Chapter Three: How the Southwest Winds Blow: Region and Gender in *So Far from God* and *Play It as It Lays*

“…for a person who had lived her whole life within a mile radius of her home and had only traveled as far as Albuquerque twice, [Loca] certainly knew quite a bit about this world, not to mention beyond, too, and that made her smile as she closed her eyes.”

--*So Far from God*

“I have neither heard nor read that a Santa Ana is due, but I know it, and almost everyone I have seen today knows it too. We know it because we feel it….To live with the Santa Ana is to accept, consciously or unconsciously, a deeply mechanistic view of human behavior.”

--Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

Despite or perhaps because of the ambiguity of space and place, we have much to learn from studying relationships between and among regions. Eudora Welty remarks that “[o]ne place comprehended can make us understand other places better” (1990, 128). Studying a single region offers in-depth insight into that region’s characteristics and constituents. Extending that analysis comparatively enables us not only to understand each region better—inasmuch as regional areas do not exist in isolation—but also to grasp regional interrelationships. Fictional and non-fictional connections between landscapes of Appalachia and the Southwest pique interest in such interrelationships. For example, bell hooks compares color and dirt: “this red dirt that was the ground of my being and becoming was a color more typically found in the terrain of the southwest and other desert landscapes. Here in Kentucky, it was special, sacred, part of a magical landscape” (2009, 203). In Edward Abbey’s novel *The Fool’s Progress*, Henry apposes both regions while considering his mortality: “Why I wouldn’t trade one morning in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada or the Allegheny Mountains of Appalachia for a complete eternity in Yeat’s gold-plated Byzantium, Dante’s polyurethane Paradiso or T.S. Eliot’s Ivy League Heaven” (1988, 65).

In *Strange as This Weather Has Been* Mogey claims different ways of life are lived in each region despite similar topography. After leaving West Virginia and meeting people from other places he believes that

people not from here probably don’t understand our feeling for these hills. Our love for land not spectacular. Our mountains are not like Western ones, those jagged awesome ones, your eyes always pulled to their tops. But that is the difference, I decided. In the West, the mountains are mostly horizon. We *live* in our mountains. It’s not just the tops, but the sides that hold us. (Pancake 2007, 173)

Mogey’s contrast between how Appalachians and Westerners live with/in mountains suggests that emotion and perspective factor into how landscape is looked upon and utilized. Lorraine Dowler, Josephine Carubia, and Bonj Szczygiel note: “Whether written, painted or built, a landscape’s meaning draws on cultural codes of the society for which it was made, codes which are embedded in social power structures” (2005, 11).

Literary depictions, rather than existing solely in an imaginary context, offer ways for readers to confront socio-cultural and political patterns of power as they are directly related to actual individuals, communities, and regions. Dowler, Carubia, and Szczygiel point out that “feminists now argue that the landscape not only reflects certain moral codes but performs as a medium to perpetuate socially constructed gender stereotyping” (2005, 1). I expand on their claim and revise ideas of identity and community formation by showing how Southwestern spaces also perform as mediums to *challenge* social constructionist and essentialist stereotyping via an emphasis on intersectionality.

Edward Ayers’ and Peter Onuf’s definition of region highlights ways in which regional intersectionality works. They

do not see regions as areas filled with a certain kind of cultural ether, but rather as places where discrete, though related, structures intersect and interact in particular patterns. The region *is* climate and land; it *is* a particular set of relations between various ethnic groups; it *is* a relation to the federal government and economy; it *is* a set of shared cultural styles. But each of these elements, even the influence of land and climate, is constantly changing. Accordingly, their relationships with one another also are constantly changing. (Ayers and Onuf 1996, 5-6)

I add: region *is* gendered. This chapter focuses on Southwestern climate and land, with an emphasis on how spirituality is exemplified through the intersections of gender, region, and race.

Although “countless ways to define” the Southwest as a region exist (Dunaway and Spurgeon 1995, xxii), an attempt at definition comes from Paula Gunn Allen, who claims that “[t]here are three cultural bases that define southwestern cultural identity: the Pueblo, the Mexican Hispano, and the American” (1995, xvi).[[1]](#endnote-1) Allen highlights links between the aesthetics of Southwestern place, culture, individual and communal identities, and literature:

As I see it, the Southwest is that space shaped by the deep understanding possessed and expressed by the ancient Pueblos, Mogollons, and Maya and their descendants, the Hohokam, Pueblo, Pima, Yaqui, Diné, and Mexicans of Aztec-European descent. It is this bedrock of a particular kind of Native American civilization and embodied in its central narrative that best distinguishes southwestern literature from that of any other region in the Western hemisphere. That central narrative is characterized by a particular aesthetic that is rooted in the ongoing relationship, or conversation, among the human, the plant and animal, the land, and the supernaturals, each perceived as members of the same geospiritual community. (1995, xviii)

In regard to the Southwest, Janice Monk states that “[p]erhaps most common across the Indian, Mexican-American and Euro-American women [writers and artists] are expressions of a sense of integration between self and land, rather than separation” (1992, 135). Elsewhere Ana Castillo links histories of Natives and Chicano/as.[[2]](#endnote-2) Like numerous Native authors, many Chicana/o writers portray conflicts between individual and group subjectivity (such as family or ethnic identity).

Rosaura Sánchez argues that the family can serve as a microcosm of the region: “Family-centered narratives in Chicano literature are not limited to the private domestic sites of one household, for not only is the concept of family broader, but it often includes the outside community. The ‘family’ functions then as a microcosm of the ethnic community or of the region…” (1997, 1019). Sánchez acknowledges the traditional portrayal of the family as being “male-centered,” but claims that “as the literary production of Chicana women has increased, the family space has been feminized…[certain women writers] have gone beyond the representation of feminine subjectivity in essentialist terms and have chosen to focus on the diversity of subjectivities and on the collective experiences of women in Chicano/Mexicano/Latino communities” (1997, 1019). *So Far from God*[[3]](#endnote-3) exemplifies Sánchez’s assertion that many Chicana authors write about women-centered families and communities and employ these “feminized” spaces to blur boundaries of identity processes.

*So Far* features a Southwestern Chicana family of women engaged in a variety of complex relationships among humans, non-human forms of life, and the supernatural. While I note religious implications in Castillo’s novel, I focus more on the “spiritual” as that which “concern[s] the spirit or higher moral qualities” and as “the nature of a spirit or incorporeal supernatural essence” (*OED*). In particular, I consider the “supernatural” as that which “transcend[s] the powers or the ordinary course of nature” and as “extraordinarily great; abnormal” (*OED*). Throughout this chapter I employ these definitions to illustrate how notions of and interactions with the spiritual and supernatural are influenced by region and gender. In *So Far*, spirituality (i.e., the ways in which characters enact their beliefs in the spiritual and supernatural) serves as a vehicle through which regionally gendered performativity is enacted in and depicted via Southwestern climate and topography.

Joan Didion’s *Play It as It Lays*[[4]](#endnote-4) is also set in the Southwest (mostly in southern California and Nevada). Like *So Far*, *Play* “depends upon an intimate connection between setting and theme” (Geherin 1974, 64). *Play*’s Anglo American characters, from an elite Hollywood milieu, offer comparative and contrasting perspectives on how gender, race/nationality, and topography intersect and affect identity and community. For instance, Rebecca Aanerud asserts that “whiteness cannot be understood as a singular entity, existing prior to or apart from other categories of identities. […] Instead, its construction and interpretation are informed by historical moment, region, political climate, and racial identity” (1997, 36-7). Both *Play* and *So Far* depict how intersectionality shapes identities.

However, *Play* portrays spirituality quite differently from *So Far*. The main protagonist, Maria,[[5]](#endnote-5) insists that “nothing applies,” and expresses what H. Jennifer Brady describes as “Didion’s reiterated concern with what she speaks of as society’s atomization—the breakdown of values traditionally held by the community and passed down through the generations…” (1979, 463). Castillo’s concern, I argue, is to show ways in which values may be continuously revised and even challenged but still unite community through strong attachments to the supernatural and physical worlds. In *Play*, regionally gendered performativity exemplifies a struggle for spirituality that ultimately fractures Hollywood and desert communities. The aim of this chapter is to examine how regionally gendered performativity functions for women in Castillo’s New Mexico and Didion’s southern California and Nevada. I argue that spirituality is reflected via the Southwest’s topography and climate and that this correlation influences women’s identities and community allegiances.

