her ability to help and cure those in the community who need a *curandera*. She rejects the machismo-centered beliefs of purists and society's sexist beliefs regarding the inferiority and weakness of women who survive trauma by overcoming that which originally harmed her. She moves beyond what hurt her and begins to employ spiritual activism as a way to continue healing and promote a healthy lifestyle every day that she cures others. Accepting shame that comes from sexual trauma and the alteration of self is a process with steps that shift through the dynamic nature of individual internalization of shame. There is a balance between shame and pride: one cannot be claimed without the other.

In her final act of agency and activism, Caridad decides her fate. Caridad realizes that she and Esmeralda would not survive an encounter with whatever was hunting them down. She confronts two different roads. On one path, she could die by the hands of whatever was chasing them, and it would be the ultimate defeat. It would mean surrendering what she has worked so hard toward, to give herself independence, faith and agency following the self-deprecation, isolation, and debilitating shame after her assault. This demon chasing them, both a metaphorical dark force that Caridad remembers as what mutilated her and literally as Francisco, represents every injustice she faced from the men who labeled her "puta" and used her over it and who made her insecure about her sexuality and place in society. It also meant succumbing to the idea of the traditional, feminine role of not only subservience and submissiveness, but of supreme obedience and silencing which she worked tirelessly to overcome. By dying at the hands of this demon, it would mean erasing all she stood for. Instead, she chose to die by her own hands. Together with Esmeralda, they throw themselves off the cliff, committing suicide, to be together as one whole. The narrator voices "There were no morbid remains of splintered bodies tossed to the ground . . . there was nothing. Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly to the wind with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out towards the sun's rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist, earth" (Castillo 211).

In essence, they never reached the Catholic idea of heaven but instead reconnected back to the Earth. The similarity between Caridad's death and the more famous creation stories like "The Four Worlds," the Navajo creation myth, and the "Emergence," emphasizes Tsichtinako's integral role in Caridad's journey. Tsichtinako is the goddess who leads souls into higher worlds, past this plane of existence to a world where they can settle permanently (Leeming and Adams

157). The fact that this goddess leads souls to another plane of existence correlates directly with how Tsichtinako called to Caridad as she approached the cliff and how she accepts death. Tsichtinako's role in Caridad's death represents Caridad's acceptance of hybrid modes of spirituality and her renunciation of the notion of purity within her religious sphere in that Tsichtinako is not a goddess present within Catholic faith. Caridad's death completed a full cycle. Birthed from nature, she will therefore be connected to the Earth once again. Her death itself represents a ceremony of Caridad and Esmeralda's akin to a marriage; they are forever bonded in a way they could have never been able to pursue within their social context. They are connected in a manner much deeper than the typical Catholic marriage could ever create since they are even unified after "till death us do part" (Tsichtinako being witness and calling for them to jump off of the edge gave them an escape from execution and a chance for rebirth into the Earth). Caridad's decision of accepting death, in this case alone, signifies her acceptance of both her pride and shame as both inherently linked to each other and to herself. She completely accepts herself and chooses to stand by her principles until the end.

### **Conclusion**

Caridad's final act of agency, by embracing death and rebirth with Esmeralda, is one that is viewed, within this narrative, as a triumph of resistance against the problematic Catholic and patriarchal society Caridad felt trapped in; however, in real-life context, this would be an absolute annihilation of everything she had accomplished. Within this narrative that is firmly based in a fantastical setting with several unrealistic scenes that could not occur in everyday life, this was a perfect ending. Caridad was able to completely accept her shame, her entire self, as well as reunite with Esmeralda in a space of eternal togetherness. If this narrative is to be taken literally though, it would only mean that Caridad's tragic suicide foregrounds her inability to thrive in a society filled with all-encompassing, overpowering standards and demands of living. The weight of their deaths, even with understanding the symbolic meaning behind their deaths, is bittersweet, if not, rage-inducing and sorrowful. Real life people do not get this opportunity of an eternal happy ending, without doubt, in life or after death. Their union and happiness in death and her spiritual triumph over a faulty religious system overshadows the reality of them committing suicide, leaving the reader with a confusing ending. Nevertheless, even with its uncomfortable and unrealistic means of achieving agency, this novel challenges flawed religious societies that capitalize off of malignant patriarchal ideologies that declare their way as the only "pure" and "true" way of practicing faith. Caridad employs the shame framework by dismantling the concept of purity, by implementing an alternative belief system through hybrid spirituality, and by accepting the inherent connection between pride and shame. In this manner, Caridad processes the varied forms of shame that once incapacitated her, and uses her shame as a means for resistance and as an instrument of power to actively confront the toxic, patriarchal religious society. Thus, she accepts herself for everything she is and forges a path of happiness and fulfillment. Overall, the aim for this essay is not only to implement the shame framework to Caridad's narrative, but to provide even just a semblance of hope for real queer persons as well as tools for agency to those queer persons who feel excluded, belittled, angered, or hopeless towards a religious faith or society. This framework was born from a cry of

helplessness, hoping to aid others in finding victory through resistance and peace through queer faith.

### **About the Author**

Isabella Montes is a recent graduate of Florida International University, where she pursued a B.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing, a minor in History, and a certificate in Professional and Technical Writing. Her research interests are grounded in Latinx literature, queer theory, activism, and religious/spirituality studies. She is conducting research on the reclamation of queer spaces and spirituality within toxic religious spheres in Ana Castillo's novel, *So Far from God*. Her passion lies in tutoring and teaching students the necessity of discovering their voice and owning authority over their work.

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