Nature and the Environment in Ana Castillo's So Far From God and Elmaz Abinader's Children of the Roojme

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Nature and the Environment in Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God* and Elmaz Abinader’s *Children of the Roojme*
Nature and the Environment in Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God* 
and Elmaz Abinader’s *Children of the Roojme*

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature

by

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Abstract

This study analyzes the role of nature and the environment in two works by the ethnic minority women writers Ana Castillo and Elmaz Abinader. The works examined are Castillo’s novel *So Far From God* and Abinader’s memoir *Children of the Roojme*. My research begins with a review of these authors’ *ouvrè*, contextualizing it within the themes here addressed. It continues with an analysis of a spectrum of Arab American and Chicano/a works that lend fruitful content and perspective to an ecocritical analysis. Although these two works are dissimilar in genre, my study demonstrates significant parallels in the following areas: characters’ spirituality vis-à-vis nature and the environment; animal representation, animal/human interaction, and contextualization of animal typologies; landscape representation and its importance to culture, and the travel-landscape connection; and, the gendered use of environments under patriarchal systems and the subsequently gendered acquisition of knowledge. My research on spirituality and religion finds an application of eco theology and liberation theology using the work of Sally McFague, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff. The chapter focusing on animals makes use of animal typology theories drawing primarily on the work by Greg Garrard. The chapter on landscape representation and the travel-landscape connection finds theoretical support from the work of Michel Kowaleski and Mary Morris, and the gendered use of environments as it relates to the gendered acquisition of knowledge finds support in a diversity of ecofeminist theories, more importantly feminist political ecology as brought forth in the seminal work *Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences* edited by Dianne Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayter, and Esther Wangari who in addition to recognizing other ecofeminist theories, add the aspect of science to their study.
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Dedication

A mis hermanos Raquel, Luisa, Gilberto, Violeta, nuestro ángel Martín, y a mi madre Raquel.

To my adored sons, Chris and Joe Bell.

To my fiancé, Daryl Schultheiss.

Para el “Negro Nolasco”. Dondequiera que estés, papá.

... to Zenobia, the Queen of Palmyra ... y a la princesa Ix chel Can.
# Table of Contents

I. Introduction 1

II. Chapter 1: Greening a Body and a Wealth of Memories: Beginning the Eco-Contextualization of Arab American and Chicano/a Literatures 11
   A. Nature and the Environment in Arab American Literature 12
   B. Writing a Body of Memory 16
   C. Nature and the Environment in Chicano/Chicana Literature 21
   D. A Wealth of Environments, a Wealth of Knowledge: Ana Castillo 24
   E. Notes 34

III. Chapter 2: So Far From God. So Close to the Land 35
    A. América/Amreeka 38
    B. Religious Background: The Maronites 40
    C. Common Background: Catholicism 41
    D. Catholics and Nature: Openness to the World 45
    E. So Far from God: Liberation Theology Meets Ecotheology 48
    F. Children of the Roojme: Spiritual Hybridity 55
    G. Leaving the Ancestral Land: Spiritual Fragmentation 58
    H. Emigration 59

IV. Chapter 3: Peacock Walk and Sheep Talk: Anthropomorphism, Zoomorphism and Animal Representation 66
   A. Animal Representation 66
   B. Powerful Locusts 70
   C. A Very Powerful Rooster 71
   D. Divining Animals 73
   E. So Far from God, So Close to the Animals 75
   F. Animals or Humans? A Postcolonial Ecocritical Dilemma 81

V. Chapter 4: Children of the Landscape: So Close to Nature 86
   A. Landscape and Travel in Children of the Roojme: Getting Closer to Nature 91
   B. Travel and Landscape in So Far from God: Pilgrimage and Creation 97
   C. Notes 103

VI. Chapter 5: Gendered Knowledge. Gendered Environments 104
    A. Ecofeminism and Difference 104
    B. A Story of Ecofeminism 105
    C. Arab/Arab American Feminism 110
    D. Chicana Feminism 115
    E. Gendered Knowledge: Children of the Roojme 117
    F. Gendered Environments: Children of the Roojme 122
    H. Gendered Knowledge in So Far from God 128
    I. Gendered Environments: So Far from God 133

VII. Conclusion 140

VIII. Works Cited 143
Introduction

*I went to Lebanon because I believe that Arab peoples and Arab Americans occupy the lowest, the most reviled spot in the racist mind of America. I went because I believe that to be Muslim and to be Arab is to be a people subject to the most uninhibited, lethal bullying possible.* –June Jordan, *Eyewitness in Lebanon*

*She can always clean shit / out of white folks toilets—the Mexican maid.* –Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

Naming and Cataloguing

The authors studied here are both women writers from the United States of America in the twenty-first century. Ideally, that should be enough of a name or title. However, they are both generally labeled “ethnic writers,” as they belong to minority ethnic groups.¹ They do not fit the broader, inherently privileged United States of America label that usually means authors in the dominant ethnic group. The “United States + other” label can have both positive and negative effects: positive inasmuch as readers are ideally able to recognize the uniqueness, diversity, and special insights or perspectives these authors have to offer. Unfortunately, the negative effect is that this “uniqueness” has led many a reader to exoticize the text, abandoning it after the realization that, as Helena Grice says, “to get beyond the initial fascination to something approaching understanding, we [the readers] have to know a lot more, and different things, than our education in mainstream canonical literature has equipped us for” (1). Mainstream readers are indeed ill equipped, for they lack an awareness of even the historical events pertaining to so-called ethnic groups, events which might begin to enlighten mainstream readers and help open up ethnic literatures for them.

Nevertheless, naming ethnic ancestry is essential for the author in the sense that writing who one is proves a vital part of the process for writers who are still “sorting out” who they are, and whose literature is often the result of “rebuild[ing] a fragmented, uncertain identity” (Aziz
xiii). The two texts under study and their authors are typically, if not systematically, found at the literary world’s margins in terms of marketing, readership, course offerings, and critical analysis, confirming what Chela Sandoval calls the “presence-absence” of a multiplicity of voices, diversity of representation, and analysis (95). In academia, ethnic authors are usually relegated to special courses, often in rotation and not always as part of the curriculum, contrasting significantly with the constant periodical offering of courses in Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Whitman, or Hemingway. However, great efforts continue to be made by Arab Americans, Latinos, and others, for as Therese Saliba says, “To push for inclusion of Arab Americans [and other minorities] within ethnic politics, ethnic studies, and feminist scholarship is a critical strategy for resisting invisibility” (“Resisting” 316).

The texts analyzed in this dissertation are clearly similar in that they both are ethnic minority women writers from the United States, both voicing important parallel issues and concerns (e.g., women and families and their interactions with patriarchy, United States culture, and the United States environment). They both claim cultural ancestry of a particular ethnic group, outside of the dominant majority: *So Far from God* to Mexican Americans living in New Mexico, and *Children of the Roojme* to first-wave Arab Lebanese who migrated to the United States in the early twentieth century (Naff 2). Nonetheless, there are some differences between these two texts. One, *Children of the Roojme*, is unambiguously catalogued as immigrant literature, and the other is found in an ambiguous category for historical reasons. As Nicolas Kanellos says, “Historically, the diverse ethnic groups that we conveniently lump together as ‘Hispanics’ or ‘Latinos’ created a literature in North America even before the founding of the United States” (1). The descendents of the New Mexico families represented in *So Far from God* claim ancestry in a homeland that although has changed in name and governance (Native, Spain,
Mexico, United States), for them, who self-identify as Mexicans, has remained home: “Unlike immigrant literature, it does not have one foot in the homeland and one in the United States. For native Hispanic peoples of the United States, the homeland is the United States; there is no question of a return to their ancestors’ Mexico, Puerto Rico, or Cuba (Kanellos 5).²

A key difference remains, however, between the two groups represented by these authors in terms of deeper and more politically complex issues related to “minority” status. Therese Saliba explains in her article “Resisting Invisibility: Arab Americans in Academia and Activism,” that because of the political climate in the United States, fitting into a racial group is essential. She finds that “to gain access to the political power of minority status,” ethnic groups must fit into a racial category. Arab Americans are denied access to this power since they are “bereft of a racial category” and thus have become “invisible” in both academic and political circles (305).

Write or Be Written³

These two ethnic groups, Arab Americans and Latinos or Hispanics, have expressed their experiences as “Americans” throughout their history in the United States through two processes. As Lisa Suhair Majaj explains, during the first wave of Arab migration to United States, Arab Mahjar (émigré) authors, led by Khalil Gibran, “were influenced by their American literary and social contexts in ways which have still to be fully explored, [but] they were nonetheless primarily expatriate writers, exiles whose vision was trained on the Middle East and its literary and political contexts” (“New Directions” 68). On the other hand, in the following decades, particularly by the nineteen fifties, the focus was on assimilation; the authors from this period were, Majaj explains, “exhibiting a deep-seated ambivalence toward Arab ethnicity” (“New Directions” 68). It was not until the nineteen sixties and seventies, with the general effervescence
of the period toward ethnic pride that Arab American writers, (poets, unsurprisingly), as Majaj claims, “engaged and affirmed ethnicity, and that paralleled the emergence of a pan-ethnic Arab-American identity bridging the different national and religious identities of immigrants and ethnics of Arabic-speaking backgrounds” (“New Directions” 68). From the sixties and seventies, Arab American literature has been profoundly affected by Middle Eastern political events such as the Israel and Palestine conflict, the Gulf war, the attacks on 9/11, and other events that have led, Majaj says, to “the demonization of Arabs and Muslims” in the United States of America (“New Directions” 68–69). Because Latino or Hispanic literature was produced in this land before the United States of America was created, its study has been lengthier and more difficult. The availability of research and studies on the available texts from past centuries is minimal because a great number of texts, as Nicolas Kanellos asserts, “have been hidden from view, even as Hispanic culture in the United States has been hidden in the shadows of history” (2). Therefore, Kanellos maintains, mainstream United States has been exposed only “to works published within the last forty years, furthering the impression the U.S. Hispanic literatures is new, young, and exclusively related to the immigrant experience” (1).

An immigrant of Mexican nationality who only recently became a United States citizen, I personally experience the often limiting labels given to minority groups. The label “Hispanic,” generally used in official documents, does not begin to define who I am, for it leaves out the Amerindian. My hybridity explains, partially, the reason why I chose to study ethnic literatures. The desire to complete a dissertation focusing on the environment grew out of my own awareness of the deterioration of the world’s ecology. Global warming, species extinction, toxic working conditions, lack of clean water, and so on, brought me to this new consciousness. I was frustrated to learn that the majority of texts being studied or analyzed using an ecocritical lens
were those labeled “environmental literature,” and that, for the most part, only the work of key canonical figures was being studied. I believe that most texts, regardless of origin or content, should be able to tell us something about the environment. Questions such as how characters interact with their environment, how the environment affects characters’ bodies, minds, and spirit, were questions one could ask of most texts. I also believe that exploring texts that are outside of the main canon would provide a different window or a different answer to those questions.

The Newness of the Field

In fairness, the field of ecocriticism and environmental literature is relatively new. Indeed, it was not until the end of the twentieth century that main voices in the field of ecocriticism saw their edited volumes published and that environmental literature anthologies were put together. The work *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson, a prominent writer, biologist, and ecologist from the United States, is usually understood to be the “first” environmental piece of literature because it called attention to the disturbing effects of pesticides on the ecosystem. Many, however, consider *Walden* (1854), the work of United States author, poet, philosopher, and leading transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau to be environmentalism’s preeminent piece (Slovic xvi). Others argue, quite legitimately, that “powerful literature about the American landscape” could go back as far as Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca’s *Shipwreck* (Slovic xvi). Nonetheless, Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s seminal *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) was one of the first compilations in the field of ecocriticism to appear, and was my introduction to the field in graduate school. Lawrence Buell’s most encompassing work, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, was published in 2005 while Bill McKibben’s edition of *American Earth: Environmental Writing*
since Thoreau, with a foreword by former Vice President Al Gore, was published in 2008. Not unexpectedly, but late in coming, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* edited by Timothy Clark was published in February of 2011; and finally, Greg Garrard’s highly recommended *Ecocriticism* saw its second edition published last year (2012). Indicating the issue’s place in the zeitgeist, other volumes have appeared that pertain to other world regions and national languages. As an example, *The Italian Environmental Literature: An Anthology*, edited by Patrick Barron and Anna Re, was published in 2010.

I mention just a few of the most widely read titles and their dates to highlight the “newness” of the field. This new field has yet to grow. As Lawrence Buell claims about his own work, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, “Until the end of the twentieth century, such a book as this could not have been written” (1). Despite its growth, the field “has not yet achieved the standing accorded (say) to gender or postcolonial or critical race studies,” says Lawrence Buell, who continues, “Eventually I believe it will; but it is still finding its path, a path bestrewn by obstacles both external and self-imposed” (1). Some of these “self-imposed” impediments have to do, I believe, with the fields’ focus on canonical texts. As Robert T. Hayashi puts it, ecocriticism’s “reliance on canonical authors [. . .] continues to limit its discoveries and its relevance” (58).

It is in this spirit of discovery that this dissertation is written. I seek to add texts that are outside of the canon with the goal of ascertaining what these texts have to offer when put through an ecocritical lens. The texts chosen are Ana Castillo’s novel *So Far from God* and Elmaz Abinader’s memoir *Children of the Roojme*. Although dissimilar in genre and content, analyzing these two works side by side proved fruitful. While the novel clearly pursues a sociopolitical agenda vis-à-vis the environment, the memoir’s goal, as pertains to genre, is to
simply tell one family’s journey of emigration. Yet, and regardless of genre or goals, I was able to ascertain similar if not identical results that helped prove that one can find answers to questions on the characters’ relationship to their environment in most texts. Also, by analyzing how the characters of these two works interact with their environment, this study provides diverse voices to the field of ecocriticism. The texts that are subjected to study here derive ancestry from totally different geographical and cultural areas of the world: one hails back to the mountains of Lebanon, while the other claims ancestry to Native America and to the territory of New Mexico colonized by and the Spanish and the United States.

The Organization of Chapters

Four aspects of the environment in the two texts inform this dissertation: the characters’ spirituality-environment link; animal representation and character-animal link; landscape representation and landscape-culture link; and the gendered use of environment as it relates to the gendered acquisition of knowledge. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the two authors’ oeuvre and how the topics of this dissertation connect or intersect with their work. This chapter also serves as an initial step toward identifying works in both Chicano/Chicana and Arab American literature that fit into an ecocritical analysis: works by Naomi Shihab Nye and Etel Adnan where the preferred choice for contextualizing other Arab American writers into the themes were studied, while works by Rodolfo “Corky” González and Gloria Anzaldúa were chosen to represent texts that address environmental or ecocritical issues for Chicano/Chicana literature.

Chapter 2 begins by examining the texts’ similarities and dissimilarities of genre and origin and provides background on a common religious axis for both texts: Catholicism. It also looks at how the communities represented in these two texts relate to or view the concept of
“America.” Because of the great significance of emigration for Abinader’s characters, this chapter also includes a brief summary of Lebanese reasons for emigration. The chapter’s analysis of the environment-spiritual link is primarily informed by the theoretical works of Sally McFague and Leonardo Boff. McFague’s subject-to-subject model seeks to erase the dual subject/object system, and Boff’s ecotheological liberationist model asserts that both the human poor and the “new poor” (the environment) should both seek liberation in a cooperative relationship. This chapter also demonstrates how, upon close analysis and despite limitations of genre, characters in Children of the Roojme exhibit a hybrid spirituality drawn from their rich cultural (spiritual) heritage and their deep attachment to their environment, often expressed in symbolic form.

Because animals are key players in the two texts under study, chapter 3 looks at their representation and interaction with the human characters. In general, animals in Children of the Roojme are represented as ordinary utilitarian objects, under human domination. Despite this general trend, the memoir recounts remarkable instances in which animals demonstrate their power, thus subverting the human-as-dominant model. In So Far from God animal and human characters travel the human/nonhuman behavior continuum: “If culture goes, so to speak, all the way ‘down’ into nature, nature must likewise come all the way ‘up’ into human existence” (Garrard 158). Thus, while human characters behave like animals, animals are likewise presented as behaving like humans, most particularly in Castillo’s novel. Consequently, chapter three includes an examination of animal typology (anthropomorphism and zoomorphism). The last part of chapter 3 addresses the rights of all of the ecosystem’s creatures, as challenged by Ana Castillo’s narrative and using a postcolonial ecocritical approach.
Chapter 4 recognizes the enormous importance landscape has for the characters in the two texts under study. To expand the dialogue regarding “the nature versus culture dichotomy” (Diamond and Feman Orenstein x), this chapter analyzes landscape representations within the two narratives with a special focus on the interrelationship between culture and nature. In order to highlight how connected culture and nature are in these two works, I first provide a few examples of general representations of landscapes in the two texts analyzed, and in the second part I focus closely on travel’s key role in driving characters of both texts into intimate relationships with their landscape. Chapter 5 addresses the correlation between use of environments and gender. I argue that environments in the two works analyzed are inhabited or dominated according to traditional gendered patterns in patriarchy and that this separation is the result of a gendered acquisition, development, and enactment of knowledge.
Endnotes

1. *So Far from God* by Ana Castillo is catalogued by the Library of Congress as 1. Mexican American families—New Mexico—Fictions. 2. Mothers and daughters—New Mexico—Fiction. 3. Mexican Americans—New Mexico—Fiction. 4. Sisters—New Mexico—Fiction. 5. Women—New Mexico—Fiction, while Elmaz Abinader’s memoir *Children of the Roojme* is catalogued as 1. Lebanese Americans—Biography. 2. Abinader family. 3. Abinader, Elmaz—Family. Both of these entries have the country of origin of the author and the communities they write about in addition to the “adopted” country of residence, America. Abinader’s text is catalogued as biography, despite the fact that Abinader’s text is in effect a memoir, “based on letters, diaries, interviews, and personal memories” and that she specifically states that even though the major events are true “names have been changed and the activities enhanced,” (Children iii).

2. Of course, the literature of immigration also pertains to Hispanics or Latinos, but it was a later occurrence, as Kanellos asserts, “it was not until the turn of the century that a well-defined immigrant expression emerged from New York to the Southwest (16).

3. As quoted by Barbara Nimri Aziz, “‘Write or be written’ is one of the three guiding principles set out in the mission statement of the Italian American Writers Association a decade ago” (xii).
Chapter 1

Greening a Body and a Wealth of Memories: Beginning the Ecocontextualization of Arab American and Chicano/a Literatures

For ethnic minority writers in the United States, the words “beginning,” “new,” or “first” are not unfamiliar. The continuing focus on British and Anglo writers makes it unfair to ethnic minority writers who are perennially perceived as new. Arriving later in the continent, Arab Americans have been unfairly forced to play catch-up, labeled as “new” or “beginner” despite the growing and impressive body of literature they have produced since their arrival. It is not much different for Chicana/o literature. These writers, despite their long literary heritage predating English-speaking settlers and literature (Kanellos 1), are also perceived as new to the landscape of United States literature although they really are not. United States Hispanic written and published works have been kept in obscurity and only “discovered” in the twentieth century. As an example, the hefty work Herencia: The Anthology of Hispanic Literature of the United States, published in 2002, is, as its editor claims, “a first [my emphasis] effort to recover interesting artifacts selected from the historical development of this literature and the first [my emphasis] to attempt to interpret and understand [our] diverse and at times contradictory cultural past” (Kanellos 2). In other words, this particular anthology addresses “beginning” issues for this literature, for our beginning literary works are often ignored or neglected and the focus given only to more recent production.

This prejudice gives the impression that “U.S. Hispanic literature is new, young, and exclusively related to the immigrant experience” (Kanellos 1). The reason behind ethnic minority literature’s appearance as novice has to do with the fact that, “reliance on canonical authors [. . . ] continues to limit its discoveries and its relevance” (Hayashi 58). To counter this situation, this
chapter offers an initial but important step toward the greening of Arab American and Chicano/a literature. It first provides a short summary of the place that nature and the environment have within different periods of these literatures. The chapter then presents samples and short analyses of Arab American and Chicano/Chicana works that are suitable for an ecocritical study. These sections are followed by short biographies and surveys of works by Ana Castillo and Elmaz Abinader, contextualized within the themes of nature and the environment analyzed here.

**Nature and the Environment in Arab American Literature**

Early Arab American literature is periodized in Arabic literary criticism as being part of the movement of Arab Romanticism, or indeed as creating that movement, one in which nature plays a significant role. As Tanyss Ludescher says, Mahjar writers, who were at that time influenced by romantic and transcendentalist principles, not only believed that “the proper province of literature is life itself,” they also had a strong conviction “in the transcendental power of nature” (96). Yet, and as Lawrence Buell claims, “while environmental criticism today is still an emergent discourse it is one with very ancient roots” (*The Future* 2). Mahjar writers were as greatly influenced by romanticism and transcendentalism, as perhaps by the discourse on nature in ancient religious texts like the Bible: “But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you (Job 12:7–9). Also, Mahjar writers, who were during the first wave of Arab immigration to the United States largely Christian, as Arabs would have certainly been familiar with the Quran: “We bring about your fertile gardens, / your palm trees and vines, / your haunts of ample fruits to eat / and a tree of trees originating in Mount Sinai, yielding oil that is always there to hand at your meals” (*Al-Qur’ān* 23:19–20). The first novel by an Arab American writer published in English, *The Book of Khalid* by Ameen Rihani, is divided in three
books dedicated “to Man,” “to Nature,” and “to God.” This structure alone signifies the transcendental importance of the relationship between humans, nature, and the divine for writers of the *Mahjar* period.

As Lisa Suhair Majaj explains, following the *Mahjar* period came the “assimilationist” stage of the fifties, and it was not until the sixties and seventies period of world-wide rebellion and activism that Arab American writers began to engage in topics of Arab ethnic identity. Today this engagement has grown exponentially in great part from the effects of political events in the Middle East, which have led to “the demonization of Arabs and Muslims” in this country (“New Directions” 68). Present-day writers provide plenty of texts that make nature or the environment an important part of its content. Some of these texts symbolically inform the reader of the effects of the current negative climate for Arab Americans in the United States. As an example, Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem in prose, “Long Overdue,” presents the now-familiar unkempt garden scene:

A gardener stares at our raggedy front yard. More weeds than grass. The star jasmine vine has died in the drought, leaving its bony spine woven through the frets of the wire fence. A young hackberry presses too close to the house. A bedraggled pomegranate tree crowds the banana palms. (*19 Varieties* 127)

This scene reminds us of Abinader’s description of the vegetable garden when her father returns to Abdelli, Lebanon, and finds it unkempt: “There are no vegetables. High thorny bushes tangle together, and the whole garden is a jungle of unruly brown weeds” (*Children* 11). Nye is one of
the more successful writers in Arab American literature. Her writings often reflect a human/nature relationship, as in *That Tree Is Older Than You Are: Poems & Stories from Mexico*, which is a children’s book and also a good example of Nye’s diverse approaches, for she often writes not only about the Middle East but also about Mexico and Mexican culture. Nye’s book of poems *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* remarkably parallels a topic addressed in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*: zoomorphism. The men in Nye’s poem titled “Different Ways to Pray” (*19 Varieties* 3) begin to behave like the animals with which they spend their time: “There were men who had been shepherds so long / they walked like sheep.” That condition is not unlike the one experienced by Castillo’s character Casimiro:

> But over seven generations of shepherding had invariably gotten into Casey’s blood, so that even though nobody would ever admit it, and it was hard to actually prove—since Casey was such a soft-spoken man to begin with—Fe was certain that her fiancé had somehow acquired the odd affliction of bleating. (*So Far* 175)

The essay *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* by Arab American writer and artist Etel Adnan is an attempt not only to present her ideas on the relationship of nature and art, but also the connection and comments she makes on Native American versus European (Spanish) culture. The book includes her own drawings and is unique in terms of cultural product and literary form; her prose reads as poetry and the drawings add a visual dimension to the literary themes. As an Arab American, daughter of a Christian and a Muslim (one Syrian and the other Lebanese), and a lesbian, who divides her time between Lebanon, Paris, and California, Etel Adnan at times defies classification. Her essay *Journey from Mount Tamalpais* focuses on nature, on its relationship to
art, and on placing a particular emphasis on the role of nature, place, or landscape in the
transnational routes travelled by the author: “Like a chorus, the warm breeze had come all the
way from Athens and Baghdad to the Bay, by the Pacific Route, its longest journey” (Adnan 99).
The breeze reenacts travels previously performed by the narrative voice and helps connect and
establish, naturally, bridges between Old and New World, East and West. Nature here also
works as an agent for healing or resolution to the trauma of migrational travel:

It is the energy of these winds that I used, when I came to these shores, obsessed,
followed by my home-made furies, errynies, and such potent creatures. And I fell
in love with the immense blue eyes of the Pacific: I saw its read algae, its blood
colored cliffs, its pulsating breath. The ocean led me to the mountain. (Adnan
99)

The last sentence, clearly a reference to both Gibran’s “mountain” in The Prophet and to
the mountains of Lebanon helps segue to a later theme in her essay: the North American
mountain, its symbolism, and its appreciation or differing views from Indians and Spaniards.
One of the symbolisms of the mountain in Western thought, due to its height, derives from
“interpretations such as that of Teilhard, who equates the mountain with inner ‘loftiness’ of
spirit, that is transposing the notion of ascent to the realm of the spirit” (Cirlot 219). Indeed, the
mountain in Adnan’s essay serves to provide different perspectives or appreciations of nature:
“The Indian called the Mountain Tamal-Pa, ‘The One close to the Sea.’” The Spaniard called it
Mal-Pais, “Bad Country”! The Spaniard sees the mountain as an obstacle for exploration and
eventual domination, while the Indian simply accepts its natural location. Adnan’s explanation
of these two perceptions seeks to ensure that readers are fully aware of the two completely different approaches to nature: “The difference between the native and the conqueror is readable in these two different perceptions of the same reality. Let us be the Indian and let be!” (Adnan 100). Adnan’s essay moves on to equate the snowy mountain with that of “the great white mushroom” of nuclear explosions, thus extending her narrative to include not only the beatitudes of nature but also the misuse and abuse of nature and our environment and our inability to reconcile each other, suggesting that in the group of natural species, we are also a part: “Through the long night of the species we go on, somehow blindly” (100). For all of the above, her essay clearly belongs in the canon of nature and environmental writing.