***So Far from God***

Castillo’s novel opens with an epigraph: “So far from God—So near the United States,” a quotation attributed to Porfirio Díaz, Dictator of Mexico during the Mexican Civil War (Castillo 2005, 15). Thinking about how places are constituted via networks of cultural meanings—what McDowell terms “nodes”—helps us understand how this epigraph immediately introduces the reader to three important points regarding the Southwest and identity. First, Díaz’s statement directs attention to how place can be defined as an area created by the convergence of entities or, in this case, the spaces created where Mexican and U.S. borders overlap. These intersections are fraught with divergent power relations: for example, “the changing border that divides the U.S. and Mexico…has placed Mexicans in a continuous neocolonial state” (Castillo 1995, 3). Secondly, rather than highlighting a node’s life-giving or cultivating activity, the epigraph suggests the opposite, declaring that to be near the U.S. is to be far from God, devoid of spiritual growth and nourishment. Thirdly, it highlights the complex roles location plays in regard to physical and psychological formations of regions, nation-states, and cultures.

Díaz’s statement alerts the reader to issues of space and place as they are inflected by geography and spirituality; to these Castillo adds gender. Laura Gillman and Stacey Floyd-Thomas observe that “within the narrative frame” of *So Far* “the link between location and identity narrows even further—location is problematized in relation to the positionality of the Mexican-American woman” (2001, 161). Written in a Spanish-English mix often referred to as “Spanglish” and set in the small town of Tome, New Mexico,[[6]](#endnote-6) *So Far*’s narrative revolves around Sofi and her four daughters, Esperanza, Fe, Caridad, and La Loca. The names of these women—which translate as “Wisdom,” “Hope,” “Faith,” “Charity,” and “The Crazy One,” respectively—signify dominant themes in Castillo’s novel. Like Lace in *Strange*, Sofi is a strong woman who survives without the help of her husband. But after twenty years of raising her daughters as a single mother, her husband Domingo returns. She grapples with decisions regarding her personal, family, and communal life, all of which contribute to the wisdom she earns laboriously but then imparts confidently. Esperanza wants desperately to create a new life outside of Tome, which she succeeds in doing even though hope carries her only so far. Fe’s beliefs in social conventions, traditional domesticity, and labor rights are gravely challenged. Caridad drastically changes her life after surviving a brutal attack, and her new outlook on how compassion inflects romantic and platonic love lead her to urgent decisions. Loca, whose “phobia of people” (Castillo 2005, 23) causes her to prefer relationships with animals and the supernatural, challenges everyone’s ideas of “normalcy” and “madness,” their embodiments, and their meanings in life and death.

These themes are delivered in a style that is both serious and entertaining and draws the reader into the women’s dynamic worlds. Castillo employs “a variety of genres, including the family saga, the *telenovela*, myth (Pueblo, Apache, and Aztec), *cuentos* (oral stories), magic realism, comedy, tragedy, folkloric elements such as *remedios* and recipes, and religious narratives” (Mermann-Jozwiak 2000, 102). This mix depicts multicultural identities and supernatural experiences and encourages readers to question ideas of cultural and spatial-temporal boundaries. Kim Barnes and Mary Blew claim that interconnections between gender and landscape bridge genres: “A sense of isolation stemming from gender and physical environment, from being part of the frontier in any number of ways—politically, ethnically, sexually—lends a strong unity to otherwise divergent literary styles” (1994, xi). From the opening scene of Loca’s demise and resurrection at age three to other family members’ confrontations with life and death, this genre-mixing depicts issues of gender, regional and ethnic identities, and spirituality.

Despite Domingo’s eventual return and appearances by some of the daughters’ male partners,[[7]](#endnote-7) *So Far* centers on how women’s regional and gendered identities affect and are affected by Southwestern space. For Loca especially, region, gender, race, and spirituality are intimately intertwined. Via metaphors of Southwestern topography and climate, Loca’s regionally gendered performativity shows how spirituality rooted and enacted in a particular place actually works to expand one’s horizons.

Many of Loca’s unusual traits are presented via descriptions of her connections with the Southwestern desert heat. After violent jerking that Sofi believes to be a seizure, three-year-old Loca dies.[[8]](#endnote-8) But her life actually begins shortly thereafter in the searing desert heat: “It was 118 degrees the day of Sofi’s baby daughter’s funeral and the two pall-bearers, upon the instruction of Father Jerome, placed the small casket on the ground just in front of the church. No one was quite certain what Father Jerome had planned when he paused there in the hot sun” (Castillo 2005, 21). What Father Jerome had planned is beside the point becausenot only does Loca come back to life but also she now has the power to fly. Shocking and frightening the funeral crowd, Loca flies up onto the church roof to avoid Father Jerome’s reach and screams, “’Don’t touch me, don’t touch me!’” (Castillo 2005, 23). Her audacity is duly noted by the community who does not expect a young girl to interact so boldly with a priest.

Loca’s aversion to Father Jerome’s proximity extends to most people. She is “repulsed by the smell of humans. She claimed that all humans bore an odor akin to that which she had smelled in the places she had passed through when she was dead” (Castillo 2005, 23). The priest tells Loca that she should come down, and they will pray for her, but Loca has other plans:

With the delicate and effortless motion of a monarch butterfly the child brought herself back to the ground, landing gently on her bare feet, her ruffled chiffon nightdress, bought for the occasion of her burial, fluttering softly in the air. “No, Padre,” she corrected him. “Remember, it is *I* who am here to pray for *you*.” With that stated, she went into the church and those with faith followed. (Castillo 2005, 24)

Loca’s description here—as a fleeting yet grounded butterfly—depicts her contrasting characteristics. The child takes control and refutes assumptions of how a young girl should act. Amidst scorching temperatures usually experienced as stifling or even suffocating, she resurrects herself, flies, asserts her autonomy to a male religious authority, and leads a group who believes in her despite her incredibility. She becomes a sort of divine figure after being reborn as an autonomous girl amidst the searing Southwestern heat.

Nor is she bothered by her regional reputation. Her rejection of socio-cultural norms fuels her lack of concern that “she eventually earned the name around the Rio Abajo region and beyond, of La Loca Santa,” which translates as “The Crazy Saint” (Castillo 2005, 25). However, Loca demands and receives respect in regard to her spirituality, and she embraces the title given her by the community:[[9]](#endnote-9) “Loca herself responded to that name and by the time she was twenty-one no one remembered her Christian name” (Castillo 2005, 25). The people of the Rio Abajo region regard Loca with a mixture of awe, fear, and reverence—a regard not dissimilar to that usually reserved for supernatural, spiritual, and/or religious figures. Loca knows that this regard lends her prominence. The mysterious distance she maintains between herself and the community promotes the image of her as a supernatural figure and enhances her regional fame.

Even though she has the charisma to lead the group into church after her resurrection, Loca does not often participate in the community at large. The narrator reports that “[t]he occasions when La Loca let people get close to her, when she permitted human contact at all, were few. Only her mother and the animals were ever unconditionally allowed to touch her” (Castillo 2005, 27). Sofi realizes that most people will not understand Loca; therefore “Sofi’s baby grew up at home, away from strangers who might be witnesses to her astonishing behavior” (Castillo 2005, 25). Yet Loca’s reclusiveness does not sever her ties to the community. According to Carmela Delia Lanza, the home not only plays a prominent role in Loca’s development but also establishes her as a member of an important community outside Sofi’s house: “Like her mother, La Loca uses the home space as a source of spiritual nourishment and a source of strength….While living in her mother’s home, Loca becomes a mythic force in her own right. She becomes a player in a scene far older and larger than her individual self” (1998, 77). Loca possesses supernatural powers unlike anyone else, enabling her to secure a prominent position in the Southwestern cosmic universe in which her family and community members believe. She uses this position as a bridge between the supernatural and regional communities of which she is a member.

Unlike Loca, many of the women in *So Far* leave Tome. Loca “had grown up in a world of women who went out into the bigger world and came back disappointed, disillusioned, devastated, and eventually not at all. She did not regret not being part of that society, never having found any use for it. At home she had everything she needed” (Castillo 2005, 151-52). Like Sula, Loca resists conformity to socio-cultural mandates; unlike Sula, Loca challenges such norms without leaving the town in which she was born. Fe sees Loca as “antisocial” and even “as a soulless creature” (Castillo 2005, 28), yet Loca proves to be anything but “soulless.” She devotes much of the time spent in Sofi’s house to strengthening relationships with the supernatural, herself, and her sisters.