Writing A Body of Memory

Being an Arab American poet is also a gift to my heritage, my only way of thanking my ancestors for my voice, my color, my hair, my parents and siblings, and for the mountains and waters of Lebanon which stay in my memory. –Elmaz Abinader

Elmaz Abinader is a poet, author, playwright, and solo performer. In addition to her more substantial work, the memoir studied here, Elmaz Abinader has a book of poetry, In the Country of My Dreams (1999); contributions to important anthologies on Arab American writing (Grape Leaves and Scheherazade’s Legacy); several one-woman shows, most importantly her play Country of Origin, which has been presented at important venues such as the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC; as well as a few articles in journals and magazines. She has earned important awards such as the 2002 Goldies Award for Literature and a PEN/Josephine Miles award for poetry (“Elmaz Abinader and The Country of Origin Band”). The epigraph above comes from the author’s preamble to her work in the anthology titled Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry. It clearly demonstrates that in addition to ethnic heritage and family, vital to her work as a poet and writer is the natural landscape, the environment of her ancestors’ land,
“the mountains and waters of Lebanon” (*Grape Leaves* 281). Indeed, while thanking her ancestors for the legacy of her physiognomy, the author makes a point to acknowledge as also fundamental the physical environment of Lebanon that “stays in [her] memory” (*Grape Leaves* 281). As she declares in her essay “The Relentlessness of Memory,” this environment has also become part of her body. For memory

... is housed in the body, not the mind, I believe, despite the theories about brain hemisphere. How it gets there does not concern me. It comes by faith and constancy. Paying attention to what one holds, what construct us, and what we have inherited are vital, especially for one who wants to access memory.

(*Scheherazade* 111)

As her preamble in *Grape Leaves* signals, Abinader’s works embrace the environment because the environment is part of herself, both the natural landscapes surrounding her as well as the environments inhabited by her and her family. Her poetry and prose bring in both the land left behind and the new land. In “On a Summer Night” (*Grape Leaves* 282) the poetic voice travels two environments: One includes “fireflies floated up from the grass / At the top of the yard” suggesting a home in the United States with grass and a yard; the other space, however, requires a “candle behind me in the room” and “has no real darkness,” suggesting perhaps a different, more rural space. “Dar a Luz” (*Grape Leaves* 284) is a reflection on the lack of nature in the apartment. The narrative voice describes “the birds fly under the bridge,” free to fly in the open space whereas “We do not break the cold air to walk from the book, chair, or quiet phone,” regretting the inability/confinement of these first-person plural subject—perhaps a family?—to the walls of a house or apartment in the city. This theme—among others—is also present in
Elmaz Abinader’s essay “Just Off Main Street,” which she wrote in 2002 for the U.S. State Department for their series *Writers on America*, in which she recollects the two worlds that she inhabited divided by the “magic door” that separated these worlds. The exterior world was “the small Pennsylvania town” (“Just Off”) and the interior world, her house, divided by “the door that led to the hallway of our house” and even though “nothing was particularly enchanting about this door, but when I entered, the context of the world changed.” The context changes in positive ways, but also in ways that the author seems to regret, for after school and after finishing their afternoon snack:

The revelry ended soon after we finished our treat. Each child of the six of us had after-school duties. My three brothers reported to the store to clean and manage the inventory, and we three girls shared the demands of house and garden. In the summer, we weeded, watered, and picked the vegetables; in the fall, we reported to the basement where we canned fruits, beans, jams, and pickles. Between these seasons were endless piles of laundry, ironing, and cleaning to maintain the nine people who filled our little house. Barbies, coloring books, afterschool sports were other children’s worlds, not ours. (“Just Off”)

The title to her main prose work to date, *Children of the Roojme*, published in 1991, tells much about this connection to people and landscape: the “children,” her ancestors, and the nonhuman relation, the “mountain,” or the *roojme* from which the “children” can view the “waters” which stay in her memory.¹ In Abinader’s memoir, the narrator describes “the *roojme*”: a pile of rocks unearthed by her ancestors to clear and build the foundations for her grandfather’s
house and his two brothers. Given the rocky conditions of the land, and since there was no room for their disposal, “the workers built a three-sided fence extending from the ground to the cliff. It formed a box against the mountainside. As they excavated, they tossed the debris over the cliff. In no time the discarded stones had reached to the height of the cliff” (Children 5). The roojme, built with the ancestral land, and which served to store the foundations of her family’s homes, is physically and symbolically her cultural foundation: “What I stood on, this pile of rocks, was my foundation, and although its existence was unintentional, it had held over the years” (5).

*Children of the Roojme* had seen earlier forms. Her 1985 dissertation for the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, *Letters from Home: Stories of Fathers and Sons*, is a collection of eight stories drawn from letters and diaries kept by Rachid Abi-Nader and Jean Abinader, the author’s grandfather and father. Later, under an Albert Schweitzer Fellowship and under Toni Morrison’s tutelage, she reworked these materials and titled it *Stories of Fathers and Sons, Voices of Mothers and Daughters*. This unpublished project was clearly an attempt to include the experiences of her female relatives absent from her dissertation. *Children of the Roojme* is thus the synthesis or culmination of a writer’s journey in her attempt to be as inclusive as possible. It is possible that in order to give voice to her female relatives, she may have had to rely on oral transmission, or to “enhance,” as she herself acknowledges in the catalogue page of her memoir. *Children of the Roojme* is divided into two parts, the first dedicated to “fathers and sons,” and the second to “mothers and daughters,” including via memories, written, spoken, or “enhanced,” the voices of all her ancestors.

Elmaz Abinader’s dissertation answers many of the technical questions arising from the reading of *Children of the Roojme*. She explains in detail how and why she proceeded to collect
and transcribe key documents (letters and diaries) that chronicled the lives of two important men in her life: her grandfather Rachid Abi-Nader and her father Jean-Abinader. The catalyst for this process was a poem she wrote at Christmas 1978 in direct response to the pain she saw in her parents at that time. Her father “wept through the Civil War in Lebanon” as he saw TV reports on Beirut, and her mother “clutched the letters” from home. But the Lebanese Civil War only served to round off her accumulated thoughts, musings, and questions regarding the lives of her father and mother and in particular her memories, experiences, and even astonishment gathered during her visit to Lebanon in 1973: “I remembered these pictures when I returned to the States, and I had to write about them” \( \textit{Letters} \ 6 \). This 1978 poem is of course an integral part of her dissertation’s introduction and is also included in \textit{Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry}, published in 1988, ten years after it was first written.

Another good fountain of information on Abinader’s writing process for the memoir is found in the anthology \textit{Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing}. This volume is divided by various themes of importance for the community: identity, politics, inspiration, memory, and language. Unsurprisingly, Elmaz Abinader’s pieces are included under the “Memory” section. Her piece “The Relentlessness of Memory” is a window into the process she uses in recovering/recapturing memories for her writing, what she remembers from stories and what she has inherited—by simply being who she is:

\begin{quote}
Memory lives in my body. My face remembers—my eyes sink deeply in small darkened sockets like Sitti Elmaz’s, chestnut brown specked with gold [. . . ]. My hips remember oil jars balanced on the head, although I have never carried them, my legs remember rocky hillsides, hard to climb to lead the cattle into the shelter
\end{quote}
for the night; . . . My body holds memories in its form and feeling, in sense and sympathy. (Scheherazade 110)

Thus “memories are inherited [through the body] and acquired” (Scheherazade 110). Moreover, the memories are played out or reenacted by the author from “the language of [our] conversations” (112) and thus she is able to experience herself, in her own skin, key moments in her mother’s early life: “At Ellis Island I run with her as she dodges the inspector who will spot her bad eyes and send her home” (113). When her mother questions her about the source of her knowledge, the author doesn’t know how to respond: “Memory is housed in the body, not the mind, I believe, despite the theories about brain hemisphere. How it gets there does not concern me. It comes by faith and constancy. Paying attention to what one holds, what construct us, and what we have inherited are vital, especially for one who wants to access memory” (Scheherazade 111). And just as Abinader’s embodied memories retell events involving human actions, her body of memories also includes the environment that also remains with her (Grape Leaves 281) and is present in her poetry, prose, and personal performance, and thus provides the opportunity for my analysis.

**Nature and the Environment in Chicano/Chicana Literature**

The discourse on nature and the environment in Chicano/a literature has as its most ancient roots texts such as the Aztec Codices or the *Popol Vuh*: “Mayan mythography represents the gods as fashioning human beings after several false starts from corn gathered with the help of already-created animals” (Buell, *The Future* 2). This action thereby signifies the spirit of interconnectivity and egalitarianism that must exist among all species. As Nicolas Kanellos states, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s *The Account*, published in Spain in 1542, “may be
considered the first anthropological and ethnographic book in what became the United States” (2). This text, and others that kept records for civil or military purposes, “gave birth to the first written descriptions and studies of the fauna and flora of these lands new to the Europeans, mestizos, and mulattos” (2).

Born to migrant worker parents, Mexican American boxer, poet, and political activist Rodolfo “Corky” González succeeded in all the areas in which he participated and was among the early figures in the Chicano movement (Kanellos 195). His most famous poem “Yo Soy Joaquín” is often catalogued within the parameters of “social-activism” and “militant aesthetics,” for it is an exhortation to his readers to accept and honor their “Indo-Mexican cultural heritage” (Kanellos 195). The poem recognizes that oppression and exploitation of the land go hand in hand with that of the humans, offering plenty of material for an ecocritical analysis. Not only does González insert the abuse of the land and the environment as part of his critique, but the poetic voice also creates a historical review of sorts, beginning with Joaquín’s current environment: “caught up in the whirl of a / gringo society, / confused by the rules, / suppressed by manipulation, / and destroyed by modern society” and then continuing with a revision of his ancestry, producing a biracial/bicultural identity, for both Cuauhtémoc and Cortés are his progenitors. In another case of zoomorphism, Joaquín, to better describe the Aztec’s land, becomes animal: “I am the eagle and serpent of / the Aztec civilization. / I owned the land as far as the eye could see.” Yet, this same land, “under the crown of Spain,” turns him human again: “and I toiled on my earth / and gave my Indian sweat and blood for the Spanish master” (González 196-197).

There is great abundance of texts in Chicano/Chicana literature that directly or indirectly address the environment. Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* not only includes these themes in her
text, but she also theorizes *and* defines the physical, cultural, and psychological environments
that she, as mestiza, inhabits: “It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of
contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape” (19).
However, within this same environment, Anzaldúa and la mestiza find mitigation and safety: “*La
madre naturaleza* succored me, allowed me to grow roots that anchored me to the earth” (20). As
Allison Steele argues, Anzaldúa’s most important call in what it refers to the environment is for
Chicana women “who have a history of politically controlled relationships with the land, to take
some of that mythmaking back into their own hands—to write both women and the earth back
into those stories” (96):

> I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious
> male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I
> am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the
> world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols
> that connect us to each other and to the planet. (Anzaldúa 102–103)

As much as Anzaldúa is challenging patriarchy of both Chicanos and Anglos, she is most
importantly serving as the voice for the (Roman) earth goddess Gaia, or rather the chthonic
goddess indigenous to the Americas, Coatlaloepuh/Coatlicue, in her call for the creation of a new
paradigm for mythmaking. The images and symbols are inescapable: “*Soy un amasamiento*, I am
an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness
and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and
gives them new meanings” (Anzaldúa 103). These images of creation are structurally in line with
many creation allegories: the presence of light (good) and darkness (evil), the mixing of materials to create a new species, and the creation of this new species that will be able to reason or “give new meanings.”

**A Wealth of Environments, a Wealth of Knowledge: Ana Castillo**

“A BROWN WOMAN, from the Mexican side of town,” Ana Castillo inhabits a physical, cultural, and spiritual wealth of environments as she tries to differentiate the landscape of possible identities that provide her with a wealth of knowledge: Chicana, Xicanista, Mexican, mestiza/Mexic Amerindian, Latina, and Hispanic (*Massacre*). The author has written extensively, exploring different genres, and has fulfilled important capacities as editor and translator. Today she is one of the better published Chicana writers, and her œuvre has a considerable place in the world of academia with numerous printed articles, chapters, and reviews. In addition to many other less mainstream works, she has published seven novels, five books of poetry, one play, and one children’s book.¹

Castillo is an important voice for what has been termed “third-wave feminism,” a feminism that critiques the class and ethnic limitations of second-wave feminism, seen from the perspective of the third wave as being Anglo-American and naïvely lacking in consciousness of imperialism’s impact on gender issues. She has contributed to works such as *Esta Puente Mi Espalda: Voces de Mujeres Tercermundistas en los Estados Unidos* (Isam Press, 1988), which she co-edited with Cherríe Moraga and translated with Norma Alarcón, published in English under the title *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), and *The Sexuality of Latinas* also co-edited with Moraga and Alarcón (Woman Press, 1993). She is also the editor of a volume on the iconic figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The compilation titled *Goddess of the Americas/La Diosa de las Américas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*
(Riverhead Books 1996) includes contributions by prominent Chicano authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Richard Rodriguez, and others. Some of these contributions come from previously published works such as the chapter “Coatlalopeuh: She Who Has Dominion over Serpents,” which is part of Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*.

Like Elmaz Abinader, Ana Castillo also completed a doctoral dissertation published in the United States: *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. The process for Castillo, however, was in reverse, for she first wrote the manuscript and then submitted it as a possible doctoral dissertation. As she admits, “[m]y Dissertation project, by my own insistence, was unorthodox” (*Massacre* ix). Indeed, Castillo was permitted to submit her manuscript to the University of Bremen in Germany “in lieu of a formal dissertation” (*Massacre* ix). Her dissertation is unorthodox in this manner as well as in its contents, because “it crossed boundaries of cultural criticism, social sciences and creative literature” (*Massacre* ix). This “unorthodox” text deals primarily with cultural criticism regarding the “mestiza/Mexic Amerindian woman” who in Castillo’s text “become[s] universal.”

Ana Castillo justifies this last statement by claiming that “The woman in the United States who is politically self-described as Chicana, mestiza in terms of race, and Latina or Hispanic in regards to her Spanish-speaking heritage, and who numbers in the millions in the United States, cannot be summarized nor neatly categorized” (*Massacre* 1). The range of issues that she confronts in *Massacre* parallel, to a large degree, issues dealt with in *So Far from God*: machismo, sexuality, hybridity, spirituality, and so forth, but none that directly addresses the environment. Nevertheless, Castillo does address issues of spirituality relevant to this dissertation, particularly Castillo’s study and analysis of liberation theology and the Chicano community in the chapters she titles “Saintly Mother and Soldier’s Whore: The Leftist/Catholic
Paradigm” (*Massacre* 85) and the hybrid “lived spirituality” of the mestiza, of chapter seven (*Massacre* 145). These two important issues are relevant to my dissertation’s chapter on spirituality. Liberation theology is a key element, whether acknowledged or not, for Catholics of the third world, and in particular for the Latin American world where it originated. I recognize thus the importance of Castillo’s challenges in *Massacre*, especially her criticism of the lack of Chicana women’s voices in this theological discussion (*Massacre* 97) given the fact that a high percentage of Chicana women are Catholic and the number of Chicana or Hispanas engaged in liberation theology is small.

Unfortunately, most of the progressive women’s voices in liberation theology come from white protestant theologians. Sally McFague, for instance, is one such theologian who takes liberation theology a step further, including the nonhuman other in its advocacy. Land, nature, and the environment are the “new poor” of ecotheologians (McFague 6). The poor are no longer only the human poor: “Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common: They start from two bleeding wounds” (*Cry of the Earth* 104). Thus, despite Castillo’s general criticism of liberation theology as being “paternal” and derived from a male-dominant church, and that “governments have shown no tolerance for those liberation theologians who have attempted to defend the rights of the poor” (*Massacre* 99), I believe that Castillo is in practice, as seen in *So Far from God* and as demonstrated in my related chapter, advocating a form of liberationist spirituality, in line with liberation theology tenets. As she sums it up, quoting partially the important work of Isasi-Díaz and Tarango: “Hispanic women’s liberation theology is ‘Hispanic Women’s Experience’” (*Massacre* 101).

Although *Massacre of the Dreamers* has received a good deal of attention, ² Ana Castillo, who began her career writing poetry, is without a doubt better known for her fiction. This fact
should not deter readers from also exploring her poetry. As she puts it, before she could write other genres, “[t]o become a good writer,” she had to polish poetry first (Cantú 60). Coming of age during the Latino movement, Ana concentrated on poetry because it gave her a place and a voice in it: “I was a poet in the movimiento. So it wasn’t as if I were thinking, I’m going to be a poet now and I’m going to send my poems to a poetry magazine. It was more like, I’m going to get up on this soapbox and start reading these poems” (Cantú 60). Thus, from the very beginning of Castillo’s voice as a writer, her impetus was always connected to a political cause, to a process of conscientization: “I knew that poetry was a good vehicle to express my conscientización as a Chicana” (Cantú 60). Perhaps without even knowing it, Castillo addresses issues of environmental importance to the greater community and tries very hard not to put it in a box. I Ask the Impossible contains a compelling text, the poem titled “I Heard the Cries of Two Hundred Children,” where the first person poetic voice straightforwardly comments on the dangerous and polluted environment where scores of children live, in what could be numerous cities in the third world, but given the clues one could presume to be Mexico City:

I heard more
of the cry of children’s ghosts
the ones who sleep on cathedral steps,
and who swerve through traffic,
little clowns and fire-eaters,
wash windshields
with contaminated water and shine shoes
with hepatitis spit, pick pockets
in the metro and pull your sleeve

on the street

while behind a dark window of the Palacio Nacional

the president looks out

central about the national deficit,

a highway built by narcotrafficking kings,

and the latest accusation of election fraud. (I Ask the Impossible 20)

This poem is not only a good example of environmental writing in Ana Castillo’s poetry, it is also very representative of the wealth of experiences and knowledge gained by this “minority ethnic writer” who has physically, or in mind and spirit, travelled these environments and can with authority write about them whether they are in Mexico City, the southwestern United States, or even Napa, California. “Napa, California” is the title of the poem I partially quote here and which, if one looks closely at its physical appearance on the page, resembles the shape of Latin America:

We pick
    the bittersweet grapes
    at harvest
    one
    by
    one
    with leather worn hands
      as they pick
        at our dignity
        and wipe our pride
        away
        like the sweat we wipe
        from our sun-beaten brows
        at midday (Women are Not Roses 61)
Both poems above critically address the environments that the poor of the Americas are forced to inhabit due to their socioeconomic condition, whether they be in the big city or a vineyard in California. These communities, who often include the young, are directly affected by the environment of what Gustavo Gutiérrez calls “the oppressed and exploited land [my emphasis] of Latin America” (ix). There are many other poems by Castillo that address issues of landscape and the environment; indeed most texts have something to tell us about the environment, directly, indirectly, or by omission. The content of these poems is directly related to the environment in relation to the socioeconomic status of the individuals portrayed.

As Ana Castillo tells it, writing fiction was her way to move out of the political movement and into the larger world. It was during graduate school that a Black classmate told her “Ana, we’re going to make it, but we’re not going to make it as poets, we’re going to make it as fiction writers ’cause nobody reads poetry.” And so Ana started writing fiction, with such a success that readers forget or are not aware of her past as a poet (Cantú 61). Without a doubt So Far from God is perhaps her most successful work of fiction.

One of Castillo’s works of fiction that closely relates to the topics here analyzed (nature and the environment), is Castillo’s Sapogonia, “a distinct place in the Americas where all mestizos reside” (Sapogonia 1). The novel is relevant to this study because of the premise that it is set in a mythical land, and thus its environment, mythical or not, plays an important role. The novel parallels in form the content of the novel by presenting a blend of cultural elements of European and American origin, such as the numbers in both Spanish (Arabic numbers) and Mayan. This blend underlines the conditions and life journey, as well as change of environments, of the novel’s bicultural/mestizo protagonist and his journey through life. The environment or landscape of this novel is important as well as all elements in our biosphere. Chapter 4 is only
three paragraphs long and compares the skills or “power[s] with which each individual [is] born,” speculating about a person’s advancement regardless of his or her position in life. The last paragraph ends with the following: “It was not a matter of humility or a sense of servility that marked the pure spirit. It was the inborn awareness of equality with other living things on earth” (*Sapogonia* 15).

Castillo calls attention to the importance of biosphere egalitarianism, but by making use of the number four, the author also makes a connection to the sacred importance of this number for Native American and Mesoamerican civilizations (Gilpin 3–4). *Sapogonia*’s title also includes “an anti-romance in 3/8 meter” pointing to Old World heritage, the Spanish *romance*, a type of song/poem that first emerged in the fifteenth century. The name *Sapogonia* is most likely a derivative of the name Guillermo Sapogón, a composer who helped the writer with Mexican *corridos* (*Sapogonia* iv). These formal elements signify the practical aspects, as well as the psycho-cultural make-up, of those who inhabit the bicultural condition. This condition, which can be embraced or rejected, is one of the main themes running through Castillo’s novel. Usually, this bicultural condition implies the experience of two landscapes or environments.

Indeed, Máximo Madrigal, the novel’s antihero, who “leaves his birth country, which he felt to be too small and insignificant [. . . ] and wanders in search of a homeland in which to establish himself” (Lynch 122), “ignores the land of his past” and focuses solely on the seductive, yet “superficial opportunities that an American landscape offers” (Lynch 129). This action diminishes his gift as a bicultural individual, almost to the point of erasure of identity. By rejecting the advantage, or special gift, that his bicultural condition provides, *la facultad*, as Gloria Anzaldúa calls it, Máximo denies any possibility of getting out of the disconnected life that leads him to seek satisfaction in sexual affairs with women. He is unable to tap into or
develop “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (Anzaldúa 38). Máximo Madrigal thus embodies the Mexican macho who tries to find an identity (disjointed and dislocated because of his disregard for his original environment) via the conquering of women and thus perpetrating a re-enactment of (self)colonization in that “sexuality has always provided gendered metaphors for colonization” (hooks 57).

Kelli Lyon Johnson sees the “home space for political involvement,” as perhaps one of the few safe environments for women characters in the fiction of Ana Castillo. This limitation is due to traditional constraints of gendered spaces as well as “the violence in the borderlands” (40). Johnson is partially right. I broaden my scope of analysis to include the borderlands environment that often, because of its “violence,” pushes characters to interact with the environment in particular ways. This interaction eventually leads characters to resort to the use of knowledge acquired in the home environment, or, more to the point, leads them to acquire the skills necessary to better respond to the novel circumstances. I look at how characters en route interact with the domestic or wild environments, including animals and natural landscapes, as is so prevalent in So Far from God and in Children of the Roojme.

Ana Castillo’s So Far from God has been analyzed predictably through the lenses of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and hybridity. Many other, less expected approaches range from analyses of her text as literature of the absurd, to its reading as a reworking of “the telenovela’s narrative form” (Torres 207). This circumstance suggests that her work is thematically rich and could be analyzed under a larger scope of topics, and by a larger, more interdisciplinary area of studies. Ethnically, United States “mainstream” authors, such as Cormac McCarthy, typically receive more attention from both the general public and the critics. In fact, one exciting article
that points in the right direction is the 2007 comparative analysis of the Southwest novels of Ana Castillo and Cormac McCarthy. In “‘Re-borderization’ in the South-Western Novels of Ana Castillo and Cormac McCarthy,” Peter Carr argues that these two authors have written “crossover novels” since despite being at the margins, as “novels of the borderlands,” they are at the same time centric because their “multicultural narratives have been embraced by the mainstream” (Carr 21).

In sum, although some existing analyses of Castillo’s novel overlap or intersect with my work, none of the critical literature specifically analyzes key ecocritical areas of study: namely, the interaction of humans with animals and with their environment; the gendered use of the environment, and its corollary, the uses of the environment as informed by gendered specific acquisition of knowledge; and the relationship of the environment to human spirituality. In fact, my research found no study of the very important area of animal studies, particularly animal typologies in So Far from God.

Most of Ana Castillo’s work deals in one way or another with environments, a wealth of environments which lead to a wealth of recorded memories and acquired knowledge. Characters and poetic voices, and she herself in her essays and personal writings and interviews, inhabit this range of environments. Ironically, and perhaps because of this multiplicity of inhabited environments, Castillo calls herself “A Countryless Woman” (Massacre 21).

The examination of other works by Castillo and Abinader provides a wider sense of how these authors treat nature and the environment. A survey of some of Abinader’s poetry and sections of her dissertation shows that her memoir, Children of the Roojme, offers some themes that are concerns in her other writings. Castillo’s production is larger; however, the poems analyzed here provide a good representation of the type of texts also written by Castillo that lend
themselves suitably for an ecocritical analysis. This study serves as an initial step toward mining works in both Chicano/Chicana and Arab American literature for ecocritical analysis. Understanding works by Naomi Shihab Nye and Etel Adnan helps to contextualize an ecocritical approach to Abinader among other relevant Arab American writers. Understanding works by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez and Gloria Anzaldúa contextualize Castillo among other treatments of environmental or ecocritical issues in Chicano/Chicana Literature.
Notes

1. “Roojme” derives from the Arabic root “rajama” meaning “to stone” (or to throw rocks). “Raajim” means “stone thrower” or “he who throws rocks” (Nadine Sinno, personal communication). This definition is logical and in agreement with the narrative since the man-made “mountain” was built by workers throwing rocks off the side of a cliff to dispose of foundation rocks unearthed during the family’s home building process.


Chapter 2

So Far from God, So Close to the Land

As the environment emerges as the preeminent topic of our time, its connection to other top issues such as religion and literature is inescapable and necessary. In the United States these topics not only “interlock,” but “viewed another way,” as in a comparative analysis, they also “wobble and pull apart” (Buell, “Religion” 216). This chapter seeks to explore ways in which four main signifiers (America, environment, literature, and religion) are at work in Ana Castillo’s So Far from God and Elmaz Abinader’s Children of the Roojme. This chapter examines the two texts’ similarities and differences of origin and genre. Despite dissimilarities in observing links between characters’ spirituality and their environment in both texts, this spirituality-environment link is clearly pursued in So Far from God and, because of particulars of genre, appears mostly in symbolic form in Children of the Roojme. The chapter addresses such questions as, “How do the communities represented in these two texts view or relate to ‘America’?” and “What were reasons for emigration from Lebanon during the first wave of Arab migration (in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries)?” Other contexts established in Chapter 1 include how each text’s use of Catholicism, a background common to both, leads to an inquiry into the positions of the Catholic Church in relation to nature and the environment. In treating spiritual hybridity in Children of the Roojme I use ecotheology theories, particularly the work of Leonardo Boff. Ecotheology and liberation theology are used to contextualize the important link between spirituality and the environment in So Far from God.

Children of the Roojme and So Far from God were written in English by ethnic minority women writers at the end of the twentieth century. Both of these works tend to reside at the canon’s margins unless taught or read in area studies. A novel and a multigeneration family
memoir, they derive ancestry from totally different geographical and cultural areas of the world: One’s origins hail back to the mountains of Lebanon, while the other claims ancestry in the New Mexico territory colonized by both the Spanish and the United States. Despite their dissimilar geographical origins and histories, the human communities featured in these texts both have an important religious matrix in a form of Catholicism—one Roman, the other Maronite. Although not immediately visible, a parallel between the spirituality of the Maronite Catholic community of Abinader’s memoir and the hybrid communities that make up Castillo’s narrative does exist when focus is put on the environment. The spirituality in which many of the characters engage in *Children of the Roojme* happens all over their surrounding environment, except perhaps in their church. Religion, which is in theory the practice of spirituality, does not provide as much connection to their spirits as the land and the stories connected to their land. These characters’ connection to landscape resonates with Leslie Marmon Silko’s assertion about the importance of earth features (boulders, water ways, etc.) and spirituality for the New Mexico Pueblo community. Both individual and collective experiences that link humans and landscape, joyful or tragic, remind the community of the “strong connection between human beings and the earth” (275).

Both of these texts provide enough evidence of the characters’ relationships to their particular religious or spiritual backgrounds and how they model and shape (or not) their interactions with nature and the environment. Abinader’s memoir tells the multigenerational story of her family more or less as it happened. Even though her work is not fiction, the molding of the different family members based on family letters, memory, and the author’s own final creation justifies the use of the term “characters” when referring to her relatives. Abinader’s goal is to tell the story of her family’s journey of emigration. This situation limits the extent to which
any other agendas can be included, as is the case with *So Far from God*. Nonetheless, Abinader’s lines present a form of hybrid spirituality in relation to the environment that is not always directly acknowledged and often appears in symbolic form. But this circumstance serves to enrich rather than to detract from the comparative goal of this study: As a trans-generational account, Abinader’s narrative echoes the conditions of the times in which her relatives lived and how they interacted with an often changing natural environment.

In Castillo’s novel, a working hybrid spirituality that incorporates Catholic as well as native religious practices allows the characters in *So Far from God* to implement progressive agendas in economic, political, and social areas that dialogue with and confront key issues on ecology and the environment. This hybrid relationship furthers the spiritual, psychological, and economic development of the characters in the novel, extending to their human and nonhuman community or bioregion. Castillo’s narrative clearly seeks the collective emancipation of an entire community. This is climactically expressed at the end of the novel when a plurality of voices representing the community articulates their concerns for their livelihood and the livelihood of their environment. They do so by reenacting and recreating, in a powerfully spiritually hybrid manner, a crucial moment in Christianity: the Way of the Cross (*So Far* 242-244).

Castillo accomplishes this by replacing the persons and places Jesus meets at each station with contemporary characters of diverse nationalities, all suffering from modern maladies derived from pollution, oppression, and poverty (*So Far* 242–244). The same concerns for livelihood appear in Abinader’s memoir and are at times powerfully depicted, as during the times of famine suffered by this community, but the link of these concerns to an obvious agenda is not present and the spirituality-environment connection is mostly present in symbolic form.
Undoubtedly, the primary and often unconscious drive of the main characters in *Children of the Roojme* is their “emancipation” (emigration) from a land that has ceased to produce enough to support their livelihood (11), even though this move causes psychological stress and spiritual angst, as will be explored here later.

**América/Amreeka**

Although today we have a terminology that seeks to differentiate America the United States from America the continent (by using the plural form to incorporate all of the other countries that make up the continent), for most in the Spanish-speaking world, “América” is the entire land mass that was also known as the “New World,” as it has been since 1507 when it was first named by Martin Waldseemüller. His chart “is one of the most important maps in the history of cartography and is also the first map to have named America” (J., G 67). In Spanish, or “Castellano,” the most often used names for the region south of the United States are “América Latina, Iberoamérica, Hispanoamérica, Indoamérica, Sudamérica y Eurindia” (Chang-Rodríguez 4). A couple of these terms endeavor to include the indigenous peoples of the region, with “Indoamérica” being the most preferred by “indigenistas” (Chang-Rodríguez 4). Something similar holds for the citizens of many Arab countries, as the characters in Abinader’s memoir demonstrate. “Amreeka,” which stands for “the formal Arabic word for America” (Malek ix), was a hemisphere in their minds, not a single country. Many from Mount Lebanon journeyed or emigrated to different countries on the continent. They travelled to South America (the author’s family to Brazil, to work in the rubber trade), Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, and yes, the United States:
“Syrians” or “Turks” (were the designations used for Syrians and Lebanese in both the United States and Latin America) and they had been emigrating since the 1800s and by the second decade of the twentieth century some 350,000 Syrians had left their homeland, two-thirds to the United States and most of the rest to South America. (Issawi 31)

The term “America” for Nuevo Mexicanos invokes a long history of colonization started by Spanish explorers and ending with the control and possession of the territory by the United States—via the Guadalupe Hidalgo treaty, signed between Mexico and the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848. In terms of land control or government, the historical background pertaining to Castillo’s novel is quite complicated and the object of a good amount of speculation, litigation, fraud, and so forth, too long and complex to include in this study (Gómez 119–130). The narrative in So Far from God comments on this particular aspect: “First the gringos took most of our land away when they took over the territory from Mexico—right after Mexico had taken it from Spain and like my vis-abuelo used to say, ‘Ni no’ habiamo’ dado cuenta,’ it all happened so fast!” (217).

Thus, despite the fact that the two texts under study were written in “America,” in terms of literary and/or cultural heritage, the characters in both Abinader’s memoir and Castillo’s novel are not the “children of Emerson, Thoreau, or Muir” (Dunlap 42–43). On the contrary, Castillo’s novel is the child of Native American spirituality and Spanish Catholic religious traditions: a spiritual hybridity that “arises not from a reinterpretation of Christianity, but from its embrace of both indigenous and Christian elements” (Delgadillo 890). Abinader’s memoir is the child of the Phoenicians, the poets of Mount Lebanon, St. Maron, and the Maronite Catholic Church. This
last inheritance, the Maronite Catholic tradition, is relevant to this study and explains some of the reasons why this group left Lebanon in great numbers. Maronites at one time were in positions of power and control in Lebanon. Currently they are a marginal group with many living abroad and only visiting sporadically, as many in Abinader’s memoir exemplify (Zamir 111–112).

**Religious Background: The Maronites**

It was in the mountains of Greater Syria that the fifth-century mystic Maron escaped from the world to seek solitude and spiritual enlightenment by praying, meditating, and fasting. According to Guita G. Hourani, Maron lived this life near “Mount Taurus” where “[H]is austere life of unrelenting prayers and fasting empowered him to heal the sick and counsel the needy” (1). These people, followers of Maron, settled in the area “around his humble abode” (Hourani 1). After Maron died, his followers began to build monasteries in his name, and some of these monasteries appear often in the memoir. Dayr Kefifan’s monastery is so near that people standing on the roojme in Abdelli are able to follow along with the monks’ daily prayers (Children 3). During the Turk occupation, Rachid, the author’s great uncle and Abdelli’s sheik, seeks sanctuary while running away from the Turk authorities at “Mar Hanna Maron, the Maronite Catholic seminary where the priests are hiding. He hopes to see the patriarch and get advice, perhaps sanctuary” (49).

In Greater Syria, the Maronites, like the Druze, had been a minority before World War I: “It is estimated that Christians constituted less than 25 percent of the Syrian population at that time, and over 50 percent of the population of Mount Lebanon” (Naff 41). However, the Orthodox Christians had a larger population than any other Christian sects, “but in Mount Lebanon, they were outnumbered by the Maronites” (Naff 41). In fact, Christian sects were in this area even before the Muslims:
When Islam overran Byzantine Syria in the seventh century, a number of rival sects were already there, the Maronites among them. Followers of an ascetic monk, they adopted in the seventh century the then heretic Monothelite doctrine which stated that Christ possessed one will but two natures. [. . . ] In the twelfth century, the church renounced its heretical belief and affiliated with the Roman Catholic church, making the Maronites one of the oldest of the Eastern-rite uniate churches. (Naff 42)

Gregory Orfalea reports that “Maronite monks fled to the Lebanon mountains from Syria in the 7th century after repression, not by Muslims but Byzantine Christians under Justinian II” (57), agreeing with Alixa Naff that the Maronites, at least the founding monks, were one of the oldest Christian churches, if not the oldest. Thus, Catholic Maronites, who retain their own particular traditions such as keeping the liturgy in the Syriac language (Naff 42), adopted the doctrines, beliefs, and attitudes of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, it is appropriate to refer to the Western Christian tradition when dealing with the scriptural and religious heritage of both the characters in So Far from God and Children of the Roojme.

Common Background: Catholicism

Most Christian-Catholic approaches to nature are seen or understood as dualistic (subject/object) and diametrically opposed to the practice of native societies that have a nondualistic (subject/subject) concept of themselves and their environment (Binde 15). However, this generally accepted discourse fails to take into consideration the heritage of the once operational model of medieval cosmology when humans related to the nonhuman in a subject-to-
subject model (McFague 49). A transformation to this model occurred when Christianity saw a significant theological shift in the seventeenth century that drastically changed humans’ perception and relationship to nature. The emergence of the Enlightenment and the acceptance of Decartes’ maxim “I think, therefore I am” reduced the human body to the epiphysis, or “third eye,” excluding all else that constitutes a human (McFague 48). As “nature”—animals, plants, rocks, etc.—had not the ability to think, humans were positioned above them and in charge. In addition, the Genesis ill-applied dictum “to have dominion” over nature quickly erased the key interconnections and interdependencies of the Middle Age cosmological system that were so vital for understanding and valuing our common hetero-ontology (McFague 51). The tenet enshrined in another Genesis phrase, “God saw that all of his creation was good” (McFague 1, 9), began to erode in the West and produced the license to abuse and exploit nature, positioning humans as dominant subjects above nature, the object.

Catholics, in general, have inherited a diversity of approaches when it comes to nature and the environment. This is due in great part not only to the cosmological model of the Church in the Middle Ages, but also to the fact that Catholicism has allowed and allows for synchretic practices all over the world (Binde 15). Religious syncretism is “the combination of different forms of belief or practice” (“Syncretism”). The influence of non-Western views and practices “such as animistic beliefs and images of communion with nature [. . . ] of popular religious practices” have been incorporated into the many Catholic communities in the world (Binde 15). This aspect is observable in the form of a hybrid spirituality demonstrated by characters in Castillo’s So Far from God and those in Children of the Roojme.

Members of many of these Catholic communities in the world such as the Maronites have made their way to the United States, making the Catholic denomination the country’s largest
single denomination of Christianity since 1850. These communities have since then suffered much prejudice and discrimination originating from an underlying intolerance “that other Americans had inherited from the original English colonists” (Labrie 1). Indeed, the perception by many United States citizens that Catholics are outsiders affected or “molded” the perception or “imagination” of notable Catholic writers such as Flannery O’Connor, who saw herself in “a culture that was traditionally Protestant” (qtd. in Labrie 1). As a United States Catholic writer of a later generation than O’Connor’s, Ana Castillo appears to have gained knowledge from this “Catholic outsider” status that allows her to experiment “with a more concrete and experiential understanding of religion than had been the case with the abstract and somewhat legalistic Catholicism that had come down to her [O’Connor]” (Labrie 2). So Far from God tests and challenges the legalistic traditions of the Catholic faith, drawing from the specific and very much experienced realities of a community that has a rich history of spirituality. It merges different traditions in its attempts at enacting a “functional cosmology,” a cosmology that looks not only at a “Christian nature spirituality” (Mc Fague 2), but also adds Native American spirituality.

Hybrid practices are clearly present in Castillo’s narrative and in Abinader’s memoir. So Far from God shows instances of traditional “legalistic” Catholic practices, but also resistance to them and a combination of practices that result in a “hybrid spirituality” (Delgadillo 888). In Children of the Roojme, this hybrid spirituality is seen in the different traditions from which this community draws influence and by the interactions of Abinader’s characters with their environment, particularly in the character of Jean Abinader. Furthermore, the communities benefitted from “the centrality of hybrid spirituality” because this merging of practices and beliefs “challenges pervasive notions of religion as an obstacle to progressive action” (Delgadillo 888). Furthermore, Catholic traditions already incorporate “animistic beliefs and images of
communion with nature; [these] form an integral part of scholarly Roman Catholic thought as well as popular religious practices” thus challenging the generally accepted idea that all Western-based forms of religion are absolute in their dualistic views of nature (Binde 1).

Even older generation Catholic writers had implicitly or explicitly challenged this assumption. Such is the case with Flannery O’Connor, Thomas Merton, and other United States Catholic writers. Even though today’s world is in many ways different from O’Connor’s time (1925–1964), it owes much to her generation. The environmental movement that many claim was launched with the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962), paired with the fact that human damage to the earth is becoming obvious to many more people today, has confronted Catholics and Christians in general with a very “concrete and experiential” reality in need of addressing. Yet, as Labrie points out:

Catholic writers exhibit a clear attraction to the natural world in their writings, attempting thereby not only to search for God in nature but also, by perceiving nature through the eyes of Christ and the church, to explore how best to interpret both nature and themselves. Because of this openness to the world, the Catholic tradition, as Greely noted, saw no harm in appropriating whatever was deemed as good, even in paganism, so long as what was appropriated was reinterpreted to have a “solidly Catholic meaning” (Labrie 3).

Labrie’s assertions describes Castillo’s use of whatever practices she deems fit to explore new ways to represent nature and the environment and how it relates to spirituality in the particular community she writes about. Her narrative is open about using and resisting Catholic
tradition. The way she appropriates and reinterprets Catholic practices produces a spiritual hybridity that is consistent with “Catholic meaning” inasmuch as it agrees with new ideas brought forth by eco and liberation theologians (McFague, Boff). Although religion, or spirituality, is not a pursued goal in Abinader’s memoir, the reader is able to observe the “attraction to the natural world” (Labrie 3) exhibited by one of the main characters, Jean Abinader.