In ways that could be labeled essentialist, Loca practices spiritual healing.[[10]](#endnote-10) For example, without any kind of training, Loca knows how to perform abortions, and she performs each of Caridad’s three (Castillo 2005, 26). The narrator reports that Loca “’cured’ her sister of her pregnancy” and that “healing her sisters from the traumas and injustices they were dealt by society—a society she herself never experienced firsthand—was never questioned” (Castillo 2005, 27). The reader does not know from where Loca’s knowledge and ability come. But her innate capabilities allow her to act apart from and ignore dominant social influence and control. Theresa Delgadillo explains that “[i]n the Americas, a sense of the abiding validity of native beliefs and practices springs both from existence in the materiality (topography, landscape) of these continents and their human communities, as well as from the uninterrupted insistence of native populations on defining the world and themselves, that is, from their history of resistance to oppression” (1998, 890). Performing abortions is audacious, and Loca defines herself, in part, by rebelling against Catholicism. Silvio Sirias and Richard McGarry assert that “the discourse in *So Far From God* constitutes a direct confrontation with Catholicism” (2000, 93).[[11]](#endnote-11) In the Catholic region in which they live, Loca’s acts are defiant and dangerous, and she challenges religious, regional, and gendered expectations.

Loca is spiritual, but arguably not religious. Castillo claims that “[s]pirituality and institutionalized religion are not the same thing. Spirituality is an acutely personalized experience inherent in our ongoing existence” (1995, 12-3). Here Castillo’s definition seems vague, but later in *Massacre* she explains that she conceives of spirituality as a process toward fulfillment, a process most likely full of revisions. She writes:

So, if a woman decides that she still finds rewards in pursuing the rituals and mandates of the church, or simply by “meditating in the temple” of her own room, or if she constructs an altar in her home, (perhaps not like the one she knew as a child of a myriad of saints and crosses, but of articles that have special meaning for her); or if one day, she discards all religious icons and can embrace herself with self-acceptance and calls *that* her spirituality, she is continuously doing one and the same thing: maintaining her well-being. (Castillo 1995, 147)

Castillo’s commentary opens up numerous questions about whether self-acceptance and/or well-being equals spirituality. My focus is on how Castillo underscores ways in which spirituality is gendered by describing the idea in terms of how a woman conceptualizes and enacts it. Loca’s spiritual journey in *So Far* is one in which she seeks to maintain her well-being and her mother’s and sisters’—even if that well-being is achieved by refusing to abide by rules of Catholicism.

Normally she would have been “excommunicated” for such a refusal, but “Father Jerome took pity on her and finally dismissed Loca as a person who was really not responsible for her mind” (Castillo 2005, 221). Deploying the common stereotype of an irrational woman to his benefit, Father Jerome tries to discredit her. But Loca is not insane, and she is not subdued by the priest’s condescension. She and Caridad make informed decisions to keep the abortions secret because they know they would be expelled by the church, and Loca would be arrested (Castillo 2005, 26-7). While Loca does challenge Catholic mandates, she also purposefully acts in accordance with social directives for fear of being excommunicated and jailed. Therefore she challenges *and* abides by socially-constructed mandates of behavior. Sánchez comments on these seeming oppositions: “Female characters are thus presented as contradictory figures, with no single function, role, or trait to define them; all are situated, however, within their capacity to affirm or counter the dominant practices and values of the ethnic collectivity” (1997, 1020). Although in many ways Loca feels separate from, perhaps even above, society and social mores, she abides by some, showing that she acknowledges the social construction of communal behavior as much as she enacts an essentialist sense of self. Similar to what Sánchez claims about Chicano/a literature’s investment in emphasizing the individual as situated in community, Castillo shows through the character of Loca that even a person who has little human interaction still negotiates individual and communal identities.

Loca occasionally leaves the house, though she does not travel far. In fact, an acequia near Sofi’s house “was as far as Loca had ever drifted from home, and her place to play and hide since she had learned to walk. Consequently, she knew and loved everything about it. She knew its quiet nature in summer, its coolness in spring; and she didn’t mind it in winter when the muddy water was frozen most of the time. It was her own place to be…” (Castillo 2005, 151). The acequia is her “spiritual home”—“a place or milieu, other than one’s home, which seems especially congenial or in harmony with one’s nature, or to which one feels a sense of belonging or indebtedness” (“Spiritual” *OED*). The comfort she finds in the seasonal changes of an irrigation canal in the Southwest fosters spirituality as a main component of Loca’s intersectional identity.[[12]](#endnote-12)

For Loca the acequia serves as a site of contemplation and communion with the supernatural. Here she often thinks of her sisters, who all leave Sofi’s house to pursue endeavors in or outside of Tome. Caridad apprentices with the healer Doña Felicia, and Fe moves in with a roommate. Esperanza, having moved to Saudi Arabia as a news reporter, is a prisoner of war. On a June afternoon with a temperature of ninety-eight degrees, Loca, “finding no relief from the heat in the house, swamp cooler going full blast or not, would seek at least a little comfort from the shade of a cottonwood near the acequia that ran by her mother’s house” (Castillo 2005, 150). During this hot afternoon alone at the acequia Loca communicates with the ghostly figure, la Llorona, who informs Loca that Esperanza is dead. Esperanza has been missing for months, and the U.S. military has informed the family “that Esperanza and her colleagues were surely kidnapped when they got too close to enemy lines” (Castillo 2005, 158). Loca rushes back and tells Sofi and Fe the dreadful news. Fe does not believe her, and Sofi is hesitant. Like the community in general, her family does not always accept that “what might be attributed to ‘imagination’ in others, in Loca’s case was nothing short of what had happened, like it or not” (Castillo 2005, 159). In part because of the intimate connection she develops with a Southwestern irrigation canal—through which Southwestern topography and seasonal climate are reflected—she is privy to information about her family that others are not.

Loca insists that “the lady with the long white dress” told her that “’Esperanza won’t never be coming back because she got killed over there. Tor…tured, she said’” (Castillo 2005, 159). She disproves Fe’s outright disbelief and Sofi’s doubt when “the official letter” from the Army arrives, which “confirm[s] that Esperanza and her colleagues were all dead” (Castillo 2005, 159). Benay Blend interprets the “arid landscape” of the desert in Chicana writing as depicting a “refusal to be owned or transformed into someone else’s image” (2000, 68-9). Using Blend’s interpretation, Loca’s life in the Southwestern desert can be read as a refusal to be pressured into conformity. She employs regionally gendered performativity to conduct spiritual practices and facilitate supernatural encounters, but these acts at times distance her from other people.

Loca’s affinity with the supernatural and her aversion for humans largely form the basis of the community’s apprehension. The narrator reports that

[s]ometimes a vecino would catch sight of La Loca [at the acequia] and think she was lost. Most people around mistook the fact that she showed no apparent social skills to mean she was a simpleton. None of them realized just how aware Loca was of her surroundings and of all the things that went on outside and away from Sofi’s house. And not only that, but how effective she could be in handling circumstances that were beyond most people’s patience, not to mention ability. (Castillo 2005, 151)

While the people of the Rio Abajo region do not shun Loca overtly, as the people of Medallion do Sula, they do not recognize the regionally gendered performativity of a young woman who avoids humans, befriends animals, and refuses to conform to standard behavior. Even her family often misunderstands Loca, and what others see as her “difference” engenders pity.

Loca’s sisters cannot understand how a life lived entirely within the physical borders of Tome, New Mexico (with the arguable exception of her supernatural journeys), could be fulfilling: “To her sisters, the saddest part of all was that Loca had never had a social life. Her limber horse-riding body had never so much as felt the inside of a dress, much less of a bra! No, Loca had done none of the things young ladies did or at least desired to do” (Castillo 2005, 221). But Loca resists *and* embodies gender roles. She never wears a dress or bra, and she trains animals and plays the fiddle. She possesses innate knowledge that provides her with extraordinary capabilities, such as performing abortions. But she also cooks, sews, and is a caretaker to her sisters. The narrator opines that “it may be said [Loca] had a full life. Maybe not one reserved for a lady, but then, neither had the rest of the women in her family” (Castillo 2005, 222).

These seeming contradictions confound even her mother. For instance, Loca cuts out the label in her jeans because she sees a television report about how workers are boycotting the local jean factory. The report reminds her of how Fe was grossly mistreated at another factory, and the reporter reminds her of Esperanza. Sofi stares “at her daughter in amazement, although that might sound hard to believe after everything Sofi had experienced with her youngest. But it made sense that even if Loca never left her home and seemed to have no use for society, some of her own sisters’ experiences had affected her” (Castillo 2005, 222). Loca does learn from others and is keenly aware of actions and consequences. She also taps her innate knowledge of and connection with the supernatural to shape her identity. Loca blurs boundaries of essentialist and socially constructed identity processes, and she does so without ever leaving Tome.