**Catholics and Nature: Openness to the World**

Within the environmental movement, the most commonly discussed view of Christians and nature is that they “either do not know how to relate to nature or they relate to it as Western culture does, as an object for our use” (McFague 1). But this inflexible view has not always operated in the Catholic tradition. Despite this background and the general claims that the Christian tradition is dualistic and in many ways responsible for the abuse and exploitation of the earth, there have been throughout the Catholic church’s history different approaches or notions of nature and interpretations of creation, perhaps because of “this openness to the world” (Labrie 3). According to Sally McFague and Per Binde, the “man as absolute ruler of nature” dual model was not always in operation (45, 19). The Middle Ages world view recognized the interconnectedness and interdependence of all entities of the system, human and nonhuman (McFague 45). Key figures of this period such as St. Francis of Assisi brought forth a different interpretation of humans’ place within creation (Binde 18). According to Leonardo Boff, it is important to acknowledge the wide assumptions and centuries-old practices in the West of “the way nature has been seen as deprived of its autonomy and as existing merely to serve human beings reigning as monarchs over the universe” (*Cry of the Earth* 203). However, today it is also important to bring forth the figure of St. Francis as an “antidote,” to counter the persistent
perception of the West as monolithic in its approach to nature; one that is dualistic, subject-to-object, and anthropocentric (*Cry of the Earth* 203). Medieval figures such as St. Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen not only provided texts confirming the subject-to-subject model, but their lives themselves were examples of such a model. St. Francis treats the natural world with the same care and respect given to humans. His “Canticle of the Creatures” is a lyrical expression of his lived praxis:

```
and first my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day;
and through whom you give us light.
How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendor;
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.
... 
All praise be yours, my Lord, through our Sister
Mother Earth, who sustains us and governs us,
and produces various fruits with colored flowers
and herbs.
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In addition to the enormous importance in the figure of St. Francis, attention should be given to another key figure of the Middle Ages for her relevance to this study in relation to environmental concerns in Castillo’s novel: Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard of Bingen, a central figure from the middle ages, has been subject to new revisions by feminists and ecologists because her views illustrate the “medieval extroverted sensibility, which saw correspondences among all aspects of human, natural, and divine reality” (McFague 53). Indeed, her
interpretation of creation as a mass of “fire, whirlwinds, thunder, and ether,” doesn’t sound far from an imagined visualization of the instant explosion proposed by Big Bang theorists (McFague 53).

According to Alma Alvarez Castillo, the insertion of this figure is a possible recognition of the important role of seventeenth-century nuns of New Spain for building “the foundations of feminist movements in Latin America” (Alvarez 66). However, there is the possibility that the reason the author does not reveal the identity of the nun visiting Loca during her last days is because she is leaving the identification of this character up to the readers, or perhaps this nun is a composite of several holy women: “She didn’t smell like nothing so Loca was not sure if she was a present nun or a past nun or maybe hasta una future subjunctive nun” (244). The writer appears to give freedom to the reader to place this nun in any period of time. The only thing certain is that “In fact, she was a nun” (244). “The Lady in Blue” is called so because she wears a blue cape. Hildegard de Bingen is always depicted with a blue cape. In some paintings she is depicted holding a scroll that shows her key text on creation: “Oh holy spirit you are the mighty way in which everything is penetrated with connection and relatedness.” The identity of this nun fits Hildegard, yet, as suggested by the narrative, the nun could be one or a combination of several nun figures. The nun sings for La Loca a particular style of song from Portugal, a fado. The song “which was about a woman who had been left by her French soldier lover” (So Far 245), does not fit Hildegard de Bingen’s persona, but does take the narrative back to the Iberian Peninsula. Nevertheless, this study provides an opportunity to include Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen, both of whom recognized the interrelatedness and interconnections of all beings, as a possible inspiration to Castillo’s narrative.
The insertion of the “Lady in Blue” character (244), is most likely built around Maria of Agreda, “a cloistered Spanish nun who claimed to have been mystically transported, while in a trance state, to the New World on a number of occasions between 1620 and 1631” (Hickerson 67). This lady appeared to Jumano Indians of the Southwestern United States and was a very effective figure in their conversion to Christianity (Hickerson 67). According to historical documents and engravings from the eighteenth century:

A mysterious figure, a woman in the costume of a Franciscan Conceptionist nun—a grey habit with a blue overgarment—is said to have appeared to a number of Indian tribes, preaching to them in their own languages, giving instruction in Christian rituals, and adjuring the Indians to seek baptism. (Hickerson 71)

So Far from God: Liberation Theology Meets Ecotheology

In retrospect, it is not surprising to notice today that when Catholic priest Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote his extremely influential work on liberation theology in 1973, the first sentence in his introduction included solely the word “land” when referring to the “oppressed” and the “exploited” in the continent: “This book is an attempt at reflection, based on the Gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation, in the oppressed and exploited land [my emphasis] of Latin America” (Gutiérrez ix). Land (nature, the environment) is the new poor for liberation and ecotheologians. The title to Castillo’s novel, So Far from God, with its multiple possibilities of interpretations, takes a liberationist stand from the very beginning. The community in Tome, New Mexico, has been far from a divinity represented by the traditional church that in the past had failed the community. The novel, highlighting a
spiritual hybridity and framed within a liberationist context, seeks to bring about progressive change.

Just as liberation theologians have been for several decades advocating the choice for the poor, liberationist ecotheologians are now asking for the nonhuman other to be included in this advocacy. Land, nature, and the environment are the “new poor” of ecotheologists (McFague 6). The poor are no longer only the human poor: “Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common: They start from two bleeding wounds” (Cry of the Earth 104). Boff refers here to the wound of the human poor and the wound of the “systematic assault on the Earth” (104):

Both seek liberation, a liberation of the poor by themselves as active subjects who are organized, conscious, and networked to other allies who take on their cause and their struggle; and a liberation of the Earth through a new covenant between it and human beings, in a brotherly and sisterly relationship and with a kind of sustainable development that respects the different ecosystems and assures a good quality of life for future generations. (Cry of the Earth 104)

The liberation Boff speaks about can be enacted jointly, as Castillo’s novel demonstrates. Her character Sofi, with the help of her community, is the key liberationist agent in the community of Tome, New Mexico. Sofi’s actions throughout the novel demonstrate an intuitive liberationist attitude for she “emerge[s] as the primary agent of [her] journey, even when [she has] support from others” (Cry of the Earth 108–109). Sofi is “the primary agent” (Cry of the Earth 109) of her liberation from oppressive circumstances whether economic, social, or
religious, for herself and for others in her community. She is the predominant organizer and creator of a community network that leads to the liberation of her community and the former exploitative uses of their land (Cry of the Earth 104). These efforts in time lead her to become “la Mayor of Tome” (So Far 130) and “la first presidenta of [. . . ] M.O.M.A.S” (247). Sofí is the personification of the qualities or attributes of an individual, or in this case an “eco-agent” who, as Boff proposes, engages in “a sisterly relationship” (Cry of the Earth 104) with the land, the animals, neighbors, and clients. Sofí is the main organizer of a cooperative that manufactures goods derived from sheep skins, “a kind of sustainable development that respects the different ecosystems and assures a good quality of life for future generations” (Cry of the Earth 104). This, however, is no easy task, as revealed in Castillo’s narrative:

There were many community-based meetings in which debates as to what ideas would lend themselves best toward some form of economic self-sufficiency for their area before some people came up with a plan that eventually mobilized everyone into action. It would take YEARS of diligence and determination beyond this telling to meet their goals but Sofí’s vecinos finally embarked on an ambitious project, which was to start a sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise, “Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative” (146).

This enterprise allowed the community to come together in ways that benefited not only the human community, but also made the land productive again in ways not detrimental to it. It also gave the community an avenue for growth in all areas, providing them with options to the low-paying, highly toxic jobs, such as the one that kills Fe (So Far 171). Several positive
outcomes derived from the institution of this cooperative: “some neighbors began planting
organic vegetables” (148), and when the cooperative was financially stable, “a low-interest loan
fund for their members” (148) was instituted. As agents for their own change, the community
was able to liberate itself from the oppressive patterns this community had suffered for years
(Cry of the Earth 104):

For some of the women, the greatest asset that came with the weaving
cooperative was the arrangement they made with the local junior college. Due to
the wide range of skills they learned from running their own business, those who
were interested could work for college credit and potentially earn an associate’s
degree in business or in fine arts. And no years of cleaning the houses of los ricos
or serving tables in restaurants could ever get them that! (147)

Ecotheology proposes a new way of looking at nature and a new way of interpreting
Christian scripture: to institute a model that extends subjectivity to all entities, human and
nonhuman. This is based on the premise that “since all religious language is metaphorical,
alternatives to traditional metaphors are possible” (Mc Fague 2). So Far from God exemplifies
this proposition made by ecotheologian Sally McFague, because the novel offers new
interpretations of Christian scripture to a degree that makes it contestatory and thus liberationist.
These far-reaching interpretations of Christian scripture fulfill liberationist and current
ecotheological propositions, which in their most fundamental terms require “a change in attitude,
of sensibility, toward nature—thinking differently about it” (McFague 2).
The solidarity between “poor human/poor nonhuman” is powerfully manifested in *So Far from God* as the novel moves to a close. It is in its penultimate chapter that the text presents its highly impacting manifesto or as the author wittily calls “a few random political remarks from the highly opinionated narrator” (*So Far* 238). By recreating a procession/reenactment of the Way of the Cross procession (*So Far* 241) in which sins and sinners are unequivocally addressed and in which the oppressed are given a voice, this event is inclusive and representative of all the different groups that make up the poor community of New Mexico as well as “the new poor” (McFague 125, *Cry of the Earth* 104). Represented are “Native” and nonnative “hispanos”: the Navajo, the unemployed, the people dying from “toxic exposure in factories,” as well as animals; “Livestock drank and swam in contaminated canals” (*So Far* 243). Represented here are also the people dying from AIDS: “It started in Africa, he said, among poor, black people, and continued sweeping across continents, taking anyone in its path” (*So Far* 243). The procession is a culmination of the novel’s attempt to show the variety of voices that inhabit New Mexico and who are looking for healing in our modern world, each a distinct voice.

As Delgadillo explains, the novel “does not attempt to fuse divergent spiritual and religious practices into a unified whole. Instead the novel emphasizes differing traditions and practices coexisting in the same world as aspects of the multiple subjectivities that define its characters” (889) including animals and landscape. What is merged, though, is the spirituality, the need for all of these voices to come together, to voice the cry of the poor, human and nonhuman (*Cry of the Earth* 104). The narration works as a liberationist manifesto for all of these groups that share the land and in one way or another have similar fates and faith. The “people spoke on the so many things that were killing their land and turning the people of those lands into an endangered species” (*So Far* 242). This liberationist manifesto is enacted in a
communal celebration of extreme significance; a new version of Jesus’ Stations of the Cross, and thus the different instances of healing carried out by the different healers as key characters in the narrative, have produced “the transformative curing process manifest in the healing powers of writing and the text” (Blend 65). Furthermore, the reenactment of the Stations of the Cross, which in this community occurs outdoors, is a way for the community to re-inscribe themselves onto the land in a sacred, spiritual manner. When Jesus takes on the cross the community consists of

… the Native and hispano families throughout the land were living below poverty level, one out of six families collected food stamps. Worst of all, there was an ever-growing number of familias who couldn’t even get no food stamps ’cause they had no address and were barely staying alive with their children on the streets (So Far 242)

The Native American population is also represented. When Jesus meets Mary his mother:

Three Navajo women talked about uranium contamination on the reservation, and the babies they gave birth to with brain damage and cancer. One of the women with such a baby in her arms told the crowd this: “We hear about what environmentalists care about out there. We live on dry land but we care about saving the whales and the rain forests, too. Of course we do. Our people have always known about the interconnectedness of things, and the responsibility we have to “Our Mother,” and to seven generations after our own. But we, as people,
are being eliminated from the ecosystem, to . . . like the dolphins, the eagle; and we are trying very hard now to save ourselves before it’s too late. Don’t anybody care about that.” (So Far 243)

These women are posing a fundamental question of increasing debate as well as encapsulating the paradox Native Americans have confronted since the arrival of the Europeans and the Native Americans’ subsequent displacement. Native Americans have always “known [and practiced] the interconnectedness of things” (So Far 243).

The liberation aspect in So Far from God often comes in the form of spiritual hybridity: a key and climactic example of this concept is María and Caridad’s marriage. This form of spirituality is so powerful that the character embodying dogmatic interpretations of spirituality, Francisco el Santero, fears and it and turns this fear into violence. This act, in turn, propels Esmeralda and Caridad to become one, literally. Their union, leaping to their death in Sky City, both recreates a Native American myth of creation and celebrates cultural hybridity and spirituality. As separate individuals, they each represent a mixture of religious and spiritual traditions which they combine and offer in self-sacrifice (So Far page 211):

There weren’t even whole bodies lying peaceful. There was nothing.

Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever. (So Far 211)
*So Far from God* presents a clear spiritual discourse which “parallels the practice of liberation theology, a sort of hybrid spirituality which makes concrete the connection between the spiritual and the material, and between the personal and the public” (Delgadillo 889). The novel recognizes the agency of humans and their actions for change in a way that recognizes the strong and unbreakable link “between the spiritual and the material” (Delgadillo 889). Spirituality for most characters in the novel is keenly rooted in their connection to the land, the animals, and the community, including the landscape that surrounds them. Through the narrator and the (informant) characters who at times literally attempt to “speak” like and for the animals (*So Far* 151, 175), the reader is well aware of their proactive approach to a subject-to-subject connection with the nonhuman other.

**Children of the Roojme: Spiritual Hybridity**

The wealth of religious and spiritual traditions from which the Lebanese Maronites draw is very ancient and rich. This group, once a part of Greater Syria, shares geography, cultural roots, and traditions, that go beyond the confines of one single religious tradition. As Alixa Naff says, “With the conquest of Syria by Islam in 637, not only did its population cease to be predominantly Christian but its universe—social, cultural, political and economic—became Islamic” (23). Thus, even though the characters in Abinader’s memoir are Maronite Catholics, their “universe” has been culturally influenced by other traditions. This ancestry mixes naturally as in the scene when the memoirist describes the *bourj* upon her arrival to Lebanon: “Beirutis in galabiyas, burnooses, fezzes, and European suits mingled at the bus stops and cafés. Veiled women sat next to the French tourists in their skimpy beach clothes” (3–4).

Such a variety of religious and ethnic traditions, even if unacknowledged, is considered a healthy spiritual aspect that contributes to spiritual hybridity. According to Leonardo Boff, “a
rigid monotheism is not salutary for the soul—as if all spiritual riches could be reduced to a single principle” (*Cry of the Earth* 205). Boff’s assertion that there are “powerful cosmic, natural and human energies that are at work in people’s subjectivity, and in the hidden meaning of things,” (*Cry of the Earth* 205) is clearly revealed in Abinader’s memoir. In *Children of the Roojme* the connection of such energies, which eventually translates into spirituality or religious drive, is mostly concealed or buried in symbolic form or in often “unintentional” actions as is the creation of the *roojme* (5). These actions are prominent in Abinader’s narrative, but their powerful effects or implications for human spirituality are not addressed as such. The *roojme* is imbued with hidden meaning for the community of Abdelli and its descendants, and its importance as a cultural (spiritual) root is recognized early in the memoir by the author: “What I stood on, this pile of rocks, was my foundation, and although its existence was *unintentional*, [my emphasis] it had held over the years” (5). Such a “pile of rocks,” which is literally Lebanon’s foundation, has been the ancestral home of Abinader’s family, and everything in that land’s history contributes to the enrichment or furthering of that community’s spirituality (*Cry of the Earth* 205).

This spiritual wealth, enriched or connected to a monument that is a very important part of Abinader’s character environment, is apparent from the memoir’s beginning: Abinader’s memoir opens up by paying homage to the “poetry of men.” Poetry, as is prayer, is connected to everything that is important in life, and for these men in particular, the bounty and beauty of nature: “Someone would start a poem about the harvest, asking God, in rhyme for figs the size of his fist. Another celebrated the sea; others glorified a woman’s beauty or praised God” (3). Such “poetry” is just as important as the offices and prayers the monks conduct at the monastery every day, and in which the men also participate: “At six, when the monks at the monastery Dayr
Kefifan recited their prayers in the courtyard, my father and his brothers knelt and prayed with them” (3).

Another very important source that furthers spirituality and contributes to spiritual hybridity for Abinader’s characters is Maron’s heritage. As Gregory Orfalea says, the descendants of the followers of Maron who “fled to the Lebanon mountains from Syria in the 7th century” (The Arab Americans 57) are most likely the characters in Elmaz Abinader’s memoir. 

A symbolic way in which these characters reenact this action is by retreating to their makeshift mountain, the roojme. Perhaps not consciously aware of their motives, the people of Abdelli gather at the top of the roojme to reconnect spiritually with the land. The characters in Children of the Roojme may not be aware of the spiritual importance of the roojme, but since “symbol underscores unity” (McFague 51), the narrative in Children of the Roojme reveals to the reader the roojme’s great spiritual wealth. The reader, by using a universal symbolic interpretation as to what the roojme and other elements present in the narrative symbolize, is able to uncover the deep spiritual link between human characters and their environment. As an example, Jean’s building of the makeshift “cave” with trunks of trees at the top of the roojme mimics the safeguarding nature of the elements and the great spiritual importance of the cave given the ancestry of these characters (Children 1–2). The roojme symbolizes the mountain, the makeshift wooden structure, the cave. The roojme is made of stone which “is a symbol of being, of cohesion and harmonious reconciliation with self “ (Cirlot 313). Thus, the roojme, made with the rocks unearthed from the native land, is an avenue for bringing together self and environment, furthering these individuals’ spirituality.

Although not directly acknowledged, another source for spiritual hybridity for characters in Children of the Roojme derives from the long relationship the Maronites have had with the
Druze in Lebanon (Orfalea, *The Arab Americans* 57–58). Sharing at times a tumultuous history, the “Druze and Maronites were amicable for the better part of the millennium, up to the 19th century” (Orfalea, *The Arab Americans* 57), with the Druze displaying “a tolerance toward other religions that is scarcely characteristic of the cradle of revealed religion and fanaticism that is the Middle East” (Orfalea, *The Arab Americans* 57). Elmaz Abinader remarks and inserts in her memoir her uncle’s play about the Druze, even though she doesn’t elaborate on its content. The memoir only cites the name of the play: “*A History of the Druze*” (19). Nonetheless, it is evident that the Druze were an important part of the lives and the imagination of the author’s family. In the memoir, the author observes “Druze shepherds marching their sheep to the pasture” (4), and more importantly, the nature that surrounds these Druze shepherds: “The hills were covered with sandstone, limestone, and rock. Pomegranate, oak, olive, cypress, and mulberry trees broke through the hard land and twisted toward the sun. Yellow grass sprouted intermittently, and little wild flowers congregated near the shallow streams” (4). This realistic description of humans and nature is reminiscent of the pastoral tradition where humans and nature are at peace with one another, and, furthermore, where nature is a vehicle for the spiritual enrichment of humans: “at the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies. Both Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman traditions imagine a divinely ordained order of nature” (Garrard 63). Abinader’s insertion of the Druze in such a pastoral setting signals to the reader the importance, if unacknowledged, of Druze tradition affecting or enriching the whole of the community—Druze, Maronite, or other.

**Leaving the Ancestral Land: Spiritual Fragmentation**

Memoirs, which in one sense limit the fictive imagination but in another offer a window into the day-to-day lives and experiences of the characters, as reconstructed via diaries, letters,
historical facts, and memory, call for a different sort of analysis. In *Children of the Roojme* there definitely exists a spiritual connection between the memoir’s characters and the natural world, but it is not a directly pursued goal. The connection of the memoir’s characters to the nature and environment of their country of origin is intense, but its expression appears mostly in symbolic form. In Abinader’s memoir this aspect is most keenly revealed when characters leave their native land. Emigration provokes a longing for the native land that manifests, particularly as exhibited by Jean Abinader, in psychological and spiritual angst. Emigration, which leads eventually to his spiritual fragmentation, becomes apparent by analyzing his fixation with making the land produce (*Children* 11, 12, 120, 124).

The next section first addresses the reasons for Lebanese emigration and then moves to analyze the consequences of emigration for Jean Abinader.

**Emigration**

Like the characters in Elmaz Abinader’s memoir, many Lebanese left their country during the first wave of Arab emigration. They sought opportunity and success in the United States where they “discovered an entrepreneurial Eden in America” (Naff 2). Some, however, did not feel successful after returning from the United States. Abinader’s memoir records this sentiment in the voice of her father Jean: “This is not how he planned to return to Lebanon. Like his father, he wanted to come back rich and successful” (12). Whether this group achieved financial gains or not, additional research shows that the Lebanese departure from Greater Syria was propelled by a variety of reasons, most particularly by World War I and the resulting occupation of Lebanon by the Ottoman Empire. According to Gregory Orfalea, this key historical event led to famine and forced conscription, in addition to locust plagues, Spanish flu, sectarian conflict, and spurred on, yes, by the Phoenicians’ eternal wanderlust (*The Arab*
Americans 50–59). In *Children of the Roojme*, most of these reasons for emigration are mentioned in the memoir by Rachid, the author’s grandfather: “‘This is the straw that killed the camel.’ They told him what he already knew: the locusts had come back. ‘This on top of everything’—starvation, Turks, sickness, and European war moving toward them” (44).

Regardless of the varied reasons for Libnani to emigrate, travelling to acquire financial success is in the culture: “Lebanon always surrendered her men to the stories of wealth abroad. Like their ancients, the Phoenicians, they took to the sea” (*Children* 80–81). The characters in Abinader’s memoir are no exception. Like the Phoenicians, the Abinaders had first gone to Brazil; Rachid, Shebl, and Yousef established a rubber trade there:

Two brothers traveled while the other managed a general store selling necessities to the laborers along the Amazon, Acre, and Purus. Wherever Rachid went he met other Libnani. Many of his countrymen also had businesses there and in the other nations of North and South America. (80)

The reasons why many Libnani left home were varied, yet the desire for travel subtly appears at unexpected turns: when Rachid reads the fortune at the bottom of his cup of coffee, “He never sees a stranger with information, or wealth, or a long illness; he always sees a map in his fortunes” (80). Thus, and despite the variety of reasons given in the memoir, it is obvious that a deeply ingrained desire to travel abroad is a constant, and the explanation for such travel is the acquisition of financial gain: “Early in the century, the three brothers had returned to Lebanon from Brazil with profits from their rubber trade. Their first order of business was to build homes, a harra for each family” (5).
But despite the success obtained or the reasons for leaving the ancestral land, for Jean Abinader it causes a spiritual fragmentation. Jean feels like “a Stranger” (18) all of his life. His loneliness and feelings of unbelonging derive from the fact that he feels disconnected from the land, a land he venerates, as can be surmised from the following: “Joseph, only fifteen, was born after the war and he does not understand Jean’s reverence for the land” (Children 120). Sadly, even though Jean feels so strongly for the land, he cannot dedicate his life to it. He must be something other than a land worker: “Jean can only think of revitalizing the land. But then what? He is not a farmer, and farmers are not needed that much anymore” (Children 124). So Jean moves away to the United States with the goal of acquiring success, something he does not feel he accomplished:

This is not how he planned to return to Lebanon. Like his father Rachid, he wanted to come back rich and successful; to buy things for his mother, his family, and their children. He wipes his shoes with a rag. What would his father think if he saw the garden now? Jean imagines Rachid with an extended arm shouting, “Down to the garden and pull those weeds, by the roots.” (12)

Jean’s psychological predicament is clearly revealed in this quote. In the same instance when he is expressing his wish to be successful like his father by returning to Lebanon wealthy, he is also revealing his mortification to keep the garden in order. The avenue through which Jean seeks to remedy this predicament is an attempted reconnection with the land, whenever and wherever possible. His fixation with revitalizing the land is simply his need to find a resolution to his spiritual predicament. Time and again the Abinader’s narrative presents Jean in situations
where he desires to be in touch with the land, to make the land produce. When Jean returns with his family to Lebanon in 1973, after being away for a long time, he cannot wait to work on his mother’s garden:

There are no vegetables. High thorny brushes tangle together, and the whole garden is a jungle of unruly brown weeds. Jean steps in.

[. . . ]

Jean’s jaw tightens as he pushes aside the thistle and turns to leave. His feet are stuck in the mud, and he begins to sink until his patent-leather loafers are swallowed up to the gold buckles. It was ridiculous for him to come here dressed for church. He lifts a foot up and lets the dirt drop. He wobbles, then stomps from the garden into the yard. (11)

Jean is on his way to Mass and dressed for the occasion. Jean’s unconscious leads him to this other place of worship, the garden. Jean’s fancy shoes with gold buckles sink into the earth. Because “gold is symbolic of all that is superior,” (Cirlot 119) there is a symbolic connection between the quality of the shoes and the need for Jean to connect with the land. His attire destined for church, the shoes that signify journey, and his sinking into the land represent, symbolically, Jean’s unconscious need to connect spiritually with the earth. For Jean, working in the garden is his way at reinstating, as Boff says, that “link in the vast cosmic chain” (Ecology 7). As a Christian, Jean’s working in the garden signifies his awareness that if the land “comes from God [he] returns to God” (Ecology 7).
Time and again the memoir presents Jean expressing emotional states paired with his desire to work with the land. In the following quote Jean expresses his loneliness both in Brazil and at home “wondering” about his future, but being able to “only” think about the land:

   Jean thinks of Brazil and how he slept under the mango trees and listened to the flute on the water. He remembers his loneliness there, and he had expected it to disappear once he returned home. But it is worse.

   [. . .]

   Jean *can only think* [my emphasis] of revitalizing the land. But then what? He is not a farmer, and farmers are not needed that much anymore. He stays quiet for days wondering where his life will go. (124)

Jean cannot afford to be a farmer in his native land. Reasons for emigration beyond his control have pushed him to leave his land with the goal of becoming financially successful. It is the combination of forced emigration combined with the fixed idea of how Jean should make a living that leads Jean to his loneliness and feelings of disconnection, of being a “stranger” everywhere (*Children* 18). This nostalgia or melancholy for the land left behind becomes, obsessively, a land in need of revival: “Jean can only think of revitalizing the [ancestral] land” (124). The analysis of this dynamic requires a closer look at the assumption that for the Lebanese “their assimilation into American life was and is remarkably easy” (Naff 141).