Unlike Lace and like Bant, Loca never experiences Tome as limiting. Instead, Tome facilitates her growth as a person, her communion with the spiritual, and her transition to the supernatural realm. After a noticeable decline in Loca’s health, Sofi calls Doctor Tolentino for a consultation. He concludes that, inexplicably, Loca has HIV: “A great wave of sadness, like a dry ocean tide, went over the whole region when the news spread that La Loquita Santa was dying again. ¡A-yyy!” (Castillo 2005, 231). The incongruent image of a “dry ocean tide” is an apt metaphor for the community’s mourning: it might seem unlikely that they passionately mourn the fatal illness of someone who is estranged from the community, but they do. In fact, the news looms large, as any thought of a “dry ocean tide” in the desert does.

Many healers try to help Loca—all of whom

had lived in the Rio Abajo region, that is, in Los Lunas, Belen, Tome, on the Isleta Pueblo, from Alameda to Socorro, all around on their own little no-name rancherías, and up in the Manzano Mountains away from everybody for a very long time, not to mention that most had learned their remedies from grandmothers who had learned from grandmothers. And all who had lived on that tierra of thistle and tumbleweed knew that every cactus and thorn had a purpose and reason, once put into a pot to boil. (Castillo 2005, 233)

In the Rio Abajo region healing knowledge and practices are passed down through women and derived from common desert flora such as thistle and cacti. Medicine originating from and practiced in the Rio Abajo region is regarded as the best, and the women practitioners are deeply respected. Regional location serves as the common factor underlying the most effective methods of healing, also referred to as “special Rio Abajo medicine” that people “couldn’t have gotten nowhere else” (Castillo 2005, 237). Instead of being dismissed as “brujas” or “nursemaids,” the Rio Abajo women healers are revered for their wisdom and experience. Regionally gendered performativity is exemplified in these instances by the fact that women of this specific region are considered the most accomplished healers.

Unfortunately, nothing and no one can save La Loca Santa from physical death. During an evening visit from the “Lady in Blue,” a supernatural being who resembles a nun, “Loca went to sleep in the Lady’s arms thinking that for a person who had lived her whole life within a mile radius of her home and had only traveled as far as Albuquerque twice, [Loca] certainly knew quite a bit about this world, not to mention beyond, too, and that made her smile as she closed her eyes” (Castillo 2005, 245). Just as Loca’s illness brings healers from different parts of the region together, her death brings disparate groups together: “young and old, poor and not-so-very-poor, Catholic or whatever, believers and non-believers alike, ‘Indian’ and ‘Spanish,’ a few gringos and some others, even non-human (since it was never no secret that all her life animals were closer to La Loca than people) came to that second funeral” (Castillo 2005, 231-32).[[13]](#endnote-13) Not only does Loca expand her own horizons by never leaving Tome, but also in her death she strengthens Tome’s community and brings people together from outside the town.

Loca’s accomplishments are extraordinary: “The truth of it was that she was just truly a santita from ever since her fatal experience at the age of three and she didn’t have to prove nothing to no one. She didn’t bother to do it when she was more or less among the living and people figured out eventually that she was not going to try to prove nothing afterward, neither” (Castillo 2005, 248-49). In a deck of tarot cards made to memorialize Sofi’s daughters, Loca is depicted as “the Fool.”[[14]](#endnote-14) What seems to be, at first glance, a derogatory representation of Loca is the opposite: “The Fool card represented one who walked without fear, aware of the choices she made in the journey of life, life itself being defined as a state of courage and wisdom and not an uncontrollable participation in society, as many people experienced their lives” (Castillo 2005, 250).

Loca resists and embodies both essentialist and social constructivist conceptualizations of identity. Like Rio Abajo healers, Loca’s innate knowledge seems to come from an otherworldly place, but one still based in the Southwest; Roland Walter comments on how “the possibility of change is articulated and actualized through a culturally specific faith in an expanded reality” (1998, 90). Through various enactments of spirituality—many of which challenge gender and regional norms—she proves that she need not leave Tome in order to complicate identity processes as they are tied to local community. As a result, she actualizes “a solidarity that is rooted in local customs, beliefs, and values as instilled in her by her mother” (Gillman and Floyd-Thomas 2001, 168). In *So Far* Castillo particularizes spirituality by focusing on how Loca simultaneously practices it as rooted in Southwestern land, weather, and community and revises it by challenging traditional ideas of gender and region, as they are inflected by race and ethnicity.

***Play It as It Lays***

Especially in contrast to Castillo’s vibrant genre-mixing, Didion’s style is minimalist. Her prose is skeletal and leaves plenty of white space on the page, while Castillo’s conversational prose fills the physical space of each page. Didion uses a single word or numbers to designate chapters; Castillo’s lengthy chapter names provide brief summaries.[[15]](#endnote-15) Together these approaches constitute an interesting way to look at the desert, because although the desert is stark, often barren land, it is a place that sustains life.

I add to conceptualizations of Southwestern literature by including Didion’s story of a wealthy white coterie who travels between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. The main protagonist, Maria Wyeth, claims to believe in nothing and therefore seems to reject spirituality. Maria is an interesting contrast to Loca for many reasons. Living in the Southwest affects them differently; issues of race and class figure prominently. Both women are perceived as “crazy,” and both manipulate this perception to cut ties (to various extents) with society, friends, and family. Through this extrication, Maria believes, she will finally be able to live on her own terms, not by the expectations pressed on her.

Under the section heading “MARIA” *Play* opens with Maria’s observation: “What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never ask” (Didion 2005, 3). Maria’s dislike for questions is exacerbated by the staff at the psychiatric facility in which she resides when the novel begins. (Like *Sula*, the opening of the novel is the end of the story; the narrative circles back on itself.) In first person she recounts being asked to complete a questionnaire:

Maria, yes or no: I see a cock in this inkblot. Maria, yes or no: A large number of people are guilty of bad sexual conduct, I believe my sins are unpardonable, I have been disappointed in love. How could I answer? How could it apply? NOTHING APPLIES, I print with the magnetized IBM pencil. What does apply, they ask later, as if the word “nothing” were ambiguous, open to interpretation….There are only certain facts, I say, trying again to be an agreeable player of the game. Certain facts, certain things that happened. (Why bother, you might ask. I bother for Kate. What I play for here is Kate. Carter put Kate in there and I am going to get her out.) (Didion 2005, 4)

Maria is thirty-one years old, divorced, and has one daughter, Kate, who is four years old (Didion 2005, 4). Maria is extremely thin.[[16]](#endnote-16) From her mother Maria inherits looks and migraines; from her father she inherits optimism which she has recently lost (Didion 2005, 5). Born in Reno, Nevada, she moves to Silver Wells, Nevada, population “then 28, now 0,” with her family at age nine (Didion 2005, 5). After graduating from high school she moves to New York City to take acting lessons and model. Shortly thereafter she marries Carter and moves to L.A., but she confesses: “I try not to live in Silver Wells or in New York or with Carter. I try to live in the now…” (Didion 2005, 10). She tries to remember nothing, which for her in large part is an exercise in forgetting place.

*Play* takes place in the late 1960s, depicting the debauchery and despair of the Hollywood elite as they travel between Los Angeles and the Nevada desert. Each of the first three chapters is told by either Maria (an out-of-work actor), her friend Helene (a socialite), or her ex-husband Carter Lang (a filmmaker). Didion then changes to what she calls “close third”—“not an omniscient third but a third very close to the mind of the character” (Thomson 2005, xv)—thereby giving the reader more access to Maria’s thoughts and feelings.[[17]](#endnote-17) David Geherin notes that *Play* “is an acutely sensitive record of Maria’s mind, moods, and emotions….Everything—events, other characters, objects, *even the weather*—is seen from her point of view, measured by her response” (1974, 76; emphasis added).

Maria has been in two of Carter’s movies. Together they have a daughter named Kate, who resides in a psychiatric facility for reasons unclear to the reader. They are friends with BZ (a producer) and Helene—a married couple who have a rocky open relationship and who both have dubious ties to the seedy sides of Hollywood. The reader follows the demise of Maria’s and Carter’s marriage amid cliquish L.A. parties, scandalous Hollywood deals, and stark Nevada desert. Symbols such as freeways and dry washes appear frequently in the novel to convey and question themes of futility of inquiry and memory and emotional burdens of pain, grief, and apathy.