Jean’s assimilation into American life might have seemed easy, but his fixation with making a spiritual connection with the land continues in the United States:
There his house is big, but his garden is small. He keeps a garden, as he has at every house they have lived in.

[...]

On his feet he slips his worn dress shoes. Cast-off wing-tips, old black oxfords, *shoes he once polished diligently before mass on Sundays* [my emphasis], sit by the cellar door with their toes curled and their sides spread beyond the soles.

When jean goes down to pick up the fallen tomatoes, to reroute the squash vines, and to drop beans into a metal pail, he wears these dress shoes instead of boots.

(13)

Jean prefers to wear the same fancy shoes he once wore to church to work in his garden, the same ones he took great care to clean before attending traditional church. These shoes could very well be the same ones he wore while trying to work on his mother’s garden while visiting Lebanon in 1973. Because shoes are a symbol of journey, in this case they signify an instrument for Jean’s spiritual journey. Shoes in this instance signify his desire to connect what he recognizes as spiritual, the traditional church, and the garden, his other church, recognized only by the unconscious. The garden is where he attempts to mend his spiritual predicament. His father Rachid’s ghost joins in this effort:

As Jean turns back toward the orchards, his father’s ghost appears. Rachid stands under the pear tree wearing a suit Jean recognizes from their days together in Brazil. Rachid waves a cane at his son. Jean squints his eyes. His father’s ghost has joined him before. Rachid has emerged from between the cornstalks, has
stood in the light of the sun as Jean tilled the spring round, and has plucked some peppermint while Jean picked leaves for the evening salad. (14)

Rachid’s ghost appears at the garden often, accompanying Jean in his gardening chores. Rachid’s appearance might signify that Jean working the land is the way to mend spiritually, but it is a conflictive message, for Rachid, as Jean hears it, wants to know when he will return to the native land:

They begin to stroll and they talk, of course, of Lebanon. Rachid wants to know why Jean is not there. Jean raises his hands, his empty arms to the sky.

Jean know his family watches him from the house, sees him talking to himself, they think, but he continues to chat with his father’s ghost, smiling and gesturing.

They discuss Abdelli and the smell of the pears in the orchard by the church. (14)

This instance in the narrative, in third person, clearly illustrates Jean’s continued predicament— not being in Lebanon. But even in Lebanon he felt lonely and could only think of revitalizing the land (Children 124). Why? Jean is aware of the pressures upon the male members of his family to go abroad and become financially successful. Jean could not think of escaping this reality, or the other realities such as war and famine that pushed many to leave Lebanon. This predicament is surmised from Jean’s constant fixation with making the land produce (124). For Jean, working the land appears, practically and symbolically, the avenue for the attainment of spiritual health.
Chapter 3

Peacock Walk and Sheep Talk: Anthropomorphism, Zoomorphism, and Animal Representation

May my beasts guide me! –Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra

In the humanities the current debate on the relationship between humans and animals centers on two key issues: “the analysis of the representation of animals in history and culture, or animal studies, and the philosophical consideration of animal rights” (Garrard 147). Following this premise, the chapter focuses first on animal representation in the two texts under study. I demonstrate how, in general, animals in Children of the Roojme are represented as ordinary utilitarian objects, under human domination. These animals, however, acquire an exponentially higher commodity value during times of famine. Despite this general trend and the fact that animals appear sparingly, Abinader’s memoir does relate a couple of remarkable instances in which animals demonstrate their power and thus subvert and challenge the human-as-dominant model. In contrast, animals in So Far from God are represented beyond the utilitarian object model. In So Far from God animal and human characters travel the human/nonhuman behavior continuum: “If culture goes, so to speak, all the way ‘down’ into nature, nature must likewise come all the way ‘up’ into human existence” (Garrard 158). Thus while human characters behave like animals, animals are likewise presented as behaving like humans, most particularly in Castillo’s novel. Therefore, my analysis will include an examination of animal typology in the various forms of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. Finally, this chapter will also address a very important issue: an exploration of the rights of all of an ecosystem’s creatures, as directly addressed in Ana Castillo’s So Far from God.
Animal Representation

In general terms, animal representation in Elmaz Abinader’s *Children of the Roojme* is a good example of speciesism: the justification of humans’ dominant position and “the basis of our different treatment of animals and humans” (Garrard 146). In the first few pages of Abinader’s *Children of the Roojme*, the narrative presents animals as dressing up the landscape, “reduced to visual spectacle” (Nelson 7). The narration at this initial moment is in the voice of an outside observer, Elmaz Abinader herself, visiting Lebanon for the first time in her youth: “I could see Druze shepherds marching their sheep to pasture, and jackasses teetering with their loads as they were led down to a village” (4). This quote illustrates how at first the style of the narration serves to “dress the stage” by using common place views of village life, as seen from a detached observer. It also demonstrates that, picturesque or not, humans are in the dominant position.

But these same jackasses, sheep, and other livestock had in the Abinaders’ past acquired a high degree of commodity value due to the historical and ecological forces affecting the livelihood of the community (World War I, the Ottoman occupation, the locust plague, and eventual famine). These commodities, although obtaining a high value during this period of great hardship, remain commodities. Despite the fact that most of the animal livestock was zealously guarded as highly priced objects, they met the same end as during times of abundance: “The villagers stay inside their houses more and more, hiding their animals in the basements instead of letting them graze in the fields” (82). At some point, and due to the great need of meat in his community, Rachid, the author’s grandfather, travels to buy livestock in exchange for his wife’s jewelry:
They climbed the rocky path above the sea to Akar. They were returning from buying two steers. Rachid was pleased with the bargain because they had traveled so far, and because his wife’s gold bracelets were worth so much [my emphasis]. (82–83)

But after Rachid buys the two steers, one of them gets sick. It is at this juncture that Rachid, much to his chagrin, becomes subject to the beast’s illness. It is the beast that guides Rachid’s subsequent actions. It becomes the dominant force through illness. It forces a change in travel plans and the inevitability of being slaughtered under less than ideal conditions in order to save the meat and attempt to regain some profit from it:

The rope in his hands pulled back. The steer shook and leaned to one side. You will not die here, beast. He yanked the animal’s neck and the steer bellowed through his nose. (84)

[. . . .]

The steer seemed to balloon in front of them. Rachid stabbed it and slit the neck until the chin dropped forward and blood ran into the river, soaking the mud. A fetid smell rose and Boutros moved his head back. Rachid squeezed his nose, then rolled the animal over. (92)

It is important to note that this incident happens at a moment in the narrative when Rachid is recounting stories of Brazil, and its much-feared river pirates, to his son Boutros. Despite the danger and challenges experienced in Brazil, there is much nostalgia expressed
through these stories and great admiration for the people involved. The nostalgia for the river itself is grand, but there is almost nothing about animals. While Rachid is about to slaughter the steer by the river and in the most difficult moments of struggle with it, he imagines a boat on a river where there are no challenges to “the current”:

The final fifty feet of ground sloped sharply, and the steer rolled and bounced to the river’s edge. Rachid, Boutros, and the steer puffed like the batallon’s smokestack. The river was silent. Rachid wanted to fall back and stare at the sky. *He imagined a small boat taking him down the river—no engines, no smoke, no wheels, just the current in command* [my emphasis]. (91)

Even though Brazil has a great impact on the psyche of Rachid and other members of his family, we almost never hear from its animals or its natural world in general. Even on the rare instances when characters speak about nature in Brazil, “Mayme told them stories [. . .] of the strange plants that hung over the river like waterfalls, and the trees whose roots sat exposed near the banks” (261), nature and animals appear to be only incidental to the main goal of acquiring wealth through the rubber trade and the sale of dry goods. Thus, although the narrative acknowledges that “stories” are being told about the natural world and quite possibly animals, the reader doesn’t get to hear them (261). Remarkably, and only in retrospect, when the community in Lebanon is suffering from famine, the only animal mentioned when talking about Brazil is the fish: “All the fish they threw back into the Río Acre, the Amazon, the Purus—if they only had them now” (81).
Sadly, but quite predictably for Rachid, it is geography, not animals, that is mostly on his mind. It relates to economic trade and allows him to fulfill his Phoenician dreams of fame and fortune. Even the language used to describe the land conveys Rachid’s desire:

Like their ancients the Phoenicians, they took to the sea, and Rachid, Shebl, and Youself followed this tradition and the water into a corner of Brazil that Rachid called its earlobe [my emphasis]. When they returned to Lebanon, they brought a museum of wealth in furniture and adornments.

Rachid fills out the map and writes in the names of his [my emphasis] towns in Peru: Ñapari and Purus; in Brazil: Río Branco, Brasiléia; in Bolivia: Cobija, Santa Rosa, Conquista. (81)

**Powerful Locusts**

Nonetheless, as Abinader’s memoir progresses, the reader is able to find animals in characterizations that subvert the human-as-dominant model. These instances of animals in positions of power illustrate the complexity of humans’ relationship or interdependence with the natural world. Humans do not dominate nature. The role some animals play in the memoir are in fact quite “unpredictable, powerful” (Nelson 7), as the instance with the locust plague in chapter 3 illustrates. It is Rachid again who, in his position of sheik, addresses the village:

He had to stand among the men of Abdelli and say, “This is the straw that killed the camel.” They told him what he already knew: the locusts had come back.
“This on top of everything”—starvation, Turks, sickness, and European war moving toward them.

The locusts hatched and crawled out of the sea and covered the land like a flood. Rachid! The new order from Batroun was very clear. No one could travel for food, and no one could stop and pick the pears from the trees. (45)

The locusts clearly and by their sheer presence become the most dominant force, directly and indirectly.

A Very Powerful Rooster

Because representation of animals outside of the utilitarian ordinary is rare in *Children of the Roojme*, the insertion of the black rooster story is remarkable. The rooster’s serendipitous appearance should not minimize its power. Its inclusion in the text signals to a perhaps neglected or unknown corpus of similar stories of active animal participation. Again, the natural world is not the main focus of Abinader’s memoir. The appearance of this striking animal in all its glory is rather extraordinary, as perhaps was the event in which the animal was involved. This well-characterized black rooster divines and foretells grandmother Elmaz’s “miraculous” recovery after being very ill with the Spanish flu (42). This instance highlights the possibilities of a representation of animals that go beyond and even subvert a simple utilitarian or dominant relationship of humans over animals. As research shows, animals have cognitive skills; they can perceive, judge, and recognize problems (Grandin 243). Furthermore, animals have “true cognition,” which is the kind necessary to figure out the solution to a crisis under new circumstances, and “birds are star performers” (Grandin 243–244). This helps explain,
scientifically, how the rooster, perceiving something amiss with grandmother Elmaż, decides that the way to solve the “crisis” is to make a fuss, spreading his wings and crowing. So important to the narrative is this rooster that Abinader chooses to title the chapter in which it appears “The Black Rooster” (29). I quote the entire passage because of its importance in explaining the animal’s behavior:

One of the roosters began to prance across the patio. He was the biggest, almost two feet high and very black and shiny. He marched across the patio spreading his feathers like a peacock’s tail; then he flew up to Elmaż’s windowsill and crowed. Her mother looked over at the rooster. He crowed again and stretched his neck. Grunting, she threw a pillow at him; he ruffled his feathers and crowed again. She rose to chase him. “Don’t, Mother, he’s my favorite,” Elmaż said.

His grandmother turned. “What?”

Elmaż’s eyes were open; she raised her hand. “Don’t hurt him, Mother.”

The children heard the scream, “My daughter, she’s alive!”

... .

In the sun the rooster’s feathers glowed blue; he crowed again and flew down from the window. “Do you think it was a miracle?” (42).

Roosters are also a powerful Christian symbol of foreshadowing because of Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial of him three times before the rooster’s crowing the next morning. In general, animals have been known to have powers of prediction or divination. However, because this rooster “was the biggest, almost two feet high and very black and shiny,” as well as Elmaż’s
favorite, it would not be farfetched to speculate that grandmother Elmaz was, while fighting the flu, tapping psychically into the rooster’s own health thus “identifying [her]self with animals represent[ing] integration of the unconscious and sometimes—like immersion in the primal waters—rejuvenation through bathing in the sources of life itself” (Cirlot 13).

**Divining Animals**

Animals in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* also share psychic abilities with humans. But these abilities are not considered strange or miraculous as in *Children of the Roojme* (42). Animals are full members of Sofi’s household and they go about it with complete freedom in the use of this important shared space. The importance and equal footing of animals in this home is made clear from the novel’s very first paragraph: “Sofi woke up at twelve midnight to the howling and neighing of the five dogs, six cats, and four horses, whose custom it was to go freely in and out of the house” (19).

Loca’s ability to predict events is paired with that of the animals who predict events such as Loca’s “death” (19) and Caridad’s miraculous healing: “all the animals that had given their perfunctory warnings just stood nervously around as well” (37). It is commonly known that animals can predict natural disasters and even “evil.” According to J. E. Cirlot, among all animals, it is horses in particular that have been throughout history “endowed with certain powers of divination (8). In fable and legend, horses, being clairvoyant, are often assigned the task of giving a timely warning to their masters” (152). In the opening paragraph of the novel there are—in addition to five dogs and six cats—four horses in the house, “whose custom it was to go freely in and out of the house” (19). Citing work by Paula Gunn Allen, Theresa Delgadillo (892) establishes the connection between the occurrence of the number four in the novel, in La Loca’s life in particular, and its importance in non-Christian cosmologies. The number four is
important in Mesoamerican civilizations as well as in North American native groups. The Maya used both hands and feet (four parts) to count with “both fingers and toes, and based their system on units of twenty” (Schele and Freidel 78). For the Maya both time and space were built “within a structure divided into quadrants,” or four planes “each with its appropriate direction and color” (Schele and Freidel 78). As for the Navajo, “the sacred number four permeates Navaho thinking. There are the four directions, the four seasons, and the four colors and substances associated with the four sacred mountains: white and white shell indicate the East; blue and turquoise, the South; yellow and coral or abalone, the West; black and jet, the North. In most rituals there are four songs and multiples thereof, as well as many other symbolic uses of four” (Gilpin 3–4). For the Sioux “four is the number that is most wakan, most sacred. Four stands for Tatuye Tope—the four quarters of the earth” (Lame Deer and Erdoes 115). In the North American Laguna-Keres Pueblo, “four is a categorical symbol-statement about the primacy of female power in tribal ritual life” (Allen 276). Delgadillo maintains that La Loca’s “journey” on the day of her death is composed of four events and that she is one of four siblings (892). And so, La Loca was three and the hour of La Loca’s death was “at twelve midnight” (three and four are both factors of twelve) and, the novel encompasses sixteen chapters (four multiplied by four equals sixteen).

The number four, and the four horses in particular, signifies throughout the novel not only the prevalent and powerful role that women play in their community (Allen 276), but also the equal place animals have standing side by side with women. Also, it is possible that these four horses in So Far from God (19) may refer back to those in the Bible’s Book of Revelation. The Four Horses of the Apocalypse are commonly known to symbolize conquest, war, famine, and death. Sofi’s family and community experience all of these calamities: the war of conquest, the Mexican American war, famine (physical or spiritual), and certainly death. Death is an
important theme in the novel and is not always a negative concept as is the case of the death and resurrection of Loca or Esmeralda and Caridad’s simultaneous death for the sake of creation.

So Far from God, So Close to the Animals

Because “humans can both be, and be compared to, animals” the amount of writing or discourse that surrounds “the animal” is never ending (Garrard 153). As Derrida once observed, “‘I think, therefore I am’: The animal that therefore I am” (qtd. in Garrard 150), humans have for centuries been dealing with their “animality” (Garrard 153). At present, the field of animal studies has made it possible to “identify some key concepts, which can usefully be schematized into a typology” on representation of animals. Namely, and for this study, I will be dealing with anthropomorphism, crude anthropomorphism, critical anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, crude zoomorphism, and critical zoomorphism (Garrard 154).

The role animals play in So Far from God is from the very beginning extremely important. Delgadillo claims that “the sensitivity of the animals, the intensity of their attempts at communication, and their proximity to the members of the household are striking” (898–899). Delgadillo, while correct in her assessment, is, however, projecting human traits onto animals (anthropomorphism). It is rather the human characters who become sensitive to animals and who attempt to communicate with them, as illustrated time and again throughout the novel. Loca attempts to speak and walk like a peacock, “She imitated the peacock’s walk and tried to make peacock talk” (151), and Casey acquires the habit of bleating (175).

Even though other animals appearing in the novel are also of significance (cats, dogs, sheep, peacocks), horses are the animals that both Loca and Caridad love the most. For Caridad, it is Corazón the horse, not a human, who “had become her best friend” (51). For Loca, it is Gato Negro, “a beautiful black-with-gray Arabian that she had helped its mother give light to, that was
her best friend” (152). Rather than a simple anthropomorphic ascription such as that proffered by Delgadillo, the above provokes a discussion on what Garrard calls “critical anthropomorphism” (154). As opposed to “crude anthropomorphism,” where there is a clear and exaggerated, even childish transference of human traits onto animals (Garrard 155), “[c]ritical anthropomorphism is prepared to consider homology of both the valued and the despised tendencies of our species with those of dogs and primates [or other animals]” (Garrard 157–158). 

Vice versa, the same can be said of “zoomorphic” tendencies: “If culture goes, so to speak, all the way ‘down’ into nature, nature must likewise come all the way ‘up’ into human existence” (Garrard 158). The shared tendencies or abilities that both humans and animals exhibit in So Far from God such as foreshadowing or clairvoyance can be both critically anthropomorphic as well as zoomorphic.

Horses are clairvoyant and so are Loca and Caridad. Loca, who had no instruction whatsoever on horsemanship, knew how to “train a horse [. . . ]; there did appear to be an intuitive connection between La Loca and all animals, but still, none of the other women in her family, not even her mother, rode as well as Loca did” (164). Caridad was by her own admission “getting more like Loca more and more each day” (75). She was developing a closer identification with animals and treating them like homologous beings, her horse in particular (critical anthropomorphism), while at the same time creating some distance from humans (critical zoomorphism): “Now, like Loca or like a blind person or even a dog, she was sensitive—although not averse—to individual body odors” (75). In this instance, Caridad is in a process of zoomorphization: developing a keen sense of smell ascribed only to dogs and, it seems, developed by blind people. Caridad, while sparing her horse the task of being ridden, also
appears to assign human traits (critical anthropomorphism), such as that of listening to a 
conversation, or being someone’s confidant and friend, to her horse Corazón:

And although Corazón had never been ridden and did not seem ready for the idea, 
Caridad spent a lot of time with her horse, who stuck its head into whatever 
window she left open, trying to follow her from room to room while she went on 
telling Corazón whatever it was that she didn’t tell no one else. Which was quite a 
bite, because Corazón had become her best friend. (51)

As per Loca’s favorite animal, there is an interesting exchange of perceptions, gazes, and/or attributions in terms of who’s who or what’s what when Loca names her favorite horse “Gato Negro” (153). Her father is totally incapable of understanding Loca’s reasons for choosing that name because he is already predisposed (so is Fe) to ascribe “strangeness” to the women of his family: “‘You named that horse Gato . . .’ Domingo laughed, as exasperated by Loca as by the other strange and wondrous women in his home that he had missed for twenty years. He would never figure out how they all came to be that way” (153). Domingo completely misses the point because he doesn’t allow himself to enter into the world these self-fashioned and self-empowered women have created, a narrative that “Chicana/Latina and other women writers have struggled for centuries to attain the right ‘to express and assert the validity of woman-space and the textured zone of women’s experience’” (Chavez Candelaria qted in Sirias and McGarry 83). Remarkably, this narrative also includes the validity of “woman [/animal] space”:
I named it Gato Negro. I never said it was a cat,” Loca said

[...]

Gato Negro was mostly black and had that fixed look of cats when they are readying for an attack or think they are going to be attacked and ready themselves. Calling it Gato Negro didn’t mean nothing more than that, obviously, because horses are not attack animals. Everyone knew that. (153).

Thus, La Loca, Caridad, and most other women in So Far from God at different levels of intensity have an embracing and active attitude toward closing the gap between human and nonhuman. This is made very clear from the beginning of the novel and with the character of Loca in particular. Not only does it become clear from the start that she is a spiritual envoy or prophet, but she is also to be physically associated only with animals and, with the exception of her mother, distanced from humans. They become repugnant to her after her death and resurrection: “For the rest of her life, however, she was to be 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” (23).

Thus, it is established in the novel from the very beginning that one of the main characters, Loca, is more comfortable with animals than with humans. She does not want to be near humans or be touched by them. Although she makes a few concessions—when she heals her sisters “from the traumas and injustices they were dealt by society [humans]—a society [humans] she herself never experienced firsthand” (27). With this sentence the author demonstrates further Loca’s unique position in the world: so far from humans, and so close to the animals. Loca’s character beautifully emblemizes Cronon’s definition of wilderness as
the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. (Cronon 80)

Because Loca, after her death and resurrection, remains separate from a good part of the “corrupting influences of our [human] artificial lives” (Cronon 80) while actively seeking to be a part of the animal world, she is by far the most “zoomorphic” character in Castillo’s novel (Garrard 158).

In the end, all of Sofi’s daughters, except for Fe, have zoomorphic traits. Namely, they have the unique ability to fly, by their own means or by others. Sofi herself is keenly aware and thus communicates it to Father Jerome:

I had to produce the kind of species that flies! [. . . ] You remember when La Loca went to the church rooftop the day of her funeral when she was three years old? Then, just before Caridad’s disappearance, doña Felicia told me that Caridad had a dream where she was flying [. . . ] Caridad more than likely she is flying somewhere in the mountains [. . . ] my Esperanza flew—not with her own wings, of course, Esperanza is much too practical for that—but in a Jet [. . . ] The only one who stays earthbound is la Fe . . . (84–85).
In this paragraph, Castillo is again reaffirming the uniqueness of Sofi’s daughters, their animal-like qualities, except for Fe who only believes in what she is able to touch or purchase. Despite Fe’s “earthbound-ness,” it is important to note that when she is abandoned by her fiancé, she falls into a “crude zoomorphism” by the constant screaming caused by the pain she is experiencing. Her cries “that could have woken the dead” (30), although animal like, are so intense and so long enacted that she “severely damaged her vocal chords during the days when she had so violently and ceaselessly screamed” (85).

The centuries-old, everyday relationship of some members of the community to animals leads, as in the case of generations of sheep herders, to zoomorphism. Casimiro, Fe’s fiancé, acquires the habit of bleating:

But over seven generations of shepherding had invariably gotten into Casey’s blood, so that even though nobody would ever admit it, and it was hard to actually prove—since Casey was such a soft-spoken man to begin with—Fe was certain that her fiancé had somehow acquired the odd affliction of bleating. (175)

This “odd affliction of bleating” (175) is viewed as negative by Fe who is mostly focused on the material artifacts produced by humans. She would have found the acquisition of any animal trait highly undesirable and belittling—as would be, for instance, Pinocchio’s growing donkey tails and ears when he behaves badly (crude zoomorphism). Viewed through the lens of critical zoomorphism, however, we can say that when the “culture” of humans (Casey’s family’s centuries-old tradition) exposed itself for a long time “into nature,” therefore nature in the form of bleating “came all the way ‘up’ into [Casey’s] existence” (Garrard 158).
Castillo, seriously, critically, and in depth, explores the relationship and possible affinities between humans and animals and on how “animals, [. . . ] make us human in a continual process of reshaping, just as we affect the evolution of both domesticated and wild species” (Garrard 151), even if at times they may appear, depending on the reader, as comical, “crude,” or even undesired by some, as is the case with Fe.

If Fe finds zoomorphism undesirable, Loca revels in it and in turn shies away from humans. Loca’s “phobia of people” and her kinship to animals begins at an early age and at the crucial moment of her so-called resurrection: “For the rest of her life, however, she was to be 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 (23).” Thus, “only her mother and the animals [my emphasis] were ever unconditionally allowed to touch her” (27). In the same vein, and at the crucial moment of her awakening, she demonstrates animal-like characteristics, zoomorphism, as expressed by the priest: “‘Is this an act of God or of Satan that brings you back to us, that has flown you up to the roof like a bird [my emphasis]?’” (23).

**Animals or Humans? A Postcolonial Ecocritical Dilemma**

The narrative in *So Far from God’s* chapter fourteen poses a fundamental question for the postcolonial ecocritic: Who should take precedence or priority, the subaltern human other or the nonhuman other? This passage is a perfect example of the “dilemmas involved in conserving endangered ecosystems and animals when the livelihoods of local (subaltern) peoples are simultaneously at risk” (Huggan and Tiffin 185). These dilemmas are not resolved and indeed will need to be continually addressed:
Jesus met his mother, and three Navajo women talked about uranium contamination on the reservation and the babies they gave birth to with brain damage and cancer. [. . . ] “We hear about what environmentalists care about out there. We live on dry land but we care about saving the whales and the rain forests, too. Of course we do. Our people have always known about the interconnectedness of things; and the responsibility we have to ‘Our Mother,’ and to seven generations after our own. But we, as a people, are being eliminated from the ecosystem, too . . . like the dolphins, like the eagle; and we are trying very hard now to save ourselves before it’s too late. Don’t anybody care about that?” (242).

In the field of ecocriticism there are several positions regarding this question. Ecotheologians argue that each environmental problem or challenge should be addressed contextually, and the solution should take into consideration the health of all creatures, human and nonhuman, rooted in a care ethic model they call “Communities of Care”:

A care model takes the good of the whole, not just the good of favored individuals, as its primary goal. Unlike the subject-object model that sets the rights of certain individuals, *primarily human ones* [my emphasis], against each other, the care model desires a community where different kinds of subjects can live together with relative satisfaction. It looks toward communities that work, not perfectly and not optimally for any particular subjects, but relatively well for most. The care ethic is pragmatic, local, and political, realizing that what works in one place may not in another and that when communities do
work—both for different kinds of people and for the natural world—they involve a lot of hard political decisions, with active citizen participation. (McFague 158)

The community of Tome, New Mexico, the setting for So Far from God, appears to have been searching and to a great degree accomplishing the establishment of such a community as described above. This is most clearly illustrated by the establishment of the co-op:

There were many community-based meetings in which debates as to what ideas would lend themselves best toward some form of economic self-sufficiency for their area before some people came up with a plan that eventually mobilized everyone into action. It would take YEARS of diligence and determination beyond this telling to meet their goals but Sofi’s vecinos finally embarked on an ambitious project, which was to start a sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise, “Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative”. (146)

Postcolonial ecocritics such as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that the postcolonial subject such as the Navajo women discussed should not be at odds with the primary goals of the environmental movement. Citing Vandana Shiva as one of the first postcolonial thinkers and simultaneously an environmentalist, Huggan and Tiffin demonstrate that by reading texts in a postcolonial ecocritical manner, one can challenge “continuing imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance” (Huggan and Tiffin 2). In So Far from God we have an example of a postcolonial community of subjects who have been dispossessed throughout history with their environment significantly altered. The novel makes clear that the land they live in has
been in the hands of Native Americans, Spaniards, Mexicans, and finally the United States (*So Far* 217). Yet this community of Tome fits neatly into the ecotheological communities of care model as well as a postcolonial community who is also mindful of their environment and is making decisions involving both humans and animals.

Despite the fact that the co-op achieves a degree of success, Castillo’s narrative is neither naïve nor disingenuous. Life in Tome is never utopia. Organizing the co-op requires a significant amount of time, and the success requires a huge commitment and hard work:

The sheep-raising wool-weaving co-op was doing well for the unofficial village of Tome, and so was the Tome Food Co-op (formerly Sofí’s Carne Buena Carnecería), and Sofía, at least with regards to her own livelihood, experienced a brief period of economic balance for the first time in her adult life.

... and despite their relentless faith together, the sheer daily toil, the centuries going by, the world changing around them, it never got no easier. (214)

These actions visibly illustrate the community’s ability in achieving the creation of a sustainable system benefitting the entire community. The task is not easy, and the benefits are often temporary. However, one must remember that the emphasis for this type of community is not the creation of a utopian community, perfect for all subjects, but instead a community that works “not perfectly and not optimally for any particular subjects, but relatively well for most” (McFague 158).
In conclusion, the representation and portrayal of animals differ significantly in the two texts under study. Animals in *Children of the Roojme* fit mostly the speciesism model, while the relationship of animals to humans in *So Far from God* is clearly much more diverse with animals taking on greater roles in the lives and culture of humans, and vice versa. Thus, this chapter provides a study of the representation of animals with an examination of animal typology in the various forms of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. This study, acknowledging that these differences of animal representation may have to do with genre, also sought to include the moments in the memoir’s narrative when animals were presented in powerful roles. These roles subverted the general view of animals as utilitarian objects and the human-over-animals dominant model with the examples of the black rooster and the locusts in *Children of the Roojme*. Finally, this chapter has also addressed, via the theoretical lenses of ecotheology and postcolonial ecocriticism, the issue of animal rights, to include the rights of the animal other, and the human as a response to Ana Castillo’s challenge in her novel (Garrard 147).
Chapter 4

Children of the Landscape: So Close to Nature

_Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are._ –José Ortega y Gasset

To expand the dialogue regarding the “nature versus culture dichotomy” (Diamond and Feman Orenstein x), this chapter analyzes landscape representations of the two texts under study with a special focus on the interrelationship between culture and nature. Some critics argue that “culture is a refuge from life in nature” (Damrosch 127). These critics perhaps draw from the traditional “woman is to nature as man is to culture” formulation (Diamond and Feman Orenstein x). Yet others contend that “nature is thoroughly implicated in culture, and culture is thoroughly implicated in nature” (Phillips 577). In agreement with the latter statement and with the understanding that “wilderness,” landscape, is a “human creation” (Cronon 69), this chapter will demonstrate how the culture and landscape as represented in the texts studied are clearly “implicated” with one another (Phillips 577). To highlight how connected culture and nature are in these two works, I first provide a few examples of general representations of landscapes in the two analyzed texts. The second stage then focuses on the key role travel has in driving the male and female characters of both texts into intimate relationships with their landscape, using typologies of travel that best contextualize the type of journey involved and the outcome or experiences these characters have that are highly related to gender (Kowaleski Morris 25).

Elmaz Abinader’s memoir provides support for the arguments expressed earlier straight from the title _Children of the Roojme_. The landscape in this work factually becomes culture with the unintended creation of the _roojme_. This “pile of rocks” (_Children_ 5) is built with the rocks dug up from the ancestral landscape. The rocks are unearthed in order to make room for the basements and foundations of the family’s new homes. This newly created landscape becomes,
in the author’s own words, her cultural base: “What I stood on, this pile of rocks, was my foundation” (*Children 5*). *So Far from God*, which refers to a well-known quote by a former president of Mexico, also makes a direct connection to the land and the culture from its title. The quote “So far from God—so near the United States” appears by itself on page fourteen of the novel’s introductory pages. It is used by Castillo to allude to the setting of her novel: the state of New Mexico. This territory used to belong to Mexico and thus the relevance of the quote. More importantly, the quote makes a direct connection between that landscape and the culture of the Southwest.

Far from the landscape of the Southwest, this study will focus on a couple of the settings for Elmaz Abinader’s memoir: Lebanon and Brazil. Her text uses, generally, two distinctive ways to present those particular landscapes. Done realistically, one offers postcard views of Lebanon’s landscape when the narrative is voiced by the author who didn’t grow up in Lebanon and thus uses the detached, picturesque tone. The other representation of landscape, much more significant to our study, is used when the author’s focus is on portraying human actions or when the landscape parallels human emotional and mental states, and is not so solely focused on landscape description as in the quote immediately below. These other representations of landscape, closely implicated in culture, are more enlightening to our study than the following:

The hills were covered with sandstone, limestone, and rock. Pomegranate, oak, olive, cypress, and mulberry trees broke through the hard land and twisted toward the sun. Yellow grass sprouted intermittently, and little wild flowers congregated near the shallow streams. The hillsides were terraced with rocks to make small
ledges where once coffee, wheat and vegetables grew. In the valleys, fig orchards bordered tobacco fields and vineyards. (4)

However, while the author is describing what happens at the roojme, the reader gets a different, perhaps more complete, sense of the landscape, one where landscape and culture are woven together:

The roojme was built during the time my grandfather, Jiddi Shebl, was sheik of the village. After dinner, the men gathered atop its stones, drinking arak and smoking their hookahs. Someone would start a poem about the harvest, asking God, in rhyme, for figs the size of his fists. Another celebrated the sea; others glorified a woman’s beauty or praised God. Eventually a word would trigger a song, and the men’s voices bounced in the canyon.

Very little was hidden from the visitors to the roojme. All the sounds from the towns in the valley rose up to the men on the cliff [my emphasis]. (3)

In contrast to the realistic description quoted before, in this segment the reader can see both the beauty of the sea and the magnificence of the canyon as the humans interact with it. The now “cliff,” and no longer “roojme,” enables these men not only to have a commanding view of the valley, but also to be able to engage with its surroundings. Thanks to this unique position in the landscape, the men are able both to send and receive the sounds of the valley (3). Moreover, the roojme provides a place for the free enactment of their culture, perhaps even more so because this enactment happens while in contact with the landscape.
The landscape of New Mexico, “the image of the South West,” with its long and rich cultural history is “[a]long with race, culture, and historical experience, [. . .] an important element in the overall self-image, the self-identity, of that people” (Chavez 5). Castillo’s narrative provides representations of this landscape, or “image,” that is closely interwoven with the culture of Sofi and her community. We have for example the acequia, with “its quiet nature in summer, its coolness in spring” (151), the adobe huts for which “mud plastering would not have to be done alone, since there was always a helping hand available for a cold beer in exchange” (149); and the smell of the ubiquitous peppers:

It was that month in the “Land of Enchantment” when it smelled of roasted chiles everywhere. Fresh red ristras and sometimes green ones were hung on the vigas of the portales throughout—all along dusty roads, in front of shops and restaurants to welcome visitors and to ward off enemies. Propane run chile roasters were hand-rotated by bagboys in front of local supermarkets and everyone who didn’t grow their own lined up to get their chiles, women were packing them up, whole, dried, and in sauces, to send off to homesick boys stationed in Panama and to wayfaring relatives in Wyoming and Washington, D.C., but mostly to feed their familias right there and to freeze for the winter. (170)

This passage offers an excellent example of how landscape is implicated in culture and vice versa. The “red ristras and sometimes green” strings of peppers are both landscape and culture displayed “along dusty roads” (So Far 170). This landscape of colorful and fragrant peppers is such a valued and desired part of the community’s culture that a piece of it is sent to
“homesick boys” and to “wayfaring relatives” (*So Far* 170). But Castillo’s narrative doesn’t only celebrate aspects of the landscape of the Southwest that are typically and even stereotypically celebrated, it also challenges the fixed gaze of the culture of tourism upon the landscape of New Mexico (“The Land of Enchantment”), which is well described in this quote:

The Southwest has been a landscape for visitors, a place where people can see the past as they want it to be, take a piece of it with them, and feel their distance from the norms of the mainstream. Here’s a landscape that works—because it isn’t what it claims to be; it’s a softer, manipulated, more valued version of the realities of the region. (Chavez 4)

These “realities of the region” are present in Castillo’s narrative just as much as the picturesque descriptions of the roasted chiles provided above. The “Land of Enchantment” (*So Far* 170) becomes for many in the community of Tome, New Mexico, “the Land of Entrapment” (*So Far* 172). This land, from which this community has depended, has become for the most part sterile. For this community it is too difficult to make a “living off [their] land” (*So Far* 139):

there were a lot of outsiders moving in, buying up land that had belonged to original families, who were being forced to give it up because they just couldn’t live off of it no more

[. . .]

Outsiders in the past had overused the land so that in some cases it was no good for raising crops or grazing livestock no more. (*So Far* 139)
People from this community have to move “away to work, or out of state to college, or out of the country with the Army, instead of staying home on the rancherías” (So Far 139). For those who remain in the community the only available jobs are low paying or highly toxic, as the “job that killed” Fe (So Far 171); a powerful reason why Sofi and her community decide to form a self-sustainable, sheep-grazing, wool-weaving enterprise, “Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative” (So Far 146).

This section has provided an analysis of general landscape descriptions in the two texts under study, those that jump out immediately from the titles and those providing realistic descriptions, as in Abinader’s memoir. I have also presented descriptions that include the typical and/or stereotypical landscapes of New Mexico, without neglecting the harsh realities of the landscape that the characters confront in So Far from God.

Landscape and Travel in Children of the Roojme: Getting Closer to Nature

In Children of the Roojme, it is human travel that brings about the most telling representations of nature. The memoir is mainly focused on providing the motivations for travel, particularly emigration, as well as the circumstances (economic and social) that propel it. With a few exceptions, landscape is generally a stylistic object used to dress the narrative or frame human activity. As stated in chapter 2, the narrative is fairly silent in referring to nature in general, or the Brazilian landscape. Mayme Abinader (the author’s grandmother) briefly describes the landscape in Brazil. But even on these rare instances, the reader only gets passing, general comments: “Mayme told them stories [. . .] of the strange plants that hung over the river like waterfalls, and the trees whose roots sat exposed near the banks” (Children 261). More prevalent are the descriptions of landscape when they are connected to a social or familiar issue,
such as culture. For example, while reminiscing about her trip to Brazil, Mayme uses landscape to frame and highlight a description of her husband Shebl: “He can take anything—in Brazil he could eat any food at all, no matter how spicy. And he swam in ponds so cold they were fringed with snow” (183).

However, representation of the landscape while the characters travel, provides a window into that which is closely connected to culture and to the unique historical circumstances of that culture. Since “travel writing borrows freely from the memoir,” Abinader’s text is a good candidate for providing a view of Arab culture and history, which on the heels of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) furthers “our understanding of persevering tropes by which Westerners have imagined oriental, Arab, African, and Native American cultures” (Kowaleski 11) without necessarily attempting to “set the record straight or to fill a gap” (Kowaleski 12). As established in chapters 1 and 2, travel is a key aspect in the imagination of the characters as a result of their inherited Phoenician culture. Less imagined and much more forced by real circumstances, characters in *Children of the Roojme* travel in order to survive.

Fueled initially by Phoenician myth, male Abinader’s characters journey abroad and most emigrate. They travel to Brazil and the United States, but they also travel within the confines of their own land. As Michael Kowalewski says, “travel writing involves border crossings both literal and figurative” (7). Because of famine, inland travels are often forced by the need to acquire food in surrounding areas, and when men are not around, women must cross “figurative” borders, lines they may have never thought of crossing because of their gender. Perhaps this is partly the reason why at these times narratives stray away from the common tropes of travel, providing the reader with newer and unique experiences, since characters become acquainted with the landscape in ways they ordinarily would not. Two of the memoir’s
principal characters travel during difficult times: Rachid and Mayme. The representation and experience of the landscape in these two instances also reflect the specifics of their gender.

Rachid, while facing danger, does not face the possibility of rape, as is the case with Mayme. As Mary Morris says, for a long time “it was frowned upon for women to travel without escort, chaperone, or husband. To journey was to put one at risk not only physically but morally” (25).

During the Turkish occupation of Lebanon, Mayme is forced to travel alone in order to trade jewelry for food. This move puts her in great danger of being caught, and most probably raped, as the narrative informs: “She would be lucky if the Turkish soldiers didn’t search her; she would be blessed if they didn’t rape her” (151). In order to avoid these soldiers, Mayme chooses a different path. The following is one of the most moving, best remembered, and often quoted scenes in the memoir. I insert it in its entirety due to its high relevance:

Taking the roughest mountain roads, she walked quickly, speaking to no one [. . .] Climbing down the cliff, Mayme let her body drop into the brush. She crawled on her stomach in the ditch, scraping her elbows on the stones. Dust filled her nostrils and sweat soaked her body. When she heard horses on the road above her, she lowered further until the dirt filtered into her dress and the rocks ripped her sleeves. Her face turned hot and red and the bags skimmed the ground. Their weight pulled on her stomach, her arms, and her breasts; her face scraped shrubs and her knees absorbed tiny rocks. Mayme prayed on her stomach and wiped away sweat and tears. She crawled along the road. She would feed her daughters. In spite. (151)
War, occupation, and famine produce a culture that forces female individuals to travel when they ordinarily would not. Thus they experience landscape in new, intimate, and diverse ways. Because Mayme cannot afford to take the main road, she must experience the landscape in its most immediate intimacy: going so far down into the earth that the dust makes its way into her nostrils while “her knees absorbed [my emphasis] tiny rocks” (151). Mayme, albeit momentarily, becomes one with the earth. Because “a culture sees [. . .] land according to its desires” (Cohen 9), Mayme, at the point of her zoomorphic episode (151), desires so much to avoid the soldiers, so much to be able to feed her daughters, that she views the landscape through the eyes of a crawling or slithering animal. This intense desire prompts her to zoomorphism. This type of travel does not seem to fit, at first glance, any of Michel Butor’s typologies of travel (65) except perhaps for the section on “vehicles,” for in this case Mayme is herself a “vehicle” who provides for her own travel, a vehicle who at times zoomorphizes in order to better navigate the territory.

As for Rachid, he travels for a variety of reasons, fitting into several travel typologies. He is never in so much danger as when he is escaping the persecution of the Turks (49). Although the narrative communicates the intensity of the immediate danger, it is not as intense as when describing Mayme’s own dangerous conditions while traveling. Although powerful, the narrative does not communicate the same level of desire to hide, the drive to interact so closely with the landscape. Here is what the narrative offers at one point in Rachid’s escape:

Rachid rushes to a tree, leans against it, and bends over gasping for breath. Voices come from the road—loud whispers. The night is a shield if you are a bird and can hover in the darkness and pick your direction. Rachid pulls himself around the
trunk and peers at the intruders not ten feet away. They are Jabali, mountain people, and speak dialect. The Jabali travel at night if they are hiding, or if they carry black-market goods. Rachid crawls to a grove of cedar. He sits and his face fills with heat. He drops his face into his thighs and breathes out slowly. (*Children* 67).

Although Rachid does crawl in order to hide, the narrative itself betrays Rachid’s inability to zoomorph: “the night is a shield *if you are a bird* [my emphasis] and can hover in the darkness and pick your direction” (67). Rachid is not a bird, nor is he going to try, so the night is not a shield for him. Perhaps Rachid decides that the Jabali are not to be feared. Nonetheless, Mayme’s actions in comparison, clearly signal to zoomorphic actions: “Mayme let her body drop into the brush. She crawled on her stomach in the ditch, scraping her elbows on the stones.” (151). Her actions parallel those of a tree animal, or an insect, perhaps an ant, or even a snake, animals which get very close into the earth. She crawls so close to the ground that the earth makes its way into her. Nothing so extreme happens to Rachid, and the narrative itself indirectly excuses Rachid, for not being a “bird,” and precluding his ability to zoomorph, as Mayme does.

Travel is a central theme in *Children of the Roojme*. Furthermore, for male characters in *Children of the Roojme*, travel to other lands is propelled mainly by their never-ending Phoenician wanderlust and their desire to acquire economic success:

Like their ancients the Phoenicians, they took to the sea, and Rachid, Shebl, and Yousef followed this tradition and the water *into a corner of Brazil that Rachid*
called its earlobe [my emphasis]. When they returned to Lebanon, they brought a
museum of wealth in furniture and adornments.

Rachid fills out the map and writes in the names of his [my emphasis] towns in
Peru: Iñapari and Purus; in Brazil: Río Branco, Brasiléia; in Bolivia: Cobija, Santa
Rosa, Conquista. (81)

This passage serves as another illustration to the assertion that “a culture sees [. . .] land
according to its desires” (Cohen 9). In this case, it is the culture that drives its male members to
travel to lands from which they can extract profit, a profit to take back to the ancestral land. In
contrast, for female characters, travel whether inland or abroad, is filled with anguish and
unpleasantness. The narrative, via the author’s grandmother Mayme, uses the Brazilian
landscape to highlight and perhaps hyperbolize the unpleasantness of the trip. Landscape mirrors,
or justifies, the mood of this character:

This was what I came here for, she thought. This was why I traveled for a month
on the Acre River in a launch, after watching the ship burn in Anti-Marie, a
seven-day trip turned into a month, and the boatmen shouting Jew at me when I
went to eat, or walk, or look out on the murky shore. I am a Christian. My
stomach churned on that small boat, turning to liquid in my hands, on my clothes,
over the side. Reaching the point where I’d kneel at the rail all day, and the river
slapped us [my emphasis], and the heat melted my body and yellowed my clothes.
(184).
It is important to note that she is shouted at with “Jew” while out looking at the “murky shore” and that it is “the river that slapped” the boat and not the other way around (184). The remainder of the paragraph goes on to say that it was “Prayer instead of anger” that got her through the ordeal. There is no mention of the aspects of landscape (trees, animals, air) different from those she identified as negative and that served to justify her state of mind. Mayme was solely focused on material culture (her rosary beads), and on justifying her anger, not on the beauty of nature to help her get through the ordeal (184).

This section has provided examples of landscape representations when characters travel that serve to frame human activity, such as the scant descriptions Mayme makes of Brazil. This study has also provided examples of landscape descriptions in Brazil that mirror the emotional and mental states of human characters (Mayme) and those that reflect back on the desire for financial gain and success that land represents (Rachid). More importantly, this section demonstrates how closely acquainted characters become with their landscape. Motivated by difficult circumstances, Mayme practically zoomorphs in order to hide from Turkish soldiers while Rachid in a similar fashion, although not quite zoomorphing, also hides within the landscape in order to escaping from Turkish officials.

**Travel and Landscape in So Far from God: Pilgrimage and Creation**

Ana Castillo’s text tends to refrain from making postcard-like landscape descriptions such as the ones offered by Elmaz Abinader. Instead, when recounting Doña Felicia and Caridad’s pilgrimage to Chimayo, the narrative voice acknowledges the fact that the procession, which involves the landscape, “will be forsaken” (74) to give room to a key event that would later in the novel lead to its climactic event:
So, the telling of the penitente procession, the description of Francisco, Doña Felicia’s godson, who carried the huge wooden cross over his bare shoulders for miles under piercing sun, and all the rest of that impressive spectacle will be forsaken [my emphasis] because it was surpassed by the one of Caridad falling in love. (74)

Here, the author chooses to avoid getting into a description of an event with such a visual magnificence that any attempt to do it justice might have detracted from her focus on the human activity, the prelude to a climactic event in the novel. There is no postcard-like description of the “Land of Enchantment.” Moreover, there is very little, if anything, in the way of landscape description despite the fact that the way to Chimayo, the actual pilgrimage, took three days and had to be completed on foot, much to Caridad’s chagrin: “Caridad was more than willing to go but not all that thrilled, frankly, at the prospect of walking all the way there, which was the only way doña Felicia said that they would get there” (73). Despite the length and the time spent on foot the text offers very little detail of the landscape. The author’s focus is in offering a parallel between absence of landscape and the way Caridad felt about the procession. She was uncomfortable and thus unable to appreciate her surroundings:

“Doña Felicia—how hot do you think it is today?” Caridad called out to her guide after they had traveled a long while. At that point it really didn’t matter how hot it was, because hot can only be so hot before it’s just hot. The sun was pounding on Caridad’s head right through the Raiders cap, sweat dripped down the sides of her
face and down her neck. She was drenched under her breasts and armpits and her T-shirt was soaked. (74)

The narrative in *So Far from God* continues to parallel Caridad’s perception of the landscape with that of her own state of mind. After Caridad falls in love, she leaves her urban home for the mountains: “Caridad herself could not explain, even if she were inclined to try, what led her up those mountains that day” (*So Far* 89). After Caridad stumbles upon a cave and spends the night inside it, the description of the landscape hints to Caridad’s higher calling and preparing her for her eventual sacrifice that will, if in a different, nonhuman, form, fulfill her desire to always remain a witness to the grandiosity of that landscape (89).

Caridad’s pilgrimage to Chimayo with Felicia, and her participation in the ritual, is preparatory to her final mission. Although at that moment, all she could think about was “the woman on the wall” (76). Here we have the landscape, Chimayo’s earth, factually and physically playing a key cultural role for this community, not unlike the one the *roojme* plays in *Children of the Roojme*:

They lined up to go through the small rooms adjacent to the chapel where there is a pozito opened to the holy earth with which, since the early part of the nineteenth century, Catholics (really, it wasn’t their fault that they came so late to this knowledge, being such newcomers to these lands) have healed both their bodies and spirits.

Both doña Felicia and Caridad bent down and rubbed some of the earth along their brows and temples and on their forearms and put a little on their
tongues. Doña Felicia also scooped some up and put it in a small coffee can she brought for that purpose, and then they slowly made their way out. (75–76)

Landscape and human culture become quite implicated with one another. The interaction is one of complete merging when the characters proceed to “put a little [earth] on their tongues” (76). They similarly become wholly joined with one another when Esmeralda and Caridad become one with the earth. While running away from Francisco, and perhaps still unaware of their upcoming mission, Caridad and Esmeralda jump off Sky City’s wall. This action, which fulfills the Acoma Pueblo myth of creation, leads these two characters to abandon their human form and become part of the earth:

There weren’t even whole bodies lying peaceful. There was nothing.

Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever. (So Far 211)

This re-enactment closely resonates with scholarship on the topic. David Adams Leeming explains that the Acoma myth of creation enacted by feminine spirits is not surprising given the fact that many Pueblo societies are matrilineal (3). The myth is described as follows:

... the Acoma creation is orchestrated by a female spirit and is representative of the emergence type of creation myth, a birth process that begins in the earth
womb. In the beginning two sister-spirits were born in the underground. Living in constant darkness they grew slowly and knew one another only by touch. For some time they were fed by a female spirit named Tsichtinako who taught them language. When the proper time had arrived, the sisters were given baskets containing seeds for all the plants and models for all the animals that would be in the next world. (3)

As such, Castillo’s re-enactment of this myth in her novel is in reverse, as immersion into the earth, rather than emergence from the earth. But regardless of the gravitational dynamic, Castillo’s narrative helps fulfill Caridad’s personal wish to forever be a part of the landscape of New Mexico (So Far 89). This time, Caridad will not only be tasting a bit of the earth as in Chimayo, this time she will physically become the earth and fulfill the rite of a new creation.

Ana Castillo refrains from making descriptions of visually magnificent landscapes as environments used to dress up the narrative. Instead she uses characters’ experiences to provide the readers a glimpse of the beauty of the landscape, for example, when Caridad awakes in the mountains. This section also provides an analysis of how landscape mirrors the states of mind of the characters and finally, how characters while travelling, whether for a pilgrimage or to fulfill a sacred mission, become completely merged with their landscape as in the tasting of the earth at Chimayo and the merging of Esmeralda and Caridad with the earth at Sky City.

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to add a minor contribution to the dialogue related to nature and culture dichotomy by providing a general description of landscapes in two contrasting texts, Ana Castillo’s So Far from God and Elmaz Abinader’s Children of the Roojme. Both texts provide from their titles evidence of the interconnection between landscape and
culture. Abinader’s text provides realistic descriptions of landscape typical of memoirs, while Castillo’s narrative, while including typical and/or stereotypical descriptions, in general focuses more on the key connections between landscape and culture. Both texts provide descriptions of landscapes that mirror human emotional and mental states, for example, when Mayme travels to Brazil and Caridad to Chimayo. This chapter has also provided examples of instances in the narrative when travel causes characters to have a different, much closer interaction with the landscape. Thus, this chapter demonstrates how closely nature, via landscape, is implicated in the culture of the characters in both Castillo’s novel and Abinader’s memoir.
Notes

1. Similar, more detailed versions of this myth can be found in “Origin Myth of Acoma and Other Records” by Matthew W. Sterling and “A Creation Myth from Acoma” by C. Daryll Forde.
Chapter 5

Gendered Knowledge, Gendered Environments

There are many paths into our rich and fertile garden, each with its own occasions for awakening. What cannot be said, though, is that women are drawn to ecology and ecofeminism simply because we are female. –Charlene Spretnak

Even a positive valuation of femininity as “closer to nature” thanks to female biology or social experience neglects the reality that all the gender distinctions we know have been constructed within patriarchal societies. –Greg Garrard

Ecofeminism and Difference

Appearing during second-wave feminism, ecofeminism grew into a diversity of conceptual approaches that ranged from feminine essentialist positions to a larger theory that went beyond female biology. The field continues to grow and become more inclusive in its attempt to address the universal experience, not just the “ideas of middle-class white women” (Clark Mane 71). This study uses theoretical concepts appearing in second-wave feminism that are, because of their universality, readily applied to the texts under study. Nonetheless, this study is also mindful of issues (re)surfacing within third-wave feminism relating specifically to ecofeminism, that which Chela Sandoval calls the “presence-absence” of a multiplicity of voices, diversity of representation, and analysis (95). As an example, Allison Steel argues that Gloria Anzaldúa “has yet to be intricately tied into the ecofeminist movement” (102), observing that “most scholars [. . .] have merely noted the ‘appeal’ of ecofeminism” to Latin American and Chicano/a writers (105). This tendency confirms Sandoval’s main complaint, that despite inclusion, writers and theorists such as Anzaldúa have for the most part been “misrecognized and under analyzed” (171). This chapter both recognizes and furthers the analysis of texts written by racially or ethnically different female authors to begin to remedy the current situation, that