*Play* begins with Maria’s assertion that “to look for ‘reasons’ is beside the point” (Didion 2005, 3), Helene’s attempt to visit Maria in a psychiatric hospital, and Carter’s recollection of scenes from his tumultuous life with Maria. Maria has affairs, an abortion, and an ambivalent relationship with Carter, all of which bring to the forefront questions about autonomy and love. She “is forced to confront irrationality and silence” (Geherin 1974, 68). The desert serves as a prime locale in which to place these scenarios. Desert landscapes can seem irrational: plants grow with little to no water, and people and animals survive barely livable conditions. Also, desert areas can provide intense quietness and darkness, far removed from city centers, freeways, traffic, and lights, and their starkness can provide clarity.

In the Nevada desert Maria finds herself in a life-or-death situation with BZ in which all of her philosophical musings on life and meaning, as they are influenced by place and gender, culminate in crisis. Samuel Coale remarks on how the “[p]hysical landscape and psychological mindscape” of Didion’s characters “merge and reflect one another” (1984, 164-65); I extend his analysis. Via metaphors of Southwestern topography and climate, Maria’s regionally gendered performativity challenges ways in which the binary spirituality/lack of spirituality is usually conceptualized. It would be easy to say that Maria is a nihilist. She seems to believe in nothing and to act accordingly, but, like misleading desert mirages, I argue that she tries to believe. Her struggle is gendered and evidenced through her interactions with place.

Thomas Mallon asserts that “character” refers to “not only the place’s look or feel, but its moral strength” (1979, 48-9), and Didion uses weather to portray the character of place and people. The first chapter narrated in “close third” tells the reader that “[i]n the first hot month of the fall after the summer she left Carter…Maria drove the freeway” (Didion 2005, 15). The first month of fall is not usually thought of as hot in comparison to the summer, but in Los Angeles the average high temperatures in September and October are in the low eighties; these are also the months in which the Santa Anas start to blow (Didion 1992, 211). Didion’s description of southern California weather, especially the Santa Ana winds, is crucial to understanding Maria’s regionally gendered performativity:

Easterners commonly complain that there is no “weather” at all in Southern California, that the days and the seasons slip by relentlessly, numbingly bland. That is quite misleading. In fact the climate is characterized by infrequent but violent extremes: two periods of torrential subtropical rains which continue for weeks and wash out the hills and send subdivisions sliding toward the sea; about twenty scattered days a year of the Santa Ana, which, with its incendiary dryness, invariably means fire. (Didion 2008, 219)

Basically, Santa Ana is a foehn wind (Didion also refers to it as “malevolent”) which “occurs on the leeward slope of a mountain range and, although the air begins as a cold mass, it is warmed as it comes down the mountain and appears finally as a hot dry wind” (Didion 2008, 218). When Santa Anas blow, usually in early fall, “the relative humidity drops to figures like 7 or 6 or 3 percent” (Didion 1992, 211). The winds “dry the hills and the nerves to the flash point” (Didion 2008, 217). Helene sums up the effect: “The wind makes me feel bad” (Didion 2005, 163).

Didion offers substantive proof that these winds directly affect human behavior, feeling, and health:

Whenever and wherever a *foehn* blows, doctors hear about headaches and nausea and allergies, about “nervousness,” about “depression.” In Los Angeles some teachers do not attempt to conduct formal classes during a Santa Ana, because the children become unmanageable. In Switzerland the suicide rate goes up during the *foehn*, and in the courts of some Swiss cantons the wind is considered a mitigating circumstance for crime. Surgeons are said to watch the wind, because blood does not clot normally during a *foehn*. (Didion 2008, 218-19)

Didion depicts these serious consequences via Maria. Maria’s experiences as a woman are affected by her location, as the Southwestern heat and wind shape her identity formation.

The unexpected hot temperature and aridity of this fall month underscore Maria’s unusual habits of dressing specifically to drive on the freeway, with nowhere in particular to go, yet bound by a certain time. She dresses casually and quickly “for it was essential…that she be on the freeway by ten o’clock—not somewhere on Hollywood Boulevard, not on her way to the freeway, but actually on the freeway. If she was not she lost the day’s rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum” (Didion 2005, 15). Throughout the narrative Maria states that nothing matters. But the autotelic movement on the circulatory freeways provide meaning for her, even if temporary. Maria travels L.A.-area freeways in particular—“the Santa Monica, the Santa Ana, the Pasadena, the Ventura” (Didion 2005, 16).[[18]](#endnote-18) She drives the freeways “as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs soar overhead at seventy miles an hour, *Normandie ¼ Vermont ¾ Harbor Fwy 1*” (Didion 2005, 16). She navigates freeways by immersing herself in the immediate and urgent pulse of traffic and the illusory images of scenery passing by. Haunted by ideas of place she feels unable to pin down, freeway driving makes her feel grounded and purposeful, no matter how aimless the exercise might seem. As a riverman works against currents, Maria works against ennui. Although eventually she quits the freeway routine, it shows Maria’s ability to believe in something.

Her struggle with the spiritual is not simply an ethos of nothingness. She recognizes how the Southwestern heat and wind both give rise to and symbolize actual and illusory peril. In the hot dry weather Maria chooses to sleep outside, by the pool, on a wicker chair with beach towels as cover: “Because she had an uneasy sense that sleeping outside on a rattan chaise could be construed as the first step toward something unnameable…she told herself that she was sleeping outside just until it was too cold to sleep beneath beach towels, just until the heat broke, just until the fires stopped burning in the mountains, sleeping outside only because the bedrooms in the house were hot, airless…” (Didion 2005, 16-7). She senses that her actions—sleeping outside on a chair instead of inside her comfortable home—fall outside the bounds of socially acceptable, but she believes they will make her feel better. That Maria searches for comfort and ways to help herself proves that she does not believe nothing matters.

Maria realizes that the dry heat literally affects her physically and mentally. Didion recalls that

an Israeli physicist discovered that not only during such [*foehn*] winds, but for the ten or twelve hours which precede them, the air carries an unusually high ratio of positive to negative ions. No one seems to know exactly why that should be; some talk about friction and others suggest solar disturbances. In any case the positive ions are there, and what an excess of positive ions does, in the simplest terms, is make people unhappy. One cannot get much more mechanistic than that. (Didion 2008, 219)

Maria’s attempts to mitigate these unhappy feelings are not the acts of a nihilist; instead, she acknowledges the biological effects the heat and aridity have on her, and she takes steps to lessen such negative effects, even if such an undertaking comes at the cost of jeopardizing her adherence to socially acceptable behavior. This kind of jeopardy clearly makes her uncomfortable (underscored by her emphasis that this situation is temporary), but it also causes her to consider socially constructed behavior in ways she previously has not.

Maria understands regional and gender norms via heat and water.[[19]](#endnote-19) The temperature of the pool water reflects ways in which these norms are enforced and regulated. Sitting outside with BZ in the “hot October twilight”[[20]](#endnote-20) Maria notes that

it was the hour when in all the houses all around the pretty women were putting on perfume and enameled bracelets and kissing the pretty children goodnight, the hour of apparent grace and promised music, and even here in Maria’s own garden the air smelled of jasmine and the water in the pool was 85º. The water in the pool was always 85º and it was always clean. It came with the rent. Whether or not Carter could afford the rent, whether it was a month like this one when he was making a lot of money or a month when the lawyers were talking about bankruptcy, the boy came twice a week to vacuum the pool and the man came four days a week to work on the roses and the water in the pool was 85º. (Didion 2005, 24-5)

Didion’s prose style reflects Maria’s boredom, yet Maria still plays along with Hollywood’s excessive standards of appearance. No matter if she and Carter can afford it, one of their top priorities is to conform by making outward appearances seem flawless, which is evidenced by Maria’s emphasis on the pool temperature being regulated at a balmy and sterile 85 degrees.

Still, “[s]ometimes it occurred to Maria that maybe the pretty children and the enameled bracelets came the same way, but she did not like to think about that” (Didion 2005, 25). Despite the unpleasant insinuations, Maria parallels the ritual importance of pool-area maintenance to the importance of adhering to regional gender norms. While a normalized standard of appearance permeates culture, Los Angeles heavily values it. These Hollywood women spray perfume; Maria’s garden air smells of jasmine. They adorn themselves with unchanging glossy bracelets; her shimmering pool is always eighty-five degrees. Regardless of the cost, she and the pretty women mentioned in this passage consistently carry out decorative, yet superficial, practices. Maria does not like to think about the parallel because she knows the costs are high, still she recognizes how she and these women enact, within the constraints of ideological codes of behavior, regional and gender norms that comprise (in part) identity and community formation.