“third-wave feminism has not sufficiently shifted the mainstream feminist project to ensure that this inclusion of racial difference is fundamentally transformative” (Clark Mane 72).

A Story of Ecofeminism

The term *ecofeminisme* is attributed to Francoise d’Eaubonne, who in the late 1970s sought with this term to “represent women’s potential for bringing about an ecological revolution to ensure human survival on the planet” (qtd. in Merchant 100). Main branches of second-wave feminism had already included the environment in their agenda: “Liberal, radical and socialist feminism have all been concerned with improving the human/nature relationship” (Merchant 100). Historically, up until the 1960s, an important branch—liberal feminism—had derived its positions from the political theory of liberalism. This theory, which “views humans as individual rational agents who maximize their own self-interest and capitalism as the optimal economic structure for human progress,” explains why for liberal feminists, conservation and preservation remain the focus:

> Environmental problems result from the overly rapid development of natural resources and the failure to regulate environmental pollutants. . . . Women, therefore, can transcend the social stigma of their biology and join men in the cultural project of environmental conservation. (Merchant 100–101)

This position brought a considerable response for its emphasis on moving away from women’s biology. As Greg Garrard says, “even a positive valuation of femininity as ‘closer to nature’ thanks to female biology or social experience neglects the reality that all the gender distinctions we know have been constructed within patriarchal societies” (27).
Radical feminism, and its eco branch, moves away from the concepts of liberal feminism in that this latter one, “is consistent with the objectives of reform environmentalism to alter human relations with nature through the passage of new laws and regulations”, just as it has always been involved in obtaining equal access for women through political action and the creation or reform of laws that will bring about this equality (Merchant 101). Radical feminism focuses on biology and women’s “unique” characteristics and, connecting these to the environment, has sought to insert themselves outside of patriarchy and the West. This branch emerged with the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s as an answer “to the perception that women and nature have been mutually associated and devalued in Western culture” and sought to unearth alternative traditions in pre history and in traditions outside the West (Merchant 101).

Riane Eisler’s “The Gaia Tradition and the Partnership Future: An Ecofeminist Manifesto” emphasizes the notion that prehistoric societies were “rooted in a social structure where women and ‘feminine’ values such as caring, compassion, and nonviolence were not subordinate to men and the so-called masculine values of conquest and domination” (23–24), while Sharon Doubiago asserts that “ecology consciousness is traditional woman consciousness” (Plant 40). With their emphasis on biology and “feminine” values, these approaches, which “celebrate the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centered on Goddess worship” and emphasize the dualities male/female, nature/culture, involve the risk of the continuation of the hierarchies “it seeks to overthrow” (Merchant 102). As Merchant puts it “[A]ny analysis that makes women’s essence and qualities special ties them to a biological destiny that thwarts the possibility of liberation. A politics grounded in women’s culture, experience, and values can be seen as reactionary” (102). Such positions have been
countered by a number of theorists who believe that this biological approach to gender
essentializes women and does not take into account social constructions of gender. For instance,
feminist political ecologists contend that

there are real, not imagined, gender differences in experiences of, responsibilities
for, and interests in “nature” and environments, but that these differences are not
rooted in biology per se. Rather, they derive from the social interpretation of
biology and social constructs of gender, which vary by culture, class, race, and
place and are subject to individual and social change. (Rocheleau, Thomas-
Slayter, and Wangari 3)

Socialist ecofeminism, as it name suggests, proposes to look at the deterioration of the
environment as a result of historical materialist conditions, to “the rise of capitalist patriarchy
and the ideology that the Earth and nature can be exploited for human progress through
technology” (104). Their central issues revolve around reproduction and production in an
environment guided by ethics that are in agreement with nondominating, nonhierarchical
relationships, including nature (Merchant 105). Socialist ecofeminism critiques
environmentalism in general because “it leaves out nature as active and responsive” and thus is
nondialectical (Merchant 105).

In truth, as Carolyn Merchant says, “Liberal, radical, and socialist feminism have all been
concerned with improving the human/nature relationship, and each has contributed to an
ecofeminist perspective in different ways” (100). Today, however, most ecofeminists have
moved away from radical ecofeminism. As Greg Garrard says, “If radical ecofeminism is
questionable in terms of its feminism, it is even more so in terms of ecology” (27) due to its continued emphasis in biology.

*So Far from God* does present a thread of women characters that in effect might appear as “better” at dealing with nature and their environment than the male characters. This could be read by radical feminists as a confirmation of their emphasis on woman’s uniqueness derived from biology. The text, rather, brings out the voices of strong women, and their close relationship to the environment, with the goal of furthering environmental causes via political action. This actions clearly adhere to the tenets of liberal feminism. Castillo’s insertion of a form of goddess worship with the reenactment of the Acoma Pueblo’s myth of creation, suggests that one of the narrative’s goals is to reinstate both goddess worship and Native American traditions in order to further environmental causes (*So Far* 211).

Goddess worship and the recognition of women’s inherent (or material) access to knowledge and wisdom regarding their environment are healthy avenues for exploration without the need to essentialize women. Indeed, the combination of strong women characters engaged or interested in environmental causes paired with the political action in which they engage moves Castillo’s *So Far from God* away from adherence to radical feminism. As Charlene Spretnak states, among the many paths that ecofeminism can take, one “is exposure to nature-based religion, usually that of the Goddess” (5). This aspect should not conflict with other avenues for exploration in the ecofeminist arena. I agree with Carolyn Merchant in that all colors of ecofeminism provide in their distinct areas of emphasis theoretical backgrounds and knowledge which can be tapped to improve the conditions of the world’s environment. A diverse and clear understanding of all these avenues, as Merchant suggests below, could create a common front for political action:
Although the ultimate goals of liberal, radical, and socialist feminists may differ as to whether capitalism, women’s culture, or socialism should be the ultimate objective of political action, shorter-term objectives overlap. In this sense there is perhaps more unity than diversity in women’s common goal of restoring the natural environment and quality of life for people and other living and nonliving inhabitants of the planet. (105)

A key ecofeminist group that embraces and furthers political action is the feminist political ecologists. This group argues that its methodology “encompasses much of ecofeminism as well as several related approaches that would not fit that label as currently used” (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, Wangari 7). In brief, these critics assert that ecofeminism lacks what they offer. Despite the fact that the women’s environmental movements “have incorporated some or all of the elements of the feminist critique of science” (9), they do not completely integrate “gender, science and environment in academic and political discourse as well as in everyday life and in the social movements that have brought new focus to this issue” (9). Feminist political ecologists address both the “the critiques of gendered environmental science, as well as the alternative practices of science within and beyond the current dominant paradigm” (9). In sum, this group is centered in the areas of science and its gendered practices as well as alternatives to that paradigm.

I draw particularly from this last statement in my studies. Males in the narratives under study make use of “science” in its traditional gender-dominant mode, while women make use of alternative forms of approaches in dealing with their environment or “the gendered sciences of
survival in a wide range of circumstances” (9). As examples, feminist political ecologists have conducted studies of women rubber tappers in Xapuri, Brazil, taking into consideration the “development of alternative ways of knowing and ways of learning based on everyday life, women’s experience, and explicit statement of values” (Campbell 9). Another example, a study on food in Poland, “illustrates the importance of gendered domains of knowledge, both real and popularly perceived. Women’s duties as environmental engineers [my emphasis] and their responsibilities for household food supply and health” reveals how women spaces such as the home can become sites for the enactment and development of knowledge (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, Wangari xviii). These last points are highly relevant to my analysis of female characters in both texts under study. Both texts demonstrate how women’s acquired knowledge, via the gendered spaces they dominate, bring forth new ways of knowing that are real, if not recognized by the patriarchal system (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, Wangari 9).

Arab/Arab American Feminism

To write on Arab feminism requires a clear awareness of how the West has, from colonial times, “imposed on the region known as the ‘Middle East’ not only its own conceptions of time, history, and geography but also transnational economic structures, globalized/U.S. culture, and even its own brand of liberal feminism” (Saliba, “Arab” 1087). Indeed, mainstream North American feminists have tended to put all women in the same category and “in their exclusive preoccupation with subverting the dominant patriarchal discourse, [have failed] to regard differences of female experiences dictated by race and ethnicity” (Chérif 108). Because of this enduring legacy, it is important to acknowledge how a persistent representation of Arab women—which has been reduced to the exotic and oppressed stereotype—has kept critics, since post-Orientalist time to the present, busy trying to remedy that situation (Saliba, “Arab” 1087).
In fact, representations of the Arab woman have been studied by female scholars such as Mohja Kahf in her seminal work *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman* (1999), Marsha J. Hamilton’s “The Arab Woman in U.S. Popular Culture: Sex and Stereotype” (1994), and Evelyn Shakir who presented the stories of Arab women immigrants in her *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the U.S.* Because most of the energies have been spent on representation and stereotype, there has been less published on the diverse experiences of Arab women. Therese Saliba’s article “Arab Feminism at the Millennium,” despite asserting that “feminist debates of the 1980s centered on the heterogeneity of Arab women’s experience, [and] the critique of Islam as an all-encompassing category” (1087) is still largely focused on feminism and Islam. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty asserts, it is “problematical to speak of a vision of women shared by Arab and Muslim societies (i.e., over twenty different countries) without addressing the particular historical, material, and ideological power structures that construct such images” (181). Elmaz Abinader’s characters in *Children of the Roojme*, as Catholic Maronites, fall outside of the mostly Muslim conception of the West for the Arab woman. The publication of texts such as Abinader’s is a welcome addition to the representation of Arab women outside of Islam. As Salwa Essayah Chérif asserts, “the Arab-Israeli struggle” and its negative effect on “already existing negative stereotypes of the Arab,” together with “a long practice of the Orientalist mode of representation” (207) has made it necessary for Arab American writers to dig up and present the past in an attempt to not just counter stereotypes, but also to expand the literary world with the experiences of a diversity of voices to make more inclusive the rich experiences of the Arab and the Arab American woman. Abinader’s text
investigate[s] the interconnectedness of the past and the present in the making of the Arab American female self and create[s] a space of self-invention for Arab American women where they negotiate a new sense of self in the layers of a buried ethnic and female past. They use memory and the journey to the past of their female family members [. . .] in order to examine the implications of their own ambivalent perceptions of the self and to devise a constructive way of dealing with the present. (Chérif 208)

These texts, Abinader’s memoir included, provide tools for Arab American women’s identity negotiations while at the same time revealing a past experienced by their female ancestors that is needed to counter the well-entrenched representations and/or stereotypes cast of the Arab woman. For female writers with backgrounds outside of the Arab Muslim woman’s experience, it is this “struggle to define a mode of agency capable of responding to the historical and political exigencies of the identity ‘Arab American,’” which, according to the Arab American critic Lisa Suhair Majaj, “resonates through contemporary Arab American literature” (“Arab” 280). This reclamation of the past is instrumental for the reader to understand the role played by the immigrant generation in shaping the future “empowerment” of their descendants, or future generation “Arab American women characters” (Chérif 208). In this manner, the effect is positive and enriching for the author and for the reader/recipient. Stereotypes are averted while more genuine narratives, voiced by Arab women, are shared.

Because little has been written about Arab American literature and the environment, it is important to begin to look at this corpus from an ecocritical perspective, taking into consideration that, due to the priorities already identified above, an environmental or ecocritical
analysis of these texts will have to be closer, attentive to nuances, subtleties, and even silences. In *Children of the Roojme*, the most evident interplay of gender and the environment appears in the narrative pertaining to the author’s grandmother, Mayme, and her victory over makeshift environments.

Despite Mayme’s insertion in the patriarchal system and the fact that mainstream feminists would automatically place her as an oppressed, powerless woman, the experiences highlighted here of gendered negotiations with her environment signal a different kind of feminist reading, one that takes into consideration elements of class, race, ethnicity, even environments, and not simply a “construction of ‘third world women’ as a homogeneous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit victims of particular socieoeconomic systems” (Mohanty 177). While Salwa Chérif argues that Abinader’s female characters “although do not always rebel, they always suffer” (Chérif 209), I believe it is in this experience of pain that they enact a sort of veiled rebellion or resistance unknown even to themselves. When circumstances bring these characters temporarily outside of well-established lines instituted by patriarchy, they quickly begin to create an environment quite their own. In the case of our character under study, Mayme, she puts into effect the knowledge gained and developed through her assigned-by-patriarchy home environment to create alternative home environments when the circumstances require it. In addition to this already acquired knowledge, Mayme demonstrates her ability to develop or enact what Anzaldúa calls “la facultad” when she has to cross into new environments:

> Those who are pushed out of the tribe [. . . ] are likely to become more sensitized. . . . Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. Those who are pounced on the most have it the
strongest—the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign. . . . It’s a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate. It is latent in all of us. (Anzaldúa 60).

The author’s portrayal of Mayme’s actions, this gendered unearthing of the past and the knowledge gained through fight and resistance, become the new environment where “their Arab American descendants’ acts of resistance and vindication” are played out (Chérif 209). Indeed,

Through her female relatives’ stories and the account of their journey, Abinader not only breaks the Orientalist stereotype of women but also vindicates her relatives by reporting their oppression. Gendered memory recalls a past which, although it needs to be claimed, also must be denounced. (Chérif 226).

. . .

Arab American feminism developed to counter the crippling images. It leads not to a celebration, but to an acknowledgement of the female past by which women lose their fixedness into images and acquire distinct lives of pain and resistance. (Chérif 209)

Mayme’s acts of defiance against terrible odds are both claimed and denounced. Some of these acts involve working through a patriarchal environment that often leaves her, as this chapter illustrates, to depend only on her very own resources. As Chérif says, Abinader’s narrative unearths “deeper layers of female experience,” (209) called “knowledge” here to better
fit into the theoretical framework used in this chapter. Marsha Hamilton claims that the “only trait possessed by all the Middle Eastern women I have known is strength, a strength often born of adversity” (179–80). This “trait,” so-called “strength,” is a combination of women’s force and vigor put together with the knowledge gained throughout their lives in and about their home environments. Strength without knowledge is vacuous.

**Chicana Feminism**

I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. —Gloria Anzaldúa

Well articulated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the experience of one’s environment according to one’s gender is a symptom or a demonstration of “situated knowledges that are shaped by many dimensions of identity and difference, including gender, race, class, ethnicity, and age, among others” (Mohanty 175–76, also qtd. in Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, Wangari 4). The convergence of these and other aspects of identity are apparent in the characters’ experiences of their environment in *So Far from God* and *Children of the Roojme*. To go even further, the female characters in both texts navigate “in-between” environments, or “borderlands,” as articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa in her seminal work *Borderlands*. As Abinader acknowledges: “I am not a foreigner with adventures to tell, and I am not an American, I am one of the children with a strange name, who cannot choose a culture, I must always live in-between” (Majaj, “Arab American” 279). These “in-between” environments, which “are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa 19), are clearly inhabited, as this chapter shows by
characters in Abinader’s memoir and Ana Castillo’s novel. Furthermore, in the Chicana tradition, new horizons on ecofeminism have been established: the recapturing of old, prehistoric myths and the female Goddess, but also a willingness to engage in the creation of a new and fluid _mestiza_ identity (Borderlands 1987) including both humans and nonhumans: “a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet” (Anzaldúa 102–103).

This aspect is also elaborated further by Ana Castillo herself with her essays on _Xicanisma_, particularly with the insertion of “MOYOCOYOTZIN: SHE WHO CREATES HERSELF” (Massacre 11). Castillo recognizes the need for “an ardent investigation” into the past, while exhorting “to not only reclaim our indigenismo—but also to reinsert the forsaken feminine into our consciousness” and thus (re)create a new identity carved out, like the stone god Coatlicue, of systems of domination, may it be the “phallocracy” of late-day Aztecs, Western patriarchy, or institutionalized religion (Massacre 11–12).

Castillo’s literal reenactment of the Acoma pueblo myth of creation in _So Far from God_ is her way and Anzaldúa’s prescription of taking “mythmaking back into their own hands—to write both women and the earth back into those stories” (Steele 96). Castillo’s use of a lesbian pair to reenact the Acoma Pueblo myth of creation and an atrophied/stymied man/homophobic man such as Francisco el Santero is an attempt to directly confront issues of gender and sexuality that resonate with the following quote: “To completely understand the complexities of the Chicana and Chicano subjectivity in the greater borderlands of the United States, discussions of gender and sexuality are central in our oppositional and liberatory projects” (Saldivar-Hull 33). Francisco el Santero’s character is the embodiment of the homophobia suffered by Chicana lesbians as discussed by Saldivar-Hull: “Life as feminists on the border means recognizing the
urgency of dealing with the sexism and homophobia within our culture; our political reality demands that we confront institutionalized racism while we simultaneously struggle against economic exploitation” (34). How does all this relate to my analysis of nature/environment in *So Far from God*? Castillo gives Caridad and Esmeralda a role of creation, a new environment, that overrides the previous and well-entrenched male-dominated and homophobic environment, effectively creating, through myth, the possibility of a new world environment for all Chicanas, Mestizas, Xicanas/os, and the planet at large.

**Gendered Knowledge: *Children of the Roojme***

According to Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari, men often have privileged access to knowledge associated with “science-as-usual,” while women’s knowledge derives and pertains to their role as providers in households (9, xviii). Women have in fact inherited a “patriarchal culture” that has left our planet “to be dominated by male-developed and -controlled technology, science, and industry” (Merchant 101). These assertions help to theoretically contextualize the male/female dynamic operating in Abinader’s memoir for the emigrant generation. Men in *Children of the Roojme* control the knowledge of the world outside the household of any science, technology, and industry of the period available, to exploit natural resources that would bring them financial gain. The most conspicuous example is their business venture in Brazil, profiting from the rubber trade and the sale of dry goods to rubber-tapping laborers:

Early in the century, the three brothers had returned to Lebanon from Brazil with profits from their rubber trade.

...
Two brothers traveled while the other managed a general store selling necessities to the laborers along the Amazon, Acre, and Purus. (5)

These men acquired the knowledge of travel, maps, and other necessary information, such as governmental regulations, business practices, economics, and language in order to achieve financial success in their business enterprise or “industry” (Merchant 101). The reader learns most of these specifics through the voice of Rachid Abinader. This character, who provides most of the narrative, is one of the most important in *Children of the Roojme*. It is for the most part through him, the one who never emigrates, that the reader finds out about family and village life in Lebanon. Village troubles and family disputes, with the exception of Mayme’s version of it, are told also mostly in his voice. The description of the Abinaders’ travels to Brazil are also told mostly in the voice of Rachid, and his travels to that country seem to leave him wanting for more. Rachid’s characterization presents him as one who is fixated on cartography; when he reads the bottom of his cup of coffee “he always sees a map in his fortunes” (80). Rachid studies maps so closely that he makes out human shapes in the cartography. He also pinpoints the places he calls his territory:

Like their ancients the Phoenicians, they took to the sea, and Rachid, Shebl, and Yousef followed this tradition and the water into a corner of Brazil that Rachid called its earlobe [my emphasis]. When they returned to Lebanon, they brought a museum of wealth in furniture and adornments.
Rachid fills out the map and writes in the names of *his* [my emphasis] towns in Peru: Iñapari and Purus; in Brazil: Río Branco, Brasiléia; in Bolivia: Cobija, Santa Rosa, Conquista. (81)

Rachid, Shebl, and Yousef Abinader learn how to move around, how to overcome governmental rules, and even how to communicate with the romance language–speaking residents, as exemplified by Rachid: “He engaged his customers in trivial how-do-you-do conversation so he could polish his Spanish and Portuguese. He counted the inventory three times, each time in a different language. At night he whispered in his sleep, *Dios, madre, mi país*” (86). They know the governmental rules and how to avoid them: “In Brazil, even though the government changed, Rachid conducted his business without interruption. Money to a harbor master went a long way” (71).

The Abinader’s profits in Brazil are significant enough to build homes with expensive materials, such as Yousef’s “imported tiles from France” or Shebl’s “Italian marble” and rugs from Persia (154). One can surmise that the amount of money earned was high enough to enable Shebl to commission a mural for his house by a painter who was “a well-known artist” (152). Although women seem to enjoy these luxuries, for Mayme and others, the knowledge, the power, the decisions, and even the money to buy such items were made by men. As we infer from the narrative, the women in Mayme’s generation have very limited knowledge outside of their household environment. We assume that Mayme cannot read or write since she has to seek the help of the village priest in order to send a letter to her husband while he is in the United States (157). While women in *Children of the Roojme* have access to natural resources such as the food from gardens and orchards to sustain their households, their ability to earn a significant amount
of wealth is limited and controlled by their husbands. Even when the family is enjoying a period of “success,” Mayme, as the narrative provides, does not gain pleasure from it:

> When they moved into the big house, she imagined she would sit on the veranda sipping tea and watching the water, but she did not. If she could have escaped through an open window for a little while, just a little while, and disappeared while Shebl’s friends drank black coffee and smoked Turkish pipes; if she could have shrunk and crept along the roads like a mole, she would have loved her home. (144)

Mayme’s use of her environment at “home” often appears unsettled, as if she were traversing in an in-between, border space. In the section above, as she fulfills her wifely role, serving coffee and tending to her husband and guests, she only temporarily “edges” the masculine environment, inhabiting a border space that Gloria Anzaldúa defines as being “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other” (19). Mayme in effect lives in a borderland, navigating an environment that is only partially her sphere of influence or domain, the area of home duties. She only crosses and temporarily interfaces with the masculine environments when she fulfills these duties.

Furthermore, and perhaps due to the animosity she develops toward her brick and mortar “home,” she is able to cultivate the keen sense developed by those who inhabit the borderlands, what Anzaldúa calls “la facultad” (Anzaldúa 60). This “facultad” is, among other things, “an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings” (Anzaldúa 60). Mayme’s developed “facultad” is so intense that she, in effect, fantasizes about zoomorphizing into a mole, an animal
that lives underground. If Mayme were a mole, “she would have loved her home” (144). Thus, the desire to completely own/inhabit a home is expressed by Mayme in the image of her as a small animal living in a burrow. But why does she not feel “at home” at the harra? The reason she feels so distanced and only in a transitory status is because this home, despite the painted mural and the fancy Italian marbles, was built, designed, and decorated by Shebl, not her. This is an environment where she did not have a role in the creation process.

This situation does not happen when she is alone with her daughters, taking care of the business of living, building a suitable environment for her children despite and against the odds, as will be demonstrated later. Mayme is consumed with the work derived from her fixed place in the patriarchal system as well as any extra work Shebl, as decision maker, brings for her. After Mayme moves into her new house in 1903, Shebl resolves to open a business in their house’s bottom floor: a bank, a general store, and on one side, the chapel which the district bishop dedicated to Saint Elias. He constructed a public oven outdoors and hired a man to bake and sell, then he departed. He did not watch over his house, store, or land. While Mayme tended to the customers and his twelve-year-old brother, Elias, kept the books, Shebl traveled. Mayme baked bread, milled flour, picked figs, tobacco, and olives, and pounded coffee. (154)

Not only does Mayme have to organize and put away the goods at the store and other tasks, she also prepares Shebl’s food, sleeps with him, and eventually gets pregnant (154–155). Thus, while Mayme looks “ten years older than her husband” he stands tall “with his cane at the end of the road. As she carried out the laundry out to lay on rocks, she may have heard his boot
After she felt the weight in her womb, a heartthrob on her own, the business slowed down. The Turks took away Lebanese autonomy, and money was scarce. No one could buy their goods. Shebl lent money, then borrowed more. He lent, spent, and promised. Taking the baker’s place, Mayme propped her belly against the public oven, and she beat dough against the stone all morning. (155)

While Mayme works to fulfill her everyday duties and take over the baker’s tasks, Shebl “now sheik of the village,” and his sibling Rachid, “worked together as they had in Brazil: dining with friends in Tripoli, Beirut, Batroun” (155).

In the end, Shebl must leave for the United States in order to make a living and in a sad twist of irony, when hard times strike, together with her husband’s unpaid debts, Mayme is pushed to live in the basement of the luxuriously furnished house she once owned, as she reveals in a letter to her husband that she dictates to the village priest: “your brother said we must leave the house … your brother let a man take the furniture … we must leave tomorrow … money is needed” (158). Such a twist of fate leads Mayme to cross into environments previously traversed or inhabited only by males. Under immense pressure, Mayme creates new environments for her and her daughters using her previously gained, gendered knowledge.

**Gendered Environments: Children of the Roojme**

As happens in many cultures under a patriarchal system, women have the responsibility to take care of the home (cleaning, cooking, etc.) Such is the case for the women in *Children of*
the Roojme. Mayme embodies the description of women as “environmental engineers” (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, Wangari xviii) because of her place in the dominant patriarchal system that confines her to a gendered space or location in and around the household, and her duties to the provision of food, health, and any other assistance required by her husband Shebl. The most remarkable feats of Mayme as an “environmental engineer” happen when she is faced with unimaginable hardship. As part of the patriarchal system, she is forced to leave, yet prepared with the knowledge to face such hardship, not unlike black women in the United States: “sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment; it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of [. . .] brutal harsh reality” (hooks 42).