Unlike the tight-knit community in *So Far*, very little sense of community exists in *Play*. Maria’s and Carter’s relationship deteriorates. Maria’s acquaintances are not loyal, trustworthy, or stable. BZ constantly provokes her, and “friendship” is probably too strong a word for Helene’s and Maria’s relationship. BZ’s and Helene’s tumultuous marriage seems to be based on ulterior motives. Provokingly BZ asks: “’Isn’t Helene a nasty, Carter? Haven’t I got a bitch for a wife? And question number three, *who am I impersonating*?’” (Didion 2005, 45). Before Carter can reply Helene retorts: “’Yourself’” (Didion 2005, 45). BZ uses regionally gendered performativity to perpetuate stereotypes. He knows his “perpetually tanned, oiled, gleaming” body (Didion 2005, 45) looks like that of a stereotypical southern Californian man. (His glossy skin recalls the shine of the enameled bracelets that Maria considers indicative of the artifice of Hollywood.) He degrades his wife in front of friends to assert control. But Helene exposes the machinations behind both performances by asserting that BZ impersonates himself. Coale argues that Maria and her cohort “remain cinematic selves, trapped in ‘lifestyles,’ tied so completely to certain acceptable, outward display and social performance that without them, they are nothing. Interior selves, if there are any, evaporate” (Didion 2005, 165). Helene exposes the ruse of BZ’s appearance and behavior and therefore unmasks ways in which regional and gendered norms operate. Helene and Maria explicitly acknowledge ways in which regionally gendered performativity functions. Therefore they counter Coale’s claim that these characters’ identities are completely constructed socially, because, if that were true, Helene and Maria would likely not be able to recognize and critique social construction.

On the beach Maria observes BZ, whose youthful body makes it seem as though he “had an arrangement with mortality” (Didion 2005, 46). Conversely, Maria notices “a certain texture to Helene’s thighs, a certain lack of resilience where fabric cut into Helene’s flesh” and thinks that “Helene was not quite so immune to time” (Didion 2005, 46). The mandates of performativity in this Hollywood milieu are gendered, and Maria recognizes “that whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women” (Didion 2005, 46). Whether Maria’s and Helene’s realizations come from some sort of women’s “interior self” is debatable, but the women do critique social construction in ways the men can or do not. Helene blurs lines between innate and imitation by stating that BZ impersonates himself. Maria blurs these lines by recognizing how a man’s body directs attention to the actual flesh of a woman’s body. In short, Helene and Maria problematize the essentialist/social constructionist binary out of which Butler’s theories of performativity are formulated.

Maria opens spaces to contest dichotomous constructions of the spirituality/lack of spirituality binary. She reluctantly agrees to get an abortion after Carter insists. While waiting for the man to call and tell her where to meet for the procedure, she restlessly listens to “fire reports on the radio” (Didion 2005, 75). The dry hot air exacerbates her agitation, and as Maria drives to the ominous meeting place, she sees a landmark in the southern California cityscape that symbolizes her ambiguous relationship with spirituality:

In the aftermath of the wind the air was dry, burning, so clear that she could see the ploughed furrows of firebreaks on distant mountains. Not even the highest palms moved. The stillness and clarity of the air seemed to rob everything of its perspective, seemed to alter all perception of depth, and Maria drove as carefully as if she were reconnoitering an atmosphere without gravity. Taco Bells jumped out at her. Oil rockers creaked ominously. For miles before she reached the Thriftimart she could see the big red T, a forty-foot cutout letter which seemed peculiarly illuminated against the harsh unclouded light of the afternoon sky. (Didion 2005, 76-7)

While the wind intensifies her anxiety, it also sharpens her view of the looming yet wrinkled mountains. She notes the contradiction in the fixity of the lanky and usually swaying palm trees. Yet Maria interprets the clarity as ironically “rob[bing] everything of its perspective.” In other words, the heat, dryness, and wind simultaneously magnify her vision and diminish her sense of stability. Maria’s struggle with the spiritual is situated in the disjunction between the immediacy of the southern Californian landscape and climate, and the incongruity of these two realities, which usually are not considered incongruous, causes her to feel detached.

Such intense interactions with one’s surroundings may be described as spiritual or religious.[[21]](#endnote-21) Many characters in *Play* (and *So Far*) reject traditional organized religion, which “is represented in the landscape of [*Play*] by the giant red T of the Thriftimart, under which the attendant meets Maria to take her to the place for her abortion” (Geherin 1974, 71). Although Geherin does not make this comparison, I interpret his analysis as a reference to the large crosses overlooking freeways, usually in groups of three and often sitting on a hill so they appear larger than life and “peculiarly illuminated” against the open sky. Maria’s doubts about the abortion are manifested in the conspicuous forty-foot, glowing red “T” made brilliant by the afternoon light. The “T” of the L.A.-area supermarket signifies a business she does not patronize; she shops at Ralph’s Market (Didion 2005, 101), a grocery store chain in southern California. Because clarity “alter[s] all perception of depth” for Maria, the “T” pinpoints the meeting place but makes murky her moral convictions. While she never expresses an explicit opposition to abortion, she struggles with the decision personally, and the reader is unsure of her motives. Particularity of place often triggers Maria’s feelings of dislocation, and this seemingly contradictory process plays a significant role in Maria’s efforts to negotiate the space in between spirituality and its absence, a space also symbolized via Las Vegas.

Shortly after the abortion Maria divorces Carter. She takes barbiturates to sleep and drinks heavily in order to avoid dreaming. In an attempt to leave the personal drama of Los Angeles behind her, she goes to Las Vegas.[[22]](#endnote-22) While Las Vegas can be interpreted as a place likely to preclude any possibility of spirituality, Maria experiences it as a place which fosters—perhaps even forces—contemplation of her gendered physicality through sensory experiences of temperature and wind: “Two or three times a day she walked in and out of all the hotels on the Strip and several downtown. She began to crave the physical flash of walking in and out of places, the temperature shock, the hot wind blowing outside, the heavy frigid air inside. She thought about nothing” (Didion 2005, 170).

While she claims to think about nothing, these experiences pull her into a sensory reality that instigates serious contemplation about how she is situated within elements of air and light:

By the end of a week she was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between *Maria* and *other*. She had the sense that if she could get that in her mind and hold it for even one micro-second she would have what she had come to get. As if she had fever, her skin burned and crackled with a pinpoint sensitivity. She could feel smoke against her skin. She could feel voice waves. She was beginning to feel color, light intensities… (Didion 2005, 170-71)

Maria’s considerations of boundaries between herself and other entities show how interconnected gendered bodies and natural elements are. Her ruminations are gendered because they complicate de Beauvoirian theories of women as the second sex by placing the woman in the privileged spot of the binary and referencing the “other” as natural elements. For her, physical sensations suggest that she will come to know herself via the heightened awareness of physical, emotional, and mental states instigated by what is most intimate for her—Southwestern desert environments. Maria’s identity is shaped by both biological factors (the wind and heat literally alter her mood) and socially constructed factors (how she is expected to act as a woman).

The Nevada desert landscape and climate reflect and instigate Maria’s actions. Shortly after her solo trip to Las Vegas, she drives to the town “on a dry river bed between Death Valley and the Nevada line” where Carter is filming with Susannah Wood, an actor rumored to be his girlfriend (Didion 2005, 187).[[23]](#endnote-23) In “the still heat of the motel on the desert” Maria and Carter fight and then barely speak (Didion 2005, 184). Despite this tense situation with Carter, Maria spends an evening with him, BZ, Helene, and Susannah in Susannah’s room and voices her concern that someone will complain about the loud music. Susannah taunts her: “Maria thinks we’re going to get ar*rest*ed for pos*ses*sion. Maria thinks she’s already *done* that number in Nevada” (Didion 2005, 190). So hot that her hair is clinging to her neck, Maria retorts: “I don’t like any of you. You are all making me sick” (Didion 2005, 190). Susannah laughs, and Helene tells her she is not being funny. Maria responds: “I mean sick. Physically sick” (Didion 2005, 191). Her disgust with their behavior, intensified by the searing heat, prompts her to eschew social mores of keeping her opinion to herself. Although Maria is surrounded by people, she feels alone, and the sweltering desert magnifies these feelings of solitude.