Even when Mayme is forced out of her home, she finds a way to create temporary shelters that function as a “domestic household” of sorts. After enjoying a harra with “Italian marble” floors and Persian rugs (154), Maymee, because of her husband’s unpaid debts, is forced to make a home for her and her two daughters in not one, but several insalubrious environments: a dusty basement, a portico in Batroun, a hotel Room in Marseille, even the steerage section of a boat. To be sure, Mayme and her daughters spend a good part of their lives “busy maintaining and developing their own places on the planet through the daily management of the living landscape” at their disposition (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, Wangari 6).

In one of these makeshift homes, the very basement of the house she used to own that had to be rented to pay for her husband’s debts, Mayme has to fight rats and dust to make the basement somewhat livable for her children: “Camille screamed and jumped as a rat ran toward her feet. Mayme swung her weapon and smashed the rodent again and again” (158); “Mayme sang loudly to puff away the clouds of dust that filled the air. [. . .] the brown particles shaking
from the walls, rising from the floor, floating into her mouth” (146). “The brightness of her daughters’ rosy cheeks had become coated with brown. She imagined the Bedouins lived like this, walking through the desert, turning their eyes away from the sand blowing on them” (158).

When Mayme takes the offer to work sewing for an American mission in Batroun, the only place she can find to create a home for her children is a porch: “The woman of the house pointed into an alley where a roof, a portico, stood over a small section of cleared dirt. Two trees grew beside like columns. They could live there until they found a suitable home” (172). Still, Mayme finds a way to make a house: “Mayme arranged their mattresses under the roof and started a fire” (172). Even in the boat carrying them from Beirut to Marseilles, en route to the United States, they quickly learn how to establish a new living environment and its boundaries: “You and your sister go for more water. Fill the jars and the basin,” Mayme instructs. “They load their arms with the containers and march through the door. In the last week they have learned their parameters—the lower deck, steerage, and around, but not in the kitchen” (183). And thus, early on, Mayme’s daughters, Camille and Zina, learn to manage “their own places on the planet” within the boundaries established to them by nature of their gender (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, Wangari 6).

If women have their environments pre-established due to their gender, men in Elmaz Abinader’s memoir have more freedom to explore, inhabit, and even appropriate certain environments. The author’s memoir begins with a prologue titled “The Poetry of Men.” This prologue sets the author’s immediate family (parents and sister) in 1976 when they travelled from their residence in the United States to visit Abdelli, Lebanon, her parents’ village. The prologue explains the importance of the roojme for the family and community in general. Yet, what goes on at the top of the roojme, the making of poetry, which explains the prologue’s title,
signifies the great relevance of this environment for the male culture of the village. This manmade landmark, built with the stones dug out to create basements for the family’s harras, eventually becomes a very important part of the environment for everyone. As the author herself recounts from a later visit, it is a significant physical embodiment of her cultural roots: “What I stood on, this pile of rocks, was my foundation” (5). Yet, as the narrative reveals, the male population appropriates this environment for the enactment of a males-only ritual:

The roojme was built during the time my grandfather, Jiddi Shebl, was sheik of the village. After dinner, the men [my emphasis] gathered atop its stones, drinking arak and smoking their hookahs. Someone would start a poem about the harvest, asking God, in rhyme, for figs the size of his fist. Another celebrated the sea; others glorified a woman’s beauty or praised God. Eventually a word would trigger a song, and the men’s voices bounced in the canyon.

Very little was hidden from the visitors to the roojme. All the sounds from the towns in the valley rose up to the men [my emphasis] on the cliff. At six, when the monks at the monstery Dayr Kefifan recited their prayers in the courtyard, my father and his brothers [my emphasis] knelt and prayed with them. (3)

As evidenced from my emphasis above, this gendered environment becomes for the village men a vital gathering place for informal worship, one where women are excluded, particularly at the end of the day.
Gendered Environments in *Children of the Roojme: Invisible Nature, Visible Exploitation*

In *Children of the Roojme*, Elmaz Abinader recounts how her grandfather and uncles travelled to Brazil in the early 1900s: “Rachid, Shebl, and Yousef established a rubber trade there. Two brothers traveled while the other managed a general store selling necessities to the laborers along the Amazon, Acre, and Purus” (80). The Amazonian rainforest has been exploited for rubber tapping throughout its history to the present, with a high period of the “rubber boom of the late 1800s through the 1920s” (Campbell 31). The early twentieth century saw unrestrained exploitation and many people, including foreigners, profited from this boom. By the 1970s, as a result of the grass roots organization of CEBs (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*), native communities learned how to protect “their land rights and to denounce the violent practices of ranchers against them” (Campbell 33). This same movement was also created in “response to the federal government’s Amazon development policy of the 1970s and 1980s” (Campbell 29). This movement grew, not without sacrifice (the assassination of Chico Mendes) into a viable organization that, although it has achieved much, “[T]he political, social and economic challenges [. . .] remain daunting” (Campbell 56). This movement, centered on the town of Xapuri in the state of Acre, Brazil, is, remarkably, in the same area were the Abinader’s brothers travelled to engage in the rubber trade and other business. According to research, at the time the Abinaders were in Brazil (1908), the laborers tapping the trees were all men. Women were excluded. With the collapse of the price of rubber in 1910, and with less control from “the bosses,” men were then allowed to bring their spouses (Campbell 32), but this process happened after the Abinaders had left Brazil.

Thus, Brazil for the Abinaders was mostly a masculine space. Laborers with whom they dealt in rubber, as well as their customers at the store, were all male. The Abinaders were
ambitious and had the know-how of their particular industry. They planned and profited from two sources: the rubber trees and the human laborers tapping the trees. And they were not unique. Many others from Lebanon also travelled to Brazil, most likely engaging in the same type of industry: “Wherever Rachid went he met other Libnani. Many of his countrymen also had businesses there and in the other nations of North and South America” (80). Lebanese, or “Syrians,” as they used to be called, “had been emigrating since the 1800s and by the second decade of the twentieth century some 350,000 Syrians had left their homeland, two-thirds to the United States and most of the rest to South America” (Issawi 31). Via the narrative voice, these men celebrate and justify their travel for capital gain in their shared ancestry and common theme, the Phoenician past:

Lebanon always surrendered her men to the stories of wealth abroad. Like their ancients, the Phoenicians, they took to the sea, and Rachid, Shebl, and Yousef followed this tradition and the water into a corner of Brazil that Rachid called its earlobe. (80–81)

Because of the narrow focus and the lenses through which the Abinaders brothers viewed Brazil, men in Children of the Roojme are mostly silent about the nature that surrounds them during their stay in Brazil, despite the fact that the area where they engage in the rubber trade is known for its luscious vegetation and animal life. Descriptions or acknowledgment of the variety of animal life and beauty of nature are largely absent. It is only in retrospect and in moments of great stress, as when Rachid is running away from the Turks, that descriptions and similarities of nature are stimulated or triggered both in Lebanon and in Brazil:
The sea is smothered in white. The sky too is a smoothed sheet with a barely noticeable spot of yellow. Before Rachid reaches Batroun, the sun should burn through. He does not hurry and he stays at the edge of the road. In the fog the ground softens and feels like the mossy paths he journeyed along the Amazon. Once when his boat broke in a strong current, he had to walk ten miles along the bank. (70)

Rachid’s only acknowledgment of animal life in Brazil happens when triggered by the famine in Lebanon: “All the fish they threw back into the Río Acre, the Amazon, the Purus—if they only had them now” (81). As previously stated, the reason behind this unintentional disregard is that these travelling men are focused only on the aspects of Brazil that can be exploited for financial gain. Male characters travelling to Brazil are focused only on the knowledge required to conduct business there. This renders the landscape invisible. Nature, the environment, is not to be celebrated, much less honored, only to be exploited, in line with the operating male-dominant patriarchal system.

**Gendered Knowledge in *So Far from God***

“Tú no sirves pa’ nada— you’re good for nothing. *Eres pura vieja.*”
In *Borderlands* by Gloria Anzaldúa

With the exception of the antagonist Francisco el Santero, the male characters in *So Far from God* are intermittent and at times disappearing flickers in the landscape and in the lives of the women of Tome, New Mexico. In general, their own macho insecurities and unresolved issues lead them to use women and their resources, even their land, their home environment, as
in the case of Domingo. A confirmed gambler, absent for the most part during his daughters’ lives, Sofi’s husband gambles away the family’s land and eventually even their ancestral home (So Far 214). Esperanza’s lover, Ruben, bends politics and Native American spirituality to establish an unhealthy dominance over Esperanza, to manipulate her and receive sexual and financial favors. These unhealthy “macho” attitudes reveal aspects of what Gloria Anzaldúa in 1987 called the “machismo” of current times: “Today’s macho has doubts about his ability to feed and protect his family. His ‘machismo’ is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem. It is the result of hierarchical male dominance” (105).

Ruben uses the knowledge he has gained regarding Chicano politics and Native American traditional religious practices to manipulate and to assert dominance over Esperanza, the most educated of Sofi’s four daughters who has a well-paid job as a reporter. Ruben, in a reflection of his repressed insecurities, acts out these insecurities by maintaining a patronizing tone over Esperanza. The following quote is inserted in its entirety for its relevance and its highly illustrative aspects, revealing at once Ruben’s nature as well as the tenor of their relationship:

“Yeah? Hey, how’s it goin’, kid?” he asked with his usual condescending manner, adding a little chuckle. Esperanza paused. He talked to her on the phone like she was a casual friend. A casual friend whom he prayed with and whom he made love with, but whom he could not call to ask on a given day how she was doing. When it was her moon-time the estrangement between them widened since she was not permitted to go to the meeting or to sweat, nor did he like to make love to her. A casual friend who accepted her gifts of groceries, the rides in her car with her gas, all up and down the Southwest to attend meetings, who called her collect
the month he left on a “pilgrimage” to visit the Mayan ruins throughout southern
Mexico, where she had not been invited to join him, who always let her pick up
the tab whenever they stopped someplace for a few beers and burritos just before
she left him—after the meetings, sweats, lovemaking, to go home so she could get
herself ready for that job which he suspected her so much of selling out to white
society for but which paid for all the food, gas, telephone calls, and even, let’s
admit it, the tens and twenties she discreetly left on his bedroom dresser whenever
she went over, knowing he could use it and would take it, although he would
never have asked her directly for it. (39–40)

The Priest and Francisco el Santero represent the fixed knowledge and dogmas of the
church. At the opening of the novel, when Loca dies and then resurrects, there is an intense
exchange between the Priest and Sofi. Sofi, relying on her own knowledge as Loca’s mother,
challenges the Priest’s quick suggestion that Loca’s resurrection and flight are probably an act of
the devil (23). Sofi’s response is strong, passionate, and emotional, and altogether unequivocal.
The reader sides with her, despite whatever knowledge the Priest may have based his assertions
on:

At that point Sofi, despite her shock, rose from the ground, unable to tolerate the
mere suggestion by Father Jerome that her daughter, her blessed, sweet baby,
could by any means be the devil’s own. “Don’t you dare!” she screamed at Father
Jerome, charging at him and beating him with her fists. “Don’t you dare start this
about my baby! If our Lord in His heaven has sent my child back to me, don’t you
dare start this backward thinking against her; the devil doesn’t produce miracles!
And this is a miracle, an answer to the prayers of a brokenhearted mother ¡hombre necio, pendejo ...! (23)

Francisco, a sort of Judas Iscariot character, fueled by his own insecurities and demons, functions as the subversive or antagonistic force battling both the love he has for Caridad as well as the lesbian love between Esmeralda and Caridad. He uses Judeo-Christian scripture and beliefs to condemn and chastise both himself and Caridad (So Far 191). This antagonistic force, based on ill-applied scripture, battles Native American knowledge inherited by Esmeralda from her Acoma Pueblo ancestors. This battle, at its climax, leads to Caridad and Esmeralda’s sacrifice. Despite the sacrifice and “death” of both, by jumping off the cliff at Sky City, Caridad and Esmeralda in their reenacting of the Acoma myth of creation, not only triumph over Francisco’s actions, they provide a “new” earth, for all in their community’s benefit. After they jump:

There weren’t even whole bodies lying peaceful. There was nothing.
Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever. (211)

Despite the general lack of knowledge on issues such as government, politics, institutions, or businesses, the community in So Far from God with Sofi at the helm embarks on several ambitious enterprises, all tied to one another, eventually leading to the improvement of
the community’s environment. Led by Sofi, who eventually decides to become mayor of her town, the community also founds and operates a wool cooperative, and organizes a women-only institution: M.O.M.A.S. When Sofi decides to run for mayor, the reader infers the women’s lack of knowledge on mainstream/dominant politics from thoughts expressed by her comadre, as well as by Sofi’s own admission: “Now the comadre really didn’t get it. She especially didn’t get it because Tome never had no mayor. She didn’t know much about those kinds of government things” (137). In fact, the comadre attributes Sofi’s ambitions to her “imagination,” which Sofi promptly disputes while acknowledging her lack of knowledge:

Imagination? I don’t know what that means, but I can tell you this. I have been living in Tome all my life and I have only seen it get worse and worse off and it’s about time somebody goes out and tries to do something about it! And maybe I don’t know nothing about those kinds of things, but I’m sure willing to work for community improvement! (138)

And this is Sofi’s modus operandi. Without mainstream “knowledge,” she makes up for it with motivation, passion, and a willingness to actively engage in whatever may be required to succeed in this political arena and others. And even though Sofi attributes her motivation not to her imagination, as her comadre will put it, but to faith: “It’s not ‘imagination’ that I’ve always had, comadre, it’s faith! Faith has kept me going,” the reader is able to see that in addition to faith, it is work and dedication that allows for success:
Now, to rescue an area as economically depressed as Sofi’s and her comadre’s would truly have taken more than the desires and dreams of a self-proclaimed mayor and her campaign manager-assistant—metiche comadre. So the two earnest women started their campaign by going around for months talking to neighbors, to fellow parishioners, people at the schools, at the local Y, and other such places to get ideas and help; and little by little, people began to respond to Sofi’s “campaign,” which they did not see as a mayoral one so much as one to rescue Tome. (146)

**Gendered Environments: *So Far from God***

In contrast to Abinader’s memoir, which due to its genre, purpose, and scope mostly presents a traditional, gendered pattern when it comes to the environment, Castillo’s female characters either willfully cross previously established lines or develop a fluidity that enables them to move from one environment to another, as is best exemplified in the character of Sofi in *So Far from God*. The author does, however, acknowledge the legacy of predetermined gendered environments as they pertain to this community, such as the involvement of males in ranching and sheepherding so prevalent in the Southwest (*So Far* 175, 191). We see this echoed in the character of Casimiro, Fe’s fiancé. His family, as many in New Mexico, had for centuries made a living from sheep herding. Their centuries-old close connection with the land and with sheep in particular causes Casimiro, in a process of involuntary zoomorphism, to exhibit the habit of bleating (174). Despite the strong, ancient connection to their environment, male ranchers in this community still follow the old religious traditions that continue to focus on anthropocentrism and dominating dualities. Guided by scripture, these men cling to the belief that they will survive
(read “dominate”) nature, and as highlighted below, these men fear humans more than environmental disaster:

   Francisco finished eating his tasteless ashen breakfast and went out to start on a bulto of San Isidro commissioned by a nearby rancher. He was the patron saint of farmers, and to not revere him could bring a farmer the worst punishment of all: bad neighbors. A farmer could survive droughts and bad crops, but not an ill-willed neighbor. (191)

   This disconnection of males with the environment in *So Far from God* is typical of most patriarchal communities, as is also exemplified in the “invisibility” of nature for males in Abinader’s memoir, as previously discussed. The majority of male characters in *So Far from God* are small figures compared with the force and stature of their female counterparts when it comes to their relationship to nature and the environment. Nonetheless, despite their relative marginality, they have a very important function in the text. Standing as opposing forces, male characters such as Francisco el Santero and Domingo represent the noxious effects and the stagnation and rigidity of the patriarchal system as it plays out in this particular community. These male characters embody the negative effects of the patriarchal system on women and nature, both of whom have “been mutually associated and devalued in Western culture” (Merchant 101). Thus, Castillo’s narrative is not just about showcasing progressive female characters; her work is about challenging “institutions bound up with oppression” (Blackford 227) such as religion and the patriarchal system, and how they play out in the relationships of males, females, humans, nonhumans, and the environment in general. In order to do a reevaluation of the system and to present alternatives, Castillo’s work “requires critique of [. . .] traditional notions of spiritual focus” (Blackford 227) such as the dogmatic religious beliefs of
Francisco el Santero, who enacts misogyny, homophobia, and religious fanaticism. Francisco el Santero’s insertion into this system brings out its worst effects. Unable to deal with his feelings for Caridad, he tries to escape his obsession by seeking refuge in highly sexist scripture:

“More bitter than death I find the woman who is a hunter’s trap, whose heart is a snare and whose hands are prison bonds,” Francisco el Penitente recited. “He who is pleasing to God will escape her, but the sinner will be entrapped by her.” He moved his lips, quoting chapter and verse from Ecclesiastes, but did not let out a sound come out of his mouth. (191)

Ironically, it is Francisco who is not able to control his natural impulses, but since in the Judeo-Christian tradition “Women are symbolized as ‘closer to nature’ than men and thus fall in an intermediate position between culture as the male sphere and uncontrolled nature,” he believes Caridad to be the “uncontrolled” one (Ruether 73). As such, and in order to highlight an otherwise obscured misogyny—obscured due to the highly symbolic nature of women’s association with nature, that which is itself incontrollable, yet needs to be dominated (Ruether 73)—Castillo’s narrative necessitates characters such as Francisco. Francisco’s actions and what fuels them highlight the importance of the work and strategies enacted by individual female characters for the transformation and betterment of the community: “Characters must think through their relationship to transcendent beings for themselves” (Blackford 227). Thus, Caridad and Esmeralda’s final actions, which bring about the recreation of a system predating Western patriarchy, the Acoma Pueblo Myth of Creation (211), are a reaction to their connection to a key male figure in So Far from God, the antagonist Francisco. By reenacting a Native American myth, they are opposing Francisco’s actions based on patriarchal myths. As Allison Steele says, referring to Anzaldúa but also of relevance here: “By associating the morality in nature with the
lessons of Indian earth religions and heritage, Anzaldúa [and Castillo] again creates a space where Chicanas, like herself, and all ‘others’ can actively participate in ecofeminist pursuits and oppose oppressive patriarchal mythmaking” (Steele 100).

Castillo’s narrative reveals the sexism in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which has as its ruling image that of the male God and his “transcendent male ego” (Ruether 47). At its most reprehensible side, this image or ego seeks “the conquest of nature, imaged as the conquest and transcendence of the Mother” (Ruether 47), best exemplified in So Far from God by Francisco el Santero’s actions against the female, “the [m]other” (Caridad and Esmeralda). This scenario has great repercussions for the environment in So Far from God. In order to subvert this scenario, Castillo’s narrative “reach[es] back behind patriarchal monotheism to religions in which a Goddess was either the dominant divine image or was paired with the male image in a way that made both equivalent modes of apprehending the divine” (Ruether 47) by having two of her female characters reenact the Acoma Pueblo myth of creation. Thus, Caridad and Esmeralda, victimized and persecuted by Francisco’s lust, misogyny, and homophobia, transfigure it into the sacred. By becoming the sacrificial lambs, they bring forth through their merging and rebirth in the reenactment of the Acoma Pueblo myth of creation, a much-needed renewal and healing for their community’s environment (So Far 211).

In general, for most female characters in So Far from God, Castillo prefers to provide them with a fluidity that will allow them to not only tap into any tradition that will further their connection to their environment for the betterment of all beings, such as the reinstitution of the Goddess, but she also “features principles of connectivity between women and the natural universe, God, other women’s bodies, the enterprise of mothering both children and the community, the land, and spirits” (Blackford 227). Male characters, as part of the community,
are often mothered, taken care of by women in *So Far from God*. So is it with Tom, Fe’s fiancé, who appears to have been mothered not only by his own mother but by Fe herself, and senses the continuation of this mothering in Fe and thus develops “susto” (30). This “susto” is probably Tom’s inability to deal with what Ruetherford calls the “conquest of nature, imaged as the conquest and transcendence of the Mother” (47). Uncannily, la Loca recognizes this dynamic and prays for him: “Above all, however, she prayed for Tom, because like so many hispanos, nuevo mexicanos, whatever he wanted to call himself, something about giving himself over to a woman was worse than having lunch with the devil” (32). Thus, since women and nature have been historically associated in the West, most men in *So Far from God* live in a continual state of (dis)connection to both women and their environment. The love/desire at one point and hate/aversion at the other help explain the actions of Domingo, Francisco, Tom, and Rubén throughout the novel.

Characters such as Domingo are the embodiment of the proverbial truncated macho, castrated by the dominant system and perpetrating the effects of such castration on his female relatives while trying but failing to operate or “be successful” in the dominant system: “Today’s macho has doubts about his ability to feed and protect his family. His ‘machismo’ is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem. It is the result of hierarchical male dominance” (Anzaldúa 105). This definition finds a remarkable parallel in the character of Shebl in *Children of the Roojme*. Both Domingo and Shebl are handsome, charismatic, and popular when young, and both, formally or informally, gamble with their families’ means. Domingo gambles away Sofi’s land and home, inherited from her parents who had held that land for centuries, and Shebl squanders away the money he makes in unending celebrations of masculinity or in business gambling.
Domingo:

Domingo was little by little betting away the land she had inherited from her father, and finally she couldn’t take no more and gave him his walking papers. Just like that, she said, “Go, hombre, before you leave us all out on the street!” Yes! It had been Sofia who had made Domingo leave. (So Far 214)

... 

And what had brought her to send Domingo out of her life once again was the day she realized he had given up the deed to the house. He couldn’t give up the butcher shop (which he probably would have, given the chance), because she had sold it already in shares to the community and it no longer belonged just to Sofi. (So Far 215)

Shebl:

All the stories of Shebl’s philandering and bad business deals are legendary, but Jean finds him wise and generous.

... 

In Brazil, Jean had met people who knew him—they did not mention the unpaid debts or the parties that lasted days. Your uncle is a good man. Generous. (Children 125)
Both Domingo and Shebl’s energies being spent on attempting to “succeed” in a hyper-masculinized world causes them to live in a perpetual state of disconnection to their families, which eventually leads to a severely curtailed relationship with nature, their land, and their environment. Not unlike Castillo’s Sapogonia’s antihero, both Domingo and Shebl spend their lives ignoring the call of their fragmented psyche and focus solely on the seductive yet “superficial opportunities that an [alternative] landscape offers” (Lynch 129).

This chapter presents an overview of past and current ecofeminist theories in order to better frame the arguments argued here: that gendered environments are strongly correlated to the types of knowledge acquired because of this division. I also demonstrated that men have easier access to mainstream knowledge while women, usually confined to the home, develop and create their own type of knowledge built from “their duties as environmental engineers [my emphasis] and their responsibilities for household food supply and health” (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, Wangari xviii). Finally, I analyzed the ill effects that a rigid gender division has for some of the men in both of the analyzed texts.
Conclusion

The answers found in this dissertation demonstrate that texts not readily recognized as environmental literature still have the potential to be put through an ecocritical lens. Even when a text is not recognized as “environmental,” the reader can still look (and find) portrayals of the environment and of human interaction with it. This study’s focus on United States ethnic minority women writers provides the added benefit of expanding the number of voices included to the field, thus bringing new dimensions to the canon and more visibility to these works. Despite the texts’ dissimilarities of genre and origin, parallels were found in terms of the existing link between characters’ spirituality and their environment, their relationship with animals, and the important link between environment and culture. Spirituality comes in a hybrid form, mixing traditional forms of religion and Native American spirituality in *So Far from God*. These practices help bring about the reinterpretation of old metaphors, opening an avenue for liberation, such as Castillo’s take on The Way of the Cross and the Acoma Pueblo myth of creation. The hybrid spirituality in *Children of the Roojme* is a result of the characters’ rich cultural heritage, often hidden in symbolic form. The hybrid spirituality demonstrated in *Children of the Roojme* needs not to go further than the analysis of the *roojme* itself. The *roojme*, the key part of the characters’ environment, becomes a place for spiritual expression, a place where poetry and prayer mix. Although animal inclusion in Abinader’s memoir is limited, occasional appearances are powerful. The memoir tells much about the characters’ relationship with animals, and about their own potential for zoomorphism when faced with dangerous situations. Animals in *So Far from God* demonstrate characters’ willingness to travel the human/animal continuum, with Loca trying to do the Peacock walk and Casimiro doing the sheep talk, both excellent examples of zoomorphism. This study demonstrates the great influence
culture has over the landscape, and vice versa, in the two texts studied. How the characters relate or view their landscape is highly connected to their culture. Such is the case of Caridad and Felicia’s attempt to become one with the landscape at Chimayo, or the enormous cultural influence the landscape of Lebanon has upon *Children of the Roojme*’s characters, as implicated in the memoir’s title. The last chapter’s analysis of the gendered use of environments as it relates to the gendered acquisition, development, and enactment of knowledge points in the direction of an interdisciplinary study of the environment. Political ecologists, who observe, record data, and compare statistics in their studies, some of it used in this chapter, provide scientific based materials which can be used by cultural and literary critics, and vice-versa.

In sum, this dissertation’s way of looking at these texts have provided new perspectives. One of the texts studied, *So Far From God*, could be easily added to the environmental literature corpus because of its evident environmental agenda. The other, the memoir *Children of the Roojme*, proved fertile for this environmental analysis precisely because it did not pursue any particular agenda. Memoirs, with their window into the day-to-day lives and experiences of the characters, provide much information about how characters relate to their environment, unaware of any particular environmental scrutiny. The serendipitous appearance of the black rooster in *Children of the Roojme* is a perfect example of the possibilities for an environmental analysis when exploring texts such as Abinader’s memoir. This positive outcome leaves me with the confidence to pursue further studies using an ecocritical approach on texts not typically considered environmental. It has also opened new areas for exploration. My dissertation provided an analysis of four aspects of the environment in the two texts under study: the characters’ spirituality-environment link; animal representation and character-animal link; landscape representation and landscape-culture link; and, the gendered use of environments as it
relates to the gendered acquisition of knowledge. The addition of the first chapter which provides an overview of the two authors’ *oeuvre* and how the topics of this dissertation connect or intersect with their work, provided new insights for future research within the scope of this dissertation. Furthermore, and since the first chapter also served as an initial step toward building a spectrum of works in both Chicano/Chicana and Arab American Literature that lend to an ecocritical analysis, I have, thanks to the present work, accumulated enough experience and research material to expand my line of inquiry in these important areas of the Literature of the United States.
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