The harsh desert environment reflects Maria’s solitude, but it does not indicate that she is a nihilist. She grapples with issues of loyalty, love, and sex. BZ insinuates that Carter is sleeping with Helene:

Maria said nothing.

“If you’re pretending that it makes some difference to you, who anybody fucks and where and when and why, you’re faking yourself.”

“It does make a difference to me.”

“No,” BZ said. “It doesn’t.”

Maria stared out the window into the dry wash behind the motel.

“You know it doesn’t. If you thought things like that mattered you’d be gone

already. You’re not going anywhere.” (Didion 2005, 195)

By asserting that who Carter sleeps with—especially when that person is supposed to be her friend—matters to her, Maria demonstrates the desire to believe in love, to believe in commitment. The dry wash symbolizes Maria and Carter’s relationship. At one point water coursed through the dry wash and could again. Maria acknowledges the current lack of commitment between her and Carter but still feels that what happens between them matters. She “attempt[s] to determine the moral implications of what she has seen, to find some larger, transcendent meaning to the memories she cannot forget” (Wolff 1983, 486).

Although these moral contemplations might cause Maria to feel lonely among her Hollywood cohort, who seem to have no similar concerns, she is not as desperate as Carter believes. She prefers solitude and desires little. Carter does not or cannot understand her inclinations as anything other than negative: “’What’s the matter,’ Carter would ask when he saw her sitting in the dark at two or three in the morning staring out at the dry wash. ‘What do you want. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what you want’” (Didion 2005, 195). Here the dry wash symbolizes the difference in perspective between Maria and Carter. Maria looks to it as an anchor, a reminder that barrenness does not signify futility or utter despondency; Carter interprets her attention on the dry wash as the exact opposite.

When Maria does not respond to his persistent questioning in a way he deems appropriate, he blames it, in part, on female physiology:

“I don’t want anything.”

“Tell me.”

“I just told you.”

“Fuck it then. Fuck it and fuck you. I’m up to here with you. I’ve had it. I’ve had it with the circles under your eyes and the veins showing on your arms and the lines starting on your face and your fucking menopausal depression—”

“Don’t say that word to me.”

“*Menopause*. *Old*. You’re going to get *old*.”

“You talk crazy any more and I’ll leave.”

“Leave. For Christ’s sake *leave*.”

She would not take her eyes from the dry wash. “All right.” (Didion 2005, 195-96)

Looking to the dry wash for support amidst Carter’s tirade, Maria checks his self-assured arrogance by telling him that she *is* willing to leave him and the milieu in which they are both involved. The hot desert temperatures exacerbate the circles under her eyes that Carter notes: “In the heat some mornings she would wake with her eyes swollen and heavy and she would wonder if she had been crying” (Didion 2005, 196). Because the climate is intimately intertwined with her mental state, the heat distorts her ability to determine whether or not she was or is emotionally upset. Unlike Carter, however, the heat does not aggravate her temper. During the argument she remains calm and detached and therefore resists gender norms. Her “passivity is a form of resistance as much as it is a sign of her psychic scars. Her sparing use of words is meant to show how empty and ‘unmotivated’ the words employed by others are” (Rhodes 2000, 134). By reacting in such a steady way she emphasizes Carter’s prattle and reverses stereotypical gender norms of women acting hysterically. The dry wash’s starkness reflects the empty relationship she has with Carter, but it also suggests the possibility of transformation (i.e., it could likely fill with water) in the future. She knows she could leave him, even though he is a famous director and she is unemployed; in Hollywood his position alone might be reason for her to stay. By challenging regional and gender norms via physical actions deployed within the desert, Maria distances herself from the artifice of Hollywood.

Maria’s deployment of regionally gendered performativity fractures community but does not translate to a lack of spirituality. The desert topography grounds her. Shortly after this fight with Carter, Maria sits “in the motel in the late afternoon light looking out at the dry wash until its striations and shifting grains seemed to her a model of the earth and the moon. When BZ came in she did not look up” (Didion 2005, 201). Once again the dry wash is a focal point of meditation and contemplation; it humbles her by reminding her of change. Maria perceives the dry wash to model the earth and moon, and in this scenario she situates herself among life forces. She might not believe in a god, but she does contemplate seriously her position in regard to others and the world at large. BZ interrupts: “’Carter is fucking Helene. I thought these things made a big difference to you’” (Didion 2005, 202). Maria walks composedly to the window: “In the few minutes that BZ had been distracting her the light had changed on the dry wash. Tomorrow she would borrow a camera, and station it on the dry wash for twenty-four hours” (Didion 2005, 202). The desert—specifically the dry wash—is her spiritual home in ways similar to how the acequia is Loca’s. Loca finds comfort in the seasonal changes of an irrigation canal in the Southwest; Maria finds reassurance in the barren yet dynamic desert dry wash. Maria’s intense connection with a topographical feature particular to the Southwest fosters her sense of spirituality yet distances her from other people.

Maria fortifies the distances she creates between herself and others by purporting to believe in nothing. While she is looking at the dry wash BZ says: “‘Tell me what matters’” (Didion 2005, 202). Maria replies: “’Nothing’” (Didion 2005, 202). But this answer is not an indication of absolute defeatism. She pretends to expect nothing from the future and tries to remember nothing of the past in order to focus all of her attention on the present.[[24]](#endnote-24) By accepting that certain circumstances are beyond her control but knowing that she can manipulate others, she wants to play it as it lays. Especially because she spends most of her time in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, her philosophy is not unwise; it is a survival mechanism employed to combat a risk of her region: “Maria survives, emerges slowly from *the California paralysis of consciousness*….she exists in *a perpetual present*” (Coale 1984, 165; emphasis added). In addition to being labeled regionally, such a “paralysis of consciousness” is gendered via the stereotype of women’s proclivity to have mental breakdowns. Yet Maria challenges gender roles by proving “[s]he is suffering not from a nervous breakdown, but from the breakdown of a world around her which threatens to engulf her whole being with nothingness” (Geherin 1974, 65). By showing the breakdown to be the “world’s,” Maria removes the regionally gendered stigma and calls attention to systemic problems that prompt feelings of insignificance.

The dénouement of the story is BZ’s suicide. He asks Maria if she wants some Seconal (a barbiturate); she declines and suggests they sleep for a while. Laying on the bed, she awakes when “she sense[s] that his weight had shifted” (Didion 2005, 213). Without looking she knows he is about to take almost all of the twenty to thirty pills (Didion 2005, 213). She says: “*Don’t*” (Didion 2005, 213). Ignoring her, he ingests almost all of the pills and asks her to hold his hand while they lay back on the bed (Didion 2005, 211-13). When Carter and Helene find them in the hotel room Carter shakes her and Helene screams relentlessly. Maria “close[s]…her mind against what was going to happen in the next few hours and tighten[s] her hold on BZ’s hand” (Didion 2005, 213).

Maria knows what she has done is considered terrible, but she believes that this judgment is the result of misunderstandings of human behavior based in dangerous dichotomous frameworks:

*If Carter and Helene want to think it happened because I was insane, I say let them. They have to lay it off on someone. Carter and Helene still believe in cause-effect. Carter and Helene also believe that people are either sane or insane. Just once, the week after the desert, when Helene came to see me in Neuropsychiatric, I tried to explain how wrong she had been when she screamed that last night about my carelessness, my selfishness, my insanity, as if it had somehow slipped my attention what BZ was doing. I told her: I knew precisely what BZ was doing. But Helene only screamed again.*  (Didion 2005, 203)

Maria challenges the sanity/insanity binary by claiming that, in order to absolve themselves of guilt and blame, Carter and Helene accuse Maria of letting BZ commit suicide because she is insane. Instead, according to Maria, she was operating with full mental capacity at the time and still decided not to stop him. While she does not advocate suicide, she does claim that Carter and Helene took no action to “save” BZ before the actual act and therefore are also implicated in his death. If Maria is considered insane because of how she acted that night, then Maria asks, in effect, are not Carter and Helene insane because of how they acted repeatedly? Are they innocent or “good”? (They certainly are self-righteousness.) This passage recalls when Sula asks Nel how Nel knows that she was the good one, not Sula. Nel and Sula and BZ, Carter, Helene, and Maria all work under disparate ideas of what is good and bad, sane and insane, and they do not or cannot negotiate such differences in a way that facilitates community development. In such cases communities fail to serve as libratory spaces, for Sula and Maria and as we will see in the next chapter, for Rose in *The Patron Saint of Liars*.

In sum, others fail to understand Maria’s regionally gendered performativity, and this “failure” further detaches her from community. Through Maria’s first-person interludes the reader learns that after BZ’s death she is admitted to a Neuropsychiatric ward. For Maria the removal from society-at-large is a relief; she sees the psychiatric ward and her subsequent residency in a sanitarium as sanctuaries: “*Except when they let Carter or Helene in, I never minded Neuropsychiatric and I don’t mind here. Nobody bothers me. The only problem is Kate. I want Kate*” (Didion 2005, 206). With the exception of wanting her daughter in her life, Maria does not want to participate in community.

Maria’s regionally gendered performativity upholds some stereotypes (i.e., she is a very thin, white Hollywood socialite) but resists others. Her challenges to regional and gender norms often arise out of ways she interrogates binaries of essentialism/social construction and spirituality/lack of spirituality. Maria’s spirituality manifests itself in her moral struggle:

“*I know what ‘nothing’ means, and keep on playing.*

*Why, BZ would say.*

*Why not, I say.*” (Didion 2005, 214)

Maria, similarly to Loca, challenges conceptualizations of “crazy,” “normal,” and “spiritual.” At the end of *So Far* Loca is regarded as a saint; at the end of *Play*, Carter and Helene think Maria is insane. However, Maria’s ability to survive cutthroat Los Angeles and Las Vegas environments draws from a spirituality she forms in the interstices between belief and disbelief. While she does not believe in a god, she does believe in the importance of perseverance, which for her is an expression of spirituality. She thinks to herself: “*You call it as you see it, and stay in the action. BZ thought otherwise*” (Didion 2005, 210). Maria’s “encounter with nothingness does not completely defeat her but forces her into a new awareness” (Geherin 1974, 66). The heat and wind shape this new awareness. She knows what she must do to survive, and she does it by garnering strength from dry washes and southern California freeways. Her actions occur in and are reflected by the stark topography and hot climate of the Southwest; often they are instigated by the winds that blow there.

*Play* and *So Far* portray regional and gendered identities as they are shaped by points of convergence between or divergence from essentialist and social constructivist processes. In both novels spirituality is depicted via and instigated by Southwestern topography and climate and serves as a medium through which regionally gendered performativity is enacted. Barnes and Blew note that some of the women writers in their anthology “were both repressed by landscape and instructed by it in the very survival skills they needed to break away from it intellectually and often physically. Others, traveling here from afar, found healing in landscape itself” (1994, xiii). Loca and Maria negotiate ways in which their locales help and hinder them, and they create identities formed in part by landscape. Loca uses Southwestern land to hone her spiritual healing capabilities. Living in the desert teaches Maria how to survive in a world in which sustaining human relationships are sparse, at best. The next chapter analyzes how characters traveling between the Southwest and Appalachia reinvent their identities as women by repositioning themselves regionally.

1. Allen’s conceptualizations of the Southwest and concomitant identity categories could be considered simply essentialist. While she acknowledges change within the region and its inhabitants, she often returns to what she sees as the Southwest’s innateness. She claims, for example, that “[o]ne of the prime characteristics of *mi país*, the Southwest, is its power to ever change and remain essentially the same” (Allen 1995, xx). Note Allen’s use of the Spanish word “país” (“country”) instead of “región” (“region”). This difference in word choice speaks to issues of naming and defining territory and land from diverse cultural perspectives. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Castillo, who identifies as “a brown woman, from the Mexican side of [Chicago]” (1995, 1), writes: “While there is admittedly an ongoing growing population migrating from Mexico (as from other parts of the world today), a large percentage of Chicano/as are not immigrants. In fact, the ancestors of many are from the Southwest United States and were not solely Spanish or Mexican but also Amerindian” (1995, 2). She also links the two cultures via the U.S. government: “Chicano/as-Mexicans are the only people besides the Native Americans who have a treaty with the United States. As with many of the treaties between Native Americans and the U.S. government, ours, The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo has been largely violated” (Castillo 1995, 3). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Hereafter referred to as *So Far*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hereafter referred to as *Play*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Maria is “pronounced Mar-*eye*-ah” (Didion 2005, 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Although Tome, NM, is an actual city, Castillo’s Tome is fictional. According to Morrow, this setting “creates a textual link to a specific history of indigenous women that reminds us of the constructedness of patriarchal economic relations” (1997, 914). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The male characters in *So Far* possess less power than the women. Sirias and McGarry call the men “emasculated” (2000, 89), and Rodriguez points out their “at best, supporting roles” (2000, 71). Like Jimmy Make in *Strange*, Domingo is unemployed and spends his days in the house watching television. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Medical personnel at a hospital in Albuquerque diagnose Loca as an epileptic (Castillo 2005, 25). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Walker critiques circumstances contributing to black women being called “Saints” (1983, 232), and she replaces the name with “Artists” (1983, 233). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Although outside the scope of this chapter, analyses of curanderismo and Loca would be fruitful. Avila, a curandera (i.e., a female practitioner of curanderismo), stresses that curanderismo is a form and practice of healing that “does not separate the soul and spirit from the body. It is medicine and spirituality practiced simultaneously” (1999, 16). In *So Far* a curandera is described as a woman healer who “not only had the health of her patient in her own hands but the spirit as well” (Castillo 2005, 62). For discussions of curanderismo and *So Far* see Morrow (1997), Delgadillo (1998), and Blend (2000). Delgadillo also discusses *So Far* in terms of liberation theology. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Esperanza’s relationship with Catholicism is another example of how *So Far*’s discourse mixes religious and spiritual beliefs. Esperanza “had spent her whole life trying to figure out why she was the way she was. In high school, although a rebel, she was Catholic heart and soul. In college, she had a romance with Marxism, but was still Catholic. In graduate school, she was atheist and, in general, a cynic. Lately, she prayed to Grandmother Earth and Grandfather Sky. For good measure, however, she had been reading a flurry of self-help books” (Castillo 2005, 38-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Lanza points out that “Loca doesn’t rely on mainstream institutions for anything, whether it be to gain knowledge or spirituality in her life” (1998, 77). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This community-building scenario contrasts with Sula’s funeral. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Readers are reminded of the tradition of the “wise fool,” as in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For example, Chapter Three of *So Far* is entitled: “On the Subject of Doña Felicia’s Remedios, Which in and of Themselves Are Worthless without Unwavering Faith; and a Brief Sampling of Common Ailments Along with Cures Which Have Earned Our Curandera Respect and Devotion throughout War and Peace.” [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Carter sarcastically asks: “’What do you weigh now? About eighty-two?’” (Didion 2005, 175). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Maria’s position as the main protagonist is significant because “within the subgenre of the Hollywood novel” *Play* “is one of the very few that focuses exclusively on the effects of the culture industry on women” (Rhodes 2000, 132). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Didion uses grammar specific to the region, as southern Californians place “the” before the name of any freeway. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Goggans reminds us that “land and water, indivisible in the West, are important signifiers in much of California’s literature” (2010, 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. October is referenced throughout *Play* (see pages 30, 44, and 83 for additional examples); in *Strange*, October is the month that Bant loves. In *Slouching* Didion stresses that “October is the bad month for the wind, the month when breathing is difficult and the hills blaze up spontaneously. There has been no rain since April. Every voice seems a scream. It is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, wherever the wind blows” (2008, 3). Suicide, divorce, and prickly dread figure prominently in *Play*. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Leed claims that “the progressional structure that passage lends to experience obviously shapes our world, designed as it is around road structures, with strip architectures, presentations of information keyed to the passing eye, [and] a world of transient but strangely mannered and civil relations” (1991, 129). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Play* depicts “a random world of chance, suggested in the novel by recurring references to gambling (including the title)” (Geherin 1974, 74). In Winterson’s *The Passion*, Henri ponders games of chance: “You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play. It’s the playing that’s irresistible” (1987, 43). While Maria probably would not use the term “irresistible,” she likely would agree with the basic premise that playing is inevitable. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. At this point in *Play* Didion intersperses Maria’s first-person point of view. Didion writes these short passages in italics, as if Maria is recalling her thoughts to someone (the reader). See pages 183, 200, 203, 206, 208, 214. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Didion discusses negative consequences of forgetting the past and dismissing the future in much of her writing about California’s history as a “frontier.” For example, see *Where I Was From*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)